Robinetta

by

Kate Douglas Wiggin

Mary Findlater

Jane Findlater

Allan McAulay

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Kate Douglas Wiggin and Mary Findlater and Jane Findlater and Allan McAulay

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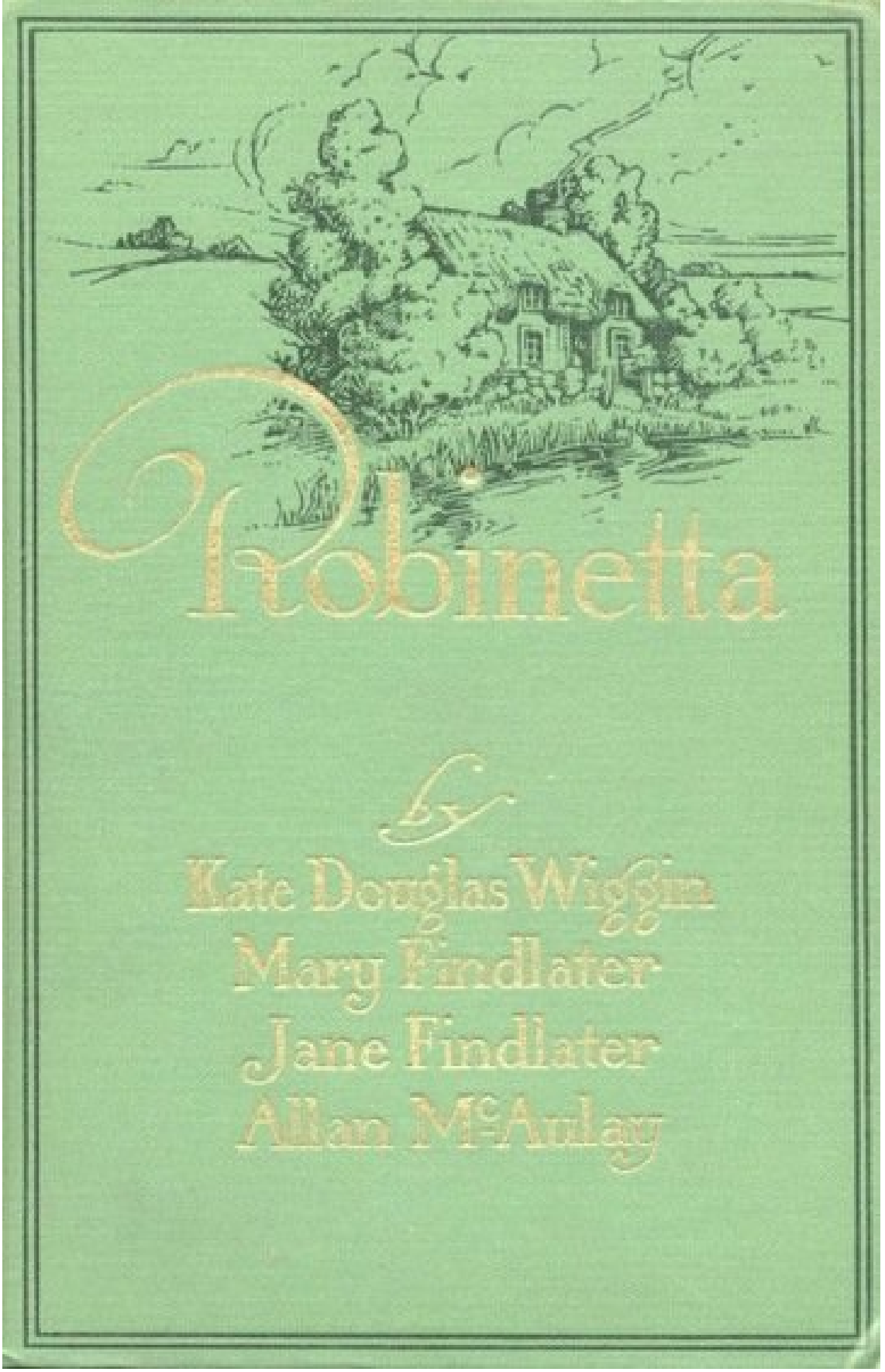
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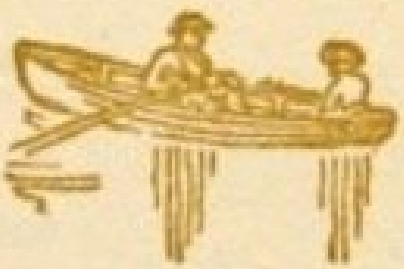

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ROBINETTA

I

THE PLUM TREE

At Wittisham several of the little houses had crept down very close to the river. Mrs. Prettyman's cottage was just like a hive made for the habitation of some gigantic bee; its pointed roof covered with deep, close-cut thatch the colour of a donkey's hide. There were small windows under the overhanging eaves, a pathway of irregular flat stones ran up to the doorway, and a bit of low wall divided the tiny garden from the river. The Plum Tree grew just beside the wall, so near indeed that it could look at itself on spring days when the water was like a mirror. In autumn the branches on that side of the tree were the first to be shaken, lest any of the fruit should fall down and be lost. Sometimes a village child treading cautiously on bare toes amongst the stones along the narrow margin, would pounce upon a plum with a squeal of joy, for although the village was surrounded with orchards, the fruit of Mrs. Prettyman's tree had a flavour all its own.

The tree had been given to her by a nephew who was a gardener in a great fruit orchard in the North, and her husband had planted and tended it for years. It began life as a slender thing with two or three rods of branches, that looked as if the first wind of winter would blow it away, but before the storms came, it had begun to trust itself to the new earth, and to root itself with force and determination. There were good soil and water near it, and plenty of sunshine, and, as is the way of Nature, it set itself to do its own business at all seasons, unlike the distracted heart of man. The traffic of the river came and went; around

the headland the big ships were steering in, or going out to sea; and in the village the human life went on while the Plum Tree grew high enough to look over the wall. Its stem by that time had a firm footing; next it took a charming bend to the side, and then again threw out new branches in that direction. It turned itself from the prevailing wind, throwing a new grace into its attitude, and went on growing; returning in blossom and leaves and fruit an hundredfold for all that it received from the earth and the sun.

In spring it was enchanting; at first, before the blossoms came out, with small bright leaves, and buds like pearls, heaped upon the branches; then, later, when the whole tree was white, imaged like a bride, in the looking-glass of the river. It only wanted a nightingale to sing in it by moonlight. There were no nightingales there, but the thrushes sang in the dawning, and the little birds whose voices were sweet and thin chirruped about it in crowds, while the larks, trilling out the ardour of mating time, sometimes rose from their nests in the grass and soared over its topmost branches on their skyward flight.

Spring, therefore, was its merriest time, for then every passer-by would cry, “What a beautiful tree!” or “Did ye ever see the likes of it?”

There were a few days of inevitable sadness a little later when its million petals fell and made a delicate carpet of snow on the ground. There they lay in a kind of fairy ring, as if there had been a shower of mother-of-pearl in the April night; and no human creature would have dared set a vandal foot on that magic circle, and mar the perfection of its beauty. All the same the Plum Tree had lost its petals, and that was hard to bear at first. But though its Wittisham neighbours often said to summer trippers, “I wish you could have seen it in blossom!” the Plum Tree did not repine, because of the secrets—the thousand, thousand secrets—it held under its leaves. “The blossoms were but a promise,” it thought, “and soon everybody will see the meaning of them.”

Then the tiny green globes began to appear on every branch and twig; crowding, crowding, crowding till it seemed as if there could

never be room for so many to grow; but the weaker ones fell from the boughs or were blown away when the wind was fierce, so the Plum Tree felt no anxiety, knowing that it was built for a large family! The little green globes grew and grew, and drank in sweet mother-juices, and swelled, and when the summer sun touched their cheeks all day they flushed and reddened, till when August came the tree was laden with purpling fruit; fruit so tempting that its rosy beauty had sometimes to be hidden under a veil of grey fishing net, lest the myriad bird-friends it had made during the summer should love it too much for its own good.

So the Plum Tree grew and flourished, taking its part in the pageant of the seasons, unaware that its existence was to be interwoven with that of men; or that creatures of another order of being were to owe some changes in their fortunes to its silent obedience to the motive of life.

II

THE MANOR HOUSE

The long, low drawing room of the Manor at Stoke Revel was the warmest and most genial room in the old Georgian house. It was four-windowed and faced south, and even on this morning of a chilly and backward spring, the tentative sunshine of April had contrived to put out the fire in the steel grate. One of the windows opened wide to the garden, and let in a scent which was less of flowers than of the promise of flowers—a scent of earth and green leaves, of the leafless daphne still a-bloom in the shrubbery, of hyacinths and daffodils and tulips and primroses still sheathed in their buds and awaiting a warmer air.

But this promise of spring borne into the room by the wandering breeze from the river, was nipped, as it were, by the frigid spirit of age and formalism in its living occupants. Mrs. de Tracy, a lady of seventy-five, sat at her writing-table. Her companion, Miss Smeardon, a person of indeterminate age, nursed the lap-dog Rupert during such time as her employer was too deeply engaged to fulfil that agreeable duty. Mrs. de Tracy, as she wrote, was surrounded by countless photographs of her family and her wide connection, most prominent among them two—that of her husband, Admiral de Tracy, who had died many years ago, and that of her grandson, his successor, whose guardian she was, and whose minority she directed. Her eldest son, the father of this boy, who had died on his ship off the coast of Africa; his wife, dead too these many years; her other sons as well (she had

borne four); their wives and children—grown men, fashionable women, beautiful children, fat babies: the likenesses of them all were around her, standing amid china and flowers and bric-a-brac on the crowded tables and what-nots of the not inharmonious and yet shabby Victorian room. Mrs. de Tracy, it might at a glance be seen, was no innovator, either in furniture, in dress, or probably in ideas. As she was dressed now, in the severely simple black of a widow, so she had been dressed when she first mourned Admiral de Tracy. The muslin ends of her widow's cap fell upon her shoulders, and its border rested on the hard lines of iron-grey hair which framed a face small, pale, aquiline in character and decidedly austere in expression.

She took one from a docketed pile of letters and held it up under her glasses, the sun suddenly striking a dazzle of blue and green from the diamond rings on her small, withered hands. Then she read it aloud to her companion in an even and chilly voice. She had read it before, in the same way, at the same hour, several times. The letter, couched in an epistolary style largely dependent upon underlining, appeared to contain, nevertheless, some matter of moment. It was dated from Eaton Square, in London, some weeks before, and signed Maria Spalding. ("Her mother was a Gallup," Mrs. de Tracy would say, if any one asked who Maria Spalding was; and this was considered sufficient, for Mrs. de Tracy's maiden name had been Gallup,—not euphonious but nevertheless aristocratic.)

My dear Augusta (Maria Spalding wrote): I am going to ask you to help me out of a *difficulty*. There is no *use* beating about the bush. You know that Cynthia's daughter Robinetta (Loring is her *married* name) has been with me for a month. *American* or no *American*, I meant to have had her for a part of the season, and to *present* her, if possible (so *good* for these Americans to learn what royalty *is* and to breathe the atmosphere which doth hedge a *King* as Shakespeare says, and which they can never *have*, of course, in a country like

theirs). I know you can't *approve*, dear Augusta, and you will blame me for sentimentality—but I never *can* forget what a *sweet* creature Cynthia was before she ran away with that odious American—and my *greatest* friend in girlhood, too, you must remember. So Robinette, as she is generally called, has come to my house as a *home*, but a most *unlucky* thing has happened. I have had influenza so badly that it has affected my *heart* (an old trouble), I am ordered to Nauheim, and Robinette is *stranded*, poor dear. She has few friends in London and certainly none who can put her up. Tho' she *is* a widow, she is only twenty-two (just *imagine*!), very pretty, and really, tho' you won't believe it, *quite* nice. I am *desperate*, and just wondering if you would let by-gones be by-gones, and receive her at Stoke Revel. She has set her heart upon seeing the place, and some *picture* she was called after (I can't remember it, so it can't be one of the *famous* Stoke Revel group—a *copy*, I fancy), and on paying a visit to Lizzie Prettyman, her mother's old nurse at Wittisham over the river. She *promised* her mother she would do this—and such a promise is *sacred*, don't you think? It's such an *old* story now, Cynthia's American marriage, and no fault of *Robinette's*, poor dear child. Her wish is almost a *pious* one, don't you agree, to pay respect to her mother's memory and the family, and is *much* to be encouraged in these days of radicalism, when every natural tie is loosened and people pay no more *respect* to their parents than if they hadn't any, but had made themselves and brought themselves up from the beginning. So don't you think it's a *good* thing to encourage the *right* kind of feeling in Robinette, especially as she is an *American*, you know....

Mrs. de Tracy paused, and replaced the letter in the package from which she had withdrawn it.

"Maria Spalding's point of view," she observed, "has, I confess, helped me to overcome the extreme reluctance I felt to receive the

child of that American here. Cynthia de Tracy's elopement nearly broke my dear husband's heart. She was the apple of his eye before our marriage; so much younger than himself that she was like his child rather than his sister."

"What a shock it must have been!" murmured the companion. "What ingratitude! Can you really receive her child? Of course you know best, Mrs. de Tracy; but it seems a risk."

"Hardly a risk," rejoined Mrs. de Tracy with dignity. "But it is a trial to me, and an effort that I scarcely feel called upon to make."

Miss Smeardon was so well versed in her duties that she knew she always had to urge her employer to do exactly what she most wanted to do, and the poor creature had developed a really wonderful ingenuity in divining what these wishes were. Just now, however, she was, to use a sporting phrase, "at fault" for a minute. She could not exactly tell whether Mrs. de Tracy wanted to be urged to ask her niece to Stoke Revel, or whether she wanted to be supplied with a really plausible excuse for not doing so. Those of you who have seen a hound at fault can imagine the companion at this moment: irresolute, tense, desperately anxious to find and follow up the right scent. Compromise, that useful refuge, came to her aid.

"It *is* difficult to know," she faltered. Then Mrs. de Tracy gave her the lead.

"Maria Spalding is right when she says that my husband's niece contemplates a duty in visiting Stoke Revel," she announced. "The young woman is the lawful daughter of Cynthia de Tracy that was: our solicitors could never discover anything dubious in the marriage, though we long suspected it. Therefore, though I never could have invited her here, I admit that the Admiral's niece has a right to come, in a way."

"Though her maiden name was Bean!" ejaculated the companion, almost under her breath. "There are Pease in the North, as everyone

knows; perhaps there are Beans somewhere."

"There have never been Beans," said Mrs. de Tracy solemnly and totally unconscious of a pun. "Look for yourself!"

Miss Smeardon did not need to rise from her seat and fetch Burke: it lay always close at hand. She merely lifted it on to her knee and ran her finger down the names beginning with B-e-a.

"Beaton, Beare, Beatty, Beale—" she read out, and she shook her head in dismal triumph; "but never a Bean! No! we English have no such dreadful names, thank Heavens!"

"This is the beginning of April," pursued Mrs. de Tracy, referring to a date-card. "Maria Spalding's course at Nauheim will take three weeks. We must allow her a week for going and coming. During that time Mrs. David Loring can be my guest."

"A whole month!" cried the companion, as though in ecstasy at her employer's generosity. "A whole month at Stoke Revel!"

Mrs. de Tracy took no notice. "Write in my name to Maria Spalding, please," she commanded. "Be sure that there is no mistake about dates. Mention the departure and arrival of trains, and say that Mrs. David Loring will find a fly at the station. That is all, I think."

The companion bent officiously forward. "You remember, of course, that young Mr. Lavendar comes down next week upon business?"

"Well, what if he does?" asked Mrs. de Tracy shortly.

"Mrs. David Loring is a widow," murmured the companion darkly; "a young American widow; and they are said to be so dangerous!"

Mrs. de Tracy drew herself up. "Do you insinuate that the Admiral's niece will lay herself out to attract Mr. Lavendar, a widow in the house of a widow! You go rather too far, Miss Smeardon, though you are speaking of an American. Besides, allusions of this character are extremely distasteful to me. I have been told that the minds of

unmarried women are always running upon love affairs, but I should hardly have thought it of you."

"I'm sure I never imagined any about myself!" murmured Miss Smeardon with the pitiable writhe of the trodden-on worm.

"I should suppose not," rejoined Mrs. de Tracy gravely, and the companion took up her pen obediently to write to Maria Spalding.

"Shall I send your love to the Admiral's niece?" she humbly enquired, "or—or something of the kind?" There was irony in the last phrase, but it was quite unconscious.

"Not my love," replied Mrs. de Tracy, "some suitable message. Make no mistake about the dates, remember."

Thus a letter containing dates, and though not love, the substitute described by Miss Smeardon as "something of the kind" for an unwanted niece from an unknown aunt, left Stoke Revel by the afternoon post and reached Robinette Loring at breakfast next morning.

III

YOUNG MRS. LORING

Young Mrs. Loring thought she had never taken so long a drive as that from the Weston railway station to Stoke Revel. The way stretched through narrow winding roads, always up hill, always between high Devonshire hedges. The rain-soaked lanes were slippery and she was unpleasantly conscious of the size and weight of the American wardrobe trunk that reared its mighty frame in front of her almost to the blotting-out of the driver, who steadied it with one hand as he plied the whip with the other. It struck her humorously that the trunk was larger than most of the cottages they were passing.

It was a late spring that year in England,—Robinette was a new-comer and did not know that England runs to late and wet springs, believing that they make more conversation than early, fine ones,—and the trees were just bursting into leaf. The sun had not shone for three days and the landscape, for all its beautiful greenness, looked gloomy to an eye accustomed to a good deal of crude sunshine.

As the horse mounted higher and higher Robinette glanced out of the windows at the dripping boughs and her face lost something of its sparkle of anticipation. She had little to expect in the way of a warm welcome, she knew that; or at least her mind knew it, but Robinette's heart always expected surprises, although she had lived two and twenty summers and was a widow at that.

Her mother had been a de Tracy of Stoke Revel whose connection with that ancient family had ceased abruptly when she met an

American architect while traveling on the Continent, married him out of hand and went to his native New England with him. The de Tracys had no opinion of America, its government, its institutions, its customs, or its people, and when they learned that Cynthia de Tracy had not only allied herself with this undesirable nation, but had selected a native by the name of Harold Bean, they regarded the incident of the marriage as closed.

The union had been a happy one, though the de Tracys of Stoke Revel had always regarded the unfortunately named architect more as a vegetable than a human being; and the daughter of the marriage was the young Mrs. Loring now driving in the station fly to the home of her mother's people.

Her father had died when she was fifteen and her mother followed three years after, leaving her with a respectable fortune but no relations; the entire family (happily, Mrs. de Tracy would have said) having died out with Harold. Robinette was unspeakably lonely, even with her hundred friends, for there was enough English blood in her to make her cry out inwardly for kith and kin, for family ties, for all the dear familiar backgrounds of hearth and home. Had a welcoming hand been stretched across the sea she would have flown at once to make acquaintance with the de Tracys, cold and indifferent as they had always been, but no bidding ever came, and the picture of the Manor House of Stoke Revel on her dressing-table was the only reminder of her connection with that ancient and honourable house.

It is not difficult to see, under the circumstances, how the nineteen-year-old Robinette became the wife of the first man in whom she inspired a serious passion.

It is incredible that women should confuse the passive process of being loved with the active process of loving, but it occurs nevertheless, and Robinette drifted into marriage with the vaguest possible notions of what it meant; feeling and knowing that she

needed something, and supposing it must be a husband. It was better fortune, perhaps, than she merited, and equally kind for both parties, that her husband died before either of them realized the tragic mistake. David Loring was too absorbed in his own emotions to note the absence of full response on the part of his wife; Robinette was too much a child and too inexperienced to be conscious of her own lack of feeling.

It was death, not life, that opened her eyes. When David Loring lay in his coffin, Robinette's heart was suddenly seized with growing pains. Her vision widened; words and promises took on a new and larger meaning, and she became a serious woman for her years, although there was an ineradicable gaiety of spirit in her that needed only sunshine to make it the dominant note of her nature.

At the moment, Robinette, in the station fly on her way to Stoke Revel, was only in the making, although she herself considered her life as practically finished. The past and the present were moulding her into something that only the future could determine. Sometimes April, sometimes July, sometimes witch, sometimes woman; impetuous, intrepid, romantic, tempestuous, illogical,—these were but the elements of which the coming years of experience had yet to shape a character. Young Mrs. Loring had plenty of briars, but she had good roots and in favorable soil would be certain to bear roses.

But in the immediate present, the fly with the immense American wardrobe trunk beside the driver, turned into the avenue of Stoke Revel, and Mrs. David Loring bestowed upon herself those little feminine attentions which precede arrival—pattings of the hair behind the ears, twitches of the veil, and pullings down about the waist and sleeves. A little toy of a purse made of golden chainwork, hanging from her wrist, was searched for the driver's fare, and it had hardly snapped to again when the fly drew up before the entrance to the house. How interesting it looked! Robinette put her head out of the carriage window and gazed up at the long row of windows, the old

weather-coloured stones, and the carved front of the building. Here was a house where things might happen, she thought, and her young heart gave a sudden bound of anticipation.

But the door was shut, alas! and a blank feeling came over Robinette as she looked at it. Some one perhaps would come out and welcome her, she thought for a brief moment, but only the butler appeared, who, with the formal announcement of her name, ushered her into a long, low room with a row of windows on one side and a pleasant old-fashioned look of comfort and habitation. She caught a glimpse of a tea-table with a steaming urn upon it, heard the furious barking of a little dog, saw that there were two figures in the room and moved instinctively towards the one beside the window, the figure in weeds, neither very tall nor very imposing, yet somehow formidable.

"How do you do?" said an icy voice, and a chill hand held hers for a moment, but did not press it. The colour in Robinette's cheeks paled and then rushed back, as she drew herself up unconsciously.

"I am very well, thank you, Aunt de Tracy," she answered with commendable composure.

"This is my friend and companion, Miss Smeardon," continued Mrs. de Tracy, advancing to the tea-table where that useful personage officiated. "Mrs. David Loring—Miss Smeardon." Miss Smeardon had the dog upon her lap, yapping, clashing his teeth together, and obviously thirsting for the visitor's blood. He was quieted with soothing words, and Robinette seated herself innocently in the nearest chair, beside the table.

"Excuse me!" the companion said with a slight cough; "Mrs. de Tracy's chair! Do you mind taking another?" There was something disagreeable in her voice, and in Mrs. de Tracy's deliberate scrutiny something so nearly insulting that a childish impulse to cry then and there suddenly seized upon Robinette. This was her mother's home—and no kiss had welcomed her to it, no kind word! There

were perfunctory questions about her journey, references to the coldness and lateness of the spring, enquiries after the health of Maria Spalding (whose mother was a Gallup), but no claiming of kinship, no naming of her mother's name nor of her native country! Robinette's ardent spirit had felt sorrow, but it had never met rebuff nor known injustice, and the sudden stir of revolt at her heart was painful with an almost physical pain.

After a long drawn hour of this social torture, Mrs. de Tracy rang, and a hard-featured elderly maid appeared.

"Show Mrs. Loring to her room, Benson," said the mistress of the house, "and help her to unpack."

Robinette followed her conductor upstairs with a sinking heart. Oh! but the chill of this English spring was in her bones, and the coldness of a reception so frigid that her passionate young spirit almost rebelled on the spot, prompting wild ideas and impulsive impossibilities; even a flight to her mother's old nurse—to Lizzie Prettyman, so often lovingly described, with her little thatched cottage beyond the river! Surely she would find the welcome there that was lacking here, and the touch of human kindness that one craved in a foreign land. But no! Robinette called to her aid her strong American common sense and the "grit" that her countrymen admire. Was she to confess herself routed in the very first onset—the very first attempt in storming the ancestral stronghold? With a characteristically quick return of hope, the Admiral's niece exclaimed, "Certainly not!"

IV

A CHILLY RECEPTION

Mrs. Benson approached the wardrobe trunk with the air of a person who has taken an immediate and violent dislike to an object.

“We have all looked at your box, ma’am, but I am sorry to say we are not sure that it is set up properly. It is very different from any we have ever seen at the Manor, and the men had some difficulty in getting it up to the room. I fancy it is upside down, is it not? No? We rather thought it was. I would call the boot-and-knife boy to unlock it, but he jammed his hand in attempting to force the catches, and I thought you would be kind enough to instruct me how to open it, perhaps?”

“I am quite able to do it myself,” said Robinette, keeping down a hysterical laugh. “See how easily it goes when you know the secret!” and she deftly turned her key in two locks one after the other, let down the mysterious façade of the affair, and pulled out an extraordinary rack on which hung so many dresses and wraps that Mrs. Benson lost her breath in surprise.

“Would you like me to carry some of your things into another room, ma’am?” she asked. “They will never go in the wardrobe; it is only a plain English wardrobe, ma’am. We have never had any American guests.”

“The things needn’t be moved,” said Robinette, “many of them will be quite convenient where they are;—and now you need not trouble about me; I am well used to helping myself, if you will be kind enough

to come in just before dinner for a moment."

Mrs. Benson disappeared below stairs, where she regaled the injured boot-and-knife boy and the female servants with the first instalment of what was destined to be the most dramatic and sensational serial story ever told at the Manor House.

"The lid of the box don't lift up," she explained, "like all the box lids as ever I saw, and me with Lady Chitterton for six years, traveling constantly. The front of the thing splits in the middle and the bottom half falls on the floor. A heathenish kind of tray lifts off from its hinges like a door, and a clothes rack pulls out on runners. 'T is a sight to curdle your blood; and the number of dresses she's brought would make her out to be richer than Crusoe!—though I have heard from a cousin of mine who was in service in America that the ladies over there spend every penny they can rake and scrape on their clothes. Their husbands may work their fingers to the bone, and their parents be in the workhouse, but fine frocks they will have!"

"Rather!" said the boot-and-knife boy, nursing his injured thumb.

On the departure of Mrs. Benson from her room, Robinette gave a stifled shriek in which laughter and tears were equally mingled. Then she flew like a lapwing to the fire-place and lifted off a fan of white paper from the grate.

"No possibility of help there!" she exclaimed. "Cold within, cold without! How shall I unpack? How shall I dress? How shall I live without a fire? Ah! here is the coal box! Empty! Empty, and it is only the month of April! 'Oh! to be in England now that April's there!' How could Browning write that line without his teeth chattering! How well I understand the desire of the British to keep India and South Africa! They must have some place to go where they can get warm! Now for unpacking, or any sort of manual labour which will put my frozen blood in circulation!"

Slapping her hands, beating her breast, stamping her feet, Mrs.

Loring removed a few dresses from the offending trunk to the mahogany wardrobe, and disposed her effects neatly in the drawers of bureau and highboy.

"I have made a mistake at the very beginning," she thought. "I supposed nothing could be too pretty for the Manor House and now I am afraid my worst is too fine. The Manor House of Stoke Revel! Wouldn't that appeal to anyone's imagination? Now what for to-night? White satin with crystal? Back you go into the trunk! Back goes the silver grey chiffon! I'll have it re-hung over flannel! Avaunt! heliotrope velvet with amethyst spangles, made with a view to ensnaring the High Church clergy! I wish I had a princess dress of moleskin with a court train of squirrel hanging from the shoulders! Here is the thing; my black Liberty satin two years old. I will cover part of my exposed neck and shoulders with a fichu of lace; my black silk openwork stockings will be drawn on over a pair of balbriggans, and the number of petticoats I shall don would discourage a Scotch fishwife! To-morrow I'll write Mrs. Spalding's maid to buy me two hot-water bottles, mittens, a box of quinine tablets and a Shetland shawl.... What are these—*fans?* Retire into the depths of that tray and never look me in the face again!... *Parasols?* I wonder at your impertinence in coming here! I shall give you cod liver oil and make you grow into umbrellas!"

Presently the dinner gong growled through the house, and Robinette, still shivering, flung across her shoulders a shimmering scarf of white and silver. It fell over her simple black dress in just the right way, adding a last touch to the somewhat exotic grace which made her a stranger in her mother's home. Then she fled down the darkening passages, instinctively aware that unpunctuality was a crime in this house. Yet in spite of her haste, she paused before the window of an upper lobby, arrested by the scene it framed. Heavy rain still fell, and the light, made greenish by the nearness of great trees just coming into leaf, was cheerless and singularly cold. But that could not mar the majesty of the outlook which made the Manor of Stoke Revel, on its

height, unique. Far below the house, the broad river slipped towards the sea, between woods that rose tier upon tier above and beyond—woods of beech and of oak, not yet green, but purplish under the rainy mist. On the bank, woods too, and here, where the river, in excess of strength, swirled into a creek—a shining sand-bank where fishing nets were hung. Then the low, strong tower of a church, with the sombreness of cypress beside it, and the thatched roofs of cottages.

Something stirred in the heart of Robinette as she looked, that part of her blood which her English mother had given her. This scene, so indescribably English as hardly to be imaginable in another land, had been painted for her again and again by her mother with all the retrospective romance of an exile's touch. She knew it, but she did not know if she could ever love it, beautiful though it was and noble.

But she banished these misgivings and ran down the twisted stairway so fast that she was almost panting when she reached the drawing-room door.

"I will take your arm, please," said the hostess coldly, while Miss Smeardon wore the virtuous and injured air of one who has been kept waiting. Mrs. de Tracy laid, on the warm and smooth arm of her guest, one of her small, dry hands, sparkling with rings, and the procession closed with the companion and the lap-dog.

In the dining room, the shutters were closed, and the candles, in branching candlesticks of silver, only partially lit a room long and low like the other. The walls were darkened with pictures, and Robinette's bright eyes searched them eagerly.

"The Sir Joshua is not here!" she thought. "And it was not in the drawing room. Has Aunt de Tracy given, or hidden it away—my very own name-picture?"

With all her determination, Robinette somehow could not summon courage enough to ask where this picture was. Such a question would involve the mention of her mother's name, and from that she shrank.

Young Mrs. Loring had never before found herself in a society where conversation was apparently regarded as a crime, and to fit herself to her environment, under the scrutiny of Mrs. de Tracy and the decidedly inimical looks of the companion, took all her time. A burden of self-consciousness lay upon her such as her light and elastic spirit had never known. She found herself morbidly observant of minute details; the pattern of the tablecloth; the crest upon the spoons; the curious red knobs upon Miss Smeardon's fingers, and the odd mincing way she held her fork; the almost athletic efforts of the butler when he raised an enormous silver dish-cover, and the curiously frugal and unappetizing nature of the viand it disclosed. The wizened face of the lap-dog, too, peering over the table's edge, out of Miss Smeardon's lap, might have acquired its distrustful expression, Robinette thought, from habitual doubts as to whether enough to eat would ever be his good fortune. The meal ended with the ceremonious presentation to each lady in turn, of three wrinkled apples and two crooked bananas in a probably priceless dish of Crown Derby. Then the procession re-formed and returned to the drawing room.

