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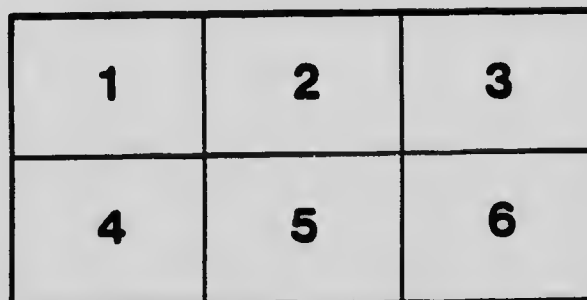
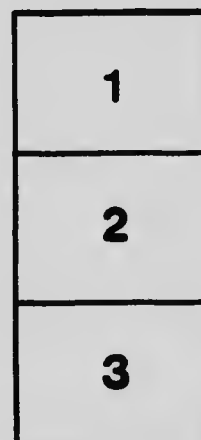
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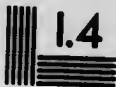
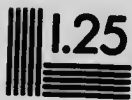
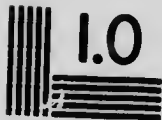
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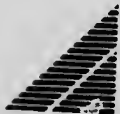
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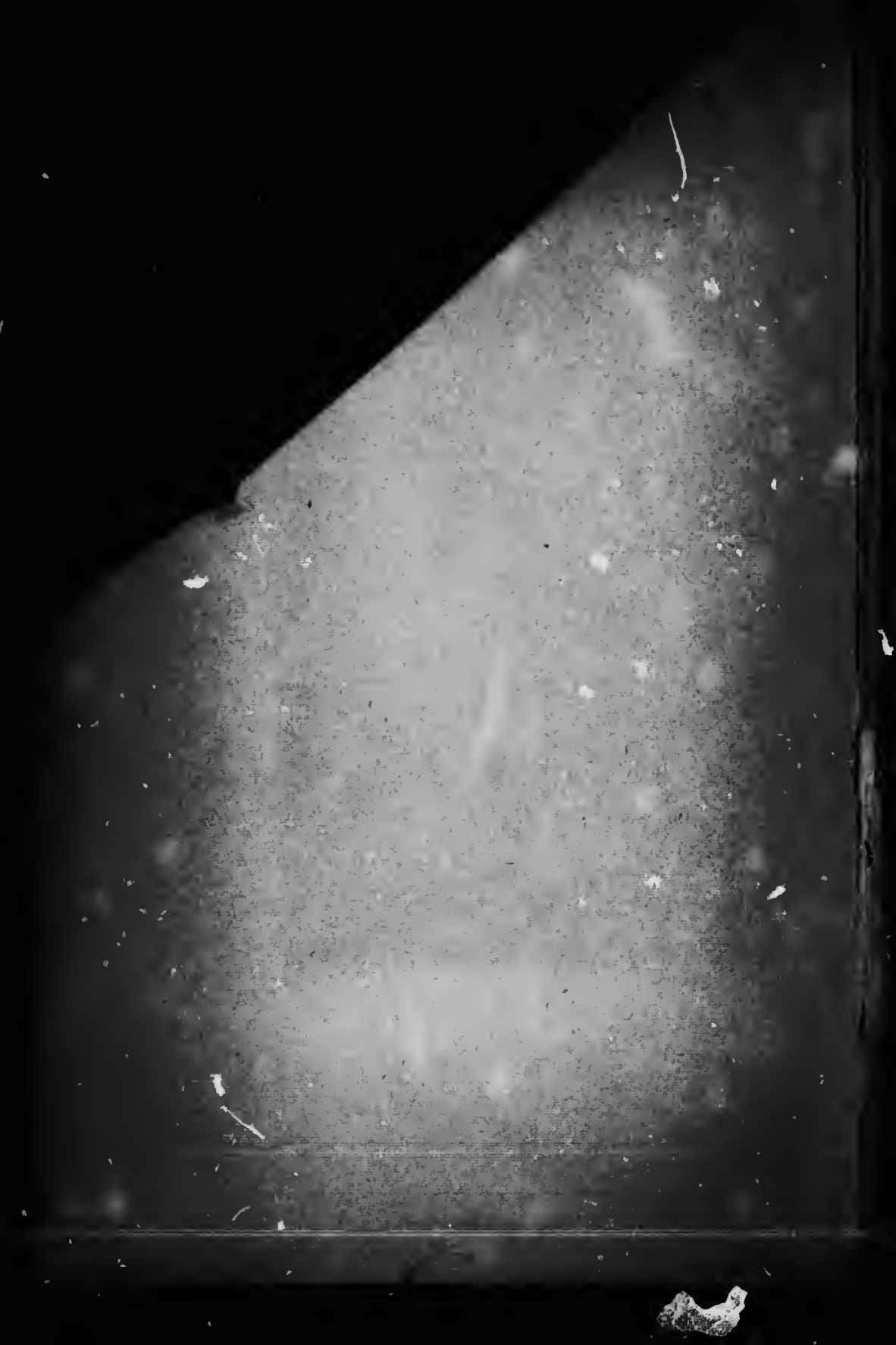
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“KRUM”

A STUDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

BY

ERNEST G. HENHAM

“Quod est ante pedes, nemo spectat: coeli scrutantur plagas.”—*Cicero*.

LONDON

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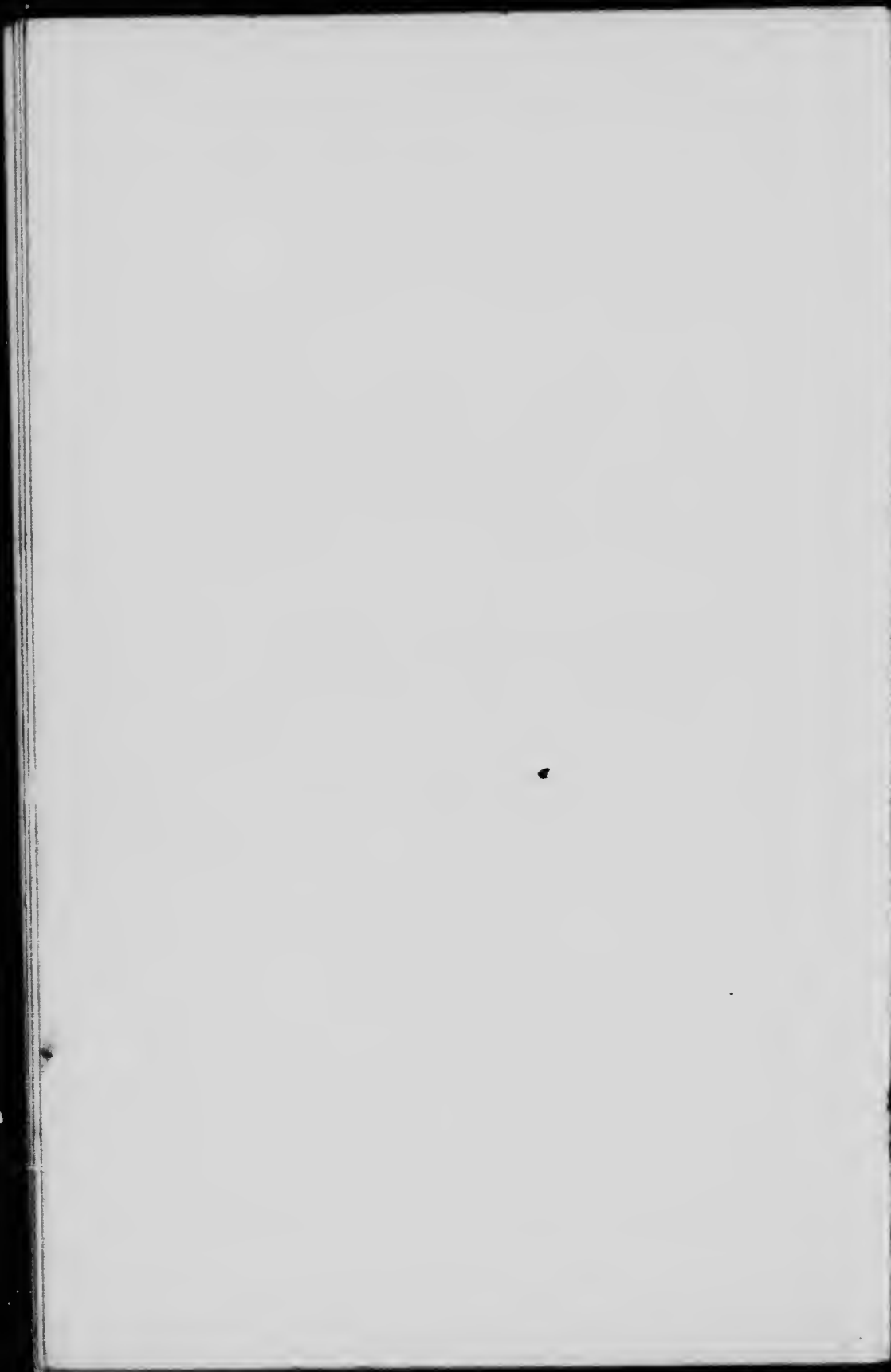
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PART I

BODY

*“ Was that his point of turning? He had thought
The stations of his course should rise unsought,
As altar-stone or ensigned citadel.*

*But lo! the path is missed, he must go back;
Yet though no light be left nor bird now sing
As here he turns, he'll thank God, hastening,
That the same goal is still on the same track.”*



“ K R U M ”

CHAPTER I

REPLACED

THE solemn clock of the penitentiary for Central Canada struck nine over the wet waste of Stonefell.

While the last stroke still rumbled among the quarries, a figure climbed the ridge which hid the buildings from the stragglng stone village below, and proceeded along a ghostly trail, until it sighted the sentry crossing a beam of light which flowed between the bars of the lower windows. There the wayfarer halted, seated himself upon a flat stone, and produced from some portion of his mixed attire a selection of cigar-ends gathered from various hotels during peripatetic days of leisure. Choosing the most promising of these remnants, he shredded the leaves, minced them with a broken knife, packed the gratuitous stimulant into a short pipe, and smoked ruminatively.

“Nine,” he said, watching the lights of the prison gleaming across the sullen pools. “Three more hours and Munro will be a free man, with the option of remaining under Government protection until morning, or of quitting its hospitable precincts

forthwith. I cannot imagine that Munro will cling to his plank bed one minute longer than necessary for the poor pleasure of claiming a restricted breakfast of bread and porridge before making his farewell. He must be, metaphorically speaking, banging his young wings against yonder cheerful walls, counting the minutes which have still to pass before Justice may be considered satisfied. Munro must be dying for some liquor. There is a saloon in Stonefell village. I possess thirty-five cents, earned, I am ashamed to think, by smashing stones for a bloated city council. There is liquor in that saloon, and Munro and I will reach that liquor in spite of any petty illegality as to hour, even though the shadow of the prison shall lie across our law-breaking. What a triviality does the law become to a level-headed man who has once defied it."

The wayfarer's voice was refined, his enunciation faultless, in strange contradiction to his unwashed face, with its stiff growth of beard a week old, and his extraordinary costume. His hat was of a distinct clerical type; the cloak which surrounded his shoulders and nearly reached the ground equally suggested the bandit. His features were anarchic in their lean ferocity. And yet Walter Krum was far less harmful than he looked. He was hopelessly selfish, unbelieving, and opinionative; but he was in no important sense a danger to the community. His well-educated voice struck the ears which heard it for the first time with a distinct shock, so astonishing was the contrast between the speech and appearance of the vagabond.

Krum's surroundings were as desolate as Nature, with man's assistance, could make them. Stone was

everywhere, in mechanical heaps and lines, broken by deep pits where granite had been quarried by grumbling convicts for their sins. These pits were now half filled with water, for it was spring, and the country was in flood. There was neither tree nor blade of grass; no bird nor insect. Only the great cold prison arising out of the wetness, built of the stone on which it stood, a melancholy mountain, the travail of which had broken many a man body and soul. The yellow gaslight from the narrow windows cut fantastic shafts into the dripping night.

"Inspiration refuses to thrive on stale bread and cigar-ends," said Krum, frowning at the gibbous moon as he replaced his pencil and note-book. "Nor is this raw cold in the least conducive to the true poetic spirit. Unfortunately, it is useless to abuse the weather. The elements listen to bad language so cynically. And, unlike Xerxes, I have no mood to flog the sea."

He drew himself up and stared along the uneven trail. The rock gave out the echo of footsteps, and he perceived a man, clad in the thick uniform of an official, swinging down towards him.

"Evenin'," Krum called pleasantly, as a black-bearded warder approached. "Sorter splashy walkin', ain't it?"

This gentleman of fortune cultivated two vocabularies and two distinct styles of speech; and exhibited a nice discrimination in the use of them.

The warder drew up abruptly, and regarded the wayfarer with marked disapproval.

"What you doing here?" he demanded, in bullying tones. "We don't want no loafers around here. This is Government ground. Seems you want a spell of free board. What's yer name?"

"Krum is my name," drawled the wayfarer. "I'm waitin' for a pal whose time is up. Not my fault if you choose to release gentlemen in the middle o' the night. Try and make yerself popular an' gimme some tobacco."

"Give you tobacco, Mister Krum!" exclaimed the warder cuttingly. "Not me. Not if you call yerself the whole loaf. Who's yer pal?"

"Leonard Munro. Say, he ain't detained? He's coming out at midnight?"

"Number four-three-nought," said the man glibly. "Nothing agin him, far as I know. He'll likely be back in another month, and you with him, I guess. Two fellers more like each other I never did see. You're just four-three-nought over agin to look at, and I reckon you're jest as wrong, if all was known. In with him over that liquor business, I'll lay a dollar."

"Bake yer brains, an' don't insult gentlemen," retorted Krum. "A man's innocent until he's proved guilty, or you wouldn't be wearing that uniform what you never paid for. You'd be in canvas, and have to pull them fins outer your pockets and pick stone."

"Wait till you come inside," growled the warder. "I won't forget ye. Dirty tramp! I'd run you off this ground if I wasn't dead certain the touch of you would poison me."

Krum leaned forward and laughed softly.

"Now is the winter of my discontent made glorious by this fellow's compliment," he recited, in his most elegant manner. "I thank you, friend. It has been for long my ambition to be called to my unshaven face a tramp. Good fellow, I would shake hands with you if our social positions allowed such a

familiarity. Oh, that my venerable father were here to hear me called a tramp! *Ars est celare artem*. I am no *asinus ad lyram*, as this man of a number and a superfluity of brass buttons paid for out of farmers' taxes, has so plainly testified. Here, take this *pour-boire* to the saloon of Stonefell and drink to the long life of the tramp!"

The speaker produced a quarter of a dollar from some mysterious source, all the money he owned in the world except ten cents, and flipped the coin into the middle of the trail, where it blinked in the sickly moonshine.

The warder stared aghast, until it became perfectly obvious that the man on the stone was a demoniac. No sane being could have given utterance to such amazing balderdash, or have altered his identity so completely. The wise official adopted that policy which is popular when a madman is encountered in any lone spot. He delivered himself of an ejaculation and ran.

Krum, laughing cynically, rose and picked up the precious coin.

"I would never have thrown it to him had I suspected he would have taken it," he observed. "So I am like Munro in appearance! Well, it is interesting to see ourselves as others see us. Probably that accounts for the charge sworn against Munro of having drugged that trooper with a mug of our smuggled whisky. It would have been folly on my part to have stepped out and owned to the deed, when Munro was already sure of prison. It is a pity, for his own sake, that he's such a good-natured fellow. He tempts easy-going men to shelve their just responsibilities. Well, well! Don't worry,

my friend. A fortnight more for him is better than a long spell for you."

The clock of the penitentiary boomed half-past nine.

A great cold lung of a corridor, paved with grey stone, and flanked by little doors studded with iron nails and eyed by wickets, ran down the centre of the main building. The only sounds audible along this passage were the mournful tramp of the warder on duty, the whistling of the gas-jets, and an occasional deep groan or half-stifed ejaculation from one of the "bird-cages." Within the cells, those prisoners who were not too indifferent to listen could hear the drip, drip of water falling at intervals from the outside roof. A black number was painted above each door. At some of the wickets a blank, hungry-eyed face stared at the warder when he passed.

Under the coping-stone which bore the figures 430, a face, by no means lacking in intelligence, was pressed into the square aperture. This convict showed no weariness after his day's toil in the quarry. His eyes were bright, his face flushed, his lips dared to part from time to time, in disregard of prison regulations, to discharge a whisper in the direction of the guardian of the black sheep. The wild eyes of 429 opposite—a lifer for manslaughter—glared at him with terrible envy, and once, when the great clock chimed, he flung himself against the solid door of his cell and howled so wildly that the warder's tramp momentarily ceased, and his harsh voice threatened the governor and the dark cell.

"Say, what's the time?" pleaded 430, as the officer came by.

This convict had held his face into the iron cage so long that the narrow bars had imprinted their pattern upon his cheeks. His white breath streamed into the cold corridor as he put the question.

"Quit yer noise," growled the warder, who was, however, not unkindly disposed towards this particular prisoner. "If I have to report you, there'll be no outside for you to-night. Git away from that door. I'll knock when you're wanted."

The lifer across the way could be heard grovelling about his cell.

"The clock has stopped," whispered 430. "I swear it struck eleven an hour ago."

"It's near the half hour," said the warder. "Now don't speak to me again."

He resumed his march, and the prisoner's face, framed by the iron and wood, continued to stare into the gas-lit corridor, his eyes peering from side to side, and all his faculties painfully alert. He heard his neighbour gently tapping upon the divisional wall, trying to arrest his attention. He heard all the throbbing, moaning, restless voices of the great establishment which had wearied his ears with their awful monotony for so long. He smelt the depressing and distinctive prison odours, which had come very near to the stifling of his intellect. He felt the greasy stones grinding him in so closely, and saw the thick light stabbing through his wicket, and the hieroglyphics cut into the walls by former tenants of that cell, some of whom had left it as he would leave, some of whom had exchanged it for the nameless graveyard among the stone pits. He shuddered at the thought of that dismal yard, where the poor prisoners seemed to be still held in bond,

a number upon the chaplain's chart corresponding with a name upon the governor's book.

The tapping upon the divisional wall became more imperative, and 430 cleared his mind of its morbid thoughts, and crossed over to the corner. For a moment he could not recall the telegraphic code which it had taken him weeks to master; but when he had given the mechanical reply to the call it came back to him, and he spelt out the question:

"Your time up?"

The signaller had already, by means of prison telegraphy, communicated to his neighbour part of the story of his life. He had served little more than half a long sentence for train wrecking and robbery; but 430 knew that he was not likely to complete the remainder, as he was breaking up fast. Nothing kills the vagabond so quickly as deprivation of liberty and the loss of the free air and the wilds. A sentence, which may be merely a standing at ease for the townsman, means often death by suffocation to the wanderer.

"I shall not go out," came the sounds, knocked rapidly, when 430 had answered in the affirmative. "Got a good memory?"

"Fair," rapped back the man who was soon to be free.

"Latitude 62.10 north. Longitude 120 east. Sand desert. Got that?"

"Yes."

"Opal. Good luck to you."

"Thanks," rapped 430, in a matter-of-fact manner; and silence ruled between the cells.

A murmur of voices sounded along the corridor. A key jarred in the lock, the door opened, and with

a flood of gaslight came the summons of an official, who stood in the light, with a big book under his arm :

"Come along, four-thirty. Your clothes are waiting."

A strange feeling thrilled through the convict's body, and his step became buoyant as he trod the corridor and heard the clang of his cage-door which would not open for him again. The warder on duty gave him a kindly nod as he passed on behind the man with the book of evil deeds. A few tired faces watched with dull eyes, in speechless envy, from their iron-bound wickets. The long, cold passage, smelling of gas and disinfectants, seemed to the convict then as pleasant as the grass-path through a flower garden.

"Your clothes are in there," said the official, indicating an open door. "When you are dressed, come into the office and take your discharge. Want to see the chaplain before you go out?"

The prisoner very decidedly stated that he would not see the chaplain.

"You can stay in till morning if you like."

"I'd sooner sleep on the stones outside," replied the ticket-of-leave man, glowing at the restored privilege of free speech.

A very few minutes had elapsed before there entered the office a tall, dark-haired young man, clothed in a shabby suit of tweed, with a white scarf around his neck to conceal the lack of a collar.

"Take your watch and ring," said the official, without looking up. "Here are five dollars allowed by Government to give you a start, and here is your discharge certificate. Don't lose it. You will report yourself to the police monthly during the next year,

and if you require to leave the country you must apply personally for a passport. Now you can go."

A warder, who stood beside the door, swung round and led the way to the debouchure of the penitentiary, where the porter rose sleepily and unlocked the wicket gate. As he swung it open, with an accompanying yawn, there came a rush of damp wind, a flicker of moonlight, and the echo of the world. Cheerless as was the prospect, it appeared a veritable Garden of Eden to the free man.

"Solong," said the warder. "See you soon."

With which stock jest the little gate was slammed into place within the larger, a well-oiled key turned softly, and convict four-thirty became suddenly metamorphosed into Leonard Munro.

CHAPTER II

A DESCENT INTO THE PIT

THE city fathers of the prairie metropolis had, in an ill-inspired mood, removed the board which bore the name Hamlet Street from the crumbling corner of the rope warehouse which tottered above the mud-flats, and had set up another, bearing the inscription Thirteenth Street; but this latter board had been speedily demolished by the conservative vagabonds who made the place their home. This street, running from north to south above the Red River, was made up by some warehouses in varying stages of decrepitude, two hotels of evil repute, and a few wooden houses. It had long been marked down as a safe shelter by the tramps and derelicts who lived from day to day by what they could extort from the charity or fear of law-abiding citizens. These men slept night after night behind the insecure door or under the leaking roof of one of the ill-kept blocks. The police were not frequent visitors in the by-way which had been tacitly allotted to the under-current. Even the tall arc-lights, which swung at either end, were neglected by the man with the climbing irons for weeks together. The lowest orders of life flourished in Hamlet Street, and a few rank weeds pushed determinedly between the rotting boards with which the road was paved.

Opposite M'Gillavery House, one of the hotels before mentioned, stood, or to be mathematically correct leaned, the boarding establishment of Mrs. Doolittle, a popular hiding-place for the great unnamed. This was a narrow house, stretching away to the back of the lot amid brickbats, which winter frosts and spring winds had worked from the wall of the adjoining block, broken crockery, and jagged tins which glistened in dreary splendour whenever an accidental beam of sunlight slanted across the shingles of the disreputable hotel on the other side of the road. Within appeared an almost impertinent paucity of furniture. In the hall there were a rusted stove surmounted by dented pipes which leaked and smelt, two chairs which had long ago discarded their backs, and a row of wooden pegs primarily intended for the support of hats and overcoats of the lodgers, had they been so fortunate as to possess such articles, or so foolish as to leave them there. The dining-room boasted an uneven trestle table, which was overturned on occasion with all its contents during the ordinary course of a fight, a few forms, and a ridiculous square of oil-cloth, nailed to the centre of the floor, like an oasis in the desert, and washed by the Icelandic servant once a week. Upon the calsomined side wall hung an almanack beneath a picture fearfully depicting Jael concluding the earthly career of Sisera. A shelf ran along the entire length of the wall opposite the window, and upon this shelf were arranged a number of meal tickets and a metal punch. Each lodger was supplied with a ticket, good for twelve meals, upon payment of two dollars, which sum also included the use of a straw mattress and a blanket ;

and after each meal Mrs. Doolittle punched the tickets, her action being closely watched by the suspicious lodgers.

When any ticket became exhausted, and its holder evinced no immediate disposition to quit the premises, Mr. Doolittle would be stirred from his apathy beside the kitchen range, and after girding up his loins, would proceed threateningly towards the lodger in question. If another two dollars were forthcoming, all was well ; but if, as was often the case, the ticket-expired one suggested a system of credit, a struggle immediately ensued. Sometimes the lodger was ejected ; sometimes Mr. Doolittle. In this latter contingency the proprietress was always at hand with a frying-pan, the use of which had won her fame apart from the kitchen, and after a few ringing blows, Mr. Doolittle would find himself installed for another season beside the range, and the ex-lodger would be rubbing his scalp before the sightless windows of M'Gillavery House.

To stir Mrs. Doolittle into eloquence it was merely necessary to discuss frying-pans. On the subject of this necessary, but in her hands not inoffensive article, she was decided.

"Some hold wi' a poker, an' can use it mighty nice," she was credited with having said. "An' once I used to deal with me lodgers wi' an ole kerosene lamp. But one night, when my husband got me riled as I was fryin' steak, I tried the pan on him. A clean hit wi' a frying-pan seems to daze a man, more especially when you take it hot off the range."

This opinion of Mrs. Doolittle, as an authority on the subject, carried its own weight.

When not assisting at an eviction, or nodding, pipe

in mouth, beside the cook-stove, regardless of season or temperature, Mr. Doolittle was generally to be found across the way, indulging in the pastime known as "shooting craps." For the rest he lived up to his name. His hawk-nosed wife managed the business with a keen eye, a terrible tongue, and a hard hand. The character of her lodgers was nothing to her, so long as their money was forthcoming in advance. The blackguard with a few dollars in his pocket was welcomed into the fold; the itinerant and earnest preacher who came without a dime was told to "go an' soak." Dollars alone appealed to the lump of gneiss which served Mrs. Doolittle for a heart; and her husband, had he owned such a thing as a mind of his own, would have cheerfully applauded that sentiment.

There was a secret door at the back of the house, used only upon those occasions when a body of police came to make inquiries relative to some notorious gentleman who had so grievously bungled in the discharge of his professional duties as to leave a clue behind him. It was when the officers confronted her in the desolate building with hard questions and suspicious glances that Mrs. Doolittle rose to a sublime height. With sable ringlets shaking, and eyes flashing, she would extend her toil-worn hands, and in pathetic voice and manner indicate the poverty of the surroundings. Honesty, she declared, was the policy to which she had tuned her life. Lodgers she might have in abundance, but did the officers think that she and her simple-minded, broken old husband—and here Mr. Doolittle sniffed—would admit any of the city scum of burglars and deadbeats? She knew that such thronged the

district, but she was prepared to starve before knowingly admitting a malefactor to dwell beneath her roof. If the street bore an evil reputation, was she to blame—she who had endeavoured in her quiet way to raise the tone of the neighbourhood by opening honest lodgings in a Christian home? It was enough to make a woman break from the principles of a lifetime to have her poor abode thus raided by the servants of the law. If a high standard of morality had not aided her, if she had obtained an evil reputation together with the place, of what use was it to continue along the hard and unprofitable path of virtue? But, she remembered, the police were not there to bestow sympathy. Let them search the house from cellar to roof. She had at that time only one lodger, a poor minister, who found himself temporarily without a congregation, and he, good man, was out in the city, seeking to reclaim a few lost sheep. And at this point it was customary for a drop of water to hiss lugubriously upon the range in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Doolittle.

But when the police were out of the street, and the Icelandic servant had recalled the vagabonds by ringing a cracked bell at the back, the proprietress would single out the sinner who had called down the visitation, and accost him thus :

“ See here, sonnie, if you're such a lightning-struck fool as to fetch the cops down here agin, I'll hand ye over.”

On one occasion Mrs. Doolittle had felt it her duty to thus surrender a lodger; but this evil-doer was notoriously skilful in evading the frying-pan, and happened to be far too muscular for Mr. Doolittle. There was also a reward in that case.

Close to the entrance a flight of dangerous steps led into a long, low cellar, which passed beneath the entire house. Here was the common room, the dormitory, wash-house, gambling saloon, and council chamber of the nameless. A couple of hanging lamps supplied the place with a bleared light; the inevitable box-stove roared in the centre; broken benches and bulging paillasses occupied the remainder of the floor. This cellar was alluded to by the initiated as the Pit.

On a nebulous night in April the usual crowd of vagabonds was assembled round the stove, engaged in a primitive form of gambling. One man would extend a sulphur match and issue a challenge. When he was taken, the stakes were named, and the two would simultaneously jab their matches, heads down, upon the roof of the stove, removing their hands immediately. The sulphur spluttered, the wood caught fire, and the two matches flared away, remaining at the perpendicular until some time after there was nothing left but two little sticks of carbon, which would presently topple over into ruin. The gambler whose match stood the longest won the stake. The cellar reeked from end to end with sulphurous fumes. Blasphemy and brutality accompanied the game, and undoubtedly the most foul-mouthed blackguard of the gang was he who rejoiced in the name of Krum. The gentleman of the cellar, though it must be owned he tried his hardest to conceal the fact, was the ticket-of-leave man, Munro. The latter so obviously repeated the blasphemies of his companion—presumably because he lacked the imagination to originate his own—that his fellow lodgers had conferred upon him the nickname of Parrot.

The father of the Pit was a thick-set man, with grey-black hair and moustache, clean-shaven chin, and a wooden leg. This artificial limb was covered with letters, dates, and designs, carved deep into the wood by the owner's hand. Unstrapped, it became useful as a weapon of offence or defence. In times of peace it served as a poker to stir the logs in the stove. The thumping of that wooden stump upon the boards would strike dismay into the heart of a neophyte. The lame man wore, for reasons of his own, the semi-military cap and coat of the Salvation Army.

A watery-eyed Scotchman, with sandy hair bristling through a ragged tam-o'-shanter; a swarthy Greek, wild-eyed and unkempt, owning a very limited knowledge of the Saxon tongue; an insignificant individual, in rusty black, with car'averous features and unhappy eyes; and an adipose wreck of middle age, sucking a water-logged pipe, and crying aggressively in maudlin grief, were some of the more prominent members of the lost.

"I'm through," growled the one-legged man, paying over his fallen match. "Ticket runs out in the morning, an' I've got to raise the stuff if I don't want to put up at Mother Green's to-morrer night. The sign of the moon is good enough summers, but a terror this time o' year."

"An awfu' peety to waste nickels at the gamble," murmured the gentle Scot. "Hold 'em down in yer pocket, father. For peety's sake, don't fool away the leetle precious bits o' siller."

The speaker was far from sober. He lurched over the stove, his red face portentously grave, and might have overbalanced had not the ferrule of the wooden

leg caught him neatly in the chest and thrust him back.

"Scottie, I'll take you on!" cried Krum, pushing out his refined face. "I'll back this match against any of yours for ten cents. Come on, old hunks! Fetch out yer mint drops."

"No, laddie," stammered the Scot, pushing out two raw hands, "I have no use for the game. I might lose, ye ken," he sniggered.

A group of men, some little distance from the stove, were recalling certain catastrophes in their lives, each trying to outstrip the fancy of the last narrator. The thin man was thoughtfully plaiting a fragment of rope. The Greek was struggling to explain, to no one in particular, how that he had once owned a respectable coffee-house in Smyrna. The father of the house closed his evil eyes and began to breathe heavily.

"I did have, all my own, one little coffee-house," whined the Greek into the ear of Munro. "It did stand up in ver' good—good circumstance. Worth much money, my friend, worth ungold told. I did sell him cheap to a man with long hair on his lip and ver' polite, and he did ascend up, while I did ascend down. Dam'."

"My little babby died at half-past nine o'clock in the morning," wailed the tearful scoundrel for the hundredth time.

"What make you a man who do the tramp?" demanded the Greek, imitating the action of walking along an interminable road.

"Listen to ink-top!" shouted Krum, pushing an arm out of his cloak to indicate the swarthy Greek. "Wants to know, boys, what made us take to the

road. Loss of the family fortune, eh? As for me, put it down to a rovin' disposition."

"I'm no dirty tramp," said Munro incautiously. "I've got a profession, and just out of prison for following it. I'm a whisky-runner."

"Whusky!" murmured the Scot, his sternness momentarily relaxing.

"Dirty tramp, hey?" shouted an angry voice from the background. "Who are yer insultin'? Ain't trampin' an honourable profession?"

"Shet yer head," interrupted Krum. "Adjectives don't count at this picnic. What made you a dirty tramp, anyhow?"

"Tired of work," replied the man, with a grin.

"I wanted to take life easy," said another.

"Drink here," said the rope-plaiter, without looking up.

"I wanted to see the land," muttered a gruff voice.

"An' I couldn't live outter the air," a mere boy chipped in.

"Beautiful charity tempted me," leered the one-legged man, opening his faded eyes. "There is too much of it around for a man to work, more especially when he's got this elegant piece of tree to stump around on. Clever men have to live on the fools, lads. It don't matter how poor the one is, or how rich the other, the clever man gets there every time. In summer we have Mother Green to lodge with. In winter there's the hospital, if we don't foller the summer south. When money's short, there's always a box-car, a waggon, a church, or a schoolhouse. Blessed charity can't rest if it ain't lookin' after us. Grub's to be had for the takin'. A good drink when we have the stuff. A soberin' up

at the expense of the tax-payer. That's the way to fatten. I reckon I cost the country three hundred dollars a year, and that's apart from my private income, which comes out of blessed charity."

"Me poor little babby is to be buried at public expense," wailed the mourner.

"Eh, but I have a calamity to cap that," said the Scot, sitting very erect, and turning to the group of talkers who were still arguing over the respective merits of the disasters which had entered into their lives. "Talk of murder, and lightnings, and thunderbolts, boys. Something happened once, a calamity which made me a care-worn man all in the minute. Eh, boys, it makes me shake to think of it."

"What was it, Scottie? Did yer breath catch fire?" asked Krum.

"Don't jest, laddie," cried the Scot piteously.

The thin man looked up from his piece of rope, which he was caressing as though he loved it, and squinted at the speaker. The Greek muttered, "He do tell one fearful story," and stared open-mouthed. The leader yawned and composed himself again to a cat-like sleep, while the dipsomaniac took up his parable.

"There were three of us in one room, Æneas Cleghorn, Angus M'Lennon, and me. 'Twas cold, and the wind blowin' through the windy. There hadn't passed a word between us for most of an hour. We was hungry, and poor, and miserable, and we had just a quarter of a dollar each of us—all the money we had in the world, after dividin' fair. We just set there, and never a word until Æneas pulled out his quarter and thumped it hard upon the bench. 'Whusky,' he proposed. Angus, he put down his quarter quick as he could move. 'Whusky,' he

seconded. Down went my bit, and the motion was carried. I took up the seventy-five cents and went out for the whusky. Oh, boys, I was never to set eyes on Æneas or Angus agin!"

"I know! The house he did catch with fire, an' he did go *poof*," cried the Greek excitedly. "An' the men they did also went *poof* likewise."

"I bought the whusky," quavered the narrator. "I hurried back, wi' the bottle cuddled to me chest, and I sang wi' joy until I came to the corner of the street where a new block was bein' built. Eh, I was singin' in the fulness of me heart, and like a fule, never watchin' the big stones that lay around. And then, boys, I slipped, me foot went from under me, I pitched forward, me arms went out, and—oh, boys, me heart breaks to think of it—the bottle dropped upon a stone."

The vagabonds shouted with laughter, until Mrs. Doolittle's voice rasped warningly at the head of the stairs. The drunkard swayed his rigid body from side to side, completely absorbed by the sorrow of a chimerical disaster which had cast its hallucination and its blight upon his life.

"I couldn't face the boys," he muttered. "I couldn't go back to Æneas and Angus and tell them. They were my partners, the only friends I had, but I went away, and let them think I was dead." He put his hands before his watery eyes. "I can see it now—runnin' over the stones, soakin' inter the ground, lost and gone. I dream of it nights. I wake snatchin' at the bottle, and hear the crash of it."

The fat man leaned over the bench, slobbering upon the Scot, and groped for his hand. This poor scoundrel had formerly occupied a fair position in

the city, and had been married to a good little woman, who would have saved him from the curse had he possessed a single grain of godliness in his composition. For him dismissal had been followed by oblivion. The little wife succumbed, broken-hearted, starved, deserted, leaving their offspring, which the dazed father farmed out for a pittance which he never paid. The child died, and thus the brute's alcoholic grief.

"Old partner, gimme hand," he quavered.

The Scot straightened himself, and pushing off the tearful crocodile, exclaimed, with a sober shudder:

"What's yon feller watching after?"

The silent man in rusty black, who had been engaged for the past hour in plaiting a thin strand of rope, was gazing villainously at the bull-like mass of flesh and muscle which rose between the big Scot's shoulders.

A growl ran through the Pit, followed by an aggressive movement headed by the father of the house. The cadaverous man had only recently joined the community, and his unpleasant face had not been recognised by any member of the brotherhood of crime.

"Don't get afeard," he growled back. "I don't belong to the police, though I did know quite a few of 'em one time when I worked for Government. I was just admiring the neck of Scottie yonder," he explained, with a hoarse laugh, testing the tight strand of rope across his knee until it creaked.

"Man!" gasped the Scot. And with the exclamation he tugged his old tam-o'-shanter down to his bleared eyes, grabbed a cudgel, and blundered out of the cellar, pursued by the grim laughter of the gang.

"There's your cord," went on the man in black,

flinging the piece of rope across Krum's knees. "What you want it for ain't none of my business, but I'll guarantee it won't give, not if you was to swing old Sandy at the end of it. I've plaited a few in my time, sonnie, and I never knew one to break. Gimme a dime."

Catching the coin which Krum threw to him, the dark little man flipped it to the roof, caught it in his mouth, then turned to the steps, wrapping his hands in his cloak, and departed, treading as noiselessly as a cat.

He was followed, after an interval, by the remaining sons of the Pit, with the exception of the two Englishmen and the sentimental wretch who continued to advertise his grief. It was past midnight; the small hours of the morning were profitable to those who walked in darkness. It was the time for carrying into execution those plots which had been hatched by day in the depths of the Doolittle domain. One by one the rogues crept out, to disappear into the grey wreaths of mist which enshrouded the avenues at either end of Hamlet Street, and the devil became busy looking after his own.

Krum and Munro remained seated upon a mattress in the far corner conversing in whispers, until the silence of the cellar became disturbed by the clattering entry of the landlady. She swept the floor for a minute, then paused, and leaning upon the handle of the broom, regarded the partners critically.

"If you two fellers was dressed alike, I'll be moon-struck if I could tell you apart," she said deliberately. "An' if it was my business to be inquisitive, I'd wonder why you aren't brothers. Well, my dandies, ain't you got any job on to-night?"

"We don't want to give ourselves away if we have," snarled Krum.

The woman grinned and spat upon her hands before resuming her work.

"I guess you're young," she said contemptuously.

"The fog is getting up now," whispered Krum.

"We can run our business through in an hour."

He drew his mud-stained cloak closely round his shoulders, and stepped across the floor. Munro followed; but as he passed Mrs. Doolittle, she swung out a red hand and held him.

"Just out of the cooler, I hear?" she said.

The young man grunted an affirmative, trying at the same time to pose as a hardened offender.

"You're a right sort of boy," said Mrs. Doolittle, with far more feeling than she generally displayed.

"You ain't one of them. Bless you, I can pick out the birds by this time. As for him, he's well plucked; but you—" She sniffed, and released his arm. "A

decent woman could make something out of *you*. See here!" she went on, between the swoops of her broom, "if they catch you agin, up goes yer

number. Remember that; an' remember, if they're after you, come right straight here." She lowered her rough voice. "I'll hide yer, lad."

"Thanks very much," the ticket-of-leave man mumbled, like a nervous schoolboy.

At the head of the stairs he found Krum awaiting him impatiently.

"I go south, you north," explained that gentleman brusquely. "You're a marked man, and if we walked together the police might suspect me. I prefer to keep my reputation. Meet me presently on the sidewalk, opposite the post office."

CHAPTER III

THE TRAPPING OF A FOOL

A SQUAT wooden office, crushed between two cloud-scraping blocks, stared impertinently upon Main Street, as though proud of the distinction of its architectural insignificance. This building, with the lot upon which it stood, was owned by two country-bred solicitors, who had worked up a considerable practice by a judicious system of advertisement. These joint partners sat for some hours daily at their roll-top desks, inwardly intoxicated by the sense of their position—for they were both little better than illiterate—veneered outwardly by a complete conversance with tough legal arguments. Their clerks performed far more than mere clerical work. Upon their shoulders, in fact, reposed the control of the office, the interviewing of city clients, the unravelling of titles, the valuation of property, with the hundred details of the day's work. Stupefied farmers were invariably introduced into the presence of whichever partner happened to be "disengaged" at the moment of their visit, and, when suitably mystified, were handed over to one of the clerks, with the unvarying formula: "Here, Mr. What's-ye-name, this gentleman wants a loan upon his farm." In four cases out of five the statement was correct; in the fifth case the gentleman in question

usually desired to buy or sell ; but it was hopeless to attempt to shake the minds of either partner out of the fixed groove of money-lending at a substantial rate of interest.

The mainstay of the office was the book-keeper, an unwholesome-looking individual with a highly-developed penchant for freemasonry, and an equally prominent bump of self-esteem. Soady, with all his faults, was however an altogether capable man of business. He knew more law than even the junior partner, a breathless young barrister who attended to the argumentative side of the office, and was honoured by the confidence of his seniors, although his name was not permitted to appear upon the notepaper of the firm. Soady was the final court of appeal. His decision upon contentious business was sought by men unconnected with the office. It was Soady whom the overdue and impecunious mortgager shrank from ; for the book-keeper was a religious man, and one half of his religion was composed of an almost fanatical faith in legal entry and foreclosure.

Strange to say, the book-keeper had no idea how entirely the office depended upon him. He worked merely for the love of exercising his faculties ; and frequently when the city was asleep he would return to the office, switch on the electric light, and indulge in a mathematical orgy during the creeping silence of the night. The partners filled in their day of business by smoking cigars and affixing their signatures. In the interval they waxed fat upon the results of work done by others. But Soady, never realising that he was making substance for these lay-figures, continued to use up brain-tissue and burn out with silent festivities of overwork.

With all his capacity for advising others, the book-keeper was weak. Like most other men he had his own dim shrine, where he had set up a little altar to a false god, and where, in moments of relaxation, he would kneel to burn incense. Love of admiration was Mr. Soady's Baal. And thus it came to pass that he, all incontinently, was delivered into the hands of Krum.

That Janus-tongued vagabond encountered the book-keeper—not, be it stated, by accident—at a church meeting; religion, masonry, carousal, were with Krum all means to an end. Soady, who was none too respectably dressed himself—the busier the man the shabbier his coat—was undismayed by the bandit's cloak, the hat of broken rim, the bulging shoes, and the lack of linen, which were the outward characteristics of the man who introduced himself suddenly. When this keen-eyed stranger, whose manner throughout the meeting had been devotional, smiled in his superior manner, and gave him the masonic grip, Soady's heart opened like a wayside flower touched by the sun, and he returned a greeting of this "brother" with unction, mingled with respect. In five minutes the book-keeper was, metaphorically speaking, gagged and bound, the Philistine's prisoner.

"Regarding my outward appearance, I beg you not to be over-hasty in your criticism," said the magnetic Krum, halting as he spoke to adjust a refractory boot, during their progress from the meeting-house. "Manners, and not clothes, make the man. I am, as a gentleman of your innate intelligence and discernment will have instantly perceived, one who has been singularly persecuted by fortune. But believe me, my dear sir, it is not

my intention to inflict any of my troubles, or even my company, if unwelcome, upon you. Being myself a gentleman of some birth and learning, I recognised in you, at a glance, a kindred spirit, a partner in mental attainments, if I may be allowed the familiarity of the expression, and therefore I ventured to address you, believing that the pleasure which I should certainly have felt had you thought fit to open the acquaintance would be entertained by you also."

These words were honey to the soul of Soady. The speaker's delightful accent, his precise periods, punctuated by the cold, masterful smile, which proclaimed him to be a man strong-minded and independent, were links in the chain which held the book-keeper captive from that hour. He entreated Krum to come home with him. He gave him supper, bringing out his best when he found that this calm, opinionative gentleman, who quoted Greek and Latin upon occasion, had no difficulty in agreeing with his own deep-rooted and narrow sentiments upon religion and socialism. He wrung himself like a sponge to squeeze out smatterings of knowledge. The two men could have shaken hands with each other after every statement.

The book-keeper regarded smoking as a nauseous habit; but when they had eaten, and Mrs. Soady had been obliterated, the host explained that he would gladly waive his objections and willingly suffer himself to be asphyxiated by the strongest narcotic fumes. Whereupon Krum knitted his brows, and after thoughtfully tapping his chin with the apex of two finely-chiselled fingers, gravely stated that he had given the matter his earnest consideration in the

past, and had arrived at the conclusion that it was neither reasonable nor decent that any man, who was called upon to play a part, however small, in the momentous issues of mankind, should convert himself, even temporarily, into the imitation of a base stove-pipe. Again, Soady looked upon strong drink as the outward and visible snare of Satan for the encompassing of weak souls. His companion smiled, and waved the question aside as one already settled by the decision of his friend's superior mind.

"Oh, say, Mr. Krum!" stammered the overcome book-keeper.

In that frame of mind Soady would have gone down on his knees and caressed the profligate's broken shoes. And so the comedy proceeded, until the guest was satisfied, and rose magnificently, announcing his intention of seeking his humble lodging, saying, as he held the wriggling hand of the flattered fool:

"It has been indeed a pleasure and a privilege, unexpected, and therefore the more enjoyable, to have encountered among the illiterate crowd of this city a mental and social equal with whom it is possible to exchange a passing thought. I do not say good-bye, my dear Mr. Soady; I merely wish you good-night."

"Oh, say, Mr. Krum!" gasped Soady. "Good-night! Good-night! Come again soon. Come to-morrow."

Tingling with gratification, the book-keeper crawled back into his domestic shell, while Krum turned his steps towards Hamlet Street, muttering disdainfully, "Soft as soap."

The following evening the scoundrel sat in a straight-backed chair in the Soady parlour and talked metaphysics. The admiring book-keeper, his elbows

straddled across the table, his small head perked like a conceited sparrow, listened, applauded, and gurgled like a bottle when some ridiculous argument on his part became received by that stately bend of the head and obsequious lowering of the eyelids, which denoted a complete acquiescence with the utterance of his shallow mind. From probing the inner source of thought, Krum passed to a consideration of physical action and its relationship to the mind. He spoke of the routine of work generally, the methodical nature of bread-winning, the monotony of actions repeated so frequently as to make the author of them mechanical, the moments of recreation necessary to preserve the *men sana in corpore sano*. He turned an expression deftly into Greek, and quoted Aristotle in the original to support his contention, until Soady's mouth became cavernous. He spoke at some length upon the effect of systematic labour upon the brain, and quoted scientists in support of his theory that the manner of a man's employment may be detected by the workings of his mind when the body is disassociated from its avocation. Finally, Krum devoted himself to a consideration of work personally, and suggested that his listener should favour him with a detailed description of the drudgery, the anxieties, and above all the responsibilities, which attended him during the ordinary routine of business.

