Peter's Mother eBook

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PETER'S MOTHER

NEW EDITION

WITH INTRODUCTION

BY

MRS. HENRY DE LA PASTURE

1906

And I left my youth behind
For somebody else to find.

TO THE BELOVED MEMORY OF MY ONLY BROTHER

LT. *Colonel Walter Floyd Bonham*, D.S.O.

TO MY AMERICAN READERS

The author of "Peter's Mother" has been bidden of the publishers, who have incurred the responsibility of presenting her to the American public, to write a preface to this edition of her novel. She does so with the more diffidence because it has been impressed upon her, by more than one wiseacre, that her novels treat of a life too

narrow, an atmosphere too circumscribed, to be understood or appreciated by American readers.

No one can please everybody; I suppose that no one, except the old man in Aesop's Fable, ever tried to do so. But I venture to believe that to some Americans, a sincere and truthful portrait of a typical Englishwoman of a certain class may prove attractive, as to us are the studies of a "David Harum," or others whose characteristics interest because—and not in spite of—their strangeness and unfamiliarity. We do not recognise the type; but as those who do have acknowledged the accuracy of the representation, we read, learn, and enjoy making acquaintance with an individuality and surroundings foreign to our own experience.

There are hundreds of Englishwomen living lives as isolated, as guarded from all practical knowledge of the outer world, as entirely circumscribed as the life of Lady Mary Crewys; though they are not all unhappy. On the contrary, many diffuse content and kindness all around them, and take it for granted that their own personal wishes are of no account.

Indeed it would seem that some cease to be aware what their own personal wishes are.

With anxious eyes fixed on others—the husband, father, sons, who dominate them,—-they live to please, to serve, to nurse, and to console; revered certainly as queens of their tiny kingdoms, but also helpless as prisoners.

Calm, as fixed stars, they regard (perhaps sometimes a little wistfully) the orbits of brighter planets, and the flashing of occasional meteors, within their ken; knowing that their own place is unchangeable—immutable.

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That the views of such women are often narrow, their prejudices many, their conventions tiresome, who shall deny? That their souls are pure and tender, their hearts open to kindness as are their hands to charity, nobody who knows the type will dispute. They lack many advantages which their more independent sisters (no less gifted with noble and womanly qualities) enjoy, but they possess a peculiar gentleness, which is all their own, whether it be adored or despised.

When one of their number happens to be cleverer, larger minded, more restless, and impatient, it may be, by nature than her sisters, tragedy may ensue. But not often. Habit and public opinion are strong restrainers, stronger sometimes than even the most carefully inculcated abstract principles.

To turn to another phase of the story—there was a time during the Boer War when there was literally scarcely a woman in England who was not mourning the death of some man—be he son, brother, or husband, lover or friend,—and that time seems still very, very recent to some of us.

The rights and wrongs of a war have nothing to do with the sympathy all civilised men and women extend to the soldiers on both sides who take part in it.

"*Theirs not to reason why,*
Theirs but to do or die,"

and whether they "do or die," the mingled suspense, pride, and anguish suffered by their women-kind rouses the pity of the world; but most of all, for the secret of sympathy is understanding, the pity of those who have suffered likewise. So that such escapades as Peter's in the story, being not very uncommon at that dark period (and having its foundation in fact), may have touched hearts over here, which will be unmoved on the other side of the Atlantic. I cannot tell. I have known very few Americans, and though I have counted those few among my friends, they have been rarely met.

My only knowledge of America has been gleaned from my observation of these, and from reading. As it happens, the favourite books of my childhood were, with few exceptions, American.

Partly from association and partly because I count it the most truly delightful story of its kind that ever was written, "Little Women" has always retained its early place in my affections. "Meg," "Jo," "Beth," and "Amy" are my oldest and dearest friends; and when I think of them, it is hard to believe that America could be a land of strangers to me after all. I confess to a weakness for the "Wide, Wide World" and a secret passion for "Queechy." I loved "Mr. Rutherford's Children," and was always interested to hear "What Katy Did," Whilst the very thought of "Melbourne House" thrills me with recollections of the joy I experienced therein.

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But this is all by the way; and for the egotism which is, I fear me, displayed in this foreword, I can but plead, not only the difficulty of writing a preface at all, when one has no personal inclination that way, but the nervousness which must beset a writer who is directly addressing not a tried and friendly public, but an unknown, and, it may be, less easily pleased and more critical audience. It appears to me that it would be a simpler thing to write another book; and I would rather do so. I can only hope that some of the readers of "Peter's Mother," if she is so happy as to find favour in American eyes, would rather I did so too; in I which case I shall very joyfully try to gratify their wishes, and my own.

Betty de La pasture.

PETER'S MOTHER

CHAPTER I

Above Youlestone village, overlooking the valley and the river, and the square-towered church, stood Barracombe House, backed by Barracombe Woods, and owned by Sir Timothy Crewys, of Barracombe.

From the terrace before his windows Sir Timothy could take a bird's-eye view of his own property, up the river and down the river; while he also had the felicity of beholding the estate of his most important neighbour, Colonel Hewel, of Hewelscourt, mapped out before his eyes, as plainly visible in detail as land on the opposite side of a narrow valley must always be.

He cast no envious glances at his neighbour's property. The Youle was a boundary which none could dispute, and which could only be conveniently crossed by the ferry, for the nearest bridge was seven miles distant, at Brawnton, the old post-town.

From Brawnton the coach still ran once a week for the benefit of the outlying villages, and the single line of rail which threaded the valley of the Youle in the year 1900 was still a novelty to the inhabitants of this unfrequented part of Devon.

Sir Timothy sometimes expressed a majestic pity for Colonel Hewel, because the railway ran through some of his neighbour's best fields; and also because Hewelscourt was on the wrong side of the river—faced due north—and was almost buried in timber. But Colonel Hewel was perfectly satisfied with his own situation, though sorry for Sir Timothy, who lived within full view of the railway, but was obliged to drive many miles round by Brawnton Bridge in order to reach the station.

The two gentlemen seldom met. They lived in different parishes, and administered justice in different directions. Sir Timothy's dignity did not permit him to make use of the

ferry, and he rarely drove further than Brawnton, or rode much beyond the boundaries of his own estate. He cared only for farming, whilst Colonel Hewel was devoted to sport.

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The Crewys family had been Squires of Barracombe, cultivating their own lands and living upon them contentedly, for centuries before the Hewels had ever been heard of in Devon, as all the village knew very well; wherefore they regarded the Hewels with a mixture of good-natured contempt and kindly tolerance. The contempt was because Hewelscourt had been built within the memory of living man, and only two generations of Hewels born therein; the tolerance because the present owner, though not a wealthy man, was as liberal in his dealings as their squire was the reverse.

* * * * *

In the reign of Charles I., one Peter Crewys, an adventurous younger son of this obscure but ancient Devonshire family, had gained local notoriety by raising a troop of enthusiastic yeomen for his Majesty's service; subsequently his own reckless personal gallantry won wider recognition in many an affray with the parliamentary troops; and on the death of his royal master, Peter Crewys was forced to fly the country. He joined King Charles II. in his exile, whilst his prudent elder brother severed all connection with him, denounced him as a swashbuckler, and made his own peace with the Commonwealth.

The Restoration, however, caused Farmer Timothy to welcome his relative home in the warmest manner, and the brothers were not only reconciled in their old age, but the elder made haste to transfer the ownership of Barracombe to the younger, in terror lest his own disloyalty should be rewarded by confiscation of the family acres.

A careless but not ungrateful monarch, rejoicing doubtless to see his faithful soldier and servant so well provided for, bestowed on him a baronetcy, a portrait by Vandyck of the late king, his father, and the promise of a handsome sum of money, for the payment of which the new baronet forebore to press his royal patron. His services thus recognized and rewarded, old Sir Peter Crewys settled down amicably with his brother at Barracombe.

Presumably there had always been an excellent understanding between them. In any case no question of divided interests ever arose.

Sir Peter enlarged the old Elizabethan homestead to suit his new dignity; built a picture-gallery, which he stocked handsomely with family portraits; designed terrace gardens on the hillside after a fashion he had learnt in Italy, and adopted his eldest nephew as his heir.

Old Timothy meanwhile continued to cultivate the land undisturbed, disdaining newfangled ideas of gentility, and adhering in all ways to the customs of his father. Presently, soldier and farmer also passed away, and were laid to rest side by side on the banks of the Youle, in the shadow of the square-towered church.

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Before the house rolled rich meadows, open spaces of cornland, and low-lying orchards. The building itself stood out boldly on a shelf of the hill; successive generations of the Crewys family had improved or enlarged it with more attention to convenience than to architecture. The older portion was overshadowed by an imposing south front of white stone, shaded in summer by a prolific vine, which gave it a foreign appearance, further enhanced by rows of green shutters. It was screened from the north by the hill, and from the east by a dense wood. Myrtles, hydrangeas, magnolias, and orange-trees nourished out-of-doors upon the sheltered terraces cut in the red sandstone.

The woods of Barracombe stretched upwards to the skyline of the ridge behind the house, and were intersected by winding paths, bordered by hardy fuchsias and delicate ferns. A rushing stream dropped from height to height on its rocky course, and ended picturesquely and usefully in a waterfall close to the village, where it turned an old mill-wheel before disappearing into the Youle.

If the Squire of Barracombe overlooked from his terrace garden the inhabitants of the village and the tell-tale doorway of the much-frequented inn on the high-road below—his tenants in the valley and on the hillside were privileged in turn to observe the goings-in and comings-out of their beloved landlord almost as intimately; nor did they often tire of discussing his movements, his doings, and even his intentions.

His monotonous life provided small cause for gossip or speculation; but when the opportunity arose, it was eagerly seized.

In the failing light of a February afternoon a group of labourers assembled before the hospitably open door of the Crewys Arms.

“Him baint been London ways vor uppard of vivdeen year, tu my zurtain knowledge,” said the old road-mender, jerking his empty pewter upwards in the direction of the terrace, where Sir Timothy’s solid dark form could be discerned pacing up and down before his white house.

“Tis vur a ligacy. You may depend on’t. ’Twas vur a ligacy last time,” said a brawny ploughman.

“Volk doan’t git ligacies every day,” said the road-mender, contemptuously. “I zays ’tis Master Peter. Him du be just the age when byes du git drubblezum, gentle are zimple. I were drubblezum myself as a bye.”

“’Twas tu fetch down this ‘ere London jintle-man as comed on here wi’ him to-day, I tell ’ee. His cousin, are zuch like. Zame name, anyways, var James Coachman zaid zo.”

“Well, I telled ’ee zo,” said the road-mender. “He’s brart down the nextest heir, var tu keep a hold over Master Peter, and I doan’t blame ’un.”

“James Coachman telled me vive minutes zince as zummat were up. ’Ee zad such arders var tu-morrer morning, ’ee says, as niver ’ee had befar,” said the landlord.

“Thart James Coachman weren’t niver lit tu come here,” said the road-mender, slyly. His toothless mouth extended into the perpetual smile which had earned him the nickname of “Happy Jack,” over sixty years since, when he had been the prettiest lad in the parish.

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“He only snicked down vor a drop o’ brandy, vur he were clean rampin’ mazed wi’ tuth-ache. He waited till pretty nigh dusk var the ole ladies tu be zafe. ’Ee says they du take it by turns zo long as daylight du last, tu spy out wi’ their microscopes, are zum zuch, as none of Sir Timothy’s volk git tarking down this ways. A drop o’ my zider might git tu their ’yeds,” said the landlord, sarcastically, “though they drinks Sir Timothy’s by the bucket-vull up tu Barracombe.”

“’Tis stronger than yars du be,” said Happy Jack. “There baint no warter put tu’t, Joe Gudewyn. The warter-varl be tu handy vur yure brewin’.”

“Zum of my customers has weak ’yeds, ’tis arl the better for they,” said Goodwyn, calmly.

“Then charge ’em accardin’, Mr. Landlord, charge ’em accardin’, zays I. Warter doan’t cost ’ee nart, du ’un?” said Happy Jack, triumphantly.

“‘Ere be the doctor goin’ on in’s trap, while yu du be tarking zo,” said the ploughman. “Lard, he du be a vast goer, be Joe Blundell.”

“I drove zo vast as that, and vaster, when I kip a harse,” said the road-mender, jealously. “’Ee be a young man, not turned vifty. I mind his vather and mother down tu Cullacott befar they was wed. Why doan’t he go tu the war, that’s what I zay?”

“Sir Timothy doan’t hold wi’ the war,” said the landlord.

“Mar shame vor ’un,” said Happy Jack. “But me and Zur Timothy, us made up our minds tu differ long ago. I’m arl vor vighting vurriners—Turks, Rooshans, Vrinchmen; ’tis arl one tu I.”

“Why doan’t ’ee volunteer thyself, Vather Jack? Thee baint turned nointy yit, be ’ee?” said a labourer, winking heavily, to convey to the audience that the suggestion was a humorous one.

“Ah, zo I wude, and shute Boers wi’ the best on ’un. But the Governmint baint got the zince tu ax me,” said Happy Jack, chuckling. “The young volk baint nigh zo knowing as I du be. Old Kruger wuden’t ha’ tuke in I, try as ’un wude. I be zo witty as iver I can be.”

Dr. Blundell saluted the group before the inn as he turned his horse to climb the steep road to Barracombe.

No breath of wind stirred, and the smoke from the cottage chimneys was lying low in the valley, hovering over the river in the still air.

A few primroses peeped out of sheltered corners under the hedge, and held out a timid promise of spring. The doctor followed the red road which wound between Sir Timothy’s

carefully enclosed plantations of young larch, passed the lodge gates, which were badly in need of repair, and entered the drive.

CHAPTER II

The justice-room was a small apartment in the older portion of Barracombe House; the low windows were heavily latticed, and faced west.

Sir Timothy sat before his writing-table, which was heaped with papers, directories, and maps; but he could no longer see to read or write. He made a stiff pretence of rising to greet the doctor as he entered, and then resumed his elbow-chair.

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The rapidly failing daylight showed a large elderly, rather pompous gentleman, with a bald head, grizzled whiskers, and heavy plebeian features.

His face was smooth and unwrinkled, as the faces of prosperous and self-satisfied persons sometimes are, even after sixty, which was the age Sir Timothy had attained.

Dr. Blundell, who sat opposite his patient, was neither prosperous nor self-satisfied.

His dark clean-shaven face was deeply lined; care or over-work had furrowed his brow; and the rather unkempt locks of black hair which fell over it were streaked with white. From the deep-set brown eyes looked sadness and fatigue, as well as a great kindness for his fellow-men.

“I came the moment I received your letter,” he said. “I had no idea you were back from London already.”

“Dr. Blundell,” said Sir Timothy, pompously, “when I took the very unusual step of leaving home the day before yesterday, I had resolved to follow the advice you gave me. I went to fulfil an appointment I had made with a specialist.”

“With Sir James Power?”

“No, with a man named Herslett. You may have heard of him.”

“Heard of him!” ejaculated Blundell. “Why, he’s world-famous! A new man. Very clever, of course. If anything, a greater authority. Only I fancied you would perhaps prefer an older, graver man.”

“No doubt I committed a breach of medical etiquette,” said Sir Timothy, in self-satisfied tones. “But I fancied you might have written *your* version of the case to Power. Ah, you did? Exactly. But I was determined to have an absolutely unbiassed opinion.”

“Well,” said Blundell, gently.

“Well—I got it, that’s all,” said Sir Timothy. The triumph seemed to die out of his voice.

“Was it—unsatisfactory?”

“Not from your point of view,” said the squire, with a heavy jocularity which did not move the doctor to mirth. “I’m bound to say he confirmed your opinion exactly. But he took a far more serious view of my case than you do.”

“Did he?” said Blundell, turning away his head.

“The operation you suggested as a possible necessity must be immediate. He spoke of it quite frankly as the only possible chance of saving my life, which is further endangered by every hour of delay.”

“Fortunately,” said Blundell, cheerfully, “you have a fine constitution, and you have lived a healthy abstemious life. That is all in your favour.”

“I am over sixty years of age,” said Sir Timothy, coldly, “and the ordeal before me is a very severe one, as you must be well aware. I must take the risk of course, but the less said about the matter the better.”

Dr. Blundell had always regarded Sir Timothy Crewys as a commonplace contradictory gentleman, beset by prejudices which belonged properly to an earlier generation, and of singularly narrow sympathies and interests. He believed him to be an upright man according to his lights, which were not perhaps very brilliant lights after all; but he knew him to be one whom few people found it possible to like, partly on account of his arrogance, which was excessive; and partly on account of his want of consideration for the feelings of others, which arose from lack of perception.

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People are disliked more often for a bad manner than for a bad heart. The one is their private possession—the other they obtrude on their acquaintance.

Sir Timothy's heart was not bad, and he cared less for being liked than for being respected. He was the offspring of a *mesalliance*; and greatly over-estimating the importance in which his family was held, he imagined he would be looked down upon for this mischance, unless he kept people at a distance and in awe of him. The idea was a foolish one, no doubt, but then Sir Timothy was not a wise man; on the contrary, his lifelong determination to keep himself loftily apart from his fellow-men had resulted in an almost extraordinary ignorance of the world he lived in—a world which Sir Timothy regarded as a wild and misty place, peopled largely and unnecessarily with savages and foreigners, and chiefly remarkable for containing England; as England justified its existence by holding Devonshire, and more especially Barracombe.

Sir Timothy had never been sent to school, and owed such education as he possessed almost entirely to his half-sisters. These ladies were considerably his seniors, and had in turn been brought up at Barracombe by their grandmother; whose maxims they still quoted, and whose ideas they had scarcely outgrown. Under the circumstances, the narrowness of his outlook was perhaps hardly to be wondered at.

But the dull immovability and sense of importance which characterized him now seemed to the doctor to be almost tragically charged with the typical matter-of-fact courage of the Englishman; who displays neither fear nor emotion; and who would regard with horror the suspicion that such repression might be heroic.