"And the evening and the morning were the first day!" sighed Robinette to herself in the chilly solitude of her own room. How often could she endure the repetition?

V

AT WITTISHAM

“May I have a fire to dress by, Benson?” Robinette asked rather timidly that night, her head just peeping above the blankets.

“*Fire*?” returned Benson, in italics, with an interrogation point.

Robinette longed to spell the word and ask Benson if it had ever come to her notice before, but she stifled her desire and said, “I am quite ashamed, Benson, but you see I am not used to the climate yet. If you’ll pamper me just a little at the beginning, I shall behave better presently.”

“I will give orders for a fire night and morning, certainly, ma’am,” said Benson. “I did not offer it because our ladies never have one in their bedrooms at this time of the year. Mrs. de Tracy is very strong and active for her age.”

“It’s my opinion she’s a w’eedler,” remarked Benson at the housekeeper’s luncheon table. “She asks for what she wants like a child. She has a pretty way with her, I can’t deny that, but is she a w’eedler?”

Wheedler or not, Robinette got her fire to dress by, and so was able to come down in the morning feeling tolerably warm. It was well that she was, for the cold tea and tough toast of the de Tracy breakfast had little in them to warm the heart. Conversation languished during the meal, and after a walk to the stables Robinette was thankful to return to her own room again on the pretext of writing letters. There

she piled up the fire, drew her chair close up to the hearth, and employed herself until noon, when she took her embroidery and joined her aunt in the drawing room. Luncheon was announced at half past one, and immediately after it Mrs. de Tracy and Miss Smeardon went to their respective bedrooms for rest.

“Are there indeed only twelve hours in the day?” Robinette asked herself desperately as she heard the great, solemn-toned hall clock strike two. It seemed quite impossible that it could be only two; the whole afternoon had still to be accounted for, and how? Well, she might look over her clothes again, re-arranging them in all their dainty variety in the wardrobe and drawers; she might put tissue paper into the sleeves of each bodice, smoothing out every crease; she might even find that some tiny repairs were needed! There were three new hats, and several pairs of new gloves to be tried on; her accounts must be made up, her cheque book balanced; yet all these things would take but a short time. Then the hall clock struck three.

“I must go out,” she thought.

Coming through the hall from her room Robinette met her aunt and Miss Smeardon descending the staircase.

“We are driving this afternoon,” said Mrs. de Tracy, “would you not like to come with us?”

The thought turned Robinette to stone: she had visited the stables, and seen the coachman lead what seemed to her a palsied horse out into the yard. Her sympathetic allusion to the supposed condition of the steed had not been well received, for the man had given her to understand that this was the one horse of the establishment, but Robinette had vowed never to sit behind it.

“I think I’d rather walk, Aunt de Tracy,” she said, “I’d like to go and see my mother’s old nurse, Mrs. Prettyman. Can I do any errands for you?”

“None, thank you. To go to Wittisham you have to cross the ferry,

remember."

"Oh! that must be simple! you may be sure I shall not lose myself!" said Robinette.

Both the older women looked curiously at her for a moment; then Mrs. de Tracy said:—

"You will kindly not use the public ferry; the footman will row you across to Wittisham at any hour you may mention to him."

"Oh, but Aunt de Tracy, I'd really prefer the public ferry."

"Nonsense, impossible; the footman shall row you," said Mrs. de Tracy with finality.

Robinette said nothing; she hated the idea of the footman, but it seemed inevitable. "Am I never to get away from their dullnesses?" she thought. "A public ferry sounds quite lively in place of being rowed by William!"

When the shore was reached, however, Robinette discovered that the passage across the river in a leaky little boat, rowed by a painfully inexperienced servant, was almost too much for her. To see him fumbling with the oars, made her tingle to take them herself; she could not abide the irritation of a return journey with such a boatman. This determination was hastened when she saw that instead of the three-decker steamer of her native land, the ferry at Wittisham was just like an ordinary row-boat; that one rang a bell hanging from a picturesque tower; that a nice young man with a sprig of wallflower in his cap rowed one across, and that each passenger handed out a penny to him on the farther side.

"How enchantingly quaint!" she cried. "William, you can go home; I shall return by the public ferry."

William looked surprised but only replied, "Very good, ma'am."

On warm summer afternoons the tiny square of Mrs. Prettyman's

garden made as delightful a place to sit in as one could wish. There was sunshine on the turf, and a thin shade was cast by the drooping boughs of the plum tree; just enough to shelter old eyes from the glare. When she was very tired with doing her work Mrs. Prettyman would totter out into the garden. She was getting terribly lame now, yet afraid to acknowledge it, knowing, with the desperate wisdom of poverty, that once to give in, very often ended in giving up altogether. So her lameness was 'blamed on the weather,' 'blamed on scrubbing the floor,' blamed on anything rather than the tragic, incurable fact of old age. This afternoon her rheumatism had been specially bad: she had an inclination to cry out when she rose from her chair, and every step was an effort. Yet the sunshine was tempting; it warmed old and aching bones through and through as no fire could do; and Mrs. Prettyman thought she must make the effort to go out.

She had just arrived at this conclusion, when a tap came to the door.

"That you, Mrs. Darke?" she called out in her piping old voice. "Come in, me dear, I'm that stiff with me rheumatics to-day I can't scarce rise out of me chair."

"It's not Mrs. Darke," said Robinette, stooping to enter through the tiny doorway. "It's a stranger, Mrs. Prettyman, come all the way from America to see you."

"Lor' now, Miss, whoever may you be?" the old woman cried, making as if she would rise from her chair. But Robinette caught her arm and made her sit still.

"Don't get up; please sit right there where you are, and I'll take this chair beside you. Now, Mrs. Prettyman, look at me hard, and tell me if you know who I am."

The old woman gazed into Robinette's face, and then a light seemed to break over her.

"It's Miss Cynthia's daughter you are!" she cried. "My Miss Cynthia as

went and married in America!”

She caught Robinette’s white ringed hands in hers, and Robinette bent down and kissed the wrinkled old face.

“I know that mother loved you, Nurse,” she said. “She used often, often to tell me about you.”

After the fashion of old people, Mrs. Prettyman was too much moved to speak. Her face worked all over, and then slow tears began to run down her furrowed cheeks. She got up from her chair and walked across the uneven floor, leaning on a stick.

“I’ve something here, Miss, I’ve something here; something I never parts with,” she said. A tall chest of drawers stood against the wall, and the old woman began to search among its contents as she spoke. At last she found a little kid shoe, laid away in a handkerchief.

“See here, Miss! here’s my Miss Cynthia’s shoe! ’T was tied on to my wedding coach the day I got married and left her. My ’usband ’e laughed at me cruel because I’d have that shoe with me; but I’ve kept it ever since.”

Robinette came and stood beside her, and they both wept together over the silly little shoe.

“I want to talk a great deal to you, Nurse; I want to tell you all about mother and father, and how they died,” said Robinette through her tears. How strange that she should have to come to this cottage and to this poor old woman before she found anyone to whom she could speak of her beloved dead! Her heart was so full that she could scarcely speak. A crowd of memories rushed into her mind; last scenes and parting words; those innumerable unforgettable details that are printed once for all upon the heart that loves and feels.

“I’d like to tell you about it out of doors, Nurse dear,” she said tearfully; “can you come out under the plum tree in your garden? It’s lovely there.”

“Yes, dearie, yes, we’ll come out under the plum tree, we will,” echoed Mrs. Prettyman.

“See, Nursie, take my arm, I’ll help you out into the warm sunshine,” Robinette said.

They progressed very slowly, the old woman leaning with all her weight upon the arm of her strong young helper. Then under the flickering shade of the tree they sat down together for their talk.

So much to tell, so much to hear, the afternoon slipped away unknown to them, and still they were sitting there hand in hand talking and listening; sometimes crying a little, sometimes laughing; a queerly assorted couple, these new-made friends.

But when all the recollections had been talked over and wept over, when Mrs. Prettyman had told Robinette, with the extraordinary detail that old people can put into their memories of long ago, all that she remembered of Cynthia de Tracy’s childhood, then Robinette began to question the old woman about her own life. Was she comfortable? Was she tolerably well off? Or had she difficulty in making ends meet?

To these questions Mrs. Prettyman made valiant answers: she had a fine spirit, and no wish to let a stranger see the skeleton in the cupboard. But Robinette’s quick instinct pierced through the veil of well-meant bravery and touched the truth.

“Nurse dear,” she said, “you say you’re comfortable, and well off, but you won’t mind my telling you that I just don’t quite believe you.”

“Oh, my dear heart, what’s that you be sayin’? callin’ of me a liar?” chuckled the old woman fondly.

Robinette rose from her seat on the bench and stood back to scrutinize the cottage. It was exquisitely picturesque, but this very picturesqueness constituted its danger; for the place was a perfect death trap. The crumbling cob-walls that had taken on those wonderful

patches of green colour, soaked in the damp like a sponge: the irregularity of the thatched roof that looked so well, admitted trickles of rain on wet nights; and the uneven mud floor of the kitchen revealed the fact that the cottage had been built without any proper foundation. The door did not fit, and in cold weather a knife-like draught must run in under it. All this Robinette's quick, practical glance took in; she gave a little nod or two, murmuring to herself, "A new thatch roof, a new door, a new cement floor." Then she came and sat down again.

"Tell me now, how much do you have to live on every week, Nurse?" she asked.

"Oh, Miss Robinette—ma'am, I should say—'t is wonderful how I gets on; and then there's the plum tree—just see the flourish on it, Missie dear! 'T will have a crop o' plums come autumn will about drag down the boughs! I don't know how 't would be with me without I had the plum tree."

"Do you really make something by it?" Robinette asked.

The old woman chuckled again. "To be sure I makes; makes jam every autumn; a sight o' jam. Come inside again, me dear, an' see me jam cupboard and you'll know."

She hobbled into the kitchen, and opened the door of a wall press in the corner. There, row above row stood a solid phalanx of jam pots; it seemed as if a whole town might be supplied out of Mrs. Prettyman's cupboard.

"'T is well thought of, me jam," the old woman said, grinning with pleasure. "I be very careful in the preparing of 'en; gets a penny the pound more for me jam than others, along of its being so fine."

Robinette was charmed to see that here Mrs. Prettyman had a reliable source of income, however slender.

"How much do you reckon to get from it every year?" she asked.

“Going five pounds, dear: four pounds fifteen shillings and sixpence, last autumn; and please the Lord there’s a better crop this season, so ’t will be the clear five pounds. Oh! I do be loving me plum tree like a friend, I do.”

They turned back into the sunshine again, that Robinette should admire this wonderful tree-friend once more. She stood under its shadow with great delight, as the Bible says, gazing up through the intricate network of boughs and blossom to the cloudless blue above her.

“It’s heavenly, Nurse, just heavenly!” she sighed as she came and sat down beside the old woman again.

“Then there’s me duck too, Missie! Lard, now I don’t know how I’d be without I had me duck. Duckie I calls ’er and Duckie she is; company she is, too, to me mornin’s, with her ‘Quack, Quack,’ under the winder.”

So the old woman prattled on, giving Robinette all the history of her life, with its tiny joys and many struggles, till it seemed to the listener that she had always known Mrs. Prettyman, the plum tree, and her duck—known them and loved them, all three.

VI

MARK LAVENDAR

Hundreds of years ago the street of Stoke Revel village, if street it could be called, and the tower of the ancient church, must have looked very much the same as now.

On such a day, when the oak woods were budding, and the English birds singing, and the spring sun was hot in a clear sky, a knight riding down the steep lane would have taken the same turn to the left on his way to the Manor. Were he a young man, he would probably have reined up his horse for a moment, and looked, as Mark Lavendar did now, at the blithe landscape before him. Only then the accessories would have been so different: the great horse, somewhat tired by long hours of riding, the armour that glinted in the sun, the casque pushed up to let the fresh air play upon the rider's face; such a figure must have often stood just at that turn where the lane wound up the little hill. The landscape was the same, and young men in all ages are very much the same, so—although this one had merely arrived by train, and walked from the nearest station—Mark Lavendar stopped and leaned over the low wall when he came to the turn of the road, and looked down at the river.

He boasted no war horse nor armour; none of the trappings of the older world added to his distinction, and yet he was a very pleasing figure of a man.

The gaunt brown face was quite hard and solemn in expression; ugly, but not commonplace, for as a friend once said of him, "His eyes

seem to belong to another person." It was not this, but only that the eyes, blue as Saint Veronica's flower, showed suddenly a different aspect of the man, an unexpected tenderness that flatly contradicted the hard features of his face. He looked very nice when he laughed too, so that most people when they had found out the trick, tried to make him laugh as often as possible.

"What a day! Heavens! what a lovely day," he said to himself as he leaned on the low wall. "I want to be courting Amaryllis somewhere in these woods, and instead I've got to go and talk business with that old woman;" and he looked ruefully towards the Manor House; for this was not his first visit by any means, and he knew only too well the hours of boredom that awaited him. Mrs. de Tracy, strange to say, had a soft side towards this young man, the son of her family solicitor. Mark was invariably sent down by his father when there was any business to be transacted at Stoke Revel. The older man was fond of a good dinner, and hated circumlocution about affairs, and it was only when a death in the family, or some other crucial event, made his presence absolutely necessary that he came down himself. Mark was sacrificed instead, and many a wearisome hour had he spent in that house. However on this occasion he had been glad enough to get out of London for a while; the country was divine, and even the de Tracy business did not occupy the whole day. There would be hours on the river; afternoons spent riding along those green lanes through which he had just passed, where the banks were starred with little vivid flowers. Mark had an almost childish delight in such beauty. He had loitered on the way along, flung himself down on a bank for a few minutes, and burying his face amongst the flowers, listened with a smile upon his mouth to the birds that chirruped in the branches of the oak above him.

Now he leaned on the low wall, and gazed at the shining reaches of the river. "What a day!" he said to himself again. "What a divine afternoon"; then he added quite simply, "I wish I were in love; everyone

under eighty ought to be, on such a day!”

Even at the age of thirty most men of any personal attractions have some romantic memories. Lavendar had his share, but somehow that morning he was disconcertingly candid to himself. It may have been the sudden change from London air and London noise; something in the clear transparency of the April day, in the flute-like melody of the birds’ song, in the dream-like beauty of the scene before him, that made all the moth and rust that had consumed the remembrances of the past more apparent. There was little of the treasure of heaven there,—it had mostly been nonsense or vanity or worse. He wanted, oh, how he wanted, to be able just for once to surrender himself to what was absolutely ideal; to have a memory when he was an old man, of something that had no fault in it.

“No, I’ve never been really in love,” he said to himself, “I may as well confess it; and I daresay I never shall be, but marry on an impulse like most men, make the best of it afterwards, and have a sort of middle-class happiness in the end of the day.”

“One, Two, Three,” said the church clock from the ancient tower, booming out the note, and Lavendar started, and rubbed his hands across his dazzled eyes. “Luncheon is a late meal in that awful house, if I remember,” he said, “but it must be over by this time. I really must go in. Let me collect my thoughts; the business is ‘just things in general,’ but especially the sale of some cottage or other and the land it stands on. Yes, yes, I remember; the papers are all right. Now for the old ladies.”

He made his entrance into the Manor drawing room a few minutes later with a charming smile.

Mrs. de Tracy actually walked a few steps to meet him, with a greeting less frigid than usual.

“I’m glad to see you, Mark,” said she. “Bates said you preferred to walk from the station.”

Mark turned his kind eyes on Miss Smeardon, and held her knuckly hand in his own almost tenderly. It was a very bad habit, which had led to some mischief in the past, that when he was sorry for a thing he wanted to be very kind to it; and this made him unusually pleasing, and dangerous!

“Business first and pleasure afterwards; excellent maxim!” he said to himself half an hour later, as he removed the dust of travel from his person, preparatory to an interview with Mrs. de Tracy. “Now for it!”

He liked the drawing room at Stoke Revel and always wished it had other occupants when he entered it. This afternoon it seemed particularly agreeable, the open windows letting in the slanting sunshine and a strong scent of jonquils and sweet briar.

“Well, Mrs. de Tracy,” said Mark, “I am my father’s spokesman, you know, and we have serious business to discuss. But tell me first, how’s my young friend Carnaby?”

“Thank you; my grandson has a severe attack of quinsy,” replied Mrs. de Tracy. “He is to have sick-leave whenever the Endymion returns to Portsmouth.”

“Oh! Carnaby will make short work of an attack of quinsy,” said Lavendar, genially.

“It would please me better,” retorted Mrs. de Tracy severely, “if my grandson showed signs of mental improvement as well as bodily health. His letters are ill-spelled, ill-written, and ill-expressed. They are the letters of a school-boy.”

“He is not much more than a school-boy, is he?” suggested Mark, “only fifteen! The mental improvement will come; too soon, for my taste. I like Carnaby as he is!”

The young man had seated himself beside his hostess in an attitude of perfect ease. Though bored by his present environment, he was entirely at home in it. Just because he greatly dared towards her and

was never afraid, Mrs. de Tracy liked him. With the mere flicker of an eyelid, she dismissed the attendant Smeardon.

“There has been an offer for the land at Wittisham,” Lavendar said, when they were alone.

Mrs. de Tracy winced. “That is no matter of congratulation with me,” she said bleakly.

“But it is with us, for it is a most excellent one!” returned the young man hardily. “The firm has had the responsibility of advising the sale, which we consider absolutely unavoidable in the present financial condition of Stoke Revel. We have advertised for a year, and advertisement is costly. Now comes an offer of a somewhat peculiar kind, but sound enough.” Lavendar here produced a bundle of documents tied with the traditional red tape. “An artist,” he continued, “Waller, R. A.—you know the name?”

“I do not,” interpolated Mrs. de Tracy grimly.

“Nevertheless, a well known painter,” persisted Mark, “and one, as it happens, of the orchard scenery of this part of England. He has known Wittisham for a long time, and only last year he made a success with the painting of a plum tree which grows in front of one of the cottages. It was sold for a large sum, and, as a matter of sentiment, I suppose, Waller wishes to buy the cottage and make it into a summer retreat or studio for himself.”

“He cannot buy it,” said Mrs. de Tracy with the snort of a war horse.

“He cannot buy it apart from the land,” insinuated Mark, “but he is flush of cash and ready to buy the land too—very nearly as much as we want to sell, and the bargain merely waits your consent. The sum that has been agreed upon is of the kind that a man in the height of his triumph offers for a fancy article. No such sum will ever be offered for land at Wittisham again; old orchard land, falling into desuetude as it is and covered with condemned cottages.”

Mrs. de Tracy was sternly silent, and Mark awaited her next words with some curiosity. He felt like a torturer drawing the tooth of a Jew in the good old days. This sale of land was a bitter pill to the widow, as it well might be, for it was the beginning of the end, as the de Tracy solicitors could have told you. There had been de Tracys of Stoke Revel since Queen Elizabeth's time, but there would not be de Tracys of Stoke Revel much longer,—unless young Carnaby married an heiress when he came of age—and that no de Tracy had ever done.

"The land across the river," Mrs. de Tracy said at last, "was the first land the de Tracys held, but much of it went at the Restoration. Well, let this go too!" she added harshly.

Mark blessed himself that indecision was no part of the lady's character and sighed with relief. "My father would like to know," he said, "what you propose to do with regard to the old woman who is the present tenant of the cottage."

"Elizabeth Prettyman is not a tenant," said Mrs. de Tracy coldly. "She is practically a pensioner, since she lives rent-free."

"True, I forgot," said Mark soothingly. "I beg your pardon."

"Do not suppose that it is by my wish," continued Mrs. de Tracy coldly. "I have never approved of supporting the peasantry in idleness. This woman happened to be for some years nurse to Cynthia de Tracy, my husband's younger sister, who deeply offended her family by marrying an American named Bean. I see no claim in that to a pension of any kind."

"But your husband saw it, I imagine," interpolated Mark quietly, and Mrs. de Tracy gave him a fierce look, which he met, however, without a sign of flinching.

"My husband had a mistaken idea that Prettyman was poor when she became a widow," said Mrs. de Tracy. "On the contrary she had relations quite well able to support her, I believe. I never cross the

river, in these days, and the matter has escaped my memory, so that things have been left as they were."

"No great loss," said Mark candidly, "since the cottage in its present state is utterly unfit for any tenant. As to Prettyman, is it your intention to give her notice to quit?"

"Unquestionably, since the cottage is needed," answered Mrs. de Tracy. "She has occupied it too long as it is." The speaker's lips closed like a vice over the words.

"God pity Elizabeth Prettyman!" ejaculated Lavendar to himself. "Might is Right still, apparently, at Stoke Revel!" Aloud he merely said, "A weak deference to public opinion was never a foible of yours, Mrs. de Tracy; but I think I would advise you to consider some question of compensation to Mrs. Prettyman for the loss of the cottage."

"If you can show me that the woman has any legal claim upon the estate, I will consider the question, but not otherwise," said Mrs. de Tracy with such an air of finality that Lavendar was inclined to let the matter drop for the moment.

"The firm," he said, "will communicate your wishes to Mrs. Prettyman by letter."

"Prettyman cannot read," snapped Mrs. de Tracy. "She must be told, and the sooner the better."

"Well, Mrs. de Tracy," said the young man with a short laugh, "provided it is not I who have to tell her, well and good. I warn you the task would not be to my taste unless compensation were offered her."

Mrs. de Tracy's features hardened to a degree unusual even to her.

"I am apparently less tender-hearted than you," she said sardonically. "I shall, if I think fit, deal with Prettyman in person." The subject was dropped, and Lavendar rose to leave the room, but Mrs. de Tracy detained him.

“The Admiral’s niece, Mrs. David Loring, is my guest at present,” she said. “It happens that she has crossed the river to Wittisham and is paying a visit to Prettyman. I should be obliged, Mark, if you would row across and fetch her back, as by some misunderstanding, my servant has not waited for her. You are an oarsman, I know.”

The young man consented with alacrity. “I shall kill two birds with one stone,” he said cheerfully, “I shall visit the famous plum tree cottage and see Mrs. Prettyman for myself; and I shall have the privilege of executing your commission as Mrs. Loring’s escort. It sounds a very agreeable one!”

“You have no time to lose,” said Mrs. de Tracy with a glance at the clock.

VII

A CROSS-EXAMINATION

Lavendar escaped from the house, where, even in the smoke-room, it seemed unregenerate to light a cigar, and took the path to the shore.

“I wonder if one woman staying in a house full of men would find life as depressing as I do cooped up here under precisely opposite circumstances,” he thought, as he made his way through the little churchyard. “It cannot be the atmosphere of femininity that bores me, however, for Mrs. de Tracy has a strongly masculine flavour and Miss Smeardon is as nearly neuter as a person can be.”

He took a couple of oars from the boat-house as he passed, and going to the little landing stage untied the boat and started for the farther shore.

It was good to feel the water parting under his vigorous strokes and delightful to exert his strength after the hours of stifled irritation at the Manor. It was a bright, calm close of day, when in the rarefied evening air each sound began to acquire the sharpness that marks the hour. He could hear the rush of the waters behind the boat and the voices of the fishers farther up the stream. As he drew up to the bank and took in his oars the stillness was so great that you could have heard a pin fall, when suddenly from a tree above him a bird broke into one little finished song and then was still, as if it had uttered all it wished to say.

“What a heavenly evening!” thought Lavendar, “and what a lovely spot! That must be the cottage just above me. Mrs. de Tracy said I should

know it by the plum tree. Ah, there it is!" Tying up the boat he sprang up the steps and walked along the flagged path. The plum tree these last few days had begun to look its fairest. The blossoms did not yet conceal the leaves, but it was a very bower of beauty already. There was a little table spread for tea under its branches, and an old woman like thousands of old women in thousands of cottages all over England, was sitting behind it, precisely as if she had been a coloured illustration in a summer number of an English weekly. She was on the typical bench in the typical attitude, but instead of the typical old man in a clean smock frock who should have occupied the end of the bench, there sat beside her a distinctly lovely young woman. What struck Lavendar was the wealth of colour she brought into the picture: goldy brown hair, brown tweed dress, with a cape of blue cloth slipping off her shoulders, and a brown toque with a pert upstanding quill that seemed to express spirit and pluck, and a merry heart. His quick glance took in the little hands that held the withered old ones. Both heads were bowed and in the brown tweed lap was a child's shoe,—a wee, worn, fat shoe. Beside it lay an absurd bit of crumpled, tear-soaked embroidery that had been intended to do duty as a handkerchief but had evidently proved quite unseaworthy.

Waddling about on the flags close to the little table was a large fat duck wearing a look of inexpressible greed. "*Quack, quack, quack*!" it said, waddling off angrily as Lavendar approached.

At the sound of the duck's raucous voice both the women looked up.

"Is this Mrs. Prettyman's cottage, ma'am?" Lavendar asked with his charming smile.

"Yes, sir, 't is indeed, and who may you be, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"I'm Mr. Lavendar, Mrs. de Tracy's lawyer, Mrs. Prettyman. I'm come to do some business at Stoke Revel," he added, for the old face had clouded over, and Mrs. Prettyman's whole expression changed to one

of timid mistrust. “I really was sent by Mrs. de Tracy,” he went on, turning to Robinette, “to take you home; Mrs. Loring, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I am Mrs. Loring,” she said, frankly holding out her hand to him. “I knew you were expected at Stoke Revel, but I sent the footman back myself. He spoils the scenery and the river altogether.”

“I’ve got a boat down there; Mrs. de Tracy doesn’t quite like your taking the ferry; may I have the honour of rowing you across? My orders were to bring you back as soon as possible.”

“I’m blest if I hurry,” was his unspoken comment as Robinette gaily agreed, and, having bidden good-bye to the old woman, with a quick caress that astonished him a good deal, she laid down the little shoe gently upon the bench, and turned to accompany him to the boat.

The river was like a looking-glass; the air like balm. “We’ll take some time getting across, against the tide,” said Lavendar reflectively, as he resolved that the little voyage should be prolonged to its fullest possible extent. He was not going into the Manor a moment earlier than he could help, when this charming person was sitting opposite to him. So this was Mrs. Loring! How different from the stout middle-aged lady whom Mrs. de Tracy’s words had conjured up when he set out to find her!

“Old Mrs. Prettyman was my mother’s nurse,” Robinette remarked as Lavendar dipped his oars gently into the stream and began to row. “I went to see her feeling quite grown up, and she seemed to consider me still a child; I was feeling about four years old at the moment when you appeared and woke me to the real world again.”

She had dried her eyes now and had pulled her hat down so as to shade her face, but Lavendar could see the traces of her weeping, and the dear little ineffectual rag of a handkerchief was still in one hand.

“What on earth was she crying about?” he thought, as with lowered

eyes he rowed very slowly across, only just keeping the boat's head against the current, and glancing now and then at the young woman.

Was it possible that this lovely person was going to be his fellow-guest in that dull house? "My word! but she's pretty! and what were the tears about ... and the little shoe? Did it belong to a child of her own? Can she be a widow, I wonder," said Lavendar to himself.

"I often think," he said suddenly, raising his head, "that when two people meet for the first time as utter strangers to each other, they should be encouraged, not forbidden, to ask plain questions. It may be my legal training, but I'd like all conversation to begin in that way. As a child I was constantly reproved for my curiosity, especially when I once asked a touchy old gentleman, 'Which is your glass eye? The one that moves, or the one that stands still?'"

The tears had dried, the hat was pushed back again, the young woman's face broke into an April smile that matched the day and the weather.

"Oh, come, let us do it," she exclaimed. "I'd love to play it like a new game: we know nothing at all about each other, any more than if we had dropped from the moon into the boat together. Oh! do be quick! We've so little time; the river is quite narrow; who's to open the ball?"

"I'll begin, by right of my profession; put the witness in the box, please.—What is your name, madam?"

"Robinette Loring," she said demurely, clasping her hands on her knee, an almost childlike delight in the new game dimpling the corners of her mouth from time to time.

"What is your age, madam?" Lavendar hesitated just for a moment before putting this question.

"I refuse to answer; you must guess."

"Contempt of Court—"

“Well, go on; I’m twenty-two and six weeks.”

“Thank you, you are remarkably well preserved. I can hardly believe—those six-weeks! What nationality?”

“American, of course, or half and half; with an English mother and American ideas.”

“Thank you. Where is your present place of residence?”

“Stoke Revel Manor House.”

“What is the duration of the visit?”

“Fixed at a month, but may be shortened at any time for bad behaviour.”

“Your purpose in coming to Stoke Revel?”

“A Sentimental Journey, in search of fond relations.”

“Have you found these relations?”

“I’ve found them; but the fondness is still to seek.”

“Have you left your family in America?”

“I have no one belonging to me in the world,” she answered simply, and her bright face clouded suddenly.

There was a moment’s rather embarrassed silence. “It’s getting to be a sad game”; she said. “It’s my turn now. I’ll be the cross-examiner, but not having had your legal training, I’ll tell you a few facts about this witness to begin with. He’s a lawyer; I know that already. Your Christian name, sir?”

“Mark.”

“Mark Lavendar. ‘Mark the perfect man.’ Where have I heard that; in Pope or in the Bible? Thank you; very good; your age is between thirty and thirty-five, with a strong probability that it is thirty-three. Am I right?”

“Approximately, madam.”

“You are unmarried, for married men don’t play games like this; they are too sedate.”

“You reassure me! Am I expected to acknowledge the truth of all your observations?”

“You have only to answer my questions, sir.”

“I am unmarried, madam.”

“Your nationality?”

“English of course. You don’t count a French grandmother, I suppose?”

Robinette clapped her hands. “Of course I do; it accounts for this game; it just makes all the difference.—Why have you come to Stoke Revel; couldn’t you help it?”

A twinkle passed from the blue eyes to the brown ones.

“I am here on business connected with the estate.”

“For how long?”

“An hour ago I thought all might be completed in a few days, but these affairs are sometimes unaccountably prolonged!” (Was there another twinkle? Robinette could hardly say.) They were half-way across the river now. She leaned over and looked at herself in the water for a moment.

Lavendar rested on his oars, and began to rub the palms of his hands, smiling a little to himself as he bent his head.

“Yours is an odd Christian name,” he said. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“Then you haven’t visited your National Gallery faithfully enough,” said Mrs. Loring. “Robinetta is one of the Sir Joshua pictures there, you know, and it was a great favourite of my mother’s in her girlhood.

Indeed she saved up her pin-money for nearly two years that she might have a good copy of it made to hang in her bedroom where she could look at it night and morning."

"Then you were named after the picture?"

"I was named from the memory of it," said Robinette, trailing her hand through the clear water. "Mother took nothing to America with her but my father's love (there was so much of that, it made up for all she left behind), so the picture was thousands of miles away when I was born. Mother told me that when I was first put into her arms she thought suddenly, as she saw my dark head, 'Here is my own Robinetta, in place of the one I left behind,' and fell asleep straight away, full of joy and content."

"And they shortened the name to Robinette?"