"I lay peculiar stress upon the word responsibilities," the vagabond went on impressively, "because it seems to me—and here I speak with some experience—that a constant receiving of moneys, with the care of the same, added to the responsibility of being held accountable to employers, who regard one with complete, and in your case

admirably deserved confidence, must in course of time affect the brain, and with it the entire nervous system, and cause the mind to near the limit of that dangerous region where common sense ends and delusion commences. I should be interested to hear your explanation."

The book-keeper floundered into the snare.

"I give you my Christian word, Mr. Krum, that often I lie awake nights worrying, when I have any big amount of money on hand," he said. "You see, not many of the farmers have bank accounts, and they generally look into the office just about the time the banks are closing to pay their interest, or instalment of principal, or the balance upon a sale. I just enter the money into the cash-book, and put it in the vault until morning. It is safe enough, of course, for though anyone could break into our office easy enough, no one, except the junior partner and me, know the combination which opens the vault. I've shown the two partners how to work it many a time, but they don't remember two minutes. Often I get down a bit late and find one of them fooling with the knob; but I've never yet known either of them to open the door. I have never told anyone, and it's not a thing I would talk about, Mr. Krum, but I don't mind telling *you* that the thought of five or six hundred dollars in paper money lying in that vault until banks open the next day has played the mischief with my mind many a night."

"I should say," observed Krum, "that an observant man, who has made any study of human idiosyncrasies, could very possibly detect from your manner whether you have, or have not, at the time of the observation, any large amount reposing temporarily

in the strong room of the office. I should say—if I may be permitted to make the remark—that to-night you have no such responsibility weighing upon your mind?”

“There’s no deceiving you, Mr. Krum,” Soady chuckled. “No, I guess there ain’t more than forty dollars petty cash in the vault to-night. But week after next you will be able to find some trouble on my face. We shall then be taking the half-annual payments on mortgages, to say nothing of rents and other collections. I pass the money into the bank as quick as I can ; but, as I told you, most of ’em call late in the afternoon, between five and six is my busiest time, and nine out of ten pay cash. Every night that week I shall be having a pile of bills put away in the vault, and I’ve no doubt at all but that a clever man like you will be able to tell as much by just looking at me.”

Krum acknowledged the compliment by an inclination of the head.

“I shall find the mental study one of profound interest,” he admitted. “But, of course,” he went on briskly, “you request the police to keep a watchful eye upon your office? The city is thronged, I am told, with unscrupulous characters.”

Soady uttered a grunt of disgust.

“The police! I wouldn’t trust one of ’em, Mr. Krum. No, sir. The money is safe enough. It is not the thought that it might be stolen what worries me. Not all the toughs in the province could open our vault, unless they learnt the combination. It is the thought that all that money is lying idle, and that I’m responsible for every cent of it. Money out of the bank is like—like flowers pulled up by the

roots and withering. I lie awake nights and think to myself, there are all those dollars lying cold and useless, when they ought to be out on investment, making interest, Mr. Krum—making their eight or nine per cent."

Soady scraped his lean hands together, and gazed hungrily into the lamplight, conjuring up airy fabrics of usurious dividends.

A few nights later Krum saw a dim light in the windows of the little office up Main Street. He ascended a flight of stairs and knocked at the door which carried the names of the partners in black letters upon clouded glass. Soady pulled back the door suspiciously, and peered out with dissatisfied eyes, because he liked not interruption, a pen in his right hand, another in his mouth, a third behind his ear; but his pallid face broke into a smile when he recognised his visitor.

"Come along in, Mr. Krum," he said, speaking with the pen still between his teeth. "I thought you had forgotten me. I often come back here, when all's quiet, to tot up a few figures. Take a stool while I finish this little bit of work."

But Krum would not stay for any length of time. His object was merely to spy out the land, and after a hurried glance around he was ready to go. He apologised in perfect periods for his interruption, explaining that he had seen the light in the window, and had ventured to make the trespass because he was anxious to acquaint Soady, whom he referred to eulogistically as his sole friend in the country, of an almost incredible stroke of happy fortune. He had received a cablegram only that afternoon from England, announcing the death of an aunt, and the

good news that the deceased lady had made him her sole heir.

Krum stroked his chin thoughtfully. "My aunt was rich," he concluded.

Soady pumped his companion by the right arm, gurgling felicitations.

"So you see," Krum went on funereally, "I shall not now be compelled to rob your strong room."

It was not often that Soady appreciated a joke, or allowed himself to indulge in irreligious laughter; but this particular witticism set into immediate action the full flow of his unmelodious mirth. It was only just, he thought, that this calm, distinguished gentleman should pass into affluence, and he accepted the fiction implicitly. But through his mirth there rang the note of genuine sorrow.

"You will be leaving for England?" he suggested.

"Next week, I surmise," replied Krum. "I am merely awaiting a remittance from the other side."

"Well, come and spend Sunday evening," invited the book-keeper sadly. "We'll go to church—the Reverend M'Beth is preaching—and back to supper afterwards."

"You must take the trip across to England and stay with me," said Krum gravely. "I will take you about the country, and show you the churches."

"Oh, say, Mr. Krum!" blurted the gratified Soady. "Oh, say!"

The ground being thus well prepared, it came to pass that Krum stood in the smoky mists an hour after midnight, his eyes searching the scarcely perceptible glow in the windows opposite, while he awaited the coming of Munro.

Quarter of an hour passed without bringing any

signs of his confederate ; twenty minutes, and still he stood alone ; half an hour, and the fog in his throat made him cough, and the cold chilled him to the marrow. His fingers fidgeted with the pliant whipcord in his pocket, and his blue lips muttered imprecations upon his missing double.

Finally Krum decided to act alone. It was well after one, and he knew that Soady would soon be quitting his self-imposed labours, and returning home with his responsibilities heavy upon him. For the second time he mounted the steps and knocked at the door ; and again the night-worker, bristling with pens, received him with annoyance which as speedily became converted into delight. After that Sunday evening, when Krum became very nearly demonstrative in his esteem, Soady felt that he would willingly do anything for the clever Englishman.

"I came on the chance of finding you here," began Krum, with sorrow in his refined voice. "I am grieved to say I have come to bid you farewell—grieved, because it means parting, though not permanently I trust, from one whom I am privileged to call my friend. I leave by the Great Northern express early in the morning, and so find this my only opportunity for a last word."

While he spoke he kept his ears pricked for the opening of the door below.

Soady stood before a long row of ledgers, and behind him the great door of the strong room was thrown back. Series of pigeon-holes, where deeds and mortgages were stocked, rows of letter-books and docketts, and the little cash cupboard were revealed by an electric globe shining within the iron walls. The book-keeper stood before the heavy door

exceeding sorrowful. Krum had brought a new pleasure into his life. There would be no soft tongue of flattery to soothe his heart when the superior Englishman had gone to his own place. He leaned forward, winking at the dark corners of the office, and nibbled his penholder spasmodically. Then he shuffled round and closed the great ledgers one by one.

"Do not let me interfere with your work," said Krum, his eyes flashing from point to point, but studiously avoiding the open drawer near the book-keeper's elbow, after having duly noted its contents. "I will say good-bye at once, and go home to bed."

"It is late, Mr. Krum," Soady replied, somewhat blankly. "I think perhaps I am working too hard these days, and not getting the right amount of sleep. There are black spots dancing before my eyes now. I will lock up, and then you will walk back with me, I hope, for a last talk."

He pulled up a great ledger, and staggered with it towards the vault.

"I insist upon rendering you some assistance, my dear man," said Krum, with unwonted feeling. "These books are too heavy for you in your weak, tired state. If you remain in the vault I will hand everything in to you. First you must take the cash."

Soady made an undecided step out of the strong-room, blinking his weary eyes, and feebly expressed his thanks, adding :

"I was just checking the amounts when you came. There should be—"

"I am running this office just now," interrupted his companion, dropping into colloquial language.

"Just you stand there, and let me hand up the books and the money."

He pulled the flat pile of bills out of the drawer, moistened his thumb and forefinger, and began to count:

"One hundred, two, three, four, five, sixty and four. Five hundred and sixty-four dollars."

"That's right, Mr. Krum—that's right," said Soady admiringly.

Krum passed an elastic band about the bundle; then coolly pushed it into his side pocket.

"The more a man has the more he wants," he said, in his critical style. "When I was poor I only asked for a roof over me, and an occasional meal; but now that I am rich, I confess this money tempts me. In my present mood I could even make away with this cash, not because I am in need of money, but merely for the pleasure of adding to that which I already have. The poor man is the only free-minded creature alive, Soady. Every rich man develops the miserly instinct so soon as he can feel the fascination that possession brings."

"Ah, Mr. Krum, how I shall miss you and your learned sayings," sighed the book-keeper. "I thought just now when I saw you counting that money that you ought to have been a lawyer. I feel sure of it, Mr. Krum."

"We are what destiny makes us," the scoundrel replied solemnly; and Soady blinked, and replied meekly:

"Very true, Mr. Krum."

"Here, take the pelf—but wait. Let us have these big books in first."

Krum gathered up the A to M ledger in both

arms and brought it to the door of the vault. At the threshold, as Soady reached out his arms to receive the burden, the bearer of it appeared to stumble. The great book crushed upon its keeper, driving him back, and long before he could recover the iron door was slammed, the well-oiled bolts were shot, and the knob was turned. A sound of rapidly moving feet, a clanking of glass shades as the electric lights were switched out, the opening and shutting of a door followed, muffled and far away; and after that Mr. Soady sat down upon the floor of the strong room, and began to think. Just at that moment he found it decidedly difficult to comprehend the superior Mr. Krum.

"It was easier without Munro," muttered the thief, as he escaped into the street. The fog had lifted considerably, and the tall arc-lights whitened the dry sidewalk frostily. "Violence is always annoying, and usually ungentlemanly. The fool is safe there until nine o'clock to-morrow. His anæmic shouts will never reach the street. But where in the deuce is Munro?"

He passed away with easy steps along the shadowed side of the street.

CHAPTER IV

FIRST LOVE

WHEN a man is young, hungry for sympathy, and lonely, the vision of a fair maid in white—or, indeed, in any colour—flickering across his path, with a twinkle of small feet and much sunlight imprisoned in her hair, brings him new thoughts, and causes his heart to quicken. Vagabond or man of honour, humanity triumphs. The choir of sirens have doubtless lured many a good man to his doom; but how many a weak sinner has some Circe reclaimed from the very brink of the pit! Woman is a lodestar. Free will is hers, and she may decide in which direction she shall guide.

Yet, in Munro's case, the fire could not burn freely owing to a lack of fuel. He cherished his secret jealously in his heart. Krum never guessed what it was that caused his partner to wander out into the city, morning, noon, and evening, during those cold weeks of the break-up. The ticket-of-leave man had nothing to say when he returned from these wanderings. He would sit silently in the corner of the cellar, and constitute himself the architect of impossible little Spanish châteaux, which crumbled like sand as he piled them up, smiling the while at the thought of the life he was leading, and his wickedness in bringing himself even mentally into any sort of

contact with *her* purity. Krum, the cynic, would have reminded him that, according to anatomy, a woman is as much descended from the apes as the man, that some particular animal type forms the basis of every feminine countenance, that the beauty of eyes merely resolves into a question of their setting. The gazelle would become a sheep had it a sheep's eyes. But Munro was neither philosopher nor scientist. He was not even clever. He merely owned enough sense to feel that he could not be in love with a girl of whom he knew nothing, except that she was young and beautiful, and tripped about the ways of the city, wonderfully white, like a lily-flower, and full of soul.

Probably she was engaged in some office as a stenographer, for she would alight from an electric car at the corner of Assiniboine Avenue shortly before nine o'clock. Her luncheon hour appeared to be from one to two. Soon after six she set her fair face northwards, walking home always, possibly for exercise, perhaps to save the fare. Often Munro followed her as far as he dared, impressionable and nervous, feeling a villain to the finger-tips; but he had not discovered where she lived, or where worked. He did not even know her name—mentally he called her Marguerite, because the flower-title seemed to suit; but once he heard her speak to another girl, whom she passed on the way, and he was not disappointed.

He saw Marguerite on the first occasion after this wise:—It was a day born before its time, a good day of sun and warm west wind. Munro loafed at the corner of Assiniboine Avenue, the busiest centre of the city, his hands deep in his shabby pockets, his defiant eyes watching the passers-by. The one-

legged man stumped past, favouring him with a scarcely perceptible wink of recognition from beneath his Salvation cap. It was not etiquette, nor was it politic, for Mrs. Doolittle's lodgers to pass the word abroad, unless need was urgent. The loafer turned, and was about to move in the direction of the police-station, because the time had come for him to report himself, when the atmosphere became fragrant, a lovely face quivered for an instant before his, pink as a bed of roses, a grey skirt was for the moment in peril of being contaminated by his touch, and a girl passed like the breeze of a morning. In that bath of sunshine she appeared more than human. Her large hat, resting sideways upon a nest of brown hair, her grey skirt that whispered poetry, her toylike shoes, receded. She went away without a thought for the watcher. Munro moved towards the police headquarters to exhibit his vile body, and as he went it seemed to him that a bird was struggling to free itself from his side.

The following evening, as he stood near the station, shamefully begging small coins from those who passed by, keeping the while out of sight of the police, he saw Marguerite for the second time. As he drew back in his degradation, the girl turned slightly, and for one moment her eyes played across the shabby figure. Munro thrust himself farther back, with head downcast. He was a tramp, a gaol-bird, one of the nameless dwellers of Hamlet Street; while she—she was an angel.

The weather was treacherous at that season of the year, and when he saw Marguerite again she was wearing a little Persian-lamb jacket and a saucy fur cap with a red cockade. She went by in this fresh

phase of loveliness, leaving her watcher with another picture to gloat over and another emotion to subdue. It was ridiculous to suppose that she had even noticed the shabby young man who stood a loafer at the corners of the city.

Munro's infatuation, at all events, bent him in the right direction. His eyes became partly opened, and he recognised what manner of man he was. But the taint of prison gives a man small chance for retrieving his lost status. Munro's reform began in egoism; he attended again to his personal appearance; he had his chin shaved and his hair trimmed; he even bought a collar, though he dared not flaunt the same in the Pit, and, luck favouring him, acquired a new pair of shoes from the street-stall of a Jew during the owner's absence. This theft was accomplished almost before he could think, the habit being strong upon him; but he suffered subsequently. It was undoubtedly Marguerite who caused the remorse. What would she think of him if she knew? That the girl could herself be anything less than what she appeared to him he could not think. But for himself he knew there was no return. All the paths were closed. Only the one wide avenue spread ahead—the road which went by way of prison, vagabondage, and law-breaking, into the dark. He hugged his infatuation to his unworthy heart, and held it there, as the one pleasure to which every man, be he worthy or worthless, is surely entitled.

Nor could he know that he, the villain, was about to play the part of hero in a tragedy; that there were, in fact, many greater villains than himself—villains unspotted by prison and full of honours in that centre as in others. With a fond chivalry he

determined to watch over Marguerite as she passed about the ways of the city. That she needed a strong protector he could not dream.

There came a time of darkness, when the watcher waited at the corners in vain. Neither down the avenue, nor at the station crossing, nor in the region of restaurants, could he sight Marguerite. He remembered that his last glimpse of the girl had shown her pale, oppressed, and less nimble of step. Marguerite was ill, so Munro went no more to the cheap barber, and no longer assumed the collar as a sign of respectability, neither did he clean the sprinklings of mud from his clothes. If Marguerite were ill he would go in mourning.

There were respectable residents in Hamlet Street, not so many as a dozen perhaps, and these were poor to the pitch of desperation. In the leaking, wind-swept rooms of the tumbling blocks rent was nominal, and here were hidden a few who walked the way of virtue unrewarded, and sheltered against the storm, hoping for better days. In the rope warehouse at the corner Munro knew that there were certainly two lodgers, medical students, who had come as near to the solution of the problem of how to live on sunshine as men can come and live. The better-fed vagabond had seen these ill-favoured men slinking into the street after lectures at the college. He had even made their acquaintance, and had been taken up into their common room, where they worked, slept, and occasionally, God knows how often, had a meal; where they talked confidently of the future, when they should have finished their examinations, and have built up a practice out of brain sweat and sheer determination.

Munro listened, and was staggered at the indomitable spirit of these burners of oil-less lamps and makers of brick without straw.

"It is never too late to start," one of the students had said, his dark eyes burning from a lean face. "I am on the wrong side of thirty, and my room-mate is older than I. But we have set our minds upon success, and succeed we shall. In summer we go out and work for farmers through the haying and harvest, and the money we make then has to keep us through the remainder of the year, and pay our college fees. The harder the fight the better the victory. We shall laugh at these days in the future."

Munro returned to the Pit, hating the sight of Krum and the thought of himself. One half of his mind was devoted to the disappearance of Marguerite; the other half, less consciously, was absorbed in wonder whether he too should "laugh at these days in the future." He was lying idle among the weeds; the students were tilling their little plots of ground, and sowing the earth with good seed. To every man falls the harvest, when he shall gather as he has sown.

Apathetically Munro listened as Krum revealed his plan of robbing the law-office. Money they must have to equip themselves for the journey north to the great sand desert; and money could only be obtained by crime. Krum, the selfish and passionless, made the plot, as usual taking upon himself little of the dirty work. He would enter the office alone, converse with Soady, see that the cash was ready to hand, and withdraw; a minute later Munro would break in, overpower the book-keeper, and snatch the money. Krum would then hastily return, having heard Soady's cries, and close with his

confederate; Munro would overpower him, and make good his escape, while Krum would feign to be hurt, and implore Soady not to leave him, so that his partner might be given time to leave the city. Munro agreed, subservient always to the stronger mind; but he registered an oath before the unknown goddess that this should be the last piece of law-breaking in his career.

Not a sound disturbed the night when Munro issued into Hamlet Street after Krum had left him. The cold fog was carried along like smoke. One beam of lamplight stabbed beneath the blind of M'Gillavery House, where gambling and deep drinking endured till morning. A long cat flashed across, a scrap of newspaper rustled along the side walk, a singing frog churned a puddle in the rotten woodwork. The stertorous breathing of the raw night resembled a sufferer on his bed of sickness. It was a good hour for the thief. The Doolittle purse would be fattened on the morrow.

Three paces separated Munro from the corner, where a leafless maple shivered in the mist, when a figure blundered from a tottering door, almost colliding with the walker in darkness. This figure clutched a muffler twisted round its neck, and was breathing loudly. Munro recognised the elder of the two students.

"You're out late," he muttered, glad to exchange a word with an honest soul.

"Hello!" exclaimed the student. "Say, I hope you aren't on the street?" he went on hoarsely. "If you are, you know our place. I have just to go round to the chemist. There is someone sick up there."

He spoke with a certain hesitation, and his statement ended in a cough.

"I'll walk on with you into Main Street," Munro said. "Nothing wrong with your partner, I hope?"

"He is as hard as a rock, and so am I." The student lowered his voice. "It is worse than that."

They hurried together along the avenue where pools of water flashed drearily under the lamp-poles. Munro had nothing more to say; his body was cold with that fear which unmans the soldier before the first shot of the battle is fired, and his brain was busy with the thought of the part he was soon to play. They were half-way towards Main Street, when it dawned upon him that the man at his side was talking rapidly, thickly, and often unintelligibly. Munro gave his attention, and a few words made his ears tingle; a phrase stung his brain. He found himself listening feverishly, and before the red lamp over the chemist's door goggled through the fog, he had forgotten the waiting Krum, as he had forgotten the plot, and the convict's information and his future. The words of the student buzzed in the cold air like hornets.

The picture was well drawn, the description was unmistakable; the details were added, as he might have added them, one by one, convincingly, if brokenly, and sometimes lovingly, by the shabby and honest pauper. It was impossible; it was unthinkable. And yet that story, which the medical's poor phrases pieced together, was too tragic for his invention. He found an evident relief in telling what he knew. He too was a man, and he too knew how to respond to the barbed touch of an ennobling pain.

The listener was dumb.

"It is an old story," said the student, as he wiped the fog, and that which was not fog, from his eyes.

They came under the red light. The honest man disappeared, and the knave waited—the one on his errand of mercy, the other stiff and stupid in a trance. Presently the student came out with a packet in his hand. Ducking his head, he began to run, unmindful of Munro, until he heard the footfalls pattering along the planks behind.

"I forgot you," he panted. "Come along! We can give you a corner."

Munro let the kind-hearted fellow believe that he had no place where to lodge that night, and so they ran together to the dark corner and the great block where no light showed. They halted beside the door, the student struck a match to reveal a flight of dirty, broken stairs leading up into a horror of darkness, and Munro followed into the lone interior.

Poverty! The place grinned of it within the large, bare room where the students struggled for the right to live. There was a bedstead, arranged at a curious angle to avoid drippings from the roof; a cracked cook-stove, with a pipe above, rusted red; one bleak table, and two tottering chairs; a pile of crockery in one corner, with a few culinary utensils placed along the wall; a heap of tattered medical books, bought for a song, and tenderly repaired; the indispensable lamp completed the store of furniture. The junior student was finishing his supper of bread and tea, after six hours' continuous brain work.

Munro nodded mechanically to the feaster, and leaned against the wall. The building was entirely

silent, except for the creaking of the uneasy woodwork, and the ticking of nocturnal insects. The senior student returned to the room and carved himself a portion of bread. He pushed the wrecked loaf across the table to Munro; but the latter shook his head. The door was left ajar. Every other minute one of the medicals crossed the room and listened from the threshold. Now and again they looked at each other and blinked when their eyes met. The younger man whispered, "Does he know?" motioning his head towards Munro. The elder whispered back, "He knows." Subdued as these whisperings were, the silence was so complete that the listener overheard every syllable.

The hushed building became disturbed at last by a sound of careless singing. The door came open; the singer pushed in, with a total lack of ceremony—a tall woman, slim and dark, bearing traces of former attractions, dressed negligently, her black hair, streaked finely with grey, spread upon her shoulders.

"Why, boys," she muttered, in a voice which must once have been pleasant, "what a sober crowd you are!"

The elder student was standing half in front of Munro, his hands behind his back, and the ex-convict watched the long, lean fingers clasping violently and unclasping, with a curious interest in the process.

"How is she?" asked a far-away voice.

"It is about the child I've come," said the woman, in the same restrained manner. "I hate to bother you again at this time of night, but I'd be real thankful if one of you would go out and get her an orange. She has eaten nothing all day, and now, all of a sudden, she has set her mind upon an orange."

She extended her rough hand, a small silver coin gleaming upon the palm.

Without being conscious that he had moved, Munro found himself in front of her, trying to pass and reach the door. He only understood that Marguerite was near, lying ill in that horrible place, and she was asking for an orange.

"Why, if here isn't another!" exclaimed the woman, with the ghost of a laugh. "Will you go for her, Englishman? Will you fetch her an orange? Poor little Jeannie," she added, speaking naturally for the first time. "Poor little girl."

Every word struck Munro like a missile. He pushed aside her hand when it would have passed him the coin, and walked out, the voice following along the passage:

"You are a good sort, Englishman. Jeannie will just love you."

Darkness hid the smile on Munro's face as he stumbled down the unsafe stairs and into the night. That he had so recently been discharged from gaol, that he was even then due to rob an office, that there was such a creature as Krum in the world, he had forgotten. Again he felt that strange sensation, as though a bird was struggling with beak and claws to escape from his side.

He came into the silent street, ran through the wan night, and so into the main, where the Jew shops were always open. An eagle-nosed Hebrew served him of his best oranges, not one, nor two, but a great bagful, and he paid for the golden fruit with a silver coin which was part of the proceeds of mendicity, and made haste to return, the story of

Jeannie's betrayal and desertion throbbing through the voices of the night.

The students were finishing the dregs of their teapot when Munro rejoined them. They looked up, but said not a word, and filling their short pipes with granulated tobacco, began to smoke as a relief to body and mind, while Munro stood again against the wall, and watched them, as he might have watched the unreal figures of a dream. So the seconds dragged along, and outside the wind of the morning began to breathe as though in distress.

The steps fell again along the passage, but the song was done. The woman re-entered, and her face was ghastly when she tried to create it into a smile.

"Jeannie says it is just good of you, Englishman. She told me to thank you lots."

When she had delivered her message, she turned and became lost in that black and throbbing passage.

Mentally Munro repeated the words again and again. He and that fair girl were under the same roof at last, and it had fallen to his lot to do her a service, and he stood rewarded by her gratitude. Yet he must remain to Jeannie as a mere passing Englishman, who in an idle moment of charity had gone out to buy her a few oranges. She would never connect the loafer at the station-crossing with the donor of the fruit. She might never know that he, the disreputable creature upon whom she had glanced, pityingly perhaps, was prepared to stand as her champion against the world. Would she ever know what good desires she had implanted in his heart?

Again the woman entered, breathing quickly, as

though she had seen a phantom, but swaggering as a cloak to cover more genuine feeling. She whispered to the elder man, and he rose with an assumed cough. Together they departed, and the door was shut for the first time. The remaining student put up his tired face and talked disjointedly; and Munro listened, not to him, but for the smallest sound from any adjacent room, starting at every creaking of the woodwork, at the moan of the wind, and each disturbance within the stove.

That fearful silence was at length broken. The two returned, the woman outwardly as careless as at first, the student taciturn and apparently indifferent, although he turned his back upon the others and devoted a long attention to the stoking of the fire.

For one moment the cloud lifted from Munro's brain, and the fluttering in his side ceased. Undoubtedly Jeannie was better; she was asleep; nothing else could justify the woman's continued absence from the sick-room. His heart bounded at the thought that he would see Jeannie walking again in her dainty white about the ways of the city. She would be told—surely she would be told about the oranges. And then perhaps she would smile upon the loafer, and perhaps she would speak.

"How is Miss Jeannie?" he asked, quite steadily, putting up a hand to silence if he could the buzzing in his ears.

The woman started and stared at him curiously. Then she turned away very slightly, and wiped her hands upon her faded skirt.

"Jeannie," she stammered, confounded by the straightforward question, and giving a strangled

cough. She laughed disdainfully, but try as she would, found herself unable to maintain a level tone when she said :

“The child was sucking one of the oranges you bought her, as patient as an angel, when she called out, and gasped once, all in a second, and—well, Englishman!” There her voice rose hysterically, as she stood aside, and pointed out into the horror of the passage. “Go across, and look.”

Thus it was that Munro was hindered from keeping his appointment with Krum.

CHAPTER V

THE RECTOR OF GRANDE MARAIS

THE spring wind came in gusts across the swamps, bending the bleached stems and tasselled heads of last year's reeds, ruffling the pools where loons and divers plunged and screamed. It was a grey day, good for the rod and the gun. The brimming river, red with its clay, cried aloud as it swept towards the lake, bearing down lumps of ice, trees torn from their moorings, hay-stacks lifted from some parish lot, with all the lesser flotsam snatched from the lowland farms by the great marauder at the time of his annual freedom. Water was everywhere; the soil oozed, and the black willows shook forth drops at every gust.

Upon the trunk of a tree an elderly man sat a-fishing. The tree had fallen into the stream; its branches were partly submerged, its straining roots still anchored to the bank. At every tug of the current the trunk quivered, and the roots creaked, heaving the soil ominously. Any moment the entire trunk threatened to resign its long connection with the mainland, and sail westward with its freight. But the unkempt old clergyman, the fisherman aforesaid, showed no apprehension, because he firmly believed that the tree would weather that spring clearing as it had struggled through others.

Therefore he sat tight and said nothing, except when his stout line drew out a whitefish. Then the horn spectacles beamed upon either side of his hairy nose, and the monosyllable, "Good!" escaped from the tangle of beard which quivered about his mouth.

Around him spread Grande Marais, dotted over with cabins, where his parishioners, chiefly half-breeds, with some dredgers, lighthouse workers, and a sprinkling of lumbermen, lived from hand to mouth, finding, as a rule, more occupation for the former than for the latter. The general store stood on a dirt-hill, where a promontory pushed into the lake like the spur on the leg of a game-cock; the saturated log-church and the equally moist parsonage were half a mile away, in the midst of a wilderness of reeds. The cry of the rails and the booming of bitterns stormed the damp wind with sorrowful echoes. It was not a cheerful parish, but the fisherman had held his charge for so many years, and had become so shaped by habit to his environment, that any change to a high and dry site would probably have nipped his humid soul forthwith.

He was a simple gentleman, and his theology was very much on a par with his outward appearance: easy, untidy, and convenient. There was neither lake of brimstone nor gnashing of teeth in the orthodoxy of this reverend gentleman. The whole duty of man, according to him, was summed up by the doctrine, support your clergyman, and see that your church is kept in repair. To which was added in summer the additional article of faith, be careful not to set the reeds on fire. He was in many ways a worthy soul, and his worthiness was valued by the Diocesan Synod at one hundred and fifty dollars per

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annum, a stipend which left no appreciable margin for self-indulgence or clothes. As he had protested to the bishop, when that excellent diocesan had once upon record descended to spend an hour in the swamps: "If I were not a good judge of a horse, my lord, I really could not live."

"Very good!" exclaimed the titheless rector of Grande Marais, as he drew up his fifth protesting whitefish; and in the act he cast his eyes landwards, and straightway his lips parted again to exclude the ejaculation, "Good heavens!"

The four-pound fish splashed back into its natural element, and renewed the fight for freedom. A jagged ice-block crashed upon the tree and caused the incumbent to totter for one perilous moment. Then he recovered himself, and pushing the long hair from his eyes, cast the interrogation, "Do you want me?" at a young man who was standing among the reeds.

"You are the parson, I believe?" called back the stranger.

The fisherman nodded, drew in his line, unhooked the trout, added it to the number of the slain, and scrambled ashore. He wiped the scales from his right hand, and extended it, with a comprehensive glance over his visitor, and the undecided query:

"Are you a brother of the cloth?"

"Your discernment is only equalled by your courtesy," Krum replied, without a pause, glad of the question which gave his cleverness an opportunity of instantly formulating a better scheme than that he had brought with him. "I am, as you have surmised, a fellow-cleric, though, unlike you, I have no permanent cure of souls. My commission is to sow the

seed nomadically. My office is that of the itinerant. I am, in short, a missionary; and as it has been found expedient that I should reach the north at the earliest opportunity, our spiritual father, the bishop of this diocese, has referred me to you, with the expressed hope that you would render me some assistance in crossing the lake."

"Well, well, well!" gasped the rector, dismayed by the speaker's grandiloquence. "Of course I'll help you. But the northern waters are dangerous so early in the season. The winds are very treacherous, and you will come across lots of ice. I would not trust myself to a sailing boat before the end of May; but then I am an old man, and you are young, and I guess you don't mind taking a risk. Come up to my house, and tell me just what you want. Of course you're not travelling alone?"

"A lay brother has been told off to accompany me," replied the ever-ready Krum, in a manner which would have deceived a far shrewder man than the simple rector of Grande Marais. "He is at this present moment at the local store, purchasing supplies for our journey. We are both of us new to the work," he went on, with a calm smile, "but not, I trust, wanting in zeal. My dear brother—if you will allow me to call you so—I may not trespass long upon your time and good-nature. I merely ask that you will immediately procure for me a good sailing boat. I place myself unreservedly in your hands, and will rely entirely upon your recommendation. My instructions compel me to make north at once, and however unwilling I may be to tear myself from this hospitable spot, and face the prospect of the cold wind and the danger of the wandering flocs of ice, I must

obey. Before another hour has passed, I hope, with your generous assistance, to be on my journey. I must not lose this wind, which should carry me far upon my way to-day."

The pastor was staggered by this unseemly haste. It was the excellent custom of the swamps to do things leisurely. Thus a week might very well be consumed over such a momentous matter as bargaining for a sale. Although the visitor's haste was indecent, it never for a moment occurred to the rector that it was suspicious, because he too had once been young and zealous, and he could remember how tedious had been delays in that distant time. Nor did it occur to him to ask for a letter of introduction. The calm, keen-faced visitor was undoubtedly all that he purported to be. The pastor's business instincts arose. If he could sell a horse, why, then, he could buy a boat; and it would have to be a very cold day if he failed to pocket something out of the transaction.

Gathering up his string of fish, he led the way from the river, along a path trodden between the rushes, and Krum followed at his heels.

Far less dismayed was the owner of the store at the requirements of the second visitor into the marshes. Both he and his half-breed assistant were kept on the move, the former bringing out goods and entering purchases upon a blackboard, the latter carrying the selected wares outside. Without any previous investigation Munro bought food-stuffs, such as cornmeal, bacon, evaporated vegetables, and fruit, tea, sugar, flour and yeast cakes; implements, such as picks, shovels, and axes; with such luxuries as a miner's tent and sleeping-bags. He selected with a feverish haste, which might have aroused suspicion had the

storekeeper been given cause to guess how the purchase-money had been acquired, merely naming his wants, and accepting what was offered. His manner suggested that he hated the work—that he would never have started upon the expedition had he been a free agent. The tragedy of the previous night still dazed and stupefied him, and he felt that he cared very little whether they got away over the black water or were caught by the police at the moment of departure.

"I guess," suggested the storekeeper, as he bustled about, "you know some place worth prospectin', and mean to be first on the ground? These beans are good," he went on professionally. "I can supply you one hundred pounds at five dollars. Yes? Right! Jim, put 'em outside."

"Say, Mr. M'Call!" cried the voice of the rector from the door. "Who has got the best sail boat around here?"

The storekeeper looked up from his calculations, hesitated, and rubbed the side of his head thoughtfully.

"Paul La Rue has a good one," he replied presently, giving the praise grudgingly. "But I don't suspect Paul would sell. Now I have just a dandy," he said shrewdly. "And new last spring."

"I know yours," said the rector, who had no idea of bargaining with a better business man than himself. "It is too small. Paul La Rue," he went on thoughtfully. "Yes, I'll just look round and speak to him."

Placing his fish upon the top of a salt-barrel, the rector proceeded to shake hands with Munro, and to enter into a conversation which was abruptly

terminated by Krum, who entered the store, and almost by force drew the procrastinator away.

"Pardon me if I ask you to respect my wishes," he said, in the stately style which quite terrified the shabby little rector. "My duty calls me to leave this shore at once. You must surely see that I cannot afford to lose this wind?"

"Yes, yes," stammered the incumbent. "I—I can understand. I will go and find La Rue at once. Have you," he ventured timidly—"have you lots of money?"

Satisfied upon this point, the rector was moved on a few paces; but the sight of the equipment outside presented another stumbling-block. He stopped and ran his hands longingly over every bale, and chuckled noisily when he beheld the mining-tools.

"Ah!" he said, pulling his beard, his horn spectacles beaming wickedly. "So you are going out well-fixed! You are quite right. But I would not take this shovel. You should have the L.H. It is a far better tool. I will just ask M'Call if he hasn't got the L.H. Do you really think you may find gold upon your station?"

"The churchman must be practical as well as spiritual," replied Krum, without relaxing a muscle of his face. "I will go and interrogate the store-keeper myself regarding the shovel you have recommended, if you will be so kind as to execute the commission which you have undertaken. Unless," he went on, "you desire me to accompany you?"

But this was precisely what the clergyman did not desire. His dealings with the owner of the boat could not secure for him any margin of profit should the bargaining take place before the principal. A

boat was not a horse ; a started plank could not be glossed over like a spavin ; a leak was so much more palpable than defective eyesight or a hard mouth. On one point the pastor's mind was rigid : Paul should sell his boat, with all appurtenances, or Paul should leave the Grande Marais for the remainder of his natural life.

The half-breed was not in his cabin ; but madame, who was washing the small store of household linen, explained that he might be found upon Jackfish Eyot. The parson made his way to the big hummock, which was reached at that season of the year by a corduroy track in a more or less submerged state, and here he encountered La Rue splitting willow boughs to make wattles for his pig-pen.

" Paul ! " exclaimed the rector, as he came up, " you've missed church these last three Sundays." And having hurled this thunderbolt to render the man amenable, he added : " I'm going to buy your boat for twenty-five dollars."

La Rue's big face gave birth to a smile, which began at the corners of his mouth, and spread gradually over his wide features away to the back of his ears. This smile denoted a certain nervousness of the rough little man in spectacles, and a decided appreciation of the drollery of the remark. He stood, axe in hand, and smiled with exasperating fatuity. At length his dull wits recovered from their shaking, and he observed :

" Boat very good ! "

" I shouldn't buy her if she were not good," said the rector sharply. " Twenty-five dollars is a lot of money for an old hulk, and more than any boat in the swamps is worth. I'll take her just as she is,

and won't even ask you to lay on a coat of paint."

The half-breed began to comprehend that the rector was in earnest. He shuffled from one foot to the other like a dazed sand-crane, and repeated :

"Boat very good!"

"Now, not another word!" said the incumbent. "You come round to my house to-night, and I'll pay you the money. Where is the boat? Up Netley Creek, or on the flat? You may as well come with me, and give a hand to row her round. Get a move on you, as I'm in a hurry."

"Hunderd dollar," said La Rue sullenly.

It became the rector's turn to smile. He did so, pityingly.

"See here, Paul," he said briskly, adjusting his spectacles and frowning. "We will say thirty dollars, cash down, for the boat, oars, rudder, and sails included. That's more than I ought to give, but I'm bound to have the boat, and you're a parishioner of mine, so I'll give you a bit in. If you don't take that, I'll inform the Department who it is that cuts saplings on Crown land. Put out your hand and say thirty dollars."

"Ninety," muttered the half-breed, who saw no good reason why he should be defrauded to his pastor's profit.

"All right, Paul! All right, boy!" said the rector, shaking his head ominously. "How about those chickens of Madame Dubois? Who stole those fowls, and came to confess to his minister in the middle of the night, and swore he would never be a rogue again if he were not exposed? Who promised to send the cash value to Madame Dubois, and never

did? Eh, Nicodemus, you rascal! Now will you sell me your boat for thirty-five dollars, which is just ten more than she is worth?"

The half-breed was very unhappy, and his fatuous smile dropped like a mask. He worked his feet into the spongy soil, and whimpered; but the tongue in him was bold enough to name the sum of eighty dollars, which was exactly twenty more than the rector intended to give.

"I've had more trouble with you than with anyone in the parish," went on the little man. "There are one or two things I can trace to you, Paul, if you make me stir up my memory. You neglect the church, and you don't pay your dues. It was you who brought thistle into the parish by your laziness in not keeping your ground clean. I've heard it said that you beat your wife, that you don't send your children to school regularly, and that you shoot in close seasons. I can put you away at Stonefell, boy, and I shall have to think about it, if you're going to remain obstinate."

"Eighty dollar," demanded La Rue, more cheerfully, because the rector had been so indiscreet as to make false charges.

"Then I shall report you to the bishop," menaced the rector.

This was a threat which carried weight, for so... inscrutable reason, seeing that the good old bishop was far more terrified of the half-breeds than they could ever have been of him.

"Boat very good," muttered La Rue, reverting to his original statement, which had at least the merit of being safe.

"Of course she's a good boat," said the rector

irritably. "Well, Paul, I will be generous. You shall have forty dollars. With that you can buy sufficient material to make two boats, with maybe a bit over. If you had any sense in that thick head, you would see that I'm laying for you the foundation of a fortune. With a capital of forty dollars, added to ordinary industry, you may become boat-builder to all Grande Marais. What do you say to that, boy?"

"Eighty dollar," was what the obdurate Paul had to say.

Then the rector perceived that he would require to take more drastic measures with his pig-headed parishioner. In his love for bargaining he had quite forgotten that he was not buying the boat for his own purposes, and he had completely lost remembrance of the urgent need of the zealous missionary. Time was of no moment to him, and as the passing hours were mere feathers so far as the half-breed was concerned, it appeared not improbable that the two would remain upon that eyot and argue until nightfall.

"Sit down, Paul," commanded the rector, pointing to a fallen willow.

La Rue obeyed, and the intending buyer seated himself also. Side by side they gazed into the soft mist which was blowing like smoke over the reeds.

"I'm thinking, Paul," said the voice regretfully, "that it will be my duty to preach at you Sunday morning."

"Seventy-five dollar," muttered La Rue, with some alacrity.

"That is exactly half my stipend," said the rector. "You are a fool if you think I can afford to spend half my income upon an old fishing boat."

"I not want to sell," protested La Rue.

"Ah! but you have to," said the little man, beaming. "I didn't want to spend my life in these swamps, but I was sent. We all have to obey our bosses, and I'm your boss, Paul, though it seems you aren't properly aware of it."

"What the biggest you give?" demanded La Rue hopefully.

"Well," said the rector reflectively, "the outside figure I can perhaps afford might be forty-two. You ought to know that you have no right to argue over this matter, Paul. It is your duty to take what I offer, and to be thankful that you are getting cash. No one else in the swamps would give you cash. They would want to make a trade. Well, see here," he continued, in a burst of liberality, "don't let them know over the swamps, or I shall be cheated on all sides, but you've got one or two good points, boy, and taking them into consideration, I'll go so far as to fix the price at the figure—the extreme figure, mind you—of forty-five dollars. Now, close on that."

La Rue wagged his great head in the obstinacy of his heart, and presently his voice boomed like a knell upon the rector's hopes:

"Seventy-five dollar."

The bargainer went off upon a fresh tack. Placing a hand upon La Rue's arm, he preached to him of the sin of covetousness and the wickedness of disobedience. Thoughtless of the flight of time, he dilated upon the business possibilities which forty-five dollars might bring. Paul would be able to lend money at the rate of usury. He could buy up more swamp land, or purchase cows and start a creamery. He might become a great man in the parish, and the

rector hinted that he would shed the light of his countenance upon these undertakings. But the sermon fell upon ears of stone. Obtuse as La Rue was, he comprehended that no possible profit could accrue to him from selling his boat, which was new and in good condition, at some five dollars less than cost price.

The argument waged more fiercely as the rector grudgingly raised his offer a dollar at a time, and La Rue as discontentedly reduced his demand by cents. Thus occupied, the minutes slipped by them rapidly, but a goodly amount still remained for argument between the sum suggested and the sixty dollars which the rector was prepared to give and the half-breed disposed to accept. The latter was determined, in his dull fashion, to make ten dollars out of the transaction; and the rector felt confident of pocketing forty out of the hundred which he felt sure his missionary brother would gladly give.

In the meantime the two vagabonds waited at the store upon the thorns of anxiety. Every moment Krum dreaded lest he might hear the approach of mounted police along the road which led through the swamps. The supplies had been paid for, and but awaited shipment. Krum fumed against the delay, shivering in the strong wind, and muttering curses upon the dilatory rector. Once he slipped away to look along the road. No one was in sight, but the mist was too thick for his eyes to carry any distance. When imagination created the stamp of shod hoofs, he returned to the dirt-hill, and whispered a suggestion to Munro.

"Where is the boat?" he asked the storekeeper, who came and went continually with suggestions and samples.

"Lying in the creek likely," the man replied. "Paul was out in her first thing this morning."

"I suppose," suggested Krum slowly, "that the clergyman will be able to induce the half-breed to sell?"

"He'll make Paul sell all right," M'Call answered, with a grin. "There's no doubt about that. What keeps him is just the matter of price. His reverence will start her pretty low, from what I know of him, and Paul will nat'rally want to fatten the pool."

"I do not wish the man to be beaten down," said Krum virtuously. "I only want to get away before this wind drops."

"His reverence will want time," said the store-keeper. "He's a terror at bargaining. Paul won't begin to best him, you may bet your neck."

"If the boat is lying handy," suggested Krum, "and if you are sure that the rector will satisfactorily conclude the deal, could we not store our supplies in her at once, and so be ready for departure?"

"Why, certainly," said M'Call. "Me and Jim will give you a hand."

Before they came upon the creek, the vagabonds saw the masts of the boat pushing out of the mist. The sails were up and straining in the wind, and they could hear the exhilarating whip-whip of the ropes and the rattle of the blocks. Beyond, the blue-black waves were tearing the windy coast of Grande Marais.

Four pairs of hands made quick work of the lading. Then Krum stood at the bottom of the boat, setting the sails with professional handiness, his eyes upon the tossing lake, which spread away from the mouth of the creek, his ears strained towards the road.

The boat was held to the bank by ropes, both fore and aft.

"We may as well sit here until his reverence returns," said Krum. "Is this as good a boat as we are likely to find?" he asked the storekeeper.

"She's a daisy," came the answer grudgingly. "There isn't another in all the swamps to touch her when she gets inter the wind. They call mine the second best for going, but she can't sail against this of Paul's. We tried 'em together in such a wind as this, and Paul had me astern in less than a little."

Krum favoured his confederate with a glance which the latter could not fail to understand; and the next moment the storekeeper's ears were assailed by a nasal drawl, delivering, with an intolerable accent, the statement:

"Then I guess me an' my partner will shift her out an' try her paces."

The disputants upon the fallen tree were aroused from the penultimate stage of their argument by M'Call, who rushed up to the hummock, shouting and gesticulating. When he succeeded in making himself understood, the rector emitted a howl of anguish, and sprinted for the coast. La Rue followed at his shambling gait, and M'Call brought up the rear, chuckling inwardly as he balanced his own profits against the rector's discomfiture.

"They had the ropes cut, and were away before I could sneeze," he remarked, when he rejoined the pair upon the flat.

The *Bluejay*, the deerhound of that coast, and La Rue's lawful property, was already far out, her sails belying mightily, holding the strong wind, and

sweeping the two rascals out and on towards the gloomy expanse of foam and cloud.

After a deadly pause the little rector recovered his senses, and turned upon the storekeeper to crush him in the hour of his triumph.

"I shall hold you responsible for this, Mr. M'Call, to the tune of one hundred dollars!" he shouted.

"Seventy dollar," amended La Rue mournfully.

CHAPTER VI

THE GREAT LONE INN

HAD either of the vagabonds flung his ring into the lake upon that northern journey, it would very possibly have been restored to him through the mediumship of some jackfish. Their luck, after getting away from the shores of Grande Marais, was phenomenal. Nothing went wrong with them. They avoided the ice, and escaped the storm, and went safely through the dangerous season, until they came at length to Big Quinze Lake, and entered upon the final stage of their voyaging.

Despite all this good fortune, the vagabonds were not in high spirits. The reverse was indeed the case. Krum became sullen, intolerably cynical, and more overbearing than ever, addressing his partner only when necessity compelled, and then as though he hated him; while Munro remained taciturn and miserable, because he seemed each day to feel the influence of the spirit of dead Marguerite silently pointing out the way in which he should go. He longed more intensely than ever to shake himself free from his strong-willed partner, that he might seek that way towards the higher life, being well assured that progress could not be his while the alliance with Krum continued.