"When is it to be?" said Blundell.

"To-morrow."

"To-morrow!"

"And here," said Sir Timothy; "Dr. Herslett objected, but I insisted. I won't be ill in a strange house. I shall recover far more rapidly—if I am to recover—among my people, in my native air. London stifles me. I dislike crowds and noise. I hate novelty. If I am to die, I will die at home."

"Herslett himself performs the operation, of course?"

"Yes. He is to arrive at Brawnton to-night, and sleep there. I shall send the carriage over for him and his assistants early to-morrow morning. You, of course, will meet him here, and the operation is to take place at eleven o'clock."

In his alarm lest the doctor might be moved to express sympathy, Sir Timothy spoke with unusual severity.

Dr. Blundell understood, and was silent.

“I sent for you, of course, to let you know all this,” said Sir Timothy, “but I wished, also, to introduce you to my cousin, John Crewys, who came down with me.”

“The Q.C.?”

“Exactly. I have made him my executor and trustee, and guardian of my son.”

“Jointly with Lady Mary, I presume?” said the doctor, unguardedly.

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“Certainly not,” said Sir Timothy, stiffly. “Lady Mary has never been troubled with business matters. That is why I urged John to come down with me. In case—anything—happens to-morrow, his support will be invaluable to her. I have a high opinion of him. He has succeeded in life through his own energy, and he is the only member of my family who has never applied to me for assistance. I inquired the reason on the journey down, for I know that at one time he was in very poor circumstances; and he replied that he would rather have starved than have asked me for sixpence. I call that a very proper spirit.”

The doctor made no comment on the anecdote. “May I ask how Lady Mary is bearing this suspense?” he asked.

“Lady Mary knows nothing of the matter,” said the squire, rather peevishly.

“You have not prepared her?”

“No; and I particularly desire she and my sisters should hear nothing of it. If this is to be my last evening on earth, I should not wish it to be clouded by tears and lamentations, which might make it difficult for me to maintain my own self-command. Herslett said I was not to be agitated. I shall bid them all good night just as usual. In the morning I beg you will be good enough to make the necessary explanations. Lady Mary need hear nothing of it till it is over, for you know she never leaves her room before twelve—a habit I have often deplored, but which is highly convenient on this occasion.”

Dr. Blundell reflected for a moment. “May I venture to remonstrate with you, Sir Timothy?” he said. “I fear Lady Mary may be deeply shocked and hurt at being thus excluded from your confidence in so serious a case. Should anything go wrong,” he added bluntly, “it would be difficult to account to her even for my own reticence.”

Sir Timothy rose majestic from his chair. “You will say that *I* forbade you to make the communication,” he said, with rather a displeased air.

“I beg your pardon,” said Dr. Blundell, “but—”

“I am not offended,” interrupted Sir Timothy, mistaking remonstrance for apology. He was quite honestly incapable of supposing that his physician would presume to argue with him.

“You do not, very naturally, understand Lady Mary’s disposition as well as I do,” he said, almost graciously. “She has been sheltered from anxiety, from trouble of every kind, since her childhood. To me, more than a quarter of a century her senior, she seems, indeed, still almost a child.”

Dr. Blundell coloured. “Yet she is the mother of a grown-up son,” he said.

“Peter grown-up! Nonsense! A schoolboy.”

“Eighteen,” said the doctor, shortly. “You don’t wish him sent for?”

“Most certainly not. The Christmas holidays are only just over. Rest assured, Dr. Blundell,” said Sir Timothy, with grim emphasis, “that I shall give Peter no excuse for leaving his work, if I can help it.”

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There was a tap at the door. The squire lowered his voice and spoke hurriedly.

“If it is the canon, tell him, in confidence, what I have told you, and say that I should wish him to be present to-morrow, in his official capacity, in case of—”

It was the canon, whose rosy good-humoured countenance appeared in the doorway whilst Sir Timothy was yet speaking.

“I hope I am not interrupting,” he said, “but the ladies desired me—that is, Lady Belstone and Miss Crewys desired me—to let you know that tea was ready.”

The canon had an innocent surprised face like a baby; he was constitutionally timid and amiable, and his dislike of argument, or of a loud voice, almost amounted to fear.

Sir Timothy mistook his nervousness for proper respect, and maintained a distant but condescending graciousness towards him.

“I hear you came back by the afternoon train, Sir Timothy. A London outing is a rare thing for you. I hope you enjoyed yourself,” said the canon, with a meaningless laugh.

“I transacted my business successfully, thank you,” said Sir Timothy, gravely.

“Brought back any fresh news of the war?”

“None at all.”

“I hear the call for more men has been responded to all over the country. It’s a fine thing, so many young fellows ready and willing to lay down their lives for their country.”

“Very few young men, I believe,” said Sir Timothy, frigidly, “can resist any opportunity to be concerned in brawling and bloodshed, especially when it is legalized under the name of war. My respect is reserved for the steady workers at home.”

“And how much peace would the steady workers at home enjoy without the brawlers abroad to defend them, I wonder!” cried the canon, flushing all over his rosy face, and then suddenly faltering as he met the cold surprise of the squire’s grey eyes.

“I have some letters to finish before post time,” said Sir Timothy, after an impressive short pause of displeasure. “I will join you presently, Dr. Blundell, at the tea-table, if you will return to the ladies with Canon Birch.”

Sir Timothy rang for lights, and his visitors closed the door of the study behind them. Dr. Blundell’s backward glance showed him the tall and portly form silhouetted against the window; the last gleam of daylight illuminating the iron-grey hair; the face turned

towards the hilltop, where the spires of the skeleton larches were sharply outlined against a clear western sky.

“What made you harp upon the war, man, knowing what his opinions are?” the doctor asked vexedly, as he stumbled along the uneven stone passage towards the hall.

“I did not exactly intend to do so; but I declare, the moment I see Sir Timothy, every subject I wish to avoid seems to fly to the tip of my tongue,” said the poor canon, apologetically; “though I had a reason for alluding to the war to-night—a good reason, as I think you will acknowledge presently. I want your advice, doctor.”

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“Not for yourself, I hope,” said the doctor, absently.

“Come into the gun-room for one moment,” said Birch. “It is very important. Do you know I’ve a letter from Peter?”

“From Peter! Why should *you* have a letter from Peter?” said the doctor, and his uninterested tone became alert.

“I’m sure I don’t know why not. I was always fond of Peter,” said the canon, humbly. “Will you cast your eye over it? You see, it’s written from Eton, and posted two days later in London.”

Dr. Blundell read the letter, which was written in a schoolboy hand, and not guiltless of mistakes in spelling.

“*DEAR CANON BIRCH*,

“*As my father wouldn’t hear of my going out to South Africa, I’ve taken the law into my own hands. I wrote to my mother’s cousin, Lord Ferries, to ask him to include me in his yeomanry corps. Of course I let him suppose papa was willing and anxious, which perhaps was a low-down game, but I remembered that all’s fair in love and war; and besides, I consider papa very nearly a pro-Boer. We’ve orders to sail on Friday, which is sharp work; but I should be eternally disgraced now if they stopped me. As my father never listens to reason, far less to me, you had better explain to him that if he’s any regard for the honour of our name, he’s no choice left. I expect my mother had better not be told till I’m gone, or she will only fret over what can’t be helped. I’ll write to her on board, once we’re safely started. I know you’re all right about the war, so you can tell papa I was ashamed to be playing football while fellows younger than me, and fellows who can’t shoot or ride as I can, are going off to South Africa every day.*

“*Yours affectionately*,

“*PETER CREWYS*.

“*P.S.—Hope you won’t mind this job. I did try to get papa’s leave fair and square first*.”

“I always said Peter was a fine fellow at bottom,” said Canon Birch, anxiously scanning the doctor’s frowning face.

“He’s an infernal self-willed, obstinate, heartless young cub on top, then,” said Blundell.

“He’s a chip of the old block, no doubt,” said the canon; “but still”—his admiration of Peter’s boldness was perceptible in his voice—“he doesn’t share his father’s reprehensible opinions on the subject of the war.”

“Sons generally begin life by differing from their fathers, and end by imitating them,” said Blundell, sharply. “Birch, we must stop him.”

“I don’t see how,” said the canon; and he indulged in a gentle chuckle. “The young rascal has laid his plans too well. He sails to-morrow. I telegraphed inquiries. Ferries’ Horse are going by the *Rosmore Castle* to-morrow morning at eleven o’clock.”

Dr. Blundell made an involuntary movement, which the canon did not perceive.

“I don’t relish the notion of breaking this news to Sir Timothy. But I thought we could consult together, you and me, how to do it,” said the innocent gentleman. “There’s no doubt, you know, that it must be done at once, or he can’t get to Southampton in time to see the boy off and forgive him. I suppose even Sir Timothy will forgive him at such a moment. God bless the lad!”

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Dr. Blundell uttered an exclamation that did not sound like a blessing.

“Look here, Birch,” he said, “this is no time to mince matters. If the boy can’t be stopped—and under the circumstances he’s got us on toast—he can’t cry off active service—*as* the boy can’t be stopped, you must just keep this news to yourself.”

“But I must tell Sir Timothy!”

“You must *not* tell Sir Timothy.”

“Though all my sympathies are with the boy—for I’m a patriot first, and a parson afterwards—God forgive me for saying so,” said Birch, in a trembling voice, “yet I can’t take the responsibility of keeping Peter’s father in ignorance of his action. I see exactly what you mean, of course. Sir Timothy will make unpleasantness, and very likely telegraph to his commanding officer, and disgrace the poor boy before his comrades; and shout at me, a thing I can’t bear; and you kindly think to spare me—and Peter. But I can’t take the responsibility of keeping it dark, for all that,” said the canon, shaking his head regretfully.

“*I* take the responsibility,” said the doctor, shortly. “As Sir Timothy’s physician, I forbid you to tell him.”

“Is Sir Timothy ill?” The canon’s light eyes grew rounder with alarm.

“He is to undergo a dangerous operation to-morrow morning.”

“God bless my soul!”

“He desires this evening—possibly his last on earth—to be a calm and unclouded one,” said the doctor. “Respect his wishes, Birch, as you would respect the wishes of a dying man.”

“Do you mean he won’t get over it?” said the canon, in a horrified whisper.

“You always want the *t’s* crossed and the *i’s* dotted,” said Blundell, impatiently. “Of course there is a chance—his only chance. He’s a d——d plucky old fellow. I never thought to like Sir Timothy half so well as I do at this moment.”

“I hope I don’t *dislike* any man,” faltered the canon. “But—”

“Exactly,” said the doctor, dryly.

“But what shall I do with Peter’s letter?” said the unhappy recipient.

“Not one word to Sir Timothy. Agitation or distress of mind at such a moment would be the worst thing in the world for him.”

“But I can’t let Peter sail without a word to his people. And his mother. Good God, Blundell! Is Lady Mary to lose husband and son in one day?”

“Lady Mary,” said the doctor, bitterly, “is to be treated, as usual, like a child, and told nothing of her husband’s danger till it’s over. As for Peter—well, devoted mother as she is, she must be pretty well accustomed by this time to the captious indifference of her spoilt boy. She won’t be surprised, though she may be hurt, that he should coolly propose to set off without bidding her good-bye.”

“Couldn’t we tell her in confidence about Peter?” said the canon, struck with a brilliant idea.

“Certainly not; she would fly to him at once, and leave Sir Timothy alone in his extremity.”

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“Couldn’t we tell her in confidence about Sir Timothy?”

“I have allowed Sir Timothy to understand that neither you nor I will betray his secret.”

“I’m no hand at keeping a secret,” said the canon, unhappily.

“Nonsense, canon, nonsense,” said Dr. Blundell, laying a friendly hand on his shoulder. “No man in your profession, or in mine, ought to be able to say that. Pull yourself together, hope for the best, and play your part.”

CHAPTER III

John Crewys looked round the hall at Barracombe House with curious, interested eyes.

It was divided from the outer vestibule on the western side of the building by a massive partition of dark oak, and it retained the solid beams and panelled walls of Elizabethan days; but the oak had been barbarously painted, grained and varnished. Only the staircase was so heavily and richly carved, that it had defied the ingenuity of the comb engraver. It occupied the further end of the hall, opposite the entrance door, and was lighted dimly by a small heavily leaded, stained-glass window. The floor was likewise black, polished with age and the labour of generations. A deeply sunken nail-studded door led into a low-ceiled library, containing a finely carved frieze and cornice, and an oak mantelpiece, which John Crewys earnestly desired to examine more closely; the shield-of-arms above it bore the figures of 1603, but the hall itself was of an earlier date.

Parallel to it was the suite of lofty, modern, green-shuttered reception-rooms, which occupied the south front of the house, and into which an opening had been cut through the massive wall next the chimney.

The character of the hall was, however, completely destroyed by the decoration which had been bestowed upon it, and by the furniture and pictures which filled it.

John Crewys looked round with more indignation than admiration at the home of his ancestors.

In the great oriel window stood a round mahogany table, bearing a bouquet of wax flowers under a glass shade. Cases of stuffed birds ornamented every available recess; mahogany and horsehair chairs were set stiffly round the walls at even distances. A heap of folded moth-eaten rugs and wraps disfigured a side-table, and beneath it stood a row of clogs and goloshes.

Round the walls hung full-length portraits of an early Victorian date. The artist had spent a couple of months at Barracombe fifty years since, and had painted three generations of the Crewys family, who were then gathered together beneath its

hospitable roof. His diligence had been more remarkable than his ability. At any other time John Crewys would have laughed outright at this collection of works of art.

But the air was charged with tragedy, and he could not laugh. His seriousness commended him favourably, had he known it, to the two old ladies, his cousins, Sir Timothy's half-sisters, who were seated beside the great log fire, and who regarded him with approving eyes. For their stranger cousin had that extreme gentleness and courtesy of manner and regard, which sometimes accompanies unusual strength, whether of character or of person.

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It was a pity, old Lady Belstone whispered to her spinster sister, that John was not a Crewys, for he had a remarkably fine head, and had he been but a little taller and slimmer, would have been a credit to the family.

Certainly John was not a Crewys. He possessed neither grey eyes, nor a large nose, nor the height which should be attained by every man and woman bearing that name, according to the family record.

But though only of middle size, and rather square-shouldered, he was, nevertheless, a distinguished-looking man, with a finely shaped head and well-cut features. Clean shaven, as a great lawyer ought to be, with a firm and rather satirical mouth, a broad brow, and bright hazel eyes set well apart and twinkling with humour. No doubt John's appearance had been a factor in his successful career.

The sisters, themselves well advanced in the seventies, spoke of him and thought of him as a young man; a boy who had succeeded in life in spite of small means, and an extravagant mother, to whom he had been obliged to sacrifice his patrimony. But though he carried his forty-five years lightly, John Crewys had left his boyhood very far behind him. His crisp dark hair was frosted on the temples; he stooped a little after the fashion of the desk-worker; he wore pince-nez; his manner, though alert, was composed and dignified. The restlessness, the nervous energy of youth, had been replaced by the calm confidence of middle age—of tested strength, of ripe experience.

On his side, John Crewys felt very kindly towards the venerable ladies, who represented to him all the womankind of his own race.

Both sisters possessed the family characteristics which he lacked. They were tall and surprisingly upright, considering the weight of years which pressed upon their thin shoulders. They retained the manners—almost the speech—of the eighteenth century, to which the grandmother who was responsible for their upbringing had belonged; and, with the exception of a very short experience of matrimony in Lady Belstone's case, they had always resided exclusively at Barracombe.

Lady Belstone, besides her widowed dignity, had the advantage of her sister in appearance, mainly because she permitted art, in some degree, to repair the ravages of time. A stiff *toupet* of white curls crowned the withered brow, below a widow's cap; and, when she smiled, which was not very often, a double row of pearls was not unpleasantly displayed. Miss Crewys had never succumbed to the temptations of worldly vanity. She scrupulously parted her scanty grey locks above her polished forehead, and cared not how wide the parting grew. If she wore a velvet bow upon her scalp, it was, as she truly said, for decency, and not for ornament; and further, she allowed her wholesome, ruddy cheeks to fall in, as her ever-lengthening teeth fell out. The frequent explanations which ensued, regarding the seniority of the widow, were a source of constant satisfaction to Miss Crewys, and vexation to her sister.

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“You might be a hundred years old, Georgina,” she would angrily lament.

“I very soon *shall* be a hundred years old, Isabella, if I live as long as my grandmother did,” Miss Crewys would triumphantly reply. “It is surprising to me that a woman who was never good-looking at the best of times, should cling to her youth as you do.”

“It is more surprising to me that you should let yourself go to rack and ruin, and never stretch out a hand to help yourself.”

“I am what God made me,” said the pious Georgina, “whereas you do everything but paint your face, Isabella; and I have little doubt but what you will come to that by the time you are eighty.”

But though they disputed hotly on occasion the sisters generally preserved a united front before the world, and only argued, since argue they must, in the most polite and affectionate terms.

The firelight shed its cheerful glow over the laden tea-table, and was reflected in the silver urn, and the crimson and gold and blue of the Crown Derby tea-set. But the old ladies, though casting longing eyes in the direction of the teapot, religiously abstained from offering to touch it.

“No, John,” said Miss Crewys, in a tone of exemplary patience; “I have made it a rule never to take upon myself any of the duties of hospitality in my dear brother’s house, ever since he married,—odd as it may seem, when we remember how he used once to sit at this very table in his little bib and tucker, whilst Isabella poured out his milk, and I cut his bread and butter.”

“We *both* make the rule, John,” said Lady Belstone, mournfully, “or, of course, as the elder sister, *I* should naturally pour out the tea in our dear Lady Mary’s absence.”

“Of course, of course,” said John Crewys.

“Forgive me, Isabella, but we have discussed this point before,” said Miss Crewys. “Though I cannot deny, our cousin being, as he is, a lawyer, his opinion would carry weight. But I think he will agree with *me*”—John smiled—“that when the elder daughter of a house marries, she forfeits her rights of seniority in that house, and the next sister succeeds to her place.”