"I was christened properly enough," she answered. "It was the world that clipped my name's little wings; the world refuses to take me seriously; I can't think why, I'm sure; I never regarded *it* as a joke."

"A joke," said Lavendar reflectively; "it's a sort of grim one at times; and yet it's funny too," he said, suddenly raising his eyes.

"Now that's the odd thing I was thinking as I looked at you just now," Robinette said frankly. "You seem so deadly solemn until you look up and laugh—and then you *do* laugh, you know. That's the French grandmother again! It was nice in her to marry your grandfather! It helped a lot!"

He laughed then certainly, and so did she, and then pointed out to him that they were being slowly drifted out of their course, and that if he meant to get across to the landing-stage he must row a little harder.

"I have met American women casually;" he said, bending to his oars, "but I have never known one well."

"It's rather too bad to disturb the tranquillity of your impressions,"

returned Mrs. Loring composedly.

Lavendar looked up with another twinkle. She seemed to provoke twinkles; he did not realize he had so many in stock.

“You mean American women are not painted in quite the right colours?”

“I suppose black *is* a colour?”

“Oh! I see your point of view!” and Lavendar twinkled again.

“I can tell you in five sentences exactly what you have heard about us. Will you say whether I am right? If you refuse I’ll put you in the witness box and then you’ll be forced to speak!”

“Very well; proceed.”

“One: We are clever, good conversationalists, and as cold as icicles.”

“Yes.”

“Two: We dress beautifully and use extravagant means to compass our ends in this direction.”

“Yes.”

“Three: We keep our overworked husbands under strict discipline.”

“Yes! I say,—I don’t like this game.”

“Neither do I, but it’s very much played,—”

“Four: We prefer hotels to home life and don’t bring up our children well.”

“Yes.”

“Five: We interfere with the proper game laws by bagging English husbands instead of staying on our own preserves. That’s about all, I think. Were not those rumours tolerably familiar to you in the ha’penny papers and their human counterparts?”

Lavendar was so amused by this direct storming of his opinion that he could hardly keep his laughter within bounds. “I’ve heard one other criticism,” he said, “that you were all pretty and all had small feet and hands! I am now able to declare that to be a base calumny and to hope that all the others will prove just as false!” Then Robinette laughed too; eyes, lips, cheeks! When Lavendar looked at her he wished that his father would keep him at Stoke Revel for a month.

The sun was going down now, and the rising tide came swelling up from the sea, lifting itself and silently swelling the volume of the river, in a way that had something awful about it. The whole current of the great stream was against it, but behind was the force of the sea and so it filled and filled with hardly a ripple, as the heart is filled with a new desire. Up from the mouth of the river came a faint breeze

bringing the taste of the ocean into the deeply wooded creeks. It had freshened into a little wind, as they drew up at the boat-house, that flapped Robinette's blue cape about her, and dyed the colour in her cheeks to a livelier tint. As they walked up the narrow pathway to the house a deep silence fell between them that neither attempted to break.

At the top of the hill, she paused to take breath, and look across the river. It was half dark already there, on the other side in the deep shadow of the hill; and a lamp in the window of the cottage shone like a star beside the faintly green shape of the budding plum tree.

As Robinette entered the door of the Manor House she took out her little gold-meshed purse and handed Mark Lavendar a penny.

"It's none too much," she said, meeting his astonished gaze with a smile. "I should have had to pay it on the public ferry, and you were ever so much nicer than the footman!"

Lavendar put the penny in his waistcoat pocket and has never spent it to this day. It is impossible to explain these things; one can only state them as facts. Another fact, too, that he suddenly remembered, when he went to his room, was, that the moment her personality touched his he was filled with curiosity about her. He had met hundreds of women and enjoyed their conversation, but seldom longed to know on the instant everything that had previously happened to them.

VIII

SUNDAY AT STOKE REVEL

On Sundays, the Stoke Revel household was expected to appear at church in full strength, visitors included.

“We meet in the hall punctually at a quarter to eleven,” it was Miss Smeardon’s duty to announce to strangers. “Mrs. de Tracy always prefers that the Stoke Revel guests should walk down together, as it sets a good example to the villagers.”

“What Nelson said about going to church with Lady Hamilton!” Lavendar had once commented, irrepressibly, but the allusion, rather fortunately, was lost upon Miss Smeardon. Mark began to picture the familiar Sunday scene to himself; Miss Smeardon in the hall at a quarter to eleven punctually, marshalling the church-goers; and Mrs. Loring,—she would be late of course, and come fluttering downstairs in some bewitching combination of flowery hat and floating scarf that no one had ever seen before. What a lover’s opportunity in this lateness, thought the young man to himself; but one could enjoy a walk to church in charming company, though something less than a lover.

It was Mrs. de Tracy’s custom, on Sunday mornings, to precede her household by half an hour in going to the sanctuary. No infirmities of old age had invaded her iron constitution, and it was nothing to her to walk alone to the church of Stoke Revel, steep though the hill was which led down through the ancient village to the yet more ancient edifice at its foot. During this solitary interval, Mrs. de Tracy visited her husband’s tomb, and no one knew, or dared, or cared to enquire,

what motive encouraged this pious action in a character so devoid of tenderness and sentiment. Was it affection, was it duty, was it a mere form, a tribute to the greatness of an owner of Stoke Revel, such as a nation pays to a dead king? Who could tell?

The graveyard of Stoke Revel owned a yew tree, so very, very old that the count of its years was lost and had become a fable or a fairy tale. It was twisted, gnarled, and low; and its long branches, which would have reached the ground, were upheld, like the arms of some dying patriarch, by supports, themselves old and moss-grown. Under the spreading of this ancient tree were graves, and from the carved, age-eaten porch of the church, a path led among them, under the green tunnel, out into the sunny space beyond it. The Admiral lay in a vault of which the door was at the side of the church, for no de Tracy, of course, could occupy a mere grave, like one of the common herd; and here walked the funereal figure of Mrs. de Tracy, fair weather or foul, nearly every Sunday in the year.

In justice to Mrs. de Tracy, it must be made plain that with all her faults, small spite was not a part of her character. Yet to-day, her anger had been stirred by an incident so small that its very triviality annoyed her pride. It was Mark Lavendar's custom, when his visits to Stoke Revel included a Sunday, cheerfully to evade church-going. His Sundays in the country were few, he said, and he preferred to enjoy them in the temple of nature, generally taking a long walk before lunch. But to-day he had announced his intention of coming to service, and well Mrs. de Tracy, versed in men and in human nature, knew why. Robinette would be there, and Lavendar followed, as the bee follows a basket of flowers on a summer day. As Mrs. de Tracy, like the Stoic that she was, accepted all the inevitable facts of life,—birth, death, love, hate (she had known them all in her day), she accepted this one also. But in that atrophy of every feeling except bitterness, that atrophy which is perhaps the only real solitude, the only real old age, her animosity was stirred. It was as though a dead branch upon

some living tree was angry with the spring for breathing on it. As she returned, herself unseen in the shadow of the yew tree, she saw Lavendar and Robinette enter together under the lych-gate, the figure of the young woman touched with sunlight and colour, her lips moving, and Lavendar smiling in answer. In the clashing of the bells—bells which shook the air, the earth, the ancient stones, the very nests upon the trees—their voices were inaudible, but in their faces was a young happiness and hope to which the solitary woman could not blind herself.

Presently in the lukewarm air within, Robinette was finding the church's immemorial smell of prayer-books, hassocks, decaying wood, damp stones, matting, school-children, and altar flowers, a harmonious and suggestive one if not pleasant. What an ancient air it was, she thought; breathed and re-breathed by slow generations of Stoke Revellers during their sleepy devotions! The very light that entered through the dim stained glass seemed old and dusty, it had seen so much during so many hundred years, seen so much, and found out so many secrets! Soon the clashing of the bells ceased and upon the still reverberating silence there broke the small, snoring noises of a rather ineffectual organ, while the amiable curate, Rev. Tobias Finch, made his appearance, and the service began.

Mrs. de Tracy had entered the pew first, naturally; Miss Smeardon sat next, then Robinetta. Lavendar occupied the pew in front, alone, and through her half-closed eyelids Robinetta could see the line of his lean cheek and bony temple. He had not wished to sit there at all and he was so unresigned as to be badly in need of the soothing influences of Morning Prayer. Robinetta was beginning to wonder dreamily what manner of man this really was, behind his plain face and non-committal manner, when the muffled slam of a door behind, startled her, followed as it was by a quick step upon the matted aisle. Then without further warning, a big, broad-shouldered boy, in the uniform of a British midshipman, thrust himself into the pew beside her, hot and

breathless after running hard. Mrs. Loring guessed at once that this must be Carnaby de Tracy, the young hopeful and heir of Stoke Revel of whom Mr. Lavendar had so often spoken, but the startling and unconventional nature of his appearance was not at all what one expected in a member of his family. Robinette stole more than one look at him as the offertory went round; a robust boy with a square chin, a fair face burnt red by the sun, a rollicking eye and an impudent nose; not handsome certainly, indeed quite plain, but he looked honest and strong and clean, and Robinette's frolicsome youth was drawn to his, all ready for fun. Carnaby hitched about a good deal, dropped his hymn-book, moved the hassock, took out his handkerchief, and on discovering a huge hole, turned crimson.

Service over, the congregation shuffled out into the sunshine, and Mrs. de Tracy, after a characteristically cool and disapproving recognition of her grandson, became occupied with villagers. Lavendar made known young Carnaby to Mrs. David Loring, but the midshipman's light grey eyes had discovered the pretty face without any assistance.

"This lady is your American cousin, Carnaby," said Mark. "Did you know you had one?"

"I don't think I did," answered the boy, "but it's never too late to mend!" He attempted a bow of finished grown-upness, failed somewhat, and melted at once into an engaging boyishness, under which his frank admiration of his new-found relative was not to be hidden. "I say, are you stopping at Stoke Revel?" he asked, as though the news were too good to be true. "Jolly! Hullo—" he broke off with animation as the cassocked figure of the Rev. Tobias Finch fluttered out from the porch—"here's old Toby! Watch Miss Smeardon now! She expects to catch him, you know, but he says he's going to be a celly—celly-what-d'you-call-'em?"

"Celibate?" suggested Lavendar, with laughing eyes.

“The very word, thank you!” said Carnaby. “Yes: a celibate. Not so easily nicked, good old Toby—you bet!”

“Do the clergymen over here always dress like that?” inquired Robinetta, trying to suppress a tendency to laugh at his slang.

“Cassock?” said Carnaby. “Toby wouldn’t be seen without it. High, you know! Bicycles in it. Fact! Goes to bed in it, I believe.”

“Carnaby, Carnaby! Come away!” said Lavendar. “Restrain these flights of imagination! Don’t you see how they shock Mrs. Loring?”

Before the Manor was reached, Robinetta and Carnaby had sworn eternal friendship deeper than any cousinship, they both declared. They met upon a sort of platform of Stoke Revel, predestined to sympathy upon all its salient characteristics; two naughty children on a holiday.

“Do you get enough to eat here?” asked Carnaby in a hollow whisper, in the drawing-room before lunch.

“Of course I have enough, Middy,” answered Robinetta with unconscious reservation. She had rejected “Carnaby” at once as a name quite impossible: he was “Middy” to her almost from the first moment of their acquaintance.

“Enough?” he ejaculated, “*I* don’t! I’d never be fed if it weren’t for old Bates and Mrs. Smith and Cooky.” Bates was the butler, Mrs. Smith the housekeeper, and Cooky her satellite. “Nobody gets enough to eat in this house!” added Carnaby darkly, “except the dog.”

At the lunch-table, the antagonism natural between a hot-blooded impetuous boy and a grandmother such as Mrs. de Tracy became rather painfully apparent. He had already been hauled over the coals for his arrival on Sunday and his indecorous appearance in church after service had begun.

“It does not appear to me that you are at all in need of sick-leave,”

said Mrs. de Tracy suspiciously.

Carnaby, sensitive for all his robustness, flushed hotly, and then became impertinent. “My pulse is twenty beats too quick still, after quinsy. If you don’t believe the doctor, ma’am, it’s not my fault.”

“Carnaby has committed indiscretions in the way of growing since I last saw him,” Lavendar broke in hastily. “At sixteen one may easily outgrow one’s strength!”

“Indeed!” said Mrs. de Tracy, frigidly. The situation was saved by the behaviour of the lap-dog, which suddenly burst into a passion of barking and convulsive struggling in Miss Smeardon’s arms. His enemy had come, and Carnaby had fifty ways of exasperating his grandmother’s favourite, secrets between him and the bewildered dog. Rupert was a Prince Charles of pedigree as unquestioned as his mistress’s and an appearance dating back to Vandyke, but Carnaby always addressed him as “Lord Roberts,” for reasons of his own. It annoyed his grandmother and it infuriated the dog, who took it for a deadly insult.

“Lord Roberts! Bobs, old man, hi! hi!” Carnaby had but to say the words to make the little dog convulsive. He said them now, and the results seemed likely to be fatal to a dropsical animal so soon after a full meal.

“You’ll kill him!” whispered Robinette as they left the dining room.

“I mean to!” was the calm reply. “I’d like to wring old Smeardon’s neck too!” but the broad good humour of the rosy face, the twinkling eyes, belied these truculent words. In spite of infinite powers of mischief, there was not an ounce of vindictiveness in Carnaby de Tracy, though there might be other qualities difficult to deal with.

“There’s a man to be made there—or to be marred!” said Robinette to herself.

IX

POINTS OF VIEW

Evenings at Stoke Revel were of a dullness all too deep to be sounded and too closely hedged in by tradition and observance to be evaded or shortened by the boldest visitor. Lavendar and the boy would have prolonged their respite in the smoking room had they dared, but in these later days Lavendar found he wished to be below on guard. The thought of Robinette alone between the two women downstairs made him uneasy. It was as though some bird of bright plumage had strayed into a barnyard to be pecked at by hens. Not but what he realised that this particular bird had a spirit of her own, and plenty of courage, but no man with even a prospective interest in a pretty woman, likes to think of the object of his admiration as thoroughly well able to look after herself. She must needs have a protector, and the heaven-sent one is himself.

He had to take up arms in her defense on this, the first night of his arrival. Mrs. Loring had gone up to her room for some photographs of her house in America, and as she flitted through the door her scarf caught on the knob, and he had been obliged to extricate it. He had known her exactly four hours, and although he was unconscious of it, his heart was being pulled along the passage and up the stairway at the tail-end of that wisp of chiffon, while he listened to her retreating footsteps. Closing the door he came back to Mrs. de Tracy's side.

"Her dress is indecorous for a widow," said that lady severely.

"Oh, I don't see that," replied Lavendar. "She is in reality only a girl,

and her widowhood has already lasted two years, you say."

"Once a widow always a widow," returned Mrs. de Tracy sententiously, with a self-respecting glance at her own cap and the half-dozen dull jet ornaments she affected. Lavendar laughed outright, but she rather liked his laughter: it made her think herself witty. Once he had told her she was "delicious," and she had never forgotten it.

"That's going pretty far, my dear lady," he replied. "Not all women are so faithful to a memory as you. I understand Americans don't wear weeds, and to me her blue cape is a delightful note in the landscape. Her dresses are conventional and proper, and I fancy she cannot express herself without a bit of colour."

"The object of clothing, Mark, is to cover and to protect yourself, not to express yourself," said Mrs. de Tracy bitingly.

"The thought of wearing anything bright always makes me shrink," remarked Miss Smeardon, who had never apparently observed the tip of her own nose, "but some persons are less sensitive on these points than others."

Mrs. de Tracy bowed an approving assent to this. "A widow's only concern should be to refrain from attracting notice," she said, as though quoting from a private book of proverbial philosophy soon to be published.

"Then Mrs. Loring might as well have burned herself on her husband's funeral pyre, Hindoo fashion!" argued Lavendar. "A woman's life hasn't ended at two and twenty. It's hardly begun, and I fear the lady in question will arouse attention whatever she wears."

"Would she be called attractive?" asked Mrs. de Tracy with surprise.

"Oh, yes, without a doubt!"

"In gentlemen's eyes, I suppose you mean?" said Miss Smeardon.

"Yes, in gentlemen's eyes," answered Lavendar, firmly. "Those of

women are apparently furnished with different lenses. But here comes the fair object of our discussion, so we must decide it later on."

The question of ancestors, a favourite one at Stoke Revel, came up in the course of the next evening's conversation, and Lavendar found Robinette a trifle flushed but smiling under a double fire of questions from Mrs. de Tracy and her companion. Mrs. de Tracy was in her usual chair, knitting; Miss Smeardon sat by the table with a piece of fancy-work; Robinette had pulled a foot-stool to the hearthrug and sat as near the flames as she conveniently could. She shielded her face with the last copy of *Punch*, and let her shoulders bask in the warmth of the fire, which made flickering shadows on her creamy neck. Her white skirts swept softly round her feet, and her favourite turquoise scarf made a note of colour in her lap. She was one of those women who, without positive beauty, always make pictures of themselves.

Lavendar analyzed her looks as he joined the circle, pretending to read. "She isn't posing," he thought, "but she ought to be painted. She ought always to be painted, each time one sees her, for everything about her suggests a portrait. That blue ribbon in her hair is fairly distracting! What the dickens is the reason one wants to look at her all the time! I've seen far handsomer women!"

"Do you use Burke and Debrett in your country, Mrs. Loring?" Miss Smeardon was enquiring politely, as she laid down one red volume after the other, having ascertained the complete family tree of a lady who had called that afternoon.

Robinette smiled. "I'm afraid we've nothing but telephone or business directories, social registers, and 'Who's Who,' in America," she said.

"You are not interested in questions of genealogy, I suppose?" asked Mrs. de Tracy pityingly.

"I can hardly say that. But I think perhaps that we are more occupied with the future than with the past."

“That is natural,” assented the lady of the Manor, “since you have so much more of it, haven’t you? But the mixture of races in your country,” she continued condescendingly, “must have made you indifferent to purity of strain.”

“I hope we are not wholly indifferent,” said Robinette, as though she were stopping to consider. “I think every serious-minded person must be proud to inherit fine qualities and to pass them on. Surely it isn’t enough to give *old* blood to the next generation—it must be *good* blood. Yes! the right stock certainly means something to an American.”

“But if you’ve nothing that answers to Burke and Debrett, I don’t see how you can find out anybody’s pedigree,” objected Miss Smeardon. Then with an air of innocent curiosity and a glance supposed to be arch, “Are the Red Indians, the Negroes, and the Chinese in your so-called directories?”

“As many of them as are in business, or have won their way to any position among men no doubt are there, I suppose,” answered Robinette straightforwardly. “I think we just guess at people’s ancestry by the way they look, act, and speak,” she continued musingly. “You can ‘guess’ quite well if you are clever at it. No Indians or Chinese ever dine with me, Miss Smeardon, though I’d rather like a peaceful Indian at dinner for a change; but I expect he’d find me very dull and uneventful!”

“Dull!—that’s a word I very often hear on American lips,” broke in Lavendar as he looked over the top of Henry Newbolt’s poems. “I believe being dull is thought a criminal offence in your country. Now, isn’t there some danger involved in this fear of dullness?”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” Robinette answered thoughtfully, looking into the fire. “Yes; I dare say there is, but I’m afraid there are social and mental dangers involved in *not* being afraid of it, too!” Her mischievous eyes swept the room, with Mrs. de Tracy’s solemn figure

and Miss Smeardon's for its bright ornaments. "The moment a person or a nation allows itself to be too dull, it ceases to be quite alive, doesn't it? But as to us Americans, Mr. Lavendar, bear with us for a few years, we are so ridiculously young! It is our growing time, and what you want in a young plant is growth, isn't it?"

"Y-yes," Lavendar replied: then with a twinkle in his blue eyes he added: "Only somehow we don't like to hear a plant grow! It should manage to perform the operation quite silently, showing not processes but results. That's a counsel of perfection, perhaps, but don't slay me for plain-speaking, Mrs. Loring!"

Robinette laughed. "I'll never slay you for saying anything so wise and true as that!" she said, and Lavendar, flushing under her praise, was charmed with her good humour.

"America's a very large country, is it not?" enquired Miss Smeardon with her usual brilliancy. "What is its area?"

"Bigger than England, but not as big as the British Empire!" suggested Carnaby, feeling the conversation was drifting into his ken.

"It's just the size of the moon, I've heard!" said Robinette teasingly. "Does that throw any light on the question?"

"Moonlight!" laughed Carnaby, much pleased with his own wit. "Ha! ha! That's the first joke I've made this holidays. *Moonlight!* Jolly good!"

"If you'd take a joke a little more in your stride, my son," said Lavendar, "we should be more impressed by your mental sparkles."

"Straighten the sofa-cushions, Carnaby," said his grandmother, "and don't lounge. I missed the point of your so-called joke entirely. As to the size of a country or anything else, I have never understood that it affected its quality. In fruit or vegetables, for instance, it generally means coarseness and indifferent flavour." Miss Smeardon beamed at this palpable hit, but Mrs. Loring deprived the situation of its point

by backing up Mrs. de Tracy heartily. She had no opinion of mere size, either, she declared.

“You don’t stand up for your country half enough,” objected Carnaby to his cousin. (“Why don’t you give the old cat beans?” was his supplement, *sotto voce*.)

“Just attack some of my pet theories and convictions, Middy dear, if you wish to see me in a rage,” said Robinette lightly, “but my motto will never be ‘My country right or wrong.’”

“Nor mine,” agreed Lavendar. “I’m heartily with you there.”

“It’s a great venture we’re trying in America. I wish every one would try to look at it in that light,” said Robinette with a slight flush of earnestness.

“What do you mean by a venture?” asked Mrs. de Tracy.

“The experiment we’re making in democracy,” answered Robinette. “It’s fallen to us to try it, for of course it simply had to be tried. It is thrillingly interesting, whatever it may turn out, and I wish I might live to see the end of it. We are creating a race, Aunt de Tracy; think of that!”

“It’s as difficult for nations as for individuals to hit the happy medium,” said Lavendar, stirring the fire. “Enterprise carried too far becomes vulgar hustling, while stability and conservatism often pass the coveted point of repose and degenerate into torpor.”

“This part of England seems to me singularly free from faults,” interposed Mrs. de Tracy in didactic tones. “We have a wonderful climate; more sunshine than in any part of the island, I believe. Our local society is singularly free from scandal. The clergy, if not quite as eloquent or profound as in London (and in my opinion it is the better for being neither) is strictly conscientious. We have no burglars or locusts or gnats or even midges, as I’m told they unfortunately have in Scotland, and our dinner-parties, though quiet and dignified, are never dull.... What is the matter, Robinetta?”

“A sudden catch in my throat,” said Robinette, struggling with some sort of vocal difficulty and avoiding Lavendar’s eye. “Thank you,” as he offered her a glass of water from the punctual and strictly temperate evening tray. “Don’t look at me,” she added under her voice.

“Not for a million of money!” he whispered. Then he said aloud: “If I ever stand for Parliament, Mrs. Loring, I should like you to help me with my constituency!”

The unruffled temper and sweet reasonableness of Robinette’s answers to questions by no means always devoid of malice, had struck the young man very much, as he listened.

“She is good!” he thought to himself. “Good and sweet and generous. Her loveliness is not only in her face; it is in her heart.” And some favorite lines began to run in his head that night, with new conviction:—

He that loves a rosy cheek,
  Or a coral lip admires,
Or from star-like eyes doth seek
  Fuel to maintain his fires,—
As old Time makes these decay,
  So his flames will waste away.

But a smooth and steadfast mind,
  Gentle thoughts and calm desires,
Hearts with equal love combined—

but here Lavendar broke off with a laugh.

“It’s not come to that yet!” he thought. “I wonder if it ever will?”

X

A NEW KINSMAN

Young Mrs. Loring was making her way slowly at Stoke Revel Manor, and Mrs. de Tracy, though never affectionate, treated her with a little less indifference as the days went on. “The Admiral’s niece is a lady,” she admitted to herself privately; “not perhaps the highest type of English lady; that, considering her mixed ancestry and American education, would be too much to expect; but in the broad, general meaning of the word, unmistakably a lady!”

Mrs. Benson, though not melting outwardly as yet, held more lenient views still with regard to the American guest. Bates, the butler, was elderly, and severely Church of England; his knowledge of widows was confined to the type ably represented by his mistress and he regarded young Mrs. Loring as inclined to be “flighty.” The footman, who was entirely under the butler’s thumb in mundane matters, had fallen into the habit of sharing his opinions, and while agreeing in the general feeling of flightiness, declared boldly that the lady in question gave a certain “style” to the dinner-table that it had lacked before her advent.

For a helpless victim, however, a slave bound in fetters of steel, one would have to know Cummins, the under housemaid, who lighted Mrs. Loring’s fire night and morning. She was young, shy, country bred, and new to service. When Mrs. Benson sent her to the guest’s room at eight o’clock on the morning after her arrival she stopped outside the door in a panic of fear.

“Come in!” called a cheerful voice. “Come in!”

Cummins entered, bearing her box with brush and cloth and kindlings. To her further embarrassment Mrs. Loring was sitting up in bed with an ermine coat on, over which her bright hair fell in picturesque disorder. She had brought the coat for theatre and opera, but as these attractions were lacking at Stoke Revel and as life there was, to her, one prolonged Polar expedition, with dashes farthest north morning and evening, she had diverted it to practical uses.

“Make me a quick fire please, a big fire, a hot fire,” she begged, “or I shall be late for breakfast; I never can step into that tin tub till the ice is melted.”

“There’s no ice in it, ma’am,” expostulated Cummins gently, with the voice of a wood dove.

“You can’t see it because you’re English,” said the strange lady, “but I can see it and feel it. Oh, you make *such* a good fire! What is your name, please?”

“Cummins, ma’am.”

“There’s another Cummins downstairs, but she is tall and large. You shall be ‘Little Cummins.’”

Now every morning the shy maid palpitated outside the bedroom door, having given her modest knock; palpitated for fear it should be all a dream. But no, it was not! there would be a clear-voiced “Come in!” and then, as she entered; “Good morning, Little Cummins. I’ve been longing for you since daybreak!” A trifle later on it was, “Good Little Cummins bearing coals of comfort! Kind Little Cummins,” and other strange and wonderful terms of praise, until Little Cummins felt herself consumed by a passion to which Mrs. de Tracy’s coals became as less than naught unless they could be heaped on the altar of the beloved.

So life went on at Stoke Revel, outwardly even and often dull, while in

reality many subtle changes were taking place below the surface; changes slight in themselves but not without meaning.

Robinette ran up to her room directly after breakfast one morning and pinned on her hat as she came downstairs. Mark Lavendar had gone to London for a few days, but even the dullness of breakfast-table conversation had not robbed her of her joy in the early sunshine, made more cheery by the prospect of a walk with Carnaby, with whom she was now fast friends.

Carnaby looked at her beamingly as they stood together on the steps. "You're the best turned-out woman of my acquaintance," he said approvingly, with a laughable struggle for the tone of a middle-aged man of the world.

"How many ladies of fashion do you know, my child?" enquired Robinetta, pulling on her gloves.

"I see a lot of 'em off and on," Carnaby answered somewhat huffily, "and they don't call me a child either!"

"Don't they? Then that's because they're timid and don't dare address a future Admiral as Infant-in-Arms! Come on, Middy dear, let's walk."

Robinette wore a white serge dress and jacket, and her hat was a rough straw turned up saucily in two places with black owls' heads. Mrs. Benson and Little Cummins had looked at it curiously while Robinette was at breakfast.

"'Tis black underneath and white on top, Mrs. Benson. 'Ow can that be? It looks as if one 'at 'ad been clapped on another!"

"That's what it is, Cummins. It's a double hat; but they'll do anything in America. It's a double hat with two black owls' heads, and I'll wager they charged double price for it!"

"She's a lovely beauty in anythink and everythink she wears," said

Little Cummins loyally.

“May I call you ‘Cousin Robin’?” Carnaby asked as they walked along. “Robinette is such a long name.”

“Cousin Robin is very nice, I think,” she answered. “As a matter of fact I ought to be your Aunt Robin; it would be much more appropriate.”

“Aunt be blowed!” ejaculated Carnaby.

“You’re very fond of making yourself out old, but it’s no go! When I first heard you were a widow I thought you would be grandmother’s age,—I say—do you think you will marry another time, Cousin Robin?”

“That’s a very leading question for a gentleman to put to a lady! Were you intending to ask me to wait for you, Middy dear?” asked Robinette, putting her arm in the boy’s laughingly, quite unconscious of his mood.

“I’d wait quick enough if you’d let me! I’d wait a lifetime! There never was anybody like you in the world!”

The words were said half under the boy’s breath and the emotion in his tone was a complete and disagreeable surprise. Here was something that must be nipped in the bud, instantly and courageously. Robinette dropped Carnaby’s arm and said: “We’ll talk that over at once, Middy dear, but first you shall race me to the top of the twisting path, down past the tulip beds, to the seat under the big ash tree.—Come on!”

The two reached the tree in a moment, Carnaby sufficiently in advance to preserve his self-respect and with a colour heightened by something other than the exercise of running.

“Sit down, first cousin once removed!” said Robinette. “Do you know the story of Sydney Smith, who wrote apologizing to somebody for not being able to come to dinner? ‘The house is full of cousins,’ he said;

‘would they were “once removed”!’”

“It’s no good telling me literary anecdotes!—You’re not treating me fairly,” said Carnaby sulkily.

“I’m treating you exactly as you should be treated, Infant-in-Arms,” Robinette answered firmly. “Give me your two paws, and look me straight in the eye.”

Carnaby was no coward. His steel-grey eyes blazed as he met his cousin’s look. “Carnaby dear, do you know what you are to me? You are my kinsman; my only male relation. I’m so fond of you already, don’t spoil it! Think what you can be to me if you will. I am all alone in the world and when you grow a little older how I should like to depend upon you! I need affection; so do you, dear boy; can’t I see how you are just starving for it? There is no reason in the world why we shouldn’t be fond of each other! Oh! how grateful I should be to think of a strong young middy growing up to advise me and take me about! It was that kind of care and thought of me that was in your mind just now!”

“You’ll be marrying somebody one of these days,” blurted Carnaby, wholly moved, but only half convinced. “Then you’ll forget all about your ‘kinsman.’”

“I have no intention in that direction,” said Robinette, “but if I change my mind I’ll consult you first; how will that do?”

“It wouldn’t do any good,” sighed the boy, “so I’d rather you wouldn’t! You’d have your own way spite of everything a fellow could say against it!”

There was a moment of embarrassment; then the silence was promptly broken by Robinette.

“Well, Middy dear, are we the best of friends?” she asked, rising from the bench and putting out her hand.

The lad took it and said all in a glow of chivalry, “You’re the dearest, the best, and the prettiest cousin in the world! You don’t mind my thinking you’re the prettiest?”