They came finally to the north arm of Little

Quinze Lake, a shallow eleven miles long by one hundred and fifty yards wide, bending between ridges of white sand. A small river, called the Barrier by those who were occupying the land, carried the stolen *Bluejay* along a league of sluggish water to a moss portage, and at the head of this portage the men entered Lonely River, which was already choked with weeds, and drifty throughout its entire length. At the head of this stream a wood of mixed timber rose upon high ground, which on the northern side sloped abruptly to the rockland where the atmosphere became thick with dust whenever the samiel howled. Beyond stretched to infinity the great sand desert where, according to the convict of Stonefell, the harlequin opal lay imprisoned.

So soon as the vagabonds reached the edge of that no man's land, they knew that the doomed train-wrecker had not lied. While running their boat into the yellow mud of Lonely River they saw figures ahead, and on reaching the wood, discovered a camp, consisting of some two score men upon the same quest as themselves. These were for the most part elderly men, of a better class than the ordinary gold-seeker, philosophical, weather-beaten wanderers, with no ties to hold them in the world. They received the new-comers with a simple welcome, neither asking questions nor vouchsafing information, because every man in that community was expected to play his part alone.

Some days passed before Krum and Munro settled down to their new life, and acquired knowledge of their work. Each day the campers left the wood upon the knoll, and passed out, as far into the parched waste as they dared, to work upon the

veins in the trachytic rocks; and every evening they gathered round the common fire when the cold north wind began to blow, and talked in their calm, philosophical manner concerning the world and themselves. The two new-comers took small part in these discussions. Munro appeared to be perfectly indifferent, while Krum, who was growing savage with disappointment—the partners having discovered nothing but rubbish—sat by himself, and planned in his dark, selfish mind how to stake all upon one desperate venture far out in the waterless waste.

It was a cloudless and unusually calm night. A lambent glow bathed the summits of the trees, and below, where the shadows of the campers were visible among the ragged bushes close to the bubbling source of Lonely River, the light of the fire was fierce. The sky was dark purple, pricked with golden points. The subdued voices of the adventurers quivered far out into the desert along the magnetic air.

"The Bishop sees what we see," a critical voice was explaining slowly, "and feels what we feel; but he has the gift, which none of us others have, of being able to speak out his feelings."

The speaker referred to the leader of the camp, a pale, sad-faced individual who rarely smiled. It was this sternness, added to an air of distinction, which had won for him the cognomen of Bishop. This spokesman of the party was an ordinary wanderer, who had ~~received~~ his education first-hand from Nature, and by virtue of imagination and the gift of expression, understood how to play upon the sympathies of men who, like himself, had embraced the roving life for love of the open air.

"It's this way," the Bishop went on, the firelight

glinting upon his eyes, "folk just can't understand us. Men who have an office by day and a house at night, and wear starched collars, and eat four meals a day, and sit at church once a week for the sake of their reputation or the good of their business, look upon us just as worms which are put into the world for some cause they don't comprehend. According to them, we differ from other human beings, just as the prairie-dog differs from the house-dog. Who would want to pat a prairie-dog and call him Fido? He'd likely have a finger bitten off for his trouble. Who would think of giving a kind word to a starlighter, or calling him Mister? He's only a Jim, or a Billy, or a Joe. He's good enough to smash stones for roads, or to shovel dirt for railways. But he's not a human being for all that."

"Unless he has money, Bishop?"

"Well, suppose he has money," went on the chiet speaker, "and we are the men who supply the raw material of wealth. Precious stones are hidden away in the earth, and we know where they are likely to be found. Good clothes and easy living don't give us our knowledge. We learn the earth by walking on it, and sleeping on it. We know what we may expect to find in sand, in quartz, and in clay. We know when to dig, and where to pass on. And when we manage to squeeze a bit of gold, or a handful of gems in the rough, out of some lone spot, after starvation and sunstroke or frostbite, we go into some city to be robbed because we are no men of business. And when we are robbed—we Jims, and Billies, and Joes—there are the prison and the poorhouse for us."

"We're only safe in the lone lands," said a voice.

"Men, who never did a stroke of clean work all their days, get on their feet and call us toughs and deadbeats in their assemblies and parliaments."

"We don't see with them," said the sad-voiced Bishop. "We don't show brass-plates while we live, or have funeral marches when we die. A grave of sand is good enough for us, and the first wind that passes wipes the heap level, and lets us lie as we lived. There's no benefit of clergy for us. There's no sermon upon our virtues. Only some old partner says once in a while, 'It was there we planted Jim,' or, 'Down there old Billy was put away.' That's good enough for me," the Bishop went on; "I don't want flowers and marble to lie on me. I have never known the four-walls-and-a-roof life since I was able to think for myself, and I want to keep starlight company when I'm dead."

So soon as the Bishop had spoken, one man, a little apart from the rest, who had been leaning against a tree, smoking ruminatively, straightened himself, and pointing upward with the stem of his pipe, observed to the assembly:

"You can just get a sight at the little lamp, boys, between them two tall pines. 'Tis wonderful clear to-night, and his light is 'most as strong as a little moon."

His comrades turned at the announcement to look up at the patch of purple sky revealed between the pines, where shone the lone star, or the "little lamp" beloved of wanderers, known to others as Polaris, or the North Star.

"Seems to be a-saying, 'Good luck to ye all,'" went on the man beside the tree. "Seems to be a-saying, 'I'm a-shining right here to look after ye."

'Tis a fine night for travel, and I'm ready to guide ye.' He only shines this way over the plains. He ain't no light at all upon a city."

"Boys, I'll tell you a yarn," the Bishop went on, tapping his pipe gently upon a log of wood—"a story of the stars, with maybe not too much truth in it, but about as old, I guess, as this hill we're camping on, and interesting to us who follow the stars for a living: They say that a man who lived by himself in the lone land, and was reckoned of no account just because he did so, same as we are, came one time into a town where he had dreamed a plague was going to break out, because he knew that he could prevent it if the folk would do as he told them. It was late at night and dark when he got into the place, and he was cold and starved—mind, this was thousands of years ago—and he didn't know how to get any food. He knocked at doors, but no one would let him in. The folk set their dogs on him, and cursed him, and when he told them what he had come for, they just laughed, and called him an old fool. They couldn't see that he was a good old man, come there to do them a service. They saw he wasn't one of themselves, and so they wouldn't have anything to do with him.

"Well, this hermit walked along the dark streets until he was spent, looking for some place where he might lie, when all of a sudden he saw a lamp shining over a door away ahead. He crawled up to that door and knocked, because, like us, he had always followed the lone star, and he knew that where it pointed it was best to go. He knocked at the door with his last bit of strength, and a man came and took him in and gave him food. 'Why did you

put that lamp over your door?' the hermit asked; and the man said, 'I put it there to guide any stranger to a place where he could have food and rest.' Then the hermit asked: 'What made you do that?' and the man answered, 'Because God has put the stars over His great door as a guide to us.' Then the hermit put his hand upon the man's head and said: 'Keep that lamp burning always, and you shall grow rich.' The man did as he was told, and so soon as the hermit had left the town that house was filled every night with people who wanted to eat there and rest a bit before going on. Every one of these travellers gave the man some money, and so he became rich. And after a while that house with the lamp over the door came to be called an inn. That's the story, boys," concluded the Bishop. "The lone star is our lamp, which lights up the roof which spreads over us every night of our lives, and gives us hearty welcome to the Great Lone Inn."

"First thing I can remember was watching the Big Dipper," said a man. "I used to watch it from a little window, and the light of it seemed to make it hard to breathe behind walls. I wanted to get outside and feel the wind."

"My folk were called respectable," said the Bishop, "but I was wild, because there was something always calling me out. One day I started to walk towards the sun. I never went back to house life. I let the lone star guide me, until I joined with others who lived under the same sign. Boys, it made my heart jump to see the tall grass bending. I sang when I heard the wind in the trees. I shouted, for the life in me, when I stood alone on the hills, and watched the clouds driving, and felt the strong wind tugging at my hair."

"Had you ever a partner?" asked the voice which had first spoken, meaning by the word, which it accentuated, a wife.

"No."

"Some say it's good," said the voice.

"Aye; but you have to find the partner," said the Bishop. "The world's full of women, but not many follow the sign of the star. Women and pictures go together, and pictures hang upon walls, and walls support a roof. I have thought, as I walked along some evenings, with the sun behind and the moon in front, how that, if I could meet a woman walking from the moon to the sun, I might— But why talk about it, lads? The wind went on blowing sweet and clean, and never brought her."

"Would you have stopped her?"

The eager question was spoken by Munro.

"I would have asked her where she was going," came the answer.

"But if you were badly dressed, and had nothing?"

"There's neither better nor worse in starlight company," the Bishop replied. "A queen is a woman, and the king is a man. The lone land levels all. And the man who doesn't speak when he is given his chance, spoils maybe his life."

"Bishop, you're going deep."

A murmur circled about the fire, as the incense of tobacco smoke ascended, laden with the aspirations of many a mind. Krum fastened his black eyes upon his confederate, his former suspicions striking into the growth of assurance. Munro had his head down. Look where he would, he saw the light figure of Marguerite, as he called her still. Think as he might, the conclusion was the same: he had missed

his chance. Her life was spent, and his was spoilt.

The silence created by the Bishop's final utterance was dispelled by one who brought out of his sack a lump of mineral. He pushed it into the firelight, moving it this way and that, until all eyes became dazzled. Across that honey-combed surface flashed all the colours of the stars; the red of Aldebaran, the blue of Rigel, the green of Sirius, the yellow of Arcturus, and the white of Fomalhaut, in lines of colour, playing in the glow of the fire like multitudes of minute spheres of water spilling down the sky, one beam setting in lucent green, another rising in ruddy purple, or orange, or crimson. The effect was as superb as the flashing of a thousand prisms.

"And useless!" muttered the possessor of this stone of glory.

"No, Jim," the Bishop urged, "not useless, but too young. Might as well call a baby useless, because he can't do more than crow and shake his little fists. He'll grow into a man. Same way that lump of stuff will turn into opal, if it lies and soaks in moonshine for a few more thousand years. Turn it again, Jim. There! There, boys!"

"Where did you dig it, Jim?"

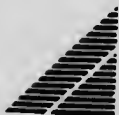
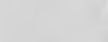
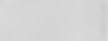
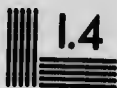
"About five miles out," the man replied, jerking his head round to the north. "I came into a sheet, and my pick broke it up like pie-crust. But I never found the stones, though I went deep."

"We want to go farther out. We will find nothing but waste on the edge of the desert," the Bishop explained. "We would get money for that pretty stuff if we could carry it south; but it's too heavy to pack with."



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"There is no water yonder," said the owner of the glorious mass.

"'Tis Nature's way. The best gold lies inside the Arctic Circle. The finest gems are hidden in the desert. We starlighters have broken her strong-room before, and we will find a way to break it again."

An hour later the occupants of that infinitesimal portion of the Great Lone Inn were asleep, and the white lamp of the Pole Star burnt steadily above. One man had not succumbed to the prevailing influence; Krum sat outside the circle of the dying fire, his active brain still scheming. Presently he stepped across the sleepers and shook Munro by the shoulder.

"You and I had better make a start," he said coldly, when his partner had shaken off his sleep. "We can get well out before break of day. You heard what those fellows said? It's no use digging at the edge of the desert."

"How about water?" Munro asked, subservient as ever to his partner's will.

"I have made a bag out of one of the boat sails. We can carry enough to last two days, if we are careful."

Munro rose, took his tools, and made a pack of sufficient food to last for the period mentioned. While he made a cache of the bulk of their supplies, under a marked tree on the west side of the wood, Krum soaked his canvas bag at the river's source and filled it to bursting. When these preparations were finished, they drank as much of the cool fluid as they could swallow, and made the start. The caked sand was easy to walk upon. The night remained calm, and a cool breeze flicked their faces.

"Munro," said Krum determinedly, after they had walked for the best part of an hour, and had become lost in the vastness of the sand waste, "I am going to stake my life upon this venture. If there is the right sort of opal here, I will find it, water or no water. There may be, for all I know, some woman in your case. Let us understand one another. Will you stay by me?"

"There is no woman," Munro replied curtly; and they stepped strongly north, side by side, without another word, the one hungry for wealth, the other craving for respectability, which he knew could never be his so long as he permitted Krum to ride upon his shoulders.

The only words spoken between them before the eastern sky became shot with red, and a pale mist heralded the coming of another scorching day, were these:

"You won't be able to report yourself to the police."

"I am not going to be taken again," said Munro doggedly.

CHAPTER VII

ALONE WITH THE STARS

BETWEEN thirty and forty miles out from Quinze Lake the partners pitched their camp among the volcanic rocks. During the cool of the evening, and the night which followed, they delved and toiled, but all that their efforts disclosed was a thin sheet of polychromatic mosaic, which they broke up and cast aside, because all this gloriously iridescent and brittle crust had no commercial value. When day returned, and the sun streamed down in his might, they were compelled to cease for very dizziness from their labours, and seek shelter beneath a ridge until the shadows should again begin to crawl across the sand. Scarcely a word passed between the men. They dared not waste their breath in idle talk.

So soon as the heat grew less, they returned to their work, knowing that the time was short. Fragments of fiery mosaic flashed and shivered chromatically in the pale evening light upon high serrated ridges of sand, which were piled on either side of a long furrow. Taking their picks, the miners smashed through the sheet of crisp mineral, all veined like the wings of butterflies, and burrowed down to the bed, where they hoped to find the precious stones before their supply of water and their energies became expended.

In his feverish state Munro seemed to behold a long table marked into columns, spaces, and figures ; the animal-like eyes of gamblers ; the calm face of the banker. He seemed to be watching the whirl of a ball and the spin of a wheel, and to hear the silence which followed the agreement between that ball and wheel, and to watch the drawing in of the stakes. That clicking ball and dizzy wheel had been before his vision all the day.

The desert was the great gaming-table. The bewildering lines and points of colour were the numbers and columns staring into his brain from the discarded crust of hydrate of silica. His mining implements were the tools of the game, and Nature, the calm banker, claiming human life and strength as the stakes upon the board.

He stirred up the bed excitedly to its rock foundation. There was nothing. The voice of Nature seemed to whisper mockingly : " Make your game," and in obedience to the command he stepped on, gripped his shovel, and flung the sand aside, his body shuddering with weakness, his mind wrought upon by the vastness and monotony of the surrounding desert.

The partners were far into the wilderness. They had exhausted two-thirds of the water, economical though they had been. But every mouthful speedily exuded from them in the form of perspiration. The dry sand seemed to drain all moisture from their bodies.

It was near the time of darkness when a loud groan reached Munro's ears, and he looked up stupidly. Krum was lying along the far end of the furrow, and Munro thought that he had fainted, for

the strong-minded man was constitutionally weaker than his partner ; but he suddenly clambered upright, and stumbled across the sand, gasping and grinning like a madman.

"Have we won?" Munro cried, scarcely knowing what he said.

Krum gurgled in his throat.

Extending the shovel, which swayed in his feeble hand, he spread out stones, one by one, each blinking sleepily, as though not yet fully awakened from the slumber of many thousand years—opals as great as eggs, and painted all through with fire. They rolled off the shovel, and blinked upon the yellow sand. Krum fell, and gathered them up, stroking them, murmuring and sweating over them, laughing in animal joy as he forced them singly into his pocket, and pressed his hand upon them there. The usually calm man displayed then a new and altogether different phase of his complex character.

Munro hurried to the scene of discovery, and Krum went on his knees in the furrow, grinning and pointing inanely at a great mass of milky opal which rested unbroken in its bed. Munro dared not trust the testimony of his eyesight. He put down his shovel to stir the great opal, but started round the same instant in a foolish fear. It was impossible that this great gem could belong to either of them. He had no right to lift it from its resting-place. He had sworn never to be a thief again, and surely this was stealing. He shivered when his shovel scraped the edge of the glorious stone.

That moment Krum screamed like a maniac, jumped forward on hands and knees, and flung aside the marauding spade.

"Get out of my lot!" he screamed. "Get out! These stones are mine." He clenched his fingers upon the hidden gems which bulged from his pocket. "What I find is mine. Get out! Get out, Munro, and dig for yourself!"

He slashed at Munro's legs with his spade, swearing wildly.

"All we find we share," Munro cried, staggered by this mad selfishness.

"Where is your agreement?" Krum shouted. "Show it me. Have you got my signature? What legal right have I given you to claim a half share in my property? You would rob me, you brute! Go and find opal for yourself. Get out, Munro, you hanger-on! I will not have you near this hole, you jealous dog!"

He went down in the trench, pillowed his face upon the great opal, and caressed its fiery surface with his lips and fingers. Dazed and incredulous, Munro watched him from above, until the full understanding of this selfishness became borne upon him. Then he began to shiver, and the good in him became conquered by a longing for revenge.

He turned away, lest he should do violence, but a thought brought him back—the thought of Marguerite and the oranges. He stood beside the furrow, wondering in a dazed fashion whether Marguerite would lie for years in her grave, until her beauty became petrified into a glory as great and precious as that over which his base-minded accomplice was raving. It was she who had prompted him to turn back, and to give the man below another chance.

"Half these opals are mine," he said, speaking

each word distinctly. "I have always shared with you. It was I who did all the dirty work in connection with the whisky smuggling, and it was I who went to prison, but you had your half share of the profits. It was I who had the secret of this place. Perhaps you want more than a level half, but that is your way. You don't think what you are saying. Perhaps you don't know."

Had Krum been less selfish, less engrossed, he must have noted that ominous ring in his partner's voice.

"Shut your noise," he growled. "If you want to have your share, there is the whole desert for you to prospect. All this is my own. I have worked harder than you. Share my discovery? What do you take me for? Go and dig for yourself, you lazy fool!"

Munro swayed, and once was nearly leaping into the trench with his shovel. Then his lips parted, but he checked the words which were ready upon his parched tongue, and went away, this time without a pause, all his human instincts shouting for revenge.

He walked back to their camping-place beside the ridge, his mind stunned by Krum's self-exposure, his brain torpid after long hours of toil beneath a scorching sun. In that hour he was unable to reason like a rational being.

Darkness was drawing on. Munro drew out the precious bag of water from the cool nook which had been found for it, and leaning back, admitted new life into his heated body. He drank until he had to gasp for breath, then drank again, while strength returned to him, and his limbs tingled, and his head grew cold. He went on drinking until he could swallow no more.

Then he poured what water remained into the thirsty sands.

A clump of olive-green cacti grew out of the desert, some fifty yards from the ridge, and here Munro waited in the cool, until Krum staggered up from the furrows laden with his treasures. In his imagination Munro could see the rascal's dry lips working, and his throat gasping for a few mouthfuls of the precious fluid. Once the watcher looked away and shivered gently, and this was when Krum approached the empty bag which he had left spread out upon the sand.

A cry came across the waste, and Munro lifted his eyes from the stems of cactus, with their tiny tufts of white bristles, and looked. He saw Krum standing motionless, with the parched bag trailing from his hands, and when, even at that distance, he heard the panting of his victim, he grew afraid.

The night mists were coming by way of the south, and the pink in the sky faded. A planet broke out serenely, with a slight breath of wind which caused the sand to whirl in eddies. Munro felt the wind, and shivered. It was the warm wind which parches the throat, well-nigh as effectually as the sun.

"He has brought his punishment upon himself," he muttered.

As he spoke to ease his mind, he perceived that Krum was running, the canvas bag, which now contained his treasure, slung over his shoulder—running, because of the fear induced by his thirst, towards the fringe of the desert and the distant source of Lonely River. His feet struck the sand

unsteadily, but his progress was good. Already he was receding down the deep blue light.

Munro made his way back to the rock, picked up his pack—the tools he left—and swung into a steady walk along the track of the treasure-finder.

An hour later night had settled, and a hot wind streamed from the south. The stars were aglow, and among them Polaris, the steady lamp of the distressed, beamed gently. The pointers were indicating, like a great finger, the blessed place of water. The partners were near, but Krum never turned, though he staggered often from side to side like a drunken man seeking support. He seemed unaware of Munro's closeness. Perhaps he dared not face him. He staggered on, clutching the canvas bag, fighting towards the far distant and impossible goal.

A ragged bank of cloud became gloriously opalescent, and a flood of white light streamed along the waste. The moon was leaving her bed, and rising to rule the hot night.

Krum continually raised a hand to his mouth, and Munro knew well the meaning of that action. Sores were forming upon his lips, the big black blisters which are produced by thirst in a hot atmosphere. The avenger was glad then that he could not see his victim's face.

An oasis of sandy soil rose from the level, and here a few tall spruce, dying below, the plumes above torn by past winds, struggled to survive, their roots bursting from the arid ground. Past this dreary knoll and its parched trees the doomed man floundered, struggling like a swimmer striving to make headway against the tide. Munro ascended

the hillock and flung himself between the sprawling roots.

The moon was immense in that clear atmosphere; the waving shadows of the pines became as black as ink. Insects were sporting joyously about the sand, and Munro watched them, until he found himself wondering how these specimens of atomic life could subsist without water or any visible means of food. He continued to watch, and the mystery was presently explained. The stronger insects obtained nutriment from the weak; on the juices and husks of the latter the former fattened and flourished. The old drama was enacted in the desert as in the world, the tragedy of the survival of the fittest, and the victory of the strong.

How long an interval of unconsciousness intervened before a cone struck his cheek and caused him to awaken, Munro did not know. He started up, and saw the summits of the trees agitating the white currents of moonlight, and flinging grotesque patterns down the hillock. Little pine-chaffers were racing up and down the bark, ticking like a thousand watches; a sleet of fine sand was beating down the wind. Munro pulled himself round and gazed across the fiery plain, shading his eyes in the glare. A sigh of relief escaped from his lips when he saw the empty waste. He was slowly lowering himself among the sticky roots, when a scream rang through the night, and in an instant he stood upright, shivering from head to foot.

A spectral shape was bounding and dancing in the light of the moon. Nearer it came, still leaping. It fell and grovelled, but rose and lurched on, and laughed fearfully when it fell again. It was Krum,

still clutching the canvas bag. It was Krum, who had described a wide circle around the oasis, and was now treading down his former tracks under the influence of the waterless moon.

Munro drew in his breath sharply, and strode down the side of the hillock, while Krum crouched like a beast about to spring, filling the air with his screams. His wild glance fell from the dry orb among the stars to the man approaching, and returned to the moon with a lustful stare.

"Mine!" he yelled, throwing his hand upward. "I was first here, and I found it alone. I will fight the world for it. That is the finest jewel that the world has ever known."

Munro approached, with hands clenched, and eyes staring pitifully.

"You drove me to vengeance," he called huskily. "I acted in the anger of the moment. I will do all I can to help you now."

"Another man after my moon-stone!" the madman shouted. "I am a match for all of them. They shan't rob me. Put up that hand. That's right. Now, hit when he comes—hit hard, and run. It must be worth a million of money. But steady! you must outwit the others. There is that man with the big black eye in the middle of his forehead. You must get rid of him first."

"God forgive me," groaned Munro. "I have destroyed his reason."

"I dug," the maniac yelled, "and light came streaming up from the great stone. . . . I must hide it in my bag, or the whole world will see the light, and be here after it. I want a longer shovel; that little man told me that I should want a longer shovel. It

is ail right. Now I must go back and dig a little more. . . . I thought that the stone was hot, and I was afraid of burning my hands."

Still gazing into the pale face of the moon the madman shambled away, lurching in short circles, and snatching thirstily at the opalescent beams. Munro stood aside and shivered in the hot wind. He forgot all Krum's meanness and greed, his contemptuous manner and cynical smile, before that pitiful spectacle of the moonstruck runner. He would then have bartered all his future for one cup of cold water with which to quench the maniac's raving thirst.

"Why did he drive me to this?" he muttered furiously. "Why am I compelled to act the villain at every turn? I had made up my mind to reform, and now—" He stood like a lump of stone, repeating at intervals that terrible aposiopesis, "And now—"

The fine sand was borne into his throat and choked him. The water supply was spent, and he became conscious that he too might have to struggle to reach the outskirts of that dead man's waste.

Yielding to an impulse, which was but a little more sane than his partner's yearnings for the moon, he bore down upon Krum, captured him after a violent struggle, and dragged him, shrieking, past the pine-knoll, and so towards the south.

Morning came, grey and ghostly. The man who bore the canvas bag across his shoulder plodded steadfastly over the caked sand, away from a little mound which the industrious breeze was already obliterating, his face as pale as death, his dry mouth working.

The lone man who thus carried his treasures into the world was the man-slayer, Munro.



PART II

MIND

*"Like the sweet apple which reddens upon the topmost bough,
A-top on the topmost twig—which the pluckers forgot,
somehow—
Forgot it not, nay, but got it not, for none could get it till now."*

CHAPTER I

BROKEN PEACE

A SHOWER of warm rain had fallen after the heat of an August day, cooling the ground and washing the chalk dust from the hedges. The early evening was so fresh and fragrant with the good smell of the earth that the grandfathers of Windycombe sat in stiff-backed chairs in their garden plots, each smoking his short clay pipe, exchanging a word of gossip with some gnarled and bent neighbour no more intellectual than himself. This gossip was small talk reduced to simplest possible matter. Farmer Brown's bull had broken through that new-fangled wire fencing, which the informant had condemned when it was set in place; or parson had ordered the moss to be removed from the church roof, "which ought a-been done afore now." Such were the items of information discussed over the fences by the village elders, with a gravity and a wagging of the head commensurable with the seriousness of each case.

Windycombe was merely a forgotten hamlet upon the Oxfordshire Downs, containing a population of less than one hundred souls. A portion of the village spread along the rounded spine of a hill, the remainder being distributed about the valley. In the depths appeared the church hard by the manor, which was occupied by Robert Phair and his

daughter. The Bethel of Windycombe was small and quaint, heavy internally with pews and gallery, lighted when need was by candles, standing in the midst of a garden, which only the mounds, marble crosses, and mighty altar-tombs—these last covered generously with vestments of ivy—proclaimed to be a place of burial for the dead. On either side of the hamlet spread the Downs, dotted with black junipers, their lower slopes patched with yellow corn, or white already with stubble. Windycombe was eight miles from any railway station, and that merely the terminus of a short single line with which an opulent company condescended to notice the small market town of Highford, five miles from the nearest main road, and eighteen from any important centre. The approach was by means of a narrow by-way, tortuous in its course, and generally rough with stones, rising and falling between luxuriant hedges; this road, or lane rather, introduced the traveller to the village by means of a steep hill with many bends.

Miss Jessie Phair, the young mistress of Windycombe manor-house, was walking abroad after the rain with her usual companion, a fox-terrier, who was a hunter mighty in renown. The girl came along a green lane two miles from the village, swinging from foot to foot, in her customary rapid gait, humming softly, and with her stick decapitating the big thistles which pushed their stems stiffly from the hedgerow.

She was a small girl, well-made, her body stored with muscle from constant exercise, dark-haired—a shade between red and brown—large-eyed, with a discontented droop to her mouth when not laughing, which was seldom, though, in truth, she had little to

make merry over. No girl could have led a much more lonely life than Jessie, fenced as she was from the world, her sole society a farmer's wife or so and her father, the middle-aged invalid of failing eyesight and rheumatic feet, who hobbled unobtrusively about the village, with a wonderful memory for a petty detail, and a keen curiosity regarding any stranger who might be seen in the neighbourhood.

The girl found her pleasure in motion. She could not sit still, could not even stand motionless; she would sway from side to side, as though in obedience to some strain of music which was audible only to her; her head would unconsciously beat time, her arms swing, her feet roam impatiently. She was slashing at the thistles for the pleasure of putting forth her strength.

She had in her blood a longing for the wind and the sun. She was restless under cover, because her spirit turned always to the sweeping Downs and mossy woods, craving for the dark pines, the clouds, and the hay-grass. On a stormy day she would lean against a window, gazing through the mist at the beating trees and slanting rain, then wander irresolutely from room to room, listening to the roar in the chimneys, taking up work and flinging it down, and finally returning to the window, until the longing to face the storm became too great, and she would throw on her macintosh, pin a cap upon her hair, and run out to battle with the wind. On a clear night she would sit for hours at her window, watching the dreamy shifting of the tree-tops and the stars above, breathing into her strong lungs the incense of flowers and earth, and wondering what force it was which held her there, and longing to lie

upon the turf under the big-leaved catalpha, so that she might watch the stars.

Once she had done so, and the eerie voices of the night made her mind dream for many a day. Whence came those sounds which entered her brain while her head rested upon the ground? By day they were silent. There was witchcraft in the air by night; a bubbling laughter, a chiming of buried bells, a throbbing of pulses of unknown life, a hurried ticking of drops from the great clepsydra of the sky. The blades of grass sprang beside her as invisible feet were lifted. The flowers were given a soul then, and each had a jewelled heart which melted in the morning. And over all was the murmur of the voice, gentle sometimes, but generally stern—preaching the distribution of free-life and the passing of breath from shape to shape, of life for the worm, and life for the weed, of a passing of quick breath from old to young, from the yellow to the green. That voice was never heard within the house; and when the sun shone it was stilled.

As she swung breathlessly down the lane, some tall burdocks and sorrels beside the hedge quivered, and Jessie's keen eyes sighted an arm and then a head. She ran forward, stopped at the edge of the green fosse, and called triumphantly, "Mr. Atcliff!"

An elderly man was digging ferns from the bank, transferring the roots to a chip basket which was nearly full. He started when he heard the call, and turned a thin face upward.

"What a wandering spirit you are!" Jessie cried. "I see you nearly every day, but you will never let me reach you. I have signalled to you on the Downs, and you would escape into the plantation, though I

am sure you often saw me. I don't believe I have spoken to you a dozen times this summer."

The fern-digger rubbed the dirt from his hands. Mechanically he sought to straighten the bent stem of a mustard plant, pressing the dislocation nervously, as though he feared the plant might cry out in pain. Then he found the courage to say :

"It is a fine evening after the rain."

"I see you have been out in it," said Jessie. "Your coat is quite wet."

The nervous man did not look at her. His ears were filled with the buzzing of the flies, and his mind was occupied by its desire to be alone.

"I think we are going to have more rain," he said foolishly. Then he added, with more confidence, "I must be getting home now."

"Then we will walk together to the top of the hill."

John Atcliff glanced from side to side, and once the girl thought he would have wormed his spare body through the hedge. She waited, swinging her body to and fro because of the life in her, feeling a little pity, but more determination, because she had for some time awaited an opportunity for making this recluse speak.

"Give me your basket," she ordered, and when he hesitated, she almost snatched it from him. "I must do something, even if it is only to carry a basket of ferns. Do you know what it is that makes life a burden to me? It is because I cannot use my strength. Yesterday evening I had to go out and chop at a dead tree, so that I might have some excuse for going to bed tired."

"I weary quickly," faltered her companion, pushing

a lock of grey hair from his cheek with a delicate hand. "But I am getting an old man," he went on desperately, "and—and—"

He broke off, and the girl saw a shiver pass across his shoulders.

"Yes?" she said encouragingly.

"I have trouble," the recluse quavered. Then his feeble mouth failed again.

They came out of the green lane beside a coppice of beech, and saw before them the narrow road rising between the Downs; to the left went the rain-sprinkled ribbon which led to Windycombe. A patch of turf flourished where the roads met, and here an old sign-post stood erect with pointing arms. Jessie walked across the turf, but the man kept to the road, and the girl noticed that he stole a glance towards the sign-post, and seemed relieved when he had passed it.

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Atcliff?"

"No, no," the recluse cried involuntarily; then smiled sadly, and put out his hand with a deprecatory movement. "Forgive me. I have lived so long alone that I find it difficult to remember my manners."

"I have never seen anything like your garden," went on the girl soothingly, if irrelevantly. "I passed it early this morning, before you were up I expect, and I thought I had never seen anything so lovely in my life. And that reminds me! Why do you have no yellow flowers in your garden?"

Atcliff remained silent, until Jessie pressed her question.

"I do not like the colour," came the answer; and presently he added, "It is the colour of gold."

"Poor Mr. Atcliff!" Jessie murmured. Then aloud, "The farmers here think you are a miser."

At that Atcliff smiled again, and the girl felt sure that there was meaning in the smile.

"If to have money, and to hide it, is to be a miser, I am one," he said.

They walked on in silence, until Jessie swung out her stick, and grievously marred the structure of a musk thistle.

Atcliff winced, as though she had struck at him.

"Don't maim the plants," he pleaded boldly. "They may have their feelings, as we have."

"I am sorry," she said. "But I told you I must do something. May I hit the stones?"

The girl flushed uncomfortably when the recluse pulled out his knife and carefully pruned the weed which she had bruised. She saw him release a white butterfly, which had blundered into a web, before the spider could rush upon it. Then he returned and went on, his eyes fixed upon the hills.

"I will out of friendliness ask my question," Jessie said. "Why do you never come to see us? Father has no one to speak to, except old Mr. Finch, and he is dreadful. We should be so glad to see you if you would come sometimes."

"My day is full of work," Atcliff faltered. "The garden is always calling to me. Then in the evening I am tired."

"That is a reflection upon our furniture," said Jessie smilingly.

"I write and read," explained the recluse. "Every hour is set apart for some particular duty. Will you permit me to take my basket now? This hill is a steep climb."

The girl refused almost scornfully, reflecting that, if it were necessary, she could probably carry, not only the basket, but its frail-looking owner. Because he was breathing heavily and stooping very much she slackened speed and hung behind. Immediately her timid companion pressed on, and it was clear that he desired to regain the shelter of his cottage as quickly as he might.

"He is afraid of everyone," the girl murmured, her eyes upon the grey man's bending back.

The shadows were long, and the light was heavy when they reached the top of the hill, and saw the white posts which stood round the Rectory gate. A few labourers passed from the fields; a team of big horses came up the slope, with a jingling of harness and the cracking of a whip, a red-faced carter-boy perched sideways upon the leader, with scarlet poppies in his hat, singing in a raw voice, to which distance and the evening contributed a certain charm.

Atcliff resumed possession of his basket, with a feeble word of thanks, and was about to pass on down the hill, where the chimneys of his silent house could be seen among the limes, when the gardener of the Manor came running up the road from the valley. Suddenly the man began to shout.

"Can there be anything wrong with Mr. Phair?" the recluse exclaimed, daring for the first time that evening to look his companion in the face.

Jesus moved forward quickly, and met the gardener upon the summit. Atcliff seemed to have forgotten his nervousness. He bent forward, craning his neck to listen.

The song of the carter-boy came ringing across the hill:

"I loved 'er well, I loved 'er true,
She was my Sal, my darlin'.

Coom over there, Captain! Coom, Nixie! Git over, Snowball!"

The brass-bound whip cracked, and the poppy-covered hat lifted over the brow.

"Come to the master, miss. He's a-se'ing in the corner o' the dining-room, calling for ye," panted the gardener.

"Is anyone with him?"

The question did not proceed from Jessie's lips. She found John Atcliff close beside her, a changed man, with a spark of colour upon either thin cheek. His basket lay overturned, and the ferns were scattered over the road.

"There's a gentleman in wi' master. 'Don't strike me,' I heard 'im cry. 'Don't ye. I be an old man, and I never done ye harm.' Them were master's words. I heard 'im in the garden."

Jessie had gathered up her skirt and was running to the valley, her dog full stretched at her heels. Her late companion began to collect his ferns with trembling hands.

"A tall man, young and dark?" he queried sharply, as he hid his face.

"That's 'im, sir," the gardener replied. "A tall young gentleman what looks as though a bit of extry feeding might do 'im no 'arm. Let me 'elp you, master."

The carter-boy clattered past, and touched the brim of his hat, with a grin.

CHAPTER II

THE ENDING OF A JOURNEY

THE four-thirty local from the county town was due into Highford Junction at twenty minutes past five, according to the official time-table; but it so happened that the station-master of Bishop's Cross, the penultimate station before the junction, had that afternoon disinterred some particularly fine potatoes which he spread in triumph before the guard of the local, who was a tuber-raiser great in renown. Therefore the train clanked into Highford Junction some seven minutes after time.

The junction was a village station, situated upon high ground, where the four winds of heaven howled. Ploughed hills rolled around, shivering in winter, shimmering with heat in August. The branch line to Highford Town swept away in a graceful curve through water-meadows, where dappled kine chewed their cud, and gazed inscrutably upon the horizon.

The main-line train brought a commercial traveller destined for the little town; also a mother, accompanied by her family, the latter so nicely graded, from the baby in arms to a lanky girl with two infants of the genus boy in tow, that it required but ordinary mathematical powers to determine how long she had been married; a bucolic, who smoked and expectorated as though he had nothing else to live for; an

elderly clergyman, attired in green sables, balancing upon his arm an infinite number of small paper parcels, which retained their position in defiance apparently of the first principles of equilibrium; and a young man, well and quietly dressed, carrying a new brown-leather bag.

The latter, who proclaimed himself a stranger by asking a porter whether the train went to Highford, was by no means an unhandsome young man, if somewhat too thin and care-lined. Indeed, his appearance bordered so nearly upon the aristocratic that the pipe-smoker was constrained to observe to the mother of many, "Ton gentleman has likely come to look at Glenfield," an estate in the neighbourhood which had remained for some time without a tenant.

The engine shrieked and panted away, the wheels grinding round the bend. The stranger found himself alone with the clergyman, and solemnly watched the old man as he carefully arranged his parcels along the rack. He was about to make a remark, when he remembered that he was in England, where it is not etiquette to speak to a stranger without an introduction, and he allowed the chilling influence of the country to curb his tongue.

However, the clergyman was not trammelled by conventionality. After a precursory glance over his travelling companion, he observed, as the train swept through a momentary gloom:

"That bridge is a danger to the line, and ought to come down." He grunted with some warmth before adding: "We always wait for an accident before we set things right."

"Is the bridge not used, then?" the stranger asked eagerly, not because he felt the slightest interest in

the structure, but snatching at the opportunity for making a conversation.

"It is not safe, and it is not wanted," said the clergyman, making a mental note of the stranger's accent. "It is merely a cart bridge between fields, and now that agriculture is in such a bad way, and all the land is down in grass, it has been allowed to fall into decay. Even the labourers prefer to cross the line by the metals, because it is contrary to the regulations of the company, I suppose. If it were illegal to use the bridge, of course they would do so. That is human nature."

The speaker chuckled, and screwed his neck to review his white line of parcels.

"I have only just reached England," the stranger volunteered. "And though I am an Englishman by birth, I do not seem able to fit easily into my surroundings. It is curious to notice to what different uses the words of a common language can be put," he went on hurriedly, anxious not to let the conversation lapse. "In America, so many of our words have a meaning which they never bear upon this side. The railway, for instance, would there be called the track, the siding a side-track, the points switches, the station a depôt, the engine a locomotive, the carriages cars, the guard a conductor, the sleepers ties, and so on. The returning traveller has to thoroughly revise his vocabulary when he reaches Liverpool."

"I thought you were from America directly I heard you speak," said the clergyman. "I have a son in that part of the world, in Central Canada. He went out to farm some years ago, but the farm seems to have proved a fiasco. Now he tells me he has a land agency office, and has hung out his shingle, whatever

that may mean, in Winnipeg; but it cannot be a remunerative profession, as he continues to require a remittance very regularly. In fact," continued the old gentleman, who seemed to find it a pleasure to spread these domestic details before the stranger, "so far as my pocket is concerned, I should be better off if he were at home, and I have lately written to tell him as much."

The listener smiled faintly, because he had a very intimate knowledge of the remittance man, the real vagabond of the country.

"I have just come through from San Francisco," he said, "and as I am quite a stranger in this part of the country, I should be obliged if you would give me a little geographical information. I am making for a village called Windycombe—"

The old clergyman interrupted him with a gratified exclamation, and added, as he leaned forward, beaming through his gold spectacles:

"I am the incumbent of Windycombe. Mr. Finch is my name—old Hawfinch, as my irreverent choir boys call me, not always behind my back, because I occasionally hesitate in the pulpit." He chuckled at the joke against himself. "So you are bound for Windycombe! It is an extremely isolated spot, and I really believe you will find yourself even more out of the world there than on a western farm. Yes, it is surprising what lonely places we have on our little island. Well now, I know you are not bound for the Rectory, though I shall hope to see you there before long, and so you must be about to honour either the Hermitage or the Manor. I cannot think that our recluse would receive a visitor, and so I shall confidently allot you to Mr. Phair."

"Yes, I am going to Mr. Phair," said the man from San Francisco.

"That gives me a subject for one of my sermons," went on the simple old parson. "The important truths we may arrive at by ordinary deduction. I shall preach it next Sunday—in the evening. I preach religion in the morning, duty to Heaven and to one's neighbour, you understand, and philosophy or science in the evening. The people come better in the evening. I am afraid they do not like to have duty preached at them. Rustics are so sensitive, and have so many corns which must not be trodden on. But I shall lay a trap one of these evenings. I will preach duty at both services. Ah! There is Highford. Come over here, sir, and you will have a good view of the place. It looks well as you approach from this side. A pretty little town, but dreadfully comatose. It wants one of the earthquakes of your Pacific slope to make the inhabitants move for once in their gossiping lives."

"Is it far out to Windycombe?" inquired the stranger.

"Seven miles by field paths, and rather more by road. At this time of the year an omnibus runs between Highford Station and the King's Head of Elmbury, a half-way village which justifies its existence by producing watercress. The Windycombe carrier will bring on your luggage to-night from the King's Head. If you will permit me to accompany you, I will show you the way across the fields to the sign-post, where a road leads up to our village. It will be a pleasant walk this evening, if those black clouds, which I see coming up yonder, do not upset their contents over us."

The stranger gratefully accepted this offer, and half an hour later the stuffy little omnibus was swaying through rain between the hedges, climbing gradually into the country of the Downs. As the luggage was put out at the King's Head, the old parson, who was not less inquisitive than most men, furtively obtained the information which was legibly inscribed upon the label of the brown bag—"Walter R. Phair. Passenger to Highford."

"Nephew or son?" wondered the clergyman. "Phair has never mentioned either, but he is not communicative. I hope he is going to stay, for Miss Jessie's sake. And I wonder if he plays whist."

The clouds were clearing when they started upon their walk from Elmbury, and the cool breeze was refreshing to the travel-tired man. Immediately they entered the path across the fields and began to climb, the clergyman pulled off his shabby coat, and slung it unashamed across his shirt sleeve. He was fat and short of breath, and whenever a stile was reached proposed a halt, despite the traveller's obvious haste to proceed. The latter, from his companion's point of view, was a puzzling and disappointing character, because, while evincing an ardent desire to put questions, he remained unwilling to answer them. Thus, in reference to Mr. Phair of the Manor, the clergyman slyly and interrogatively iterated the phrase, "your father," but the traveller altogether disregarded the hint, and at once professed a keen interest in the past history of that almost deserted country. Afraid lest he might be written down an ignoramus, the clergyman launched out hurriedly into a more or less inaccurate account of bygone times, which continued until they came into the

weedy road, and saw, beside a beech coppice, the sign-post which pointed out the uphill road to Windycombe.

Hardly had they entered the road when a sturdy terrier broke from the coppice, dragging a small rabbit in triumph.

"Jim, you rascal!" the rector called, dropping his rhetoric with relief. "Poaching again! Let me introduce you," he went on, turning to his companion with unctuous humour in his eyes. "This is a connection of yours, a certain incorrigible member of the Phair household, Jim by name. He is a regular vagabond, I assure you. On many a star-lit night I have heard him giving tongue upon the Downs. Jim, come and wag your tail before a member of the family."

The traveller had been deep in thought before the advent of the dog, but at this introduction he started, and a line appeared across his forehead. Not one word of his companion's flowery discourse anent Saxons, Romans, and Danes, had entered his ears. His thoughts were concentrated upon the immediate future, and the spirit was very faint within him at the prospect. The terrier recalled him to the present by sniffing at his legs disapprovingly, and growling, his hackles lifting stiffly. This hostile reception filled the traveller's mind with ominous forebodings.

"If I were you I should run home with that rabbit before your mistress catches you," recommended the rector; and the dog, evidently concluding that the advice was sound, caught up his spoils, and trotted away.

At the gate of the Rectory the travelling companions separated.

"Go down the hill until you reach the churchyard," the incumbent directed. "Then you will see an old gate on your left hand opening upon a drive. The Manor itself is hidden among trees. Good-night! Thank you for your pleasant company. Yes, straight on! You cannot possibly miss the way."

The traveller passed on, and reached the gate beside the churchyard. There was no one in sight. Birds were singing softly in the plantations, bees went by, hiveward bound, all yellow with pollen, and butterflies crossed the drive. There was not a sound except the sleepy chuckling of the rooks.

The traveller wiped his forehead, breathing as though the walk had exhausted him, and opened the gate. The click of the catch seemed to him to arouse an unnatural tumult, and he turned to close it gently. Standing thus, facing the churchyard, he saw an inscription near the wooden fence. The long word "unfortunately" ran across a green stone, and caught his eye. "Mary Hawkins, who was unfortunately burnt at Lone Lea Farm, aged 23." Surely the big word might have been taken for granted. What sin had poor Mary Hawkins committed that she should have been burned to death at the time when life ripened within her? Who troubled their minds about her now? The stone was mossy, the grass rank, the ivy trailing, and a great dandelion flaunted its golden tassel above her head. She would have been then a wife and mother, probably, had it not been for that fatal fire. Unfortunate and forgotten Mary Hawkins!

The traveller shivered and started round. The trees waved gently at him, the flower-beds gave out their evening fragrance, a robin hopped along the

gravel, and a humming-bird moth whirred in the centre of a sunbeam. A corner of the house came out from the trees, a patch of ivy, a window, a chimney-stack, a wealth of honeysuckle. It was a good home.

A minute later the tall figure walked quickly to the front door, mounted the steps, and pulled the iron bell-handle.

Mr. Phair was sitting in the dining-room, resting his eyes, which had lately become very weak. Such was the information volunteered by the servant. Would the gentleman give his name? Mr. Phair was not accustomed to receive visitors, and the lady of the house was out. The gardener, who was snipping spent blooms from a geranium bed, looked up and saw the unknown gentleman pass the country maid, and disappear into the darkening house.

"Yes, sir, that's the dining-room," the housemaid said. "But, sir—"

The traveller had entered, shutting the door behind him. The blinds were half-drawn, and the curtains had fallen across the open windows. In the dim light he saw an old man sitting low in an easy-chair.

"Father!" the stranger cried.

A groan proceeded from the chair, and then a cry. Mr. Phair struggled to his feet and stumbled to the corner, pulling a curtain in front of him, shaking and moaning in fear.

"Father!" the stranger muttered.

"Jessie!" the old man screamed. "Jessie! Jessie!"

"I have come back to ask you to forgive me," said the traveller pityingly. "Father—I will be a good son to you now."

He came forward as he spoke.

"Don't strike me, Walter," implored the master of the house. "I am an old man, and cannot hold my own. I have never done you harm. Why have you come back to drive me into my grave?"

"I have come to—to try and do my duty."