“I should suppose that might be the case,” John, bowing politely in the direction of the widow.

“I never disputed the fact, Georgina. It is, as our cousin says, self-evident,” said Lady Belstone, returning the bow. “But I have always maintained, and always shall, that

when the married sister comes back widowed to the home of her fathers, the privileges of birth are restored to her."

Both sisters turned shrewd, expectant grey eyes upon their cousin.

"It is—it is rather a nice point," said John Crewys, as gravely as he could.

He welcomed thankfully the timely interruption of an opening door and the entrance of Canon Birch and the doctor.

At the same moment, from the archway which supported the great oak staircase, the butler entered, carrying lights.

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“Is her ladyship not yet returned from her walk, Ash?” asked Lady Belstone, with affected surprise.

“Her ladyship came in some time ago, my lady, and went to see Sir Timothy. She left word she was gone upstairs to change her walking things, and would be down directly.”

The sisters greeted the canon with effusion, and Dr. Blundell with frigid civility.

John Crewys shook hands with both gentlemen.

“I am sorry I cannot offer you tea, Canon Birch, until my sister-in-law comes down,” said Miss Crewys.

“Our dear Lady Mary is so very unpunctual,” said Lady Belstone.

“I dare say something has detained her,” said the canon, good-humouredly.

“It often happens that my sister and myself are kept waiting a quarter of an hour or more for our tea. We do not complain,” said Lady Belstone.

John Crewys began to feel a little sorry for Lady Mary.

As the sisters appeared inclined to devote themselves to their clerical visitor rather exclusively, he drew near the recess to which Dr. Blundell had retired, and joined him in the oriel window.

“Have you never been here before?” asked the doctor, rather abruptly.

“Never,” said John Crewys, smiling. “I understand my cousins are not much given to entertaining visitors. I have never, in fact, seen any of them but once before. That was at Sir Timothy’s wedding, twenty years ago.”

“Barely nineteen,” said the doctor.

“I believe it was nineteen, since you remind me,” said John, slightly astonished. “I remember thinking Sir Timothy a lucky man.”

“I dare say *he* looked much about the same as he does now,” said the doctor.

“Well,” John said, “perhaps a little slimmer, you know. Not much. An iron-grey, middle-aged-looking man. No; he has changed very little.”

“He was born elderly, and he will die elderly,” said the doctor, shortly. “Neither the follies of youth nor the softening of age will ever be known to Sir Timothy.” He paused, noting

the surprised expression of John's face, and added apologetically, "I am a native of these parts. I have known him all my life."

"And I am—only a stranger," said John. He hesitated, and lowered his voice. "You know why I came?"

"Yes, I know. I am very glad you did come," said the doctor. His tone changed. "Here is Lady Mary," he said.

John Crewys was struck by the sudden illumination of Dr. Blundell's plain, dark face. The deeply sunken eyes glowed, and the sadness and weariness of their expression were dispelled.

His eyes followed the direction of the doctor's gaze, and his own face immediately reflected the doctor's interest.

Lady Mary was coming down the wide staircase, in the light of a group of wax candles held by a tall bronze angel.

She was dressed with almost rigid simplicity, and her abundant light-brown hair was plainly parted. She was pale and even sad-looking, but beautiful still; with a delicate and regular profile, soft blue eyes, and a sweet, rather tremulous mouth.

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John's heart seemed to contract within him, and then beat fast with a sensation that was not entirely pity, because those eyes—the bluest, he remembered, that he had ever seen—brought back to him, suddenly and vividly, the memory of the exquisitely fresh and lovely girl who had married her elderly guardian nineteen years since.

He recollected that some members of the Crewys family had agreed that Lady Mary Setoun had done well for herself, "a penniless lass wi' a lang pedigree;" for Sir Timothy was rich. Others had laughed, and said that Sir Timothy was determined that his heirs should be able to boast some of the bluest blood in Scotland on their mother's side,—-but that he might have waited a little longer for his bride.

She was so young, barely seventeen years old, and so very lovely, that John Crewys had felt indignant with Sir Timothy, whose appearance and manner did not attract him. He was reminded that the bride owed almost everything she possessed in the world to her husband, but he was not pacified.

The glance of the gay blue eyes,—the laugh on the curved young mouth,—the glint of gold on the sunny brown hair,—had played havoc with John's honest heart. He had not a penny in the world at that time, and could not have married her if he would; but from Lady Mary's wedding he carried away in his breast an image—an ideal—which had perhaps helped to keep him unwed during these later years of his successful career.

Why did she look so sad?

John's kind heart had melted somewhat towards Sir Timothy, when the poor gentleman had sought him in his chambers on the previous day, and appealed to him for help in his extremity. He was sorry for his cousin, in spite of the pompousness and arrogance with which Sir Timothy unconsciously did his best to alienate even those whom he most desired to attract.

He had come to Devonshire, at great inconvenience to himself, in response to that appeal; and in his hurry, and his sympathy for his cousin's trouble, he had scarcely given a thought to the momentary romance connected with his first and only meeting with Lady Mary. Yet now, behold, after nineteen years, the look on her sweet face thrilled his middle-aged bosom as it had thrilled his young manhood. John smiled or thought he smiled, as he came forward to be presented once more to Sir Timothy's wife; but he was, nevertheless, rather pleased to find that he had not outgrown the power of being thus romantically attracted.

"I hope I'm not late," said the soft voice. "You see, no one expected Sir Timothy to come home so soon, and I was out. Is that Cousin John? We met once before, at my wedding. You have not changed a bit; I remember you quite well," said Lady Mary. She came forward and held out two welcoming hands to her visitor.

John Crewys bowed over those little white hands, and became suddenly conscious that his vague, romantic sentiment had given place to a very real emotion—an almost passionate anxiety to shield one so fair and gentle from the trouble which was threatening her, and of which, as he knew, she was perfectly unconscious.

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The warmth of her impulsive welcome did not, of course, escape the keen eyes of the sisters-in-law, which, in such matters as these, were quite undimmed by age.

“Why didn’t somebody pour out tea?” said Lady Mary.

“We know your rights, Mary,” said Miss Crewys. “Never shall it be said that dear Timothy’s sisters ousted his wife from her proper place, because she did not happen to be present to occupy it.”

“Besides,” said Lady Belstone, “you have, no doubt, some excellent reason, my love, for the delay.”

Lady Mary’s blue eyes, glancing at John, said quite plainly and beseechingly to his understanding, “They are old, and rather cranky, but they don’t mean to be unkind. Do forgive them;” and John smiled reassuringly.

“I’m afraid I haven’t much excuse to offer,” she said ingenuously. “I was out late, and I tired myself; and then I heard Sir Timothy had come back, so I went to see him. And then I made haste to change my dress, and it took a long time—and that’s all.”

The three gentlemen laughed forgivingly at this explanation, and the two ladies exchanged shocked glances.

“Our cousin John did his best to entertain us, and we him,” said Lady Belstone, stiffly.

“His best—and how good that must be!” said Lady Mary, with pretty spirit. “The great counsel whose eloquence is listened to with breathless attention in crowded courts, and read at every breakfast-table in England.”

“That is a very delightful picture of the life of a briefless barrister,” said John Crewys, smiling.

“Mary,” said Miss Crewys, in lowered tones of reproof, “I understood that *divorce* cases, unhappily, occupied the greater part of our cousin John’s attention.”

“We’ve heard of you, nevertheless—we’ve heard of you, Mr. Crewys,” said the canon, nervously interposing, “even in this out-of-the-way corner of the west.”

“But there is one breakfast-table, at least, in England, where divorce cases are *not* perused, and that is my brother Timothy’s breakfast-table,” said Lady Belstone, very distinctly.

John hastened to fill up the awkward pause which ensued, by a reference to the beauty of the hall.

“I’m afraid we don’t live up to our beautiful old house,” said Lady Mary, shaking her head. “There are some lovely things stored away in the gallery upstairs, and some beautiful pictures hanging there, including the Vandyck, you know, which Charles II. gave to old Sir Peter, your cavalier ancestor. But the gallery is almost a lumber-room, for the floor is too unsafe to walk upon. And down here, as you see, we are terribly Philistine.”

“This hall was furnished by my grandmother for her son’s marriage,” said Miss Crewys.

“And she sent all your great-grandmother’s treasures to the attics,” said Lady Mary, with rather a wilful intonation. “I always long to bring them to light again, and to make this place livable; but my husband does not like change.”

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“Dear Timothy is faithful to the past,” said Miss Crewys, majestically.

“I wish old Lady Crewys had been as faithful,” said Lady Mary, shrugging her shoulders.

“Young people always like changes,” said Lady Belstone, more leniently.

“Young people!” said Lady Mary, with a rather pathetic smile. “John will think you are laughing at me. Am I to be young still at five-and-thirty?”

“To be sure,” said John, “unless you are going to be so unkind as to make a man only ten years your senior feel elderly.”

Miss Crewys interposed with a simple statement. “In my day, the age of a lady was never referred to in polite conversation. Least of all by herself. I never allude to mine.”

“You are unmarried, Georgina,” said Lady Belstone, unexpectedly turning upon her ally. “Unmarried ladies are always sensitive on the subject of age. I am sure I do not care who knows that my poor admiral was twenty years my senior. And *his* age can be looked up in any book of reference. It would have been useless to try and conceal it,—-a man so well known.”

“A woman is as old as she looks,” said the canon, soothingly, for the annoyance of Miss Crewys was visible. “I am bound to say that Miss Crewys looks exactly the same as when I first knew her.”

“Of course, a spinster escapes the wear and tear of matrimony,” said Miss Crewys, glaring at her widowed relative.

“H’m, h’m!” said Dr. Blundell. “By-the-by, have you inspected the old picture gallery, Mr. Crewys?”

“Not yet,” said John.

Lady Belstone shot a glance of speechless indignation at her sister. Sympathy between them was immediately restored. Prompt action was necessary on the part of the family, or this presumptuous physician would be walking round the house to show John Crewys the portraits of his own ancestors.

“*I* shall be delighted to show our cousin the pictures in the gallery and in the dining-room,” said Miss Crewys, “if my sister Isabella will accompany me, and if Lady Mary has no objections.”

“You are very kind,” said John. He rose and walked to a small rosewood cabinet of curios. “I see there are some beautiful miniatures here.”

“Oh, those do not belong to the family.”

“They are Setoun things—some of the few that came to me,” said Lady Mary, rather timidly. “I am afraid they would not interest you.”

“Not interest me! But indeed I care only too much for such things,” said John. “Here is a Cosway, and, unless I very much mistake, a Plimer,—and an Engleheart.”

Lady Mary unlocked the cabinet with pretty eagerness, and put a small morocco case into his hands.

“Then here is something you will like to see.”

For a moment John did not understand. He glanced quickly from the row of tiny, pearl-framed, old-world portraits, of handsome nobles and rose-tinted court dames, to the very indifferent modern miniature he held.

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The portrait of a schoolboy,—an Eton boy with a long nose and small, grey eyes, and an expression distinctly rather sulky and lowering than open or pleasing. Not a stupid face, however, by any means.

“It is my boy—Peter,” said Lady Mary, softly.

To her the face was something more than beautiful. She looked up at John with a happy certainty of his interest in her son.

“Here he is again, when he was younger. He was a pretty little fellow then, as you see.”

“Very pretty. But not very like you,” said John, scarcely knowing what he said.

He was strangely moved and touched by her evident confidence in his sympathy, though his artistic tastes were outraged by the two portraits she asked him to admire. He reflected that women were very extraordinary creatures; ready to be pleased with anything Providence might care to bestow upon them in the shape of a child, even cross-looking boys with long noses and small eyes. The heir of Barracombe resembled his aunts rather than his parents.

“He is a thorough Crewys; not a bit like me. All the Setouns are fair, I believe. Peter is very dark. He is such a big fellow now; taller than I am. I sometimes wish,” said Lady Mary, laying the miniature on the table as though she could not bear to shut it away immediately, “that one’s children never grew up. They are such darlings when they are little, and they are bound, of course, to disappoint one sometimes as they grow older.”

John Crewys felt almost murderously inclined towards Peter. So the young cub had presumed to disappoint his mother as he grew older! How dared he?

Poor Lady Mary was quite unconscious of the feelings with which he gazed at the little case in his hand.

“Not that my boy has ever *really* disappointed me—yet,” she said, with her pretty apologetic laugh. “I only mean that, in the course of human nature, it’s bound to come, now and then.”

“No doubt,” said John, gently.

Then she allowed him to examine the rest of the cabinet, whilst she talked on, always of Peter—his horsemanship and his shooting and his prowess in every kind of sport and game.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Lady Belstone was holding a hurried consultation with her sister.

“How thoughtless you are, Georgina, asking our cousin into the dining-room just when Ash must be laying the cloth for dinner. He will be sadly put about.”

“Dear, dear, it quite slipped my memory, Isabella.”

“You have no head at all, Georgina.”

“Can I frame an excuse?” said Miss Crewys, piteously, “or will he think it discourteous?”

“Leave it to me, Georgina,” said Lady Belstone, with the air of a diplomat. “Mary, my love!”

Lady Mary started. “Yes, Isabella.”

“Georgina has very properly recalled to me that candles and lamps make a very poor light for viewing the family portraits. You know, my love, the Vandyck is so very dark and black. She proposes, therefore, with your permission, to act as our cousin’s cicerone to-morrow morning, in the daytime. Shall we say—at eleven o’clock, John?”

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Canon Birch started nervously, and the doctor frowned at him.

“At eleven o’clock,” said John, in steady tones; and, as he spoke, Sir Timothy entered the hall.

CHAPTER IV

“Some tea, Timothy?” said Lady Mary.

“If you please, my dear,” said Sir Timothy, dropping his letters into the box.

“I am afraid the tea will be little better than poison, brother,” said Lady Belstone, in warning tones; “it has stood so long.”

“Perhaps dear Mary intends to order fresh tea, Isabella,” said Miss Crewys.

“It hasn’t stood so *very* long,” said Lady Mary, looking appealingly at Sir Timothy; “and you know Ash is always cross if we order fresh tea.”

“Excuse me, my love,” said Miss Crewys. “I am the last to wish to trouble poor Ash unnecessarily, but the tea waited for ten minutes before you came down.”

“My dear Mary,” said Sir Timothy, “will you never learn to be punctual? No; I will take it as it is. Poor Ash has enough to do, as Georgina truly says.”

Lady Mary sighed rather impatiently, and it occurred to John Crewys that Sir Timothy spoke to his wife exactly as he might have addressed a troublesome child. His tone was gentler than usual, but this John did not know.

“I should have liked to take a turn about the grounds with you,” said Sir Timothy to his cousin, “if it had been possible; but I am afraid it is getting too dark now.”

“Surely there will be time enough to-morrow morning for that, brother,” said Lady Belstone.

Sir Timothy had walked to the oriel window, but he turned away as he answered her.

“I may be otherwise occupied to-morrow.”

“But I hope the opportunity may arise before very long,” said John, cheerfully. “I should like to explore these woods.”

“You will have to come with *me*, then,” said Lady Mary, smiling. “Timothy hates walking uphill, and I should love to show our beautiful views to a stranger.”

“I do not like you to tire yourself, my dear,” said Sir Timothy.

“A walk through Barracombe woods means simply a climb, Mary,” said Lady Belstone; “and you are not strong.”

“I am perfectly robust, Isabella. Do allow me at least the use of my limbs,” said Lady Mary, impatiently.

“No woman, certainly no *lady*, can be called *robust*,” said Miss Crewys, severely.

The sudden clanging of a bell changed the conversation.

“Visitors. How tiresome!” said Lady Mary.

“My dear Mary!” said Sir Timothy.

“But I know it can’t be anybody pleasant, Timothy,” said his wife, with rather a mischievous twinkle, “for I owe calls to all the nice people, and it’s only the dull ones who come over and over again.”

“You *owe* calls, Mary!” said Lady Belstone, in horrified tones.

“I am afraid,” said Miss Crewys, considerately lowering her voice as the butler and footman crossed the hall to the outer vestibule, “that dear Mary is more than a little remiss in civility to her neighbours.”

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“My dear admiral never permitted me to postpone returning a call for more than a week. Royalty, he always said, the same day; ordinary people within a week,” said Lady Belstone.

“When royalty calls I certainly will return the visit the same day,” said Lady Mary, petulantly. “But I cannot spend my whole life driving along the high-roads from one house to another. I hate driving, as you know, Isabella.”

“What did Providence create carriages for but to be driven in?” said Lady Belstone.

“You will give John a wrong impression of our worthy neighbours, Mary,” said Sir Timothy, pompously. “Personally, I am always glad to see them.”

“But you don’t have to return their calls, Timothy,” said Lady Mary.

The canon inadvertently laughed. Sir Timothy looked annoyed. Miss Crewys whispered to Lady Belstone, unheard save by the doctor—

“How very odd and flippant poor Mary is to-night—worse than usual! What can it be?”

“It is just the presence of a strange gentleman that is upsetting her, poor thing,” said her sister, in the same whisper. “Her head is easily turned. We had better take no notice.”

The doctor muttered something emphatic beneath his breath.

“Mrs. and Miss Hewel,” said Ash, advancing into the hall.

“Is it only you and Sarah, after all? What a relief! I thought it was visitors,” cried Lady Mary, coming forward to greet them very kindly and warmly. “Did you come across in the ferry?”

“No, indeed. You know how I dislike the ferry. I have the long drive home still before me. But we were so close to Barracombe, at the Gilberts’ tea-party. I thought we should be certain to meet you there,” said Mrs. Hewel, in rather reproachful tones. “Sarah, of course, wanted to go back in the ferry, but I am always doubly frightened at night—and in one’s best clothes. It was quite a large party.”

“I’m afraid I forgot all about it,” said Lady Mary, with a conscience-stricken glance at her husband.