“Mind it? I delight in it! I shall come to your ship and pour out tea for you in my most fetching frock. Your friends will say: ‘Who is that particularly agreeable lady, Carnaby?’ And you, with swelling chest, will respond, ‘That’s my American cousin, Mrs. Loring. She’s a nice creature; I’m glad you like her!’”

Robinette’s imitation of Carnaby’s possible pomposity was so amusing and so clever that it drew a laugh from the boy in spite of himself.

“Just let anyone try to call you a ‘creature’!” he exclaimed. “He’d have me to reckon with! Oh! I am so tired of being a boy! The inside of me is all grown up and everybody keeps on looking at the outside and thinking I’m just the same as I always was!”

“Dear old Middy, you’re quite old enough to be my protector and that is what you shall be! Now shall we go in? I want you to stand near by while I ask your grandmother a favor.”

“She won’t do it if she can help it,” was Carnaby’s succinct reply.

“Oh, I am not sure! Where shall we find her,—in the library?”

“Yes; come along! Get up your circulation; you’ll need it!”

“Aunt de Tracy, there is something at Stoke Revel I am very anxious to have if you will give it to me,” said Robinette, as she came into the library a few minutes later.

Mrs. de Tracy looked up from her knitting solemnly. “If it belongs to me, I shall no doubt be willing, as I know you would not ask for anything out of the common; but I own little here; nearly all is Carnaby’s.”

“This was my mother’s,” said Robinette. “It is a picture hanging in the

smoking room; one that was a great favorite of hers, called ‘Robinetta.’ Her drawing-master found an Italian artist in London who went to the National Gallery and made a copy of the Sir Joshua picture, and I was named after it.”

“I wish your mother could have been a little less romantic,” sighed Mrs. de Tracy. “There were such fine old family names she might have used: Marcia and Elspeth, and Rosamond and Winifred!”

“I am sorry, Aunt de Tracy. If I had been consulted I believe I should have agreed with you. Perhaps when my mother was in America the family ties were not drawn as tightly as in the former years?”

“If it was so, it was only natural,” said the old lady. “However, if you ask Carnaby, and if the picture has no great value, I am sure he will wish you to have it, especially if you know it to have been your mother’s property.” Here Carnaby sauntered into the room. “That’s all right, grandmother,” he said, “I heard what you were saying; only I wish it was a real Sir Joshua we were giving Cousin Robin instead of a copy!”

“Thank you, Carnaby dear, and thank you, too, Aunt de Tracy. You can’t think how much it is to me to have this; it is a precious link between mother’s girlhood, and mother, and me.” So saying, she dropped a timid kiss upon Mrs. de Tracy’s iron-grey hair, and left the room.

“If she could live in England long enough to get over that excessive freedom of manner, your cousin would be quite a pleasing person, but I am afraid it goes too deep to be cured,” Mrs. de Tracy remarked as she smoothed the hairs that might have been ruffled by Robinette’s kiss.

Carnaby made no reply. He was looking out into the garden and feeling half a boy, half a man, but wholly, though not very contentedly, a kinsman.

XI

THE SANDS AT WESTON

“Thursday morning? Is it possible that this is Thursday morning? And I must run up to London on Saturday,” said Lavendar to himself as he finished dressing by the open window. He looked up the day of the week in his calendar first, in order to make quite sure of the fact. Yes, there was no doubt at all that it was Thursday. His sense of time must have suffered some strange confusion; in one way it seemed only an hour ago that he had arrived from the clangour and darkness of London to the silence of the country, the cuckoos calling across the river between the wooded hills, and the April sunshine on the orchard trees; in another, years might have passed since the moment when he first saw Robinette Loring sitting under Mrs. Prettyman’s plum tree.

“Eight days have we spent together in this house, and yet since that time when we first crossed in the boat, I’ve never been more than half an hour alone with her,” he thought. “There are only three other people in the house after all, but they seem to have the power of multiplying themselves like the loaves and fishes (only when they’re not wanted) so that we’re eternally in a crowd. That boy particularly! I like Carnaby, if he could get it into his thick head that his presence isn’t always necessary; it must bother Mrs. Loring too; he’s quite off his head about her if she only knew it. However, it’s my last day very likely, and if I have to outwit Machiavelli I’ll manage it somehow! Surely one lame old woman, and a torpid machine for knitting and writing notes like Miss Smeardon, can’t want to be out of doors all day. Hang that boy,

though! He'll come anywhere." Here he stopped and sat down suddenly at the dressing-table, covering his face with his hands in comic despair. "Mrs. Loring can't like it! She must be doing it on purpose, avoiding being alone with me because she sees I admire her," he sighed. "After all why should I ever suppose that I interest her as much as she does me?"

No one could have told from Lavendar's face, when he appeared fresh and smiling at the breakfast table half an hour later, that he was hatching any deep-laid schemes.

Robinette entered the dining room five minutes late, as usual, pretty as a pink, breathless with hurrying. She wore a white dress again, with one rose stuck at her waistband, "A little tribute from the gardener," she said, as she noticed Lavendar glance at it. She went rapidly around the table shaking hands, and gave Carnaby's red cheeks a pinch in passing that made Lavendar long to tweak the boy's ear.

"Good morning, all!" she said cheerily, "and how is my first cousin once removed? Is he going to Weston with me this morning to buy hairpins?"

"He is!" Carnaby answered joyfully, between mouthfuls of bacon and eggs. "He has been out of hairpins for a week."

"Does he need tapes and buttons also?" asked Robinette, taking the piece of muffin from his hand and buttering it for herself; an act highly disapproved of by Mrs. de Tracy, who hurriedly requested Bates to pass the bread.

"He needs everything you need," Carnaby said with heightened colour.

"My hair is giving me a good deal of trouble, lately," remarked Lavendar, passing his hand over a thickly thatched head.

"I have an excellent American tonic that I will give you after breakfast,"

said Robinette roguishly. “You need to apply it with a brush at ten, eleven, and twelve o’clock, sitting in the sun continuously between those hours so that the scalp may be well invigorated. Carnaby, will you buy me butter scotch and lemonade and oranges in Weston?”

“I will, if Grandmother’ll increase my allowance,” said Carnaby malevolently, “for I need every penny I’ve got in hand for the hairpins.”

“I hope you are not hungry, Robinetta,” said Mrs. de Tracy, “that you have to buy food in Weston.”

“No, indeed,” said Robinette, “I was only longing to test Carnaby’s generosity and educate him in buying trifles for pretty ladies.”

“He can probably be relied on to educate himself in that line when the time comes,” Mrs. de Tracy remarked; “and now if you have all finished talking about hair, I will take up my breakfast again.”

“Oh, Aunt de Tracy, I am so sorry if it wasn’t a nice subject, but I never thought. Anyway I only talked about hairpins; it was Mr. Lavendar who introduced hair into the conversation; wasn’t it, Middy dear?”

Lavendar thought he could have annihilated them both for their open comradeship, their obvious delight in each other’s society. Was he to be put on the shelf like a dry old bachelor? Not he! He would circumvent them in some way or another, although the rôle of gooseberry was new to him.

The two young people set off in high spirits, and Mrs. de Tracy and Miss Smeardon watched them as they walked down the avenue on their way to the station, their clasped hands swinging in a merry rhythm as they hummed a bit of the last popular song.

“I hope Robinetta will not Americanize Carnaby,” said Mrs. de Tracy. “He seems so foolishly elated, so feverishly gay all at once. Her manner is too informal; Carnaby requires constant repression.”

“Perhaps his temperature has not returned to normal since his attack

of quinsy," Miss Smeardon observed, reassuringly.

Meanwhile Lavendar sat in Admiral de Tracy's old smoking room for half an hour writing letters. Every time that he glanced up from his work, and he did so pretty often, his eyes fell on a picture that hung upon the opposite wall. It was the copy of Sir Joshua's "Robinetta" made long ago and just presented to its namesake.

In the portrait the girl's hair was a still brighter gold; yet certainly there was a likeness somewhere about it, he thought; partly in the expression, partly in the broad low forehead, and the eyes that looked as if they were seeing fairies.

Of course to his mind Mrs. Loring was a hundred times more lovely than Sir Joshua's famous girl with a robin. He felt very ill-used because Robinette and Carnaby had deliberately gone for an excursion without him and had left him toiling over business papers when they had gone off to enjoy themselves.

How bright it was out there in the sunshine, to be sure! And why should it be Carnaby, not he, who was by this time walking along the sea front of Weston, and watching the breeze flutter Robinette's scarf and bring a brighter colour to her lips?

There! the last words were written, and taking up his bunch of letters, watch in hand, he sought Mrs. de Tracy, and explained that he would bicycle to Weston and catch the London post himself.

"I'll send William"—she began; but Lavendar hastily assured her that he should enjoy the ride, and hurried off in triumph. Miss Smeardon smiled an acid smile as she watched him go. "He has forgotten all about poor Miss Meredith, I suppose," she murmured. "Yet it was not so long ago that they were supposed to be all in all to each other!"

"It was a foolish engagement, Miss Smeardon," said Mrs. de Tracy in a cold voice. "I never thought the girl was suited to Mark, and I understand that old Mr. Lavendar was relieved when the whole thing

came to an end."

"Quite so; certainly; no doubt Miss Meredith would never have made him happy," said Miss Smeardon at once, "though it is always more agreeable when the lady discovers the fact first. In this case she confessed openly that Mr. Lavendar broke her heart with his indifference."

"She was an ill-bred young woman," said Mrs. de Tracy, as if the subject were now closed. "However, I hope that the son of my family solicitor would think it only proper to pay a certain amount of attention to the Admiral's niece, were she ever so obnoxious to him."

Miss Smeardon made no audible reply, but her thoughts were to the effect that never was an obnoxious duty performed by any man with a better grace.

The sea front at Weston was the most prosaic scene in the world, a long esplanade with an asphalt path running its full length, and ugly jerrybuilt houses glaring out upon it, a gimcrack pier with a gingerbread sort of band-stand and glass house at the end;—all that could have been done to ruin nature had been determinedly done there. But you cannot ruin a spring day, nor youth, nor the colour of the sea. Along the level shore, the placid waves swept and broke, and then gathered up their white skirts, and retreated to return with the same musical laugh. Children and dogs played about on the wet sands. The wind blew freshly and the sea stretched all one pure blue, till it met on the horizon with the bluer skies.

Weston seemed to Lavendar a very fresh and delightful spot at that moment, although had he been in a different mood its sordidness only would have struck him. Yes, there they were in the distance; he knew Robinette's white dress and the figure of the boy beside her. Hang that boy! Were they really going to buy hairpins? If so, then a hair-dresser's he must find. Lavendar turned up the little street that led from the sea-front, scanning all the signs—Boots—Dairies—

Vegetable shops—Heavens! were there nothing but vegetable and boot shops in Weston? Boots again. At last a Hairdresser; Lavendar stood in the doorway until he made sure that Robinette and the middy had turned in that direction, and then he boldly entered the shop.

To his horror he found himself confronted by a smiling young woman, whose own very marvellous erection of hair made him think she must be used as an advertisement for the goods she supplied.

In another moment Robinette and the boy would be upon him, and he must be found deep in fictitious business. He cast one agonized glance at the mysteries of the toilet that surrounded him on every side, then clearing his throat, he said modestly but firmly, that he wanted to buy a pair of curling tongs for a lady.

"These are the thing if you wish a Marcel wave," was the reply, "but just for an ordinary crimp we sell a good many of the plain ones."

"Yes, thank you. They will do; the lady—my sister, also wished—"

"A little 'addition,' was it, sir?" she moved smilingly to a drawer. "A few pin curls are very easily adjusted, or would our guinea switch—"

At this moment the boy and Robinette entered the shop. Lavendar was paying for the curling tongs, and not a muscle of his face relaxed. "Oh, here you are. I have just finished my business," he said, turning round, "I thought we might encounter one another somewhere!"

Robinette and Carnaby exchanged knowing glances of which Lavendar was perfectly conscious, but he stood by while Mrs. Loring bought her hairpins, and Carnaby endeavoured to persuade her to invest in a few "pin curls." "Not an hour before it is absolutely necessary, Middy dear," she said; "then I shall bear it as bravely as I can. Come now, carry the hairpins for me, and let me take Mr. Lavendar out of this shop, or he will be tempted to buy more than he needs."

"Oh, no!" Lavendar remarked pointedly. "I have what I came for!"

“Don’t forget your parcel,” Carnaby exclaimed, darting after Lavendar as they went into the street. “You’ve left it on the counter.”

“How careless!” said Mark. “It was for my sister.”

“You never told me you had a sister,” said Robinette, as they walked together, Lavendar wheeling his bicycle and Carnaby sulking behind them.

“I am blessed with two; one married now; the other, my sister Amy, lives at home.”

“Well, you see, in spite of all our questions the first time we met, we really know very little about each other,” she went on lightly. “It takes such a long time to get thoroughly acquainted in this country. Do they ever count you a friend if you do not know all their aunts and second cousins?”

Lavendar laughed. “Willingly would I introduce you to my aunts and my uttermost cousins, and lay the map of my life before you, uneventful as it has been, if that would further our acquaintance.”

Even as he spoke a hateful memory darted into his thoughts, and he reddened to his temples, until Mrs. Loring wondered if she had said anything to annoy him.

Some fortunate accident at this point ordered that Carnaby should meet a friend, another middy about his own age, and they set off together in quest of a third boy who was supposed to be in the near neighbourhood.

As soon as the lads were out of sight Lavendar found the jests they had been bandying together die on his lips. “I’m going down deeper; I shall be out of my depth very soon,” he thought to himself, as he walked in silence by Robinette’s side.

“Let us come down to the beach again; we can’t go to the station for half an hour yet,” she said. “I like to look out to sea, and realize that if I

sailed long enough I could step off that pier, and arrive in America."

They stood by the sea-wall together with the fresh wind playing on their faces. "Isn't it curious," said Robinette, "how instinctively one always turns to look at the sea; inland may be ever so lovely, but if the sea is there we generally look in that direction."

"Because it is unbounded, like the future," said Lavendar. He was looking as he spoke at some children playing on the sands just beside them. There was a gallant little boy among them with a bare curly head, who refused help from older sisters and was toiling away at his sand castle, his whole soul in his work; throwing up spadefuls—tremendous ones for four years old—upon its ramparts, as if certain they could resist the advancing tide.

"What a noble little fellow!" exclaimed Robinette, catching the direction of Lavendar's glance. "Isn't he splendid? toiling like that; stumping about on those fat brown legs!"

"How beautiful to have a child like that, of one's own!" thought Lavendar as he looked. On the sands around them, there were numbers of such children playing there in the sun. It seemed a happy world to him at the moment.

Suddenly he saw his companion turn quickly aside; a nurse in uniform came towards them pushing, not a happy crooning baby this time, but a little emaciated wisp of a child lying back wearily in a wheel chair. Something in Robinette's face, or perhaps the bit of fluttering lace she wore upon her white dress, had attracted its notice, and it stretched out two tiny skeleton hands towards her as it passed. With a quick gesture, brushing tears away that in a moment had rushed to her eyes, young Mrs. Loring stepped forward, and put her fingers into the wasted hands that were held out to her. She hung above the child for a moment, a radiant figure, her face shining with sympathy and a sort of heavenly kindness; her eyes the sweeter for their tears.

"What is it, darling?" she asked. "Oh, it's the bright rose!" Then she

hurriedly unfastened the flower from her waist-belt and turned to Lavendar. “Will you please take your penknife and scrape away all the little thorns,” she asked.

“The rose looked very charming where it was,” he remarked, half regretfully, as he did what she commanded.

“It will look better still, presently,” she answered.

The child’s hands were outstretched longingly to grasp the flower, its eyes, unnaturally deep and wise with pain, were fixed upon Robinette’s face. She bent over the chair, and her voice was like a dove’s voice, Lavendar thought, as she spoke. Then the little melancholy carriage was wheeled away. Motherhood always seemed the most sacred, the supreme experience to Robinette; a thing high and beautiful like the topmost blooms of Nurse Prettyman’s plum tree. “If one had to choose between that sturdy boy and this wistful wraith, it would be hard,” she thought. “All my pride would run out to the boy, but I could die for love and pity if this suffering baby were mine!”

Lavendar had turned, and leaned on the wall with averted face. “Sweet woman!” he was saying to himself. “It is more than a merry heart that is able to give such sympathy; it’s a sad old world after all where such things can be; but a woman like that can bring good out of evil.”

Robinette had seated herself on a low wall beside him. Her little embroidered futility of a handkerchief was in her hand once more. “A rose and a smile! that’s all we could give it,” she said; “and we would either of us share some of that burden if we only could.” She watched the merry, healthy children playing beside them, and added, “After all let us comfort ourselves that brown cheeks and fat legs are in the majority. Rightness somehow or other must be at the root of things, or we shouldn’t be a living world at all.”

“Amen,” said Lavendar, “but the sight of suffering innocents like that, sometimes makes me wish I were dead.”

“Dead!” she echoed. “Why, it makes me wish for a hundred lives, a hundred hearts and hands to feel with and help with.”

“Ah, some women are made that way. My stepmother, the only mother I’ve known, was like that,” Lavendar went on, dropping suddenly again into personal talk, as they had done before. He and she, it seemed, could not keep barriers between them very long; every hour they spent together brought them more strangely into knowledge of each other’s past.

“She was a fine woman,” he went on, “with a certain comfortable breadth about her, of mind and body; and those large, warm, capable hands that seem so fitted to lift burdens.”

Lavendar was in an absent-minded mood, and never much given to noting details at any time. He bent over on the low wall in retrospective silence, looking at the blue sea before them.

Robinette, who was perched beside him, spread her two small hands on her white serge knees and regarded them fixedly for a moment.

“I wonder if it’s a matter of size,” she said after a moment. “I wonder! Let’s be confidential. When I was a little girl we were not at all well-to-do, and my hands were very busy. My father’s success came to him only two or three years before his death, when his reputation began to grow and his plans for great public buildings began to be accepted, so I was my mother’s helper. We had but one servant, and I learned to make beds, to dust, to wipe dishes, to make tea and coffee, and to cook simple dishes. If Admiral de Tracy’s sister had to work, Admiral de Tracy’s niece was certainly going to help! Later on came my father’s illness and death. We had plenty of servants then, but my hands had learned to be busy. I gave him his medicines, I changed his pillows, I opened his letters and answered such of them as were within my powers, I fanned him, I stroked his aching head. The end came, and mother and I had hardly begun to take hold of life again when her health failed. I wasn’t enough for her; she needed father and

her face was bent towards him. My hands were busy again for months, and they held my mother's when she died. Time went on. Then I began again to make a home out of a house; to use my strength and time as a good wife should, for the comfort of her husband; but oh! so faultily, for I was all too young and inexperienced. It was only for a few months, then death came into my life for the third time, and I was less than twenty. For the first time since I can remember, my hands are idle, but it will not be for long. I want them to be busy always. I want them to be full! I want them to be tired! I want them ready to do the tasks my head and heart suggest."

Lavendar had a strong desire to take those same hands in his and kiss them, but instead he rose and spread out his own long brown fingers on the edge of the wall, a man's hands, fine and supple, but meant to work.

"I seem to have done nothing," he exclaimed. "You look so young, so irresponsible, so like a bird on a bough, that I cannot associate dull care with you, yet you have lived more deeply than I. Life seems to have touched me on the shoulder and passed me by; these hands of mine have never done a real day's work, Mrs. Loring, for they've been the servants of an unwilling brain. I hated my own work as a younger man, and, though I hope I did not shirk it, I certainly did nothing that I could avoid." He paused, and went on slowly, "I've thought sometimes, of late I mean, that if life is to be worth much, if it is to be real life, and not mere existence, one must put one's whole heart into it, and that two people—" He stopped; he was silent with embarrassment, conscious of having said too much.

"Can help each other. Indeed they can," Mrs. Loring went on serenely, "if they have the same ideals. Hardly anyone, fortunately, is so alone as I, and so I have to help myself! Your sisters, now; don't they help?"

"Not a great deal," Lavendar confessed. "One would, but she's married and in India, worse luck! The other is—well, she's a candid sister." He laughed, and looked up. "If my best friend could hear my

sister Amy's view of me, just have a little sketch of me by Amy without fear or favour, he, or she, would never have a very high opinion of me again, and I am not sure but that I should agree with her."

"Nonsense! my dear friend," exclaimed Robinette in a maternal tone she sometimes affected,—a tone fairly agonizing to Mark Lavendar; "we should never belittle the stuff that's been put into us! My equipment isn't particularly large, but I am going to squeeze every ounce of power from it before I die."

"Life is extraordinarily interesting to you, isn't it?"

"Interesting? It is thrilling! So will it be to you when you make up your mind to squeeze it," said Robinette, jumping off the wall. "There is Carnaby signalling; it is time we went to the station."

"Life would thrill me considerably more if Carnaby were not eternally in evidence," said Lavendar, but Robinette pretended not to hear.

XII

LOVE IN THE MUD

The next day Robinette was once more sitting in the boat opposite to Lavendar as he rowed. They were going down the river this time, not across it. Somehow they had managed that afternoon to get out by themselves, which sounds very simple, but is a wonderfully difficult thing to accomplish when there is no special reason for it, and when there are several other people in the house.

Fortunately Mrs. de Tracy did not like to be alone, so that wherever she went Miss Smeardon had to go too, and there happened to be a sale of work at a neighbouring vicarage that afternoon where she considered her presence a necessity. Robinette had vanished soon after luncheon and the middy had been dull, so after loitering around for a while, he too had disappeared upon some errand of his own. Lavendar walked very slowly toward the avenue gateway, then he turned and came back. He could scarcely believe his good fortune when he saw Mrs. Loring come out of the house, and pause at the door as if uncertain of her next movements. She looked uncommonly lovely in a white frock with touches of blue, while the ribbon in her hair brought out all its gold. She wore a flowery garden hat, and a pair of dainty most un-English shoes peeped from beneath her short skirt.

“Are you going out, or can I take you on the river?” Lavendar asked, trying without much success to conceal the eagerness that showed in his voice and eyes.

Robinette stood for a moment looking at him (it seemed as if she

read him like a book) and then she said frankly, “Why yes, there is nothing I should like so much, but where is Carnaby?”

“Hang Carnaby! I mean I don’t know, or care. I’ve had too much of his society to-day to be pining for it now.”

“Well, he does chatter like a magpie, but I feel he must have such a dull time here with no one anywhere near his own age. Elderly as I am, I seem a bit nearer than Aunt de Tracy or Miss Smeardon. Aunt de Tracy, all the same, will never understand my relations with that boy, or with anyone else for that matter. I did try so hard,” she went on, “when I first arrived, just to strike the right note with her, and I’ve missed it all the time, by that very fact, no doubt. I’m so unused to trying—at home.”

“You mean in America?”

“Yes, of course; I don’t try there at all, and yet my friends seem to understand me.”

“Does it seem to you that you could ever call England ‘home’?”

“I could not have believed that England would so sink into my heart,” she said, sitting down in the doorway and arranging the flowers on her hat. “During those first dull wet days when I was still a stranger, and when I looked out all the time at the dripping cedars, and felt whenever I opened my lips that I said the wrong thing, it seemed to me I should never be gay for an hour in this country; but the last enchanting sunny days have changed all that. I remember it’s my mother’s country, and if only I could have found a little affection waiting for me, all would have been perfect.”

“You may find it yet.” Lavendar could not for the life of him help saying the words, but there was nothing in the tone in which he said them to make Robinette conscious of his meaning.

“I’m afraid not,” she sighed, thinking of Mrs. de Tracy’s indifference. “I’m much more American than English, much more my father’s

daughter than the Admiral's niece; perhaps my aunt feels that instinctively. Now I must slip upstairs and change if we are going boating."

"Never!" cried Lavendar. "If I don't snatch you this moment from the devouring crowd I shall lose you! I will keep you safe and dry, never fear, and we shall be back well before dark."

They went down the river after leaving the little pier, passing the orchards heaped on the hillsides above Wittisham, and Lavendar wanted to row out to sea, but Robinette preferred the river; so he rowed nearer to the shore, where the current was less swift, and the boat rocked and drifted with scarcely a touch of the oars. They had talked for some time, and then a silence had fallen, which Robinette broke by saying, "I half wish you'd forsake the law and follow lines of lesser resistance, Mr. Lavendar. Do you know, you seem to me to be drifting, not rowing! I've been thinking ever since of what you said to me on the sands at Weston."

"Ungrateful woman!" he exclaimed, trying to evade the subject, "when these two faithful arms have been at your service every day since we first met! Think of the pennies you would have taken from that tiny gold purse of yours for the public ferry! However, I know what you mean; I never met anyone so plain-spoken as you, Mrs. Robin; I haven't forgotten, I assure you!"

"How about the candid sister? Isn't she plain-spoken?"

"Oh, she attacks the outside of the cup and platter; you question motive power and ideals. Well, I confess I have less of the former than I ought, and more of the latter than I've ever used." Lavendar had rested on his oars now and was looking down, so that the twinkle of his eyes was lost. "I suppose I shall go on as I have done hitherto, doing my work in a sort of a way, and getting a certain amount of pleasure out of things,—unless—"

"Oh, but that's not living!" she exclaimed; "that's only existing. Don't

you remember:—

> It is not growing like a tree
> In bulk doth make man better be.

It's really *living* I mean, forgetting the things that are behind, and going on and on to something ahead, whatever one's aim may be."

"What are you going to do with yourself, if I may ask?" said Lavendar. "Don't be too philanthropic, will you? You're so delightfully symmetrical now!"

"I shall have plenty to do," cried Robinette ardently. "I've told you before, I have so much motive power that I don't know how to use it."

"How about sharing a little of it with a friend!"

Lavendar's voice was full of meaning, but Robinette refused to hear it. She had succumbed as quickly to his charm as he to hers, but while she still had command over her heart she did not intend parting with it unless she could give it wholly. She knew enough of her own nature to recognize that she longed for a rowing, not a drifting mate, and that nothing else would content her; but her instinct urged that Lavendar's indecisions and his uncertainties of aim were accidents rather than temperamental weaknesses. She suspected that his introspective moods and his occasional lack of spirits had a definite cause unknown to her.

"I haven't a large income," she said, after a moment's silence, changing the subject arbitrarily, and thereby reducing her companion to a temporary state of silent rage.

"Yet no one would expect a woman like this to fall like a ripe plum into a man's mouth," he thought presently; "she will drop only when she has quite made up her mind, and the bough will need a good deal of shaking!"

"I haven't a large income," repeated Robinette, while Lavendar was

silent, “only five thousand dollars a year, which is of course microscopic from the American standpoint and cost of living; so I can’t build free libraries and swimming baths and playgrounds, or do any big splendid things; but I can do dear little nice ones, left undone by city governments and by the millionaires. I can sing, and read, and study; I can travel; and there are always people needing something wherever you are, if you have eyes to see them; one needn’t live a useless life even if one hasn’t any responsibilities. But”—she paused—“I’ve been talking all this time about my own plans and ambitions, and I began by asking yours! Isn’t it strange that the moment one feels conscious of friendship, one begins to want to know things?”

“My sister Amy would tell you I had no ambitions, except to buy as many books as I wish, and not to have to work too hard,” said Mark smiling, “but I think that would not be quite true. I have some, of a dull inferior kind, not beautiful ones like yours.”

“Do tell me what they are.”

He shook his head. “I couldn’t; they’re not for show; shabby things like unsuccessful poor relations, who would rather not have too much notice taken of them. In a few weeks I am going to drag them out of their retreat, brighten them up, inject some poetry into their veins, and then display them to your critical judgment.”

They were almost at a standstill now and neither of them was noticing it at all. As Mrs. Loring moved her seat the boat lurched somewhat to one side. Mark, to steady her, placed his hand over hers as it rested on the rail, and she did not withdraw it. Then he found the other hand that lay upon her knee, and took it in his own, scarcely knowing what he did. He looked into her face and found no anger there. “I wish to tell you more about myself,” he stammered, “something not altogether creditable to me; but perhaps you will understand. Perhaps even if you don’t understand you will forgive.”

She drew her hands gently away from his grasp. “I shall try to understand, you may rely on that!” she said.

“I’m not going to trouble you with any very dreadful confessions,” he said, “only it’s better to hear things directly from the people concerned, and you are sure to hear a wrong version sooner or later.”—Then stopping suddenly he exclaimed, “Hullo! we’re stuck, I declare! look at that!”

Robinette turned and saw that their boat was now scarcely surrounded with water at all. On every side, as if the flanks of some great whale were upheaving from below, there appeared stretches of glistening mud. Just in front of them, where there still was a channel of water, was an upstanding rock. “Shall we row quickly there?” she cried. “Then perhaps we can get out and pull the boat to the other side, where there is more water. What has happened?”

“Oh, something not unusual,” said Lavendar grimly, “that I’m a fool, and the sea-tide has ebbed, as tides have been known to do before. I’m afraid a man doesn’t watch tides when he has a companion like you! Now we’re left high, but not at all dry, as you see, till the tide turns.”

By a swift stroke or two he managed to propel their craft as far as the rock. They scrambled up on it, and then he tried to haul the boat around the miniature islet; but the more he hauled, the quicker the water seemed to run away, and the deeper the wretched thing stuck in the mud. He jumped in again, and made an effort to push her off with an oar; meanwhile Robinette nearly fell off the rock in her efforts to get the head of the boat around towards the current again, and making a frantic plunge into the ooze, sank above her ankles in an instant. Lavendar caught hold of her and helped her to scramble back into the boat. “It’s all right; only my skirt wet, and one shoe gone!” she panted. “Now, what are we to do?” She spread out her hands in dismay, and looked down at her draggled mud-stained skirt, her little feet, one shoeless and both covered with mud and slime. “What an

object I shall be to meet Aunt de Tracy's eye, when, if ever, it does light on me again! Meanwhile it seems as if we might be here for some hours. The boat is just settling herself into the mud bank, like a rather tired fat old woman into an armchair, and pray, Mr. Lavendar, what do you propose to do? as Talleyrand said to the lady who told him she couldn't bear it."

Lavendar looked about them; the main bed of the river was fifty yards away; between it and them was now only an expanse of mud.

"It's perfectly hopeless," he said, "the best thing we can do is to beget some philosophy."

"Which at any moment we would exchange for a foot of water," she interpolated.

"We must just sit here and wait for the tide. Shall it be in the boat or on the rock?"

"I don't see much difference, do you? Except that the passing boats, if there are any, might think it was a matter of choice to sit on a damp rock for two hours, but no one could think we wanted to sit in a boat in the mud."

They landed on the rock for the second time. "For my part it's no great punishment," said Lavendar, when they settled themselves, "since the place is big enough for two and you're one of them!"

"Wouldn't this be as good a stool of repentance from which to confess your faults as any?" asked Robinette, as she tucked her shoeless foot beneath her mud-stained skirt and made herself as comfortable as possible. "I'll even offer a return of confidence upon my own weaknesses, if I can find them, but at present only miles of virtue stretch behind me. Ugh! How the mud smells; quite penitential! Now:—

> "What have you sought you should have shunned,
> And into what new follies run?"