"I will pay you to go away—far away," Mr. Phair whined, in abject supplication. "I have not much money. I am living on my capital, but I will give you all, if you will go far away. Oh, don't be violent. Don't throw me down. Jessie! Jessie! Yes, you shall have it all. I will go into the workhouse, and Jessie shall go out and earn her own living."

The traveller went back to the window. He had not looked for this.

"You must not be afraid of me," he pleaded. "I have not come for money. I only ask you to receive me, to give me another chance, and let me atone for the past. Put any test upon me that you like. I have come back a beggar, I admit. I am here to beg for a home, for a respectable position, and a place in life. Time has changed me. I only desire to devote myself to you for the remainder of your life."

The old man crouched in the corner, shivering still from head to foot.

"I know that cunning tongue and that smooth manner," he muttered. "I forgave you seventy times, and—you Judas!—you forged my name and escaped. The warrant still exists. I can put you in prison, I can send you into penal servitude, and then I shall be safe again. I will send for the policeman, and have you arrested to-night. No, no! I will not. I will not. Don't strike me. No, no! I will let you go."

The traveller had moved forward again.

"For God's sake!" he cried, "I will endure anything but prison. You would not bring this disgrace upon your name."

"It is disgraced," muttered the old man. "It is as black as sin can make it."

"Cannot we forget the past?" cried the prodigal.

He saw the lovely English scenery under the twilight; the jewelled garden falling to sleep, the grand trees, and the darkening hills. Respectability was worth a struggle.

"Let me only bear the name of Walter Phair," he went on passionately. "Let me live near you, if I may not be with you, and work out my own redemption."

"What is his plan?" came the frightened whisper. "What trap is he setting for me now?"

Then the door burst open, and Jessie stepped breathless into the room.

The master of the house found his courage when he saw his protector.

"Drive him away, Jessie. Set the dog at him!" he cried vindictively. "He has come to rob us. Take the stick away from him, girl."

"I have no stick," came the quiet voice out of the gloom.

Jessie came forward, and saw a tall, tired-looking young man, slightly bent, his hands clenched tightly, his eyes full of hunger.

"My brother!" she exclaimed.

He saw a small, beautifully-made girl, with a wealth of hair; a face with large scornful eyes, and cheeks as scarlet as the geraniums in the window-boxes.

"Yes," he answered, with an effort.

"Leave this house at once, please. Now, don't

threaten," she said firmly. "I am not afraid of you. There is a wagonette to be hired at the inn. They will drive you back to Highford to-night, and to-morrow you had better go to London. We will pay your expenses. Do you understand? Now go. I am sorry we cannot offer you any refreshment."

The spirit of the traveller broke. Once he looked up, but his glance fell again before that scornful face. The vagabond life was calling him, the trees beckoned, the open places awaited him. The dog had growled at the sight of him; the old man in the corner dreaded him as though he had come as a hired assassin; but it was this girl who showed him what he was.

He moved towards the door.

Wonder flickered in Jessie's eyes. Was this the brutal brother who had forged his father's name as a climax to a home life of vice, and left, pursued by the law, when she was little more than a child? this the blasphemous brother who had done violence whenever he had been opposed? She expected a torrent of abuse, a flood of blasphemy, a blow perhaps. He had stunned her once as a child when she dared to act contrary to his wishes.

A movement came from the corner, followed by the whisper:

"Has he gone, Jessie? Has he gone?"

"He is going, father."

The outcast noticed the change in her voice, and dared to search again for pity. It was not there; but a hand came out to him, and the cold voice said:

"Here is a little money for your journey."

"I would take nothing from either of you, except forgiveness," he faltered.

He opened the door, feeling her eyes upon him. He walked across the hall, and out at the front door into the garden, where the dew glistened and the stars were showing. He was near the gate when the terrier dashed across the gravel, growling furiously. A voice called, the dog stopped, and crept sulkily back to his mistress. The traveller turned, but a hand motioned him away. It was surely his imagination that made the act appear undecided. The gate swung and clicked behind, and he saw the dark outline of Mary Hawkins' grave.

For a short time he stood by the churchyard, holding the damp rail; and during those few moments he made a resolve: He would compel someone to care for him; he would carve out a shelter in some heart—if it were only some vagabond heart; he would cling to it and justify his existence. As he turned away from the rail, the light of the lone star burnt above a cypress, and beckoned him up the hill.

Up the hill he went, and when near the summit heard the wheels of the carrier's cart, the blowing of the horse, and the tramp of the carrier breaking through the evening.

Out of the shadow of the Rectory shrubbery a figure came upon him. The weary traveller stepped back to allow the labourer, as he supposed him to be, to pass; but a wiry hand seized his arm and gripped it fast, and a grey face was pushed up to his.

"Walter!" muttered a resolute voice. "If you are planning how you may harm the girl who has turned you out like the dog that you are, you shall settle first with me."

CHAPTER III

EXPOSURE

THE traveller saw a thin, grey face, quivering with nervousness, and for a moment made no effort to draw away, because he was even then attracted by the delicate beauty of that face, with its suggestion of latent suffering, the pathetic furrows beneath the honest eyes and sensitive mouth, and the plenteous grey hair curling over the high forehead. The traveller realised that this stranger had been battling to overcome his constitutional nervousness before venturing to step out and seize and accost him as he had done. The fragile hand still clung upon his arm, a frail thing, which he could have shaken off without an effort, and the eyes, which tried to be vindictive but could not, made him thrill with their psychic force. This stranger was acquainted, it appeared, with the traveller's object in coming to Windycombe, and had guessed that he would be rejected by the tenants of the Manor. Had he not been standing there in wait, anticipating that rejection?

"What do you know about me?" the traveller asked, with an attempt at hauteur.

For one moment doubt grew upon the pale face of Atcliff the recluse, and his hand loosened. Then his eyes glinted with a genuine fierceness as he rapidly

unfastened his coat and low collar, wrenched the loose flap of his flannel shirt aside, and pushed the bare shoulder up to the traveller's eyes. Dark as it was, the mystified man could not fail to see an angry scar stamped across the white skin.

"You have a bad memory, Walter," the grey man muttered. "Have you knifed so many in your time that you cannot keep track of them?"

It became the traveller's turn to wonder. In his excitement, Atcliff had lapsed into the language of the plains. The verb "to knife" and the phrase "to keep track of" were everyday expressions upon the prairie and in the mining lands. They sounded strangely in the village of Windycombe.

"I have never knifed a man in my life," he replied quietly.

The cart came round the bend, the carrier walking at the head of his labouring horse, urging on the willing beast with gruff ejaculations. Atcliff stepped out and addressed the man:

"Bring Mr. Phair's luggage to my cottage."

Then he hurried to the traveller's side, as though he dared not lose him, nudged him with his elbow, and motioned him to walk on.

Two minutes later they passed into a wonderful flower-garden, and entered an old-fashioned cottage, where every door and window stood open to admit the fresh-scented night. The carrier left the luggage. Atcliff called a sleepy old woman, and ordered her to make ready a room for the guest. She shuffled away, wide-awake with astonishment. The recluse closed the door and window of the sitting-room, then took up his stand before the flower-decked grate, and motioned the traveller to a seat.

"I knew you would come," he began. "Men like you always turn up again. I receive you here, not because I love you, but because I cannot have it known about the village that you were expelled from your father's house. Have you seen anyone beside the old man and Jessie and the servants down yonder?"

"What right have you to question me in this way?" the traveller demanded.

"Don't try that tack," the recluse said firmly. "I am a level-headed man still, in spite of this lonely life, and I understand you, Walter. You know that I understand you. We will have no blasphemy and no violence. We will discuss as coolly and sensibly as two enemies can. You know much about me, and I know you for one of the worst rascals unchanged."

The traveller rose.

"Don't use those words," he pleaded. "I have put away the past life, put it away as far as I can, and I am going to strain my very heart to reform."

Had there been sufficient light, he would have seen the face of his host clouding again with doubt.

"That's not like you," Atcliff said slowly. "Well, I suppose you have something mighty cunning up your sleeve. But you won't fool me. I am not to be bitten more than once by the same dog. Tell me this—are you going to revert to your old games?"

"I will answer anything if you will give me something to eat," came the reply. "I landed at Liverpool early this morning, and I have had no solid food since breakfast on the ship. I can pay you," he added hesitatingly.

Atcliff pulled a cord beside him, and a bell jangled sadly in a remote part.

"Bring the cold meat, the loaf, and a jug of beer," he said to the housekeeper, who received the order sulkily, and went to obey with audible grumblings.

"I won't handle any money of yours, Mr. Walter," the little grey man went on. "By the way, you might as well tell me if you have come here because you are wanted?"

"Not as Walter Phair," came the answer.

"You feel safe in this country?"

"I feel that I have my chance, if you and others will let me take it."

"You forget yourself," Atcliff muttered. "You are too crooked ever to grow straight."

A match cracked sharply, and the recluse lighted a candle. While he drew close the blind and curtains, and the housekeeper was setting out supper, the wanderer glanced round the room. He noticed some specimens of Indian bead-work, an old pair of snow-shoes, some buffalo horns, and a buckskin coat; a few pen-and-ink drawings depicting western scenes; a magnificent buffalo robe worth its weight in gold; a dented pan gleaming in a corner; some specimens of rock, quartz principally, showed dimly in a cabinet of dark oak. As he looked his wonder increased.

"I travelled from the junction with Mr. Finch," he said, answering his host's former question, when they were alone again. "I walked with him from Elmbury. He found that I was bound for the Manor, and he showed me the way."

"In that case, I shall have to keep you here for a week, and concoct some story to account for your not

staying at the Manor. What Finch does not know in this district nobody knows."

There was a different sound in Atcliff's voice, and the traveller became suddenly aware that he was being subjected to a close scrutiny. He went on eating in silence, his face burning. The light in the room became stronger. Atcliff had lighted a second candle, and was passing across the room, holding a flaring paper spill. Candle after candle grew into a flame, until a warm and steady illumination filled the little place. Then the recluse returned to his former position before the grate, and went on reading the face and figure of his guest.

"Won't you drink with me?" muttered the traveller.

At the question Atcliff started from his reverie.

"Yes, I will drink," he said absently; and crossing the room, he took a bottle and glass out of a cupboard, and helped himself to a very little whisky.

The other pushed back his chair, trying to find shadow. The pitiless candlelight fell everywhere in festive yellow, and whenever he glanced up, there was the grey face set towards him. He took out his pipe, and sought to envelop himself in a fog of smoke; but all the time he was aware of the watching eyes, and presently he heard the voice:

"What's your scheme?"

"I have come to undo the past," the traveller replied boldly.

"Old Phair has heard that sort of lie before. Most of us work our lives into a pretty bad tangle, but few of us are given time or opportunity to work it straight again. I imagine you have made a little bit, and finding the country over the water too hot to hold

you, or getting tired of the life maybe, you concluded to ship back to the old country and throw yourself again upon the old man. Well, he's done with you. That last villainy of yours before you ran has given him a card which can beat the best you hold. He can send you to prison if you force him. As for undoing the past, that's moonshine. You don't mean it, Walter. You want to fatten here for a time, then lay your hand on a parcel of money, and cut out—"

"Wait a while," the traveller interrupted, falling into the language of the plains. "Give me a show. See—see here!" He pulled out a pocket-book, opened it, and drew out a piece of stiff paper, which he rubbed flat upon his knee before passing to his host. "Read that!" he exclaimed, with a note of triumph.

The silence in the room became so intense that when a beetle floundered against the window-pane both men started.

"This," said Atcliff, staring at his visitor—"this is a draft made out by a New York bank upon their London branch for four thousand pounds, in favour of Robert Phair of the Manor House, Windycombe."

"You say I have come back to squeeze money out of him," the triumphant voice went on. "Put that in an envelope, will you? And to-morrow, perhaps, you will send it to the Manor."

"It's not good!" cried Atcliff. "Man, what game is this you're playing?"

"Let him send the draft up to the bank. He can easily find out whether it is good or not."

"And this is Walter Phair!" said Atcliff, in a scarcely audible voice. "The young blackguard who

if he had done a decent act by accident would have gone into mourning for it. I guess you have reformed," he went on ironically. "Have you any idea what this money will mean to the old man?"

"He told me he was living upon his capital."

"Which will last, perhaps, another five years. He has the Manor dirt cheap—at thirty-five pounds a year. There is no demand for house property in this part of the country, and the owners, who are as poor as rats themselves, were glad enough to find a tenant. A business man could have got the place for thirty. Do you think the old man will take this?"

"It is his already. If he does not want the money, he can make it over to his daughter."

Atcliff winced slightly.

"The question is, will he accept anything from you?"

"Will you try him in the morning?" asked the traveller eagerly.

"I can send to him. He and I seldom meet."

Atcliff took an envelope and sheet of paper, wrapped up the draft, hesitated, and finally turned to his companion.

"Write something," he said, holding out a pencil. "This is your affair, not mine."

The traveller took the pencil and lowered his head. He wrote, "To my father and sister," closed and addressed the envelope, and returned it to his host.

The latter had changed. An old-fashioned courtesy had taken the place of his former angry opposition. His grey face was smiling in a friendly fashion. It appeared as though he had suddenly come to understand the man before him, that he had forgiven his past transgressions, and had reached the conclusion that his reformation was genuine.

"You look tired," he said, in a kindly voice. "I am going to release you in a few minutes, because I retire early myself. Five o'clock finds me in my garden when the mornings are fine. But before you go, there is something I have to say. Will you tell me the exact amount for which you forged your father's name?"

A look of malicious enjoyment passed across the little man's face as he awaited the reply. He seemed to enjoy this dragging into light of a miserable past, this exposure of his companion's heartlessness, this bullying of the man who was in his power. It was only reasonable that he should remember that old wound in his shoulder, which caused him considerable suffering every spring and autumn.

"I cannot remember at this moment," the traveller replied. "My brain is dazed to-night," he added hurriedly. "I seem unable to recall anything."

"It is of no importance," Atcliff went on, screwing up his eyes. "You will be clearer after a night's rest. There is, however, a certain scene I will recall to you, and one which can hardly entail any effort upon your memory. Of course you have a very distinct remembrance of Danesmoor, where you went to school, where your father lived before he moved out here?"

The traveller replied quickly in the affirmative.

"You remember that night when the gipsies attacked Mr. Robson's farm and tried to burn it down, because he had taken up one of their gang for poaching. It was for poaching, was it not?"

"Oh yes," said the listener.

"It was about this time of the year, and one of the hottest nights I have known in this country," went on the speaker. "You took the part of the gipsies, of course, vagabond that you were, and it was you who

lighted the big stack in the long meadow. The stack was burnt to the ground, as there was no water handy. Am I correct in what I say?"

"Quite," said the traveller.

"There was a lich-stone under the sign-post where the roads forked. The gipsy caravans were upon the grass close to this stone, from which a good view of the farm buildings could be obtained. It was upon this road, immediately opposite the stone, that your father caught you, and induced you to return home before the arrival of the police. You were frightened at what you had done, and went with him without any attempt at resistance. All that is clear in your memory, I suppose?"

"Perfectly so," the traveller muttered, wiping his forehead with the flat of his hand.

"I need not go on," said Atcliff, with another of his grim smiles. "But I daresay you wonder why I have recalled so much?"

The traveller admitted his wonder.

"Just this. Mr. Phair never lived at Danesmoor, but some twelve miles off, at Pikesford, which I must inform you is a small town about the size of Highford. The unpopular farmer's name was Beveridge, and the gipsy attack was made in midwinter, upon a bitterly cold night. The gipsies came out to avenge themselves because Beveridge had turned them out of a lane which belonged to him, upon which they considered they had camping rights. It was their chief, and not you, who lighted the big stack, which was not in the long meadow, but close beside the house, and this stack was hardly injured, because it was too wet to burn. There was abundance of water, as the farm stood on very low ground, and there was

a great pond in the yard. Further," Atcliff went on pitilessly, "the lich-stone is two miles from Pikesford, on the Danesmoor road, and a very long way from Beveridge's farm. It was not upon the road, but in one of the farm out-houses, that I, and not your father, found you. The police had already arrived, and were beating back the gipsies. You were like a young madman, but I was stronger than you in those days. I had to drag you away by force, and as I did so you bit my hand."

The recluse stretched out his left hand, and indicated the swollen joint of his third finger.

The traveller had obeyed his instructions, and remained motionless while his host was speaking. He made no sign of hearing. He did not even look at the outstretched hand, but a gentle sigh fell from his lips when the quiet voice finished what it had to say. Then he rose and stood between the flickering candles.

"I have forgotten everything," he said desperately.

"There is one thing you cannot have forgotten, Walter Phair," said the grey man satirically. "Will you be good enough to tell me my name?"

It was past midnight when the two men ascended the stairs, the host leading the way, holding a lighted candle he had absently lifted from its holder, which shed its grease impartially over his fingers and the worn stair-carpet. The little house was in deadly silence; around it the summer night throbbed closely, and the whisper of the warm wind through the flowers wafted a heavy odour up the passages.

The recluse pushed open a white door, and transferred the candle to his guest.

"Good-night, Mr. Munro," he whispered.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE HERMITAGE

A GAUZY mist blurred the stars, and the summer darkness wrapped Atcliff closely as he came out upon the gleaming road, an envelope in his hand. The shutters of the old cottages were clamped across their low windows, and not a sound proceeded from any of the thatched dwelling-places, and not a voice was raised.

The recluse hurried down the hill, passed beside the moss-inlaid fence, and pushed his spare body in by the Manor gate. A ray of candlelight poured from the central eye of the house, and across this beam the white moths shivered. It was Jessie's window which was still awake. Walking outside the beam, Atcliff reached the door, opened the flap of the letter-box, pushed in the envelope, and stepped back on tiptoe.

Midway along the drive something impelled him to look back. All the garden lay in the dark, and the candle shone no longer from the room upstairs. Under the shadow of the plantation Atcliff watched until a sudden glow died out of the fan-light over the front door. Then he backed away. The yellow dawn flushed the central window, and the long beam slanted again, and down it came the call of a nervous voice :

"Walter!"

The recluse moved gently along the strip of grass.

"Walter!"

Atcliff heard no more. But there was a well-satisfied smile on his grey face as he came up the ghostly hill. He knew that a woman is clear-sighted where a man is blind, that she is more ready to forgive, more prone to forget.

Reaching the cottage, he brought out a chair, which he placed among the rose-bushes, and there sat for an hour deep in thought, in the centre of his little Eden of flowers.

Behind the purple clematis above, Munro slept in snatches, falling into a dream, starting from it, and sinking into another. One time he saw Krum staggering through the desert, the thirst-sores bleeding on his mouth; another time he saw himself making his confession in the camp of opal-seekers, and heard the grave voice of the Bishop exonerating him from blame with the words: "When a man tries to foul the life of his partner, he calls punishment upon himself. What you did you did unthinking, mad at his meanness, and I'm not saying that I wouldn't have acted the same if fortune had stood me in your shoes." Again he saw himself bending over the dead man's pack, and finding there the information upon which he had acted; that Krum was an alias, that the father lived in an English wayside village, that Phair was the supercilious blackguard's rightful name; again he felt himself travelling to the far west, dropping down the Pacific coast to the Golden Gate, parting with his treasure in the Californian city, rushing from ocean to ocean, no longer as the ragged vagabond

Leonard Munro, but as the well-dressed Englishman, Walter Phair. The ball was still clicking through his broken rest, the wheel still spinning. . . .

At half-past nine, whatever the weather, Mr. Finch passed out of his gate, pipe in mouth, to take the twenty-minute constitutional ordered by his doctor. The reverend gentleman was dyspeptic, being somewhat of an idler, and, had duty and the doctor not interfered, would have clung to his russet-leather chair with very much the same pertinacity that the snail exhibits in adhering to its shell. A pipe, a book, and a pair of felt slippers, were with him necessary aids to living. A glass of sound port, a good anecdote, and a rubber of whist, were the luxuries which added piquancy to his calm existence.

Sallying forth in his strong country boots, lately resoled for the third time by the village cobbler, his old mackintosh and shameful umbrella—he would justify his appearance by the statement: “No one expects a parson to dress respectably, and, bless your good soul, everybody knows old Finch!”—he met Atcliff proceeding from the opposite direction. Had anyone informed the old parson that his neighbour had come along the road for the express purpose of meeting him, the rector would probably have uttered the clerical equivalent for “Rct.” As it was, he chuckled vastly at this opportunity of catching the parishioner who was invariably hidden in his garden on the occasion of a clerical visitation, and whose face had not yet caught the rector’s eye as he adjusted his spectacles and swept the congregation before beginning either his religious or his scientific discourse.

“A nasty wet day, Mr. Atcliff!” he shouted as he drew up, extending a spongy, unbuttoned glove.

"My garden wants the rain. It is very welcome," said the little man.

"Ah, your garden! Still harping upon your garden. Are you for a walk? Come with me a little way. Do you know that the Phairs are entertaining a visitor?"

"I know that Mr. Phair's only son has just returned from abroad," replied Atcliff. "But he is not staying with his own people. He happens to be honouring me."

"Well, that is a surprise!" The rector closed his lips rather abruptly, afraid that he had been guilty of an incivility. "He told me that he was going to the Manor, and went on suggestively.

"Shall we walk on?" said the recluse. "We feel the full force of the rain here."

"I am going along the valley. My wobbly umbrella would be reduced to wreckage upon the upper road," said Mr. Finch cheerfully. "I had no idea that you were a close acquaintance of the Phairs, Mr. Atcliff."

"I have not been twice inside the Manor during the last four years," the other answered. "But I knew Walter Phair some time ago, when he was a boy sowing his wild oats, and I could not refuse him hospitality when he came to me last night."

"Really!" said the astonished old gossip, scenting a pleasant story. "He came to you. How very remarkable!"

"Not a bit," returned Atcliff, somewhat rudely. "You must know the story of the prodigal son well enough."

"Ah!" sighed the rector, more deeply perhaps because he too had a son. "I begin to see daylight.

I was deceived—I have never been more deceived in my life."

"Young Phair is all right," said Atcliff; "but the old man has grown stubborn, and refuses to believe in him. Years ago they had a difference of opinion which made the home uncomfortable, so the boy went abroad. Now he has come back, still of the same mind, to find that his father has not altered his. I'm not blaming either of them. There are faults on both sides, and neither is prepared to admit that he is wrong. They had a few words last night, and it ended by Walter coming to my place, and asking for a bed. He will stop with me until the old gentleman comes round. I think he will. I am telling you this, Mr. Finch, because I wish you to understand the situation. And now I will wish you good morning, as I begin to feel my rheumatism."

"I am very glad that I was not deceived," the rector said. "I took a fancy to the young man, and I flatter myself that my judgment is fairly good. We had a most enjoyable walk together last night. I will call upon him this afternoon, if the weather clears. Perhaps he will give us a lecture upon his travels. It would be most interesting and instructive to us stay-at-homes. You might suggest it to him. I am sure Mr. Phair will come round. It is so much better, as you suggest, not to attempt to force the issue. We old men grow perverse, I know. That is human nature. I must preach a sermon on the subject. You must bring Mr. Walter to the Rectory some evening, and we will have some whist. The old lady will make a fourth—an indifferent fourth, I fear, because she will not finesse. Why! I will get Mr. Phair to come—all in happy ignorance, you

comprehend—and give him his son as partner. You and I might play into their hands, not too shamelessly, of course, and leave them together when they had won. It would not be sportsmanlike, but it would be none the less effective. The subsequent reconciliation, I am sure, would be complete. You know what a generous feeling you entertain for a partner who has assisted you to win. And when that partner is a son, and an only son, with whom you have a slight difference—I declare, Mr. Atcliff, it would make a very pleasant rubber.”

The rector would have rambled on in this strain indefinitely, but he suddenly found himself bereft of a listener. Atcliff was already bending his back to ascend the hill.

“Dear me!” said the rector. “What a very unsociable neighbour he is!”

He trudged along a grass road which led to a farm, having sighted the mistress of the house standing under an umbrella, dispensing grain to her poultry. He felt it incumbent upon himself to give this good woman, who was a sieve so far as secret communications were concerned, a full and particular account of the little misunderstanding between the Phairs.

In the cottage on the hill Atcliff sought to entertain his guest by exhibiting his portfolio of botanical specimens, and pointing out to him the peculiarities of each plant and bloom. But both were obviously uninterested. They forced a conversation, until Atcliff began to ramble, and Munro ceased from listening. The wind moaned about the corners of the cottage, and the grey rain pelted mistily.

Atcliff stood before the window, his back presented to his guest. Thus placed, he asked :

"If your notion comes to anything, do you think you could care for them?"

There was a pause before the reply came.

"My mother died shortly after her second marriage, when I was a small child, and my stepfather was a brute to me. When I was twelve years old I ran away. I have been a vagabond for sixteen years. A home has always been the dream of my life. I could not break from the old life. I was dragged under; I did not drift willingly. You do not know how hard it is to return to respectability when you have been driven to the road."

"Don't I know?" exclaimed Atcliff, quickly turning. "You think, like everyone who has been through a hard experience, that you are the most unfortunate man alive. Cannot you add things up?" he went on harshly. "You see a grey and rusty man living the lone life. You think that the words 'home' and 'family' are nothing to him."

"You have a home."

"It is a refuge."

The silence that fell between them was only disturbed by the lashing of the rain.

"I have my flow-ers, and they only flourish under my hands because they cannot help themselves. I open my mind to you because—" Atcliff made a step forward. "You have the free spirit that I once thought everything. Tell me, have you ever been admitted into the freemasonry of the lone star?"

Munro sprang up, and reached out both hands.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You have been in star-light company?"

"I, too, have followed the star," said John Atcliff.

"We are brothers," he went on gladly. "We have both been under the sky; our secrets we can keep to ourselves. The wanderers' philosophy is to live for the present. Now, tell me, do you think you could care for them?"

"I could care for anyone who would give me the hand of friendship," the wanderer replied. "My heart went out to Mr. Finch because he treated me as an equal. I felt dazed when a labourer touched his hat to me last night; he did not know that I ought to have taken off mine to him."

"Will old Phair make a move?" muttered Atcliff restlessly. "Everybody knows by now that you are staying with me. Finch will not rest until he has carried the news through the village. Probably he is at the Manor now. You won't go there again?"

"I have done my part," Munro answered.

"He must do something, if it is nothing more than to acknowledge your gift, or to return it without thanks. I rather think he will return it. You do not know what a thorough brute you are impersonating."

"I shall do my best," said Munro earnestly. "I want to restore myself—that first of all, I suppose—but there is something else. I must redeem the dead man's character, and show the father that the son was not wholly bad. It is the least I can do for the memory of the man I knew as Krum."

"Did you find any good in him? All the time that you were together, did he once give you a decent thought or perform a single unselfish action?" asked Atcliff. "Was there anything in the man's nature that seemed to you worth preserving? Did you find any white spot in his character?"

Munro shook his head reluctantly.

"And now you know the kind of work you have undertaken. You have to convince the father—Jessie does not count, as she was a child when Walter went away—that there was a lot of good in that man, that he was capable of acting unselfishly, that he could be decent-minded, and that his penitence is real. Not only that, but you have impressions to remove, the memories of insults, a hundred petty villainies, a broken fortune, aye, and kicks and blows, and the calling in of police to save father from son. Now, Mr. Munro, you won't hear any blame from me if you back out of playing that part."

"Will he guess that I am not his son?" was the wanderer's only reply.

"Not likely. He is half blind, and none too strong mentally. You are wonderfully like Walter in externals; and naturally, after twelve years' absence and hard living, a man changes. But Walter was older than you. You must remember that you are thirty-one."

The two men went to the mid-day meal, and afterwards returned to the sitting-room. The wind was still blowing about the rain, and little rivulets coursed crookedly down the gravel paths, where rose and poppy petals lay sodden, and wet humble-bees, brought very low in their humility, dragged their protesting bodies from cover to cover. Atcliff dozed. Munro sat near the window, trifling with his cold pipe. The hopeless afternoon dragged on. Atcliff awoke, grey and cold, and proposed a fire. He pulled the flower-pots out of the grate, and pushed a lighted match into a heap of rubbish. As the twigs began to crackle, the little iron gate of the garden swung back noisily.

"How are you fixed for money?" Atcliff asked, obviously anxious to distract his companion's attention.

"Money!" repeated Munro, with a slight start. "I have close upon a hundred pounds."

A girl passed the window in a grey macintosh, short walking skirt, and red tam-o'-shanter. She carried no umbrella, and wore no gloves, and her face was flushed with wind and wet with rain.

"If you can afford to pay me ten shillings a week, we shall be able to manage," Atcliff went on, with curious distinctness. "I am very poor, or I would not suggest it."

A bell jangled at the back of the cottage, the letter-box rattled, the crunch of wet gravel sounded again, and the strong, handsome girl swept past the window, gazing straight ahead. She seemed to warm the garden as she passed.

"Tea, Mrs. Field—bring us some tea," called Atcliff gaily. "A letter! Not for me? Ah, yes! For Mr. Phair."

Munro tore open the envelope, which contained a half sheet of notepaper. He brought it up to his eyes, stood for a minute like a stone figure, then swung his arm round, and pushed the missive within reach of his host. Atcliff caught it up, and read:

"Windycombe. August 6th. Received from Mr. Walter Phair, bank draft, value £4,000."

This receipt was properly stamped and signed, after the ordinary manner of business.

CHAPTER V

THE WAIT-A-BITS

A SECOND recluse had been added to Windycombe. Two men now worked in the little garden of the Hermitage. Two figures were often seen near dusk proceeding along the sky-line of the Downs.

Here was an altogether unsociable state of affairs. Mr. Finch was justly indignant when he discovered that questioning Mr. Phair was tantamount to groping down a *cul-de-sac*; when Jessie merely responded to his artful insinuations by irrelevant questions concerning the crops; when the supposed Walter Phair returned his call at a time when he must have been well aware that he, the rector, was out of his arm-chair.

It was an easy matter to escape from Windycombe by means of one of the numerous field-paths and lanes. Every day Munro covered six miles of lonely land, always taking the same road, and walking at full speed. He sometimes saw Jessie during these wanderings. She, too, walked alone, and yet less alone than he, for her dog accompanied her; and she, he noticed, had one particular walk: down the hill and the long road by the sign-post, up the green lane, through the wood, and back by the Downs.

No further communication had passed between the Manor and the cottage on the hill. The respective tenants remained as though unconscious

of the other's existence; the houses, instead of being some two hundred yards apart, might have been situated at opposite ends of the country. Atcliff sagely pointed out that Walter had never let a week pass without some violent act of aggression; the day in which he had not occasioned some local trouble, even though it were nothing more than setting one dog upon another, had been by him accounted lost. Nothing would be more likely to persuade Mr. Phair that his putative son's repentance was no mere lip affair than the fact that he was able to live in the place without stirring up the breath of evil report.

"If you are given the chance to approach Jessie, I should take it," recommended Atcliff one golden afternoon, when Munro was about to start upon his walk. "Don't speak, but pass quickly, merely removing your hat. I almost believe that she only wants a little encouragement to take your side. But you must give her an opening. And I should consent to give that lecture," he added thoughtfully. "It would please the locals—and she might come to it."

"But what good would it do?" asked Munro.

"Have you forgotten how Othello won the heart of Desdemona?"

Munro made no reply, but walked away, flushing.

He made for the springy turf, crossed the blunt ridge, and descended into a hollow where a tiny sandbank silted down to a horse-pond. Leaving this green basin, where newts and frogs spent halcyon days, he described an erratic course between the junipers in the direction of the wood. He was straying from his usual route that afternoon.

The dark-brown broom-pods cracked asunder in the heat; the butterfly blooms of the bird's-foot trefoil were wide open; and scarlet pimpernel jewelled the slopes between thorny patches of rest-harrow and tall star thistles. Elusive grasshoppers rose in shoals, noisy little warriors in green or khaki. Peewits started up and down, and a lark, beating under the blue heaven, filled space with its overflowing song.

All the silence of the plains was there, but the lines were soft, and the limits well defined. The scented flowers were far more desirable than the gaudy blossoms of the prairie; the birds were drab, but not dumb; no arctic winter had frozen their little throats. The air was always humid, and laden with gum olibanum from the junipers. The wanderer found only one thing wanting in this English garden, and that was companionship.

The shadow of the wood fell across the valley as Munro came up among the trees. The mosses and brambles ahead invited him with their coolness. A gnarled, picturesque trunk sprawled beside the winding path, a mass of rottenness to be broken by a kick.

A dog was barking in the subdued light of the wood, and the wanderer thought he recognised that short, sharp sound. A brace of partridges swept past tumultuously. After a momentary hesitation, he walked on, and allowed the undergrowth of garlic to swallow up his feet.

Suddenly a clear voice called:

"Oh, Jim! You are a silly little fool! If you were any good at all, you would pull away these brambles instead of standing there barking."

Munro recalled his instructions: "Don't speak, but pass quickly, merely removing your hat."

Well enough upon the road, or in the village; but how was he to pass in that tangling wood with merely a formal recognition of the girl, who was busily tearing from her skirt numerous octopus-like strands of bramble, each invested with a vicious and tenacious spirit of mischief?

The sunbeams drifted through the foliage, one ray persistently blinding the girl, as she swayed and fretted among her entanglements. One little brown hand wore an angry red scratch. Her loosened hair caressed her flushed cheeks. She was breathing quickly, angrily, and being, as she thought, alone, gave vent to her feelings after her own manner.

"Oh, hang your noise, Jim! Hang these sticky things! Hang everything! That's right—tear, if it's any pleasure to you—rotten old stuff!"

The dog broke into a growl; the tugging and imprecations ceased. Munro's courage went out. As he would never have formed the resolution to make himself known to the girl who had so strongly fascinated him in that distant city during the days of the abyss, so now he sought to escape while there was time from the opportunity which he had longed for, lest he should be compelled to pass through the ordeal of standing face to face with Jessie Phair and addressing her in that lonely spot.

"Oh!"

There was no mistaking that sound. He was discovered. He halted and stood foolishly upon the moss.

"Come here, Jim!"

Munro saw as in a mist the small figure of the girl

who believed herself to be his sister, looking at him defiantly, half ashamed, still a little angry, holding her imprisoned skirt, and flicking away the flies from her hot forehead. He tried to speak, but thoughts, words, and action alike abandoned him.

"This is ridiculous," he heard her say.

Something seemed to give way in the intruder's head, and he found himself composed. Strengthened by desperation, which occasionally makes the nervous man as confident to outward appearance as one of iron nerves, he took off his hat and moved forward, saying falteringly :

"This meeting is accidental. I had no idea that you were here. Will you allow me to—to help you out of that tangle?"

"I came in here to pick a fungus. I collect them, you know." Jessie laughed somewhat hysterically. "I stepped upon the thing and squashed it, and then found myself caught everywhere."

Munro was perfectly cool now. He ploughed into the brambles, leaving his hat upon the moss for the dog to worry—which he did, until his mistress gave him a sharp word—took out his knife, and said :

"I had better cut you free."

"The beastly things," she murmured. "I—I am not generally as helpless as this."

"In the country where I have been, these brambles are called lawyers," Munro said. His head was bent low; he could see nothing of her face. "The name is founded upon the belief that when lawyers once lay hold upon you, they don't let you get away easily."

Jessie laughed, not very confidently, nor yet happily; but it was certainly a friendly laugh.

"Some people call them the wait-a-bits. I expect you see why."

"I do," said Jessie, with another grave little laugh. "They have made me wait a bit. And I should have waited a good bit longer if—if you had not come. Oh, thank you!"

She stepped daintily clear of the bramble patch, her skirt festooned with adhesive lawyers. Munro followed, still painfully nervous, but grateful for this first success. He bent again, when he saw how deeply the curved red thorns had entered into the warp and woof of her frock, saying:

"Let me remove them. You may tear your hands."

Jessie pushed back her hair, and looked down in almost blind astonishment at "the blackguard who, out of shame, had returned what he had stolen," as her father had described him. From the dim recollection of that brother she simply could not imagine him kneeling at her feet picking brambles out of her skirt.

"What is that mark below your ear?"

The question had escaped before she could hold it back. She flushed and frowned, angry at the indiscretion; then waited to see if he would take advantage of the familiarity.

"I was bitten there," he said quietly, without stopping his work.

"A bite! A wild beast?"

"No; a man. He was drunk," he answered, ashamed of the confession.

"The brute! Why did he bite you?"

He flushed. Now she appeared to be taking his part.

"I was taking him home, that is, to our tent. He wanted to lie down on the railroad track, and to save him I had to use force. It was then that he bit me."

"The brute!" she said again. "Why didn't you leave him there?"

"He was my partner." He might also have added, "And your brother."

"Did you always stand up for your partners?"

"I tried to."

"Where is he now?"

"Dead."

"A good thing, I should think. A man who could act like a beast—"

She broke off suddenly, as the past misdeeds of the man before her flashed across her memory. But if this were not acting, here was transformation indeed. Her brother not resent being bitten by a drunkard! Her brother stand up for a partner to his own disadvantage! That brother who had stunned her once with a cowardly blow! And now he was kneeling on the damp moss, pulling brambles off her dress, and burrs, and grass seeds, yes, and actually dusting the hem of her skirt with lingering hands, and scraping the pulp of fungus from her little shoe!

"Thank you," she said, blushing warmly. "I am free from the lawyers' clutches."

Munro rose and stepped back. He did not dare to smile at the pleasantries which she had uttered with perfectly grave lips. A beam of sunlight crossed between, and this seemed to him to part them like the great gulf.

How she reminded him of Marguerite! The same size and figure, the same tint of hair and flush of

face, the same swinging motion and independent pose. She was Marguerite again, and yet the two girls were not alike. No one else, he felt sure, who had seen them would observe any near resemblance. But in his eyes Jessie resembled in a thousand small ways the girl who had all so unknowingly commenced the work of his reformation. Marguerite was dead ; but here was Jessie Phair, who believed herself to be his sister, reigning in her stead.

"Will you tell me which way you are going back?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I am going by the green lane," said Jessie. She turned upon him suddenly. "Why do you ask?"

Munro cast his eyes foolishly among the wait-a-bits.

"So that I shall not intrude. I will go back by the Downs."

There was an interval of intense silence. Jim had gone a-hunting, and suddenly his wild tongue gave information that the chase was keen. The sunlight swayed between them, flecked with flies, and shuddering with the movement of the trees.

"You do mean it!" she cried—"you do mean it! Have you forgotten, Walter?"

"Forgotten—what?" he wondered.

"That I am Jessie, your sister. And—and I am lonely here." With that confession she moved into the sunbeam, which straightway covered her head with glory, and said winningly: "Won't you walk home by the green lane too?"

CHAPTER VI

A SISTER'S SYMPATHY

STILL the name of Walter was never mentioned at the Manor, the rigid mind of the master unchanging, and Jessie being too wise to rub the open sore. Only the gardener ventured to mention the young gentleman, asking when he was coming down to stay, "Mr. Atcliff being quiet company for he," prompted to the question by inquisitive connections.

Jessie smiled at the insinuation, and answered lightly:

"Mr. Walter does not agree very well with the master, Holder."

Whereupon the horticulturist wagged his head wisely.

"Aye, miss, I know all about that," he said. "Old folk never do hold wi' new-fashioned notions. There was Bill Saunders—Mr. William calls hisself now—son of old Job, who works over at Lone Lea, and he never had a good word for his people when he come back from London. He got talking about these telephones and telegraphs up there, until the old man had to give him the boot. Job couldn't understand, you see, miss, him being an old-fashioned man, what has never been on the railroad or gone down to seaside in his life. Once he went to Highford Junction by muck-cart, and saw the expresses go by.

That were twelve year ago, and he talks about that now, do Job. They trains passing at the junction fair 'mazed he."

Having been thus privileged to view the situation from the villagers' standpoint, Jessie went away, laughing, to her household duties.

One day the master of the Manor ordered the wagonette from the Fleur-de-llys Inn, as the single beer-house of the hamlet had been styled for centuries, and drove into Highford with his daughter. There a visit was made to a lawyer's office, and that same evening Mr. Phair informed Jessie that he had made over "his son's conscience-money" to her, in order to evade the death duties; and she believed what he told her, not guessing that he had an ulterior motive.

"Walter," said the girl the following afternoon, when she met Munro at the usual time upon the Downs, "I have a most important disclosure to make. I am no longer the penniless Miss Phair. Thanks to you, I am an heiress!"

She went on to tell him of her father's action.

"The lawyer is going to invest the money at four per cent. I am to have a bank account and a cheque-book. But father is to have the use of the money during his lifetime, so my allowance will remain the same."

"But you can do exactly what you like with the principal," Munro said. "Why has he given it you?"

"As a bait to tempt some impecunious man, perhaps. Don't you think that my attractions, plus an income of one hundred and sixty pounds, must prove irresistible?"

"A man who really loves a girl would prefer her to

be penniless," he said feelingly, "so that he may have the pleasure of providing her with everything."

"Oh," she murmured. "You are not cynical?"

"I don't think I am ever cynical!"

Munro's position was becoming daily more dangerous, because when in Jessie's presence he would forget that she was to be regarded as his sister. The contingency which he had overlooked began to threaten. Man is not easily satisfied. First he covets the apple, and when that is his long for the tree, then for the orchard, and finally for the earth and the sun which shines upon it.

"This is the loneliest of places," Jessie went on, more seriously. "Nobody ever comes here for any time, and we never go away. The family who own the village has become reduced to a pair of old dames, who live at Cheltenham in an atmosphere of cats and canaries, and let the shooting every year. Perhaps father hopes that one of the shooters may take compassion upon me. Unfortunately, I do not fancy that I should reciprocate the compassion."

"But you will marry?" he ventured.

"One never knows what the future may bring forth. I could not marry a really respectable man. Don't misunderstand me," she went on, with a laugh. "I don't mean that there is any danger of my entering into an alliance with a positive criminal. I mean that I could not settle down in a stupid little house, surrounded by a stupid little garden, knowing that there was my home for life, and there was the room in which I had to die. I could never wear gloves every day, order the same dinners, smile at the same people, and be sweetly hypocritical over their faults and follies. I could not marry a husband

with no soul outside his home. I simply could not conform to the routine of social duties; church every Sunday morning in a nice frock; garden parties, where I should be even more bored than my guests; the same pictures and ornaments staring at me every day; the same flowers coming up year after year in the same places. Oh, it would stifle! I should break loose and run wild after a year of it. I want change, movement, a different scene and different faces every week; and I must have a husband who will agree with me. If I want to live in a tent, he must want it too. If I set my heart upon roaming the country in a caravan, he must share my wish. Now you see the sort of girl I am. Fancy me the wife of a respectable man!"

"You might reform him," Munro suggested.

"Yes; suppose he were a clergyman," she said delightedly. "And suppose it were Sunday morning, and I should say, 'Put on an old suit, my dear, and come with me to dig truffles in the wood.' Or suppose a doctor—how he would lose his practice! Or a lawyer—how his clients would tear themselves from him on account of his vagabond of a wife."

They were walking through a copse where the grass was long. While she was still laughing, a yellow streak darted suddenly from Jessie's foot and glided up the trunk of a fallen tree. With a movement equally rapid, Munro snatched the reptile by its tail, swung it above his head, cracked it in the air like a whip, and the adder's head flew off into the wood.

With a quick exclamation, Jessie stopped and looked at him with nervous wonder. She could not forget her brother's absolutely feminine fear of

reptiles. He would turn pale, she remembered, at the sight of a slow-worm, and long ago, when she was a toddling child, and he a great bullying boy, visiting the Zoological Gardens, nothing could induce Walter to enter the snake-house. And now he had coolly performed a feat which a snake-charmer might have envied.

"You used to have a horror of snakes," she said quietly.

Munro flushed. He had acted on the impulse of the moment, forgetting his part, as he so often forgot it when she was with him. Directly Jessie had spoken, he remembered how Krum had once made a circuit to evade a harmless frog.

"Living upon the plains a man must forget his weaknesses," he said, as lightly as he could.

"You have changed beyond all understanding," she murmured; and Munro heard, and somehow felt no regret for his act of indiscretion.

They turned homewards along the green lane, and a figure stopped when it saw them, and deliberately broke through the hedge and made across the stubble into freedom. Munro tried not to allow his eyes to wander in the direction of that small lone man.

Lately the master of the Hermitage had drawn apart from his companion. There had been no word of disagreement, but the natural sensitiveness of the recluse had asserted itself. They seldom walked together; Atcliff would often sit down to table after his guest had risen, or leave the house when he entered. Munro respected the wishes of his host, anticipated them when he could, feeling that he was an unwanted cuckoo in this lone bird's nest. Quite recently he had hinted at departure, but Atcliff muttered sharply, "Stay, I want you here."

"Walter, who is Mr. Atcliff?"

Jessie gave a sigh of relief. A hundred times she had found that question upon her tongue, but a vague fear had always bidden her to keep silence. Now she had broken the ice, and her brother must either sink or swim.

He did neither; he floundered. Munro knew, indeed, nothing of the silent man, beyond the fact that he had once wandered upon the plains. He did not know why the recluse had waited for him upon the night of his arrival; why he had exhibited fear at the sight of him; why he had taken him in and given him shelter.

"I know very little," he said unsteadily.

"What do you know? Why did he receive you at the Hermitage?" she insisted.

"He knew us at Pikesford," Munro ventured.

"He *was* there!" Jessie exclaimed. "You are sure? How strange!"

"Why?"

"Of course I was only a child then," she said. "But when I saw Mr. Atcliff here, I felt sure that we had met before. It must have been at Pikesford. Why does he treat father as an enemy, and you as a friend? Why does he never come to the Manor? Why does father never mention him? They must know each other well; they cannot even live far apart, and yet they will neither meet nor speak."

The darkness which enveloped the life of the recluse was at least as dense to Munro as to his putative sister. He feared to answer, lest he should find himself inside another trap. But the look on Jessie's face reassured him; she was palpably

walking in ignorance, and seeking that information which he could not give.

"He does not wish his past life to be known," he said. "He has been kind to me, and I must respect his wishes."

Directly Munro had spoken, he realised that he had merely increased the mystery. But what could he do? He dared not exert his imagination to concoct a tale which might prove harmful to his friend.

"I know that Mr. Atcliff wishes to be left alone," he went on hurriedly. "He desires to forget the past, as—as we want to forget. What little I could say about him would not satisfy you."

"Tell me, anyhow," Jessie persisted.

"I cannot."

"Then you are a pig! Walter, I am your partner, and it is wicked of you to keep a secret from me."

"Your father knows. Have you not asked him?"

"It is hopeless to get any information there. Don't say *your* father. What does Mr. Atcliff say about him?"

"Never mind Mr. Atcliff," said Munro resolutely. "Jessie," he went on quickly, "I must find something to do."

"What!" she exclaimed. "Work?"

"Yes; I cannot live in idleness. I must earn a living; but I don't know how to set about it."