“I hope you sent the carriage round to the stables?” said Sir Timothy.

“No, no; we mustn’t stop a minute. But I couldn’t help just popping in—so very long since I’ve seen you—and all this happening at once,” said Mrs. Hewel. She was a

large, stout woman, with breathless manner and plaintive voice. “And I wanted to show you Sarah in her first grown-up clothes, and tell you about *her* too,” she added.

“Bless me!” said Sir Timothy. “You don’t mean to say little Sarah is grown up.”

“Oh yes, dear Sir Timothy; she grew up the day before yesterday,” said Mrs. Hewel.

“Sharp work,” said the doctor, grimly.

“I mean, of course, she turned up her hair, and let her dresses down. It’s full early, I know, but it’s such a chance for Sarah—that’s partly what I came about. After the trouble she’s been all her life to me, and all—just going to that excellent school in Germany—here’s my aunt wanting to adopt her, or as good as adopt her—Lady Tintern, you know.”

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Everybody who knew Mrs. Hewel knew also that Lady Tintern was her aunt; and Lady Tintern was a very great lady indeed.

“She is to come out this very season; that is why I took her to the Gilberts’, to prepare her for the great plunge,” said Mrs. Hewel, not intending to be funny. “It will be a change for Sarah, such a hoyden as she has always been. But my aunt won’t wait once she has got a fancy into her head; though the child is only seventeen.”

“At seventeen *I* was still in the nursery, playing with my dolls,” said Lady Belstone.

“Oh, Lady Belstone!” said an odd, deep, protesting voice.

John looked with amused interest at the speaker. The unlucky Sarah had taken a low chair beside her hostess, and was holding one of the soft white hands in her plump gloved fingers.

Sarah Hewel’s adoration for Lady Mary dated from the days when she had been ferried over the Youle with her nurse, to play with Peter, in his chubby childhood. Peter had often been cross and always tyrannical, but it was so wonderful to find a playmate who was naughtier than herself, that Sarah had secretly admired Peter. She was the black sheep of her own family, and in continual disgrace for lesser crimes than he daily committed with impunity. But her admiration of Peter was tame and pale beside her admiration of Lady Mary. A mother who never scolded, who told no tales, who petted black sheep when they were bruised and torn or stained entirely through their own wickedness, who could always be depended on for kisses and bonbons and fairy-tales, seemed more angelic than human to poor little Sarah; whose own mother was wrapt up in her two irreproachable sons, and had small affection to spare for an ugly, tiresome little girl.

Sarah, however, had slowly but surely struggled out of the ugliness of her childhood; and John Crewys, regarding her critically in the lamplight, decided she would develop, one of these days, into a very handsome young woman; in spite of an ungainly stoop, a wide mouth that pouted rather too much, and a nose that inclined saucily upwards.

Her colouring was fresh, even brilliant—the bright rose, and creamy tint that sometimes accompanies vivid red hair—and of a vivid, uncompromising red were the locks that crowned Miss Sarah’s little head, and shaded her blue-veined temples.

Miss Crewys had, in consequence, long ago pronounced her to be a positive fright; and Lady Belstone had declared that such hair would prove an insuperable obstacle to her chances of getting a husband.

“I know she’s very young,” said Mrs. Hewel, glancing apologetically at her offspring. “But what can I do? There’s no going against Lady Tintern; and at seventeen she ought to be something more than a tomboy, after all.”

“*You* were married at seventeen, weren’t you?” said Sarah to Lady Mary, in her deep, almost tragic voice—a voice that commanded attention, though it came oddly from her girlish chest.

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“Sarah!” said Mrs. Hewel.

Lady Mary started and smiled. “Me? Yes, Sarah; I was married at seventeen.”

“Mamma says nobody can be married properly—before they’re one and twenty. I *knew* it was rot,” said Sarah, triumphantly.

“Miss Sarah retains the outspokenness of her recently discarded childhood, I perceive,” said Sir Timothy, stiffly.

“Sarah!” said her mother, indignantly, “I said not unless they had their parents’ consent. I was not thinking of Lady Mary, as you know very well.”

“*Your* people didn’t say you were too young to marry at seventeen, did they?” said Sarah, caressing Lady Mary’s hand.

Lady Mary smiled at her, but shook her head. “You want to know too much, Sarah.”

“Oh, I forgot,” said Sarah the artless. “Sir Timothy was your guardian, so, of course, there was nobody to stop his marrying you if he liked. I suppose you *had* to do what he told you.”

“Oh, Sarah, will you cease chattering?” cried her mother.

“I hope you have good news of your sons in South Africa, Mrs. Hewel,” said the canon, briskly advancing to the rescue.

Mrs. Hewel’s voice changed. “Thank you, canon; they were all right when we heard last. Tom is in Natal, so I feel happier about him; but Willie, of course, is in the thick of it all—and the news to-day—isn’t reassuring.”

“But you are proud of them both,” said Lady Mary, softly. “Every mother must be proud to have sons able and willing to fight for their country.”

“We may feel differently concerning the justice of this war,” said Sir Timothy, clearing his throat; and Lady Mary shrugged her shoulders, whilst the canon jumped from his chair, and sat meekly down again on catching the doctor’s eye.

“But in our sympathy with our brave soldiers we are all one, Mrs. Hewel.”

Sarah sprang forward. “You don’t mean to say you’re *still* a pro-Boer, Sir Timothy?” she exclaimed. “Well, mamma—talking of the justice of the war—when Tom and Willie are risking their lives”—she broke into a sudden sob—“and now *Peter*—”

“Peter!” said Lady Mary.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Sarah, running to her friend. “I didn’t mean to hurt *you*—talking of the war—and—and the boys—when you must be thinking only of Peter.” She wrung her hands together piteously.

“Of Peter!” Lady Mary repeated.

“We only heard to-day,” said Mrs. Hewel, “and came in hoping for more details. My cousin George, who is also going out with Lord Ferries, happened to mention in his letter that Peter had joined the corps.”

“I think I can explain how the mistake arose,” said Sir Timothy, stiffly. “Peter wrote for permission to join, and I refused. My son is fortunately too young to be of any use in a contest I regard with horror.”

“But Cousin George was helping Peter to get his kit, because they were to sail at such short notice,” cried Sarah.

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“Sarah,” said her mother, in breathless indignation, “*will* you be silent?”

“What does this mean, Timothy?” said Lady Mary, trembling.

She stood by the centre table; and the hanging lamp above shed its light on her brown hair, and flashed in her blue eyes, and from the diamond ring she wore.

The doctor rose from his chair.

“I am at a loss to understand,” said Sir Timothy.

“It means,” said Sarah, half-hysterically,—“oh, can’t you see what it means? It just means that Peter is going to South Africa, whether you like it or not.”

“There must be some mistake, of course,” said Mrs. Hewel, in distressed tones. “And yet—George’s letter was so very clear.”

Dr. Blundell touched the canon’s arm.

“Shall I—must I—” whispered the canon, nervously.

“There is no help for it,” said the doctor. He was looking at Lady Mary as he spoke. Her face was deathly; her little frail hand grasped the table.

“Sir Timothy,” said the canon, “I—I have a communication to make to you.”

“On this subject?” said Sir Timothy.

“A letter from Peter.”

“Why did you not say so earlier?” said Sir Timothy, harshly.

“I will explain, if you will kindly give me five minutes in the study.”

“A letter from Peter,” said Lady Mary, “and not—to me.”

She looked round at them all with a little vacant smile.

John Crewys, who knew nothing of Peter’s letter, had already grasped the situation. He divined also that Lady Mary was fighting piteously against the conviction that Sarah’s news was true.

“How could we guess you did not know?” said Mrs. Hewel, almost weeping.

“I am still in the dark,” said Sir Timothy, coldly.

“Birch will explain at once,” said the doctor, impatiently.

“Peter writes—asking me,—I am sure I don’t know why he pitched upon me,—to—break the news to you, that he has joined Lord Ferries’ Horse; feeling it his—his duty to his country to do so,” said the unhappy canon, folding and unfolding the letter he held, with agitated fingers.

“I knew there would be a satisfactory explanation,” said Mrs. Hewel, tearfully. “Dear Lady Mary, having so inadvertently anticipated Peter’s letter, there is only one thing left for me to do. I must at least leave you and Sir Timothy in peace to read it. Come, Sarah.”

“Allow me to put you into your carriage,” said Sir Timothy, in a voice of iron.

Sarah followed them to the door, paused irresolutely, and stole back to Lady Mary’s side.

“Say you’re not angry with me, dear, beautiful Lady Mary,” she whispered passionately. “Do say you’re not angry. I didn’t know it would make you so unhappy. It was partly my fault for telling Peter in the holidays that only old men, invalids, and—and cowards—-were shirking South Africa. I thought you’d be glad, like me, that Peter should go and fight like all the other boys.”

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“Sarah,” said Dr. Blundell, gently, “don’t you see that Lady Mary can’t attend to you now? Come away, like a good girl.”

He took her arm, and led her out of the hall; and Sarah forgot she had grown up the day before yesterday, and sobbed loudly as she went away.

Lady Mary lifted the miniature from the table, and looked at it without a word; but from the sofa, the two old sisters babbled audibly to each other.

“I always said, Isabella, that if poor Mary spoilt Peter so terribly, *something* would happen to him.”

“What sad nonsense you talk, Georgina. Nothing has happened to him—*yet*.”

“He has defied his father, Isabella.”

“He has obeyed his country’s call, Georgina. Had the admiral been alive, he would certainly have volunteered.”

John Crewys made an involuntary step forward and placed himself between the sofa and the table, as though to shield Lady Mary from their observation, but he could not prevent their words from reaching her ears.

She whispered to him very softly. “Will you get the letter for me? I want to see—for myself—what—what Peter says.”

“Go quietly into the library,” said John, bending over her for a moment. “I will bring it you there immediately.”

She obeyed him without a word.

John turned to the sofa. “I beg your pardon, canon,” he said courteously, “but Lady Mary cannot bear this suspense. Allow me to take her son’s letter to her at once.”

“I—I am only waiting for Sir Timothy. It is to him I have to break the news; though, of course, there is nothing that Lady Mary may not know,” said the canon, in a polite but flurried tone. “I really should not like—”

“My brother must see it first,” said Miss Crewys, decidedly.

“Exactly. I am sure Sir Timothy would not be pleased if—Bless my soul!”

For John, with a slight bow of apology, and his grave air of authority, had quietly taken the letter from the canon’s undecided fingers, and walked away with it into the library.

“How very oddly our cousin John behaves!” said Lady Belstone, indignantly. “Almost snatching the letter from your hand.”

“Depend upon it, Mary inspired his action,” said Miss Crewys, angrily. “I saw her whispering away to him. A man she never set eyes on before.”

“Pray are *we* not to hear the contents?” said Lady Belstone, quivering with indignation.

“I suppose he thinks Lady Mary should make the communication herself to Sir Timothy,” gasped the canon. “I am sure I have no desire to fulfil so unpleasing a task. Still, the matter *was* entrusted to me. However, the main substance has been told; there can be no further secret about it. My only care was that Sir Timothy should not be unduly agitated.”

“It is a comfort to find that *some one* can consider the feelings of our poor brother,” said Miss Crewys.

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“Do give me your arm to the drawing-room, canon,” said Lady Belstone, rightly judging that the canon would reveal the whole contents of Peter’s letter to her more easily in private. “The shock has made me feel quite faint. You, too, Georgina, are looking pale.”

“It is not the shock, but the draught, which is affecting me, Isabella,—Sir Timothy thoughtlessly keeping the door open so long. I will accompany you to the drawing-room.”

“But Sir Timothy may want me,” said the canon, uneasily.

“Bless the man! they’ve got the letter itself, what can they want with *you?*” said her ladyship, vigorously propelling her supporter out of reach of possible interruption. “Close the door behind us, Georgina, I beg, or that odious doctor will be racing after us.”

“He takes far too much upon himself. I have no idea of permitting country apothecaries to be so familiar,” said Miss Crewys.

CHAPTER V

Lady Mary, coming from the library with the letter in her hand, met her husband in the hall.

“Timothy!”

She looked at him wistfully. Her face was very pale as she gave him the letter. Sir Timothy took out his glasses, wiped them deliberately, and put them on.

“Never mind reading it. I can tell you in one word,” she said, trembling with impatience. “My boy is sailing for South Africa to-morrow morning.”

“I prefer,” said Sir Timothy, “to read the letter for myself.”

“Oh, do be quick!” she said, half under her breath.

But he read it slowly twice, and folded it. He was really thunderstruck. Peter was accustomed to write polite platitudes to his parent, and had presumably not intended that his letter to the canon should be actually read by Sir Timothy, when he had asked that the contents of it should be broken to him.

“Selfish, disobedient, headstrong, deceitful boy!” said Sir Timothy.

Lady Mary started. “How can you talk so!” Her gentle voice sounded almost fierce. “At least he has proved himself a man.’ And he is right. It was a shame and a disgrace for

him to stay at home, whilst his comrades did their duty. I say it a thousand times, though I am his mother."

Then she broke down. "Oh, Peter, my boy, my boy, how could you leave me without a word!"

"Perhaps this step was taken with your connivance after all?" said Sir Timothy, suspiciously. He could not follow her rapid changes of mood, and had listened resentfully to her defence of her son.

"Timothy!" said Lady Mary, trembling, "when have I ever been disloyal to you in word or deed?"

"Never, I hope," said Sir Timothy. His voice shook a little. "I do not doubt you for a moment, Mary. But you spoke with such strange vehemence, so unlike your usual propriety of manner."

She broke into a wild laugh which pained and astonished him.

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“Did I? I must have forgotten myself for a moment.”

“You must, indeed. Pray be calm. I understand that this must be a terrible shock to you.”

“It is not a shock,” said Lady Mary, defiantly. “I glory in it. I—I *wish* him to go. Oh, Peter, my darling!”

She hid her face in her hands.

“It would be more to the purpose,” said Sir Timothy, “to consider what is to be done.”

“Could we stop him?” she cried eagerly, and then changed once more. “No, no; I wouldn’t if I could. He would never forgive me.”

“Of course, we cannot stop him,” said Sir Timothy. He raised his voice as he was wont when he was angry. Canon Birch, in the drawing-room, heard the loud threatening tones, and was thankful for the door which shut him from Sir Timothy’s presence. “He has laid his plans for thwarting my known wishes too well. I do not know what might be said if we stopped him. I—I won’t have my name made a laughing-stock. I am a Crewys, and the honour of the family lies in my hands. I can’t give the world a right to suspect a Crewys of cowardice, by preventing his departure on active service. We have fought before—in a better cause.”

“We won’t discuss the cause,” said Lady Mary, gently. When Sir Timothy began to shout, she always grew calm. “Then you will not telegraph to my cousin Ferries?”

“Ferries ought to have written to *me*, and not taken the word of a mere boy, like Peter,” stormed Sir Timothy. “But the fact is, I never flattered Ferries as he expected; it is not my way to natter any one; and consequently he took a dislike to me. He must have known what my views are. I am sure he did it on purpose.”

“It was natural he should believe Peter, and I don’t think he knows you well enough to dislike you,” said Lady Mary, simply. “He has only seen you twice, Timothy.”

“That was evidently sufficient,” said Sir Timothy, meaning to be ironical, and unaware that he was stating a plain fact. “I shall certainly not telegraph to tell him that my son has lied to him, well as Peter deserves that I should do so.”

“Oh, don’t, don’t; you are so hard!” she said piteously. “If you’d only listened to him when he implored you to let him go, we could have made his last days at home all they should be. He’s been hiding in London, poor Peter; getting his outfit by stealth, ashamed, whilst other boys are being *feted* and praised by their people, proud of earning so early their right to be considered men. And—and he’s only a boy. And he said himself, all’s fair in love and war. Indeed, Timothy, it is an exceptional case.”

“Mary, your weakness is painful, and your idolatry of Peter will bring its own punishment. The part of his deception that should pain you most is the want of heart he has displayed,” said Sir Timothy, bitterly.

“And doesn’t it?” she said, with a pathetic smile. “But one oughtn’t to expect too much heart from a boy, ought one? It’s—it’s not a healthy sign. You said once you were glad he wasn’t sentimental, like me.”

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“I should have wished him to exhibit proper feeling on proper occasions. His present triumph over my authority involves his departure to certain danger and possible death, without even affording us the opportunity of bidding him farewell. He is ready and willing to leave us thus.”

Lady Mary uttered a stifled scream. “But I won’t let him. How can you think his mother will let him go like that?”

“How can you help it?”

She pressed her trembling hands to her forehead. “I will think. There is a way. There are plenty of ways. I can drive to the junction—it’s not much further than Brawnton—-and catch the midnight express, and get to Southampton by daybreak. I know it can be done. Ash will look out the trains. Why do you look at me like that? You’re not going to stop my going, are you? You’re not going to *try* and stop me, are you? For you won’t succeed. Oh yes, I know I’ve been an obedient wife, Timothy. But I—I defied you once before for Peter’s sake; when he was such a little boy, and you wanted to punish him—-don’t you remember?”

“Don’t talk so, Mary,” said Sir Timothy, almost soothingly. Her vehemence really alarmed and distressed him. “It is not like you to talk like this. You will be sorry—-afterwards,” he said; and his voice softened.

She responded instantly. She came closer to him, and took his big shaking hand into her gentle clasp.

“I should be sorry afterwards,” she said, “and so would you. Even *you* would be sorry, Timothy, if anything happened to Peter. I’ll try and not make any more excuses for him, if you like. I know he’s not a child now. He’s almost a man; and men seem to me to grow harsh and unloving as they grow older. I try, now and then, to shut my eyes and see him as he once was; but all the time I know that the little boy who used to be Peter has gone away for ever and ever and ever. If he had died when he was little he would always have been my little boy, wouldn’t he? But, thank God, he didn’t die. He’s going to be a great strong man, and a brave soldier, and—and all I’ve ever wanted him to be—when he’s got over these wilful days of boyhood. But he mustn’t go without his father’s blessing and his mother’s kiss.”