“Oh, what a bad rhyme!” said Lavendar.

“It’s Pythagoras, any way,” she explained.

Then suddenly changing his tone, Lavendar went on. “This is not merely a jest, Mrs. Loring. Before you admit me really amongst the number of your friends I should like you to know that—to put it plainly—my own little world would tell you at the moment that I am a heartless jilt.”

“That is a very ugly expression, Mr. Lavendar, and I shall choose not to believe it, until you give me your own version of the story.”

“In one way I can give you no other; except that I was just fool enough to drift into an engagement with a woman whom I did not really love, and just not enough of a fool to make both of us miserable for life when I, all too late, found out my mistake.”

There passed before him at that moment other foolish blithe little loves, like faded flowers with the sweetness gone out of them. They had been so innocent, so fragile, so free from blame; all but the last; and this last it was that threatened to rise like a shadow perhaps, and defeat his winning the only woman he could ever love.

Robinette stared at the stretches of ooze, and then stole a look at Mark Lavendar. “The idea of calling that man a jilt,” she thought. “Look at his eyes; look at his mouth; listen to his voice; there is truth in them all. Oh for a sight of the girl he jilted! How much it would explain! No, not altogether, because the careless making of his engagement would have to be accounted for, as well as the breaking of it. Unless he did it merely to oblige her—and men are such idiots sometimes,—then he must have fancied he was in love with her. Perhaps he is continually troubled with those fancies. Nonsense! you believe in him, and you know you do.” Then aloud she said, sympathetically, “I’m afraid we are apt to make these little experimental journeys in youth, when the heart is full of *wanderlust*.

We start out on them so lightly, then they lead nowhere, and the walking back alone is wearisome and depressing."

"My return journey was depressing enough at first," said Lavendar, "because the particular She was unkinder to me than I deserved even; but better counsels have prevailed and I shall soon be able to meet the reproachful gaze of stout matrons and sour spinsters more easily than I have for a year past; you see the two families were friends and each family had a large and interested connection!"

"If the opinion of a comparative stranger is of any use to you," said Robinette, standing on the rock and scraping her stockinged foot free of mud, "*I* believe in you, personally! You don't seem a bit 'jilty' to me! I'd let you marry my sister to-morrow and no questions asked!"

"I didn't know you had a sister," cried Lavendar.

"I haven't; that's only a figure of speech; just a phrase to show my confidence."

"And isn't it ungrateful to be obliged to say I can't marry your sister, after you have given me permission to ask her!"

"Not only ungrateful but unreasonable," said Robinette saucily, turning her head to look up the river and discovering from her point of vantage a moving object around the curve that led her to make hazardous remarks, knowing rescue was not far away. "What have you against my sister, pray?"

"Very little!" he said daringly, knowing well that she held him in her hand, and could make him dumb or let him speak at any moment she desired. "Almost nothing! only that *she* is not offering me *her* sister as a balm to my woes."

"She *has* no sister; she is an only child!—There! there!" cried Robinette, "the tide is coming up again, and the mud banks off in that direction are all covered with water! I see somebody in a boat, rowing towards us with superhuman energy. Oh! if I hadn't worn a white

dress! It will *not* come smooth; and my lovely French hat is ruined by the dampness! My one shoe shows how inappropriately I was shod, and whoever is coming will say it is because I am an American. He will never know you wouldn't let me go upstairs and dress properly."

"It doesn't matter anyway," rejoined Mark, "because it is only Carnaby coming. You might know he would find us even if we were at the bottom of the river."

XIII

CARNABY TO THE RESCUE

At Stoke Revel, in the meantime, the solemn rites of dinner had been inaugurated as usual by the sounding of the gong at seven o'clock. Mrs. de Tracy, Miss Smeardon, and Bates waited five minutes in silent resignation, then Carnaby came down and was scolded for being late, but there was no Robinette and no Lavendar.

"Carnaby," said his grandmother, "do you know where Mark intended going this afternoon?"

"No, I don't," said Carnaby, sulkily.

"Your cousin Robinetta,"—with meaning,—"perhaps you know her whereabouts?"

"Not I!" replied Carnaby with affected nonchalance. "I was ferreting with Wilson." He had ferreted perhaps for fifteen minutes and then spent the rest of the afternoon in solitary discontent, but he would not have owned it for the world.

"Call Bates," commanded Mrs. de Tracy. Bates entered. "Do you know if Mr. Lavendar intended going any distance to-day? Did he leave any message?"

"Mr. Lavendar, ma'am," said Bates, "Mr. Lavendar and Mrs. Loring they went out in the boat after tea. Mr. Lavendar asked William for the key, and William he went down and got out the oars and rudder, ma'am."

“Does William know where they went?” asked Mrs. de Tracy in high displeasure. “Was it to Wittisham?”

“No, ma’am, William says they went down stream. He thinks perhaps they were going to the Flag Rock, and he says the gentleman wouldn’t have a hard pull, as the tide was going out. But Mr. Lavendar knows the river well, ma’am, as well as Mr. Carnaby here.”

“Then I conclude there is no immediate cause for anxiety,” said Mrs. de Tracy with satire. “You can serve dinner, Bates; there seems no reason why we should fast as yet! However, Carnaby,” she continued, “as the men cannot be spared at this hour, you had better go at once and see what has happened to our guests.”

“Right you are,” cried Carnaby with the utmost alacrity. He was hungry, but the prospect of escape was better than food. He rushed away, and his boat was in mid-river before Mrs. de Tracy and Miss Smeardon had finished their tepid soup.

A very slim young moon was just rising above the woods, but her tender light cast no shadows as yet, and there were no stars in the sky, for it was daylight still. The evening air was very fresh and cool; there was no wind, and the edges of the river were motionless and smooth, although in mid-stream the now in-coming tide clucked and swirled as it met the rush. Over at Wittisham one or two lights were beginning to twinkle, and there came drifting across the water a smell of wood smoke that suggested evening fires. Carnaby handled a boat well, for he had been born a sailor, as it were, and his long, powerful strokes took him along at a fine pace. But although he was going to look for Robinette and Mark, he was rather angry with both of them, and in no hurry. He rested on his oars indifferently and let the tide carry him up as it liked, while, with infinite zest, he unearthed a cigarette case from the recesses of his person, lit a cigarette, and smoked it coolly. Under Carnaby’s apparent boyishness, there was a certain somewhat dangerous quality of precocity, which was stimulated rather than checked by his grandmother’s repressive

system. His smoking now was less the monkey-trick of a boy, than an act of slightly cynical defiance. He was no novice in the art, and smoked slowly and daintily, throwing back his head and blowing the smoke sometimes through his lips and sometimes through his nose. He looked for the moment older than his years, and a difficult young customer at that. His present sulky expression disappeared, however, under the influence of tobacco and adventure.

“Where the dickens are they?” he began to wonder, pulling harder.

A bend in the river presently solved the mystery. On a wide stretch of mud-bank, which the tide had left bare in going out, but was now beginning to cover again, a solitary boat was stranded.

With this clue to guide him, Carnaby’s bright eyes soon discovered the two dim forms in the distance.

“Ahoy!” he shouted, and received a joyous answer. Robinette and Mark were the two derelicts, and their rescuer skimmed towards them with all his strength.

He could get only within a few yards of the rock to which their boat was tied, and from that distance he surveyed them, expecting to find a dismal, ship-wrecked pair, very much ashamed of themselves and getting quite weary of each other. On the contrary the faces he could just distinguish in the uncertain light, were radiant, and Robinette’s voice was as gay as ever he had heard it. He leaned upon his oars and looked at them with wonder.

“Angel cousin!” cried Robinette. “Have you a little roast mutton about you somewhere, we are so hungry!”

“You *are* a pretty pair!” he remarked. “What have you been and done?”

“We just went for a row after tea, Middy dear,” said Robinette, “and look at the result.”

“You’re not rowing now,” observed Carnaby pointedly.

“No,” said Mark, “we gave up rowing when the water left us, Carnaby. Conversation is more interesting in the mud.”

“But how did you get here? I thought you were going to the Flag Rock?” demanded Carnaby.

“Is there a Flag Rock, Middy dear? I didn’t know,” said Robinette innocently. “It shows we shouldn’t go anywhere without our first cousin once removed. We just began to talk, here in the boat, and the water went away and left us.” Then she laughed, and Mark laughed too, and Carnaby’s look of unutterable scorn seemed to have no effect upon them. They might almost have been laughing at him, their mirth was so senseless, viewed in any other light.

“It’s nearly eight o’clock,” he said solemnly. “Perhaps you can form some idea as to what grandmother’s saying, and Bates.”

“Well, you’re going to be our rescuer, Middy darling, so it doesn’t matter,” said Robinette. “Look! the water’s coming up.”

But Carnaby seemed in no mood for waiting. He had taken off his boots, and rolled up his trousers above his knees.

“I’d let Lavendar wade ashore the best way he could!” he said, “but I s’pose I’ve got to save you or there’d be a howl.”

“No one would howl any louder than you, dear, and you know it. Don’t step in!” shrieked Robinette, “I’ve confided a shoe already to the river-mud! I just put my foot in a bit, to test it, and down the poor foot went and came up without its shoe. Oh, Middy dear, if your young life—”

“Blow my young life!” retorted Carnaby. He was performing gymnastics on the edge of his boat, letting himself down and heaving himself up, by the strength of his arms. His legs were covered with mud.

“No go!” he said. “It’s as deep as the pit here; sometimes you can find

a rock or a hard bit. We must just wait."

They had not long to wait after all, for presently a rush of the tide sent the water swirling round the stranded boat, and carried Carnaby's craft to it.

"Now it'll be all right," said he. "You push with the boat-hook, Mark, and I'll pull"; but it took a quarter of an hour's pushing and pulling to get the boat free of the mud.

Except for the moon it would have been quite dark when the party reached the pier. They mounted the hill in some silence. It was difficult for Robinette to get along with her shoeless foot; Lavendar wanted to help her, but she demanded Carnaby's arm. He was sulking still. There was something he felt, but could not understand, in the subtle atmosphere of happiness by which the truant couple seemed to be surrounded; a something through which he could not reach; that seemed to put Robinette at a distance from him, although her shoulder touched his and her hand was on his arm. Growing pangs of his manhood assailed him, the male's jealousy of the other male. For the moment he hated Mark; Mark talking joyous nonsense in a way rather unlike himself, as if the night air had gone to his head.

"I am glad you had the ferrets to amuse you this afternoon," said Robinette, in a propitiatory tone. "Ferrets are such darlings, aren't they, with their pink eyes?"

"O! *darlings*," assented Carnaby derisively. "One of the darlings bit my finger to the bone, not that that's anything to you."

"Oh! Middy dear, I am sorry!" cried Robinette. "I'd kiss the place to make it well, if we weren't in such a hurry!"

Carnaby began to find that a dignified reserve of manner was very difficult to keep up. His grandmother could manage it, he reflected, but he would need some practice. When they came to a place where there were sharp stones strewn on the road, he became a mere boy

again quite suddenly, and proposed a “queen’s chair” for Robinette. And so he and Lavendar crossed hands, and one arm of Robinette encircled the boy’s head, while the other just touched Lavendar’s neck enough to be steadied by it. Their laughter frightened the sleepy birds that night. The demoralized remnant of a Bank Holiday party would have been, Lavendar observed, respectability itself in comparison with them; and certainly no such group had ever approached Stoke Revel before. They were to enter by a back door, and Carnaby was to introduce them to the housekeeper’s room, where he undertook that Bates would feed them. Lavendar alone was to be ambassador to the drawing room.

“The only one of us with a boot on each foot, of course we appoint him by a unanimous vote,” said Robinette.

But the chief thing that Carnaby remembered, after all, of that evening’s adventure, was Robinette’s sudden impulsive kiss as she bade him good-night, Lavendar standing by. She had never kissed him before, for all her cousinliness, but she just brushed his cool, round cheek to-night as if with a swan’s-down puff.

“That’s a shabby thing to call a kiss!” said the embarrassed but exhilarated youth.

“Stop growling, you young cub, and be grateful; half a loaf is better than no bread,” was Lavendar’s comment as he watched the draggled and muddy but still charming Robinette up the stairway.

XIV

THE EMPTY SHRINE

Lavendar had discovered, much to his dismay, that he must return to London upon important business; it was even a matter of uncertainty whether his father could spare him again or would consent to his returning to Stoke Revel to conclude Mrs. de Tracy's arrangements about the sale of the land.

Affairs of the heart are like thunderstorms; the atmosphere may sometimes seem charged with electricity, and yet circumstances, like a sudden wind that sweeps the clouds away before they break, may cause the lovers to drift apart. Or all in a moment may come thunder, lightning, and rain from a clear sky, and there is nothing that is apt to precipitate matters like an unexpected parting.

When Lavendar announced that he had to leave Stoke Revel, two pairs of eyes, Miss Smeardon's and Carnaby's, instantly looked at Robinette to see how she received the news, but she only smiled at the moment. She was just beginning her breakfast, and like the famous Charlotte, "went on cutting bread and butter," without any sign of emotion.

"Hurrah!" thought the boy. "Now we can have some fun, and I'll perhaps make her see that old Lavendar isn't the only companion in the world."

"She minds," thought Miss Smeardon, "for she buttered that piece of bread on the one side a minute ago, and now she's just done it on the

other—and eaten it too."

"She doesn't care a bit," thought Lavendar. "She's not even changed colour; my going or staying is nothing to her; I needn't come back."

He had made up his mind to return just the same, if it were at all possible, and he told Mrs. de Tracy so. She remarked graciously that he was a welcome guest at any time, and Carnaby, hearing this, pinched Lord Roberts till he howled like a fiend, and fled for comfort to his mistress's lap.

"You little coward," said Carnaby, "you should be ashamed to bear the name of a hero."

"I've mentioned to you before, Carnaby, I think, that I dislike that jest," said his grandmother, and Carnaby advancing to the injured beast said, "Yes, ma'am, and so does Bobs, doesn't he, Bobs?" reducing the lap-dog to paroxysms of fury. "Would it be any better if I called him *Kitchener*?" hissing the word into the animal's face. "Jealous, Bobs? Eh? *Kitchener*." This last word had a rasping sound that irritated the little creature more than ever; his teeth jibbered with anger, and Miss Smeardon had to offer him a saucer of cream before he could be calmed down enough for the rest of the party to hear themselves speak.

"Had you nice letters this morning? Mine were very uninteresting," Robinette remarked to Lavendar as they stood together at the doorway in the sunshine, while Carnaby chased the lap-dog round and round the lawn.

"I had only two letters; one was from my sister Amy, the candid one! her letters are not generally exhilarating."

"Oh, I know, home letters are usually enough to send one straight to bed with a headache! They never sound a note of hope from first to last; although if you had no home, but only a house, like me, with no one but a caretaker in it, you'd be very thankful to get them, doleful or

not."

"I doubt it," Mark answered, for Amy's letter seemed to be burning a hole in his pocket at that moment. He had skimmed it hurriedly through, but parts of it were already only too plain.

When the others had gone into the house, he went off by himself, and jumping the low fence that divided the lawn from the fields beyond, he flung himself down under a tree to read it over again. Carnaby, spying him there, came rushing from the house, and was soon pouring out a tale of something that had happened somewhere, and throwing stones as he talked, at the birds circling about the ivied tower of the little church.

The field was full of buttercups up to the very churchyard walls. "I must get away by myself for a bit," Lavendar thought. "That boy's chatter will drive me mad." At this point Carnaby's volatile attention was diverted by the sight of a gardener mounting a ladder to clear the sparrows' nests from the water chutes, and he jumped up in a twinkling to take his part in this new joy. Lavendar rose, and strolled off with his hands in his pockets and his bare head bent. The grass he walked in was a very Field of the Cloth of Gold. His shoes were gilded by the pollen from the buttercups, his eyes dazzled by their colour; it was a relief to pass through the stone archway that led into the little churchyard. To his spirit at that moment the chill was refreshing. He loitered about for a few minutes, and then seeing that the door was open, he entered the church, closing the door gently behind him.

It was very quiet in there and even the chirping of the sparrows was softened into a faint twitter. Here at last was a place set apart, a moment of stillness when he might think things out by himself.

He took out Amy's letter, smoothing it flat on the prayer books before him, and forced himself to read it through. The early paragraphs dealt with some small item of family news which in his present state of mind mattered to Lavendar no more than the distant chirruping of the birds,

out there in the sunshine. “You seem determined to stay for some time at Stoke Revel,” his sister wrote. “No doubt the pretty American is the attraction. She sounds charming from your description, but my dear man, that’s all froth! How many times have I heard this sort of thing from you before! Remember I know everything about your former loves.”

“You *don’t*, then,” said Lavendar to himself. Down, down, down at the bottom of the well of the heart where truth lies, there is always some remembrance, generally a very little one, that can never be told to any confidant.

“You will find out faults in Mrs. Loring presently, just like the rest of them,” continued the pitiless writer. (Amy’s handwriting was painfully distinct.) “I must tell you that at the Cowleys’ the other day, I suddenly came face to face with Gertrude Meredith *and Dolly*! Dolly looks a good deal older already and fatter, I thought. I fear she is losing her looks, for her colour has become fixed, and she *will* wear no collars still, although on a rather thick neck, it’s not at all becoming. I spoke to her for about three minutes, as it was less awkward, when we met suddenly face to face like that. She laughed a good deal, and asked for you rather audaciously, I thought. They live near Winchester now, and since the Colonel’s death are pretty badly off, Gertrude says. Dolly is going to Devonshire to stay with the Cowleys; you may meet her there any day, remember. It does seem incredible to me that a man of your discrimination could have been won by the obvious devotion of a girl like Dolly; but having given your word I almost think you would better have kept it, rather than suffer all this criticism from a host of mutual friends.”

Lavendar groaned aloud. He had a good memory, and with all too great distinctness did he now remember Dolly Meredith’s laugh. How wretched it had all been; not a word had ever passed between them that had any value now. If he could have washed the thought of her forever from his memory, how greatly he would have rejoiced at that

moment.

Well, it was over; written down against him, that he had been what the world called a jilt and a fool; yes, certainly a fool, but not so great a one as to follow his folly to its ultimate conclusion, and tie himself for life to a woman he did not love.

Lavendar was extraordinarily sensitive about the breaking of his engagement; partly because Miss Meredith herself, in her first rage, had avowed his responsibility for her blighted future, giving him no chance for chivalrous behaviour; partly because in all his transient love affairs he had easily tired of the women who inspired them. He seemed thirsty for love, but weary of it almost as soon as the draught reached his lips.

And now had he a chance again?—or was it all to end in disappointment once more, in that cold disappointment of the heart that has received stones for bread? It was not entirely his own fault; he had expected much from life, and hitherto had received very little. But Robinette!

“Let me find all her faults now,” he said to himself, “or evermore keep silent; meantime I hope I am not concealing too many of my own.”

He tried to force himself into criticism; to look at her as a cold observer from the outside would have done; for that curious Border country of Love which he had entered has not an equable climate at all. It is fire and frost alternate; and criticism is either roused almost to a morbid pitch, or else the faculty is drugged, and nothing, not even the enumeration of a hundred foibles will awaken it for a time.

When the cold fit had been upon him the evening before, Lavendar had said to himself that her manner was too free—that she had led him on too quickly; no, that expression was dishonourable and unjust; he repented it instantly; she had been too unself-conscious, too girlish, too unthinking, in what she said and did. “But she’s a widow after all, though she’s only two and twenty,” he went on to himself.

“Hang it! I wish she were not! If her heart were in her husband’s grave I should be moaning at that; and because I see that it is not, I become critical. There’s nothing quite perfect in life!”

He had begun by noticing some little defects in her personal appearance, but he was long past that now; what did such trifles matter, here or there? Then he remembered all that he had heard said about American women. Did those pretty clothes of hers mean that she would be extravagant and selfish to obtain them? Could a young man with no great fortune offer her the luxury that was necessary to her? and even so, what changes come with time! He had a full realization of what the boredom of family life can be, when passion has grown stale.

“At seventy, say, when I am palsied and she is old and fat, will romance be alive then? Will such feeling leave anything real behind it when it falls away, as the white blossoms on Mrs. Prettyman’s plum tree will shrink and fall a fortnight hence?”

He looked about him. On the walls of the little church were tablets with the de Tracy names; the names of her forefathers amongst them. Under his feet were other flags with names upon them too; and out there in the sunshine were the grave-stones of a hundred dead. How many of them had been happy in their loves?

Not so many, he thought, if all were told, and why should he hope to be different? Yet surely this was a new feeling, a worthy one, at last. It was not for her charming person that he loved her; not because of her beauty and her gaiety only; but because he had seen in her something that gave a promise of completion to his own nature, the something that would satisfy not only his senses but his empty heart.

He clenched his hands on the carved top of the old pew in front of him, which was fashioned into a laughing gnome with the body of a duck. “And if this should be all a dream,” he asked himself again, “if this should all be false too! Good Lord!” he cried half aloud, “I want to

be honest now! I want to find the truth. My whole life is on the throw this time!”

There was a moment’s silence after he had uttered the words. He got up and moved slowly down the aisle, opening the door, seeing again the meadow of buttercups, yellow as gold, and listening again to the sparrows chirruping in the sunshine outside.

“I have been in that church a quarter of an hour,” he said to himself, “and in trying to dive to the depths of myself and find out whether I was giving a woman all I had to give, I did not get time to consider that woman’s probable answer, should I place my uninteresting life and liberty at her disposal.”

XV

“NOW LUBIN IS AWAY”

Lavendar made his adieux after luncheon and went off to London. “Good-bye for the present, Mrs. de Tracy; I shall be back on Wednesday probably, if I can arrange it,” he said. “Good-bye, Mrs. Loring,” and here he altered the phrase to “Shall I come back on Wednesday?” for his hostess had left the open door.

There was no hesitation, but all too little sentiment, about Robinette’s reply.

“Wednesday, at the latest, are my orders,” she answered merrily, and with the words ringing in his ears Lavendar took his departure.

“Do you remember that this is the afternoon of the garden party at Revelsmere?” Mrs. de Tracy enquired, coming into the drawing room a few minutes later, where Mrs. Loring stood by the open window. She had allowed herself just five minutes of depression, staring out at the buttercup meadow. How black the rooks looked as they flew about it and how dreary everything was, now that Lavendar had gone! She was woman enough to be able to feel inwardly amused at her own absurdity, when she recognized that the ensuing three days seemed to stretch out into a limitless expanse of dullness. “The village seemed asleep or dead now Lubin was away!” Still, after all, it was an occasion for wearing a pretty frock, and she knew herself well enough to feel sure that the sight of a few of her fellow-creatures even pretending to enjoy themselves, would make her volatile spirits rise like the mercury in a thermometer on a hot day.

Miss Smeardon was to be her companion, as Mrs. de Tracy had a headache that afternoon and was afraid of the heat, she said. “What heat?” Robinette had asked innocently, for in spite of the brilliant sunlight the wind blew from the east, keen as a knife. “I shall take a good wrap in the carriage in spite of this tropical temperature,” she thought. Carnaby refused point blank to drive with them; he would bicycle to the party or else not go at all, so it was alone with Miss Smeardon that Robinette started in the heavy old landau behind the palsied horse.

Miss Smeardon gave one glance at Mrs. Loring’s dress, and Robinette gave one glance at Miss Smeardon’s, each making her own comments.

“That white cloth will go to the cleaner, I suppose, after one wearing, and as for that thing on her head with lilac wistaria drooping over the brim, it can’t be meant as a covering, or a protection, either from sun or wind; it’s nothing but an ornament!” Miss Smeardon commented; while to herself Robinette ejaculated,—

“A penwiper, an old, much-used penwiper, is all that Miss Smeardon resembles in that black rag!”

Carnaby, watching the start at the door, whistled in open admiration as Robinette came down the steps.

“Well, well! we are got up to kill this afternoon; pity old Mark has just gone; but cheer up, Cousin Robin, there’s always a curate on hand!”

For once Robinette’s ready tongue played her false, and a sense of loneliness overcame her at the sound of Lavendar’s name. She gathered up her long white skirts and got into the carriage with as much dignity as she could muster, while Carnaby, his eyes twinkling with mischief, stood ready to shut the door after Miss Smeardon.

“Hope you’ll enjoy your drive,” he jeered. “You’ll need to hold on your hats. Bucephalus goes at such fiery speed that they’ll be torn off your

heads unless you do."

"Middy dear, you're not the least amusing," said Robinette quite crossly, and with a lurch the carriage moved off.

Miss Smeardon settled herself for conversation. "I'm afraid you will find me but a dull companion, Mrs. Loring," she said, glancing sideways at Robinette from under the brim of her mushroom hat.

"Oh, you will be able to tell me who everyone is," said Robinette as cheerfully as she could.

"I am no gossip," Miss Smeardon protested.

"It isn't necessary to gossip, is it?—but I've a wholesome interest in my fellow creatures."

"And it is well to know about people a little; when one comes among strangers as you do, Mrs. Loring; one can't be too careful—an American, particularly."

Miss Smeardon's voice trailed off upon a note of insinuation; but Robinette took no notice of the remark. She did not seem to have anything to say, so Miss Smeardon took up another subject.

"What a pity that Mr. Lavendar had to leave before this afternoon; he would have been such an addition to our party!"

"Yes, wouldn't he?" Robinette agreed, though she carefully kept out of her voice the real passion of assent that was in her heart.

"Mr. Lavendar is so agreeable, I always think," Miss Smeardon went on. "Everyone likes him; he almost carries his pleasant ways too far. I suppose that was how—" She paused, and added again, "Oh, but as I said, I never talk scandal!"

"Do you think it's possible to be too pleasant?" Robinette remarked, stupidly enough, scarcely caring what she said.

"Well, when it leads a poor girl to imagine that she is loved! I hear that

Dolly Meredith is just heart-broken. The engagement kept on for quite a year, I believe, and then to break it off so heartlessly!—I was reminded of it all by coming here. Miss Meredith is a cousin of our hostess, and they met first at Revelsmere when they were quite young."

"There is always a certain amount of talk when an engagement has to be broken off," said Robinette in a cold voice.

"They seemed quite devoted at first," Miss Smeardon began; but Robinette interrupted her.

"The sooner such things are forgotten the better, I think," she said. "No one, except the two people concerned, ever knows the real truth.—Tell me, Miss Smeardon, whom we are likely to meet at Revelsmere? Who is our hostess? What sort of parties does she give?"

Being so firmly switched off from the affairs of Mr. Lavendar and Miss Meredith, it was impossible for Miss Smeardon to talk about them any more, and she had to turn to a less congenial theme.

"We shall meet the neighbours," she told Robinette, "but I am afraid they may not interest you very much. I understand that in America you are accustomed to a great deal of the society of gentlemen. Here there are so few, and all of them are married."

"All?" laughed Robinette.

"Well, there is Mr. Finch, the curate, but he is a celibate; and young Mr. Tait of Strewe, but he is slightly paralysed."

"Why, Carnaby must be quite an eligible bachelor in these parts," said Robinette; but Miss Smeardon was so deadly literal that she accepted the remark as a serious one.

"Not quite yet; in a few years' time we shall need to be very careful, there are so many girls here, but not all of them desirable, of course."

"There are? What a dull time they must have with the Married Men, the

Celibate, the Paralytic, and Carnaby! I'm glad my girlhood wasn't spent in Devonshire."

Conversation ended here, for the carriage rumbled up the avenue, and Robinette looked about her eagerly. Revelsmere was a nice old house, surrounded by fine sloping lawns and a background of sombre beechwoods. The lawns to-day were dotted with groups of people, mainly women, and elderly at that. As Robinette and Miss Smeardon alighted at the door an elderly hostess welcomed them, and an elderly host led them across the lawn and straightly they fell into the clutches of more and more elderlies.

"It is fairly bewildering!" Robinette cried in her heart; then she saw a bevy of girls approaching; such nice-looking girls, happy, well dressed, but all unattended by their suitable complement of young men.

"For whom do they dress, here? They've a deal of self-respect, I think, to go on getting themselves up so nicely for themselves and the Celibate, the Paralytic, and Carnaby," thought Robinette, as she watched them.

Presently another couple came across the lawn; the young woman was by no means a girl, rather heavily built, with a high fixed colour. She was attended by a man. "Not the Celibate certainly," thought Mrs. Loring with a glance at his bullock-like figure, his thick neck, and glossy black hair, "nor the Paralytic; and it's not Carnaby. It must be a new arrival!"

At that moment it began to rain, but nothing daunted, their hostess approached her, and saying pleasantly that she wished to introduce her to Miss Meredith, she left Robinette and the young woman standing together under a spreading tree, and took the gentleman away with her.

The moment that she heard the name, Robinette realized who Miss Meredith was. They seated themselves side by side on a garden

bench, and Miss Meredith remarked upon the heat, planting a rather fat hand upon the arm of the garden seat, and surveying it complacently, especially the very bright diamond ring upon the third finger.

After a few preliminary remarks, she asked Mrs. Loring if she were stopping in the neighbourhood.

“Yes, I am staying at Stoke Revel for a short time,” Robinette replied; “Mrs. de Tracy is my aunt, or at least I am Admiral de Tracy’s niece.”

Her companion did not seem to take the least interest in this part of the information, only when Stoke Revel was mentioned she looked around suddenly as if surprised.

They talked upon indifferent subjects, while Robinette, as she watched Miss Meredith, was saying a good deal to herself, although she only spoke aloud about the weather and the Devonshire scenery.

“I will be just, if I can’t be generous,” she thought. “She has (or she must once have had) a fine complexion. I dare say she is sincere enough; she may be sensible; she might be good-humoured,—when pleased.”

“There is going to be a shower,” said Miss Meredith, “but I’ve nothing on to spoil,” she added, glancing at Robinette’s hat.

Sitting there on the bench, hearing the spitting rain upon the water below them and watching the leaden mists that slowly gathered over the landscape, Robinette fell upon a moment of soul sickness very unusual to her. Miss Meredith too was silent, absorbed in her own thoughts.

“If she had looked even a little different it would have been so much easier to explain,” thought Robinette. Then suddenly she glanced up. She saw that her companion’s face had softened, and changed. There was a look,—Robinette caught it just for one moment,—such as a proud angry child might have worn: sulky, hurt to the heart, but

determined not to cry. Instantly a chord was struck in Robinette's soul. "She has suffered, anyway," she thought. "May I be forgiven for my harsh judgment!"

With a shiver she drew her wrap about her shoulders, and Miss Meredith turned towards her. The expression Robinette had noticed passed from the high-coloured face and left it as before, self-complacent and slightly patronizing. "You seem to feel cold," she said. "I never do; which is rather unfortunate, as I'm just going out to India!"

"Indeed? How soon are you going?"

"In about six weeks. I'm just going to be married, and we sail directly afterwards," said Miss Meredith. "You saw Mr. Joyce, I think, when we came up together a few minutes ago?"