"You must not go away."

"Would you miss me?"

"Why, of course! I could not go back to my lonely walks. If you go away— But why should you?"

"I have scarcely any money. Cannot you suggest

anything? I could not breathe in an office; I cannot write; I have no experience of a useful kind. I must live in the open air. It seems to me that the only thing I am good for is labour upon a farm. I might make a carter or a ploughman."

Jessie became grave. She began to understand what her companion was to her now that he suggested leaving Windycombe. They agreed so entirely; he looked at life with her eyes exactly; his was the one mind which understood hers. The bond of sympathy which had united them so suddenly had become as suddenly perfect. She had forgotten and forgiven the past, not only because Walter had made what amends he could, but because she lived so entirely for the present.

"There is nothing for you," she declared. "The professions are closed doors. There is no money to be made out of farming, and a farm means a settling in one place, which is a thing I am sure you could not do. You used to be very clever, Walter. Father has told me that you could read Greek and Latin, and you might have been a scholar had you set your mind upon it. You might try to obtain some pupils?"

"I could not do that," said Munro hastily.

"Then, you see, you are spoilt for everything. There is no place for the man who has led a wandering life. I will tell you what," she went on decisively, "I will beard father. I will show him his duty," she said determinedly. "If he will not unbend, there will be only one course left. I shall have to make you an allowance. That money is mine, but it is far more yours. I have always stood up for father; but now I must stand up for my partner as well."

"I would not touch it," Munro declared.

"Oh, yes, you would," said Jessie.

"I would turn ploughman rather."

"I shall tell father what you say. If he will not forgive you, I shall be angry with him. I have never been angry with him yet, and I expect he will be surprised."

"Jessie!" he exclaimed irresistibly, "why do you stand up for me?"

"You are my brother," she answered promptly. She added, lowering her voice, and allowing her mind to drift back for a moment, "And you are an altogether different brother."

They were near the foot of the hill. The wagonette of the Fleur-de-lys came round the bend, and behind the driver Mr. Finch beamed upon the prospect through his gold spectacles, his hands folded across the handle of his shabby umbrella. He sighted the pair, and pushing open the door, alighted, and advanced to them, voluble as ever.

"Where do you think I am going?" he cried, with a sly air of mystery.

"To Highford, of course," said Jessie, somewhat rudely.

"Ah, but what do you think I am going for?" went on the clergyman. "You would never guess. I am going to meet my son. I wrote and told him that he might as well be at home, seeing that I was keeping him abroad, and the rascal has taken me at my word. He reached Liverpool this morning, and has sent me a telegram. I was never more surprised in my life, and the sight of the boy with the message quite upset the old lady. I don't know what I shall do with Percy, I am sure," he rambled on, "but I do

hope you will give my boy the pleasure and advantage of your society while he is here, Mr. Walter. I am so glad, by the way, that you will deliver that lecture, and I am exceedingly obliged. It will be given under the auspices of the local Temperance League. I will see that you have a good roomful, and we will have a collection at the door in aid of the funds, which are in a very bad state at present. But I must not stop, or I shall be late for the train. Come and see us soon, Mr. Walter. Come to-morrow, and I will introduce you to Percy. My kind regards to Mr. Phair, and to Mr. Atcliff. His garden is more inspiring than ever."

The old rector was running down the hill as he shouted his last words. He caught the wagonette, clambered into it, and moved away with a wave of his umbrella.

"Well," remarked Jessie, "I wonder what Mr. Percy will be like."

"He has been a remittance-man," said Munro.

"Is that as bad as your tone suggests?"

"It is."

CHAPTER VII

IN MEMORIAM

THE Hermitage was empty when Munro returned, though it wanted only a few minutes to the usual supper-time. There was nothing irregular about Atcliff's absence; he often remained out until night. Munro had heard a subdued clatter of knife and fork after he had gone to bed; and once, hearing a strange voice in the garden, he had looked out, to see the recluse walking among the sleepy flowers, carrying a lighted candle, which flickered away towards a corner which had been left to run into a wilderness where thistles and great docks tangled with thorn-bushes.

As Munro passed along the passage, the door of Atcliff's bedroom stood open. He looked in; a bowl filled with flowers stood upon the deep window-seat, and the light air which parted the curtains carried their fragrance into the room. Beside the bed hung a picture, a dark panel in a tarnished gilt frame. Yielding to temptation, Munro stepped in, and drew aside the red curtain to admit more light. The sunset streamed into the little room as he crossed to the side of the bed.

He examined the picture curiously, then closely. A dark canvas stared back at him, a mere blotch of blackened crimson, unrelieved by face or line.

There was neither title, name, nor date. The picture, like the man who owned it, was an enigma.

Beneath the unfathomable canvas a Shakspearian calendar was fastened to the wall, one leaf for each day of the year, giving the date, the day of the week, the time of the sun's uprising and downsetting, and the phase of the moon, with a quotation from one of the plays or sonnets. Alongside the date, faintly pencilled, Munro read, "The anniversary." The quotation for the day came from *Hamlet*, Act I., Scene 3, and the words were dimly underlined :

" Would the night were come !
Till then sit still, my soul ; foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes."

Mystified, the intruder fastened his eyes again upon the inscrutable picture.

Neither reason nor penetration suggested any definition of that deep crimson stain. Munro stared, as one might gaze into a crystal globe, until his imagination woke, and the master within him—for it is not the man who is master of his mind—stirred the dark canvas into the movement of life, and he saw the mouth of the man whom he had buried in the desert ; after that, the white, shut lily-flower of Marguerite's face, and then the glowing features of Jessie, with deep-brown lights darting high in her defiant eyes.

The gentle closing of the cottage door aroused Munro from his trance, and he fled out of the room. Atcliff had returned. He stood in the centre of the sitting-room ; the fingers of his left hand were holding a great iron key.

" Ah ! " he exclaimed calmly, when his companion

came in. "I saw you from a distance. Your spirit is growing; you were building up your future. It has been a wonderful evening. It is supper-time, I think. You do not mind sitting to table by yourself, I know. I must be alone to-night."

"What is the key?" Munro asked.

The heavy piece of metal fell with a clang upon the edge of the fender.

"The church key," Atcliff answered, stooping to regain it. "I sometimes borrow it to play the organ. There is a half-witted village boy who blows the bellows," he went on, smiling drearily. "I sit in the half darkness and play to myself."

Munro hesitated, knowing that he was not wanted, but anxious to speak.

"I always thought you were religious," he said, with difficulty. "Quiet men often are; but in our life—the starlight life—religion is not generally found. We believe in luck only, and think that it is the star which brings us to that. Perhaps we forget that there may be an influence working behind the star."

Atcliff stood, leaning forward, his face pinched and whiter than usual. He said nothing.

"I notice," Munro hesitated, "that you will not destroy anything. You desire even the insect to have its day. When there are weeds to be taken up in the garden, you have allotted that work to me."

"Life is so marvellous, so beautiful!" Atcliff cried out suddenly. "What a lovely creature is yonder creamy rod of hollyhock! What a hideous rotten stalk it must become! But the life will be still there, latent in the root. To pull up a weed, and feel the tender resistance of the clinging roots, is to me like tearing the wings off a butterfly."

"That is a religion Mr. Finch would not understand. But," said Munro gently, "I can understand."

Atcliff answered him in his strained, high-pitched voice :

"The man who loves his surroundings, and is thankful for them, and does his best to make them more beautiful, is more religious, to my mind, than he who prays with his lips seven times a day and fasts twice in the week. All other religion is selfishness. You lower your hand to the lily's cup, not because God fills it with sunshine, but because the woman you love has touched it as she passed."

Munro opened his lips to reply; but no answer came to him. This silent man understood. He went away, and left Atcliff in the solitude which his soul loved.

It was night. Munro extinguished his candle and watched by the window. He had been roaming in the neighbourhood of the church, startling rustic lovers in the lane to Lone Lea Farm, but no light had glanced through the mullioned windows under their heavy ivy-brows, and no music from the organ had touched the night. If the master of the cottage had not yet used the key of the church, it followed that he was about to use it. It was typical of the man that he should refrain from the valley until all the villagers slept.

It was very dark. There was not a breath of air to brush the heavy clouds along the sky. Only a few stars appeared—Polaris, the faithful, one of these—and there was no moon. Up from the garden ebbed the strong fragrance of the mathiola in wave upon wave.

The cottage door opened, closed, and a dark figure

was outlined against the background of white flowers. As this figure moved rapidly to the iron fence, the watcher distinguished a large bag dragging upon its arm. Munro struck a match, and held the flame before his watch glass. The time was close upon midnight.

He let himself from the cottage and followed. The figure had disappeared, but there could be no doubt as to its destination. The tracker kept along the middle of the barely visible road, rounded the corner, passed the cold Rectory, and so down the hill. He proceeded cautiously when the black shrubberies of the Manor rose before him.

A gate clicked with a guarded softness. The sense of mystery became deepened when Jessie, ghost-like, came stealing past, hatless, her hair flowing, a dark shawl wound about her grey dress, her eyes peering into the gloom.

"Jessie," he whispered sharply, adding breathlessly, "Don't be afraid. I have followed Mr. Atcliff."

The girl gave a little gasp, and came hurriedly to the rail.

"I am following father," she whispered.

"Have they met?"

"Yes, at the gate. I was watching from my window, and saw father leave the house. He held a lantern, and was carrying a bag. I followed, and came towards the gate through the shrubbery. It was lucky that I did so, or Mr. Atcliff must have seen me. They met, and neither of them spoke a single word."

"Where are they now?"

"Gone into the church."

"Come!" he said.

They passed through the lich-gate, up the path, and into the porch. The iron-clamped door was shut, and they dared not try to open it. But when Munro lighted a match, they saw that the tongue of the lock was rigid in its place. The men had locked themselves in.

"Is there no way of seeing into the church?" he whispered.

"By the west window," said the girl. "A grass bank runs up the wall."

They hurried through the wet grass. A faint light was visible against the windows, a light which appeared to grow more definite every moment.

"Father and Mr. Atcliff never spoke," Jessie was saying. "They did not shake hands, or seem to look at each other. They walked apart, as though they hated one another. Walter, we cannot see in," she said sharply. "Give me a stone."

The west window was not painted, but its clouded green glass effectually baffled the eyesight.

"We must not break the glass."

"I will."

"They may hear the noise."

Munro's objection was silenced by a solemn sound. The shuddering introat of the Dead March struggled through the lone churchyard.

There was no one to hear this unnerving music except themselves. The Rectory was well away on the hill. The nearest farm-house was two hundred yards distant, and there were no cottages near the church. Only the Manor lay in the immediate vicinity.

"Give me a stone," repeated Jessie; and Munro hesitated no longer.

As the organ boomed, the girl struck the diamond

pane sharply, and cracked it into a starry pattern; another blow shivered the glass. Jessie picked the loose pieces out of the lead, and stooped to look in.

The nave and aisles of the little church were shrouded in gloom, but the sanctuary was glowing. Upon the Protestant altar of Windycombe candles were glowing in crape-vested candlesticks, revealing the stained columns and the shabbiness of the permanent altar-cloth, which was taken up to the Rectory four times in the course of the year, and reverently cleansed by the hands of the rector himself. A brass crucifix had replaced the usual wooden cross. Jessie stared at the unaccustomed scene until the lights danced before her vision.

She came down the bank with the exclamation, "Look!" and Munro hastened to obey.

The organist was hidden by the choir seats, and Mr. Phair, who was attending to the bellows, stood concealed behind a curtain. But while Munro looked, the pipes pealed forth the triumphant notes of the finale, and a deathly silence settled along the church. Soon Mr. Phair, vested in the rector's cassock and surplice, hobbled from the vestry, and after him a sombre figure for which Munro had no remembrance. These two passed up to the altar.

"What does it mean?" murmured Jessie, when he turned to face her.

"It means," said Munro, in a hushed voice, conscious of little beyond her eyes and her flowing hair, which scarcely moved in the dark atmosphere—"it means that Mr. Atcliff is a priest."

Jessie put out her hand. He drew her up, and she fastened her eye to the aperture.

The little figure in its black chasuble was standing

before the altar with uplifted hands, while her father served behind. She heard the voice of the man whom she believed to be her brother.

"He is saying a mass for the dead."

"Come up beside me, Walter," she murmured.

He came up to her willingly. Standing thus, holding the cold stonework, Jessie touching him at every movement, looking into his eyes when she put her ear to the broken window, with the close summer night pressing round them, and that smell of the valley, like a field which God had blessed, he felt an almost irresistible impulse to take her hand and confess the whole story of his deceit. "Jessie, I am not your brother," he whispered mentally, yet watching to see if she could understand. "I am not your brother."

A chilly little hand came into his, and a small voice whispered: "I am afraid."

It was no time for a confession, nor was this the place, among the damp mounds, beside the candle-lit church, with the muttering of the mass in their ears.

"Do not be afraid, dear," he said, pressing her fingers to his side.

At another time she must have noticed the tenderness in his voice; under a better light she would have seen the love upon his face which was not a brother's love.

"Father Atcliff! Father Atcliff!" she kept murmuring to herself.

Still the listener could not concentrate his thoughts upon the little grey man.

"They hate one another. They did not speak. They would not even shake hands."

That sense of the ludicrous, which insists at the most solemn moments, forced the girl to smile. She imagined the outraged rector breaking into his church

to behold this desecration of his altar by a spiritualist. She could see his horror at beholding those unflickering candles, the crucifix, the sombre vestments; his dismay at hearing the Latin words which had been banished from the little church in the valley since the middle ages. She could see him rolling up the dark aisle, shouting as he always shouted when calling his choir-boys to order: "You must stop this! My good people, you must stop this at once!"

A breath passed and shook the trees. The dew fell like manna upon the graves. With the wind came the stronger voice of the priest, and instantly Jessie straightened herself and drew Munro nearer, little knowing how great a fire her slight action kindled.

"Joseph Patello. He said that name distinctly," she whispered.

"I do not know the name," he answered.

"Oh!" cried Jessie, "I wish I had not broken this window. I wish I knew nothing of what is taking place there."

"Let me take you home," he urged. "Jessie, let us go into the Manor garden."

Munro scarcely knew what he was saying. Every evening it became the desire of his heart to enter that old garden and roam the paths, and the smooth lawn, and the silent orchard, where young apples rotted in the long grass. To walk thus after midnight with her, among the moths, with the mysterious night blotting them from the world, and the lone star beckoning from the edge of a cloud—to walk thus would mean at least one hour to look back upon from that darkening future when the veil had fallen and he had fled to his own place.

"They are singing!"

The cracked bass of Mr. Phair laboured in vain with the high-pitched tenor of the officiant. But at that time all sounds were solemn.

Bats were flickering about the west end of the building, like lost souls of some of those bodies beneath the mounds, striving, so Jessie thought, to enter the church, and the clammy ivy-leaves shone where the light brushed them. Inside the church silence became supreme, broken only by the movements of the acolyte as he stumbled blindly about the encaustic tiles, with certain vessels in his shaking hands.

"Look!" the girl exclaimed.

Mr. Phair was lying prone. The priest was bending, his elbows in motion. Then a little bell jangled from end to end.

A thrill raced through the watcher. Jessie was stroking the scar left by her brother's teeth.

"My poor Walter," she murmured. "That brute who bit you!"

The little bell jangled the second time.

Munro turned, with the sound in his ears, in a fever of love and longing.

"My darling sister!"

"Walter!" she murmured wonderingly.

"Kiss me, sister. Oh, Jessie!"

Amazedly she raised her sweet face. Suddenly she trembled and turned faint.

The bell jangled for the last time.

"Kneel, Walter!" she cried.

They went side by side upon the mound, their faces brushed by the wet ivy. Father Atcliff turned from the altar; and his benediction fell upon the pair who knelt outside the church under the broken window, hand strained in hand.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIGHT

THE following day Jessie was walking in the cool of the shrubbery, her mind perplexed by many problems. The man whom she never suspected was not her brother occupied a great part of her thoughts, her father the remainder, with the exception of one small cell over the entrance to which she had now set the name of Father Atcliff.

For reasons of his own her father had maligned Walter's character. Of that she was sure. Not a century of change could have transformed the heartless villain of Mr. Phair's description into the affectionate protector whom she had grown to love. And yet, unassisted memory suggested certain acts of brutality. She saw the cowardly boy running from a farmer's dog, after ill-treating it, and slinking out at evening to lay poison for the animal. Like incidents returned, to be dismissed with a puzzled shake of the head.

Possibly, she went on to reason, Walter had felt the galling restraint of his early home, and fretting under the tyranny of clipped wings, had resolved upon acting a disgraceful part in order that he might be sent away to some more congenial place, where he might breathe and expand, and develop all the

latent good which confinement had not allowed to grow.

Possibly her father, through harping so long upon the evil reputation of his son, had come to believe that Walter was entirely bad. Old men cling to their ideas. Having made up his mind to disown his son, he found himself unable to change. Having formerly refused to see good in the boy, his eyes remained blinded by his own misjudgment. They who are wilfully without sight stumble more grievously than the actually afflicted.

Atcliff remained the besetting mystery. She could dimly picture him walking across the fields off the Pikesford road, or standing with eyes fixed upon the brown leaves drifting down the muddy river. She could never recall him inside their house; but as she struggled with her memory, she saw a stunted oak hung with dead foliage, projecting over a by-way, and under it herself, as a little girl, holding her nurse's hand. A little grey man appeared before them and frightened her. She heard him mutter, as though to himself, "Dear little girl. She is growing beautiful," or some such words. Then he was gone, while she clung more tightly to her nurse's hand. That little man was undoubtedly Father Atcliff.

"I believe I have been too good a daughter," said Jessie aloud to the snowberry bushes. "Father must learn that I am not a child now. He shall do justice to Walter. He shall!"

She reached the end of the path, and saw the lawn swelling away like a green cloth from the wild border of the shrubbery. At the same moment she sighted Mr. Phair walking slowly in her direction,

a stick in each hand, an old straw-bonnet pressed upon his faded hair. Jessie had not seen him that morning previously, as he had taken his breakfast in bed. She could not help noticing that he looked more ill; that his movements were very feeble; that he presented the sad spectacle of a man very near the end of his tether. She grew compassionate while she looked, and at the same time more jealous for her brother. Had Walter not come back what would have happened to her after their father's death?

Dismissing these thoughts, she came over the grass, removed the stick from Mr. Phair's left hand, and propped the arm thus left destitute upon her own.

"You are very late this morning, father," she said.

"I had little sleep," he replied gratingly, and with a suspicion of wildness.

The master of the Manor had not an agreeable voice, nor did it ever seem to occur to him to try and make it gentle.

"I believe you had none at all," his daughter returned.

If she had expected her father to make any sign, she was disappointed. He shuffled along unmoved, leaning heavily upon her arm, grunting at moments, when the rheumatism in his back twisted him.

"~~Let us~~ sit down," he suggested, pointing with his stick towards a rustic seat. "The sun tires me."

"You are not ill?" said Jessie.

She had been her father's attendant so long that the question was almost a professional one.

"Ill!" the old man repeated pettishly. "Do I look ill?"

"Certainly not," replied Jessie untruthfully.

"Ill," he said again, more harshly. "Defective eyesight and pains in the back are not serious maladies. Perhaps change would do me good—different air, and food, and scenes."

"Do you mean that?" she cried eagerly. "Shall we go where it is wild and fresh? I would love to be among rocks and heath and bracken, and hear the sea, and feel it across the moors."

Her longing for change infected him.

"Aye, I would like to roam again," he admitted, as he sank heavily upon the seat and his head drooped. "I would like to track across the plains with a pack on my shoulders, to explore the waterways, and visit the creeks, and sound the rocks. I would like to start at the end of the old trail, and work over the same ground, with the same chances and the same luck. I would not make the same mistakes. I would steer straight and avoid the bad spots."

"Father, what are you talking about!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Phair started violently, and his body began to quake.

"What, Jessie! What—what was I telling you, my girl?"

"Do try and be a little relevant," she urged. "I hate to hear you wander. Father, will you answer a question?"

"So you want to take me away," the old man rambled. "I do not think I could have found any better place. Far from the railway, up the hills, and off the roads. Why, there is hardly a map which marks Windycombe. I was very pleased when I discovered it."

The master of the Manor was decidedly not himself that morning. The ordeal of the past night had weakened his nerves, and the close presence of the silent priest unhinged his already feeble mind. Jessie, watching, saw the twitchings of his hands, and his working face, and his uneasy, half-vacant smile. The girl hesitated; but she had a purpose from which she did not intend to shrink.

"Has it never occurred to you," she said clearly, "that you might have somebody here who could look after you better than I can?"

Her question reached a mark at which it had never been aimed. Her father's mind was unable to work with hers.

"You are always on the move," he said. "You are up and down the lanes, and over the hills every day. When anyone comes into the village, you are always the first to tell me. I could not find anyone better than you."

"Who do you think might come?" she asked innocently.

"Eh?" exclaimed Mr. Phair, with a strong start. "Who might come here? Why, rogues. The world is full of them. We all have our bad debts, and we all mean to pay, but settling day is put off and off."

"If you owe any money, I think you ought to pay it. You can afford to now."

"What!" he cried. "Feed thieves? Encourage the rogues? Let 'em go and feed on fools. Wait a bit, and creditors must die."

He laughed cunningly and unpleasantly.

"If we owe Mr. Atcliff anything, let us pay it," she said defiantly.

"Atcliff!" he cried, fully aroused. "Who are you talking about, you girl? Ah, I know. The man who lives up yonder. I don't want to know him. These men who live to themselves and hate everyone, and hoard their money, and play with the coins by night—I have no use for them. What is he doing here? A rogue, I will tell you, by the look of him. What? Hiding away from the world, afraid of venturing out, spying on others. Owe him money? I owe him nothing, nothing."

If Jessie had never entertained suspicions before, she would have known them then. She flamed with anger and shame. How dare her father assert that he and the recluse were strangers, that he hated the grey priest, after that solemn service of the night! He had lied to her. His whole life had been a lie. Like a lightning flash it came into her brain that her father also was a recluse. He was friendless; if he did not shrink from the rector and the village folk, it was only because his temperament was not the same as his—accomplice. Ah, that word would out. Accomplices they were, the priest and the layman.

Who was Joseph Patello? And what had her father and this unfrocked priest done to him, or how had he served them, that they should trouble Heaven for his repose?

"I will not talk about Mr. Atcliff," she said coldly. "But I must speak about Walter. I have told you that you wrong him, and I tell you now that you are hard and cruel. He went away, little more than a boy, wild and unthinking. He has come back a man, as different as possible from the son you remember, a kind and unselfish man, who only asks your permission to come and settle here with us."

The old man was leaning forward as though turned into stone, but Jessie could see his fingers twitching over the handle of his stick. Reason appeared to have returned to him. He spoke gratingly, without turning his head, or moving from his position.

"I knew it. I knew that he would win you with that smooth tongue. Women are weak, and creatures such as he know how to play upon their feelings. You may take this message to him who sent you—"

"He did not send me," she flamed at him.

"Take this message to him who sent you," went on the stubborn tongue. "When the bell of yonder church is tolling for him, they may carry him here, up my steps, and into my house. Then I will put my hand on him and forgive, because I shall know that he cannot harm me again. The brute!" he shouted, again losing his self-control. "He tied me, tied my hands and feet, and flogged me as though I had been a dog. Forgive him! The brute! Never, never!"

"I will not believe it," Jessie passionately cried.

"It is true."

"You have lied to me about Walter all these years. I love my brother better than any man, and more than you, because *he* has never tried to deceive me. Why have you kept me here to act as a guard over you? Why have you kept me out of all society, and made me wander alone with my own thoughts about this country? Why do you not tell me what fear it is which hangs over you?"

"It is my dream," he raved, falling from side to side.

"Men are not afraid of dreams, unless they recall the memory of a crime."

"You are not my daughter—my daughter Jessie."

"Heavens! Let us be cool; for my blood is your blood, and it boils quickly. I am too strong to quarrel with you. You must take Walter back and live with him again. He is changed. Cannot you believe me? He is another man."

"The same soul," muttered the old man. "The devil is not made a priest by putting on a priest's vestments. I have thrown the serpent out. He shall not crawl back again."

"You have taken his money, and while accepting, cursed the hand which gave it. You have made over that money to me."

"I could not plead poverty while I held it," he muttered.

"You have made over that money to me," she repeated. "Father, it is a threat."

The old man forced himself up, and for one moment Jessie's resolution wavered. He was so ill, so broken, so abject in his loneliness.

"What will you do?" he said, his voice cracking at every word.

"You must take Walter back. I do not ask you to be friendly with him. I demand justice for him. You must restore him to his rightful place as your son. And I demand justice for myself. My brother has become my companion, and I will not see him turned from the gate as though he were a dog."

Mr. Phair put up a hand to his white forehead and grinned with anger.

"That is Walter," he grated. "A dog! Let him bite and howl in his own kennel. He shall not show his teeth here."

Jessie's blood became volcanic. She had never even crossed her father before that day, had hardly

spoken a word which could ruffle the surface, and thus she knew nothing of what lay hidden in the depths. She flamed at him again :

"You shall have son and daughter, or neither. If Walter may not live here, neither will I. He has shown me what unselfishness is, and you have only taught me selfishness. Choose—choose now, at once ; for to-day I will leave the Manor and go to him, and I will not return except with him."

No outburst came from the pale old man. With complete confidence she looked for her father to yield, but his back became more rigid, and his mouth more grimly set. The old man had ever loved a fight. Yield? Not for his life. His stubborn will was as strong as in the past, and he rejoiced at the knowledge that his body was still prepared to undergo the storm and stress of opposition. He had been challenged. What! A fight? Robert Phair could give his hard knocks with the best of them.

He rolled away, laughing, along the lawn.

For a time Jessie sat stunned upon the rustic seat. She had not intended to threaten, or even to quarrel ; but anger had come upon her, before which the best intentions are as dust before the wind. She, too, was unflinching in her determination ; she had served her father long and faithfully, and this was her reward. Mr. Phair should stand or fall alone.

An hour later the Manor gate had clicked behind the strong-willed girl, her boxes stood against the iron railings of the Hermitage garden, and the staggered gardener had been dismissed with a story which his young mistress hoped sounded sufficiently plausible. Jessie walked unannounced into the



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cottage, and discovered Munro eating his mid-day meal in solitude.

“Walter!” she cried, advancing upon him, hungry for sympathy. “Father and I have fought and parted. Let us go out together and be vagabonds upon the face of the earth.”

CHAPTER IX

HARVEST

THAT hour which saw the long agreement between Jessie and her father broken, saw also the recluse of Windycombe setting out upon one of his lonely, but not on this occasion aimless, rambles. A message had reached him the previous evening, a grey film of smoke rising beyond the highest ridge of the Downs, and the sight had gladdened his eyes, because he knew a helper was at hand. Having placed a packet of tobacco in his pocket, he went forth, leaving Munro working in the garden.

The green lane, along which the recluse passed, lifted from the angle made by the side roads where they touched, until, like a weedy river flowing into the sea, it entered and became lost upon a common, where mossy stones caught the feet of the unwary, and ragged whin-bushes were golden half the year. This place was sacred to sheep and gipsies, such as love high ground and the sweeping wind. Where the land lifted to its highest point, six hundred feet above sea-level, an old windmill shook four lacerated arms against the clouds; the mill-house had long been untenanted, save for rats and birds. Daylight peeped through its rotten walls, weeds and wall-flowers filled the cavities. The relic of bygone custom stood sombrely awaiting some strong storm

which should complete the work of devastation, and crash it into ruin.

Beyond, a caravan was marked against the skyline. A thread of smoke enveloped the spectral arms, and the sunlight there was acrid with the stench of smouldering roots. Some children played at the edge of a pond, which mirrored the outline of the creaking giant, paddling in mud and slimy growths; a pair of horses, one brown and the other grey, their ribs prominent, pulled the grass; a woman presided over an iron pot suspended from a tripod of sticks, and two men in moleskin caps were dragging fuel from a parched clump of furze.

Atcliff understood these nomads who, in their own way, followed the guidings of the star. He ascended the common briskly, inhaling the wind-borne fragrance, lifting his grey face to the tempered rays, and approached an elderly man who was sitting in the shade, mending a rotten piece of harness.

"Isaac!" he cried. "How are you doing, my friend?"

The gipsy nodded without a smile, his deft brown hands continuing their work.

"Times are hard, master," he replied. "Life becomes more a gamble than a fight. It is the fool who wins with his luck. The gipsies are going under. We are driven from the land. The reed-beds are enclosed, and he who takes one withy is hunted for a thief. They would take the air from us if they could, master, and remove the sky from over us if they could, and put out for us the stars. We are poachers if we bake an urchin from the hedgerow."

"Here is tobacco for you," said the recluse.

"Good tobacco, I warrant, master. I must clean my pipe before I fill it with this sweet weed."

"How are the roads, Isaac?"

The gipsy understood. He moved his jaws deliberately, and swept the common with his bird-like eyes.

"There are the usual faces, master. We meet them every year, a little older, a little more tired. There are strangers, passing from the town to the fields. I saw a man with his face this way, a sailor, I should think, and one sleeve of his coat was fastened to his shoulder."

"But both legs, Isaac?" whispered the recluse.

"Strong as trees the pair, and the feet of them large and flat."

The relief on Atcliff's face was unmistakable. He smiled as he produced some silver coins and held them out.

"You have slept in my cart and saved my traps from the keeper," said the gipsy. "You have walked with me under the stars. I will take food from you and tobacco, and your good-will. Offer your money to your enemies," he concluded harshly.

"Take care that you do not fire the common," said the little man, understanding his nomad friend.

"The fewness of the rights left us make us careful. There is hardly a common left throughout the country. The rich enclose them, because they know the people cannot fight. What is the use of fighting money? The times are bad, master. There is too much money in the world."

"Have you seen anything lately, Isaac?" Atcliff asked, lowering his voice, and speaking with a pained and eager interest.

The other lowered his hands quickly, and raising his head, gazed forward beneath the brim of his hat.

"I was waiting for that question," he answered gravely. "I see a change approaching. Last night the power came, and I saw before me a figure shutting out the light of the fire. I have seen her for you many times. I need not describe her again. But I may tell you that she seemed more happy, and the light in her eyes and upon her fair hair was brighter, and her smile more confident, and the aura encircling her was stronger than ever before. She did not speak—she has never spoken yet; but while she looked on me, I thought of you, master, and then I saw you sitting in your house, but not alone, for a maid stood by you, stroking your hair with a hand as white as hers, and looking down upon you with her eyes and her smile. Go back to your house, master. The maid is waiting for you now, and *she* has sent her. And with her I see the name Marguerite."

"Is that all the change, Isaac? Is there more?" the recluse asked, blinking away tears from his eyes.

The gipsy shook his head, still gazing into space, and replied regretfully:

"There is much that I cannot see. The figures are confused. Come and sit with me some midnight beside the junipers, and we will tear down these flimsy veils, and look out far. They are trying to come across all the time, but we are too material to understand, and their hands do not reach, and their voices cannot carry. Only this I see, master—beware of the wild wind, for sorrow comes with it, and in all your difficulties do not forget the message that the robin brought."

Atcliff leaned forward, and taking both his helper's hands, gripped them fast, whispering brokenly:

"Thank God, Isaac. Thank God for your great gift."

"Have I helped you, master?" said the other, rubbing the mystic sleep from his eyes. "I do not know why the wind should try you, or how a robin should bring you help. But the words came, and I had to utter them, and you know the name of her who put them in my mouth. It is strange that she cannot speak to you direct, but has to make me her mouth-piece. But there are many strange things round us, and we cannot see far enough as yet."

With more words of gratitude Atcliff abandoned his occult friend, and walked freely across the common beside the old mill ; and coming down into the shadow of the lane, he began to sing softly as he felt the spring of the turf. For that hour the milk and honey of life were his. He ran like a boy down the long slope, over the ridge, and again down, filled with that glorious strength which comes so seldom, and dies with the suddenness of its coming.

The man who entered the village street, his head down, his arms stiff beside him, was only the dull recluse, who had never a word for any.

He started violently when he saw the boxes beside his gate. Shaking his head almost imperceptibly, with a curious smile and a strange light in his eyes, he passed in. Jessie and Munro were waiting for him in the garden under a jasmine which was still in bloom.

The girl came out to meet him, apologised quickly for her intrusion, explained her position, announced her resolution of never returning to the Manor unless her brother accompanied her, and added :

"I want to find a cottage where Walter and I can live for a time—not for long, because I want to wander. Mr. Finch would know, but I cannot go to him."

"It is impossible," said Atcliff, turning to face the weak figure of Munro.

"We are only vagabonds," said Jessie seriously.

"Have you not told your sister that you cannot do this?" said Atcliff.

"She will not listen," came the reply.

The recluse stepped forward, clasped the young man's arm, and drew him along the avenue of hollyhocks.

"She has allowed her temper and her loyalty for you to get the better of her judgment," he said, in a voice which he tried to make unconcerned. "Persuade her to go back."

"I have tried, but it is useless. See what I have done," Munro muttered despairingly. "I have broken up that home, severed the daughter from the father, brought her into a false position, left him unprotected. I had hoped to redeem his son's character, and I have only been living up to it. He will hate me now more bitterly than before."

"You have not failed," said Atcliff; and the young man recognised that it was the priest speaking. "You have won the daughter, and with her a great victory. You have helped me—how much you cannot dream—in my fight." He went on hurriedly: "Mr. Phair has very much to forgive, and I know that he is a hard man, who even now will welcome a message of defiance rather than a flag of truce. You have chosen your path, rightly or wrongly it is not for me to say, and you have gone too far to turn back. Tell Jessie the truth."

"Stand before those eyes and admit myself a deceiver!" Munro exclaimed.

"I will tell her."

"You would drive me away," Munro said weakly.

"You know your own feelings. How will it profit you to remain brother and sister?" the recluse went on. "She regards you with affection, and you look upon her with love."

"Don't use that word. I do not even dare to think that word."

"It is true. Face the truth. Will you ruin this life for a cowardly fear?"

They reached the end of the garden and entered the wilderness.

"It is true. But—listen to me."

The recluse looked up, and saw pain and passion working his companion's face. The wild scenes of his own former life swept back, and the premonitory shadow of his own confession, struggling then at his heart, darkened the light between them.

"I am listening," he whispered.

Munro stared into the mesh of thorns and brambles.

"I murdered her brother," he said.

The sunlight became a crimson blotch before his eyes. No voice proceeded out of that stain of deep colour. Munro's tongue became spell-bound, as though an iron weight was forcing it upon the floor of his mouth. He might have pleaded so much in palliation of his crime; he could have told of Walter Phair's unparalleled dishonesty and greed; he could with truth have sworn that when he wasted the water he had been too mad with anger to foresee the fatal consequence; he could have mentioned the rough miners who had exonerated him from blame. But he said nothing, and upon this silence the man

who watched him was compelled to build the only construction.

"My poor friend," Atcliff murmured brokenly. "My poor boy!"

The white dahlias nodded where he had passed, and the bees climbed the sunbeams; grumbling Munro stood among the thorns and thistles, throbbing with heat and fear. He had never fully realised his position until then, or felt the burning of the brand. While the secret remained inviolate, he was safe; but now that it had escaped from him, he stood self-condemned.

"Why this mysterious conversation?" demanded Jessie. "Where is Walter?"

"There," pointed Atcliff. "He is coming. Miss Phair," he went on, "a room in this cottage remains at your disposal, on the understanding that you will not resent my eccentricities, and will not seek to disturb my privacy. The few people here will talk, I know. They will say that my little house has become an asylum for the Phairs, who are driven from the Manor. That cannot be prevented. Their gossip is nothing to me, and the scandal will not overleap the boundary of an exceedingly small circle. If you care to accept my proposal, say so, and let me go."

The sun shone into Jessie's eyes and made them water, and the light was reflected upon the speaker.

"You are kind indeed," she said.

"You agree? Then there is nothing more to say. Come here, and be happy if you can."

"But I must have the last word. That is my privilege." She came up to him, and took his cold hands and pressed warmth into them. "Let me

make this house a home for you. Give me the management. Let me see you often, and try, oh try, to forget your troubles. Let us sit together in the evenings and be foolish. Let us laugh all the time. We will make trips together, and come back tired and happy. We will just do what we like, and village opinion may go and hang itself by Mr. Finch's white tie. Will you let me be mistress here?"

Atcliff closed his eyes as her voice played about him like a peal of bells. Could it be true that goodwill had won? Robert Phair had gone on his way, sowing no seed, unbending and unrelenting, his soul rebelling against the just hand which should presently steal out of the darkness. He, on the other hand, lone and friendless, had gone upon his broader way, repenting, striving to make strong his character, and in his small way to build up life around him in the garden, to preserve the breath of birds and insects, and the life of the flower. Here was harvest ripening upon him fast. Jessie was accepting protection under his roof; and the solitary old man in the gloomy Manor must quake when the winds of autumn howled, and say: "My son and my daughter have forsaken me and gone to him."

"What do you say?" cried Jessie.

"This is your home if you will call it so."

"But smile," said Jessie impatiently. "Smile. Come here, Walter. Why, the pair of you are cold ghosts. Come, let us have my boxes in before the labourers pass from the fields."

She hung a hand on Munro's shoulder, and they turned together while Atcliff stood apart, held in the meshes of a golden dream. Through all his life he

had retained his belief in the soul's immortality. He had turned from it often, closed his eyes to it, pushed himself away from it, hating it more than once for the terrors it suggested; but he had felt the faith was there, pushing like a rock enveloped in fog out of a stormy sea, there stern and strong, a clinging place to which he might turn and hang when the Hermitage would serve no longer.

A man is punished for his evil deeds; but the good that he does—for that he shall reap a harvest.

"They are fond of me," he murmured. "They would fight on my behalf like lion and tigress. But if she knew!" He compressed his lips, and his forehead stood out as strong as a wall when he lifted his face and voice in thankfulness: "She has come to me at last. Alethea, sweetest spirit, you have conquered indeed. The child must know all now!"

CHAPTER X

CONFESSION

THE rector's easy-going soul found life a burden. His arm-chair was uncomfortable, his pipe was choked, and the pup, which his son had already introduced into the house, had recently demolished one of his most comforting pair of slippers. These were grievances heavy to be borne by the simple old conservative; but they were as straws to trees compared with certain other matters.

He had taken Percy to visit at the Manor that afternoon, but Mr. Phair sent out his apologies, and the maid vaguely stated that Miss Jessie was not there. Further information not being forthcoming, they had gone on to the Hermitage, where they were not only admitted, but discovered Atcliff taking tea with Mr. Phair's son and daughter, the latter presiding over the mysteries of the teapot. Percy was presented; Jessie calmly mentioned that she had come to look after her brother. Atcliff hinted that the master of the Manor was in ill health, and wished to be alone for a time. The two young men chatted discursively. For once Mr. Finch's ready tongue was put to silence.

Called out later in the day to visit a sick parishioner, he had sighted Percy in front of the Fleur-de-lys, supported by Mr. Lake junior, the ne'er-do-well of the village, and one Jim Golding,

who was reputed to be in private life a poacher. Three pots of beer reposed on a bench, and the same number of friendly voices were raised in discussing dogs and guns. Percy was evidently signalling his return to respectability after the manner most agreeable to him.

"These unfortunate western manners must be dropped," muttered the rector, as he ransacked his study for a pipe-cleaner. "Sociability is all very well; but Percy must be taught that in England certain grades exist. We may be very much behind the times, but in this country, when one man wishes to be polite to another, he mentions the weather. In the colonies, apparently, acquaintances prefer to discuss liquor. There may be an advantage, after all, in having only samples of climate." Then he shuffled off to consult his wife.

Mrs. Finch was a chronic invalid, and very rarely left the garden around which she was wheeled in a chair when weather permitted. She presided over the house and various parochial societies from the drawing-room sofa, and her word was law, despite the fact that she was a quiet little woman of insignificant exterior. People found themselves doing as she wished, without realising that hers was the influence which had moved them so to act.

"My dear," said the rector, bringing a low chair to the sofa and seating himself, "I really begin to think that old Mr. Phair is scarcely a desirable acquaintance." He went on to narrate what he knew of the family disagreement, embellishing the story as his manner was. "Mr. Walter seems a respectable young man, and Miss Jessie has always been a friend of mine, though you will remember,

my dear, I have remarked that she is far too high-spirited," he added. "It is possible that this free spirit has tried the pacific temperament of our friend somewhat too sorely, and he may have been thoughtless enough to express sentiments which he probably now regrets, which, however, have offended the young people, who are very likely somewhat ready to take offence. I wonder if it is my duty to write to Mr. Phair, giving him a little practical advice as between rector and parishioner, though for the matter of that he has never been inside my church since he came here."

"Good seldom comes from interfering in family quarrels," said Mrs. Finch, with her usual common sense. "These estrangements right themselves. It is possible Mr. Atcliff is right, and there has been no quarrel, but Mr. Phair merely desires to be alone. When the winter comes, he will ask them to return."

"Very good, my dear," the rector said, "I will take your advice. But why do they gravitate towards our recluse?"

"He seems ready to welcome them. And really, there is nowhere else for them to go, as we could hardly receive them."

"I am not referring so much to them," went on Mr. Finch, "as to that mysterious character Atcliff. Why should he permit these young people to ruin his solitude?"

"I can easily believe that Mr. Atcliff has grown tired of his loneliness," replied Mrs. Finch. "It certainly seems to me that he must be more closely acquainted with the Phairs than we have ever supposed."

"We must wait and see how things go, I suppose,"

said the rector moodily. "I am getting very tired of Windycombe, my dear. Twenty years in a lonely parish stifle one's energies. I think I must suggest to the bishop that he might give me the refusal of some living near a centre. The congregation has fallen off each year of my incumbency. Brown and Lake have been churchwardens uninterruptedly for over a decade. The young men rush for the towns; their sisters follow to shops and service. We country parsons will soon be shepherds without flocks. Mr. Phair never attends church. Mr. Atcliff has told me that he cannot accept the Thirty-nine Articles. I really do not know what we are coming to."

"Let us come nearer home," suggested the practical wife. "What are we to do with Percy?"

"Ah," said the rector, as the scene before the inn recurred to him, "I was just about to mention that subject. We must get him away from here, and as soon as possible, or we shall have him accused, like Socrates, though with more justice, of corrupting young men. He declares he will not leave England again. I suppose we must give him another start. But I cannot see where the money is to come from," he concluded wearily.

The couple continued to discuss their son, and the rector finally undertook to talk seriously with the young man, with a view to discovering whether Percy entertained any ideal in life higher than the consumption of beer with loose characters, and the acquiring of miscellaneous dogs.

"He will not dig, he tells me, perverting the parable," sighed the rector; "but he is not in the least ashamed to beg. We have dearly bought the

experience, Caroline, that the colonies afford a poor training-ground for the sons of English gentlemen."

"I am afraid we made a mistake in sending him money so regularly," admitted Mrs. Finch; and here the practical lady grasped, when it was too late, the root of the whole mischief.

"Mrs. Hobbes informed me this morning that she found some spots of grease upon the altar-cloth," the rector observed, as he rose. "I reminded her that I have often said she was not to rest her candlestick upon the holy table while she cleans the sanctuary. It is most irreverent. However, she declares she is not the culprit, and I may see for myself that the stains are white wax, while she always burns tallow. She must be mistaken, as no one has access to the church on week-days, except herself, or Mr. Atcliff, who sometimes goes to play the organ for the pleasure of his moody self. I cannot imagine him placing a lighted candle upon my altar, and I should be very indignant if he suggested that I should make any ceremonial use of such things. I will bring up the altar-cloth to-morrow, Caroline, and you can take out the marks with a hot iron. And those mischievous boys have broken a pane of glass at the bottom of the west window—throwing stones at sparrows, I suppose. I told the schoolmaster that in my young days boys were flogged regularly, not only as a punishment, but also as a preventive, and that if he used his cane a little more our boys would be strengthened both morally and physically. But he tells me parents will not have their sons flogged now, and magistrates are weak enough to support them. Stuff and nonsense! Boys want flogging, just as corn requires rain and sunshine. If I had my way, I

would begin Monday morning school by trouncing the lot. And the gipsies have come back. We have called a meeting of the Parish Council for Wednesday, to determine whether we can legally close the common against them. Lake says they are destroying his hedges, and Brown tells me they are burning the gorse, and Swan, the keeper declares that there is next to no game this year on account of them. Lazy, useless vagabonds! Parliament ought to send them all to Portland and make them work."

With that the reverend gentleman returned to his study, thumped his chair until it was comfortable, and slept righteously until supper-time.

On the following evening a lecture, entitled "Life upon the Plains," was to be delivered by Mr. Walter Phair, the chair to be taken by the rector at eight o'clock.

Munro was as nervous at the prospect as though he were about to make an initial appearance at a London theatre, instead of in a stuffy schoolroom, with whitewashed walls, before a few farmers and a group of rustics who were quite prepared to gape admiringly at the traveller from an unknown world, even though he should do nothing more than stand before them in silence. Mr. Finch had suggested that an account of the agricultural methods of the new world would be received with especial favour; therefore the lecturer had promised to restrict his observations as much as possible to matters relating to stock-raising and the farm.

In the afternoon he and Jessie walked into Highford across the fields, promising themselves a conveyance back as far as Elmbury. It was a bright

afternoon, with a suspicion of autumn in the wind, and the girl enjoyed her walk thoroughly, and did her best to cheer her somewhat morose companion. When they reached the little market-town, they made a few purchases, and then sauntered about the place in search of a possible tea-shop.

Highford boasted that its charter of incorporation dated far back into the mists of mediævalism. It had nothing else to be proud of, being little more than a large village, containing a population of shopkeepers. Nature and the Town Council had been at war together for many years, the former trying her hardest to make the place beautiful, the latter struggling as strenuously in precisely the opposite direction. After a long struggle, Nature had to confess herself well beaten.

Four main roads brought into the town, and each of these highways would have been good to look upon, had it not been for the froward spirit which lives in man, prompting him to foul the beauty of his environment. At one entrance to the town a peculiarly unsightly workhouse had been erected; at another a lunatic asylum; the third had been rendered objectionable by the existence of a sewage-farm; and the fourth was saddened by a precise cemetery. The general effect of an approach to Highford was therefore depressing.

"There is Percy Finch!" exclaimed Jessie, pulling her companion by the sleeve, as they rounded the corner of one of the narrow streets.

The rector's son was quitting the Bell, the principal hotel in Highford, after a diverting conversation with the landlord's youngest daughter, who condescended to serve favoured customers at the bar with her own

white hands. He saw his neighbours, and crossed the road, lifting his wide-brimmed hat.