“He has chosen to do so, Mary,” said Sir Timothy, coldly.

She clung to him caressingly. “But you’re going to forgive him before he goes, Timothy. There’s no time to be angry before he goes. It may be too late to-morrow.”

“It may be too late to-morrow,” repeated Sir Timothy, heavily.

He resented, in a dull, self-pitying fashion, the fact that his wife's thoughts were so exclusively fixed on Peter, in her ignorance of his own more immediate danger.

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“Don’t think I’m blind to his faults,” urged Lady Mary, “only I can laugh at them better than you can, because I *know* all the while that at the very bottom of his heart he’s only my baby Peter after all. He’s not—God bless him—he’s *not* the dreary, cold-blooded, priggish boy he sometimes pretends to be. Don’t remember him like that now, Timothy. Think of that morning in June—that glorious, sunny morning in June, when you knelt by the open window in my room and thanked God because you had a son. Think of that other summer day when we couldn’t bear even to look at the roses because little Peter was so ill, and we were afraid he was going back to heaven.”

Her soft, rapid words touched Sir Timothy to a vague feeling of pity for her, and for Peter, and for himself. But the voice of the charmer, charm she never so wisely, had no power, after all, to dispel the dark cloud that was hanging over him.

The sorrow gave way to a keener anxiety. The calmness of mind which the great surgeon had prescribed—the placid courage, largely aided by dulness of imagination, which had enabled poor Sir Timothy to keep in the very background of his thoughts all apprehensions for the morrow—where were they?

He repressed with an effort the emotion which threatened to master him, and forced himself to be calm. When he spoke again his voice sounded not much less measured and pompous than usual.

“My dear, you are agitating yourself and me. Let us confine ourselves to the subject in hand.”

Lady Mary dropped the unresponsive hand she held so warmly pressed between her own, and stepped back.

“Ah, forgive me!” she said in clear tones. “It’s so difficult to—”

“To—?”

“To be exactly what you wish. To be always on guard. My feelings broke bounds for once.”

“Calm yourself,” said Sir Timothy. “And besides, so far as I am concerned, your pleading for Peter is unnecessary.”

“You have forgiven him?” she cried joyfully, yet almost incredulously.

He paused, and then said with solemnity: “I have forgiven him, Mary. It is not the moment for me to cherish resentment, least of all against my only son.”

“Ah, thank God! Then you will come to Southampton?”

“That is impossible. But I will telegraph my forgiveness and the blessing which he has not sought that he may receive it before the ship sails.”

“I am grateful to you for doing even so much as that, Timothy, and for not being angry. Then I must go alone?”

“No, no.”

“Understand me,” said Lady Mary, in a low voice, “for I am in earnest. I have never deceived you. I will not defy you in secret, like Peter; but I *will* go and bid my only son God-speed, though the whole world conspired to prevent me. *I will go!*”

There was a pause.

“You speak,” said Sir Timothy, resentfully, “as though I had habitually thwarted your wishes.”

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“Oh, no,” said his wife, softly, “you never even found out what they were.”

He did not notice the words; it is doubtful whether he heard them.

“It has been my best endeavour to promote your happiness throughout our married life, Mary, so far as I considered it compatible with your highest welfare. I do not pretend I can enter into the high-flown and romantic feelings engendered by your reprehensible habit of novel-reading.”

“You’ve scolded me so often for that,” said Lady Mary, half mockingly, half sadly. “Can’t we—keep to the subject in hand, as you said just now?”

“I have a reason, a strong reason,” said Sir Timothy, “for wishing you to remain at home to-morrow. I had hoped, by concealing it from you, to spare you some of the painful suspense and anxiety which I am myself experiencing.”

Lady Mary laughed.

“How like a man to suppose a woman is spared anything by being kept in the dark! I knew something was wrong. Dr. Blundell and Canon Birch are in your confidence, I presume? They kept exchanging glances like two mysterious owls. Your sisters are not, or they would be sighing and shaking their heads. And John—John Crewys? Oh, he is a lawyer. When does a visitor ever come here except on business? He has something to do with it. Ah, to advise you for nothing over your purchase of the Crown lands! You have got into some difficulty over that, or something of the kind? You brought him down here for some special purpose, I am sure; but I did not know him well enough, and I knew you too well, to ask why.”

“Mary, what has come to you? I never knew you quite like this before. I dislike this extraordinary flippancy of tone very much.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Lady Mary; make allowance for me this once. I learnt ten minutes ago that my boy was going to the war. I must either laugh or—or cry, and you wouldn’t like me to do that; but it’s a way women have when their hearts are half broken.”

“I don’t understand you,” he said helplessly.

Lady Mary looked at him as though she had awakened, frightened, to the consciousness of her own temerity.

“I don’t quite understand myself, I think,” she said, in a subdued voice. “I won’t torment you any more, Timothy; I will be as calm and collected—as you wish. Only let me go.”

“Will you not listen to my reason for wishing you to remain at home?” he said sternly. “It is an important one.”

“I had forgotten,” she said indifferently. “How can there be any business in the world half so important to *me* as seeing my boy once more before he sails?”

The colour of Sir Timothy’s ruddy face deepened almost to purple, his grey eyes glowered sullen resentment at his wife.

“Since you desire to have your way in opposition to my wishes, *go!*” he thundered. “I will not hinder you further.”

But his sonorous wrath was too familiar to be impressive.

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Lady Mary's expression scarcely changed when Sir Timothy raised his voice. She turned, however, at the foot of the staircase, and spoke to him again.

"Let me just go and give the order for my things to be packed, Timothy, and tell Ash to go and find out about the trains, and I will return and listen to whatever you wish—I will, indeed. I could not pay proper attention to anything until I knew that was being done."

Sir Timothy did not trust himself to speak. He bowed his head, and the slender figure passed swiftly up the stairs.

Sir Timothy walked twice deliberately up and down the empty hall, and felt his pulse. The slow, steady throb reassured him. He opened the door of the study.

"John," said Sir Timothy, "would you kindly come out here and speak to me for a moment? Dr. Blundell, would you have the goodness to await me a little longer? You will find the London papers there."

"I have them," said Dr. Blundell, from the armchair by the study fire.

John Crewys closed the door behind him, and looked rather anxiously at his cousin. It struck him that Sir Timothy had lost some of his ruddy colour, and that his face looked drawn and old.

But the squire placed himself with his back to the log fire, and made an effort to speak in his voice of everyday. His slightly pompous, patronizing manner returned upon him.

"You are doubtless accustomed, John, in the course of your professional work," he said, "to advise in difficult matters. You come among us a stranger—and unprejudiced. Will you—er—give me the benefit of your opinion?"

"To the best of my ability," said John. He paused, and added gently, "I am sorry for this fresh trouble that has come upon you."

"That is the subject on which I mean to consult you. Do you consider that—that her husband or her child should stand first in a woman's eyes?"

"Her husband, undoubtedly," said John, readily, "but—"

"But what?" said Sir Timothy, impatiently. A gleam of satisfaction had broken over his heavy face at his cousin's reply.

"I speak from a man's point of view," said John. "Woman—and possibly Nature—may speak differently."

“Your judgment, however, coincides with mine, which is all that matters,” said Sir Timothy. He did not perceive the twinkle in John’s eyes at this reply. “In my opinion there are only two ways of looking at every question—the right way and the wrong way.”

“My profession teaches me,” said John, “that there are as many different points of view as there are parties to a case.”

“Then—from *my* point of view,” said Sir Timothy, with an air of waving all other points of view away as irrelevant, “since my wife, very naturally, desires to see her son again before he sails, am I justified in allowing her to set off in ignorance of the ordeal that awaits me?”

“Good heavens, no!” cried John. “Should the operation prove unsuccessful, you would be entailing upon her a lifelong remorse.”

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“I did not look upon it in that light,” said Sir Timothy, rather stiffly. “The propriety or the impropriety of her going remains in any, case the same, whether the operation succeeds or fails. I feared that it would be the wrong thing to allow her to go at all; that it might cause comment were she absent from my side at such a critical juncture.”

“I see,” said John. His mobile, expressive face and bright hazel eyes seemed to light up for one instant with scorn and wonder; then he recollected himself. “It is natural you should wish for her sustaining presence, no doubt,” he said.

“I trust you do not suppose that I should be selfishly considering my own personal feelings at such a time,” said Sir Timothy, in a lofty tone of reproof. “I am only desirous of doing what is right in the matter. I am asking your advice because I feel that my self-command has been shaken considerably by this unexpected blow. I am less sure of my judgment than usual in consequence. However, if you think my wife ought to be told”—-John nodded very decidedly—“let her be told. I am bound to say Dr. Blundell thought so too, though his opinion is neither here nor there in such a matter, but so long as you understand that my only desire is that both she and I should do what is most correct and proper.” He came closer to John. “It is of vital importance for me to preserve my composure,” said Sir Timothy. “I am not fitted for—for any kind of scene just now. Will you undertake for me the task of explaining to—to my dear wife the situation in which I am placed?”

“I will do my best,” said John. He was touched by the note of piteous anxiety which had crept into the squire’s harsh voice.

“Thank you,” said Sir Timothy. “Will you await her here? She is returning immediately. Break it to her as gently as you can. I shall rest and compose myself by a talk with Dr. Blundell.”

He went slowly to the study, leaving John Crewys alone.

CHAPTER VI

“Is that you, Cousin John?” said Lady Mary. “Is Sir Timothy gone? I have not been away more than a few minutes, have I?”

She spoke quite brightly. Her cheeks were flushed, and her blue eyes were sparkling with excitement.

John looked at her, and found himself wishing that her soft, brown hair were not strained so tightly from her forehead, nor brushed so closely to her head; the fashion would have been trying to a younger face, and fatal to features less regularly delicate and correct. He also wished she were not dressed like a Quaker’s wife. The stiff, grey poplin fitted like a glove the pretty curves of Lady Mary’s slender figure, but it lacked distinction, and

appropriateness, to John's fastidious eye. Then he reproached himself vehemently for allowing his thoughts to dwell on such trifles at such a moment.

"Will you forgive me for going away the very day you come?" said Lady Mary.

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How quickly, how surprisingly, she recovered her spirits! She had looked so weary and sad as she came down the stairs an hour ago. Now she was almost gay. A feverish and unnatural gaiety, no doubt; but those flushed cheeks, and glittering blue eyes—how they restored the youthful loveliness of the face he had once thought the most beautiful he ever saw!

“I am going to see the last of my boy. You’ll understand, won’t you? You were an only son too. And your mother would have gone to the ends of the earth to look upon your face once more, wouldn’t she? Mothers are made like that.”

“Some mothers,” said John; and he turned away his head.

“Not yours? I’m sorry,” said Lady Mary, simply.

“Oh, well—you know, she was a good deal—in the world,” he said, repenting himself.

“I use to wish so much to live in the world too,” said Lady Mary, dreamily; “but ever since I was fifteen I’ve lived in this out-of-the-way place.”

“Don’t be too sorry for that,” said John; “you don’t know what a revelation this out-of-the-way place may be to a tired worker like me, who lives always amid the unlovely sights and sounds of a city.”

“Ah! but that’s just it,” she said quickly. “You see I’m not tired—yet; and I’ve done no work.”

“That is why it’s such a rest to look at you,” said John, smiling. “Flowers have their place in creation as vegetables have theirs. But we only ask the flowers to bloom peacefully in sheltered gardens; we don’t insist on popping them into the soup with the onions and carrots.”

Lady Mary laughed as though she had not a care in the world.

“It is quite refreshing to find that a big-wig like you can talk just as much nonsense as a little-wig like me,” she said; “but you don’t know, for all that, what the silence and monotony of life here *can* be. The very voice of a stranger falls like music on one’s ears. I was so glad to see you, and you were so kind and sympathetic about—my boy. And then, all in a moment, my joy was turned into mourning, wasn’t it? And Peter is going to the war, and it’s all like a dreadful dream; except that I know I shall wake up every morning only to realize more strongly that it’s true.”

John remembered that he was dallying with his mission, instead of fulfilling it.

“Sir Timothy cannot go to see his son off? That must be a grief to him,” he said.

“No; he isn’t coming. He has business, I believe,” said Lady Mary, a little coldly. “There has been a dispute over some Crown lands, which march with ours. Officials are often very dilatory and difficult to deal with. Probably, however, you know more about it than I do. I am going alone. I have just been giving the necessary orders. I shall take a servant with me, as well as my maid, for I am such an inexperienced traveller—though it seems absurd, at my age—that I am quite frightened of getting into the wrong trains. I dread a journey by myself. Even such a little journey as that. But, of course, nothing would keep me at home.”

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“Only one thing,” said John, in a low voice, “if I have judged your character rightly in so short a time.”

“What is that?”

“Duty.”

She looked at him with sweet, puzzled eyes, like a child.

“Are you pleading Sir Timothy’s cause, Cousin John?” she said, with a little touch of offence in her tone that was only charming.

“I am pleading Sir Timothy’s cause,” said John, seriously.

“Love is stronger than duty, isn’t it?” said Lady Mary.

“I hope not,” said John, very simply.

“You mean my husband doesn’t wish me to go?”

“Don’t think me too presuming,” he said pleadingly.

“I couldn’t,” said Lady Mary, naively. “You are older than I am, you know,” she laughed, “and a Q.C. And you know you would be my trustee and my boy’s guardian if anything ever happened to Sir Timothy. He told me so long ago. And he reminded me of it to-day most solemnly. I suppose he was afraid I shouldn’t treat you with proper respect.”

“He has honoured me very highly,” said John. “In that case, it would be almost my—my duty to advise you in any difficulty that might arise, wouldn’t it?”

“That means you want to advise me now?”

“Frankly, it does.”

“And are *you* going to tell me that I ought to stay at home, and let my only boy leave England without bidding him God-speed?” said Lady Mary incredulously. “If so, I warn you that you will never convince me of that, argue as you may.”

“No one is ever convinced by argument,” said John. “But stern facts sometimes command even a woman’s attention.”

“When backed by such powers of persuasion as yours, perhaps.”

She faced him with sparkling eyes. Lady Mary was timid and gentle by nature, but Peter’s mother knew no fear. Yet she realized that if John Crewys were moved to put forth his full powers, he might be a difficult man to oppose. She met his glance, and

observed that he perfectly understood the spirit which animated her, and that it was not opposition that shone from his bright hazel eyes, as he regarded her steadily through his pince-nez.

“I am going to deal with a hard fact, which your husband is afraid to tell you,” said John, “because, in his tenderness for your womanly weakness, he underrates, as I venture to think, your womanly courage. Sir Timothy wants you to be with him here to-morrow because he has to—to fight an unequal battle—”

“With the Crown?”

“With Death.”

“What do you mean?” said Lady Mary.

“He has been silently combating a mortal disease for many months past,” said John, “and to-morrow morning the issue is to be decided. Every day, every hour of delay, increases the danger. The great surgeon, Dr. Herslett, will be here at eleven o’clock, and on the success of the operation he will perform, hangs the thread of your husband’s life.”

Lady Mary put up a little trembling hand entreatingly, and John’s great heart throbbed with pity. He had chosen his words deliberately to startle her from her absorption in her son; but she looked so fragile, so white, so imploring, that his courage almost failed him. He came to her side, and took the little hand reassuringly in his strong, warm clasp.

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“Be brave, my dear,” he said, with faltering voice, “and put aside, if you can, the thought of your bitter, terrible disappointment. Only *you* can cheer, and inspire, and aid your husband to maintain the calmness of spirit which is of such vital importance to his chance of recovery. You can’t leave him against his wish at such a moment; not if you are the—the angel I believe you to be,” said John, with emotion.

There was a pause, and though he looked away from her, he knew that she was crying.

John released the little hand gently, and walked to the fireplace to give her time to recover herself. Perhaps his eye-glasses were dimmed; he polished them very carefully.

Lady Mary dashed away her tears, and spoke in a hard voice he scarcely recognized as hers.

“I might be all—you think me, John,” she said, “if—”

“Ah! don’t let there be an *if*,” said John.

“But—”

“Or a *but*.”

“It is that you don’t understand the situation,” she said; “you talk as though Sir Timothy and I were an ordinary husband and wife, entirely dependent on one another’s love and sympathy. Don’t you know *he* stands alone—above all the human follies and weaknesses of a mere woman? Can’t you guess,” said Lady Mary, passionately, “that it’s my boy, my poor faulty, undutiful boy—oh, that I should call him so!—who needs me? that it’s his voice that would be calling in my heart whilst I awaited Sir Timothy’s pleasure to-morrow?”

“His *pleasure*?” said John, sternly.

“I am shocking you, and I didn’t want to shock you,” she cried, almost wildly. “But you don’t suppose he needs *me*—me myself? He only wants to be sure I’m doing the right thing. He wants to give people no chance of saying that Lady Mary Crewys rushed off to see her spoilt boy whilst her husband hovered between life and death. A lay figure would do just as well; if it would only sit in an armchair and hold its handkerchief to its eyes; and if the neighbours, and his sisters, and the servants could be persuaded to think it was I.”

“Hush, hush!” said John.

“Do let me speak out; pray let me speak out,” she said, breathless and imploring, “and you can think what you like of me afterwards, when I am gone, if only you won’t scold

now. I am so sick of being scolded," said Lady Mary. "Am I to be a child for ever—I, that am so old, and have lost my boy?"

He thought there was something in her of the child that never grows up; the guilelessness, the charm, the ready tears and smiles, the quick changes of mood.

He rolled an elbow-chair forward, and put her into it tenderly.

"Say what you will," said John.

"This is comfortable," she said, leaning her head wearily on her hand; "to talk to a—a friend who understands, and who will not scold. But you can't understand unless I tell you everything; and Timothy himself, after all, would be the first to explain to you that it isn't my tears nor my kisses, nor my consolation he wants. You didn't think so *really*, did you?"