A weight as if of a ton of lead was lifted from Robinette's heart as she spoke. She could scarcely refrain from jumping up to throw her arms about Dolly Meredith's neck and kiss her. As it was, she bubbled over with a kind of sympathetic interest that astonished the other woman. It is only too easy to lead an approaching bride to talk about her own affairs, for she can seldom take in the existence of even her nearest and dearest at such a time, and in a few minutes the two young women were deep in conversation. When a quarter of an hour later Miss Smeardon appeared to tell Robinette that they must be going, she looked up with a start at the sound of footsteps on the gravel path. "Oh, you are here, Mrs. Loring; we couldn't think where you had gone," said Miss Smeardon, acidly.

"And here is Miss Meredith of all people!" she continued, "I thought you were sure to be on the tennis court, Miss Meredith; Mr. Joyce is playing now."

"Oh, we have had such a delightful talk," said Dolly, so flushed with pleasure that Miss Smeardon gazed at her in astonishment.

"If only I knew her well enough to send her a munificent wedding

present! How I should love to do so; just to register my own joy," said Robinette to herself. As it was she shook hands very warmly with Miss Meredith before they parted, and when half way across the lawn, looked back again, and waved her hand gaily. Miss Meredith was pacing the grass, and treading heavily beside her, with a very gallant air, was her bullock-like young man.

"Mr. Joyce is quite wealthy," said Miss Smeardon. "I understand that he is an only son too, and will some day inherit a fine property. Miss Meredith is most fortunate, at her age and with her history."

Robinette said nothing. She looked out at the glistening reaches of the river, now shining through the silver mist; at the fields yellow with buttercups, and the folds of the distant hills. As they drove up the lane to the house, the birds, refreshed by the rain, were singing like angels. In her heart too, something was singing as blithely as any bird amongst them all.

"Sometimes, sometimes our mistakes do not come home to roost!" she thought, "but fly away and make nests elsewhere—rich nests in India too!"

"How did you enjoy the party, Cousin Robin?" said Carnaby, who was waiting for them in the doorway. "I had a good tuck-in of strawberries. The ladies were a little young for my taste; just immature girls; no one under sixty, and rather frisky, don't you think? By the way did you see Number One and her millionaire?"

"I don't know what you mean by Number One," said Robinette, haughtily, as she passed in at the door.

"You will, when you're Number Two!" rejoined Carnaby, stooping to pinch Lord Roberts' tail till the hero yelped aloud.

XVI

TWO LETTERS

Lavendar tore up his fourth sheet of paper and began afresh. “Dear Mrs. Loring.” No, that would not do; he took another sheet, and began again:—

“My dear Mrs. Loring,—Your commission for old Mrs. Prettyman has taken some little time to execute, for I had to go to two or three shops before finding a chair ‘with green cushions, and a wide seat, so comfortable that it would almost act as an anæsthetic if her rheumatism happened to be bad, and yet quite suitable for a cottage room.’ These were my orders, I think, and like all your orders they demand something better than the mere perfunctory observance. My own proportions differing a good deal from those of the old lady, it is still an open question whether what seemed comfortable to me will be quite the same to her. I can but hope so, and the chair will be dispatched at once.

“London is noisy and dusty, and grimy and stuffy, and, to one man at least, very, very dull. A boat on Greenshaw ferry seems the only spot in the world where any gaiety is to be found. You can hear the cuckoos calling across the river as you read this, no doubt, and Carnaby is rendered happier than he deserves by being allowed to row you down to tell Mrs. Prettyman about the chair. I feel as if, like the Japanese, I could journey a hundred miles to worship that wonderful tree.—Don’t let the blossoms fall until I come!

“There seems a good deal of business to be done. My father

unfortunately is no better, so he cannot come down to Stoke Revel, and I shall probably return upon Wednesday morning. A poem of Browning's runs in my head—something about three days—I can't quote exactly.

"If my sister were writing this letter, she would say that I have been very hard to please, and uninterested in everything since I came home. Indeed it seems as if I were. London in this part of it, in hot weather, makes a man weary for green woods, a sliding river, and a Book of Verses underneath a Bough. Well, perhaps I shall have all of them by Wednesday afternoon. You will think I can do nothing but grumble. All the same, into what was the mere dull routine of uncongenial work before, your influence has come with a current of new energy; like the tide from the sea swelling up into the inland river.—I'm at it again! Rivers on the brain evidently.

"I hope meanwhile that Carnaby behaves himself, and is not too much of a bore, and that England,—England in spring at least, is gaining a corner in your heart? Your mother called it home, remember. Yes, do try to remember that!

"Did you go to the garden party? Did you walk? Did you drive? Did you like it? Who was there? Were you dull?"

There was a postscript:—

"I have found the verse from Browning, 'So I shall see her in three days.'

"M. L."

"Tuesday, 19th.

"Dear Mr. Lavendar: First, many thanks for Nurse's armchair, which arrived in perfect order, and is a shining monument to your good taste. She does nothing but look at it, shrouding it when she retires to

bed with an old table-cover, to protect it from the night air.

“Whether she will ever make its acquaintance thoroughly enough to sit in it I do not know, but it will give her an enormous amount of pleasure. Perhaps her glow of pride in its possession does her as much good as the comfort she might take in its use.

“Her ‘rheumatics’ are very painful just now, and I have a good deal to do with Duckie. You remember Duckie? I call her Mrs. Mackenzie, after that lady in The Newcomes who talked the Colonel to death. Mrs. Mackenzie is heavy, elderly, and strong-willed. I am acquainted with every bone, tendon, and sinew in her body, having to lift her into a coop behind the cottage where she will not wake Nurse at dawn with her eternal quacking. She has heretofore slept under Nurse’s bedroom window and dislikes change of any kind. So lucky she has no offspring! I tremble to think of what maternal example might do in such a talkative family!

“Stoke Revel is as it was and ever will be, world without end; only Aunt de Tracy is crosser than when you are here and life is not as gay, although Carnaby does his dear, cubbish best. If ever you desire your mental jewels to shine at their brightest; if ever you wish a tolerably good disposition to seem like that of an angel; if ever, in a fit of vanity, you would like to appear as a blend of Apollo, Lancelot, Demosthenes, Prince Charlie, Ajax, and Solomon, just fly to Stoke Revel and become part of the household. Assume nothing; simply appear, and the surroundings will do the rest; like the penny-in-the-slot arrangements. Seen upon a background of Bates, William, Benson, Big Cummins, the Curate, Miss Smeardon, and may I dare to add, the lady of the Manor herself,—any living breathing man takes on an Olympian majesty. I shouldn’t miss you in Boston nor in London; perhaps even in Weston I might find a wretched substitute, but here you are priceless!

“I have some news for you. On Saturday Miss Smeardon and I went to a garden party. That was what it was called. The thermometer was

only slightly below zero when we started, and that luminary masquerading as the sun was pretending to shine. Soon after we arrived at the festive scene, there were gusts of wind and rain. I sought the shelter of a spreading tree, the kitchen fire not being available, and I was joined there by the hostess, who presented her niece, your Miss Meredith.

“Dear Mr. Lavendar, this is a subject we cannot write about, you and I. I am loyal to my sex, and what Miss Meredith said, and looked, and did, are all as sacred to me as they ought to be. I only want to tell you that she is happy; that she has this very week become engaged, and is going to India with her husband in a month. Now that little cankerworm, that has been gnawing at your roots of life for the last year or two, has done its worst, and you are perfectly free to go and make other mistakes. I only hope you’ll get ‘scot free’ from those, too, for I don’t like to see nice men burn their fingers. We became such good friends huddled up in that boat when we were stuck in the mud—Ugh! I can smell it now!—that I am glad to be the first to send you pleasant news.

“Sincerely yours,
“Robinetta Loring.”

XVII

MRS. DE TRACY CROSSES THE FERRY

Lavendar's blunt refusal, except under certain conditions, to announce to Mrs. Prettyman her coming ejection from the cottage at Wittisham, was unprofessional enough, as he himself felt; but it was final and categorical. Conveying as it did a sort of tacit remonstrance, this refusal had an unfortunate effect, for it only served to rouse Mrs. de Tracy's formidable obstinacy. She had seized upon one point only in their numberless and wearisome discussions of the matter: Mrs. Prettyman had no legal claim upon Stoke Revel. To give her compensation for the plum tree would be to allow that she had; to create a precedent highly dangerous under the circumstances. How could one refuse to other old women or old men leaving their cottages what one had weakly granted to her? The demands would be unceasing, the trouble endless. So arguing, Mrs. de Tracy soon brought herself to a state of determination bordering on a sort of mania. She was old, and in exaggerated harshness her life was retreating as it were into its last stronghold, at bay.

As good as her word, for she had vowed she would warn Mrs. Prettyman herself, and she was never one to procrastinate, the lady of the Manor proceeded to plan her visit to Wittisham. She had not crossed the river for years. Wittisham, one of the loveliest villages in England, perhaps, though little known, was a thorn in her side, as it would have been in that of any other landlord with empty pockets.

What you could not deal with to your own advantage, it was better to ignore, and on this autocratic principle, Mrs. de Tracy had left Wittisham to itself.

But now the boat carried her there, alone and fierce—*thrawn*, as the Scotch say—bent upon a course of conduct that she knew would hold her up to the hatred of every right-thinking person of her acquaintance, and bitterly triumphant in the knowledge. The meanness of her errand never struck her. On the contrary, she would have argued it was one well worthy of her, a part of the scheme in the consummation of which she had spent her married life and her whole indomitable energy, losing actually her own identity in the process, and becoming an inexorable machine. That scheme was the holding together of Stoke Revel for the de Tracys, the maintenance of family dignity and power, the pre-eminence of a race that had always ruled. The river beneath her, carrying her to the fulfilment of her duty, the noble river, widening to the sea, subject to its tides and made turbulent by its storms, typified to Mrs. de Tracy only the greatness of Stoke Revel. From its banks the de Tracys had sent out, generation after generation, men who had commanded fleets, who had upheld the national honour upon the farthest seas, very often at the cost of life. There was no sacrifice of herself at which Mrs. de Tracy would have hesitated in upholding this ideal, no sacrifice of others, either. What was Lizzie Prettyman in comparison? A bag of old bones, fit for nothing but the workhouse!

“A little faster, William,” said the widow, sitting upright in the stern, and William the footman bent to his oars, the beads of perspiration standing on his brow. When Mrs. de Tracy stepped out upon the pier, she had to be reminded where the Prettyman cottage was.

“You’ll know it by the plum tree, ma’am,” said William respectfully, “everybody does.”

It was not far off on the river side. The tide had ebbed and left a

stretch of muddy foreshore in front of it, where the rotting poles for hanging the fishing nets out to dry stood gauntly up. Mrs. de Tracy approached the steps, which merged into the flagged path before the door, and paused to survey the property she intended to part with. She had no eye for the picturesque. A few white petals from the blossoming plum tree, scattered by the breeze, fell upon her black bonnet and shoulders. A faint scent of honey came from it and the hum of bees, for the day was warm. The tumble-down condition of the cottage engaged Mrs. de Tracy's attention.

"And for this," she thought scornfully, "a man will give hundreds of pounds! There's truth in the adage that a fool and his money are soon parted!"

She mounted the steps that led up to the patch of garden, her keen, cold eyes everywhere at once. "A cat can't sneeze without she 'ears 'im!" her villagers at Stoke Revel were wont to say, disappearing into their houses as rabbits into their burrows at sight of a terrier.

Old Elizabeth Prettyman stood at her door, and it took some time to make her realize who her august visitor was. She was getting blind; she had never been a favourite with Mrs. de Tracy, nor had she entered Stoke Revel Manor since her nursling disgraced it by marrying a Bean. She curtseyed humbly to the great lady.

"There now, ma'am," she said, "it's not often we have seen you across the river. Will you please to come inside and sit down, ma'am? 'T is very warm this afternoon, it is." She was a good deal fluttered in her welcome, for there was that in Mrs. de Tracy's air that seemed to bode misfortune.

"I shall sit down for a few minutes, Elizabeth," was the reply, "while I explain my visit to you."

Mrs. Prettyman stood aside respectfully, and Mrs. de Tracy swept past her into the cottage and seated herself there. It never occurred to her to ask the old woman to sit down in her own house; she expected

her to stand throughout the interview. Without further preamble, then, Mrs. de Tracy came to the point:—

“Elizabeth,” she said, “I have come to tell you that I am going to sell the land on which this cottage stands, and that you will have to find some other home.”

The old woman did not understand for a minute. “You be going to sell the land, ma’am?” she repeated stupidly.

“Yes, I am. A gentleman from London wishes to buy it; you will need to go.”

“A gentleman from London! Lor, ma’am, no gentleman from London wouldn’t live ’ere!” Elizabeth cried, perfectly dazed by the statement.

Mrs. de Tracy repeated: “It is not your business, Elizabeth, what he intends to do with the place; all you have to do is to remove from the house.”

The old woman sank down on the nearest chair and covered her face with her hands. She was so old and so tired that she had no heart to face life under new conditions, even should they be better than those she left. A younger woman would have snapped her fingers in Mrs. de Tracy’s face, so to speak, and wished her joy of her old rattletrap of a house, but Elizabeth Prettyman, after a lifetime of struggles, had not vitality enough for such an action. She had never dreamed of leaving the cottage, and where was she to go? Her furrowed face wore an expression of absolute terror now when she looked up.

“But where be I to live, ma’am?” she cried.

“I do not know, Elizabeth; you must arrange that with your relations,” said Mrs. de Tracy.

“I don’t ’ave but only me niece—’er as married down Exeter way.”

“Well, you should write to her then.”

“She don’t want to keep me, Nettie don’t,—she’s but a poor man’s

wife, and five chillen she 'as; it's not like as if she were me daughter, ma'am."

"You have some small sum of money of your own every year, have you not?" Mrs. de Tracy asked.

"Ten pound a year, ma'am; the same that me 'usband left me; two 'undred pounds 'e 'ad saved and 't is in an annuity; that's all I 'ave—that and me plum tree."

"The plum tree is not yours, either, Elizabeth; that belongs to the land," said Mrs. de Tracy curtly.

"'T was me 'usband planted it, ma'am, years ago. We watched 'en and pruned 'en and tended 'en like a child we did—an' now to be told 'er ain't mine!"

"You're forgetting yourself, Elizabeth, I think," said Mrs. de Tracy. It was simply impossible for her to see with the old woman's eyes; all she remembered was the legal fact that any tree planted in Stoke Revel ground belonged to the owner of the ground.

"But ma'am, 't is a big part of me living is the plum tree; only yesterday I says to the young lady—Miss Cynthia's young lady—I says, 'Dear knows how 't would be with me without I had the plum tree.'"

"I cannot help that, Elizabeth: the plum tree is not yours, it belongs to Stoke Revel."

"Then ma'am, you'll be 'lowing me something for it surely?"

"No," said Mrs. de Tracy obstinately, "you have no legal claim to compensation, Elizabeth. I cannot undertake to allow you anything for what is not yours. If I did it in your case you know quite well I should have to do it in many others."

There was a long and heavy silence. Elizabeth Prettyman was taking in her sentence of banishment from her old home; Mrs. de Tracy was

merely wondering how long it would take her to walk down that nasty steep bit of path to the ferry. At last the old woman looked up.

“When must I be goin’ then, ma’am?” she asked meekly.

Mrs. de Tracy considered. “The transfer of land from one person to another generally takes some time: you will have several weeks here still; I shall send you notice later which day to quit.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Elizabeth simply, and added, “The plum tree blossoms ’ul be over by that time.”

“I don’t see what that has to do with it,” said Mrs. de Tracy, in whose heart there was room for no sentiment.

“’T would have been ’arder leavin’ it in blossom time,” the old woman explained; but her hearer could not see the point. She rose slowly from her chair and looked around the cottage.

“I am glad to see that you keep your place clean and respectable, Elizabeth,” she said. “I wish you good afternoon.”

Elizabeth never rose from her chair to see her visitor to the door—(an omission which Mrs. de Tracy was not likely to overlook)—she just sat there gazing stupidly around the tiny kitchen and muttering a word or two now and then. At last she got up and tottered to the garden.

“I’ll ’ave to leave it all—leave the old bench as me William did put for me with his own ’ands, and leave Duckie, Duckie can’t never go to Exeter if I goes there,—and leave the plum tree.” She limped across the little bit of sunny turf, and stood under the white canopy of the blossoming tree, leaning against its slender trunk. “Pity ’t is we ain’t rooted in the ground same as the trees are,” she mused. “Then no one couldn’t turn us out; only the Lord Almighty cut us down when our time came; Lord knows I’m about ready for that now—grave-ripe as you may say.” She leaned her poor weary old head against the tree stem and wept, ready, ah! how ready, at that moment, to lay down the burden of her long and toilsome life.

“Good afternoon, Nursie dear!” a clear voice called out in her ear, and Elizabeth started to find that Robinette had tip-toed across the grass and was standing close beside her. She lifted her tear-stained face up to Robinette’s as a child might have done.

“I’ve to quit, Missie,” she sobbed, “to leave me ’ome and Duckie and the plum tree, an’ I’ve no place to go to, and naught but my ten pounds to live on—and ’t won’t keep me without I’ve the plum tree, not when I’ve rent to pay from it; not if I don’t eat nothing but tea an’ bread never again!”

In a moment Robinette’s arms were about her: her soft young cheeks pressed against the withered old face.

“What’s this you’re saying, Nurse?” she cried. “Leaving your cottage? Who said so?”

“It’s true, dear, quite true; ’asn’t the lady ’erself been here to tell me so?”

“Was that what Aunt de Tracy was here about? I met her on the road five minutes ago; she said she had been here on business! But tell me, Nurse, why does she want you to leave? Are you going to get a better cottage? Does she think this one isn’t healthy for you?”

“No, no, dear, ’t isn’t that, she ’ve sold the cottage over me ’ead, that’s what ’t is, or she’s going to sell it, to a gentleman from London—Lord knows what a gentleman from London wants wi’ ’en—and I’ve to quit.”

Robinette tried to be a peacemaker.

“Then you’ll get a much more comfortable house, that’s quite certain. You know, though this one is lovely on fine days like this, that the thatch is all coming off, and I’m sure it’s damp inside! Just wait a bit, and see if you don’t get some nice cosy little place, with a sound roof and quite dry, that will cure this rheumatism of yours.”

But Mrs. Prettyman shook her head.

“No, no, there won’t be no cosy place given to me; I’m no more worth than an old shoe now, Missie, and I’m to be turned out, the lady said so ’erself; said as I must go to Exeter to live with me niece Nettie, and ’er don’t want us—Nettie don’t—and whatever shall I do without I ’ave Duckie and the plum tree?”

“Oh, but”—Robinette began, quite incredulously, and the old woman took up her lament again.

“And I asked the lady, wouldn’t I ’ave something allowed me for the plum tree—that ’ave about clothed me for years back? And ‘No,’ she says, ‘’t ain’t your plum tree, Elizabeth, ’t is mine; I can’t ’low nothing on me own plum tree.’”

Robinette still refused to believe the story.

“Nurse, dear,” she said, “you’re a tiny bit deaf now, you know, and perhaps you misunderstood about leaving. Suppose you keep your dear old heart easy for to-night, and I’ll come down bright and early to-morrow and tell you what it really is! If you have to leave the plum tree you’ll get a fine price put on it that may last you for years; it’s such a splendid tree, anyone can see it’s worth a good deal.”

“That it be, Missie, the finest tree in Wittisham,” the old woman said, drying her eyes, a little comforted by the assurance in Robinette’s voice and manner.

“There now, we won’t have any more tears: I’ve brought a new canister of tea I sent for to London. I’m just dying to taste if it’s good; we’ll brew it together, Nursie; I shall carry out the little table from the kitchen and we’ll drink our tea under the plum tree,” Robinette cried.

She was carrying a great parcel under her arm, and when Mrs. Prettyman opened it, she could scarcely believe that this lovely red tin canister, filled with pounds of fragrant tea, could really be hers! The sight of such riches almost drove away her former fears. Robinette whisked into the kitchen and came out carrying the little round table

which she set down under the white canopy of the plum tree. Then together they brought out the rest of the tea things, and what a merry meal they had!

“It’s just nonsense and a bit of deafness on your part, Nurse, so we won’t remember anything about leaving the house, we are only going to think of enjoyment,” Robinette announced. Then the old woman was comforted, as old people are wont to be by the brave assurances of those younger and stronger than themselves, forgot the spectre that seemed to have risen suddenly across her path, and laughed and talked as she sipped the fragrant London tea.

XVIII

THE STOKE REVEL JEWELS

“Hullo! Cousin Robin, hurry up, you’ll need all your time!” It was Carnaby of course who saluted Robinette thus, as she came towards the house on her return from Wittisham.

“I’m not late, am I?” she said, consulting her watch.

“I thought you’d be making a tremendous toilette; one of your killing ones to-night,” Carnaby said. “Do! I love to see you all dressed up till old Smeardon’s eyes look as if they would drop out when you come into the room.”

“I’ll wear my black dress, and her eyes may remain in her head,” Robinette laughed.

“And what about Mark’s eyes? Wouldn’t you like them to drop out?” the boy asked mischievously. “He’s come back by the afternoon train while you were away at Wittisham.”

“Oh, has he?” Robinette said, and Carnaby stared so hard at her, that to her intense annoyance she blushed hotly.

“Horrid lynx-eyed boy,” she said to herself as she ran upstairs, “He’s growing up far too quickly. He needs to be snubbed.” She dashed to the wardrobe, pulled out the black garment, and gave it a vindictive shake. “Old, dowdy, unbecoming, deaconess-district-visitor-bible-woman, great-grand-auntly thing!” she cried.

Then her eye lighted on a cherished lavender satin. She stood for a

moment deliberating, the black dress over her arm, her eyes fixed upon the lavender one that hung in the wardrobe.

"I don't care," she cried suddenly: "I'll wear the lavender, so here goes! Men are all colour blind, so he'll merely notice that I look nice. I must conceal from myself and everybody else how depressed I am over the interview with Nurse, and how I dread discussing the cottage with Aunt de Tracy. That must be done the first thing after dinner, or I shall lose what little courage I have."

Lavendar thought he had never seen her look so lovely as when he met her in the drawing room a quarter of an hour later. There was nothing extraordinary about the dress but its exquisite tint and the sheen of the soft satin. The suggestion that lay in the colour was entirely lost upon him, however: if asked to name it he would doubtless have said "purplish." How he wished that he might have escorted her into the dining room, but Mrs. de Tracy was his portion as usual, and Robinette was waiting for Carnaby, who seemed unaccountably slow.

"Your arm, Middy, when you are quite ready," she said to him at last. Carnaby's extraordinary unreadiness seemed to arise from his trying to smuggle some object up his sleeve. This proved, a few moments later, to be a bundle of lavender sticks tied with violet ribbon that he had discovered in his bureau drawer. He laid it by Robinette's plate with a whispered "My compliments."

"What does your cousin want that bunch of lavender for, at the table?" Mrs. de Tracy enquired.

"She likes lavender anywhere, ma'am," Carnaby said with a wink on the side not visible by his grandmother. "It's a favourite of hers."

Robinette could only be thankful that Lavendar was occupied in a *sotto voce* discussion of wine with Bates, and she was able to conceal the bundle of herbs before his eyes met hers, for the fury she felt against her precious young kinsman at that moment she could

have expressed only by blows.

Dinner seemed interminably long. Robinette, for more reasons than one, was preoccupied; Lavendar made few remarks, and Carnaby was possessed by a spirit of perfectly fiendish mischief, saying and doing everything that could most exasperate his grandmother, put her guests to the blush, and shock Miss Smeardon.

But at last Mrs. de Tracy rose from the table, and the ladies followed her from the room, leaving Lavendar to cope alone with Carnaby.

“My fair American cousin is more than usually lovely to-night, eh, Mr. Lavendar?” the boy said, with his laughable assumption of a man of the world.

“There, my young friend; that will do! you’re talking altogether too much,” said Lavendar, as he poured himself out a glass of wine and sat down by the open window to drink it. Carnaby, perhaps not unreasonably offended, lounged out of the room, and left the older man to his own meditations.

Robinette in the meantime went into the drawing room with her aunt, and they sat down together in the dim light while Miss Smeardon went upstairs to write a letter.

“Aunt de Tracy,” Robinette began, “I was calling on Mrs. Prettyman just after you had been with her this afternoon, and do you know the dear old soul had taken the strangest idea into her head! She says you are going to ask her to leave the cottage.”

“The land on which her cottage stands is about to be sold,” said Mrs. de Tracy. “It is necessary that she should move.”

“Yes, she quite understood that; but she thinks she is not going to get another house; that was what was distressing her, naturally. Of course she hates to leave the old place, but I believe if she gets another nicer cottage, that will quite console her,” said Robinette quickly.

“I have no vacant cottage on the estate just now,” said Mrs. de Tracy quietly.

“Then what is she to do? Isn’t it impossible that she should move until another place is made ready for her?” Robinette rose and stood beside the table, leaning the tips of her fingers on it in an attitude of intense earnestness. She was trying to conceal the anger and dismay she felt at her aunt’s reply.

“Mrs. Prettyman has relatives at Exeter,” said Mrs. de Tracy without the quiver of an eyelid.

“Yes; but they are poor. They aren’t very near relations, and they don’t want her. O Aunt de Tracy, is it necessary to make her leave? She depends upon the plum tree so! She makes twenty-five dollars a year from the jam!”

“Dollars have no significance for me,” said Mrs. de Tracy with an icy smile.

“Well, pounds then: five pounds she makes. How is she ever going to live without that, unless you give her the equivalent? It’s half her livelihood! I promised you would consider it? Was I wrong?”

Old bitternesses rose in Mrs. de Tracy’s heart, the prejudices and the grudges of a lifetime. Everything connected with Robinette’s mother had been wrong in her eyes, and now everything connected with Robinette was wrong too, and becoming more so with startling rapidity.

“You had no right whatsoever to make any promises on my behalf,” she now said harshly. “You have acted foolishly and officiously. This is no business of yours.”

“I’ll gladly make it my business if you’ll let me, Aunt de Tracy!” pleaded Robinette. “If you don’t feel inclined to provide for Mrs. Prettyman, mayn’t I? She is my mother’s old nurse and she shan’t want for anything as long as I have a penny to call my own!” Robinette’s eyes

filled with tears, but Mrs. de Tracy was not a whit moved by this show of emotion, which appeared to her unnecessary and theatrical.

“You are forgetting yourself a good deal in your way of speaking to me on this subject,” she said coldly. “When I behaved unbecomingly in my youth, my mother always recommended me to go upstairs, shut myself up alone in my room, and collect my thoughts. The process had invariably a calming effect. I advise you to try it.”

Robinette did not need to be proffered the hint twice. She rushed out of the room like a whirlwind, not looking where she went. In the hall, she came face to face with Lavendar, who had just left the dining room.

“Mr. Lavendar!” she cried. “Do go into the drawing room and speak to my aunt. Preach to her! Argue with her! Convince her that she can’t and mustn’t act in this way; can’t go and turn Mrs. Prettyman out, and rob her of the plum tree, and leave her with hardly a penny in the world or a roof over her head!”

“It’s not a very pretty or a very pleasant business, Mrs. Loring, I admit,” said Lavendar quietly.

“Is it English law?” cried Robinette with indignation. “If it is, I call it mean and unjust!”

“Sometimes the laws seem very hard,” said Lavendar. “I’d like to discuss this affair with you quietly another time.”

As he spoke, Carnaby appeared and wanted to be told what the matter was, but Robinette discovered that it is not very easy to criticise a grandmother to her youthful grandson, more especially when the lady in question is your hostess.

“Aunt de Tracy and I have had a little difference of opinion about Mrs. Prettyman and her cottage, and the plum tree,” she said to the boy quietly, and Lavendar nodded approval.

“Prettyman’s got the sack, hasn’t she?” Carnaby enquired with a boy’s carelessness.

Robinette looked very grave. “My dear old nurse is to leave her cottage,” she said with a quiver in her voice. “She’s to lose her plum tree—”

“But of course she’ll get compensation,” cried Carnaby.

“No, Middy; she’s to get no compensation,” said Robinette in a low voice.

“Well, I call that jolly hard! It’s a beastly shame,” said Carnaby, evidently pricking up his ears and with a sudden frown that changed his face. “I say, Mark—” But Lavendar did not think the moment suitable for a discussion of Mrs. Prettyman’s wrongs. Besides, he did not wish Robinette to be banished from the drawing room for a whole interminable evening. He contrived to silence Carnaby for the time being.

“Let’s bury the hatchet for a little while,” he suggested. “Have you forgotten, Mrs. Loring, that I made Mrs. de Tracy promise to show off the Stoke Revel jewels for your benefit this very night?”

“O! but now I’m in disgrace, she won’t!” said Robinette.

“Yes, she will!” said Carnaby. “Nothing puts the old lady in such a heavenly temper as showing off the jewels. Don’t you miss it, Cousin Robin! It’s like the Tower of London and Madam Tussaud’s rolled into one, this show, I can assure you. Come on! Come back into the drawing room. Needn’t be afraid when Mark’s there!”

Robinette found that a black look or two was all that she had to fear from Mrs. de Tracy at present, and even these became less severe under the alchemy of Lavendar’s tact. A reminder that an exhibition of the jewelry had been promised was graciously received. Bates and Benson were summoned, and armed with innumerable keys, they descended to subterranean regions where safes were unlocked and

jewel-boxes solemnly brought into the drawing room. Mrs. de Tracy wore an air almost devotional, as she unlocked the final receptacles with keys never allowed to leave her own hands.

“If the proceedings had begun with prayer and ended with a hymn, it wouldn’t have surprised me in the least!” Robinette said to herself, looking silently on. Her silence, luckily for her, was taken for the speechlessness of awe, and did a good deal to make up, in the eyes of her august relative, for her late indiscretions. As a matter of fact, her irreverent thoughts were mostly to the effect that all but the historical pieces of the Stoke Revel *corbeille* would be the better of re-setting by Tiffany or Cartier.

Mrs. de Tracy opened an old shagreen case and the firelight flickered on the diamonds of a small tiara.

“This is a part of the famous Montmorency set,” she announced proudly, with the tone of a Keeper of Regalia. Then she took out a rope of pearls ending in tassels. “These belonged to Marie Antoinette,” she said.

An emerald set was next produced, and the emeralds, it was explained, had once adorned a crown. Deep green they were, encrusted in their diamond setting; costly, unique; but they left Robinette cold, though like most American women, she loved precious stones as an adornment. One of those emeralds, she was thinking, was worth fifty times more than old Lizzie Prettyman’s cottage: the sale of one of them would have averted that other sale which was to cause so much distress to a poor harmless old woman.

“When do you wear your jewels, Aunt de Tracy?” she asked gravely.

“I have not worn them since the Admiral’s death,” was the virtuous reply, “and I have never called or considered them mine, Robinetta. They are the de Tracy jewels. When Carnaby takes his place as the head of the house, they will be his. He will see that his wife wears them on the proper occasions.”