He was a good-looking young fellow, clean-faced and well-built, wearing none of the outward signs of viciousness which mar the majority of remittance-men. His blue eyes could look straight when he spoke, and it was evident from his manner that he possessed the quality of self-assurance in no small degree. Life was to him something to be taken very easily. Had Nature turned him out as an insect, instead of a human being, she would certainly have made him a bee; not the hard-working little creature with a honey-bag to fill, but a blatant fellow, in gold taffeta and black velvet, enjoying himself the round of the year, sucking the box flowers in April, the limes in July, the sunflowers in August, and the ivy bloom in October, always a good-for-nothing, existing on the fruits of the garden and the work done by others.

"Tea?" he said, in answer to Jessie's question. "Come into the Bell. Haven't you found your way about, Phair? I learnt the town during the half-hour I was waiting for the old man to fetch me from the station. Pretty quiet hole for live people, Miss Phair."

"I hardly know the place," said Jessie. "It is so far from Windycombe; I only come here occasionally to shop."

They went into the Bell, and Percy ordered tea as though he were master of the house. They prolonged the trifling meal indefinitely, laughing over the quaint entries in the visitors' book, and then Percy made himself agreeable telling strange stories and ridiculing the old-fashioned furniture and fittings

—the solemn bell-rope, the plated candlesticks, the quaint pictures and ornaments. He produced cigarettes, and Jessie smoked one with a thrill of freedom, and entered into an animated conversation with the rector's son, while Munro saw more and more of her pretty neck as she turned from him, forgetful of his presence. It was impossible that he, her brother, could be jealous.

Percy's spirit became presently inclined to mischief. It occurred to him that Phair was rather a good sort, to sit thus apart and not interfere with his game of courtship. Picking up a piece of cake, he turned to the silent member with the challenge :

"Bet you a shilling I'll hit that fellow on the nose before you, giving you first throw."

He indicated the painted face of a probable former landlord suspended over the fireplace.

"I'll take you," cried Jessie, before Munro could reply. "Let us each take three pieces of cake and try."

"You can fling," said Percy admiringly, when Jessie's doughy missile smacked the canvas.

"The mouth! It was the mouth, wasn't it, Walter?" Jessie screamed delightedly, after a lamentable failure on her opponent's part.

"The mouth it was," admitted Percy. "Now, Miss Phair, a bull's-eye."

Jessie flung with all her might, and won, the cake flattening disgracefully across the nose of the portrait, and there remaining.

"I guess we had better clear out," remarked Percy, as he handed over his shilling. "The landlord may not appreciate our rustic ways."

He picked up the scattered fragments of cake,

and flicked the crumbs under the fender with his handkerchief.

"I am not going yet," cried Jessie, now thoroughly excited. "Here's a piano! I'll thump, and you two shout. Wake up, Walter, my dear; never mind that stupid lecture."

Fortunately, the piano was locked, and thus the proposed outrage upon the peace of the house had to be abandoned. Jessie and the rector's son relieved their feelings by turning all the ornaments on the mantel-shelf upside down, and stuffing the local directory up the chimney. Then they followed Munro, who had left the inn, miserable because he was unable to throw himself into a like spirit of mischief.

They caught the omnibus going to Elmbury, and as they had the conveyance to themselves, the two lively members continued their boisterous behaviour, while Munro sat apart in the corner, trying to read a paper which he had bought in the town. His eyes wandered continually from the sheet to rest upon Jessie's laughing face. She was looking exceedingly pretty; her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes dancing with excitement. Occasionally his glance passed to Percy's good-looking, unintellectual face. This man, through no merit of his own, had always found the path smoothed for his steps; he had never known what it was to grope in the darkness of the abyss; to consort with rogues as one of them. He was a gentleman in the eyes of the world, a man with a settled position as the son of a clergyman. The wind of fortune stayed at set-fair for him.

It was past six when the omnibus jolted beside the beds of watercress, and drew up at the King's

Head. Percy was in no haste to proceed, and suggested to Munro that they should partake of some refreshment before tackling the road across the fields.

"Well, you have dropped out of western ways," he said, somewhat disgustedly, when his invitation was refused.

Hardly had they started, when one of Jessie's few acquaintances came along, an elderly lady, propelling herself with almost painful caution upon a tricycle. Recognising the girl, whom she had not seen for a long time, she disentangled herself gradually from the machine, and greeted her warmly. Jessie introduced her companions, and the lady of the tricycle became effusive.

"I am so glad to meet you, Mr. Phair. Your sister should have brought you over to call upon us. But Windycombe seems to be quite a fatal place. They really must not make you a hermit. I am coming over to hear your lecture this evening, as my husband thinks it will be such a good plan to send our boy out to farm when he leaves school, and I would like to hear what you have to say about the country. I have just been to order the fly to take me over, as I cannot manage the hills on my machine, and I would not dare try to steer myself after dark. Jessie, my dear," she went on, turning to the girl, "I am quite alone, as my husband is in London, so I am going to take you back, and feed you, and drive you over with me. These gentlemen will leave any message you may wish to send your father. I hear Mr. Phair is not so well. It is a very trying time of the year. I assure you I can scarcely work my tricycle for rheumatism. But I do believe in being bold, my dear. I wear the enemy out by constant exercise. Rheumatism is

never cured by sitting in the house. Good-bye for the present, Mr. Phair. I shall see you again later, and Jessie must bring you over next week. My dear, you must not try to mount that machine. I am sure you will send it over, and probably break something. You might also hurt yourself," she added, as an afterthought. "But perhaps you will wheel it for me up the hill. Good-bye, Mr. Finch. My kind regards to your mother and father."

The talkative dame turned away, with Jessie and the tricycle, and the sound of her voice travelled back to the men as they watched the departure.

"Full of gas," said Percy laconically.

The rector's son continued to look along the road, but it was not the garrulous lady, nor was it the tricycle that found favour in his eyes. When the turn of the road had hidden the attraction, he released his pent-up breath.

"That sister of yours, Phair," he said, with what respect he could, "she is—excuse the phrase, old chap, but you have been out west—she's just a daisy."

Munro found something in his throat. He swallowed it resolutely, and suggested that they should be getting on.

"Hanged if we do!" said Percy. "You have lots of time. The atmosphere of my place is a bit too choked with the microbes of righteousness for my breathing capacity, and I guess you're none too lively up your way. Let's have some grub at the King's Head, and walk over afterwards."

Munro refused, but finally yielded. They went back to the inn, which Percy disorganised by his orders. Later, they sat opposite one another at the

parlour window, over the green boxes which were still yellow with calceolarias, while twilight darkened upon the hills.

Over supper Munro gradually thawed. Percy was so full of talk, so disposed to be friendly—it might have been for Jessie's sake—that it would have been churlish to refuse his advances. The whisky and soda, which the rector's son ordered repeatedly, possibly conduced to Munro's change of manner. He was talking freely by the time the meal was done, and when they had lighted their pipes, and were sitting again at the window in the sight of the stars, their conversation turned to the dark and distant City of Infatuation, where the one had spent the useless life of the remittance-man, and the other had halted a beggar at the corners of the streets, to watch Marguerite stepping freely in her tiny shoes, with her grey skirt swinging, and her bright eyes laughing at the life which was so soon to turn.

"Plenty of time," said Percy, somewhat unsteadily.

"Let's have something to drink."

He rolled across the glimmering room, and tugged the bell-rope.

"Course, I never had an office," he rambled on, when he had returned to the window-seat. "But I had to make up some sort of a yarn to satisfy the old man. I did once think of trying to do something in real estate, but there was no opening. There was a real-estate agent in every block up Main Street, every man of them living on what he could pick from the pockets of any fool that came to hand from the old country, and if they, knowing the ropes all the way up, couldn't show any decent return, what sort of a show had I? I ran a couple of rooms in the

King Block. Know it? Not a bad part, though none too stylish; but I was out all day and half the night at one or another of the saloons with some of the fellows. But the place became a bit warm after a time, and I thought it would be convenient to show up here again, and shake the old folks up to life. What part of the city were you in?"

"I was about from place to place," Munro faltered.

"I was pretty hard up in those days."

"Poor old chap! No governor to post you out a draft once a quarter. Not bad whisky they keep here. I guess they're bringing it out for their distinguished guests, hoping for a continuance of patronage. We'll have a bottle. All right! It's only seven o'clock. We'll drive over. I'll tell you what made it uncomfortable for me over there. . . ."

The Windycombe schoolroom was festive with kerosene lamps. An audience occupied the back benches half an hour before the lecturer was due, passing the time in badinage of a personal nature. A few minutes before the hour, the rector hove into the room, bearing a book which contained the records of the Temperance Society, and he was quickly followed by his churchwardens with their families, who distributed themselves over the chairs which were reserved for the elect. On the stroke of the hour a carriage drew up with a flash of lights, and Jessie with her friend from Elmbury advanced towards the platform. The rector nodded, and then began to drum his fingers impatiently upon the table. Never punctual himself, he could not appreciate the same failing in others. 't was past the hour, but the lecturer had not arrived.

The chairman cleared his throat, and the hum of

voices ceased. He rose, opened the book and his lips, and proceeded :

"While we are waiting for Mr. Phair, who has very probably omitted to set his watch to correspond with local time, I will read the minutes of the last meeting of this society."

It was quarter past eight by Highford Station time when the rector concluded and signed the minutes, which from time immemorial had been passed unanimously. The lecturer had not arrived. . . .

Some children, playing at a ring game on Elmbury Street, heard the loud and careless voice of a man who spoke at the open window of the King's Head :

"Well, I was a fool, of course, old chap, but I guess we all make our mistakes. My money had just arrived, and I remember I didn't mind spending it ; but I swear I meant to do the square thing—and later on I was devilishly hard up, and you know how helpless a fellow is without money. And there was rent to pay, and my restaurant bill, and these things have to come first. I would have made it right in the only way possible, if it had been in my power. But as it was, I could only extinguish myself, and hope for the best. What do you say, Phair? A fellow couldn't have done anything, placed as I was, could he? Needs must when the devil drives. Here's luck, old chap!"

The blue-black sky spread over Elmbury, unstained by a blur of cloud, and the same stars which stared upon the desert beamed upon the peaceful village, where sweet water streamed in great abundance. The constellation of the Great Bear stood clear, and the silver knuckles of the pointers indicated the lone star, blinking at the listener like a tearful eye. That

star shone also upon two nameless graves : that of the man whose death the watcher had caused ; that of the girl whose life he had only sought to save in its last hour by the gift of a bagful of oranges. . . .

It was half-past eight. Jessie had been to the Hermitage, and returned with the information that Walter had not been seen. Mr. Finch had sent to the Rectory, and had learnt that his son had not returned. The back-benchers were not impatient ; they did not appear to be even disappointed. Content at being brought together for a quiet evening, they chatted discursively ; but among the people on the chairs Mr. Walter Phair became unpopular.

The valley was filled with the sound of the organ. Atcliff missed his companions, and after bribing the half-witted boy to blow for him, had betaken himself to the church. One of Bach's fugues rolled sublimely from his fingers and entered the wind. From the Downs came the baying of dogs, and the sky beyond was red where the gipsies had their fire.

Robert Phair was stumbling about his garden alone, his half-blind eyes starting towards the shrubberies at every crack of a twig or noisy rustling of a bird. " Better here than in the house," he muttered. He exulted in his isolation though he feared it. The fire, suddenly revived, had not been allowed time to burn down. He would show them that he was still the strong, stubborn man who could fight his way through, as in the old time, against wind and tide.

Nine o'clock, and the audience in the schoolroom were undergoing an extempore address from the chairman. Mr. Finch loved the sound of his voice, and was willing to forgive the lecturer

for his failure to appear, as he warmed and dilated upon the advantages of protection and a more liberal education, and passed on to ride his hobby of small holdings. The front seats chafed, the back-benchers applauded at regular intervals. The rector filled out the allotted time with his halting periods; Mr. Lake proposed a vote of thanks; Mr. Brown seconded; the rustics thumped and stamped respectfully; and the audience adjourned. . . .

The landlord of the King's Head of Elmbury rose from the tap-room to answer the summons of a bell. He opened the door of the front parlour, which was lit only by the starlight, and discovered a young man leaning stupidly against the table.

"He will stop here to-night," said this dazed man, pointing with an effort to a figure doubled upon the window-seat. "I—I am going now."

"Yes, sir," said the landlord, as the speaker stumbled to the door. "Good-night, sir."

Jessie, in the Hermitage garden at that moment, was speaking to the recluse, who had just returned from the valley.

"Walter is not back, neither is Percy Finch. I am afraid Walter has fallen into his old ways. I think I will go half-way down the hill."

"I will come with you," said Atcliff. "You must not walk alone these dark nights, child."

Jessie wondered at the tenderness in his voice.

"Then we will go as far as the sign-post. I like to walk in the dark, and there will be a wind on the face of the hill."

They went out together and descended the hill, but passed no man upon the way. The black line

of the Downs zig-zagged across the deep-blue of the sky, and far up a peewit screamed restlessly. At the sign-post they turned, but had only made a few steps in the direction of home, when Jessie stopped, with an exclamation, and pointed out a figure which was standing on the highest ridge, outlined in the glow of the rising moon. As they watched this figure, it sank among the juniper bushes, and it seemed then to the watchers in the valley as though the pole-star was resting lightly upon the spot where that lone man knelt.

"Set your mind at rest," said Atcliff, placing his hand tenderly upon the girl's shoulder. "Our friend is finding consciousness upon those hills. His character is growing as fast as it can."

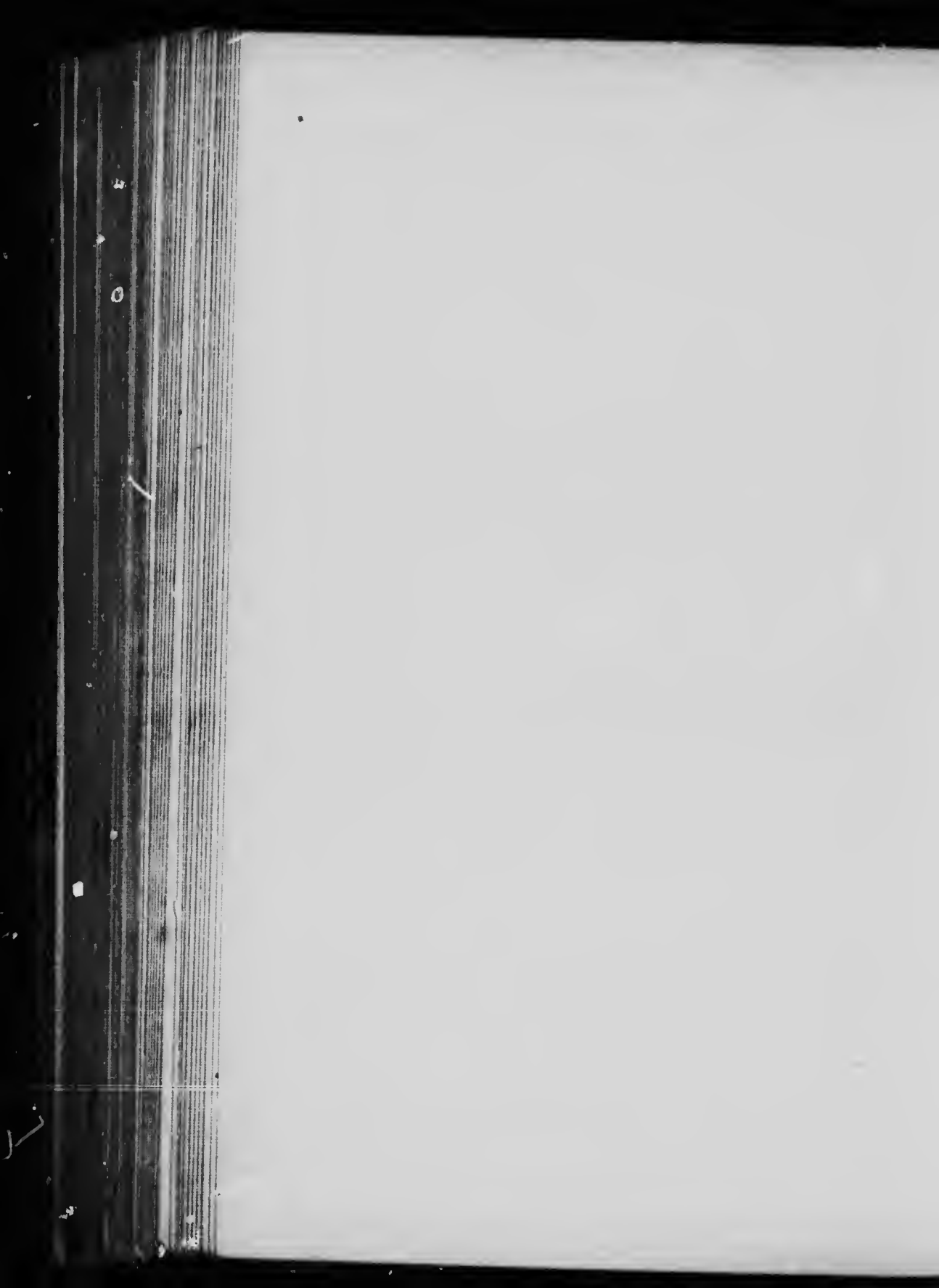
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PART III

SPIRIT

*"God's breath
Even at this moment haply quickeneth
The air to a flame; till spirits, always nigh,
Though screened and hid, shall walk the daylight here."*



CHAPTER I

PUNISHMENT

SUMMER was spent, the wreckage of autumn had been whirled along the lanes, and the winter wind mourned upon the land.

November entered sleepily, clad in fog, and went with stinging sleet. December followed, tearful and calm, until the week of Christmas ; and then Nature's mind turned to anarchy, and the trees of the wood were beaten together, and the old elms showed many a ragged stump.

Windycombe slept unchanged. The carrier still crawled along the switchback road ; the dim candles and lamps were requisitioned for light, as in historic days ; hedging and ditching, road-mending, ploughing, took place as ancient custom ordained. The hum of the threshing-machine was heard in the rick-yards — up to at least one small holding a flail beat out the grain, and the hungry sparrows rejoiced when they saw the flying chaff.

Human nature also remained unaltered. It is only life that changes with the seasons, and the passions which warm and cool with the phases of the sun.

Mr. Finch had taken his worn overcoat from the press ; his wife had retired into winter quarters ; Percy, still at home, both unable and unwilling to find any occupation for his idle hands, divided his time

between the loose society of young Lake and Golding of poaching fame, and the tenants of the Hermitage, returning to the Rectory for food and sleep, thus living up to his reputation of accepting much and giving nothing in exchange. He had, indeed, no desire to leave Windycombe while Jessie was there. Penniless and improvident as he was, he was yet prepared to offer the girl a future without prospects. He claimed as his right the best in life, with no idea of paying for the prize at the price which Nature has fixed.

Atcliff's mood veered with every change of the weather. He had struggled to free his mind from its sense of fear, to forget himself in the entertainment of his guests, to open and expand beneath Jessie's vigorous happiness. Occasionally he succeeded, but more generally failed. Often he would leave the room, pass upstairs, and stand before the indecipherable canvas, which seemed to contain his secret, painted in crimson cypher, and there remain, gazing, with a hand pressed upon his heart. Then he would go down and say: "This evening I shall tell you a story. Do not let me forget." As though he could forget! But when the time came, and Jessie demanded a redemption of his promise, he would say: "I cannot tell you to-night."

One November day Munro walked into Highford, and steamed away for London, determined to lose himself and forget. The movement of the metropolis, his sense of helplessness there, and the unimportance of his individuality brought back his courage. He would complete the task which he had set before him; he returned to the station, and the next down train brought him back to the country of the hills. That

night he was more like his former self, and Jessie was delighted at the change in her moody comrade.

She was in one of her fondling moods, and passing the back of his chair when about to retire for the night, flung her arms about his neck, and with a "Good-night, old bear," kissed him on the cheek.

It was the first kiss which had passed between them since that night in the churchyard. For one second Munro yielded, then pulled his head free, and bent his hot face over a book.

"Sulky!" cried Jessie, as she left the room.

On the first day of the last month a note came to Jessie, and she read: "Daughter, come back, I am ill and lonely." Colour came into the girl's cheeks, pity to her heart, but she too could be stubborn. The reply went back, "I will come whenever you like, with Walter." There was no answer, and Jessie hardened her heart, and would not go alone.

By three o'clock on the afternoon of Christmas Eve the sky was overhung with dark masses of cloud. Munro slipped away from the Hermitage, and walked into Highford alone.

Within the old tower of the parish church, lifting from the side of the market-place, bells were clanging in celebration of the Royal Birthday, each shell of metal thrilling and throbbing in response to the ringing of its wheel. Munro bought Christmas presents to this wild music: an engraving for Atcliff, a silver hat-pin for Jessie—he knew she wanted one—and he resolutely selected a pin with an opal head.

"Opals are popular now," said the woman who served him.

He pushed the trifle quickly into his pocket, and

was about to leave the shop, when his eyes fell upon a small picture, depicting an old man sitting in a garden, and behind him a girl, half hidden under a shower of roses; a young man was approaching across the grass, with outstretched hands. Underneath he read the title, "The Return."

"I will buy that picture," he said suddenly.

With these purchases under his arm, Munro left the town and the lamplight. The country beyond was closely wrapped in its winter sables. The clouds made shapes of paleozoic monsters upon the Christmas sky. Knotted roots of fir trees twisted out of the chalk banks in fantastic patterns. Centennial oaks traced crooked lines across the glimmering light, and club-headed willows stood in rows of spectral outposts along a field of sedges. Solitude and imagination caused Munro to conjure with these inanimate objects of his environment. The winding road led upward between chalk hills and octopus bushes to a sleeping village of enchantment; an abandoned scarecrow, leaning stiff near a wayside path, became the immature creation of another Frankenstein; an owl, flapping over the larches where the moon was struggling, was certainly no bird at all, but the unhappy wraith of Walter Phair come back to hoot forth sinister omens at his impersonator.

It was wearisome ploughing through the mud and the sodden grass. Munro's head was aching when he left Elmbury, and his thoughts presently became fantastic. He spoke aloud to himself incoherently, his mind partly engrossed by mundane affairs, partly by speculations into the unseen. In that half-trance, walking condition he seemed to realise a record of

all that was about to occur in that desolate, drenched neighbourhood, and a strange future very near at hand became in part opened to the consciousness of his subliminal self. Anything to banish remembrance of the rector's hated son, and to turn his mind into a channel which had no flow towards revenge. In the same strange mood he fell to reciting some verses which his late partner had composed one evening on a prairie knoll, while they awaited the Indian driver who was bringing up the wagon of hay which concealed their smuggled liquor.

"Good God!" he muttered, returning with an effort to his normal state. "How could that man write poetry!"

Up the hill he dragged and plodded into Windycombe by the deserted road. There was mildewed grass high beside the cobble-paths. The moss-covered thatch had sagged heavily into a ruined cottage, the walls of which were stained with mud, and last summer's growth of spidery creepers hung in sodden festoons.

He heard an old clock ticking heavily when he opened the door of the Hermitage. The house seemed to be empty, and was darkened with masses of yew and holly. Following the sound of grumbling, Munro reached the kitchen, and persuaded the house-keeper to make him a cup of tea. The stimulant drove the morbid fit out of him. Wrapping up the picture which he had bought at Highford, he passed again into the damp, descended the slope, and reached the church, which was heavy with light. A little snow was falling, and Jessie was standing on the path before the porch, catching the flakes.

"Come here, Sulks!" she called; and Munro unfastened the latch of the gate and joined her.

"I have been hauling greenstuff into the church," Jessie laughed. "Branches and trees and roots! The nave is like a shrubbery. And I put a quantity of misletoe round the font, and Mr. Finch pulled it all off and threw it away. 'I will have neither Paganism nor Romanism in this church, Miss Phair,'" she said, imitating the rector's voice and manner. "Then it began to snow, and I came out to feel it. Where are you going with that parcel? And what a muddy creature you are!"

"I have just walked from Highford," Munro explained, watching the snow-crystals melting in her hair.

"You have walked there and back! Why didn't you tell me, and I would have come too? Do you know that you have changed again?" she went on, more seriously. "You are always changing, you curious brother. You will soon be like Father Atcliff was before I saved him."

"I did not think you would care for the walk through the mud," Munro said.

"But you had no business to think. You should have asked. I have a tongue which is capable of saying 'No,' if it wants to. Where are you going with that parcel? May I see?"

She put out her hand and felt the paper inquisitively.

"A picture!" she exclaimed.

"A Christmas present," he answered, moving his head towards the dripping elms.

Jessie looked at him curiously, and her face became grave.

"This is the time of the year when men will forgive," she said softly. "But see him yourself. Don't be discouraged if he refuses, as he is sure to do at first; but press him, and tell him I will come back to-morrow if he will forgive you."

"Will he be afraid of me?"

"Give me your stick," said Jessie. "You must not let him see you with that. Now, luck be with you!"

Munro left the churchyard, and as his feet found the road, Percy descended the hill, whistling contentedly. Upon sighting his neighbour he called:

"Say, Phair, where are you off to? Come up to the Rectory and have a drink."

The church door opened as Munro curtly refused, and Jessie became outlined against the light across which the snow-flakes shivered. The door closed, and Percy ceased from urging his companion to return.

"You are an unsociable beggar, Phair," he said frankly. "You ought to turn parson."

With that, the nearest approach to a sneer upon which Percy had ventured, he passed on, leaving Munro shivering on the road.

As the door of the church closed behind the rector's son, the damp Manor gate swung into place behind the man who had no right there.

The old house seemed to exude moisture, and every window exhaled an icy breath. The ivy was grey with winter film, and the feathery snow tossed in sport across the lawn. One light showed to the left of the entrance; that window was the eye of "the cold room," so called because neither sun in summer, nor fire in winter, could bring warmth into it. Was the old man there, doing penance at the season of good-will?

Munro was about to pull the bell-handle, when the gardener plodded up, carrying a pair of white chrysanthemums to the church, a pot beneath each arm. He greeted the visitor with a surprised start and an "Evening, sir," and Munro stepped down to inquire whether he had seen the master.

"He ain't indoors, sir," said the man. "My belief is that master's walking in the big meadow. I saw he come out wi' a lantern and stick, and go to the hole in the fence. Seems like he was looking for someone, sir, for 'tis a queer time for an old gent to be walking about, weak as he be, but 'tis as much as my place is worth to follow him, sir."

"Which way was he going?" Munro asked.

The gardener pointed among the dancing flakes to where a ragged catalpa was barely visible on the slope, and Munro started across the lawn, where there was just snow enough to sign his tracks.

He found the hole in the fence, and passed through into a meadow which was soaked with mist. Here he felt the biting air forced through the valley and pushed his ungloved hands deep in his pocket. As he hurried on, the parcel pressed underneath his arm, wondering what had been the impulse which had driven Mr. Phair out on this of all nights. The meadow, which belonged to the Manor estate, was, he knew, rented to Mr. Lake, the rector's church warden. It was nearly quarter of a mile in width and bounded on the far side by a deep ditch which ran with water from a spring.

He reached this ditch, but saw no living thing. The bleached teasles and reeds moved with a hollow sound, and beyond the old oaks were grinding and creaking as though in pain. Suddenly it occurred

to Munro that the gardener had been deceiving him. It was impossible that so short-sighted and broken a man as Mr. Phair could be tramping about this meadow in the biting cold. But before this conviction had become settled, he saw a footmark upon the grass.

It disappeared at once, and though he returned to his former position he could not find it again. He was certain that the heel had been towards him, so he kept on along the edge of the ditch, and presently all doubt became removed. The soft ground was regularly indented with footmarks which the restless flakes were whitening silently.

There came a gleam from beside a thicket of whitethorn, and Munro stopped. He heard the strokes of a spade, followed by a sound which suggested the rattling of stones and mould in a tin pan. He advanced to where the ditch widened and the bank shelved. The lantern light stood out clearly, the mist smoking round it. A mound of dirt heaved upon the grass. A figure was stooping over the black water, its shoulders heaving, its arms working painfully. Munro came out of the fog, and the candle in the lantern shed its light upon the strange sight of Mr. Phair leaning over the stream, a miner's prospecting pan gripped between his hands, washing out the black soil of the ditch.

While he stood, amazed at this mad prank, the old figure lifted its head, and the pan clattered down the bank. Munro hesitated, then advanced, calling deceitfully the one word, "Father!"

In an instant the old man rolled round, caught the spade, and climbed to his knees. He had not the strength to find his feet. He knelt in the candle-

light, a savage creature, his face streaked with mud, his dim eyes glaring, and his feeble hands ready to strike.

"I have come to take you home," said Munro firmly. "You will find your death out here."

"I was a fool," the cramped figure muttered. "I forgot to destroy my tracks. So you have followed me, and now you will murder me, and hide my body in this ditch. I will make a fight of it. A spade is a good weapon. I could use it well one time."

"So you have been prospecting," said Munro, hoping thus to humour the old man. "You can hardly expect to find gold here."

The old man remained in the same position, clutching his spade. A small, sane voice, deep in his inner consciousness, told him that he was playing at folly, and he was ashamed, as a grown man may be ashamed when detected in the act of amusing himself with a childish game. He began to shiver abjectly when the raw air removed the warmth which his exertions had made.

"You are not my son," he said harshly.

"Who am I, then?" asked Munro, as lightly as he could.

"You come from the Mackenzie River. I have had dreams about you. I woke last night laughing, and between the cracks of the curtains I saw a man's head hanging. There is someone coming after you. You are going back to tell him that you have found me."

Munro advanced, picked up the lantern, and turned its light full upon the dim eyes.

"If you can see you will know me," he said. "Do you remember that affair long ago at Pikesford, when

the gipsies attacked Beveridge's farm? And do you remember the part that I took, and how Father Atcliff found me in the outhouse, and dragged me home by force?"

The spade loosened from the old man's fingers. He tried to rise, but his legs failed; the damp mildewed his body, and his joints were as stiff as wood.

"Take that light away," he said angrily. "I believe you are my son Walter, after all. What do you want with me? I understood you when you were a wild young beast, but now that you are tamed I cannot recognise you. Why did you send me that money?"

"I repaid as best I could. But get up, and I will see you back to the house. You are cramped with cold."

"Hide the spade under that bush, and the pan beside it," said the old man. Then he relapsed into his former mood. "There is an oak over there. I cannot see it, but I know exactly where it stands. That oak has been crooked for a hundred years, and though it may live for another hundred, it will never grow straight. You are like that tree. I don't know why you have kept quiet for so long, or why you left me alone all these weeks. You have taken Jessie from me," he shouted. "Ah, that is why you came back. And now you have some other plan. What is that you have there? You need not think I cannot see. What is it?"

The old man reached forward, seized the parcel, which Munro had placed upon the grass in order that he might conceal the tools, and hurled it into the ditch.

"There it will cool," he chuckled, highly pleased at his ingenuity.

Munro regained the parcel and shook the water from it.

"It is nothing of importance," he said quietly. "Only a picture, a little present, which I thought you might accept because it is Christmas."

Conflicting thoughts surged into Munro's brain: was Walter Phair worth reinstating; was the father himself worthy of any sacrifice? He remembered Atcliff's suggestion that he should draw back from the plough before attempting to turn so arduous a furrow.

But every question had its answer in Jessie; all the rough places became smooth when he thought of her. She had entered his life, not as the girl whom he still called Marguerite, entering unsignalled and passing unspoken, but she, the second Marguerite, had drifted up to him, and the same current was bearing them along side by side. He could abandon the father and forget the son, but the day had passed when he might have cast himself free from the sister, to venture out under the privateering flag of the old life. Jessie was worth the fight.

As in the desert Munro had seized Walter Phair to save him if it were possible from death, so now he seized Robert Phair, and dragged him to his feet, disregarding the cries and the threats which flowed from the old man's lips. Able only to associate Walter's touch with violence, he struggled to be free, but his strength was altogether spent. Had it not been for the coming of the impersonator, the master of the Manor might never have escaped from that field alive. As it was, Munro was dragging rather

than supporting the broken man long before the iron fence drew its stiff lines along the mist. Back in the meadow the lantern gleamed above the ditch, and beside it lay the present which had been despised.

By the time that the outline of the melancholy house appeared through the gloom the snow had turned to rain. Mr. Phair's breath came in thick gasps as he tottered against the rugged bole of the catalpha.

"Have pity on me," he gasped, harping on the old fear. "I know you have brought me back to give me over to that man."

"There is no one here except ourselves," Munro said.

Then he prevailed upon the unhappy man to proceed to the house. There was a great fire burning in the cold room, which yet struck freezingly as they entered. It occurred to Munro that this room was used because it commanded a good view of the drive. He lowered the old man into a deep chair, and was about to leave, when Mr. Phair's head came up, and his voice sounded in a hollow fashion:

"Walter, I believe I am ill."

"Shall I stay with you, sir?"

The old man's eyes roved round the room, and he shivered when they touched Munro.

"This is Walter," he muttered to himself. "He has a smooth tongue. Jessie would come back with him if I yielded, and I might be safe." He tried to rise, and fell back heavily. "I think I must go to bed," he gasped.

Munro came up to the chair and bent over him.

"I am going for the lantern, but will soon be back. Give me your hand. Now, we are reconciled. While I am here nobody shall come near to harm you."

Mr. Phair put up his cold hand and placed it in that which came to him over the arm of the chair. Munro grasped it strongly, and hurried away.

He was almost happy as he ran through the rain. He had come very near to the working out of Walter Phair's redemption, to restoring the character of the fallen, and to saving himself. The stubborn old heart had yielded at last.

Back he sped, the lantern in his hand, the picture beneath his arm, back to his own home. He rang, and the door opened grudgingly, a few inches only, and when the crabbed face of the housekeeper looked out, Munro saw that the chain was up.

"You see who I am," he said cheerfully.

The woman's face stared out like a brown block of wood.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but master's orders are as how I'm not to let you in."

The house, which had looked almost warm a minute back, became as cold as the night itself.

Munro crept away from that door after handing in the lantern and his Christmas present over the chain. He had been deceived in his turn. The man was father of the son.

But Jessie was still his, the girl who had forsaken father and home for his sake. She had not refused him, save in the first instance; she believed in him; to her he would now devote himself. What was a hard old man, what a home or position, as compared with her?

It was raining fiercely when he reached the Hermitage, and the wind was rising in gusts. Jessie had ordained that supper should be replaced by dinner that night, and her word was law. Directly

he entered, Jessie rustled from the dining-room, flushed and pretty, and the question reached Munro as he closed the door against the rain :

"Have you succeeded?"

The look on his face was sufficient answer.

"Never mind, poor boy!" she went on. Then she began to speak very quickly: "I am so sorry you have nothing good to tell me, because I have something wonderful for you to hear. What do you think? Have three guesses."

"I cannot think," he said wearily.

"Well, then, Percy Finch has asked me to be his wife. You know, Walter, he is just the none-too-respectable man that I wanted."

For a moment Munro lost the sight of his eyes. "Just the none-too-respectable man that I wanted!" Did she, could she, guess? And he—he was indeed cursed. There was nothing now but the roof of stars, and the old life, and the nameless grave at the end of that life.

Jessie was before him, warm and lovely. He felt her approach him. He felt her place her two hands upon his shoulders, lifting herself on tiptoe. He heard her tender, happy voice:

"Brother, kiss your sister! Tell her that you love her still."

The wind was moaning at the corner of the house.

CHAPTER II

DREAMS

IT was not until the week after Christmas that Percy informed his father—and then as casually as though it were a matter of no more moment than the state of the weather—that he was engaged to Jessie. The announcement was made after breakfast, in the rector's study, and when the easy-going old gentleman had grasped the situation, he lost his temper entirely.

"What do you think you are?" he cried angrily. "A man with an income assured from your father's success? Look here, if you can feel shame—look at these clothes of mine! Look at this carpet, these curtains, and this furniture. Do you think I enjoy these things? I may laugh at appearances, and say that everyone knows me, that my position as rector covers all outward signs of poverty, but do you think I appreciate a life which is merely a struggle to keep tradesmen paid? Do you imagine that I find it a pleasure to see the cold joint appear meal after meal until it is picked to the knuckle? This living is worth to me about one hundred and fifty pounds, which sum tends to decrease annually. Your mother has an income of one hundred, and I have the interest upon a thousand pounds left me by my father. Our joint income amounts to rather less than three hundred, and out of that we have maintained you in

idleness all these years. Since returning from abroad you have spent your days in the lowest society, instead of putting your shoulder to the wheel like an honest man ; and now you calmly announce that you intend to marry—you, a penniless vagabond, with not a single good mark to your credit. I shall see Miss Phair, and tell her that the engagement is impossible. And if you have any grace left, you will apologise for the ridiculous proposal with which you have insulted her."

"Give me a chance," the drone pleaded, somewhat abashed at his father's plain truths. "I am going to work now."

"How are you going to set about it? When are you going to begin?" demanded the rector.

"I thought you would put me into some business, and allow me a certain amount to start upon," Percy shamelessly suggested.

Mr. Finch glared, without daring to trust himself to answer, then ran from the room in a rage to seek sympathy from his wife.

Later in the day the rector called at the Hermitage, and found the man whom he sought digging in the garden. Munro listened to him, with a certain poor satisfaction at discovering there was opposition to the marriage.

"I think," he said, when he had heard what the rector had to say, "you had better go and see Mr. Phair."

"He is in bed with a bad cold, and refuses to see anyone," replied Mr. Finch. "You are Miss Jessie's brother, and therefore I come to you that I may explain my son's position. His mother and I are prepared—though I am sure he does not deserve it—

to put him into a business where he must work his way up from the lowest rung of the ladder. I have just written to a friend, who has a tea business in Mincing Lane, to ask him if he can make an opening. We will pay the premium, and after that Percy must make his own way. At the best, I do not see how my son can expect to be in a position to marry until five years are gone, and that is the point which I wish Miss Jessie to understand."

"She has money of her own," said Munro thoughtlessly.

It was not the least bitter part of his portion to know that it was his own money which might make it possible for Jessie to marry his one enemy upon earth.

"I was not aware of that," said Mr. Finch. "Percy never mentioned it."

"Then perhaps you will say nothing about it," Munro went on, vexed that he had spoken. "She will not have the use of it until her father's death."

It was good to know that Jessie had not mentioned her little fortune. It could be for no other reason but that she regarded the money as still belonging to himself.

"Ah," the rector observed, "I will say nothing about it. I naturally supposed that Mr. Phair's money would come to you."

A satisfied smile returned to Mr. Finch's simple face, as he walked away, considerably mollified, the idea that Percy had done fairly well for himself, after all, gradually assuming a concrete form.

Munro watched the retreating figure until it was out of sight. Then he walked into the house and called for the master from room to room. No voice

answered him. Jessie was out, he knew, and probably in Percy's company. Believing that the cottage was empty, Munro went upstairs to wash the marks which his labours in the garden had made from his face and hands; but when he came out of his room, he saw the little grey man standing silent and spirit-like in the passage.

"I heard you calling me," he said.

Munro came up and passed his hand round the arm of the recluse. This man was now his only friend, and he desired to cling to him fast.

"I must speak to you," he said. "Let us go in here."

He drew Atcliff round towards the bedroom; but the recluse held back, objecting:

"Not there. We will talk downstairs."

"Father," Munro suddenly cried, "I want to speak to you in your priestly capacity."

He felt the man shiver. He saw the white face set towards him; and he heard a deep sigh, followed by the hollow question:

"Who has told you that I was once a priest?"

"I heard you say mass in the church at midnight. Jessie was with me, and she too knows."

There was an interval of silence before Atcliff smiled.

"I think I am glad that you know," he said. "You wish to speak with me? I too have much to confess, but not to you. Come into my room."

Seating himself beneath the mysterious picture, the priest pointed mechanically to a chair beside the window. Munro made a step in that direction, but turned, and went suddenly on his knees by Atcliff's side, and with a sudden loss of self-restraint began to sob like a lonely child.

Atcliff sat rigid, until he placed his hand upon Munro's head. At the contact he too gave way, and tears filled the deep furrows of his cheeks.

"My boy," he whispered—"my boy, let me help you if I can."

Seeing those tears on his companion's face, Munro became less ashamed of his own. He was about to speak, when the cottage shook, and a mad howling sounded from the garden.

"It is the wind," said the recluse composedly. "I was upon the Downs early this morning, and caught a glimpse of the sun as it rose and was swallowed up. I could see by the colour of the dawn that a storm was near. God answered Job out of the whirlwind," he went on reverently, "and spoke to Elijah out of the storm on Horeb. Perhaps He will speak to us now out of the wind."

Then Munro told at last the story of his infatuation for the beautiful girl of whose birth-name he was even then in ignorance. He described the scene in Hamlet Street, speaking of the medical students, the woman of the place, his purchase of the oranges. He confessed the influence for good which the dead girl had worked upon his life, and finally he spoke of the evening at the King's Head, and of Percy's drunken confession.

"And Jessie proposes to marry this man."

Munro's head was down, or he might have seen a smile upon Atcliff's face.

"It is a strange history; but mine is stranger far," the priest murmured. "The way in which spirits help us is beyond our understanding. Let us dismiss Jessie for the moment. Leonard," he said, in that soft voice which made the animals come to him,

"I must hear the true account of Walter's death. I knew him well, and now that I know you, I wish to judge between him and you."

"I killed him," said Munro.

"But how?"

That question might only be answered by the truth. Munro gave the story of the search for opal, from the time of their departure from the shores of Grande Marais, to his own arrival in San Francisco, offering no excuse for his crime.

"It is as I had suspected," said Atcliff quietly. "Walter relied upon his will power to conquer you, and by his own madness brought death upon himself; man is not master of himself when passion has the upper hand. You have no premeditated crime to repent."

"But Jessie!" exclaimed Munro, thoughtless of all else. "Walter was her brother."

"Leave her to me," the priest answered. "You must not endeavour to open her eyes by a story which is not fit for her ears. My solitary walks may have been of some service to you and her; let us go down. I will write a note to Mr. Finch, inviting him and Percy to supper with us this evening."

When Munro came upon the crest of the village hill, with the letter of invitation in his hand, the wind was blowing half a gale, the atmosphere had become curiously indistinct, and clouded with leaves, which darted into the higher currents like brown birds. An old-fashioned bicycle staggered along the side of the blast, and Munro perceived that its rider was the gardener of the Manor. The man fell from the machine when a few yards distant, and pushed it, panting, while Munro waited before the Rectory gate.

"Master's bad, sir!" the man cried. "I'm going to Elmbury for the doctor; but the Lord knows, sir, how I'll get there with this cross wind!"

"Go for the wagonette at the inn, or get someone to ride," said Munro hastily. "Who is at the Manor?"

"Just the housekeeper and servant, sir. Master has been bad since morning. He sent for me, and he says, 'Holder, has anyone come into the village?' he says. 'They gipsies has come back to the common, sir,' I says, and master was took bad that moment."

"Get to Elmbury as soon as you can," said Munro sharply. "If the doctor is not in, wait for him. I will go down to the house."

It was a few minutes after one when Jessie arrived at the Hermitage, her cheeks buffeted a rich poppy colour. Luncheon was ready, and Atcliff was sitting at the table partaking of it alone. The windows were rattling in their frames, and every door strained upon its catch.

"Couldn't you wait five minutes, hungry man?" she cried. "Isn't this wind glorious? I have been flying with it down the road. It is getting stronger every minute. Hark at it! And look at my hair!"

She caught a strand, which had broken loose, and twisted it round her neck.

"The trees are crashing above the green lane," she went on; "little bits of branches are flying like kites, and the dry grass is torn out in tufts. It is grand! You should go upon the Downs. Don't create a famine, because I am starving," she called, as she released the fluttering door. "I will be with you in two minutes."

The wind rushed again into the cottage, the

pictures grated against the walls, and Munro came in, breathless. In one sentence Atcliff was informed of Mr. Phair's condition, and the recluse left his chair at once.

"Go down," he said shortly. "I will follow. He must face me now."

"Is Jessie in?"

"Yes; she will be here in a minute. I do not want her to know—not yet."

They could hear the girl singing against the wind.

The storm was less furious in the valley, but the old gate was clicking to and fro, as restless as the men who passed through it. It was fortunately the young servant, and not the housekeeper, who answered the bell, and thus they were not opposed in their entry. They passed up the wide stairs, where the carpet was moving uneasily, and the drumming and beating of creepers upon the windows were riotous. From a room on the second floor they heard the calling of a wild voice.

"Joe!" it called. "Why don't you move, Joe? Bury that spade under the gravel. Push it beneath the willows. No, no. Wash it first. Take it down the creek, and wash it well."

With a deep breath Atcliff pushed the door open. Mr. Phair was sitting upright, glaring, and when he saw the intruders his cries became fearful. He rolled on the floor, and sought to drag himself under the bed, protecting his body with a pillow. The housekeeper stood helplessly, near the window.

Atcliff moistened his lips, then crossed the room and arrested the terrified figure.

"Bob, it is I, Atcliff, and here is Walter, your son," he muttered into his ear. "You have no cause to be

afraid of us. Get back into bed. These are delusions, man. Walter will stand by the door, and no one shall pass him. You used not to be a coward, Bob. Have the courage of a mouse, and look up."

He raised Mr. Phair by force, lowered him on the bed, and covered his shaking body. But the frightened old man started upright again, and stared about the room, nibbling the points of his fingers, and whining with terror.

"Ah, John, where are we?" he muttered. "Is this the Woodbine House? It is quiet for the Woodbine, but I think sometimes I hear the shouts of the faro-players and the glasses rattling in the bar."

"Forget all that," said Atcliff quickly. "You are in the Manor House at Windycombe."

"I remember being in the Windy City," said old Phair eagerly. "The price of corn was good, and the money flowed like water. You remember the Windy City in the good old days, John?"

Atcliff turned to the housekeeper and dismissed her, charging her to bring them word when the doctor arrived from Elmbury.

Munro closed the door behind the woman, and settled his back against it. The master of the house appeared to have forgotten his presence. Atcliff came between them, and it was upon Atcliff that his wild eyes stared.

"John," he muttered, pulling at the bed-clothes. "You see the spade in that corner, in front of the pan? Is it mine or yours?"

Atcliff started, and stared vaguely round the room almost as though he too expected to find himself in an hotel at the outskirts of a mining-camp.

"There is no spade," he said, remembering himself

"You fool, John! Let us have an end to this matter. The spade is yours."

"No," said the recluse fiercely. "That spade was not mine. You might have seen the initials R. P. burnt on the handle with a hot stick, if you had held it the right way. It was your hand, and not mine, and yours was also the brain. I am guilty with you, but you shall no longer burden me with your share of our crime. You have been a false partner to me ever since that awful night. I am an older man than you, but fear has not broken me. I have repented, while you have put your sin away from you, and hardened your heart against it, and tried to persuade yourself that you are innocent. You have done me great wrong. You spread it abroad that it was I alone who entered Patello's tent that night, and had it not been for that storm in which we lost one another, I should have been taken and hanged. Speak the truth now, for your soul's sake, and I will listen, not as your partner, but as a priest."