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John hesitated, remembering Sir Timothy's words, but she did not wait for an answer.

"Yes," she said calmly, "he wishes me to be in my proper place. It would be a scandal if I did such a remarkable thing as to leave home on any pretext at such a moment. Only by being extraordinarily respectable and dignified can we live down the memory of his father's unconventional behaviour. I must remember my position. I must smell my salts, and put my feet up on the sofa, and be moderately overcome during the crisis, and moderately thankful to the Almighty when it's over, so that every one may hear how admirably dear Lady Mary behaved. And when I am reading the *Times* to him during his convalescence," she cried, wringing her hands, "Peter—Peter will be thousands of miles away, marching over the veldt to his death."

"You make very sure of Peter's death," said John, quietly.

"Oh yes," said Lady Mary, listlessly. "He's an only son. It's always the only sons who die. I've remarked that."

"You make very sure of Sir Timothy's recovery."

"Oh yes," Lady Mary said again. "He's a very strong man."

Something ominous in John's face and voice attracted her attention.

"Why do you look like that?"

"Because," said John, slowly—"you understand I'm treating you as a woman of courage—Dr. Blundell told me just now that—the odds are against him."

She uttered a little cry.

The doctor's voice at the end of the hall made them both start.

"Lady Mary," he said, "you will forgive my interruption. Sir Timothy desired me to join you. He feared this double blow might prove too much for your strength."

"I am quite strong," said Lady Mary.

"He wished me to deliver a message," said the doctor.

"Yes."

"On reflection, Sir Timothy believes that he may be partly influenced by a selfish desire for the consolation of your presence in wishing you to remain with him to-morrow. He was struck, I believe, with something Mr. Crewys said—on this point."

“God bless you, John!” said Lady Mary.

“Hush!” said John, shaking his head.

Dr. Blundell’s voice sounded, John thought, as though he were putting force upon himself to speak calmly and steadily. His eyes were bent on the floor, and he never once looked at Lady Mary.

“Sir Timothy desires, consequently,” he said, “that you will consider yourself free to follow your own wishes in the matter; being guided, as far as possible, by the advice of Mr. Crewys. He is afraid of further agitation, and therefore asks you to convey to him, as quickly as possible, your final decision. As his physician, may I beg you not to keep him waiting?”

He left them, and returned to the study.

Though it was only a short silence that followed his departure, John had time to learn by heart the aspect of the half-lighted, shadowy hall.

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There are some pauses which are illustrated to the day of a man's death, by a vivid impression on his memory of the surroundings.

The heavy, painted beams crossing and re-crossing the lofty roof; the black staircase lighted with wax candles, that made a brilliancy which threw into deeper relief the darkness of every recess and corner; the full-length, Early Victorian portraits of men and women of his own race—inartistic daubs, that were yet horribly lifelike in the semi-illumination; the uncurtained mullioned windows,—all formed a background for the central figure in his thoughts; the slender womanly form in the armchair; the little brown head supported on the white hand; the delicate face, robbed of its youthful freshness, and yet so lovely still.

"John," said Lady Mary, in a voice from which all passion and strength had died away, "tell me what I ought to do."

"Remain with your husband."

"And let my boy go?" said Lady Mary, weeping. "I had thought, when he was leaving me, perhaps for ever, that—that his heart would be touched—that I should get a glimpse once more of the Peter he used to be. Oh, can't you understand? He—he's a little—-hard and cold to me sometimes—God forgive me for saying so!—but you—you've been a young man too."

"Yes," John said, rather sadly, "I've been young too."

"It's only his age, you know," she said. "He couldn't always be as gentle and loving as when he was a child. A young man would think that so babyish. He wants, as he says, to be independent, and not tied to a woman's apron-string. But in his heart of hearts he loves me best in the whole world, and he wouldn't have been ashamed to let me see it at such a moment. And I should have had a precious memory of him for ever. You shake your head. Don't you understand me? I thought you seemed to understand," she said wistfully.

"Peter is a boy," said John, "and life is just opening for him. It is a hard saying to *you*, but his thoughts are full of the world he is entering. There is no room in them just now for the home he is leaving. That is human nature. If he be sick or sorry later on—as I know your loving fancy pictures him—his heart would turn even then, not to the mother he saw waving and weeping on the quay, amid all the confusion of departure, but to the mother of his childhood, of his happy days of long ago. It may be "—John hesitated, and spoke very tenderly—"it may be that his heart will be all the softer then, because he was denied the parting interview he never sought. The young are strangely wayward and impatient. They regret what might have been. They do not, like the old, dwell fondly upon what the gods actually granted them. It is *you* who will suffer from this

sacrifice, not Peter; that will be some consolation to you, I suppose, even if it be also a disappointment."

"Ah, how you understand!" said Peter's mother, sadly.

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“Perhaps because, as you said just now, I have been a young man too,” he said, forcing a smile. “Oh, forgive me, but let me save you; for I believe that if you deserted your husband to-day, you would sorrow for it to the end of your life.”

“And Peter—” she murmured.

He came to her side, and straightened himself, and spoke hopefully.

“Give me your last words and your last gifts—and a letter—for Peter, and send me in your stead to-night. I will deliver them faithfully. I will tell him—for he should be told—of the sore straits in which you find yourself. Set him this noble example of duty, and believe me, it will touch his heart more nearly than even that sacred parting which you desire.”

Lady Mary held out her hand to him.

“Tell Sir Timothy that I will stay,” she whispered.

John bent down and kissed the little hand in silence, and with profound respect.

Then he went to the study without looking back.

When he was gone, Lady Mary laid her face upon the badly painted miniature of Peter, and cried as one who had lost all hope in life.

CHAPTER VII

“Her didn’t make much account on him while him were alive; but now ’ce be dead, ’tis butivul tu zee how her du take on,” said Happy Jack.

There was a soft mist of heat; the long-delayed spring coming suddenly, after storms of cold rain and gales of wind had swept the Youle valley. Two days’ powerful sunshine had excited the buds to breaking, and drawn up the tender blades of young grass from the soaked earth.

The flowering laurels hung over the shady banks, whereon large families of primroses spent their brief and lovely existence undisturbed. The hawthorn put forth delicate green leaves, and the white buds of the cherry-trees in the orchard were swelling on their leafless boughs.

In such summer warmth, and with the concert of building birds above and around, it was strange to see the dead and wintry aspect of the forest trees; still bare and brown, though thickening with the red promise of foliage against the April sky.

John Crewys, climbing the lane next the waterfall, had been hailed by the roadside by the toothless, smiling old rustic.

“I be downright glad to zee ’ee come back, zur; ay, that ’a be. What vur du ’ee go gadding London ways, zays I, when there be zuch a turble lot to zee arter? and the ladyship oop Barracombe ways, her bain’t vit var tu du ’t, as arl on us du know. Tis butivul tu zee how her takes on,” he repeated admiringly.

John glanced uneasily at his companion, who stood with downcast eyes.

“Lard, I doan’t take no account on Miss Zairy,” said the road-mender, leaning on his hoe and looking sharply from the youthful lady to the middle-aged gentleman. “I’ve knowed her zince her wur a little maid. I used tu give her lolly-pops. Yu speak up, Miss Zairy, and tell ’un if I didn’t.”

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“To be sure you did, Father Jack,” said Sarah, promptly.

“Ah, zo ’a did,” said the old man, chuckling. “Zo ’a did, and her ladyship avore yu. I mind *her* when her was a little maid, and pretty ways her had wi’ her, zame as now. None zo ramshacklin’ as yu du be, Miss Zairy.”

“There’s nobody about that he doesn’t remember as a child,” said Sarah, apologetically. “He’s so old, you see. He doesn’t remember how old he is, and nobody can tell him. But he knows he was born in the reign of George the Third, because his mother told him so; and he remembers his father coming in with news of the Battle of Waterloo, So I think he must be about ninety.”

“Lard, mar like a hunderd year old, I be,” said Happy Jack, offended. “And luke how I du wark yit. Yif I’d ’a give up my wark, I shude ’a bin in the churchyard along o’ the idlers, that ’a shude.” He chuckled and winked. “I du be a turble vunny man,” quavered the thin falsetto voice. “They be niver a dune a laughin’ along o’ my jokes. An’ I du remember Zur Timothy’s vather zo well as Zur Timothy hisself, though ’ee bin dead nigh sixty year. Lard, ’ee was a bad ‘un, was y’ ould squire. An old devil. That’s what ’ee was.”

“He only means Sir Timothy’s father had a bad temper,” explained Sarah. “It’s quite true.”

“Ah, was it timper?” said Jack, sarcastically. “I cude tell ’ee zum tales on ‘un. There were a right o’ way, zur, acrust the mead thereby, as the volk did claim. And ’a zays, ’A’ll putt a stop tu ‘un,’ ’a zays. And him zat on a style, long zide the tharn bush, and ’a took ’ee’s gun, and ’a zays, ’A’ll shute vust man are maid as cumes acrust thiccy vield,’ ’a zays. And us knowed ’un wude du ’t tu. And ’un barred the gate, and there t’was.”

He laughed till the tears ran down his face, brown as gingerbread, and wrinkled as a monkey’s.

“Mr. Crewys is in a hurry, Jack,” said Sarah. “He’s only just arrived from London, and he’s walked all the way from Brawnton.”

“’Tain’t but a stip vur a vine vellar like ‘ee, and wi’ a vine maiden like yu du be grown, var tu kip ’ee company,” said Happy Jack. “But ’ee’ll be in a yurry tu git tu Barracombe, and refresh hisself, in arl this turble yeat. When the zun du search, the rain du voller.”

“I dare say you want a glass of beer yourself,” said John, producing a coin from his pocket.

“No, zur, I doan’t,” said the road-mender, unexpectedly. “Beer doan’t agree wi’ my inzide, an’ it gits into my yead, and makes me proper jolly, zo the young volk make

game on me. But I cude du wi' a drop o' zider zur; and drink your health and the young lady's, zur, zo 'a cude."

He winked and nodded as he pocketed the coin; and John, half laughing and half vexed, pursued his road with Sarah.

"It seems to me that the old gentleman has become a trifle free and easy with advancing years," he observed.

"He thinks he has a right to be interested in the family," said Sarah, "because of the connection, you see."

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“The connection?”

“Didn’t you know?” she asked, with wide-open eyes. “Though you were Sir Timothy’s own cousin.”

“A very distant cousin,” said John.

“But every one in the valley knows,” said Sarah, “that Sir Timothy’s father married his own cook, who was Happy Jack’s first cousin. When I was a little girl, and wanted to tease Peter,” she added ingenuously, “I always used to allude to it. It is the skeleton in their cupboard. We haven’t got a skeleton in our family,” she added regretfully; “least of all the skeleton of a cook.”

John remembered vaguely that there was a story about the second marriage of Sir Timothy the elder.

“So she was a cook!” he said. “Well, what harm?” and he laughed in spite of himself. “I wonder why there is something so essentially unromantic in the profession of a cook?”

“Her family went to Australia, and they are quite rich people now: no more cooks than you and me,” said Sarah, gravely. “But Happy Jack won’t leave Youlestone, though he says they tempted him with untold gold. And he wouldn’t touch his hat to Sir Timothy, because he was his cousin. That was another skeleton.”

“But a very small one,” said John, laughing.

“It might seem small to *us*, but I’m sure it was one reason why Sir Timothy never went outside his own gates if he could help it,” said Sarah, shrewdly. “Luckily the cook died when he was born.”

“Why luckily, poor thing?” said John, indignantly.

“She wouldn’t have had much of a time, would she, do you think, with Sir Timothy’s sisters?” asked Sarah, with simplicity. “They were in the schoolroom when their papa married her, or I am sure they would never have allowed it. Their own mother was a most select person; and little thought when she gave the orders for dinner, and all that, who the old gentleman’s *next* wife would be,” said Sarah, giggling. “They always talk of her as the *Honourable Rachel*, since *Lady Crewys*, you know, might just as well mean the cook. I suppose the old squire got tired of her being so select, and thought he would like a change. He was a character, you know. I often think Peter will be a character when he grows old. He is so disagreeable at times.”

“I thought you were so fond of Peter?” said John, looking amusedly down on the little chatterbox beside him.

“Not exactly fond of him. It’s just that I’m *used* to him,” said Sarah, colouring all over her clear, fresh face, even to the little tendrils of red hair on her white neck.

She wore a blue cotton frock, and a brown mushroom hat, with a wreath of wild roses which had somewhat too obviously been sewn on in a hurry and crookedly; and she looked far more like a village schoolgirl than a young lady who was shortly to make her *debut* in London society. But he was struck with the extraordinary brilliancy of her complexion, transparent and pure as it was, in the searching sunlight.

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“If she were not so round-shouldered—if the features were better—her expression softer,” said John to himself—“if divine colouring were all—she would be beautiful.”

But her wide, smiling mouth, short-tipped nose, and cleft chin, conveyed rather the impression of childish audacity than of feminine charm. The glance of those bright, inquisitive eyes was like a wild robin’s, half innocent, half bold. Though her round throat were white as milk, and though no careless exposure to sun and wind had yet succeeded in dimming the exquisite fairness of her skin, yet the defects and omissions incidental to extreme youth, country breeding, and lack of discipline, rendered Miss Sarah not wholly pleasing in John’s fastidious eyes. Her carriage was slovenly, her ungloved hands were red, her hair touzled, and her deep-toned voice over-loud and confident. Yet her frankness and her trustfulness could not fail to evoke sympathy.

“It is—Lady Mary that I am fond of,” said the girl, with a yet more vivid blush.

He was touched. “She will miss you, I am sure, when you go to town,” he said kindly.

“If I thought so really, I wouldn’t go,” said Sarah, vehemently. She winked a tear from her long eyelashes. “But I know it’s only your good nature. She thinks of nothing and nobody but Peter. And—and, after all, when I get better manners, and all that, I shall be more of a companion to her. I’m very glad to go, if it wasn’t for leaving *her*. I like Aunt Elizabeth, whereas mamma and I never *did* get on. She cares most for the boys, which is very natural, no doubt, as I was only an afterthought, and nobody wanted me. And Aunt Elizabeth has always liked me. She says I amuse her with my sharp tongue.”

“But you will have to be a little careful of the sharp tongue when you get to London,” said John, smiling. He was struck by the half-sly, half-acquiescent look that Sarah stole at him from beneath those long eyelashes. Perhaps her outspokenness was not so involuntary as he had imagined.

“If I had known you were coming to-day, I would have gone up to say good-bye to Lady Mary last night,” said Sarah, mournfully. “She won’t want me now you are here.”

“I have a thousand and one things to look after. I sha’n’t be in your way,” said John, good-naturedly, “if she is not busy otherwise.”

“Busy!” echoed Sarah. “She sits *so*, with her hands in her lap, looking over the valley. And she has grown, oh, so much thinner and sadder-looking. I thought you would never come.”

“I have my own work,” said John, hurriedly, “and I thought, besides, she would rather be alone these first few weeks.”

Sarah looked up with a flash in her blue eyes, which were so dark, and large-pupilled, and heavily lashed, that they looked almost black. She ground her strong white teeth together.

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“If I were Lady Mary,” she said, “I would have slammed the old front door behind me the very day after Sir Timothy was buried—and gone away; I would. There she is, like a prisoner, with the old ladies counting every tear she sheds, and adding them up to see if it is enough; and measuring every inch of crape on her gowns; and finding fault with all she does, just as they used when Sir Timothy was alive to back them up. And she is afraid to do anything he didn’t like; and she never listens to the doctor, the only person in the world who’s ever had the courage to fight her battles.”

“The doctor,” said John, sharply. “Has she been ill?”

“No, no.”

“What has *he* to do with Lady Mary?” said John.

His displeasure was so great that the colour rose in his clean-shaven face, and did not escape little Sarah’s observation, for all her downcast lashes.

“Somebody must go and see her,” said Sarah; “and you were away. And the canon is just nobody, always bothering her for subscriptions; though he is very fond of her, like everybody else,” she added, with compunction. “Dear me, Mr. Crewys, how fast you are walking!”

John had unconsciously quickened his pace so much that she had some ado to keep up with him without actually running.

“I beg your pardon,” he said.

“It is so hot, and the hill is steep, and I am rather fat. I dare say I shall fine down as I get older,” said Sarah, apologetically. “It would be dreadful if I grew up like mamma. But I am more like my father, thank goodness, and *he* is simply a mass of hard muscle. I dare say even I could beat you on the flat. But not up this drive. Doesn’t it look pretty in the spring?”

“It was very different when I left Barracombe,” said John.

He looked round with all a Londoner’s appreciation.

In the sunny corner next the ivy-clad lodge an early rhododendron had burst into scarlet bloom. The steep drive was warmly walled and sheltered on the side next the hill by horse-chestnuts, witch-elms, tall, flowering shrubs and evergreens, and a variety of tree-azaleas and rhododendrons which promised a blaze of beauty later in the season.

But the other side of the drive lay in full view of the open landscape; rolling grass slopes stretching down to the orchards and the valley. Violets, white and blue, scented the air, and the primroses clustered at the roots of the forest trees.

The gnarled and twisted stems of giant creepers testified to the age of Barracombe House. Before the entrance was a level space, which made a little spring garden, more formal and less varied in its arrangement than the terrace gardens on the south front; but no less gay and bright, with beds of hyacinths, red and white and purple, and daffodils springing amidst their bodyguards of pale, pointed spears.

A wild cherry-tree at the corner of the house had showered snowy petals before the latticed window of the study; the window whence Sir Timothy had taken his last look at the western sky, and from which his watchful gaze had once commanded the approach to his house, and observed almost every human being who ventured up the drive.

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On the ridge of the hill above, and in clumps upon the fertile slopes of the side of the little valley, the young larches rose, newly clothed in that light and brilliant foliage which darkens almost before spring gives place to summer.