“Carnaby’s wife!” thought Robinette. “Why! she mayn’t be born! He may never have a wife! And to think of all those precious stones hiding their brightness in these boxes like prisoners in a dungeon for years and years, only to be let out now and then by Bates and Benson, jingling their keys like jailers! And this house is a prison too!” she said to herself; “a prison for souls!” and the thought of its hoarded wealth made her indignant; all this hidden treasure in a house where there was never enough to eat, where guests shivered in fireless bedrooms, where servants would not stay because they were starved! And Carnaby, too, whose youth was being embittered by unnecessary economies: Carnaby, who had so little pocket-money that he was a laughing-stock among his fellows—it was for Carnaby these sacrifices were being made! Strange traditions! Fetiches of family pride almost as grotesque to her thinking as those of any savages under the sun.

“My poor dear Middy!” she thought. “What chance has he, brought up in an atmosphere like this?” But she happened to raise her eyes at the moment, and to see the actual Carnaby of the moment, not the Carnaby her gloomy imagination was evoking from the future with the “petty hoard of maxims preaching down” his heart. He had contrived to get hold of the Marie Antoinette pearls without his grandmother’s knowledge and to hang them around his neck; he had poised the Montmorency tiara on his own sleek head; he had forced a heavy bracelet by way of collar round Rupert’s throat, and now with that choking and goggling unfortunate held partner-wise in his arms, he was waltzing on tiptoe about the farther drawing room behind the unconscious backs of Mrs. de Tracy and Miss Smeardon.

“He’s only a careless boy,” thought Robinette, “a happy-go-lucky, devil-may-care, hare-brained youngster. They can’t have poisoned his nature yet, and I’m sure he has a good heart. If he were at the head of affairs at Stoke Revel instead of his grandmother, I wonder what would be done in the matter of my poor old nurse?” Robinette stood in

the doorway for a moment before going up to her room. Her whole attitude spoke depression as Carnaby stole up behind her.

“See here, Cousin Robin, I can’t bear to have you go on like this. Don’t take Prettyman’s trouble so to heart. We’ll do something! I’ll do something myself! I have a happy thought.”

XIX

LAWYER AND CLIENT

Robinette had a bad night after the jewel exhibition, and a heavy head and aching eyes prompted her to ask Little Cummins to bring her breakfast to her bedroom.

It was touching to see that small person hovering over Robinette: stirring the fire, sweeping the hearth, looping back the curtains, tucking the slippers out of sight, and moving about the room like a mother ministering to an ailing child. Finally she staggered in with the heavy breakfast tray that she had carried through long halls and up the stairs, and put it on the table by the bed.

“There’s a new-laid egg, ma’am, that cook ’ad for the mistress, but I thought you needed it more; an’ I brewed the tea meself, to be sure,” she cooed; “an’ I’ve spread the loaf same as you like, an’ cut the bread thin, an’ ’ere’s one o’ the roses you allers wears to breakfast; an’ wouldn’t your erming coat be a comfort, ma’am?”

“Dear Little Cummins! How did you know I needed comfort? How did you guess I was homesick?”

Robinette leaned her head against the housemaid’s rough hand, always stained with black spots that would give way to no scrubbing. From morning to night she was in the coal scuttle or the grate or the saucer of black lead, for she did nothing but lay fires, light fires, feed fires, and tidy up after fires, for eight or nine months of the year.

“You mustn’t touch me, ma’am; I ain’t fit; there’s smut on me, an’

hashes, this time o' day," said Little Cummins.

"I don't care. I like you better with ashes than lots of people without. You mustn't stay in the coal scuttle all your life, Little Cummins; you must be my chambermaid some of these days when we can get a good substitute for Mrs. de Tracy. Would you like that, if the mistress will let you go?"

Little Cummins put her apron up to her eyes, and from its depths came inarticulate bursts of gratitude and joy. Then peeping from it just enough to see the way to the door, she ran out like a hare and secluded herself in the empty linen-room until she was sufficiently herself to join the other servants.

Robinette finished her breakfast and dressed. She had lacked courage to meet the family party, although she longed for a talk with Mark Lavendar. It was entirely normal, feminine, and according to all law, human and divine, but it appealed also to her sense of humour, that she should feel that this new man-friend could straighten out all the difficulties in the path. She waited patiently at her window until she saw him walk around the corner of the house, under the cedars, and up the twisting path, his head bent and bare, his hands in his pockets. Then she flung her blue cape over her shoulders and followed him.

"Mr. Lavendar," she called, as she caught up with his slow step, "you said you would advise me a little. Let us sit on this bench a moment and find out how we can untangle all the knots into which Aunt de Tracy tied us yesterday. I am so afraid of her that I am sure I spoke timidly and respectfully to her at first; but perhaps I showed more feeling at the end than I should. I am willing to apologize to her for any lack of courtesy, but I don't see how I can retract anything I said."

"It is hard for you," Lavendar replied, "because you have a natural affection for your mother's old nurse; and Mrs. de Tracy, I begin to believe, is more than indifferent to her. She has some active dislike, perhaps, the source of which is unknown to us."

“But she is so unjust!” cried Robinette. “I never heard of an Irish landlord in a novel who would practice such a piece of eviction. If I must stand by and see it done, then I shall assert my right to provide for Nurse and move her into a new dwelling. After you left the drawing room last night, I begged as tactfully as I could that Aunt de Tracy would sell me some of the jewels, so that she need not part with the land at Wittisham. She was very angry, and wouldn’t hear of it. Then I proposed buying the plum-tree cottage, that it might be kept in the family, and she was furious at my audacity. Perhaps the Admiral’s niece is *not* in the family.”

“She cannot endure anything like patronage, or even an assumption of equality,” said Lavendar. “You must be careful there.”

“Should I be likely to patronize?” asked Robinette reproachfully.

“No; but your acquaintance with your aunt is a very brief one, and she is an extraordinary character; hard to understand. You may easily stumble on a prejudice of hers at every step.”

“I shouldn’t like to understand her any better than I do now,” and Robinette pushed back her hair rebelliously.

“Will you be my client for about five minutes?” asked Lavendar.

“Yes, willingly enough, for I see nothing before me but to take Nurse Prettyman and depart in the first steamer for America.”

Mrs. Loring looked as if she were quite capable of this rather radical proceeding, and very much, too, as if any growing love for Lavendar that she might have, would easily give way under this new pressure of circumstances.

“This is the situation in a nutshell,” said Lavendar, filling his pipe. “Mrs. de Tracy is entirely within her legal rights when she asks Mrs. Prettyman to leave the cottage; legally right also when she declines to give compensation for the plum tree that has been a source of income; financially right moreover in selling cottage and land at a

fancy price to find money for needed improvements on the estate."

"None of this can be denied, I allow."

"All these legal rights could have been softened if Mrs. de Tracy had been willing to soften them, but unfortunately she has been put on the defensive. She did not like it when I opposed her in the first place. She did not like it when my father advised her to make some small settlement, as he did, several days ago. She resented Mrs. Prettyman's assumption of owning the plum tree; she was outraged at your valiant espousing of your nurse's cause."

"I see; we have simply made her more determined in her injustice."

"Now it is all very well for you to show your mettle," Lavendar went on, "for you to endure your aunt's displeasure rather than give up a cause you know to be just; but look where it lands us."

Robinette raised her troubled eyes to Lavendar's, giving a sigh to show she realized that her landing-place would be wherever the lawyer fixed it, not where she wished it.

"Go on," she sighed patiently.

"Your legal adviser regards it as impossible that you should come over from America and quarrel with your mother's family;—your only family, in point of fact. If this affair is fought to a finish you will feel like leaving your aunt's house."

"I shouldn't have to wait for that feeling," said Robinette irrepressibly. "Aunt de Tracy would have it first!"

"In such an event I could and would stand by you, naturally."

"*Would* you?" cried Robinette glowing instantly like a jewel.

Lavendar looked at her in amazement. "Pray what do you take me for? On whose side could I, should I be, my dear—my dear Mrs. Loring? But to keep to business. In the event stated above, neither my father nor I could very well continue to have charge of the estate. That

is a small matter, but increases the difficulties, owing to a long friendship dating back to the Admiral's time. Then we have Carnaby. Carnaby, my dear Mrs. Loring, belongs to you. Do you want to give him up? He adores you and you will have an unbounded influence on him, if you choose to exercise it."

"How can I influence Carnaby—in America?"

This was a blow, but Lavendar made no sign. "You may not always be in America," he said. "Now why not let Mrs. de Tracy sell the land and cottage and plum tree in the ordinary course of things? Oh, how I wish *I* could buy the blessed thing!" he exclaimed, parenthetically.

"Oh! how I wish *I* could buy the plum tree, and keep it, always blossoming, in my morning-room!" sighed Robinette.

"But unfortunately, Waller R. A. will buy the plum tree, confound him! Now, just after Mrs. de Tracy has definitely sold the premises and all their appurtenances, suppose you, in your prettiest and most docile way (docility not being your strong point!) ask your aunt if she has any objection to your taking care of Mrs. Prettyman during the few years remaining to her. Meantime keep her from irritating Mrs. de Tracy, and make the poor old dear happy with plans for her future. If you are short on docility you are long on making people happy!"

"Never did I hear such an argument! It would make Macduff fall into the arms of Macbeth; it would tranquillize the Kilkenny cats themselves! I'll run in and apologize abjectly to my thrice guilty aunt, then I'll reward myself by going over to Wittisham."

"If you'll take the ferry over, I'd like to come and fetch you if I may. That shall be my reward."

"Reward for what?"

"For giving you advice very much against my personal inclinations. Courses of action founded entirely on policy do not appeal to me very strongly."

XX

THE NEW HOME

It was in rather a chastened spirit that Robinette set off to see Mrs. Prettyman. “I’ve been foolish, I’ve been imprudent; oh! dear me! I’ve still so much to learn!” she sighed to herself. “No good is ever done by losing one’s temper; it only puts everything wrong. I shall have to try and take Mr. Lavendar’s advice. I must be very prudent with Nurse this morning—never show her that I think Aunt de Tracy is in the wrong; just persuade her ever so gently to move to another home, and arrange with her where it is to be.”

It is always difficult for an impetuous nature like Robinette’s to hold back about anything. She would have liked to run straight into Mrs. Prettyman’s room, and, flinging her arms round the old woman’s neck, cry out to her that everything was settled. And instead she must come to the point gently, prudently, wisely, “like other people” as she said to herself.

The cottage seemed very still that afternoon, and Robinette knocked twice before she heard the piping old voice cry out to her to come in.

“Why, Nurse dear, where are you? Were you asleep?” Robinette said as she entered, for Mrs. Prettyman was not sitting in the fine new chair. Then she found that the voice answered from the little bedroom off the kitchen, and that the old woman was in bed.

“I ain’t ill, so to speak, dear, just weary in me bones,” she explained, as Robinette sat down beside her. “And Mrs. Darke, me neighbour,

she sez to me, 'You do take the day in bed, Mrs. Prettyman, me dear, an' I'll do your bit of work for 'ee'—so 'ere I be, Missie, right enough."

"I'm afraid you were worried yesterday," said Robinette; "worried about leaving the house."

"I were, Missie, I were," she confessed.

"That's why I came to-day; you must stop worrying, for I've settled all about it. I spoke to my aunt last night, and it's true that you have to leave this house; but now I've come to make arrangements with you about a new one."

The old woman covered her face with her hands and gave a little cry that went straight to Robinette's heart.

"Lor' now, Miss, 'ow am I ever to leave this place where I've been all these years? I thought yesterday as you said 'twas a mistake I'd made."

"But alas, it wasn't altogether a mistake," Robinette had to confess sadly, her eyes filling with tears as she realized how she had only doubled her old friend's disappointment. Then she sat forward and took Mrs. Prettyman's hand in hers.

"Nursie dear," she said, "I don't want you to grieve about leaving the old home, for it isn't an awfully good one; the new one is going to be ever so much better!"

"That's so, I'm sure, dearie, only 'tis *new*," faltered Mrs. Prettyman. "If you're spared to my age, Missie, you'll find as new things scare you."

"Ah, but not a new house, Nursie! Wait till I describe it! Everything strong and firm about it, not shaking in the storms as this one does; nice bright windows to let in all the sunshine; so no more 'rheumatics' and no more tears of pain in your dear old eyes!"

Robinette's voice failed suddenly, for it struck her all in a moment that her glowing description of the new home seemed to have in it

something prophetic. That bent little figure beside her, these shaking limbs and dim old eyes,—all this house of life, once so carefully builded, was crumbling again into the dust, and its tenant indeed wanted a new one, quite, quite different! A sob rose in Robinette's throat, but she swallowed it down and went on gaily.

"I've settled about another thing, too; you're to have another plum tree, or life wouldn't be the same thing to you. And you know they can transplant quite big trees now-a-days and make them grow wonderfully. Some one was telling me all about how it is done only a few days ago. They dig them up ever so carefully, and when they put them into the new hole, every tiny root is spread out and laid in the right direction in the ground, and patted and coaxed in, and made firm, and they just catch hold on the soil in the twinkle of an eye. Isn't it marvellous? Well, I'll have a fine new tree planted for you so cleverly that perhaps by next year you'll be having a few plums, who knows? And the next year more plums! And the next year, jam!"

"'Twill be beautiful, sure enough," said the old woman, kindling at last under the description of all these joys. "And do you think, Missie, as the new cottage will really be curing of me rheumatics?"

"Why yes, Nurse. Whoever heard of rheumatism in a dry new house?"

"The house be new, but the rheumatics be old," said Mrs. Prettyman sagely.

"Well, we can't make *you* entirely new, but we'll do our best. I'm going to enquire about a nice cottage not very far from here; there's plenty of time before this one is sold. It shall be dry and warm and cosy, and you will feel another person in it altogether."

"These new houses be terrible dear, bain't they?" the old woman said anxiously.

"Not a bit; besides that's another matter I want to settle with you, Nursie. I'm going to pay the rent always, and you're going to have a

nice little girl to help you with the work, and there will be something paid to you each month, so that you won't have any anxiety."

"Oh, Missie, Missie, whatever be you sayin'? *Me* never to have no anxiety again!"

"You never shall, if I can help it; old people should never have worries; that's what young people are here for, to look after them and keep them happy."

Mrs. Prettyman lay back on the pillow and gazed at Robinette incredulously; it wasn't possible that such a solution had come to all her troubles. For seventy odd years she had worked and struggled and sometimes very nearly starved and here was some one assuring her that these struggles were over forever, that she needn't work hard any more, or ever worry again. Could it be true? And all to come from Miss Cynthia's daughter!

Robinette bent down and kissed the wrinkled old face softly.

"Good-night, Nursie dear," she said. "I'm not going to stay any longer with you to-day, because you're tired. Have a good sleep, and waken up strong and bright."

"Good-night, Missie, good-night, dear," the old woman said. Her face had taken on an expression of such peacefulness as it had never worn before.

She turned over on her pillow and closed her eyes, scarcely waiting for Robinette to leave the room.

"I've been allowed to do that, anyway," Robinette said to herself, standing in the doorway to look back at the quiet sleeper, and then looking forward to a little boat nearing the shore. The cottage sheltered almost the only object that connected her with her past; the boat, she felt, held all her future.

The river, when Lavendar rowed himself across it, was very quiet.

“The swelling of Jordan,” as Robinette called the rising tide, was over; now the glassy water reflected every leaf and twig from the trees that hung above its banks and dipped into it here and there.

Mooring his boat at the landing, Mark sauntered up to Mrs. Prettyman’s cottage, and having tapped lightly at the door to let Mrs. Loring know of his arrival, as they had agreed he should do, he went along the flagged pathway into the garden, and sat down on the edge of the low wall that divided it from the river. Just in front of him was the little worn bench where he had first seen Robinette as she sat beside her old nurse with the tiny shoe on her lap. It was scarcely a fortnight ago; yet it seemed to him that he could hardly remember the kind of man he had been that afternoon; a new self, full of a new purpose, and at that moment of a new hope, had taken the place of the objectless being he had been before.

Everything was very still; there was scarcely a sound from the village or from the shipping farther down the river. Lavendar fancied he heard Robinette’s clear voice within the cottage; then he started suddenly and the blood rushed to his heart as he listened to her light steps coming along the paved footpath.

“Here you are!” she whispered. “Let us not speak too loud, for Nurse was just dropping asleep when I left her. I’ve put a table-cover and a blanket over ‘Mrs. Mackenzie’ to keep her from quacking. Mrs. Prettyman has not been very well, poor dear, and is in bed. We’ve just talked about the lovely new home she’s going to have, and the transplanted plum tree; small, but warranted to bear in a year or two and give plums and jam like this one. I left her so happy!”

She stopped and looked up. “Oh! can any new tree be as beautiful as this one? Was ever anything in the world more exquisite? It has just come to its hour of perfection, Mr. Lavendar; it couldn’t last,—anything so lovely in a passing world.”

She sat down on the low wall, and looked up at the tree. It stood and

shone there in its perfect hour. Another day, and the blossoms, too fully blown, would begin to drift upon the ground with every little shaking wind; now it was at its zenith, a miracle of such white beauty that it caused the heart to stop and consider. Bees and butterflies hummed and flew around it; it cast a delicate shadow on the grass, and leaning across the wall it was imaged again in the river like a bride in her looking-glass.

Robinette sat gazing at the tree, and Lavendar sat gazing at her. At that moment he "feared his fate too much" to break the silence by any question that might shatter his hope, as the first breeze would break the picture that had taken shape in the glassy water beneath them.

"I feel in a better temper now," said Robinette. "Who could be angry, and look at that beautiful thing? I've left dear old Nurse quite happy again, and I haven't yet offended Aunt de Tracy irrevocably, and all because you persuaded me not to be unreasonable. All the same I could do it again in another minute if I let myself go. Doesn't injustice ever make people angry in England?"

Lavendar laughed. "It often makes me feel angry, but I've never found that throwing the reins on the horses' necks when they wanted to bolt, made one go along the right road any faster in the end."

"I often think," said Robinette, "if we could see people really angry and disagreeable before we—" She hesitated and added, "get to know them well, we should be so much more careful."

"Yes," said Mark, bending down his head and speaking very deliberately, "that's why I wish you could have seen me in all my worst moments. I'd stand the shame of it, if you could only know, but, alas, one can't show off one's worst moments to order; they must be hit upon unexpectedly."

"I don't believe thirty years of life would teach one about some people—they are so *crevicey*," said Robinette musingly. She had risen and leaned against the plum tree for a moment, looking up

through the white branches.

Lavendar rose and stood beside her. “Thirty years—I shall be getting on to seventy in thirty years.”

A little gust of wind shook the tree; some petals came drifting down upon them, like white moths, like flakes of summer snow, a warning that the brief hour of perfection would soon be past ... and under it human creatures were talking about thirty years!

XXI

CARNABY CUTS THE KNOT

That afternoon, Carnaby was having what he called “an absolutely mouldy time,” and since his leave was running out and his remaining afternoons were few, he considered himself an injured individual. Robinette and Lavendar seemed for ever preoccupied either with each other or with some subject of discussion, the ins and outs of which they had not confided to him.

“It’s partly that blessed plum tree,” he said to himself; “but of course they’re spooning too. Very likely they’re engaged by this time. Didn’t I tell her she’d marry again? Well, if she must, it might as well be old Lavendar as anyone else. He’s a decent chap, or he was, before he fell in love.”

Carnaby sighed. This effort of generosity towards his rival made him feel peculiarly disconsolate. He had fished and rowed on the river all the morning; he had ferreted; he had fed Rupert with a private preparation of rabbits which infallibly made him sick, the desired result being obtained with almost provoking celerity. Thus even success had palled, and Carnaby’s sharp and idle wits had begun to work on the problem which seemed to be occupying his elders. Neither Robinette nor Lavendar could expatiate to the boy on his grandmother’s peculiarities, but Carnaby had contrived to find out for himself how the land lay.

“Why is Waller R. A. so keen on the plum tree?” he had enquired.

“He wants to make a quartette of studies,” answered Lavendar. “The Plum Tree in spring, summer, autumn, and winter.”

“What a rotten idea!” said Carnaby simply.

“Far from rotten, my young friend, I can assure you!” Lavendar returned. “It will furnish coloured illustrations for countless summer numbers of the *Graphic* and *The Lady’s Pictorial*, and fill Waller R. A.’s pockets with gold, some of which will shortly filter in advance into the Stoke Revel banking account, we hope.”

“I’m not so sure about that!” said Carnaby; but he said it to himself, while aloud he only asked with much apparent innocence, “Waller R. A. wouldn’t look at the cottage or the land without the plum tree, I suppose?”

“Certainly not,” Lavendar had answered. “The plum tree is safeguarded in the agreement as I’m sure no plum tree ever was before. Waller R. A.’s no fool!”

Digesting this information and much else that he had gleaned, Carnaby now climbed to the top of a tree where he had a favourite perch, and did some serious and simple thinking.

“It’s a beastly shame,” he said to himself, “to turn that old woman out of her cottage. Cousin Robin thinks it’s a beastly shame, and what’s more, Mark does, and he’s a man, and a lawyer into the bargain.”

Carnaby thought remorsefully of a pot of jam which old Mrs. Prettyman had given him once to take back to college. What good jam it had been, and how large the pot! He had never given her anything—he had never a penny to bless himself with; and now his grandmother was taking away from the poor old creature all that she had. “It’s regular covetousness,” he thought, “and that infernal plum tree’s at the bottom of it all. Naboth’s vineyard is a joke in comparison, and What’s-his-name and the one ewe lamb simply aren’t in it.” He grew hot with mortification. Then he reflected, “If the plum tree weren’t there,

Waller R. A. wouldn't want the cottage, and old Mrs. Prettyman could live in it till the end of the chapter." A slow grin dawned upon his face, its most mischievous expression, the one which Rupert with canine sagacity had learned to dread. He felt and pinched the muscle of his arm fondly. (*Mussle* he always spelled the word himself, upon phonetic principles.)

"I may be a fool and a minor" (generally spelt *miner* by him), he said, as he climbed down from his perch, "but at least I can cut down a tree!"

He became lost to view forthwith in the workshops and tool-sheds attached to the home premises of Stoke Revel, and presently emerged, furnished with the object he had made diligent and particular search for; this he proceeded to carry in an inconspicuous way to a distant cottage where he knew there was a grindstone. He spent a happy hour with the object, the grindstone, and a pail of water. *Whirr*, *whirr*, *whirr*, sang the grindstone, now softly, now loudly—"*this is an axe, an axe, an axe, and a strong arm that holds it*!"

"You be goin' to do a bit of forestry on your own, Master Carnaby, eh?" suggested the grinning owner of the grindstone.

"I am; a very particular bit, Jones!" replied the young master, lovingly feeling the edge of the tool, which was now nearly as fine as that of a razor.

"You be careful, sir, as you don't chop off one of your own toes with that there axe," said the man. "It be full heavy for one o' your age. But there! you zailor-men be that handy! 'Tis your trade, so to speak!"

"Quite right, Jones, it is!" replied Carnaby. "Good-afternoon and thank you for the use of the grindstone." He was already planning where he would hide the axe, for he had precise ideas about everything and left nothing to chance.

Carnaby went to bed that night at his usual hour. His profession had

already accustomed him to awaking at odd intervals, and he had more than the ordinary boy's knowledge of moon and tide, night and dawn. When he slipped out of bed after a few hours of sound sleep, he put on a flannel shirt and trousers and a broad belt, and then, carrying his boots in his hand, crept out of his room and through the sleeping house. He would much rather have climbed out of the window, in a manner more worthy of such an adventure, but his return in that fashion might offer dangers in daylight. So he was content with an unfrequented garden door which he could leave on the latch.

The moon, which had been young when she lighted the lovers in the mud-bank adventure, was now a more experienced orb and shed a useful light. Carnaby intended to cross the river in a small tub which was propelled by a single oar worked at the stern, the rower standing. This craft was intended for pottering about the shore; to cross the river in it was the dangerous feat of a skilled waterman, but Carnaby had a knack of his own with every floating thing. As he balanced himself in the rocking tub, bare-headed, bare-necked, bare-armed, paddling with the grace and ease of strength and training, he looked a man, but a man young with the youth of the gods. The moon shone in his keen grey eyes and made them sparkle. A cold sea-wind blew up the river, but he did not feel its chill, for blood hot with adventure raced in his veins.

Wittisham was in profound darkness when he landed, and the moon having gone behind a bank of cloud, he had to grope his way to Mrs. Prettyman's cottage, shouldering the axe. The isolated position of the house alone made the adventure possible, he reflected; he could not have cut down a tree in the hearing of neighbours, and as to old Elizabeth herself, he hoped she was deaf. Most old women were, he reflected, except unfortunately his grandmother!

Soon he was entering the little garden and sniffing the scent of blossom, which was very strong in the night air. He could see the dim outline of the plum tree, and just as he wanted light, the moon came

out and shone upon its whiteness, giving a sort of spiritual beauty to the flowering thing that was very exquisite.

“What price, Waller R. A. now?” thought Carnaby impishly. “The plum tree in moonlight! eh? Wouldn’t he give his eyes to see it! But he won’t! Not if I know it!” The boy was as blind to the tree’s beauty as his grandmother had been, but he had scientific ideas how to cut it down, for he had watched the felling of many a tree.

First, standing on a lower branch, you lopped off all the side shoots as high as you could reach. This made the trunk easy to deal with, and its fall less heavy, and Carnaby set to work.

“She goes through them all as slick as butter!” he said to himself in high satisfaction. The axe had assumed a personality to him and was “she,” not “it.” “She makes no more noise than a pair of scissors cutting flowers; not half so much!” he said proudly. Branch after branch fell down and lay about the tree like the discarded garments of a bathing nymph. The petals fell upon Carnaby’s face, upon his hair and shoulders; he was a white figure as he toiled. Frightened birds and bats flew about, but he did not notice them. His only care was the cottage itself and its inmate. If *she* should awake! But the little habitation, shrouded in thatch and deep in shadow, was dark and silent as the grave.

“She must be sound asleep and deaf,” thought the boy. “Yes, very deaf.” He paused. The first stage in his task was accomplished. Shivering and naked, one absurd tuft of blossom and leaves at the tip—the murdered tree now stood in the moonlight, imploring the *coup de grâce* which should end its shame.

“Jolly well done,” said the murderer complacently. He stretched his arms, looked at the palms of his hands to see if they had blistered, and addressed himself to the second part of his business. Thud! thud! went the axe on the trunk of the tree, and the sweat broke out all over Carnaby’s skin, not with exertion but with nervous terror.

“If that doesn’t wake the dead!” he thought—but there was no awaking in the cottage. Its tiny window blinked in the moonlight, and Carnaby thought he heard the drowsy quack of a duck in an out-house. But the danger passed. Thud! went the axe again. The slim severed shaft of the tree was poised a moment, motionless, erect before it fell. Then it subsided gently among its broken and trodden boughs, and Carnaby’s task was done.

XXII

CONSEQUENCES

Early that morning before the sun had risen, when the light was still grey in the coming dawn, Robinette was awakened by a bird that called out from a tree close to her open window, every note like the striking of a golden bell. She jumped up and looked out, but the little singer, silenced, had flown away. Instead, she caught sight of a figure stealing across the lawn towards the side door which opened from the library. Even in the dim light she could distinguish that it was Carnaby, Carnaby with something in his hand. What he carried she could not quite make out, but the sleeves of his flannel shirt were rolled up above his elbows in a fatally business-like way, and he walked with an air of stealth.

"What mischief can that boy have been up to at this time of day?" thought Robinette as she lay down again, but she was too sleepy to wonder long.

She forgot all about it until she saw Carnaby at the breakfast table some hours later. Sometimes the gloom of that meal—never a favorite or convivial one in the English household, and most certainly neither at Stoke Revel—would be enlivened by some of the boy's pranks. He would pass over to the sideboard, pepper-pot slyly in hand, and Rupert, whose meal at this hour consisted of grape-nuts and cream, would unaccountably sneeze and snuffle over his plate.

"Bless it, Bobs!" his tormentor would exclaim tenderly. "Is it catching cold? Poor old Kitchener! Hi! *Kitch! Kitch!*" (like a violent sneeze) and

the outraged Rupert would forget grape-nuts and pepper alike in a fit of impotent fury. But this morning the dog fed in peace and Carnaby never glanced at him or his basin. Robinette, looking at the boy and remembering where she had seen him last, noticed that he was rather silent, that his cheeks were redder than common, and that under his eyes were lines of fatigue not usually there.

“What were you doing on the lawn at four o’clock this morning?” she began, but checked herself, suddenly thinking that if Carnaby had been up to mischief she must not allude to it before his grandmother.

No one had heard her. The meal dragged on. Robinette and Lavendar talked little. Miss Smeardon was preoccupied with the sufferings and the moods of Rupert. Mrs. de Tracy alone seemed in better spirits than usual; she was talkative and even balmy.

“The work at the spinney begins to-day,” she observed complacently, addressing herself to Lavendar and alluding to the rooting up of an old copse and the planting of a new one—an improvement she had long planned, though hitherto in vain. “The young trees have arrived.”

“But where is the money to come from?” enquired Carnaby suddenly, in a sepulchral tone. (His voice was at the disagreeable breaking stage, an agony and a shame to himself and always a surprise to others.) His grandmother stared: the others, too, looked in astonishment at the boy’s red face.

“I thought it had all been explained to you, Carnaby,” said Mrs. de Tracy, “but you take so little interest in the estate that I suppose what you have been told went in at one ear and out at the other, as usual! It is the sale of land at Wittisham which makes these improvements possible, advantages drawn from a painful necessity,” and the iron woman almost sighed.

“There won’t be any sale of land at Wittisham,—at least, not of Mrs. Prettyman’s cottage,” said Carnaby abruptly.

“It is practically settled. The transfers only remain to be signed; you know that, Carnaby,” said Lavendar curtly. He did not wish the vexed question to be raised again at a meal.

“It *was* practically settled—but it’s all off now,” said the boy, looking hard at his grandmother. “Waller R. A. won’t want the place any more. The bloomin’ plum tree’s gone—cut down. The bargain’s off, and old Mrs. Prettyman can stay on in her cottage as long as she likes!”

There was a freezing silence, broken only by the stertorous breathing of Rupert on Miss Smeardon’s lap.

“Repeat, please, what you have just said, Carnaby,” said his grandmother with dangerous calmness, “and speak distinctly.”

“I said that the cottage at Wittisham won’t be sold because the plum tree’s gone,” repeated Carnaby doggedly. “It’s been cut down.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve seen it.” Carnaby raised his eyes. “I cut it down myself,” he added, “this morning before daylight.”

“Who put such a thing into your head?” Mrs. de Tracy’s words were ice: her glance of suspicion at Robinette, like the cold thrust of steel. “Who told you to cut the plum tree down?”