"Stand away!" shouted old Phair wildly. "Who is that man you are hiding?"

"He can answer for himself," Atcliff replied.

"Come here!" cried the master of the Manor. "Why do you shelter behind him? Who are you?"

Munro came forward without speaking, because the lie he desired to utter would not out. He took Atcliff's place, and allowed the cold fingers to clutch his hand, while he gazed straight into the pale-blue eyes which strained widely, seeing so little.

"This is the man who has beaten me," said the grating voice. "This is the man who stole from me a part of that which the man there says I stole from another. This is the man who calls himself my son,

who carried me across the foggy meadow without harming me, and sent me a Christmas present. Why are you here?" he shouted. "You have come together to attack a man when he is down."

"I have come," said Munro, playing his part to the end, "because the son's place is at his father's side."

"Have you been to the gipsy camp?" said the helpless old man. "Can you swear to me that the enemy is not there?"

"Humour him," came Atcliff's advice, in a whisper.

"He is not there," answered Munro; and at the sound of that determined voice old Phair became composed.

After a few minutes they saw that he was asleep, sprawling on his back, breathing fiercely, his teeth showing, and his hands twitching. The room was shaking, and outside the clouds pressed low.

Atcliff came up to Munro, and drew him aside.

"I am going to prepare for our guests," he whispered. "You remain here, and send me word if there is any change. At present I am not wanted." He paused, his hand feeling for the door. "I believe you have conquered," he murmured. "I think you have very nearly worked out the redemption of Walter Phair."

He was gone, and Munro sat beside the bed, watching the struggle between mind and body through that painful sleep which never suggested peace.

An hour passed, and the gloom had increased. Munro felt his eyes drooping, and to rouse himself, rose softly and lighted a candle upon the old-fashioned mantel. He drew the curtains, but there

was still daylight in the room, a wan streak between the shifting fringes. Resuming his seat, he wondered whether Atcliff would enlighten Jessie, and whether, if she knew, she would join him. Probably at that moment she was at the Rectory, while Percy, the brute who was not fit to breathe in her atmosphere, or walk the ground where her foot had touched, was with her. . . .

He started fearfully, with a scream ringing in his ears. The candle flame waved from side to side. He gasped, and turned for the bell, but his hand dropped. Mr. Phair was sitting upright, pale and sweating, his fingers straining upon the bed-clothes, his eyes staring at the streak of daylight between the curtains.

"What is it, sir? What do you see?" Munro faltered.

The master of the Manor did not move. Stiff in that same position, his eyes never turning from the line of misty light, he said, in a grating whisper:

"That head without a face is hanging between the curtains."

Munro could not speak. He stood close to the bed, fascinated by that stiff body and the starting eyes, which saw only pale visions in a mist. He looked mechanically at his watch, and noted that it was past three o'clock.

Then a voice came into the room amid the riotings of the wind. Like a parrot repeating a well-learned story, without knowledge of its meaning, the old man spoke:

"I see a creek winding upwards from a river, and tents and log-cabins among the spruce. Where the water of the creek runs red into the river I see rockers, and barrows, and ridges of gravel. Two

partners occupy the highest tent upon the hill-side. One is a little nervous man, who reads a great deal, and seldom speaks. The face of the other is blurred as I look upon it, but the voice is familiar. These partners have had no luck; but Patello, who owns the claim adjoining, has been gathering in wealth for a year."

Munro drew nearer, and lowered his head.

"I see the man, whom I cannot name, creeping from his sleeping-bag towards the side of his silent partner, and whispering into his ear. The quiet man rises in anger, but the other forces him down, and terrifies him with threats. Then the man without a face picks up a spade, and steals through the undergrowth. There is a noise of shouting and of singing below, and fires are darting about the creek. The man with the spade feels as though he were in the Niagara whirlpool, being dragged and tossed, and flung up and down."

Munro scarcely dared to breathe, lest he should interrupt this confession which the disintegrated personality of Robert Phair was making.

"I see the flap of a tent shaken in the wind. The man with the spade crawls in upon his knees. Now I can hear the loud beating of a heart. I see a red atmosphere leaping with black spots. My arms rise, and with closed eyes I bring them down. I shudder until the bed shakes. I hear the rattling of a cry in a man's throat. The spade is leaping up and down. There are bags in the tent, and each bag becomes covered with red spots. One of the partners is groaning, but the other laughs. There is a pack-horse outside the tent. The night is very dark. The heavy bags are blown about like feathers. They fly

around, float in the air, settle on the pack-horse like flying ants, and are of no more weight than thistle-seed. One of the partners is blubbering like a frightened child. The other goes on laughing, louder and louder, until I cannot breathe. There is a hand upon my throat, and another upon my heart. And then—then I see that head without a face hanging between the curtains."

The physical body relaxed as the door opened noisily, and the flame of the single candle guttered in the blast.

"Here is the doctor, sir," announced the house-keeper, in a hushed voice.

CHAPTER III

THE WHIRLWIND

THE recluse sat upon a straight-backed chair before the incomprehensible picture in his room, at work upon the canvas with a small instrument shaped like a burin. His hands and knees were covered with crimson dust, and so was the carpet about his feet. He appeared to have forgotten the master of the Manor making his grim fight for a few more seconds of life, to have forgotten Munro keeping his watch alone, and Jessie who was awaiting him below, and the guests whom he had invited to sup with him that evening; but he had not forgotten. He was engaged in making his preparations.

A knock sounded upon his bedroom door as his labours were completed, and he immediately extinguished the candles, leaving the room lit by the little red lamp which he kept burning always above the picture, and rose to answer his housekeeper's summons.

"Mrs. Curtis and her daughter have just come, sir," said the woman wonderingly. "Do you want me to tell them anything, sir?"

"Let them stay in the kitchen until I send for them," the master answered. "I may not require them after all," he muttered to himself. Then he

asked aloud, and with evident anxiety: "Has Mr. Phair come in?"

"I haven't seen him, sir. Miss Jessie is waiting downstairs," the woman added. "This wind is a-getting worse and worse, sir."

Atcliff covered the canvas, washed his hands, and hurried down. The dining-room, where Jessie stood in ghost-like white arranging flowers, was acrid with smoke. The flames of the candles were swaying wildly. The girl was trying not to cough, and her eyes shone with a certain fear through the fog.

"This is awful," she said, when the recluse joined her, nervously collecting some chrysanthemum petals from the cloth. "Before you came I had a stupid fear that something horrible might be blown through the window. I am letting the fire go out, because the smoke cannot escape. Just now a poor bird fell down the chimney and was burnt. I hope it was dead before it reached the fire."

"I am afraid our guests will not come," said Atcliff.

"Here is someone!" Jessie cried.

It was Munro. Atcliff drew him into the room opposite, and demanded the news from the Manor.

"Mr. Phair's heart is seriously affected," Munro said. "He is not violent now; indeed, vitality has almost reached its lowest ebb. The doctor will remain, chiefly because it is impossible for him to return at present; but he can do nothing. He believes that syncope will intervene before morning, and he is powerless to prevent it. I must go back; the old man rests more quietly when he is holding my hand."

"Go and finish your work," Atcliff answered.

"Where is your hat?"

"Snatched away on the brow of the hill."

"I shall come down later; but I have first to entertain my guests," said Atcliff.

Percy reached the cottage shortly after Munro had left it. The rector felt unable to face the storm, and he did not like to leave his wife. The supper party became thus reduced to three, the two young people, and the master of the place. These three sat down at the cold table in the booming room, where the smoke still moved.

So strange was the meal that even Percy became awed. Jessie still knew nothing of her father's critical state; Percy was ignorant of the near presence of Mrs. and Miss Curtis; but it was impossible to be merry while that tumult was beating the walls.

"Mr. Atcliff," said Jessie, after several vain attempts at conversation had been followed by solemn silence, "when do you expect Walter to return?"

The man at the head of the table looked down and muttered: "Presently."

"I passed him on the road," said Percy. "I shouted to him, but he made no reply."

"Which way was he going?" Jessie demanded, turning upon the speaker, and adding: "Since Mr. Atcliff will tell me nothing."

"Towards the Manor."

The girl pushed back her chair.

"I will not stay here another minute!" she cried. "You are keeping something back from me. Why did Walter come in just now, speak to you, and then go out again?"

"Wait," said Atcliff, with unusual sternness, when

the girl made as though she would follow Munro. He added nervously, "I have something to say to both of you."

The priest felt their eyes fixed upon him as he watched the struggling candles. Soon he heard Jessie's voice :

"What have you to say?"

The recluse hesitated, his hands lifting and dropping. Finally he put out his arm with determination, snatched an orange from a dish, and rolled it across the table towards Percy. The young man checked the progress of the golden fruit, but as he did so, another came in his direction. This fell to the carpet, and rolled into a corner.

"Do you understand?" the grey man called grimly.

"Are you trying to make a fool of me?" exclaimed Percy hotly.

"I am giving you an opportunity to behave at last like an honourable man." Leaning across the table, the priest muttered for his guest alone: "Surely you know the story of the dying girl in Hamlet Street—"

"That is enough," broke in the rector's son, heating suddenly, and starting from the table. "I do not know how you came to hear that story, unless," he added with a touch of venom in his voice, "you are that Englishman who bought the girl those oranges."

"It was not I," said Atcliff.

"It was Walter Phair?"

"And now you understand," Atcliff murmured.

Jessie watched and listened, wide-eyed and very grave.

"Please remember that I do not understand," she

cried, turning from one to the other. "What is the meaning of all this? What has this fooling with oranges to do with either of us?"

Atcliff came round the table and pressed his hand upon her shoulder.

"It means, dear child," he said, in his softest voice, "that both you and Mr. Finch have made a great mistake. You, in believing that he is worthy to be your husband, and he, in trusting that his past would never be recalled."

"What do I care for your respectability?" cried Jessie, before the man opposite had time to give vent to his anger. "Percy, what is all this nonsense?"

"It is nonsense, Jessie," the rector's son answered fiercely. "Mr. Atcliff has asked me here to insult me at his own table—"

"No more!" broke in the master of the house, with unwonted heat. "Remember that I have Walter Phair as witness."

"Have you done anything against my brother?" said Jessie, in a miserable voice.

"I have never wronged your brother," answered Percy strongly, and on this occasion with truth. "I had never met him before I came here."

Atcliff passed to the wall and tugged the bell-rope. Not a word would he allow to be spoken until the housekeeper entered, and then the master said:

"Ask Mrs. Curtis to step in here, please."

The door closed, and went on rattling, and Percy turned a malevolent face towards his host.

"So you have been playing the eavesdropper," he said furiously. "Cannot you overlook a young man's indiscretions?"

"When he plays the part of fool, I can; but not when he plays the knave," answered the little man.

"Tell me what you mean," demanded Jessie angrily.

"I mean," said Atcliff, in a subdued voice, which yet rose above the wind and a hard knock upon the door, "that this man, who has made you an offer of marriage, has also been making love to Grace Curtis, my washerwoman's daughter, and Mrs. Curtis is at this moment at the door, ready to prove the truth of my accusation."

"And I may presume that the girl herself is in the kitchen?" went on Percy, with a defiant smile.

"You are correct," replied the grave host.

"In that case," said the rector's frail son, in his cool fashion, avoiding Jessie's flaming eyes, "I may as well go home."

He stepped quickly across the room, pushed aside the nervous village matron, and that instant a mighty torrent of wind streamed in and extinguished the candles.

Atcliff groped for matches, while Jessie leaned against the wall, glad of the roaring darkness to hide her anger and her shame at Percy's treachery. He had dared to give her words of affection after caressing Grace Curtis, the girl who carried away the weekly wash from the Manor every Monday morning on a wheelbarrow. He had gone from her presence to make love to such a girl as that. Now she began to understand, as she thought, Walter's strangeness, his disinclination to meet the rector's son, and his distaste at hearing even the sound of his name. Walter knew, and it was doubtless he who had induced the recluse to act.

An angry sob came out of the darkness, stifled, and blended with the appeal:

"Do not light the candles."

"I can not find any matches," said Atcliff helplessly. "And there is no life in the fire. I shall not require you now, Mrs. Curtis," he went on, raising his voice. "Go back to the kitchen, and tell my housekeeper to give you some supper. Do not attempt to go home until this wind drops."

As he spoke a gleam of light flashed into the room, fading as quickly as it entered.

"What was that?" cried Jessie, starting up.

"Nothing, child—nothing," said Atcliff soothingly.

"There is a light moving about the garden," she cried. "Mr. Atcliff, where is Walter?"

"Still thinking of him," he murmured. Then he came across, and sitting down beside her, grasped her hands. "My child," he said. "Walter is at the Manor. Mr. Phair is very ill."

"I knew it," she cried, tugging at her hands; but he held them fast. "He is dying, and I am estranged from him. Let me go, Mr. Atcliff. How dare you hold me! I must go to my father."

"Stay here. Your place is here—at my side," he said.

The cottage shook to its foundations, and the window, snatched bodily from its setting, frame and all, was hurled along the garden, crashing through the bushes, the glass shivering in its flight.

"My father!" screamed Jessie, shuddering with terror.

"He is here," muttered an almost inaudible voice; and before the girl could move again, the ghastly light flashed across the gaping darkness where the

window had been. There a lantern appeared. It rose and was pushed into the room, and behind it came the patriarchal face and shoulders of old Isaac the gipsy.

"Master!" he shouted out of the crashing tumult. "Man and boy I have walked this land, but I have never lived in a wilder night. The old elm at the top of the hill has been blown across the road."

Atcliff blundered forward towards the light.

"Why have you come at such a time?" he cried.

"To help you, master. Have you forgotten how I was compelled to warn you against this wind? A man with a wooden leg is coming up the hill."

CHAPTER IV

THE SEANCE

"Stand still, fond fettered wretch ! while Memory's art
Parades the Past before thy face, and lures
Thy spirit to her passionate portraitures."

"HAVE no fear," continued the self-restrained nomad, his dark beard streaming in the wind. "I will follow your enemy, and when he comes upon you, I will be at your side. He climbs the hill slowly. His wooden stump slips upon the stones."

Reaching his arm inside, Isaac placed his horn lantern on the carpet, and disappeared instantly, as though the wind had carried him away.

Jessie held her hands to her eyes. For the first time in her life she dreaded the night, because Nature and mystery had become blended in that tumultuous darkness, and wan figures, uncredited by science, were abroad, invested with vigorous life. There were no stars ; there was no light. The lower order of spirits held high revelry above the Downs. She knew that she dared not leave the house alone.

She felt Atcliff's breath upon her ear. She recognised it, because it was gentler and warmer than the wind ; and she heard his voice :

"I have told you that I have a story for your ears. You must hear it now, because presently I must go

out to receive sentence, and God alone knows whether I shall return."

"Let me understand," she cried, shivering.

"Wait here for one moment. Do not be afraid."

"Do not leave me," Jessie entreated. "Take me out of this place," she cried wildly. "Take me to my father. He must forgive me before he dies."

"Bear with me," said Atcliff deeply. "You must listen to my history first, and afterwards you shall go to the Manor if you will."

He left her in the room which was open to the revelry of the unseen world. The dim lantern shed an unearthly light over the white table, the disordered glass, the scattered flowers, and the oranges rolling on the carpet. Leaves from the garden flickered against her cold cheek. Beetles were driven in like bullets, and clung desperately to her dress. Pictures were swinging from their nails, and curtains strained from the cornice poles, beating like flags.

Yet Atcliff was scarcely gone a minute. He stumbled back, with a picture beneath his arm. He set it in front of Jessie, and raising the lantern, flashed the light across the canvas, bringing it nearer and nearer to her eyes, until the girl uttered a stifled cry, and caught the frame suddenly in two shuddering hands.

"Explain!" she could only cry. "Explain!"

"You recognise that?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"You shall understand me," the recluse went on.

"Now you shall listen to that which will make you either cling to me or flee from me."

"Tell me who I am," she panted.

"Hear me first. Listen, girl. Listen to the strangest and saddest history that has ever fallen from a man's lips."

Kneeling then at her side, like a penitent, Atcliff seized the girl's trembling hands and pressed them between his cold palms; and lifting his pale face began in a tremulous whisper to reveal the occult history of his soul.

"Do not turn from me in unbelief when I say that this present existence is my second coming into flesh. While I now speak I have the terrible memory of that past life, and can perceive my villainess during a state when my mind refused to open to the light, and my undeveloped spirit clung to the things of darkness. God, who would not have me wrecked, alone saw some little latent good in the soul which he had made, and in great mercy sent out that soul again to win redemption. In this life I have in part succeeded—succeeded, thank God through the power, the love, and the fragrant life of the sweetest woman who ever walked in flesh upon this earth."

"What are you telling me?" his listener shivered.

"I am telling you what little I know of the history of my soul," Atcliff answered, "and thus discharging a sacred duty which I owe you. Call my memories of the past a dream if you will, and say that it is imagination which has touched me; but listen, for nothing but good can come to you from my narrative."

Drawing yet nearer, Atcliff bent his grey head and his voice became a penetrating whisper, which rose above the noises of the wind.

"In the former state I see myself merely as

young man, the eldest son of a powerful official, who had but one child beside myself, also a boy, but some years my junior. I remember a great and ancient mansion set in the midst of a garden where ivy flourished in abundance. I have but to close my eyes to see again distinctly those black waves of ivy billowing over white crumbling walls. I also remember a stone cottage, at the edge of a thicket, beside large, gilded gates, and at a low window an old man in a red cap, reading in the sunlight from a parchment folio, and taking snuff perpetually. This man's duty, I imagine, was to open and close the great gates; but how he came by his education I have often wondered. At night a candle burnt before his window, and when my brother and I were children, we would sometimes escape from the house after dusk to capture the moths which fluttered up and down the luminous panes. But these are trivial matters. I pass to the life of the heir to that estate, the man whose name I do not know, but whose face I often see—a handsome face, they called it, but weak, and slightly feminine in appearance, thin and clear-skinned, with two uneasy blue eyes beneath a mass of fair hair. The brother's face I have never been able to recall.

“It was passion I dishonoured by the name of love, which made my brother and myself enemies for life. What a commonplace story I relate to you, child—a story as old as man himself; but it is its age which invests it with its depth of tragedy, for by it you may learn that human nature cannot change. I can recall neither name nor face, but sometimes, while I have walked upon these Downs, I have seen in dim outline her who innocently occasioned the enmity

between my brother and myself. I know she was good, and he loved her with the love which endures and she reciprocated, and I know also that I came between them and sought to dazzle her with talk of my wealth; and when I failed, my evil nature rose to the surface, and on the very evening of our father's death I dropped the smiling mask, and felled my brother to the ground beneath one of the walls where the thick ivy waved in the dusk, and ordered him out from the house and property, which were then all mine. We never met again, but for the remainder of my life I did him what injury might, with the aid of unscrupulous agents employed for that sole purpose. So successfully was my evil work accomplished that he was hounded into poverty, and the heart of his wife was broken and she died with her infant son.

"I cannot tell you what was my position in the life of sin, but it must have been one of enormous power, because my influence was almost supreme and I can see men and women bowing before me in fear and hatred, begging favours for themselves and their friends. Another scene now arises. The condition is that of walking through some ruined cloister. A beautiful woman is at my side, and figures of friends and attendants appear through distant arches, or pass beside the shattered columns. The sun falls hotly upon the ruins where jewelled lizards dart to and fro, and I discern an odour of wild thyme mingled with the jasmine which hangs from my companion's hand. I see her white robe sweeping the herbage which springs from the site of a broken altar. Beyond flashes a ribbon of water where the gilded barges that have brought us to

that unknown spot chafe one against the other, while swallows dart and dip around. I feel for the first time the stirring within me of higher longings. For the sake of my beautiful companion I determine to lead a new life. Beside the broken altar I seize her unwilling hand, and declare my unworthy love, and demand in confidence my answer—and soon her startled and emphatic negative rings boldly upon my astounded ears. And in due course I see this true woman also sinking beneath my vengeance.

“From that time on I feel that I became like the tiger which has tasted human flesh. No wickedness was too great for me. Yet a small sentient voice suggested sometimes that I was not irremediably bad. I think that I cared for flowers and animals—I know I cruelly punished any men who dared to ill-treat the latter. I think, also, I was in a selfish manner charitable, for the same strange memory suggests that the widow and orphan never appealed to me in vain. These were small virtues to place against a mass of moral corruption, yet in the sight of God they must have been sufficient to justify my reprieve.

“Illness came, as a result of my abandoned living, and for many days I groaned upon a bed of pain. It was wild wintry weather, and as I sank I could hear the wind, as we hear it now, beating through the trees. After a time these sounds died away, and small voices filled my ears. Sparks of intense brilliancy darted before my closed eyes. All sense of pain departed, and I felt a strange new strength, which compelled me to struggle as though I were striving to lift some enormous weight. A recoil came with such suddenness that I appeared to be flung violently aside. I found myself standing erect,

shivering with cold, terribly afraid, and weak as a new-born infant; and two strange figures were supporting me, one on either side, while I looked down upon the tumbled bed and my body white with death."

Cold and shuddering, the girl whispered: "Surely this is nothing more than the strangest of dreams."

"With my departure from that bedside," Atcliff continued, with a slight gesture to acknowledge the interruption, "hurried into the night by the guardian who had been appointed to receive my spirit and initiate it into the mysteries of its new state, sentient ends. Yet I know there was no place for me in the second sphere. It is the duty, as it is the happiness of spirits to watch over and help their lovers in the flesh. I had none to assist, and having no duties I knew consequently no happiness. Even had there been any to care for me, and to respond to my ministrations in the lower world, it is doubtful whether I could have made my assistance felt because my spirit was weak and gross after its long sojourn of wickedness.

"Such is what I can, with absolute certainty, say of the little mystery we call death. The crossing over is, I do assure you, far less to be feared than any journey into a far country. I have still much to say for your ear. Listen while I unfold to you the record of my punishment. Can you hear me? The fury of the wind is lessening, I think."

"I can hear," she whispered. "But finish as quickly as you can, for I am frightened."

"In what place I was born the second time I cannot say, nor do I know the name of my parents. Atcliff went on, shifting his slight figure by the light

of the lantern. "When I was about four years old, I remember myself an inmate of a small country house as the adopted son of a childless couple named Atcliff. Neither of my guardians would ever enlighten me as to my origin, and this has led me to imagine that possibly I may not have been of gentle birth, and to believe that Mrs. Atcliff may have insisted upon adopting me—against the wishes of her husband I am sure—merely because I happened to be well-endowed by Nature. She was, as regards myself, well intentioned, but having no knowledge of a child's nature, her methods were harsh, and indeed almost cruel. Others called her ill-tempered, bigoted, and uncharitable, epithets which I consider might have been more suitably applied to her husband, whom she worshipped with an altogether inconceivable devotion, for I still maintain, while freely forgiving him, that a more unlovable man never lived. He regarded all enjoyments as sinful. I never heard him laugh, and any slight attempt at mirth on my part he would suppress with a positive snarl of anger. He hated me, and found a saturnine pleasure in crushing my energies, and making my young life empty. He allowed me no pleasures, refused me playmates, denied me even the companionship of animals, and imposed upon me silence both in house and garden. Once, while standing in the hall, waiting for the rain to stop before resuming my aimless wanderings, he came up to me suddenly, and gave me a blow upon the ear, which left me dazed, and permanently injured my hearing. There was no apparent cause for this act of cruelty; but later I understood that I had then been made to suffer for that heavy, cowardly blow I had

inflicted upon my weaker brother during my former state. This is not the time to dilate upon my early years. Let it suffice to say that a more unhappy childhood could not possibly have been spent.

"At school, ill-fortune pursued me. My bringing-up had made me different from my companions, and consequently they shunned me. The masters also disliked me, and almost without exception condemned me as a bad character before giving me a trial. It was not long before, in sheer defiance, I did very much to live up to my reputation. I became idler, liar, and cheat; I disregarded the rules of the school, and set authority at defiance. Often expulsion appeared to be inevitable, but the warden as frequently shrank from resorting to an extreme course. But when I reached my eighteenth year, and it was notorious that I exerted a harmful influence upon the juniors, the morale of the school had to be considered, and I was required to leave the establishment, branded with disgrace. Reaching the house which I had been accustomed to call home, I was sincerely shocked to hear that I had arrived a few hours too late to receive the last words of her who, whatever may have been her faults in the eyes of others, had been well-intentioned to me.

"And the next day I was sent out into the world," Atcliff continued, in a rising voice. "I was summoned after breakfast to the study, where the grim man, who had done so much to harm my character, stood beside a round table. He did not even glance at me, but extending his hand towards a small heap of paper on the table, remarked briefly, 'Take that, and go.' Fifty pounds in bank-notes lay in my hand, when I asked him wonderingly, 'Where?' Then he turned

on me with the old familiar snarl, and said, 'Out. And never let me see your sneaking face again.' I departed from him without a word. Long afterwards I was to recall how in like manner I had driven out my brother, and to see in my own expulsion a just and fitting punishment.

"I went to America, and quickly squandered my tiny capital. Thrown upon my own resources, I went to work upon a farm, and after two years of that life became a trapper. Then came a period of gold-digging, which ended in my drifting back to city life to lose what money I had made in the haunts of ne'er-do-wells. An opportunity for regaining respectability opened before me when I obtained a position in an office of good standing, but at the end of a few weeks I was dismissed for drunkenness. After that, I joined myself to a gang of vagabonds, each one as unscrupulous as myself, and we went out together to the provinces, and for a time maintained a precarious existence by conducting a private still, until the authorities made a raid upon us, capturing our appliances and shooting two of my accomplices who offered armed resistance. I escaped to a city, and begged at the corners of the streets, until the police arrested me for a vagabond, and I was sentenced to prison and the stone pile. When restored to freedom, I joined a travelling circus as stableman, and after many more vicissitudes, found myself upon the stage. Such was my early manhood.

"My sensitive nervous temperament suited me for the actor's career, and I rose in the profession despite myself. In my twenty-fifth year I was leading player to a well-known American tragedian, and earning a

large salary. But this period of prosperity was short. I had never abandoned my drunken habits, and one evening fainted in the course of the play and was carried off the stage, never to return to it. When the doctor who examined me expressed his belief that I had not long to live, I gathered together what remained to me, cancelled my agreements, and came to live again in my native land.

"See the failure of my early life, and shrink from me when I say that I was to fathom yet lower depths. In England I conducted an existence which was absolutely in defiance to all goodness, snatching a living meantime, once as a journalist, again as bookmaker's clerk upon the race-courses, another time as a purveyor of cheap food, spending freely one week, starving the next. For the greater part of that dark time I lodged in a large house in central London, occupied by other men, who, like myself, were cursed by the sin of drunkenness. I, the youngest, watched my associates, the majority of whom were of gentle birth, passing out singly, one to prison, another to the madhouse, a third to the grave. Their fate did not disturb me. Their respective endings seemed to me natural. I followed their guidance, until, for the second time, my body broke down, and my mind became temporarily deranged through the influence of alcohol."

The narrator paused and moistened his dry lips. Jessie sat motionless, her hands clasped, staring into the picture by the feeble light, and shrinking whenever a blast from the night smote her. With growing agitation, the priest continued his bitter confession :

"During convalescence I was reading a newspaper

when my eye became attracted by an announcement which contained my name. This notice was of the usual kind: John Atcliff would hear of something to his advantage by applying to a certain solicitor in Lincoln's Inn. Though I was scarcely strong enough to stand without assistance, I made my way to the address given that afternoon, and learnt that I was entitled to a yearly income of one hundred and fifty pounds under the will of Caroline Atcliff, made many years before. James Atcliff had recently suffered transition. May God rest him! He had been withholding this money from me all those years.

"The doctor who attended me during my illness had impressed upon me the necessity of leaving London for a change of air. Although I had no love for the country, I acted upon this advice. I advertised for a lodging in some healthy locality, and as a result of that advertisement, found myself, a week later, living as a gentleman of leisure in the town of Highford."

The speaker's breathing became difficult. Jessie turned her white face towards him, and her tongue whispered amazedly:

"Highford!"

A stifled sob broke from her companion. He straightened himself, pressed his thin hands madly to his eyes, and resumed, in a failing voice:

"At the age of thirty, the unseen guided me into this neighbourhood, where my shapeless substance was to be moulded into the form of one of God's creatures. I hated the dull little town during those first months. I remained merely because I lacked the energy to go. My acquaintances were the rector, a genial, broad-minded man, and a family living in the

village of Highford Junction, consisting of a sculptor, his wife who was a painter, and their three young children. These people were good enough to tolerate me. I was intolerably cynical, opinionative, and supercilious, finding fault everywhere, and praising no one. A kind word was never upon my tongue.

"My health continuing very indifferent, I went for a sea voyage, returning to my former lodgings after four months' absence. The Prescotts, my friends at Highford Junction, were astonished at my appearance, so greatly had my health benefited; but I was inwardly still the same hard-hearted, selfish, fault-finding man. Little did I dream that the time of my redemption was drawing near, and the hour when God was to lay his hand heavily upon me and say: 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.'"

For some time Atcliff had been standing against the table; but at this point of his narrative he knelt again, and his shoulders began to rise and fall as he lowered his head and clasped his hands in the attitude of prayer.

"Along the south road leading from Highford were then perhaps half-a-dozen houses, standing in their own grounds," he went on reverently. "The last but one on the western side as you leave the town has been entirely rebuilt during the last ten years. At that time it was a low, white house, partly covered with creepers, and fronted by a high hedge of evergreen, which survives in very much the same state to this day. I had passed this house a hundred times, with no more than a careless glance, before one December day, when a note came from Mrs. Prescott

asking me to call that afternoon, as she wished me to meet her friend, Miss Bryant. I read the invitation carelessly, and determined to accept, simply because I had nothing better to do.

"I set out that short winter's afternoon from my lonely room, and walked along the bending road which led past the little white house behind the ever-green hedge. Beyond, as you may remember, a few fir trees form a clump where the roads bifurcate, and a sign-post indicates which way to take for Highford Junction. This road is straight and level all the way to the village, and at the time at which I am speaking, ran between marsh-meadows, its monotony broken in one part by a drift-way, and in another by a bridge across a brook. I thought it that day the dullest road I had ever traversed . . . and it was to become . . . my Via Sacra . . . my Via Dolorosa . . ."

"Don't tell me," cried Jessie pitifully. "Don't go on, if it hurts you so."

"What is a little mental suffering to one who has looked upon the world through a mist of tears for twenty-six years?" he replied; but his slight figure, as he spoke, was convulsed by a storm which had nothing in common with that which raged around. "This manner is only bodily weakness, for I am growing old, and my punishment has been almost too great to be borne. But strength comes with the knowledge that every day I am nearer that hour when I may cast aside this worn grey body and ascend; and I shall not be alone—not alone on that day when the vase of life shall shatter, for I believe that a sweet guardian shall be waiting in the light, ready to receive my soul."

Atcliff knelt upright, swaying slightly, and by the

crepuscular gleams the watcher perceived a wan smile upon his mouth, lying there softly, like a spirit's kiss. Then he spoke again out of the wind :

"I reached The Limes, the residence of my friends, a large, old-fashioned cottage long ago destroyed, as darkness fell. I entered the drawing-room, and my hostess rose to welcome me, then turned to present me to her friend. And then I saw in a low chair near the fire a young woman, unmistakably my senior, quietly but prettily dressed, sitting with her back toward the darkening window, and watching me with soft, clairvoyant eyes. I glanced at her quickly, determined that she was neither interesting nor attractive, and taking a seat beside my hostess, listened to their conversation in my moody fashion, giving occasionally utterance to one of my supercilious statements. But presently I noticed that, instead of treating my remarks with the contempt they merited, Miss Bryant was laughing at them, and somehow her laughter did not stir in me the slightest feeling of annoyance.

"When she rose to go, etiquette demanded that I should offer to be her escort, the road being dark and lonely. She thanked me brightly, and we left the cottage together and walked side by side for the first time through the moist night towards the shimmer of light above the trees which marked the site of Highford.

"She stopped at a gate in the evergreen hedge in front of the white house. 'This is my home,' she said, holding out her hand. 'Good-night.' She left me with her bright smile. I heard the gate swing back and the knocker rap upon the door as I went

on my lonely way, startled with the knowledge that during the past half-hour this almost total stranger had drawn from me much of the history of my misspent life.

"Close upon six months passed before I saw Miss Bryant again," the voice resumed, after another distressing pause. "She was away during the remainder of the winter, and long before the snow-drops blossomed the fascination of that meeting had lost its charm. At the new year I returned to my former haunts and joined my old associates, and when they pressed me to remain and die their death, I was willing enough to do so. With this object in view, I came back to Highford and packed my belongings; but before going back to the life of vice, I felt it my duty to call upon the Prescotts and bid them farewell.

"The sculptor was working in his studio, but I found his wife, paint-brush in hand, making fantastic designs to please her children. She dismissed them when I joined her, and at once exclaimed: 'Miss Bryant is back!'

"I replied that I was glad she had her friend again, and went on to inform her of the purpose of my visit. She was surprised, and, I think, a little distressed, but went on to chat lightly upon various subjects before asking me when I intended to leave the neighbourhood. I replied, 'To-morrow.' Then she said quickly, 'You must grant me a favour. Postpone your departure till the day after, and come to a farewell tea to-morrow.' She pressed me until I consented. The following afternoon I walked along that straight, dull road, and in the drawing-room of The Limes found Miss Bryant, wearing that same

bright smile upon her unaffected face, sitting in the chair against the window where I had seen her upon the former occasion.

"I remained at the cottage until she rose to go, and walked home with her again through the enchanted evening, though, alas, I did not then know that it was enchanted. The next morning I had a note inviting me to call at the little white house, as Mrs. Bryant would be pleased to make my acquaintance. Again I postponed my departure that I might make this visit upon the widow and her daughter; and the following evening, when I came back from the pure and peaceful atmosphere of that sweet old garden, I unpacked my belongings, re-engaged my rooms, and there and then cut away the ties which connected me with the associates of my sins.

"There is not the time now to tell you in detail how the work of my redemption was continued. Let me only say that for a period of eighteen months that sweet influence guided my life, and led me on toward higher things. I had no knowledge that I had changed, and was changing. I only knew that I had abandoned the old vices, but thought it was because they had lost their power of pleasing. I was surprised when I found myself growing popular, when I overheard obviously sincere expressions of regard concerning myself. I did not even know that I was straining every nerve to live up to that state of life which *my* guide was silently pointing out to me. There was *absolutely nothing* of the preacher about her. She was *always* laughing, always happy, carrying light and sunshine with her as she went from one friend to another, dispelling

their despondency by her sympathy and brightness, her beautiful character scenting her presence with its fragrance. Not once did she mention to me the subject of religion. Never did she reprove me for my selfishness. But now I see how surely she was drawing me away from that which was lowering, and, though without being aware of it herself, holding up, in sharp contrast to my own life, the beauty and the faithfulness and the purity of her own. During those eighteen months my spirit was developing at last and rising towards the light.

"I must hasten, for time presses. The eighteenth month of my companionship with this saint arrived, and found me loving her as I believe few women have ever been loved upon this lower sphere. And she loved me. . . . Merciful God, how my heart beats still in uttering those words! She loved me. She, the immaculate, loved the sin-stained soul which she had called to light within me."

An abrupt calm came as the narrator cried these words. In the stead of the wild wind, his stertorous breathing filled the room. Jessie looked up, dashing the sympathetic tears from her eyelids, and by a ray of light which escaped from a perforation in the lantern, saw his face, white and withered, and wet with perspiration, and quivering in agony. She tried to speak, and as the effort failed in her, a weird moan of returning wind rose in the garden, and with it came the moaning of the voice :

"It was the end of the year. The valley in which Highford lies was deep in mud and overhung with fog, and the oppressive silence of the heart of winter was over all, and the owls were hooting in the elms. . . . It was Thursday afternoon. . . . I came to the

little white house. . . . There were other visitors present, and Mrs. Prescott was one. . . . My sweet saint flushed slightly as she rose to greet me . . . this colour was succeeded by a pallor, which made her appear grey and worn. A chill struck through me, but I was reassured by her manner. She talked with such apparent ease, laughed with all her customary brightness . . . and I left the house happy ; but, as I walked home, a vague shadow was over me, and the shrieking of the owls seemed to be charged with augury.

"The next afternoon we were together in the little drawing-room of The Limes. I was always looking at her, and that cold thrill of fear visited me again when I saw she was wearing a veil so as to cover her eyes. I had never known her to wear a veil before. I fancied she was listening to all I had to say with a painful eagerness that was new to her. Suddenly, in the midst of a brisk conversation which was taking place between the sculptor and a friend who was staying in the house, she turned towards me and whispered, 'I am leaving early this evening. Will you walk home with me?' As she spoke she lifted her veil and showed me her eyes. She was not pretty in the accepted sense of the word, and then her face was grey and worn . . . but it appeared to me beautiful beyond words. And then I knew why she wore that veil. Her eyes, her sweet grey eyes, were changed. They were dark, and large, and lustrous, full of light, and woe, and hope, and love. Those two lovely spiritual eyes have never left me since. From them proceeds the light which has led me on through this dark night on earth.

"Silently I rose, and we exchanged the warm

cottage for the muddy night. She talked quickly, eagerly, and laughed in her old sweet way, and made me tell her again all the incidents of my early life; and while we walked the bells of Highford rang in the distance to herald the coming of Christmas. Child, I could lead you now along that enchanted road, and repeat to you what I said to her as we crossed the brook, as we passed the drift-way and each field-gate, and could point out to you each sacred spot where she looked up to me, and where she spoke softly, and where she laughed happily, and where once she sighed. And throughout that walk I longed that the road might never end. When in the dim distance I made out the white sign-post beneath the dark clump of firs, I slackened speed, because I could not help myself, and I think she understood what was to be, for it was then she sighed. And my soul was saying, 'You must not let her go.'

"The road ended. We turned, and stopped, and stood beside the gate, talking on trivial matters, the darkness around us. It seemed to me that she and I were alone in a sleeping world, and all went away from me except her and my adoration, and I saw only the light in her eyes, and the fragrant soul under them, and the pure history written upon them. Scarcely knowing what I did, I raised her gloved hand and pressed it to my lips. And then she laughed no more. Her hand was upon the gate. Her face was hidden. Once more she spoke. Her word of parting before that night had been, 'Good-bye,' or 'Good-night.' Then it was, 'Until we meet again.' I tried to speak. My tongue was tied. Already the mist of tears had formed. I heard the swing of the gate, the rap of the knocker—and the owls hooting in the elms.

"Child, are you crying? Do not cry for me, because my time is short, and there is much happiness awaiting me beyond. Shed your tears for those who pass over friendless to the dark; and now lift up your soul and ascend with me, and look out into the furthest distance, and you shall see upon each side, along all the way, to where even spiritual vision fails amid space, nothing but the intensity and power of love. Then see how calm I am."

He put out his hand and soothed her with the gesture; and so continued:

"For an hour I watched the house, waiting in vain for a light to flush her window, before a figure hurried to the gate and passed out. It was a servant, and stopping her, I asked, with what composure I could muster, whether anything was wrong. Her answer came quickly, 'Miss Bryant fainted when she came in, and we cannot bring her round. I am going for the doctor.' Steadying myself, I told her to return, and then ran like a madman down the road towards the doctor's house.

"Until midnight I stood beneath the hedge of evergreen, watching with half-blind eyes the cold, cruel light pouring from her bedroom window. Once I thought I heard her groan, and I flung myself against the hedge and bit the iron rails. The rain lashed and the wind buffeted me. And all the time that pitiless light streamed in a wide shaft from her window, and grim shadows flickered to and fro, until at last I lost my sanity and turned and ran, like a malefactor fleeing from justice—ran along that road I had traversed with her a few hours earlier, through the silent village beyond, and up into the hills, across the sombre Downs, and through

the dripping woods, until the wintry dawn lighted the leaden sky. And then I crawled, half-fainting, towards home.

"The farm-labourers must have been astir, but I saw no one, and for a long time heard nothing; but as I halted along the road of many memories at no great distance from the clump of firs, it seemed to me that the cracked jangling of a bell had touched my ears. I knew there was a little church hard by; I had often seen its squat, insignificant tower from the road, and had heard the summons of its single bell—just such a jangling noise as that. But its clamour then, I said, had been established only in my fancy. During that night I had been haunted by the tolling of bells and the moaning of dirges. Yet I listened, beside myself, and when no sound came, and breath returned, I plunged on through the light, which in spite of ever-present hope was darkness to me, and straightway the sound came again unmistakably, shrill, jangling, shaking the air unutterably, from beyond the elms ahead, where the owls had hooted in the night. It was the tolling of the bell in that squat, mossy tower.

"Each stroke of the iron clapper descended, as it were, upon my heart, stunning and benumbing me, as I stood and struggled, supported by the hedge which drove its thorns into my side, and wildly reasoned. It was some old man who had passed away, some veteran full of years, or some withered crone, past work and glad to go, or perhaps some infant, who had opened its eyes to close them hurriedly and escape. Upon this madness followed an interval of trance. During those minutes I must have moved, I must even have run, but I have no memory of ever

stirring from that dripping hedge. I awoke when I stopped by instinct before the white house. I lifted my eyes to her window, I put out my hand to the gate, stumbled, and fell against it; and there the passing bell struck me, first on my body, then on my mind, then on my soul, until I reeled and was stunned. And presently I walked away, talking and laughing; and a man came out of the darkness, and took me by the arm, and led me home. And then shadow settled into night, consciousness went out, and God spared me the passing of the hearse, and the scattering of the flowers, and the closing of the grave upon the body of His saint."

The speaker's grey head bent. He gasped, and strained the moisture from his brow.

CHAPTER V

THE SEANCE—*continued*

“Lo! Love yet bids thy lady greet thee once ;—
Yea, twice—whereby thy life is still the sun’s ;
And thrice—whereby the shadow of death is dead.”

“WHEN I stood up again,” went on the peaceful voice, “all strength and manhood were cut out of me, and the light of life was gone. The time of that half awakening, when dazed and dumb I stumbled into the air, which choked me like a poisonous element, was an atonement surely for a life of sin. Oh, my child, turn always a deaf ear to the fantastic tales of future purgatory. Here is hell—here, upon this world of pain. We do not grieve and pass on to grief. All that we suffer, we suffer here, and beyond there is rest for those who have led the spiritual life. Those who have retarded their upward progress so greatly as to be unfitted for that rest are punished indeed, and punished bitterly, by being sent again into this world to work out their salvation.

“Hear my history out. Under cover of night I fled from Highford, and escaped with my grief to Italy and the Alps. In a mountain village, far from the beaten track, I immured myself amid the wild solitude of the snows.

“There came a clear day in February. The sun

shone brightly, and the sky was a cloudless blue when I left the village of Madonna, and ascending the valley-road for some three miles, struck out upon a path beaten in the snow which led upward between two ice-clad peaks. I saw no human being upon that walk, no animal, not even a bird; nor did I feel any influence stirring in me from the world we long for. I was alone amid evidences of dim human faith and memorials to the dead; I passed on the right side of the path a cappella, wherein a bleeding Christ was represented, and on the left another, where I saw portrayed a Madonna clasping the hilt of a sword, the blade of which pierced her heart. I passed a black cross nailed to the rock, announcing the date of some peasant's decease. A turn of the path brought me before a terrible ossario, wherein a life-sized Man of Sorrows hung to a cross, amid tier upon tier of bones and skulls, the last sad material relics of former generations of mountain folk. Above I saw a village upon a platform of rock, overshadowed by chestnut trees. No human being showed, and not a dog barked as I climbed towards this village, which was a mere collection of stone cottages, with a church in the background, the whole constricted within a curiously inadequate area. The streets were dark passages, not more than a yard in width, and a few paces in length, winding beneath the gloom of the houses. I passed into one of these passages, and perceiving the sign 'Vendita di vino,' advanced up some broken steps into a stifling interior, where an aged woman, so shapeless as hardly to suggest humanity, served me with a bottle of sour Muscato.

"I have, in relating these apparently trivial details,

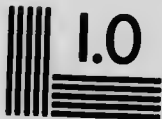
the object of setting before you the composed state of my mind before I made the ascent of the mountain of Avesca, the peak of which shadowed the village upon the ledge. As I sat in the rudely-constructed room, blackened with wood-smoke and heavy with the odour of anise-seed, I little imagined that the time had come for me to learn, that my soul, through the softening influence of agony and the guiding power of her whom I adore, was about to be uplifted towards the everlasting light. Alone I rested in that most miserable of osterie, for the woman had left me. A single window opposite gave light to the room, the upper part stuffed with hay, the lower filled with cracked and dirty glass. Through one of these panes I secured a glimpse of the mountain-side, glazed with a blue wave of ice, and while I was looking upon this ice, it seemed to me that a hand brushed lightly across my hair, sending a wild thrill throughout my body, and in a moment the burden of grief fell from me, and happiness returned, followed by a wave of strength. Starting up, I ran to the mountain and climbed at a mad speed, until breath failed, and I found myself upon a lip of rock, stiff with icicles, gazing down along the valley, four thousand feet below.

"The sunlight and the wind met upon the mountain-side and filled the prospect with gleaming points of frost," Atcliff continued, after a tumultuous outburst had passed the trembling cottage. "My solitude remained unbroken. Below I saw the plumed firs above the naked chestnuts, and between a glacier stained green with deposits of copper. A slight avalanche of snow descended with a whispering sound, and a few goats galloped out of the dusty



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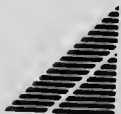
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cloud surrounding it. Watching, listening, wrapped in amazement, I stood alone, and a faintness came over me, and I entered into a trance until the hand gently stirred my hair again. When I came to myself, understanding was mine, and faith, and knowledge of what had been and must be. For the first time in my long, long life I became a man made in the image of God.

"Child, there was nothing marvellous in this manifestation. Those whom we foolishly call dead are more alive than we; they are nearer to us than ever they were in this life; their love is greater, because it is the love of soul released from the gross envelope of the body; they are with us continually, calling, guiding, sending messages along the sensitive currents of air; and those of us who can turn our thoughts from the world, and lift up our hearts, and follow the life of unselfishness, shall distinguish in time those messages, and feel that guidance, and interpret the signs of our lovers in the soul.

"Upon Mount Avesca the perfectly developed spirit of her whom I adore came and showed me all that had been. Very faintly I perceived that this life had occurred before, that I had failed already in the world. Sharply came the memory of my mis-spent second life, and the knowledge that I had drawn all my awful punishment upon myself. . . . Child, she had to die. . . . There was no other way by which I might be saved.