They found Lady Mary in the drawing-room; the sunshine streamed towards her through the golden rain of a *planta-genista*, which stood on a table in the western corner of the bow window. She was looking out over the south terrace, and the valley and the river, just as Sarah had said.

He was shocked at her pallor, which was accentuated by her black dress; her sapphire blue eyes looked unnaturally large and clear; the little white hands clasped in her lap were too slender; a few silver threads glistened in the soft, brown hair. Above all, the hopeless expression of the sad and gentle face went to John's heart.

Was the doctor the only man in the world who had the courage to fight her battles for this fading, grieving woman who had been the lovely Mary Setoun; whom John remembered so careless, so laughing, so innocently gay?

He was relieved that she could smile as he approached to greet her.

"I did not guess you would come by the early train," she said, in glad tones. "But, oh—-you must have walked all the way from Brawnton! What will James Coachman say?"

"I wanted a walk," said John, "and I knew you would send to meet me if I let you know. My luggage is at the station. James Coachman, as you call him, can fetch that whenever he will."

"And I have come to say good-bye," said Sarah, forlornly.

She watched with jealous eyes their greeting, and Lady Mary's obvious pleasure in John's arrival, and half-oblivion of her own familiar little presence.

When Peter had first gone to school, his mother in her loneliness had almost made a *confidante* of little Sarah, the odd, intelligent child who followed her about so faithfully, and listened so eagerly to those dreamy, half-uttered confidences. She knew that Lady Mary wept because her boy had left her; but she understood also that when Peter came home for the holidays he brought little joy to his mother. A self-possessed stripling now walked about the old house, and laid down the law to his mamma—instead of that chubby creature in petticoats who had once been Peter.

Lady Mary had dwelt on the far-off days of Peter's babyhood very tenderly when she was alone with little Sarah, who sat and nursed her doll, and liked very much to listen; she often felt awed, as though some one had died; but she did not connect the story much with the Peter of every day, who went fishing and said girls were rather a nuisance.

Sarah, too, had had her troubles. She was periodically banished to distant schools by a mother who disliked romping and hoydenish little girls, as much as she doted on fat and wheezing lap-dogs. But as her father, on the other hand, resented her banishment from home almost as sincerely as Sarah herself, she was also periodically sent for to take up her residence once more beneath the parental roof. Thus her life was full of change and uncertainty; but, through it all, her devotion to Lady Mary never wavered.

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She looked at her now with a melancholy air which sat oddly upon her bright, comical face, and which was intended to draw attention to the pathetic fact of her own impending departure.

“I only came to say good-bye,” said Sarah, in slightly injured tones.

“Ah! by-the-by, and I have promised not to intrude on the parting,” said John, with twinkling eyes.

“It is not an eternal farewell,” said Lady Mary, drawing Sarah kindly towards her.

“It may be for *years*,” said Sarah, rather offended. “My aunt Elizabeth is as good as adopting me. Mamma said I was very lucky, and I believe she is glad to be rid of me. But papa says he shall come and see me in London. Aunt Elizabeth is going to take me to Paris and to Scotland, and abroad every winter.”

“Oh, Sarah, how you will be changed when you come back!” said Lady Mary; and she laughed a little, with a hand on Sarah’s shoulder; but Sarah knew that Lady Mary was not thinking very much about her, all the same.

“There is no fresh news, John?” she asked.

“Nothing since my last telegram,” he answered. “But I have arranged with the Exchange Telegraph Company to wire me anything of importance during my stay here.”

“You are always so good,” she said.

Then he took pity on Sarah’s impatience, and left the little worshipper to the interview with her idol which she so earnestly desired.

“I will go and pay my respects to my cousins,” said John.

But the banqueting-hall was deserted, and gaps in the row of clogs and goloshes suggested that the old ladies were taking a morning stroll. They had not thought it proper to drive, save in a close carriage, since their brother’s death; and on such a warm day of spring weather a close carriage was not inviting to country-bred people.

CHAPTER VIII

John took his hat and stepped out once more upon the drive, and there met Dr. Blundell, who had left his dog-cart at the stables, and was walking up to the house.

He did not pause to analyze the sentiment of slight annoyance which clouded his usual good humour; but Dr. Blundell divined it, with the quickness of an ultra-sensitive nature. He showed no signs that he had done so.

“It was you I came to see,” he said, shaking hands with John. “I heard—you know how quickly news spreads here—that you had arrived. I hoped you might spare me a few moments for a little conversation.”

“Certainly,” said John. “Will you come in, or shall we take a turn?”

“You will be glad of a breath of fresh air after your journey,” said the doctor, and he led the way across the south terrace, to a sheltered corner of the level plateau upon which the house was built, which was known as the fountain garden.

It was rather a deserted garden, thickly surrounded and overgrown by shrubs. Through the immense spreading Portuguese laurels which sheltered it from the east, little or no sunshine found its way to the grey, moss-grown basin and the stone figures supporting it; over which a thin stream of water continually flowed with a melancholy rhythm, in perpetual twilight.

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A giant ivy grew rankly and thickly about the stone buttresses of this eastern corner of the house, and around a great mullioned window which overlooked the fountain garden, and which was the window of Lady Mary's bedroom.

"These shrubberies want thinning," said John, looking round him rather disgustedly. "This place is reeking with damp. I should like to cut down some of these poisonous laurels, and let in the air and the sunshine, and open out the view of the Brawnton hills."

"And why don't you?" said the doctor, with such energy in his tone that John stopped short in his pacing of the gravel walk, and looked at him.

The two men were almost as unlike in appearance as in character.

The doctor was nervous, irritable, and intense in manner; with deep-set, piercing eyes that glowed like hot coal when he was moved or excited. A tall, gaunt man, lined and wrinkled beyond his years; careless of appearance, so far as his shabby clothes were concerned, yet careful of detail, as was proven by spotless linen and well-preserved, delicate hands.

He was indifferent utterly to the opinion of others, to his own worldly advancement, or to any outer consideration, when in pursuit of the profession he loved; and he knew no other interest in life, save one. He had the face of a fanatic or an enthusiast; but also of a man whose understanding had been so cultivated as to temper enthusiasm with judgment.

He had missed success, and was neither resigned to his disappointment, nor embittered by it.

The gaze of those dark eyes was seldom introspective; rather, as it seemed, did they look out eagerly, sadly, pitifully at the pain and sorrow of the world; a pain he toiled manfully to lessen, so far as his own infinitesimal corner of the universe was concerned.

John Crewys, on the other hand, was, to the most casual observer, a successful man; a man whose personality would never be overlooked.

There was a more telling force in his composure than in the doctor's nervous energy. His clear eyes, his bright, yet steady glance, inspired confidence.

The doctor might have been taken for a poet, but John looked like a philosopher.

He was also, as obviously, in appearance, a man of the world, and a Londoner, as the doctor was evidently a countryman, and a hermit. His advantages over the doctor included his voice, which was as deep and musical as the tones of his companion were harsh.

The manner, no less than the matter of John's speech, had early brought him distinction.

Nature, rather than cultivation, had bestowed on him the faculty of conveying the impression he wished to convey, in tones that charm; and held his auditors, and penetrated ears dulled and fatigued by monotony and indistinctness.

The more impassioned his pleading, the more utterly he held his own emotion in check; the more biting his subtly chosen words, the more courteous his manner; now deadly earnest, now humorously scornful, now graciously argumentative, but always skilfully and designedly convincing.

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The doctor, save in the presence of a patient, had no such control over himself as John Crewys carried from the law-courts, into his life of every day.

“Why don’t you,” he said, in fiery tones, “let in air and life, and a view of the outside world, and as much sunshine as possible into this musty old house? You have the power, if you had only the will.”

“You speak figuratively, I notice,” said John. “I should be much obliged if you would tell me exactly what you mean.”

He would have answered in warmer and more kindly tones had Sarah’s words not rung upon his ear.

Was the doctor going to fight Lady Mary’s battles now, and with him, of all people in the world? As though there were any one in the world to whom her interests could be dearer than—

John stopped short in his thoughts, and looked attentively at the doctor. His heart smote him. How pallid was that tired face; and the hollow eyes, how sad and tired too! The doctor had been up all night, in a wretched isolated cottage, watching a man die—-but John did not know that.

He perceived that this was no meddler, but a man speaking of something very near his heart; no presuming and interfering outsider who deserved a snub, but a man suffering from some deep and hidden cause.

The doctor’s secret was known to John long before he had finished what he had to say; but he listened attentively, and gave no sign that this was so.

“She will die,” said Blundell, “if this goes on;” and he neither mentioned any name, nor did John Crewys require him to do so.

The doctor’s words came hurrying out incoherently from the depths of his anxiety and earnestness.

“She will die if this goes on. There were few hopes and little enough pleasure in her life before; but what is left to her now? *De mortuis nil nisi bonum.* But just picture to yourself for a moment, man, what her life has been.”

He stopped and drew breath, and strove to speak calmly and dispassionately.

“I was born in the valley of the Youle,” he said. “My people live in a cottage—they call it a house, but it’s just a farm—on the river,—Cullacott. I was a raw medical student when *she* came here as a child. Her father was killed in the Afghan War. He had quarrelled with his uncle, they said, who afterwards succeeded to the earldom; so she was left to

the guardianship of Sir Timothy, a distant cousin. Every one was sorry for her, because Sir Timothy was her guardian, and because she was a little young thing to be left to the tender mercies of the two old ladies, who were old even then. If you will excuse my speaking frankly about the family"—John nodded—"they bullied their brother always; what with their superiority of birth, and his being so much younger, and so on. Their bringing-up made him what he was, I am sure. He went nowhere; he always fancied people were laughing at him. His feeling about his—his

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mother's lowly origin seemed to pervade his whole life. He exaggerated the importance of birth till it became almost a mania. If you hadn't known the man, you couldn't have believed a human being—one of the million crawling units on the earth—could be so absurdly inflated with self-importance. It was pitiful. He went nowhere, and saw no one. I believe he thought that Providence had sent a wife of high rank to his very door to enable him partially to wipe out his reproach. She looked like a child when she came, but she shot up very suddenly into womanhood. If you ask me if she was unhappy, I declare I don't think so. She had never realized, I should think, what it was to be snubbed or found fault with in her life. She was a motherless child, and had lived with her old grandfather and her young father, and had been very much spoilt. And they were both snatched away from her, as it were, in a breath; and she alone in the world, with an uncle who was only glad to get rid of her to her stranger guardian. Well,—she was too young and too bright and too gay to be much downcast for all the old women could do. She laughed at their scolding, and when they tried severity she appealed to Sir Timothy. The old doctor who was my predecessor here told me at the time that he thought she had bewitched Sir Timothy; but afterwards he said that he believed it was only that Sir Timothy had made up his mind even then to quarter the Setoun arms with his own. Anyway, he went against his sisters for the first and only time in his life, and they learnt that Lady Mary was not to be interfered with. Whether it was gratitude or just the childish satisfaction of triumphing over her two enemies, I can't tell, but she married him in less than two years after she came to live at Barracombe. The old ladies didn't know whether to be angry or pleased. They wanted him to marry, and they wanted his wife to be well-born, no doubt; but to have a mere child set over them! Well, the marriage took place in London."

"I was present," said John.

"The people here said things about it that may have got round to Sir Timothy; but I don't know. He never came down to the village, except to church, where he sat away from everybody, in the gallery curtained off. Anyway, he wouldn't have the wedding down here. He invited all her relatives, and none of them had a word to say. It wasn't as if she were an heiress. I believe she had next to nothing. She was just like a child, laughing, and pleased at getting married, and with all her finery, perhaps,—or at getting rid of her lessons with the old women may be,—and the thought of babies of her own. Who knows what a girl thinks of?" said the doctor, harshly. "I didn't see her again for a long time after. But then I came down; the Brawnton doctor was getting old, and it was a question whether I should succeed him or go on in London, where I was doing well enough. And—and I came here," said the doctor, abruptly.

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John nodded again. He filled in the gaps of the doctor's narrative for himself, and understood.

"She had changed very much. All the gaiety and laughter gone. But she was wrapt up in the child as I never saw any woman wrapt up in a brat before or since; and I've known some that were pretty ridiculous in that way," said the doctor, and his voice shook more than ever. "It was—touching, for she was but a child herself; and Peter, between you and me, was an unpromising doll for a child to play with. He was ugly and ill-tempered, and he wouldn't be caressed, or dressed up, or made much of, from the first minute he had a will of his own. As he grew bigger he was for ever having rows with his father, and his mother was for ever interceding for him. He was idle at school; but he was a manly boy enough over games and sport, and a capital shot. Anyway, she managed to be proud of him, God knows how. I shouldn't wonder if this war was the making of him, though, poor chap, if he's spared to see the end of it all."

"I have no doubt the discipline will do him a great deal of good," said John, dryly.

It cannot be said that his brief interview at Southampton had impressed John with a favourable opinion of the sulky and irresponsive youth, who had there listened to his mother's messages with lowering brow and downcast eye. Peter had betrayed no sign of emotion, and almost none of gratitude for John's hurried and uncomfortable journey to convey that message.

"A few hard knocks will do you no harm, my young friend; and I almost wish you may get them," John had said to himself on his homeward journey; dreading, yet expecting, the news that awaited him at Peter's home, and for which he had done his best to prepare the boy.

"Too much consideration hitherto has ruined him," said the doctor, shortly. "But it's not of Peter I'm thinking, one way or the other. From the time he went first to school, she's had to depend entirely on her own resources—and what are they?"

He paused, as though to gather strength and energy for his indictment.

"From the time she was brought here—except for that one outing and a change to Torquay, I believe, after Peter's birth—she has scarce set foot outside Barracombe. Sir Timothy would not, so he was resolved she should not. His sisters, who have as much cultivation as that stone figure, disapproved of novel-reading—or of any other reading, I should fancy—and he followed suit. Books are almost unknown in this house. The library bookcases were locked. Sir Timothy opened them once in a while, and his sisters dusted the books with their own hands; it was against tradition to handle such valuable bindings. He hated music, and the piano was not to be played in his presence. Have you ever tried it? I'm told you're musical. It belonged to Lady

Belstone's mother, the Honourable Rachel. That is her harp which stands in the corner of the hall. Her daughter

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once tinkled a little, I believe; but the prejudices of the ruling monarch were religiously obeyed. Music was *taboo* at Barracombe. Dancing was against their principles, and theatres they regard with horror, and have never been inside one in their lives. Nothing took Sir Timothy to London but business; and if it were possible to have the business brought to Barracombe, his solicitor, Mr. Crawley, visited him here."

The doctor spoke in lower tones, as he recurred to his first theme.

"I don't think she found out for years, or realized what a prisoner she was. They caught and pinned her down so young. There are no very near neighbours—I mean, not the sort of people they would recognize as neighbours—except the Hewels. Youlestone is such an out-of-the-way place, and Sir Timothy was never on intimate terms with any one. Mrs. Hewel is a fool—there was only little Sarah whom Lady Mary made a pet of—but she had no friends. Sir Timothy and his sisters made visiting such a stiff and formal business, that it was no wonder she hated paying calls; the more especially as it could lead to nothing. He would not entertain; he grudged the expense. I was present at a scene he once made because a large party drove over from a distant house and stayed to tea. He said he could not entertain the county. She dared ask no one to her house—she, who was so formed and fitted by nature to charm and attract, and enjoy social intercourse." His voice faltered. "They stole her youth," he said.

"What do you want me to do?" said John, though he was vaguely conscious that he understood for what the doctor was pleading.

He sat down by the fountain; and the doctor, resting a mended boot on the end of the bench, leant on his bony knee, and looked down wistfully at John's thoughtful face, broad brow, and bright, intent eyes.

"You are a very clever man, Mr. Crewys," he said humbly. "A man of the world, successful, accomplished, and, I believe, honest"—he spoke with a simplicity that disarmed offence—"or I should not have ventured as I have ventured. Somehow you inspire me with confidence. I believe you can save her. I believe you could find a way to bring back her peace of mind; the interest in life—the gaiety of heart—that is natural to her. If I were in your place, not the two old women—not Sir Timothy's ghost—not that poor conceited slip of a lad who may be shot to-morrow—would stand in my way. I would bring back the colour to her cheek, and the light to her eye, and the music to her voice—"

"Whilst her boy is in danger?" John asked, almost scornfully. He thought he knew Lady Mary better than the doctor did, after all.

"I tell you *nothing* would stop me," said Blundell, vehemently. "Before I would let her fret herself to death—afraid to break the spells that have been woven round her, bound as she is, hand and foot, with the prejudices of the dead—I would—I would—take her to South Africa myself," he said brilliantly. "The voyage would bring her back to life."

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John got up. “That is an idea,” he said. He paused and looked at the doctor. “You have known her longer than I. Have you said nothing to her of all this?”

The doctor smiled grimly. “Mr. Crewys,” he said, “some time since I spoke my mind—a thing I am over-apt to do—*of* Peter, and *to* him. The lad has forgiven me; he is a man, you see, with all his faults. But Lady Mary, though she has all the virtues of a woman, is also a mother. A woman often forgives; a mother, never. Don’t forget.”

“I will not,” said John.

“And you’ll do it—”

“Use the unlimited authority that has been placed in my hands, by improving this tumble-down, overgrown place?” said John, slowly. “Let in light, air, and sunshine to Barracombe, and do my best to brighten Lady Mary’s life, without reference to any one’s prejudices, past or present?”

“You’ve got the idea,” said the doctor, joyfully. “Will you carry it out?”

“Yes,” said John.

CHAPTER IX

The new moon brightened above the rim of the opposite hill, and touched the river below with silver reflections. On the grass banks sloping away beneath the terrace gardens, sheets of bluebells shone almost whitely on the grass. The silent house rose against the dark woods, whitened also here and there by the blossom of wild cherry-trees.

Lady Mary stepped from the open French windows of the drawing-room into the still, scented air of the April night. She stood leaning against the stone balcony, and gazing at the wonderful panorama of the valley and overlapping hills; where the little river threaded its untroubled course between daisied meadows and old orchards and red crumbling banks.