“My conscience!” was Carnaby’s unexpected reply. He was as red as fire, but his glance did not falter. Mrs. de Tracy rose. Not a muscle of her face had moved.

“Whatever your action has been, Carnaby,” she said with dignity—“whether foolish and disgraceful, or criminal and dangerous, it cannot be discussed here. You will follow me at once to the library, and presently I may send for Mark. A lawyer’s advice will probably be necessary,” she added grimly.

Carnaby said not a word. He opened the door for his grandmother and followed her out; but as he passed Robinette, he looked at her

earnestly, half expecting her applause; for one of the motives in his boyish mind had certainly been to please her—to shine in her eyes as the doer of bold deeds and to avenge her nurse's wrongs. And all that he had managed was to make her cry!

For Robinette had put her elbows on the table and had covered her eyes with her hands. As he left the room, Carnaby could hear her exclamation:—

"To cut down that tree! That beautiful, beautiful, fruitful thing! O! how could anyone do it?"

So this was justice; this was all he got for his pains! How unaccountable women were!

Lavendar awaited some time his summons to join Mrs. de Tracy and her grandson in what seemed to him must be a portentous interview enough, trying meanwhile somewhat unsuccessfully to console Mrs. Loring for the destruction of the plum tree, and exchanging with her somewhat awe-struck comments on the scene they had both just witnessed. No summons came, however; but half an hour later, he came across Carnaby alone, and an interview promptly ensued. He wanted to plumb the depth of the boy-mind and to learn exactly what motives had prompted Carnaby to this sudden and startling action in the matter of the plum tree.

"Had you a bad quarter of an hour with your grandmother?" was his first question. Carnaby, he thought, looked subdued, and not much wonder.

The boy hesitated.

"Not so bad as I expected," was his answer. "The old lady was wonderfully decent, for her. She gave me a talking to, of course."

"I should hope so!" interpolated Lavendar drily.

"She jawed away about our poverty," continued Carnaby. "She's got

that on the brain, as you know. She said that this loss of the money—Waller R. A.'s money, she means, of course—is an awful blow. She *said* it was, but it seemed to me—" Carnaby paused, looking extremely puzzled.

"It seemed to you—?" prompted Lavendar encouragingly.

"That she wasn't so awfully cut up, after all," said Carnaby. "She seemed putting it on, if you know what I mean." Lavendar pricked up his ears. Mrs. de Tracy's intense reluctance to sell the land recurred to him in a flash. To get her consent had been like drawing a tooth, like taking her life-blood drop by drop. Could it be that she was not very sorry after all that the scheme had fallen through, secretly glad, indeed? It was conceivable that this was Mrs. de Tracy's view, but her grandson's motive was still obscure.

"Why did you do it, Carnaby?" Lavendar asked with kindness and gravity both in his voice. "You have committed a very mischievous action, you know, one that would have borne a harsher name had the transfers been signed and had the plum tree changed hands."

"But then I shouldn't have done it—you—you juggins, Mark!" cried the boy. "I've no earthly grudge against Waller R. A. If he'd actually bought the tree, it would have been too late, and his beastly money—"

"You need the money, you know," remarked Lavendar. "Remember that, my young friend!"

"It would have been dirty money!" said Carnaby, with a sudden flash that lit up his rather heavy face with a new expression. "You and Cousin Robin have been jolly polite when you thought I was listening, but *I* know what you really thought, and the kind of things you were saying to one another about this business! You thought it beastly mean to take the cottage away from old Lizzie in the way it was being done, and sheer robbery to deprive her of the plum tree without paying her for it. I quite agreed with you there, and if I felt like that, do you think I could sit still and let the money come in to Stoke Revel—

money that had been got in such a way? What do you take me for?" Lavendar was silent, looking at the boy in surprise. "Oh," continued Carnaby, "how I wish I were of age! Then I could show Cousin Robin, perhaps, what an English landlord can be! I mean that he can be a friend to his tenants, and kind and generous as well as just. As it is, Cousin Robin will go back to America and tell her friends what selfish brutes we are over here, and how jolly glad she was to get away!"

"Mrs. Loring will carry no tales, I am sure," said Lavendar. "But tell me, my dear fellow, did you imagine that Mrs. Prettyman would be a gainer by your action?"

"Well, why not?" answered the boy. "Didn't you tell me yourself that Waller R. A. wouldn't look at the cottage without the tree? What's to prevent the old woman living on where she is? Do you think there'll be a rush of new tenants for that precious old hovel? Go on! You know better than that!"

"But the tree, Carnaby, the plum tree!" cried Lavendar. "My young Goth, hadn't you a moment's compunction? That beautiful, flowering thing, as your cousin called it; could you destroy it without a pang?"

"The *tree*?" echoed Carnaby with unmeasured scorn. "What's a tree? It's just a tree, isn't it?"

"A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more!"

quoted Mark, despairingly.

"Well; and what more did he expect of a primrose, whoever the Johnny was?" asked the contemptuous Carnaby.

"At any rate," commented Lavendar, "it isn't necessary to search as far as Peter Bell for an analogy for your character, my young friend! You are your grandmother's grandson after all!"

“In some ways I suppose I can’t help being,” answered Carnaby soberly, “but not in all,” he added, and suddenly turning red he fumbled in his pocket and produced a coin which he held out to Lavendar. “It’s only ten bob,” he said apologetically, “and I wish it was a jolly sight more! But please give it to old Mrs. Prettyman to make up a bit for the loss of her plums. Daresay I’ll manage some more by and by. Anyway, I’ll make it up to her when I come of age.—I’m nearly sixteen already, you know. Be sure you tell her that!”

But Lavendar refused to take the money.

“Mrs. Prettyman is provided for, my boy,” he said. “She has become your cousin’s especial care. You need have no fear about that. The poor old woman is very happy and will have a cottage more suited for her rheumatism and her general feebleness than the present one. But I think your cousin will understand your motives and believe that you meant well by old Lizzie in your little piece of midnight madness.”

“Though I was a bit rough on the plum tree!” said Carnaby, with a broad smile.

“You think it’s a laughing matter?” Lavendar asked indignantly. “I wish you had my father to deal with, and Waller R. A.! It’s all very well for you.”

But Carnaby only laughed. The blood was still hot in his veins, and the joy of his night’s adventure. Mark told him that he and Mrs. Loring were crossing the river at once to see for themselves the extent of his mischief and what effect it had had upon old Mrs. Prettyman. Carnaby observed with diabolical meaning that as he had not been invited to join the party, he would make himself scarce. Gooseberries, he said, were very good fruit, but he wasn’t fond of them; so he lounged off with his hands in his pockets. Suddenly he turned. “See here, old Mark! You’ll speak a word for me with Cousin Robin, won’t you? It’s hard on me to have her hate me when I was trying to do my best to please her.”

“She won’t hate you; she couldn’t hate anybody,” said Lavendar absently, watching first the door and then the window.

“You say that because you’re in love with her! I’ve a couple of eyes in my head, stupid as you all think me. You can deny it all you like, but you won’t convince me!”

“I shan’t deny it, Carnaby. I am so much in love with her at this moment that the room is whirling round and round and I can see two of you!”

“Poor old Mark! Do you think she’ll take you on?”

“Can’t say, Carnaby!”

“You’re a lucky beggar if she does; that’s my opinion!” said the boy.

“Put it as strong as you like, Carnaby,” Lavendar answered. “You can’t exaggerate my feelings on that subject!”

“If you hadn’t fifteen years’ start of me I’d give you a run for your money!” exclaimed Carnaby with a daring look.

XXIII

DEATH AND LIFE

While these incidents were taking place at the Manor House, village life at Wittisham had been stirring for hours. Thin blue threads of smoke were rising from the other cottages into the windless air: only from Nurse Prettyman's there was none. Duckie in the out-house quacked and gabbled as she had quacked and gabbled since the light began, yet no one came to let her out and feed her. The halfpenny jug of milk had been placed on the doorstep long ago, but Mrs. Prettyman had not yet opened the door to take it in.

Outside in the garden, where the plum tree stood yesterday, there was now only a stump, hacked and denuded, and round about it a ruin of broken branches, leaves, and scattered blossoms. Over the wreck the bees were busy still, taking what they could of the honey that remained; and in the air was the strong odour of juicy green wood and torn bark.

The children who brought the milk were the first to discover what had happened, and very soon the news spread amongst the other cottagers. Then came two neighbours to the scene, wondering and exclaiming. They went to the door, but Mrs. Prettyman did not answer their knock or their calling. Mrs. Darke looked in through the tiny window.

"She be sleepin' that peaceful in 'er bed in there," she said, "it 'ud be a shame to wake 'er. She's deaf now, and belike she never 'eard the tree come down, 'ooever's done it. But I'll go and see after Duckie:

she's makin' noise enough to rouse 'er, anyway."

Then Duckie was released and fed and departed to gabble her wrongs to the other white ducks that were preening themselves amongst the deep green grass of the adjacent orchard.

"You can 'ear that bird a mile away—she's never done talking!" said Mrs. Darke as the indignant gabble grew fainter in the distance. "But 'ere's my old man a-come to look at the plum tree. Wonder what he'll say to it? This be a queer job, sure enough!"

Old Darke, on two sticks, hobbled towards the scene of desolation with grunts of mingled satisfaction and dismay. 'Twas a rare sensation, though a pity, to be sure!

Mrs. Darke stood by the well at the turn of the road, keeping a sharp eye on the cottage while she gossiped with the neighbour who was filling her pitcher. She did not want to miss the sight of Mrs. Prettyman's face when she opened her door and found out what had happened.

"She be sleepin' too long; I'll go and waken her in a minute," said Mrs. Darke. "'Tis but right she should be told what's come to 'er tree, poor thing."

Then a beggar woman selling bootlaces came along the shore of the river; she mounted the cottage steps and the gossips watched her trailing up the pathway in her loose old shoes, and knocking at the door. She waited for a few minutes: there was no answer, so she turned away resignedly and trailed off along the sun-lit lane, in-shore, leaving the garden gate swinging to and fro.

"There's summat the matter!" Mrs. Darke had just whispered with evident enjoyment, when some one else was seen approaching the cottage from the direction of the pier. It was the young lady from the Manor, this time. She wore a white dress and a green scarf, and her face was tinted with colour. She looked like a young blossoming tree

herself, all lacy white and pale green, a strange morning vision in a work-a-day world! Robinette ran quickly up the pathway and knocked at the door, but there was no answer to her knock. She called out in her clear voice:—

“Good morning, Nurse! Good morning! Aren’t you ready to let me in? It’s quite late!” But there was no answer to her call. She was just trying to open the door, which seemed to be locked, when a gentleman came up from the boat and followed her to the cottage. That, the women who were watching her thought quite natural, for surely such a young lady would be followed by a lover wherever she went! Indeed, Mrs. Darke said so.

“’Tis in that there kind,” she observed philosophically, “like the cuckoo and the bird that follows; never sees one wi’out the other!”

“’Tis quite that way, Mrs. Darke,” agreed the neighbour, approvingly.

Robinette turned a white face to Lavendar as he approached.

“Nurse won’t answer, and I can’t get in!” she cried. “Something must have happened. I—I’m afraid to go in alone. The door is locked, too.”

“It’s not locked,” said Lavendar, and exerting a little strength, he pushed it open and gave a quick glance inside. “I’ll go in first,” he said gently. “Wait here.”

He came again to the threshold in a few minutes, a peculiar expression on his face which somehow seemed to tell Robinette what had happened.

“Come in, Mrs. Robin,” he said very gravely and gently. “You need not be afraid.”

Robinette instinctively held out her hand to him and they entered the little room together.

She need not have feared for the old woman’s distress over the ruined plum tree, for nothing would ever grieve Nurse Prettyman

again. Just as she had lain down the night before, she lay upon her bed now, having passed away in her sleep. “And they that encounter Death in sleep,” says the old writer, “go forth to meet him with desire.” The aged face was turned slightly upwards and wore a look of contentment and repose that made life seem almost gaudy; a cheap thing to compare with this attainment....

Robinette came out of the cottage a little later, leaving the neighbours who had gathered in the room to their familiar and not uncongenial duties. She went into the garden, where Mark Lavendar awaited her. He longed to try to comfort her; indeed, his whole heart ran out to her in a warmth and passion that astounded him; but her pale face, stained with weeping, warned him to keep silence yet a little while.

"I just came for one branch of the blossom," Robinette said, "if it is not all withered. Yes, this is quite fresh still." She took a little spray he had found for her and stood holding it as she spoke. "Only yesterday it was all so lovely! Oh! Mr. Lavendar, I needn't cry for my old Nurse, I'm sure! How should I, after seeing her face? She had come to the end of her long life, and she was very tired, and now all that is forgotten, and she will never have a moment of vexation about her tree. I don't know why I should cry for her; but oh, how could Carnaby destroy that beautiful thing!"

"It was a genuine though mistaken act of conscience! You must not be too hard on Carnaby!" pleaded Lavendar. "He would not touch the money that was to come from the sale of Mrs. Prettyman's cottage under the circumstances, so it seemed best to him that the sale should not take place, and he prevented it in the directest and simplest way that occurred to him. It's like some of the things that men have done to please God, Mrs. Robin," Mark added, smiling, "and thought they were doing it, too! But Carnaby only wanted to please you!"

"To *please* me!" exclaimed Robinette, looking round her at the ruin before them. "Oh dear!" she sighed, "how confusing the world is, at times! I am just going to take this snowy branch and lay it on Nurse's pillow. She so loved her tree! See; it's quite fresh and beautiful, and the dew still upon it, just like tears!"

"That seemed just right," said Robinette softly as she came out into the sunshine again, a few minutes later. "I laid the blossoms in her

kind old tired hands, the hands that have known so much work and so many pains. It is over, and after all, her new home is better than any I could have found for her!”

The two walked slowly down the little garden on their way to the gate. As they passed, old Mr. Darke, who had hobbled around again to have another look at the fallen tree, addressed Lavendar solemnly.

“Best tree in Wittisham ’e was, sir,” touching the ruin of the branches as he spoke. “’Ooever could ha’ thought o’ sich a piece of wickedness as to cut ’im down? Murder, I calls it! ’Tis well as Mrs. Prettyman be gone to ’er rest wi’out knowledge of it; ’twould ’ave broken her old ’eart, for certain sure!”

“It nearly breaks mine to see it now, Mr. Darke!” said Robinette in a trembling voice. But the old labourer bent down, moving his creaking joints with difficulty and steadying himself upon his sticks till he could touch the stump of the tree with his rough but skilful hands. He pushed away the long grass that grew about the roots and looked up at Robinette with a wise old smile.

“’Tisn’t dead and done for yet, Missy, never fear!” he said. “Give ’im time; give ’im time! ’E’s cut above the graft—see! ’E’ll grow and shoot and bear blossom and fruit same as ever ’e did, given time. See to the fine stock of ’im; firm as a rock in the good ground! And the roots, they be sound and fresh. ’E’ll grow again, Missy; never you cry!”

Robinette looked so beautiful as she lifted her luminous eyes and parted lips to old Darke, and then turned to him with a gesture of hope and joy, that again Lavendar could hardly keep from avowing his love; but the remembrance of the old nurse’s still shape in the little cottage hushed the words that trembled on his lips.

XXIV

GRANDMOTHER AND GRANDSON

The disagreeable duty of announcing Mrs. Prettyman's death to the lady of the Manor now lay before Lavendar and his companion, and the thought of it weighed upon their spirits as they crossed the river. Carnaby also must be told. How would he take it? Robinette, still under the shock of the plum tree's undoing, expected perhaps some further exhibition of youthful callousness, but Lavendar knew better.

In their concern and sorrow, the young couple had forgotten all minor matters such as meals, and luncheon had long been over when they reached the house. They could see Mrs. de Tracy's figure in the drawing room as they passed the windows, occupying exactly her usual seat in her usual attitude. It was her hour for reading and disapproving of the daily paper.

Robinette and Lavendar entered quietly, but nothing in the gravity of their faces struck Mrs. de Tracy as strange.

"I have a disturbing piece of news to give you," Mark began, clearing his throat. "Mrs. Prettyman died last night in her cottage at Wittisham."

The erect figure in the widow's weeds remained motionless. Perhaps the old hand that lowered the newspaper trembled somewhat, so that its diamonds quivered a little more than usual.

"So Mrs. Prettyman is dead?" she said. Then, as the young people stood looking at her with an air of some expectancy, she added with a sour glance, "Do you expect me to be very much agitated by the

news?"

"The death was unexpected," began Lavendar lamely.

"She was seventy-five; my age!" said Mrs. de Tracy with a wintry smile. "Is death at seventy-five so unexpected an event?"

Lavendar said nothing; he had nothing to say, and Robinette for the same reason was silent. She was gazing at her aunt, almost unconsciously, with a wondering look. "At any rate," continued Mrs. de Tracy, addressing her niece, "your *protégée* has been fortunate in two ways, Robinette. She will neither be turned out of her cottage nor see the destruction of her plum tree. By the way—" with a perfectly natural change of tone, dismissing at once both Mrs. Prettyman and Death—"the plum tree *is* down, I suppose? You saw it?"

"Very much down!" answered Lavendar. "And certainly we saw it! Carnaby does nothing by halves!"

A slight change, a kind of shade of softening, passed over Mrs. de Tracy's stern features, as the shadow of a summer cloud may pass over a rocky hill. She turned suddenly to Robinette. "Can you tell me o n your word of honour that you had nothing to do with Carnaby's action; that you did not put it into his head to cut the plum tree down!"

"I?" exclaimed Robinette, scarlet with indignation. "*I?* Why—do you want to know what I think of the action? I think it was perfectly brutal, and the boy who did it next door to a criminal! There!"

Mrs. de Tracy seemed convinced by the energy of this disclaimer. "I have always considered yours a very candid character," she observed with condescension. "I believe you when you say that you did not influence Carnaby in the matter, though I strongly suspected you before."

"Well, upon my word!" ejaculated Robinette when they had got out of the room, too completely baffled to be more original. "What does she mean? Has any one ever understood the workings of Aunt de Tracy's

mind?"

"Don't come to me for any more explanations! I've done my best for my client!" cried Lavendar. "I give up my brief! I always told you Mrs. de Tracy's character was entirely singular."

"Let us hope so!" commented Robinette with energy. "I should be sorry for the world if it were plural!"

Carnaby was not in the house, and Lavendar proceeded to look for him out of doors. He knew the boy was often to be found in a high part of the grounds behind the garden, where he had some special resort of his own, and he went there first. The afternoon had clouded over, and a slight shower was falling, as Mark followed the wooded path leading up hill. A rock-garden bordered it, where ferns and flowers were growing, each one of which seemed to be contributing some special and delicate fragrance to the damp, warm air. The beech trees here had low and spreading branches which framed now and again exquisite glimpses of the river far below and the wooded hills beyond it.

Lavendar had not gone far when he found Carnaby, Carnaby intensely perturbed, walking up and down by himself.

"You don't need to tell me!" said the boy, with a quick and agitated gesture of the hand. "Bates told me. Old Mrs. Prettyman's dead!" His merry, square-set face was changed and looked actually haggard, and his eyes searched Lavendar's with an expression oddly different from their usual fearless and straightforward one. They seemed afraid. "Was it my grandmother's—was it our fault?" he asked. "I, I feel like a murderer. Upon my soul, I do!"

"Don't encourage morbid ideas, my dear fellow!" said Lavendar in a matter-of-fact tone. "There's trouble enough in the world without foolish exaggeration. Mrs. Prettyman was 'grave-ripe,' as she often said to your cousin; a very feeble old woman, whose time had come.

The doctor's certificate will tell you how rheumatism had affected her heart, and the neighbours would very soon set your mind at rest by describing the number of times poor old Lizzie had nearly died before."

"Think of it, though!" said Carnaby with wondering eyes. "Think of her lying dead in the cottage while I hacked and hewed at the plum tree just outside! By Jove! it makes a fellow feel queer!" He shuddered. The picture he evoked was certainly a strange one enough: a strange picture in the moonlight of a night in spring; the doomed beauty of the blossoming tree, the blind, headstrong human energy working for its destruction, and Death over all, stealthy and strong!

"What an ass I was!" said Carnaby, summing up the situation in the only language in which he could express himself. "Sweating and stewing and hacking away—thinking myself so awfully clever! And all the time things ... things were being arranged in quite a different manner!"

"We are often made to feel our insignificance in ways like this," said Lavendar. "We are very small atoms, Carnaby, in the path of the great forces that sweep us on."

"I should rather think so!" assented the wondering boy. "And yet, can a fellow sit tight all the time and just wait till things happen?"

"Ask me something else!" suggested Lavendar ironically.

There was a short pause. "I'm awfully sorry old Mrs. Prettyman's dead," Carnaby said in a very subdued tone. "I meant to do a lot for her, to try and make up for my grandmother's being such a beast." He stopped short, and to Lavendar's astonishment, his face worked, and two tears squeezed themselves out of his eyes and rolled over his round cheeks as they might have done over a baby's. "It's the j-jam I was thinking of," he sniffed. "Once a pal of mine and I were playing the fool in old Mrs. Prettyman's garden, pretending to steal the plums, and giving her duck bits of bread steeped in beer to make it s-squiffy

(a duck can be just as drunk as a chap). She didn't mind a bit. She was a regular old brick, and gave us a jolly good tea and a pot of jam to take away.... And now she's dead and—and....” Carnaby's feelings became too much for him again, and a handkerchief that had seen better and much cleaner days came into play. Lavendar flung an arm round the boy's shoulder.

“This kind of regret comes to us all, Carnaby,” he said. “I don't suppose there's a man with a heart in his breast who hasn't sometime had to say to himself, I might have done better: I might have been kinder: it's too late now! But it's never too late!” added Lavendar under his breath—“not where Love is!”

The shower was over, and though the sun had not come out, a pleasant light lay upon the river as the friends walked down; upon the river beyond which old Lizzie Prettyman was sleeping so peacefully, the sleep of kings and beggars, and just and unjust, and rich and poor alike. Carnaby had dried his eyes but continued in a pensive mood.

“Cousin Robin's still angry with me about the tree,” he said, uncertainly.

“She won't be angry long!” Lavendar assured him. “You and your Cousin Robin are going to be firm friends, friends for life.”

Carnaby seemed a good deal comforted. “Mind you don't tell her I blubbered!” he said in sudden alarm. “Swear!”

“She wouldn't think a bit the worse of you for that!” said Lavendar.

“Swear, though!” repeated Carnaby in deadly earnest.

And Lavendar swore, of course.

But an influence very unlike Lavendar's and a spirit very different from Robinette's enfolded Carnaby de Tracy in his home and fought, as it were, for his soul. That night, after the last lamp had been put out by the careful Bates, and after Benson had bade a respectful good-night

to her mistress, a light still burned in Mrs. de Tracy's room. Presently, carried in her hand, it flitted out along the silent passages, past rows of doors which were closed upon empty rooms or upon unconscious sleepers, till it came to Carnaby's door; to the Boys' Room, as that far-away and most unluxurious apartment had always been called. Mrs. de Tracy was making a pilgrimage to the shrine of one of her gods. She opened the door, and closing it gently behind her, she stood beside Carnaby's bed and looked at him, intently and haggardly.

Mrs. de Tracy's was a singular character, as Mark Lavendar had said. The circumstances of her widowhood with its heavy responsibilities had perhaps hardly been fair to her. There had been little room for the kindlier and softer feelings, though it is to be feared that they would not have found much congenial soil in her heart. The personal selfishness in her had long been merged in the greater and harder selfishness of caste; she had become a mere machine for the keeping up of Stoke Revel.

But to-night she was moved by the positively human sentiment which had been stirred in her by Carnaby's startling act of cutting the plum tree down. Ah! let fools believe if they could that she was angry with the boy! She had never felt anger less or pride more. While others talked and argued, shilly-shallied, made love, muddled and made mistakes, her grandson, the man of the race that always ruled, had cut the knot for himself, without hesitation and without compunction, without consulting anyone or asking anyone's leave. That was the way the de Tracys had always acted. And it seemed to Mrs. de Tracy a crowning coincidence, a fitting kind of poetical justice, that Carnaby's action should actually have prevented the sale of the land; that dreaded, detestable sale of the first land that the de Tracys had held upon the banks of the river.

So, since Carnaby was to be a man of the right kind, his grandmother had come to look at him, not in love, as other women come to such

bedsides, but in pride of heart. The boy, after his “white night” at Wittisham and the varied emotions of the succeeding day, lay on his side, in the deep, recuperative sleep of youth whence its energies are drawn and in which its vigors are renewed. His round cheek indented the pillow, his rumpled hair stirred in the breeze that blew in at the window, his arm and his open hand, relaxed, lay along the sheet. Another woman would have straightened the bed-clothes above him; another might have touched his hair or hand; another kissed his cheek. But not even because he was like her departed husband, like the man who five and fifty years before had courted a certain cold and proud, handsome and penniless Miss Augusta Gallup, would Mrs. de Tracy do these things. She had had her sensation, such as it was, her secret moment of emotion, and was satisfied. She left the room as she had come, the candle casting exaggerated shadows of herself upon the walls where Carnaby’s bats and fishing rods and sporting prints hung.

It is sad to be old as Mrs. de Tracy was old, but her age was of her own making, a shrinkage of the heart, a drying up of the wells of feeling that need not have been.

“I should be better out of the way,” her bitterness said within her, and alas! it was true. Her great, gaunt room seemed very lonely, very full of shadows when she returned to it. Rupert, who always slept at her bedside, awaited her. Disturbed at this unwonted hour, he stirred in his basket, wheezed and gurgled, turned round and round and could not get comfortable, whined, and looked up in his mistress’s face. She stood watching him with a sort of grim pity, and, strangely enough, bestowed upon him the caress she had not found for her grandson.

“Poor Rupert! You are getting too old, like your mistress! Your departure, like hers, will be a sorrow to no one!” Rupert seemed to wheeze an asthmatical consent, and presently he snuggled down in his basket and went to sleep.

XXV

THE BELLS OF STOKE REVEL

On Sunday morning Robinette and Lavendar were both ready for church, by some strange coincidence, half an hour too soon. He was standing at the door as she came down into the hall. Mrs. de Tracy and Miss Smeardon were nowhere to be seen; even Carnaby was invisible, but the shrill, infuriated yelping of the Prince Charles from the drawing room indicated his whereabouts only too plainly.

“We’re much too early,” said Robinette, glancing at the clock.

“Shall we walk through the buttercup meadow, then—you and I?” asked Lavendar. His voice was low, and Robinette answered very softly. She wore a white dress that morning without a touch of colour.

“I couldn’t wear black to-day for Nurse,” she said, in answer to his glance, “but I couldn’t wear any colour, either.”

“You’re as white as the plum tree was!” said Lavendar. “I remember thinking that it looked like a bride.” Robinette made no reply. He ventured to look up at her as he spoke, and she was smiling although her lip quivered and her eyes were full of tears. Lavendar’s heart beat uncomfortably fast as they walked through the meadow towards the stile which led into the churchyard.

“It’s too soon to go in yet,” he said. “The bells haven’t begun.”

“Let’s stop here. It’s cool in the shadow,” said Robinette. She leaned on the wall and looked out at the shining reaches of the river. “The

swelling of Jordan is over now," she said with a little smile and a sigh. "The tide has come up, and how quiet everything is!"

The water mirrored the hills and the ships and the gracious sky above them. There was scarcely a sound in the air. At the point where they stood, the Manor House was hidden from view, and only the squat old tower of the church was visible, and the yew tree rising above the wall against the golden field. A bush of briar covered with white roses hung above them, just behind Robinette, and Lavendar looking at her in this English setting on an English Sunday morning, wondered to himself, as he had so often done before, if she could ever make this country her home.

"Yet she has English blood as well as I," he thought. "Why, the very name on the old bells of the church there, records the memory of an ancestress of hers! We cannot be so far apart." Looking at her standing there, he rehearsed to himself all that he meant to say, oh, a great many things both true and eloquent, but at that moment every word forsook him. Yet this was probably the best opportunity he would have of telling her what was burning in his heart: telling her how she had beguiled him at first by her quick understanding and her frolicsome wit, because all that sort of thing was so new to him. She had come like a mountain spring to a thirsty man. He had been groping for inspiration and for help: now he seemed to find them all in her. She was so much more than charming, though it was her charm that first impressed him; so much more than pretty, though her face attracted him at first; so much more than magnetic, though she drew him to her at their first meeting with bonds as delicate as they were strong. These were tangible, vital, legitimate qualities—but were they all? Could lips part so, could eyes shine so, could voice tremble so, if there were not something underneath; a good heart, fidelity, warmth of nature?

"For the first time," he thought, "I long to be worthy of a woman. But I would not tell her how I love her at this moment, unless I felt I need not

be wholly unequal to her demands. I have never desired anything strongly enough to struggle for it, up to now; but she has set my springs in motion, and I can work for her until I die!"

All this he thought, but never a word he said. Then the church clock struck and the clashing bells began. They shook the air, the earth, the ancient stones, the very nests upon the trees, and sent the rooks flying black as ink against the yellow buttercups in the meadow.

"We must go, in a few minutes," said Robinette. "Oh, will you pull me some of those white roses up there?"

Lavendar swung himself up and drawing down a bunch he pulled off two white buds.

"Will you take them?" he asked, holding them out to her. Then suddenly he said, very low and very humbly, "Oh, take me too; take me, Robinette, though no man was ever so unworthy!"

Robinette laid the roses on the wall beside her.

"For my part," she said, turning to Lavendar with a little laugh that was half a sob; "for my part, I like giving better than taking!" She put both her hands in his and looked into his face. "Here is my life," she said simply. "I want to belong to you, to help you, to live by your side."

"I oughtn't to take you at your word," he said, his voice choked with emotion. "You are far too good for me!"

"Hush," Robinetta answered, putting a finger on his lip; "it isn't a question of how great you are or how wonderful: it's a question of what we can be to each other. I'd rather have you than the Duke of Wellington or Marcus Aurelius, and I believe you wouldn't change me for Helen of Troy!"

"I have nothing to bring you, nothing," said Lavendar again, "nothing but my love and my whole heart."

"If all the kingdoms of the earth were offered to me instead, I would

still take you and what you give me," Robinette answered.

Lavendar laid his cheek against her bright hair and sighed deeply. In that sigh there passed away all former things, and behold, all things became new. Two cuckoos answered each other from opposite banks of the river and two hearts sang songs of joy that met and mingled and floated upward.

Again the bells broke out overhead, filling the air with music that had rung from them ever since just such another morning hundreds of years before, when they rang their first peal from the church tower, bearing the legend newly cut upon them: "Pray for the Soul of Anne de Tracy, 1538." And Anne de Tracy's memory was forgotten—so long forgotten—except for the bells that carried her name!

Yet in these same meadows that she must have known, spring was come once more. The Devonshire plum trees had budded and blossomed and shed their petals year after year, and year after year, since the bells first swung in the air; and now Hope was born once again, and Youth, and Love, which is immortal!

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