"Through love alone comes salvation. And it is death in love that opens the mind to truth. Not the life, but the death of Christ turns hearts towards that great spirit. Had my beloved lived on here, not even she could have lifted me entirely out of the

groove of my sinful life; and thus, while she would have continued to advance, I should have still hung back, and been for the second time unfitted to reach the light. In order that I might attain to life she was taken away."

Atcliff's voice rang out clearly in a note of thankfulness. The tempest that had filled his heart went away, even as the wind failed, and the wild will, which had for the time continued to rebel against the yet living agony succumbed, and the body ceased to shiver and endured. Jessie looked up with tear-dimmed eyes, and caught a look of rapture upon the strained, white face.

"'Except a man be born again he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,'" he quoted, with uplifted head. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but cannot tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the spirit.' Christ is represented in this world to-day by those into whom God has breathed His spirit. The sweet saint whose earthly body has perished still loves the failure who stands before you, not with that weak, suffering body, but with her strong developed soul. Is not this the Christ relationship working on?"

"I came down from Mount Avesca, leaving my old self upon its snows. At the end of three days I was again in London, and on the evening of the fourth entered the valley in which Highford lies. An hour later I stood beside the grave. A high wind surged restlessly through the firs, and the darkness was so deep that I could scarcely distinguish the outlines of the mound. As I stood there, a cone struck my shoulder, and I started round, in dim

human fear of the unknown, and stared into the night. Nothing met my gaze, except some half-seen shapes of white memorials; but, as I turned again to face the hallowed spot, it seemed to me that a wind-blown leaf had fluttered swiftly upon the mound. I bent and saw a bird, which twittered feebly before spreading its wings and seeking shelter in the tree above, approaching me so closely that in spite of the darkness I was able to discover that the little messenger was a robin.

"The next morning I was early beside the grave with a few late snow-drops in my hand. A cold rain was beating, and the heavy clouds pressed low. Standing at the foot of the mound, I permitted memory to parade the past before my mind; and as I so remained, shivering with grief, the robin fluttered from the tree and welcomed me again. When, upon reaching my hand down towards the bird, it escaped from me, with a palpable effort, I accepted the belief which was soon to become absolute, that the bird was acting under the influence of spiritual control. You will perceive how well-founded was this belief when I tell you that every morning I visited the grave at the same time, and for a space of three weeks the robin never failed. After that period I saw the bird no more.

"The time of agony passed, leaving me with a new mind," the narrator went on. "The vices which had once been a part of my nature tempted me no longer. In their stead came an affection for all living things, for the fellow-beings whom I had hitherto hated or despised, for the animals who laboured so readily on our behalf, for the meanest wayside flower. And as the months went on,

obtained a deeper insight into all mysteries ; and as the soul grew within me, spiritual manifestation became more clear, and my evil life in the long gone past assumed more definite outlines.

" But the lower nature was not altogether subdued. Materialism had yet to be conquered. I was only thirty-three, and when time and faith began to heal my wounds, the former active spirit asserted itself, and called me out to a change of scene. I now perceive that my spiritual guide would have had me remain in Highford, to serve my friends and help those who were in trouble ; but I could not then discern the warning, because I had allowed the body to obtain some semblance of its former mastery. I longed to taste again of the wild free life beneath the stars, and when this craving became intolerable, I yielded to it, made the crossing of the ocean, and travelled night and day until I stood again upon the plains. There I met Robert Phair, and he and I became partners."

Jessie broke her long silence with the faint cry :
" My father ! "

" He is not your father," came the answer.

She shivered, and was silent.

" He and I came together in a prairie town, which was enjoying a rapid growth owing to a series of successful harvests," Atcliff continued. " Phair was married to a woman of Indian extraction, and had by her two children, Walter and Jessie, the latter a baby when I made his acquaintance."

" My name ! " exclaimed the girl. " What is it ? "

" Marguerite. But it was I who gave it you."

" My birth-name ? " she demanded.

" I do not know—unless it be mine."

She began to laugh, yet more with a sense of relief than any bitterness.

"I am a nobody," she cried.

"Not so," he replied strongly, as though her statement had hurt him. "You are a gift from the unseen world."

She ceased to laugh, and gazed at him in wonderment.

"Listen," the priest went on; "for now I reach your birth into my life. All that winter I remained in the new town, living by myself in a small cabin at the extreme limit of the one long street. I was inexpressibly lonely, as I refused to join Phair and his associates in the places of drinking and gambling. The greater part of my time was occupied in study, which was chiefly of an esoteric nature. I went as deeply as the books I had with me would permit, into telepathy, spiritism, and clairvoyance, extracting what truths I might out of each of these sublime sciences, and studied, both from the scientific and religious point of view, such problems as the origin of life, the formation of matter, and the ultimate destiny of the soul. These were strange pursuits for one placed as I was, in a western town where vice ran practically unchecked, science was unknown, and religion had no jurisdiction worthy of the name. No one disturbed my solitude, except Phair. You may think it curious that he should have taken a liking for me, seeing that we had absolutely nothing in common beyond the tie of nationality, but I imagine he judged me to be a steady character upon whom he could rely.

"The early part of that winter was unusually mild. Snow came during the first week of November,

pursued closely by a thaw. A spell of frost followed, and about the middle of December warm winds began to blow from the Pacific, and these continued until the anniversary of my awful sorrow.

"Upon the evening of that day I sat alone, my books unopened before me, pitiless memory confronting me with all the incidents of the happy year which had gone; those walks along the sacred road, our conversation in the old garden, the happy pursuits in the house—the plans there made for days of enjoyment in the future; and I heard her true voice again, and the sound of her happy laugh, and saw her face turned to me in its mute sorrow of farewell, and the veil uplifted from her grey face, and those sweet eyes darkened by the nearness of death. . . . Then my head fell powerless upon my shivering hands, and I groaned aloud, 'O God, I cannot bear it. I cannot live alone.'

"Again I felt the hand brushed lightly through my hair, and again my body thrilled as upon Mount Avesca, and again the dark cloud of anguish rolled away. And as I looked up, with words of adoration, a sound came from outside, as of some small animal in distress, and starting up, I hurried to the door and flung it open, admitting the night and the warm west wind. A child was lying upon the threshold, naked, and crying with the cold. I gathered this infant hurriedly in my arms, and stared into the darkness, yet without perceiving a sign of any human presence. You came to me as a mystery, and I accepted you as a gift."

Jessie threw herself forward, her hands gleaming faintly in the gloom.

"Who am I?" she cried. "Who am I?"

"You are mine," he answered, in his sweet voice. "As the wind cometh or goeth, so is it with every one that is born of the spirit. It is not for either of us to ask who left you at my door that night. Child! Marguerite," he whispered, in a sudden passion of love. "Who gave you those eyes? How did you obtain that happy laugh which I have heard so often ringing upon the road? Who ordained the colour of your hair, or gave you those white hands, or set that pose to your head? Oh, child—our child! She sent you to me—she sent you, as the daughter of our spiritual love."

But the girl only drew back, murmuring reproachfully :

"Why have you deserted me? Why did you give me over to Mr. Phair? Does he know I am not his daughter, and—and Walter's sister? You have been a false guardian to me."

"Listen," he pleaded—"listen to the remainder of my history, and judge me then."

"I am listening," she murmured faintly.

"With much difficulty I obtained a nurse for you," Atcliff continued, "and the remainder of the winter passed for me happily. With the coming of spring Phair suggested that I should accompany him to the north and prospect for gold, and after many refusals, I consented, upon the understanding that his wife would watch over you in my absence. So we exchanged the plains for the mountains, and for two years worked our way through unexplored territory, seeking gold, but finding no more than sufficient to supply us with the bare necessities of living. Finally we staked out a partnership claim upon the Koyukuk River, in a new settlement where gold was

plentiful. There we worked for many months, but fortune refused to favour us, and we were barely able to pay our way. In the meantime, Phair's temper increased in violence—he was never the man to bear disappointment patiently—until his very presence became intolerable; but I could not leave him, because wherever I went he would follow.

“Throughout the year wealth had been pouring in upon the miner who occupied the claim contiguous to ours, and one night Phair awoke me from sleep, to whisper greedily, ‘Patello must have made a fortune.’ When I made no answer, he flung his arm about my neck, pulled down my head, and imparted to me a plan whereby we might become possessed of our neighbour's wealth.”

“You did not consent?” the girl cried, shrinking back against the wall.

“Never did I imagine he was in earnest. I judged him to be a weak-minded man, incapable of acting alone. But I was mistaken. Secretly he made his plans, and a few nights later aroused me, and demanded my assistance. I exerted all my strength to restrain him from the crime, but he acted like a madman, flung me down violently, rushed from the tent, and before I had sufficiently recovered to be able to follow, the deed was done. In attempting to stun Patello he had killed him. And in my terror I became a partner to the crime. I helped the actual murderer both by word and deed, weak creature that I was, knowing well that if the crime were discovered by the men in the tents below, the vengeance which would fall upon my partner must fall upon me also.

“We both escaped from that vengeance, Phair going in one direction, I in another. For many

weeks I lay hidden in an Indian village before venturing to travel to the south, and the greater part of a year had elapsed before I reached the prairie town which had been our starting-point. There I was informed that you had died in my absence, and also learnt that Phair had passed through in the spring, and had taken his wife and two children away. . . . Then despair settled over me again. I left the plains and made for the Atlantic seaboard.

"There I was destined to be brought within the influence of a large-hearted bishop, who, after hearing my story, permitted, nay, encouraged me to study for orders. His kindness to me, both then and subsequently, was more than human. In due course he ordained me to the diaconate, then to the priesthood, and after no more than a year's work, entrusted me with a cure beneath his eye. I followed the ascetic life as best I could, but as time went on, and I came to acquire a certain amount of learning, it became increasingly difficult to reconcile the faith as revealed to me with that it was my duty to teach. I found the ceremonial galling, the doctrine unintelligent to humanity in its present stage of development. Purgatory, and other superstitions of the dark ages of human ignorance, were abhorrent to me. I could not willingly teach what I knew to a certainty to be false. The determination to resign my charge became hastened by the passing over of the good bishop who had been my patron and my friend. I attended his funeral, and at the conclusion of the rites, turned for the last time towards my river-side parish. On the way to the station I met a woman whose face was familiar. A second glance convinced me that I had encountered the native wife of Robert Phair.

"At first she could not believe it was I who accosted her, so complete was the disguise of my priestly soutane; but when I had convinced her she burst into tears, and implored me to hear her confession. I accompanied her to a church where I was known, and there she told me you were living. It was Phair's little Jessie who had passed into spirit life during our wanderings, but the mother, knowing her husband's violent nature, had not dared to tell him the truth. She further told me that Phair had shamefully abandoned her in that city, and gone to England with his boy Walter and my little Marguerite. She desired neither to see nor hear of him again. After giving me permission to make use of her confession as I might desire, I absolved her and let her go. And that day my heart was light."

"Why did you not take me from him?" the girl cried.

Atcliff, instead of replying, sank to his knees and crossed himself with slow movements. "Peace be with him," he murmured. Then he rose and passed a hand before his eyes.

"The man whom you here called father went over as you spoke," he said quietly. "There is no suffering where he has gone, but I am troubled for him. I fear he has failed, even as I failed, and must come again before he can rest. Marguerite, by that same power I see the avenger approaching. I must go out now and face him, and play the man at last."

"You shall not go out!" she cried, and with the words placed herself between him and the window. "I will not let you put yourself to danger."

A smile broke upon his face when he saw her arms spread forth to warn him back.

"Why did I not demand you?" he murmured. "It was my duty to accept your loss as a part of my just punishment. If you were called by the saint above to lead Robert Phair towards the light, and to reclaim his son, it was not for me to intervene. I waited for you to come. And you came, not knowing you had a right to my home, not knowing who it was that brought you. And when you accepted shelter under my roof that evening, I knew that all my past had been forgiven.

"In the days of my active life as a priest I painted a picture," he went on, in a dreamy voice, "a portrait of her—of her, my light, my guiding star on sea and land; but as I worked, the beauty of her soul shone out upon that face, and each feature became idealised. Thus it was not her face which appeared upon the canvas, but the face rather of a spirit. I concealed my work beneath a pigment which might be easily removed, and placed at my bedside the portrait which remained unintelligible to all eyes save my own, and there it has been hanging all these years. And now I have removed the covering that you might look upon my work, and you start from it, because in that face you think you can recognise your own."

The wind was gone, and there fell a great silence over the ruined garden. In the same enraptured voice the priest spoke on :

"In a dream I was told to go to Pikesford, and there found Phair living, but not flourishing, upon the wages of sin. He pressed on me a share of that blood-money, and I accepted it, but not for myself. My food has at least been clean. I buried the money which represented my share beneath the lich-stone at

Pikesford, and when I left to follow Robert here, I disinterred the box which contained it, changed the old notes for new, and hid the box at the foot of the sign-post below the hill where the green lane comes into the road. I could not live away from my partner because of you, and he, hating and fearing my presence, yet clung to me. I knew it was my duty to help him, but again and again he turned on me and would not have my aid."

"Thank God I am not his daughter," the girl moaned. Then she cried bitterly, "Walter is not his son? Say that he is not!"

But Atcliff did not hear her. He advanced slowly, his thin hands clenched before him.

"I have finished," he said. "Patello shall have his own this night. Marguerite, spare me before I go one kindly thought. Give me, for her sake, one word of love."

Doubt was chased away from her face at that entreaty, and her eyes began to shine. Again she barred the means of exit, and when he moved on, conscious only of his duty, a white hand closed upon his arm and held him, and a soft voice whispered yearningly:

"Not for her sake only, but your own."

Then Isaac's grand old face and great shoulders appeared within the window-frame, and his calm voice called:

"The wind has passed, and there is light yonder. Nature is fighting on your side, master. The old man of the Manor is a spirit, and the rogue with the wooden leg is not fifty yards away."

CHAPTER VI

THE REJECTED

EVEN while sentience departed from him, the master of the Manor would not know that the phantom likeness of himself was about to leave its physical body. He felt the cause of life and thought, that unsubstantial but strongly conscious image, struggling to desert the materialism which it had animated for so long ; but even so, while the burning fluid of life drained out, the heart failed, the brain grew numb, and coldness crept upward from his feet, he wrested his mind from the immediate future and all the loneliness it threatened, and sought to marshal his failing energies to fight once more against his fear for the present.

The doctor turned at length from the shaded lamp, and advanced towards Munro, chafing his hands nervously :

"I can do nothing more," he said ; "I may as well go down and take a rest before the fire. Send for me when any change takes place." He hesitated before adding : "Had you not better send for Mr. Finch?"

Softly though he spoke, the keen ears of the failing man caught the words. Anger and cunning contorted his white face, as the voice gurgled from his throat :

"Think I don't hear you? I hear every sound, every movement, every crack of the woodwork, and step upon the stairs. Think I don't hear this wind? I tell you I can hear the breathing of everyone in Windycombe."

"You may administer brandy if he can swallow it," the doctor whispered, drawing Munro nearer to the door. "It is only a question of an hour or so at the best; there is no pain. Had his mind been less powerful, he must have relapsed into unconsciousness hours ago. I will send that old servant up to watch with you. You must excuse me, but I have been about the country all day, and can scarcely keep my eyes open now."

He left the room with professional abruptness, knowing that the time when his skill might have availed the patient had passed. With the closing of the door the light appeared to be more faint, the shadows heavier, and the tumult more terrible. Munro had returned to the bed, but when he tried to free his hand that he might remove the shade from the lamp, he found his fingers held tightly, and he saw two glazed eyes feeling for him through the waves of heavy air. A voice gurgled at him from the region of the eyes:

"Where is John—partner John?"

"He is at the Hermitage," Munro answered.

"Shall I go for him?"

"He would go to his knees and pray over me," the voice mumbled. "He thinks I am dying, but I shall fool him. Why did you try to take away your hand?"

"I was going to remove the shade from the lamp."

"Yes, let us have more light," gasped Phair.

"Open the window and draw back the curtains, that I may look at the stars, and tell me if there is anything moving about the garden."

"I cannot open the window. The wind would wreck everything in the room."

But hardly had Munro moved from the bedside, when the old man screamed with terror:

"Where are you? Come back! Walter, you brute! I can't see you, and—don't you hear the garden-gate swinging? A man is coming over the gravel—now on the grass—now the striking of a stick—now the thud of a stump. Go to the door. Stand against it. Hold him out!"

Munro felt his courage breaking. It was impossible to hear anything beyond the wind. He pulled the green shade from the globe and hurried back; but when he reached the bed, Phair was stretched upon his back, with closed eyes.

An unmistakable sound came through the storm from the region of the hail. A disturbance followed within the room, a sombre beating that throbbed like an old clock at regular intervals. Munro sent his eyes across the bed, and for a moment sealed them shiveringly when he beheld that face.

"Hear it," muttered a strangled voice.

Out of the fury of the wind issued a thumping from stair to stair. The door opened gently. The old servant stood there, her sour face worked into stupidity by awe, and whispered loudly:

"A man who says he must see the master."

"Patello," a gruff voice called. "Patello to see Bob Phair."

There was no appreciable motion from the bed, but Munro felt the clutching fingers relax, and as

the woman at the door gave way to a short, wide-chested man, attired in Salvation Army uniform, Munro looked down, with the single word "Walter" humming in his ears, and understood that Robert Phair had gone from Windycombe and the world, tightly clenching the hand of him whom he believed was his son, with the name of that son upon his tongue.

So the victory was won. The man who was dead had turned to him at the end, not in affection, nor yet with kindness; but even though fear had forged the link, the fact remained that Munro had worked out as completely as a man might the redemption of Walter Phair.

"You have come too late," he said, bringing his eyes slowly from the bed.

That same moment he smarted with a cold thrill. The life which he had escaped from seemed to reach for his body again when he beheld the one-legged man who had travelled around one hemisphere to avenge his son. Between him and the door Munro saw the father of the Pit, and in one bitter instant the former scenes swept back: horrible Hamlet Street, tottering in its decay, the rope warehouse at the corner, the wooden street heaped with mud, the medical students hoping for better things, and Marguerite crushed upon her bed by death.

"Not a word," muttered Patello.

The hope that he had not been recognised by the vagabond died out. Munro advanced, and motioned with his head. The one-legged man crossed over to the bed, looked down, and thumped away to the door, where Munro was saying to the servant:

"You had better call the doctor and do what is necessary here."

Then he tramped quickly from the room, and the stumping followed down the stairs, across the hall, and into the "cold room," where the firelight was leaping up and down the walls. Here he turned to face Patello.

"Do yer know my game?" the avenger growled eagerly. "Say now, are yer any relation of that upstairs? Because, if you are, me and you must have words together."

"I know your business," Munro answered. "You needn't ask me mine, but I am no more related to Phair than you are."

"That young feller with you at Mother Doolittle's," broke in the vagabond, "was he related?"

"Son," said Munro shortly. "And he's dead."

"That so?" said Patello. "Well, I'm mighty surprised to meet one of the gang here. They were after you out yonder for not reporting on yer ticket, but I guess you're hidden here right well. Which of them two was it that fixed my Joe?"

"Phair," said Munro.

"Proud of it, I reckon. I always thought 'twas him. T'other man hadn't grit. This Atcliff lives up the hill in a place called the Hermitage. Found out all about 'em at the village between here and Highford."

"I know Atcliff well," said Munro hastily. "He never killed your Joe."

"Don't you say a word, sonnie," interrupted the vagabond. "As a partner, he's liable. I'm after my Joe's bit of money. I've worked and saved and travelled half the world to get my own back, and I'm a-going to have it. This is the right sort o' night for my game, and I'm a-going to finish right

now." He pulled his cap closely over his eyes, and stumped to the door. There he turned, with the query: "Who's the feller follering me?"

"One of Atcliff's friends," hazarded Munro. "He has no enemy, except yourself."

"Then I'll have to watch," Patello growled. "Say, will I meet you in the morning? I'm lonesome in this land. Maybe you'll be taking to the road about then?"

"I haven't finished here," Munro answered, preserving the same attitude.

"All right," returned Patello, with a suspicious glance. "So-long."

The front door clanged, and Munro hastened to the window, released the shutters, and looked out. The darkness was impenetrable.

He went out into the hall, where he found the gardener waiting at the foot of the stairs. The man looked up, awed by the presence of death in the house, and with superstitious pride held out a Christmas rose, muttering as Munro put out his hand:

"They say you can always find it down here, sir, afore a death. I picked he yesterday—and sure enough, sir."

The man grinned with a certain morbid satisfaction.

The waxen petals of the white flower were blotched with drops of cardinal red.

Munro flung the weird little blossom into a dark corner.

"I be just a-going to toll the bell, sir, and call Mother Hunt, the layer-out, sir, but I come here first to wait for orders."

"Wait until the doctor comes down," said Munro. "I have finished here," he murmured, making for the door as the gardener shuffled softly to the back of the house. "I must go to Atcliff. Patello will hardly try violence. It is money that he is after, rather than revenge, and dead men have no money to give."

He was about to thrust himself into the windy night, when a slight figure ran out gasping, sprang up the steps, and the girl whom he supposed was Jessie Phair almost fell into his arms.

"Walter!" she panted, using the familiar name by force of habit. "Oh, what am I saying? My head seems to be spinning on my shoulders."

She was pale and distressed, but altogether pretty. She was, as she moved, Marguerite's very self.

"Where is Atcliff?" Munro asked, drawing back with her into the house.

"Gone!" she cried. "Isaac came to warn him and he escaped through the window—the wind had carried it away—and out upon the Downs."

"I must follow him," he said.

"He is safe. The gipsies will protect him there. And Walter—you are not my brother, and Percy is the vilest creature upon earth, and Mr. Phair is not my father," she cried incoherently. "I am besides myself from what I have heard to-night."

Munro could only mutter: "Mr. Phair is dead."

"I know. Do not think me heartless, Walter—I do not forget. I am not your sister. Mr. Phair, your father is alone to blame. My father—oh, I do not know what to say! It is all so weird. Are you Walter Phair, son of that man and the half-breed woman? I cannot—cannot believe that you are

He was a brute, always a brute—and you have been kind. How did he die? Did he curse you to the end?”

“Holding my hand, and calling me Walter.”

It seemed to Munro that light was breaking, and the wild night sweeping away. So Jessie held none of the blood of that sinful old man asleep above. He was not the brother's murderer. He was only the vagabond, who had been led by the star to that place. There was nothing left but a confession of the truth.

“I am Mr. Atcliff's daughter,” the girl cried. “My name is not Jessie. My name is Marguerite.”

“Marguerite!”

“Yes; but how dare you call me by it?” the girl went on wildly.

She was, as she had said, beside herself with the mysteries of that night.

“Marguerite!” he said again. “I was disappointed when I met you because your name was not Marguerite.”

“Oh, you are mad!” she cried.

Had she called herself by any other name, Munro might have preserved his reason. But that name! He was in love with every letter of it. He found himself pressing his lips to her hand, speaking as wildly as she had spoken, gasping out the oldest story of all, the tale of human love. Frail nature had been pent up within him for so long. Now that the barrier had been suddenly snatched away by the magic of that name, his feelings conquered, carrying away heart, brain, and mind in resistless anarchy. The girl was no more able to reason clearly than he. She heard his burning words, saw his face hot amid

the surrounding damp, felt the hold of his hand on hers, and dimly understood that she was listening to yet another story of deception. Would the wonders of that wild night never have an end? Since the fall of darkness she had lost a father, a brother, and a lover; since the coming of the wind she had found a father, a name, and now another lover in the person of him who had acted the part of brother. Her brain steadied; the balance of her mind, after swaying up and down, began to settle; but her heart was beating fast, and anger reddened her face.

She snatched her hand away as his words came humming into her ears, just as she might have heard the murmur of the sea in a shell:

"Mr. Phair was not my father. Walter Phair was my partner. I caused his death when he would have robbed me. I have no right to be here. My name is Munro. I have neither parents, nor home, nor friends."

The girl became aware that she was answering this confession wrathfully; but even when she saw him shrinking from her she did not know what she was saying. He who was waiting upon her sentence, hoping for mercy, heard:

"You have made a fool of me. You have deceived me, you, a stranger, for your own selfish purpose. You came to me as a brother, and forced me to give you a brother's privileges. You tried to buy your position here. You are worthy of Walter Phair, the brute who made my life hateful when I was a child. You, who have lived by deceiving, and lying, and I know not what, dare to say that you love me! No wonder you kept silence though you knew what sort of life Percy Finch had lived. Thank God I have a

father who can show me how you and those like you use your lives. Go back to your vagabond life. Go and join the one-legged man, the associate who is worthy of you, and never come near me again!"

"Your father knew," he cried blindly. "I tried to deceive him, but could not."

She did not hear. A sense of injustice occupied her mind, excluding all remembrance of her own doubts concerning his identity, of her former encouraging words, and of her past loyalty to him. In that state she could only understand that she had done much to aid this man, and he had repaid her by treachery. Had he chosen any other time for that inevitable confession, she might have used him differently. But at that hour, in her hatred for the Phair family, she could only be irrational.

"I will not hear another sound from you!" she flamed at him. "Go out of this house, which you had never the right to enter, and out of this garden, and—and out of the village."

"Will you send me back to the old life?" he pleaded miserably.

"Go where you will!" she cried. "Follow what life you like. You will find your partner on the Downs."

"I have done with that life," he found the courage to say.

"Go back to it. It is the only life you are fitted for. You have made a fool of me, both here, and in my father's house, and in the churchyard that night when— Don't you hear the wind calling you? Go out! Go out!"

Munro found himself standing on the steps, groping foolishly to steady his feet, her voice following him still, in wild anger. The lessening wind was indeed

calling to the lone spots and the wild life, where men are nameless.

Threatening clouds frowned upon the garden. The church bell was tolling through the dampness. "Begin again," shouted the voices in the wind. "Make your game. One may fall out broken, but the great wheel grinds for ever."

He turned, rebelling against the lot which had cast him out into the night to be lost in the wind, but in moving his forehead encountered an obstacle. The door was closed—the door of the cold house which had never opened to him hospitably. It was fast closed, spurning him as a beggar from that place.

Then it was that he remembered the advice tendered by an aged starlighter with whom he had once tramped a stage. "Never look back," the old man had said. "Look up, look on, look down, but never behind." So Marco passed through the garden without one backward glance.

Had he looked back he must have seen Marguerite Atcliff standing upon his side of the closed door. It had shut against her also, but he had not seen her in the darkness. She was watching, listening; and presently heard a voice carried along the stream of the wind from the churchyard fence, crying:

"Marguerite!"

Then she awoke from her anger, and answered:
"I am here."

She heard nothing but the iron tongue of the bell.

CHAPTER VII

THE LAST BLAST

"SEE!" cried Isaac, pointing upward with his staff as he and the priest emerged from the plantation of firs, and came upon the backbone of the Downs, "the star shines above the ridgeway. From the summit of the barrow you shall see the old windmill and my cart standing among the gorse."

That ancient barrow, which formed a knob against the sky, marked the highest point of the Downs. The men ascended, bending before the gale, and looked out. On the one side the gaunt arms of the disused mill were flapping; on the other the junipers shuddering at every blast, and dead leaves whirling in flights. There a dark figure fought its way upward, stiffly dragging the artificial contrivance which eked out its stunted body.

"There is no safety in houses," said the gipsy. "We who live under the sky know that the only place to meet our enemy is on the open, where there is neither tree nor bush. One of the kings of Britain lies here," he went on, stamping upon the hill—"a heathen king, but a brave spirit for all that. Bloody battles have taken place upon these hills, and here ancient councils were held, and here the beacon was fired to warn the people of the lowlands that the Danes had landed. My grandfather remembered a

post standing upon this knoll to support the beacon-grate. Seven English counties may be seen from this point when God wills."

"It will be calm by midnight," said Atcliff.

"The storm was too fierce to last," replied Isaac. "Let us go on to my cart. We have a superstition that no man who is seeking the life of another may pass the mill, for if he attempts to do so, one of the flying arms shall strike him dead."

Atcliff did not move from the lonely barrow. He felt ashamed at his sudden flight from the man whose coming he had awaited so long.

"I will meet Patello here," he muttered; "better here than on the common among the furze. I have done him a great wrong. Many debts have been settled this night, and here I will settle my last and face the world. My partner has paid his account by death, and now I will pay mine, as the coward must, by meeting my enemy face to face and making what amends I may for the evil I have done."

"Heaven favours you, master. We are nearer the spirit-world here than upon the river valley. While you spoke, I had a glimpse of the pole-star shining above the knoll. No harm shall fall to him who follows that light."

The sage old occultist strode down the side of the barrow, and took up his stand at the foot, bending upon his staff, all his psychic faculties keenly alert. The wind swayed him from side to side, but his strong feet were settled upon the turf as firmly as the roots of a tree. An ancient stone, hollowed in the centre, heaved before him; and soon the thinker's knowledge of folk-lore, added to his penetrating clairvoyance, peopled his solitude with

white figures officiating round that stone amid savage shapes, hungry for a human sacrifice.

A voice broke into the wind. Atcliff was calling from the summit. The nomad turned and watched the slight figure, which was outlined against the flying clouds.

"Patello!" Atcliff called, and signalled with his hand.

The man with the wooden leg came up slowly, suspicious of a plot, and halted at the foot of the knoll.

"I have waited for you, Patello!" cried the grey man. "I am guilty of your son's death, and I will make what recompense I can."

Patello leaned upon his stick, his stump sinking into the damp turf, the muscles down his neck throbbing with his late exertions. He looked up, dimly conscious that he stood confronted by an overmastering character.

"You were always good at running," he growled. "You ran from the Koyukuk, and you ran again in Mackenzie River District, where I lost your track. And now again to-night; but me and you were bound to meet."

Atcliff answered him from the top of the mound:

"Your son has avenged himself, Patello. Night and day through all these years he has been with me. I have done what I could to give him rest, but I knew that he would not leave me until I had settled with you. Yet I was always afraid, and so hid myself, and followed my partner, whom I could not leave, because he and I were bound together by a tie which you would not understand. That is broken at last," he went on triumphantly. "Robert Phair has

gone out to struggle among the mists ; and I am here to make answer for both."

"He speaks of the old man who has passed over," muttered the occultist into the wind. "The master has overcome the mysteries of religion, and the mysteries of free life. For him the barrier between the worlds sinks out of sight. I believe in the near presence of spirits. There would be no guiding star if there were no everlasting life. The master knows ; and he and I have followed the star together."

Across Patello's face struggled a fierce amazement. He cared for none of the things forthcoming ; for him everything was in the present, and his beyond was that of the animals. Good food and drink, a place where he might rest, sun to warm him, wind to stir his sluggish energies, starlight to enable him to follow the trail--such were his desires. He belonged to the lowest order of the homeless. The wind off the spicy plain brought him no odours. The sight of the golden gorse struck no note of thankfulness at his heart. The blossoming almond-tree was nothing to him. After transition he would remain less spiritual than many still moving in the flesh.

Dimly he realised that he would not be able to take vengeance upon his enemy. Robert Phair he might have struck down, because the master of the Manor had been like unto himself. But he could not raise his hand against that spiritual being who stood above him, and above the burying-place of the Saxon king.

"You killed my Joe," he growled, in a dazed fashion. "You've made me waste my life trying to get back my own. I am lost in this country. I

want to get back to my own life. But I've sworn to square with you before I go."

"Punishment has already overtaken me," replied Atcliff. "All you can do is to sharpen remembrance. But you cannot understand, for you and I are upon planes apart. I can enter into your life and thoughts, but you cannot touch the fringe of mine."

"The one is God's man, the other is God's animal," soliloquised Isaac the occultist, at the foot of the barrow. "We are God's animals when we eat and drink, and when we free our passions. We are God's men when we walk at moonlight, when we love, and when we watch the rising of the sun. There are glorious hours of consciousness for God's men. I would rather see the whitethorn in bloom on a warm upland than wear a crown of gold."

"I swore that night on the Koyukuk River I would have life for life," said Patello malevolently. "But when a man grows old, he wants money more than revenge. I saw Bob Phair lying dead yonder, and I knew my coming had killed him. He and I have settled. His life for Joe—"

"You and I will settle now," broke in Atcliff. "You shall have money from me, my share of that which we stole from Joe. You shall have that now."

"Give it me, and I'll be away before morning," growled the one-legged man, his flat face lighting into avarice.

As he spoke a tumultuous blast swept along the ridgeway and raged across the common like an inundating wave. The old windmill tottered once, and when the gale had passed upon its way, the four ragged arms pointed no longer, the rotten boards

were gone from the landscape, and a shapeless mass struggling in agony amid the furze alone marked the site of the ancient mill.

"The last effort of the storm," said Isaac, casting the hair from his eyes, and watching the sky whiten. "The old windmill has gone ; but the wind will pass fresh and strong every day."

"Isaac," called Atcliff from the brow, "have you a spade in your cart?"

"Yes, master. I will bring it you in ten minutes."

"Bring it down to the green lane. You will find this man and me beside the sign-post."

The nomad strode across the common, pulling the cloak about his shoulders, and muttering his thoughts aloud ; while the spiritualist descended the grassy slope, with the halting vagabond at his side. Neither spoke ; a great gulf divided "God's animal" from "God's man," and their spirits were unable to meet.

CHAPTER VIII

ACCEPTED

WHILE the wind was at the height of its wildness, the unimpressible rector, who was very far removed from the spiritual life, despite his position as pastor of a parish, sat alone in his study, preparing a sermon. The simple old man first attentively perused the controlled writings of one of the early fathers, then transcribed and simplified the ideas he there found, and finally justified his conduct with the excuse, "It is not I who speak to the people. It is the voice of the Church; and that voice is here."

With the lowering of the tumult he brought his uninspired labours to an end, and shuffling presently from the room, opened the door of the house. The raw breath of the night struck his face, and with it came the throbbing of the bell from the valley. The rector started, and moving back into the hall, began to grope for his coat and overshoes.

"Someone is dead, and I have not been told," he muttered. "It was thoughtful, no doubt, not to call me during the storm, but not right. Who can it be? I cannot think of anyone. Ah! it might be the master of the Manor." He pushed his arms vigorously along the ragged lining of his coat-sleeves and turned up the collar, buttoning it tightly. "Yes, it must be

Phair," he went on, reaching for his stick. "Poor man! Poor old man! he has not attended church once since he came to Windycombe."

Nobody met the rector on his way to the Manor. The villagers were already abed, and not a light showed until he entered the garden of the Manor and saw the dark outline of the house, and a window on the second floor suffused by a solemn glow.

"Yes, sir, master's gone," the housekeeper whispered, as she admitted him. "He was took sudden. Holder was a-coming up to tell you soon as he'd done ringing the bell. Did you not see that man, sir?"

"What man?" Mr. Finch exclaimed.

"A rough man, sir, with a bad, blasphemous tongue and a wooden leg. He forced himself in and wouldn't listen to me, and stamped up the stairs, dreadful noisy, sir, before I could call anyone to stop him, and master died directly he saw him. Master must have been afraid of that man, sir."

"This is a very extraordinary tale," the rector muttered; and immediately certain incidents in the life of the late tenant of the house recurred and began to arrange themselves in due order. "No, I have not seen the man," he went on. "I think I will go upstairs, and see that all is as it should be. Tell Miss Phair that I am here."

"Miss Jessie has gone, sir. I wonder you didn't pass her on the road. Mr. Walter was here, sir, a-holding his father's hand to the end, and then he came down with that man, and they left the house, but not together, sir. Miss Jessie had words with her brother, sir, before he went out. I heard her from the top of the stairs. She was terrible angry with him, sir."

"You should have sent for me," said the rector sharply.

More he wished to say, but remembering prudence, closed his lips firmly upon any suspicion, and ascending the stairs, entered the silent room, where the layer-out of the village was completing her task with professional indifference. Dismissing her, the rector went on his knees beside the body, and commended the undeveloped spirit which had already passed away to the protection and mercy of the power which he worshipped with the simple consciousness of his nature.

Soon the housekeeper was startled by the violent ringing of a bell. She crept upstairs, and confronted the rector, who was standing outside the closed door, trembling and white.

"Do you want anything, sir?" she whispered.

"He is not dead!" the rector cried. "He is not dead!"

"Oh, yes, sir," she replied tremulously. "The doctor said he was dead, and Mrs. Hunt—she will tell you the same, sir."

Mr. Finch moved slowly to the stairs, admitting unwillingly:

"The body moved. It made a sign with its right hand, and I was frightened for the moment. Yes, yes, you are quite right," he went on muttering. "The movement must have been muscular. He is dead, and God rest him. I know now why he never attended my church. His creed was possibly not mine. Perhaps I have judged him wrongly. Perhaps he was a better man than I supposed."

Still trembling and muttering, the rector descended and let himself from the door. The layer-out being

hastily summoned, entered the room, and saw at a glance that the position of the right arm was not as she had left it. What that arm had done she did not know, and tatter though he was, the rector never confided to anyone, not even to his wife, that he had seen that hand sign the body at the last words of his commendatory prayer.

As Mr. Finch returned in a dazed fashion to his home, he was seen by a lone man, who stood upon the road above the Rectory gate waiting for a sign. This solitary watcher was Munro, who again found his feet upon the path which is trodden by starlighters, crushed by failure and the righteous punishment for deceit. His eyes were opened then, and he saw how completely his life had been dominated by the sin of selfishness. It had been, after all, mere self-indulgence, and not an honest hatred for wrong-doing, which had held him in Hamlet Street while Krum was robbing the book-keeper. The same self-love had prompted him to personate the dead man. A respectable position and a home were stimulants which had always been more powerful than any genuine desire to work out Walter Phair's redemption. Even that gift to his late partner's father had been actuated by selfishness.

Yet, as he stood and contemplated, he knew that the last moments of the girl whom he had called Marguerite had been made easier by his gift of oranges; that Robert Phair had passed over holding his hand, constrained to believe that his son had obtained a humble and a contrite heart. Here were two little points of light struggling out of all the darkness. Atcliff had so frequently urged him to believe that reward follows any good that a man may

do. Though virtue, charity, and even love may have been gnawed more or less at the root by the canker-worm of selfishness, results shall triumph over motive, and what is lacking the unseen shall add.

As Munro waited after Mr. Finch had disappeared into the Rectory for the sign to be given him—a sign that there was yet work for him in Windycombe, small matters began to occupy his mind. He wondered whether the two medical students had yet won their bitter battle with the world, and whether it had become a delight to them to recall those days of the past. He vexed his brain over such trivial details as the number of oranges bought by him that night, and to whether the dying girl had eaten more than one. . . .

The time of the calm was near. Lighter clouds were sweeping over the Downs, the faint sky became pricked by soft stars, the dead leaves ceased their frantic dance, and the sparrows chattered in the ivy. A light shone from the old-fashioned windows of the Fleur-de-lys Inn, and while the wayfarer gazed at the creaking sign, the door opened, and Percy Finch stumbled out, to sway irresolutely in the centre of the road. Munro stepped back into the shadow of the hedge and watched the figure, until his ears became stunned by the beating of his heart. The rector's son went on, reached the point where the roads forked, hesitated again, and finally mistaking the direction, staggered away along the road which went, not by the Rectory, but down the lonely hill.

That same instant Munro, who had again fallen deeply into the material abyss, perceived what he madly supposed to be his duty. Here was the sign for which he had been waiting. Most assuredly he

was called upon to avenge the betrayal and death of Marguerite. How carefully destiny had prepared the way! Had they not been brought together in that lonely village upon the hills? And now he, Munro, had been cast out again into vagabondage, so that there might be no ties to hold him back from completing the work. And now the betrayer had been brought out alone before him in that hour of perplexity. And now that betrayer had wandered out from the village instead of returning to his home.

Munro wiped his cold face, then rolled his handkerchief and knotted it in the centre. He knew that he was a stronger man than the rector's son. Hesitating no longer, he passed along the road which went by the Hermitage, never once daring to lift his eyes from the knotted handkerchief dangling from his damp hand. One thought remained with him in that awful loneliness, the thought that were it only possible for the girl whom he loved—not the cold Marguerite who approached him as a spirit form, but the warm Marguerite in the body—to call from behind, as she had wont to do, "Wait for me. I am coming with you,"—then how joyfully he would turn from the path which led to destruction, and how rapturously abandon the betrayer and the past.

The purpose before him altered this tender mood into a fanatical belief that he was a tool in the hand of Destiny; and when he reached the brow of the hill and saw a gloomy figure flickering unsteadily ahead beside the hedgerow, he came to regard it as merely a human reptile that it was necessary to destroy lest it should bite and poison others of its kind.

While these material beings, the haunter and the

haunted, descended towards the valley, two spiritual beings stood together below—Atcliff beside the signpost, watching the short figure of Patello as it receded in the direction of Elmbury, and Isaac, wrapped in his cloak, leaning against the fence of the coppice, which was full of whisperings.

"It is peace," the grey man called tremulously.

Isaac smiled strangely out of the darkness.

"The wind has gone, and with it your enemy," he said. "Money is powerful after all, ruin character though it will, if it can buy us peace."

Atcliff cast back the mould into a hole which opened at his feet, replaced the turf and stamped it level, then crossed to the nomad's side, and held his time-worn hand.

"See for me," he urged. "I feel that I am not alone to-night."

"I see a graveside," the occultist said, after a short silence. "A grave in an old churchyard, which is fenced-in and not used now, and beside the stone I see your astral body, and over it a spirit, who looks down with love, which we of the flesh cannot understand. She would speak if she could, but she has never spoken yet. Never have I seen her so clearly. . . . She does speak. 'The time is short,' she says. Take away your hand, master. You are hurting me. It is dark again now, and I can see nothing. There is no more power to-night."

Their hands fell apart, and Isaac opened his eyes to behold before him a face which was transfigured with joy.

"A little time," the recluse murmured. "A time in which to round off this life, to help the two I love—a time in which to develop my character, and to grow

nearer to the light. May that time pass with the speed of the wind. But how foolish is impatience when we consider the shortness of this state. Have you never gone to rest feeling that you could not wait until the morning?" he asked strongly. "Impatient for the dawn which was to come in happiness. Have you never longed for the rising or the setting of the sun?"

"A young man should answer you," Isaac replied, failing to gather the priest's full meaning. "I have gone out to run across the hills, because of the glory of the evening. I have fought against the wind, rejoicing in it because I have been strong. A man will do such things when he has won the love of a woman."

"Will he rejoice less when he knows that he is soon to pass out of the flesh?" Atcliff asked.

"It is the spirit which is moved," replied the nomad. "Then the man will sit alone and watch the movement in the sky. When he loves a woman, the body must act and be strong. You have watched the tide coming up the shore. You have seen each minute two waves running on a rock, rounding it and meeting, overlapping, kissing, and blending, and so returning as one to the great sea. So we see men and women coming together and passing on. Love is a restless joy, master."

"The restless love awaits us," the recluse made answer. "There is only one mystery remaining—to what wonderful height shall we ascend, sphere beyond sphere, when we have shaken off these earthly conditions and escaped the lower influences? How great a portion of eternity shall we occupy in rising from this darkness to the perfect state of life?"

The occultist moved forward from the shadow of the coppice.

"I will go to my cart yonder," he said dreamily. "I will look into the heart of the fire, and if messages come to me you shall hear of them. Master, one word before we part—live out what life remains to you within the free air upon the hills. And know that the spirit world is close, so very close that we may reach out and meet it when we will. But first we must lead the spiritual life ourselves. You have learnt from me, and I from you. Let us pass on the light which we have received to those who walk in darkness."

There, at the beginning of the green lane, beside the sign-post which had marked the burying-place of blood-money, the spiritualists parted, the priest returning to the lone village, the gipsy making for the common. Each was far removed from the world of action, and both were near, very near, to the second sphere of consciousness, which marks the real starting-point of development towards the life everlasting.

That peace, which had its origin in the valley, spread out along the by-ways and up the hills to settle upon the Hermitage, the Manor House, and all Windycombe; and under the shelter of that peace the betrayer hid himself, although in ignorance of his nearness to a bitter expiation of his deeds, and wandered finally by a devious course to the door of the home which he had disgraced. Peace had come to Munro, not the wondrous rest of John Atcliff or of Isaac the nomad, not the rest which comes from the world without—for materialism still held him strongly—but that peace which the

world of passion gives through the mediumship of women.

The girl, who was to know herself in the future by the name of Marguerite Atcliff, made no attempt to enter the Manor House after its door had been closed against her by the wind. She hated the house and its surroundings. While she stood alone upon the steps, with the torn creepers beating above her head, her anger cooled, her mind cleared, and justice began to argue with her dispassionately. Why had she hurried to this her former home, the spirit of justice, which might well have been the spirit of her mother, suggested to her? Assuredly she had come with no desire to look upon the body of the man whose name she had borne for so long. Had she not found in her heart a longing to regard the face of him who had played the part of brother towards her? Had she not hastened, with her brain heated by her spiritual father's story and her body exalted by the wind, yearning to tell him, who was brother no longer, that she was not the daughter of Robert Phair? Had she not also been eager to hear what he would have to say in reply?

Reason, and that which was stronger, the influence of objective consciousness, went on working, until she thought of Munro, not as the man who had deceived her and had acted a part to which he was not entitled, but as a being of unselfishness, who had given his money to the unworthy man whose affection he had determined to win, who had been the sympathetic companion of her walks, who had altered the entire aspect of her life, and had won John Atcliff's heart. She thought of him, also, as the man who had been bitten by Walter Phair, and yet had saved that rascal's life.

This was the man whom she had sent from her with words which had carried nothing but hatred; and he had gone—she knew his sensitive nature—never to return.

She hurried back to the Hermitage, and going into her room, which overlooked the road, knelt in the old way by the open window, until the damp gusts of wind fanned away the last ember of resentment, and she became so cool that she shivered when she tried to think.

As she thus knelt, with her face towards the hills, a figure staggered past the garden, and recognising the form of the man who had played so fast and loose with his life, she clenched her fingers and heated suddenly. Then came a second figure of one who walked evenly and with determination, and this man, too, she recognised. The two departed out of her sight, the one following the other, and the road became empty. Not a sound ascended, except the chafing of boughs and the rustle of dead leaves along the garden path, where the light trembled of the white half-moon.

Then the girl awoke as from a trance, and left the house and the garden by the little gate in the iron fence, and again made her way through the night, persuading herself that she had come out to meet and assist her father. It was calm when she reached the brow of the long, steep hill. The land had fallen back into its winter sleep, and all the tired trees were still. With the return of peace all things seemed to be new; the shrouded country was beautiful; the tight buds on the lilacs spoke of spring; the earth was pregnant with life awaiting its call to birth. The heaven was clear of the rack of the storm; the

angry clouds had hurried away ashamed; the last gusts died out; the last whisper became a small voice upon the hills.

And near her on every side pressed the conscious beings who had passed on to the second sphere of the life everlasting.

THE END

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