A broad-shouldered figure appeared in the window, and a man’s step crunched the gravel of the path which Lady Mary had crossed.

“For once I have escaped, you see,” she said, without turning round. “They will not venture into the night air. Sometimes I think they will drive me mad—Isabella and Georgina.”

“Mary!” cried a shrill voice from the drawing-room, “how can you be so imprudent! John, how can you allow her!”

John stepped back to the window. “It is very mild,” he said. “Lady Mary likes the air.”

There was a note of authority in his tone which somehow impressed Lady Belstone, who withdrew, muttering to herself, into the warm lamplight of the drawing-room.

Perhaps the two old ladies were to be pitied, too, as they sat together, but forlorn, sincerely shocked and uneasy at their sister-in-law’s behaviour.

“Dear Timothy not dead three months, and she sitting out there in the night air, as he would never have permitted, talking and laughing; yes, I actually hear her laughing—-with John.”

“There is no telling what she may do *now*,” said Miss Crewys, gloomily.

“I declare it is a judgment, Georgina. Why did Timothy choose to trust a perfect stranger—even though John is a cousin—with the care of his wife and son, and his estate, rather than his own sisters?”

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“It was a gentleman’s work,” said Miss Crewys.

“Gentleman’s fiddlesticks! Couldn’t old Crawley have done it? I should hope he is as good a lawyer as young John any day,” said Lady Belstone, tossing her head. “But I have often noticed that people will trust any chance stranger with the property they leave behind, rather than those they know best.”

“Isabella,” said Miss Crewys, “blame not the dead, and especially on a moonlight night. It makes my blood run cold.”

“I am blaming nobody, Georgina; but I will say that if poor Timothy thought proper to leave everything else in the hands of young John, he might have considered that you and I had a better right to the Dower House than poor dear Mary, who, of course, must live with her son.”

“I am far from wishing or intending to leave my home here, Isabella,” said Miss Crewys. “It is very different in your case. You forfeited the position of daughter of the house when you married. But I have always occupied my old place, and my old room.”

This was a sore subject. On Lady Belstone’s return as a widow, to the home of her fathers, she had been torn with anxiety and indecision regarding her choice of a sleeping apartment. Sentiment dictated her return to her former bedroom; but she was convinced that the married state required a domicile on the first floor. Etiquette prevailed, and she descended; but the eighty-year-old legs of Miss Crewys still climbed the nursery staircase, and she revenged herself for her inferior status by insisting, in defiance of old associations, that her maid should occupy the room next to her own, which her sister had abandoned.

“For my part, I can sleep in one room as well as another, provided it be comfortable and *appropriate*,” said Lady Belstone, with dignity. “There are very pleasant rooms in the Dower House, and our great-aunts managed to live there in comfort, and yet keep an eye on their nephew here, as I have always been told. I don’t know why we should object to doing the same. You have never tried being mistress of your own house, Georgina, but I can assure you it has its advantages; and I found them out as a married woman.”

“A married woman has her husband to look after her,” said Miss Crewys. “It is very different for a widow.”

“You are for ever throwing my widowhood in my teeth, Georgina,” said Lady Belstone, plaintively. “It is not my fault that I am a widow. I did not murder the admiral.”

“I don’t say you did, Isabella,” said Georgina, grimly; “but he only survived his marriage six months.”

“It is nice to be silent sometimes,” said Lady Mary.

“Does that mean that I am to go away?” said John, “or merely that I am not to speak to you?”

She laughed a little. “Neither. It means that I am tired of being scolded.”

“I have wondered now and then,” said John, deliberately, “why you put up with it?”

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“I suppose—because I can’t help it,” she said, startled.

“You are a free agent.”

“You mean that I could go away?” she said, in a low voice. “But there is only one place I should care to go to now.”

“To South Africa?”

“You always understand,” she said gratefully.

“Supposing this—this ghastly war should not be over as soon as we all hope,” he said, rather huskily, “I could escort you myself, in a few weeks’ time, to the Cape. Or—or arrange for your going earlier if you desired, and if I could not get away. Probably you would get no further than Cape Town; but it might be easier for you waiting there—than here.”

“I shall thank you, and bless you always, for thinking of it,” she interrupted, softly; “but there is something—that I never told anybody.”

He waited.

“After Peter had the news of his father’s death,” said Lady Mary, with a sob in her throat, “you did not know that he—he telegraphed to me, from Madeira. He foresaw immediately, I suppose, whither my foolish impulses would lead me; and he asked me—I should rather say he ordered me—under no circumstances whatever to follow him out to South Africa.”

John remembered the doctor’s warning, and said nothing.

“So, you see—I can’t go,” said Lady Mary.

There was a pause.

“I am bound to say,” said John, presently, “that, in Peter’s place, I should not have liked my mother, or any woman I loved, to come out to the seat of war. He showed only a proper care for you in forbidding it. Perhaps I am less courageous than he, in thinking more of the present benefit you would derive from the voyage and the change of scene, than of the perils and discomforts which might await you, for aught we can foretell now, at the end of it. Peter certainly showed judgment in telegraphing to you.”

“Do you really think so? That it was care for me that made him do it?” she asked. A distant doubtful joy sounded in her voice. “Somehow I never thought of that. I remembered his old dislike of being followed about, or taken care of, or—or spied upon, as he used to call it.”

“Boys just turning into men are often sensitive on those points,” said John, heedful always of the doctor’s warning.

“It is odd I did not see the telegram in that light,” said poor Lady Mary. “I must read it again.”

She spoke as hopefully as though she had not read it already a hundred times over, trying to read loving meanings, that were not there, between the curt and peremptory lines.

“It is not odd,” thought John to himself; “it is because you knew him too well;” and he wondered whether his explanation of Peter’s action were charitable, or merely unscrupulous.

But Lady Mary was not really deceived; only very grateful to the man who was so tender of heart, so tactful of speech, as to make it seem even faintly possible that she had misjudged her boy.

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She said to herself that parents were often unreasonable, expecting impossibilities, in their wild desire for perfection in their offspring. An outsider, being unprejudiced by anxiety, could judge more fairly. John found that the telegram, which had almost broken her heart, was reasonable and justified; nay, even that it displayed a dutiful regard for her safety and comfort, of which no one but a stranger could possibly have suspected Peter. She was grateful to John. It was a relief and joy to feel that it was she who was to blame, and not Peter, whose heart was in the right place, after all. And yet, though John was so clever and had such an experience of human nature, it was the doctor who had put the key into his hands, which presently unlocked Lady Mary's confidence.

"You mustn't think, John, that I don't understand what it will be like later, when Peter comes of age. Of course this house will be his, and he is not the kind of young man to be tied to his mother's apron-string. He always wanted to be independent."

"It is human nature," said John.

"I am not blind to his faults," said Lady Mary, humbly, "though they all think so. It is of little use to try and hide them from you, who will see them for yourself directly my darling comes back. I pray God it may be soon. Of course he is spoilt; but I am to blame, because I made him my idol."

"An only son is always more or less spoilt," said John. He remembered his own boyhood, and smiled sardonically in the darkness. "He will grow out of it. He will come back a man after this experience."

"Yes, yes, and he will want to live his life, and I—I shall have to learn to do without him, I know," she said. "I must learn while he is away to—to depend on myself. It is not likely that—that a woman of my age should have much in common with a manly boy like Peter. Sometimes I wonder whether I really understand my boy at all."

"It is my belief," said John, "that no generation is in perfect touch with another. Each stands on a different rung of the ladder of Time. You may stoop to lend a helping hand to the younger, or reach upwards to take a farewell of the older. But there must be a looking down or a looking up. No face-to-face talk is possible except upon the same level. No real and true comradeship. The very word implies a marching together, under the same circumstances, to a common goal; and how can we, who have to be the commanding officers of the young, be their true companions?" he said, lightly and cheerfully.

"I dare say I have expected impossibilities," said Lady Mary, as though reproaching herself. "It comforts me to think so. But I have had time to reflect on many things since—February." She paused. "I don't deny I have tried to make plans for the future. But there are these days to be lived through first—until he comes home."

“I was going to propose,” said John, “that, if agreeable to you, I should spend my summer and autumn holiday here, instead of going, as usual, to Switzerland.”

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“I should be only too glad,” she said, in tones of awakened interest. “But surely—it would be very dull for you?”

“Not at all. There is a great deal to be done, and in accordance with my trust I am bound to set about it,” said John. “I propose to spend the next few days in examining the reports of the surveys that have already been made, and in judging of their accuracy for myself. When I return here later, I could have the work begun, and then for some time I could superintend matters personally, which is always a good thing.”

“Do you mean—the woods?” she asked. “I know they have been neglected. Sir Timothy would never have a tree cut down; but they are so wild and beautiful.”

“There are hundreds of pounds’ worth of timber perishing for want of attention. I am responsible for it all until Peter comes of age,” said John, “as I am for the rest of his inheritance. It is part of my trust to hand over to him his house and property in the best order I can, according to my own judgment. I know something of forestry,” he added, simply; “you know I was not bred a Cockney. I was to have been a Hertfordshire squire, on a small scale, had not circumstances necessitated the letting of my father’s house when he died.”

“But it will be yours again some day?”

“No,” said John, quietly; “it had to be sold—afterwards.”

He gave no further explanation, but Lady Mary recollected instantly the abuse that had been showered on his mother, by her sisters-in-law, when John was reported to have sacrificed his patrimony to pay her debts.

“I rather agree with you about the woods,” she said. “It vexes me always to see a beautiful young tree, that should be straight and strong, turned into a twisted dwarf, in the shade of the overgrowth and the overcrowding. The woodman will be delighted; he is always grumbling.”

“It is not only the woods. There is the house.”

“I suppose it wants repairing?” said Lady Mary. “Hadn’t that better be put off till Peter comes home?”

“I cannot neglect my trust,” said John, gravely; “besides,” he added, “the state of the roof is simply appalling. Many of the beams are actually rotten. Then there are the drains; they are on a system that should not be tolerated in these days. Nothing has been done for over sixty years, and I can hardly say how long before.”

“Won’t it all cost a great deal of money?” said Lady Mary.

“A good deal; but there is a very large sum of money lying idle, which, as the will directs, may be applied to the general improvement of the house and estate during Peter’s minority; but over which he is to have no control, should it remain unspent, until he comes of age. That is to say, it will then—or what is left of it—be invested with the rest of his capital, which is all strictly tied up. So, as old Crawley says, it will relieve Peter’s income in the future, if we spend what is necessary now, according to our powers, in putting his house and estate in order. It would have to be done sooner or later, most assuredly. Sir Timothy, as you must know,” said John, gently, “did not spend above a third of his actual income; and, so far as Mr. Crawley knows, spent nothing at all on repairs, beyond jobs to the village carpenter and mason.”

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“I did not know,” said Lady Mary. “He always told me we were very badly off—for our position. I know nothing of business. I did not attend much to Mr. Crawley’s explanations at the time.”

“You were unable to attend to him then,” said John; “but now, I think, you should understand the exact position of affairs. Surely my cousins must have talked it over?”

“Isabella and Georgina never talk business before me. You forget I am still a child in their eyes,” she said, smiling. “I gathered that they were disappointed poor Timothy had left them nothing, and that they thought I had too much; that is all.”

“Their way of looking at it is scarcely in accordance with justice,” said John, shrugging his shoulders. “They each have ten thousand pounds left to them by their father in settlement. This was to return to the estate if they died unmarried or childless. You have two thousand a year and the Dower House for your life; but you forfeit both if you re-marry.”

“Of course,” said Lady Mary, indifferently. “I suppose that is the usual thing?”

“Not quite, especially when your personal property is so small.”

“I didn’t know I had any personal property.”

“About five hundred pounds a year; perhaps a little more.”

“From the Setouns!” she cried.

“From your father. Surely you must have known?”

Lady Mary was silent a moment. “No; I didn’t know,” she said presently. “It doesn’t matter now, but Timothy never told me. I thought I hadn’t a farthing in the world. He never mentioned money matters to me at all.” Then she laughed faintly. “I could have lived all by myself in a cottage in Scotland, without being beholden to anybody—on five hundred pounds a year, couldn’t I?”

“There is no reason you should not have a cottage in Scotland now, if you fancy one,” said John, cheerfully.

“The only memories I have in the world, outside my life in this place, are of my childhood at home,” she said.

John suddenly realized how very, very limited her experiences had been, and wondered less at the almost childish simplicity which characterized her, and which in no way marred her natural graciousness and dignity. Lady Mary did not observe his silence, because her own thoughts were busy with a scene which memory had painted for her,

and far away from the moonlit valley of the Youle. She saw a tall, narrow, turreted building against a ruddy sunset sky; a bare ridge of hills crowned sparsely with ragged Scotch firs; a sea of heather which had seemed boundless to a childish imagination.

“I could not go back to Scotland now,” she said, with that little wistful-sounding, patient sob which moved John to such pity that he could scarce contain himself; “but some day, when I am free—when nobody wants me.”

“London is the only place worth living in just now, whilst we are in such terrible anxiety,” he said boldly. “At least there are the papers and telegrams all day long, and none of this dreary, long waiting between the posts; and there are other things—to distract one’s attention, and keep up one’s courage.”

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“I do not know what Isabella and Georgina would say,” said Lady Mary.

“But you—would you not care to come?”

“Oh!” she said, half sobbing, “it is because I am afraid of caring too much. Life seems to call so loudly to me now and then; as though I were tired of sitting alone, and looking up the valley and down the valley. I know it all by heart. It would be fresh life; the stir, the movement; other people, fresh ideas, beautiful new things to see. But, indeed, you must not tempt me.” There was an accent of yearning in her tone, a hint of eager anticipation, as of a good time coming; a dream postponed, which she would nevertheless be willing one day to enjoy. “I mustn’t go anywhere; I couldn’t—until my boy comes home, if he ever comes home,” she added, under her breath.

“But when he comes home safe and sound, as please God he may,” said John, cheerfully, “why, then you have a great deal of lost time to make up.”

“Ah, yes!” said Lady Mary, and again that wistful note of longing sounded. “I have thought sometimes I would not like to die before I have seen my birthplace once more. And there is—*Italy*,” she said, as though the one word conveyed every vision of earthly beauty which mortal could desire to behold—as, indeed, it does. And again she added, “But I don’t know what my sisters-in-law would say. It would be against all the traditions.”

“Surely Lady Belstone, at least, must be less absurdly narrow-minded,” said John, almost impatiently.

“Shall I tell you the history of her marriage?” said Lady Mary.

Her pretty laugh rang out softly in the darkness, and thrilled John’s heart, and shocked yet further the old ladies who sat within, straining their ears for the sound of returning footsteps.

“It took place about forty years ago or less. A cousin of her mother’s, Sir William Belstone, came to spend a few days here. I believe the poor man invited himself, because he happened to be staying in the neighbourhood. He was a gallant old sailor, and very polite to both his cousins; and one day Isabella interpreted his compliments into a proposal of marriage. Georgina has given me to understand that no one was ever more astounded and terrified than the admiral when he found himself engaged to Isabella. But apparently he was a chivalrous old gentleman, and would not disappoint her. It is really rather a sad little story, because he died of heart disease very soon after the marriage. Old Mrs. Ash, the housekeeper, always declares her mistress came home even more old-maidish in her ways than she went away, and that she quarrelled with the poor admiral from morning till night. Perhaps that is why she has never lightened her garb of woe. And she makes my life a burden to me because I won’t wear

a cap. Ah! how heartless it all sounds, and yet how ridiculous! Dear Cousin John, haven't I bored you? Let us go in."

With characteristic energy John Crewys set in hand the repairs which he had declared to be so necessary.

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The late squire had apparently been as well aware of the neglected state of his ancestral halls as of his tangled and overgrown woods; but he had also, it seemed, been unable to make up his mind to take any steps towards amending the condition of either—or to part with his ever-increasing balance at his bankers'.

Sir Timothy had carried both his obstinacy and his dullness into his business affairs.

The family solicitor, Mr. Crawley, backed up the new administrator with all his might.

"Over sixty thousand pounds uninvested, and lying idle at the bank," he said, lifting his hands and eyes, "and one long, miserable grumbling over the expense of keeping up Barracombe. One good tenant after another lost because the landlord would keep nothing in repair; gardener after gardener leaving for want of a shilling increase in weekly wages. In case Sir Peter should turn out to resemble his father, we had best not let the grass grow under our feet, Mr. Crewys," said the shrewd gentleman, chuckling, "but take full advantage of the powers entrusted to you for the next two years and a quarter. Sir Peter, luckily, does not come of age until October, 1902."

"That is just what I intend to do," said John.

"Odd, isn't it," said the lawyer, confidentially, "how often a man will put unlimited power into the hands of a comparative stranger, and leave his own son tied hand and foot? Not a penny of all this capital will Sir Peter ever have the handling of. Perhaps a good job too. Oh, dear! when I look at the state of his affairs in general, I feel positively guilty, and ashamed to have had even the nominal management of them. But what could a man do under the circumstances? He paid for my advice, and then acted directly contrary to it, and thought he had done a clever thing, and outwitted his own lawyer. But now we shall get things a bit straight, I hope. What about buying Speccot Farm, Mr. Crewys? It's been our Naboth's vineyard for many a day; but we haggled over the price, and couldn't make up our minds to give what the farmer wants. He'll have to sell in the end, you know; but I suppose he could hold out a few years longer if we don't give way."

"He's been to me already," said John. "The price he asked is no doubt a bit above its proper value; but it's accommodation land, and it would be disappointing if it slipped through our fingers. I propose to offer him pretty nearly what he asks."

"He'll take it," said Mr. Crawley, with satisfaction. "I could never make Sir Timothy see that it wouldn't pay the fellow to turn out unless he got something over and above the value of his mortgages."

"The next thing I want you to arrange is the purchase of those twenty acres of rough pasture and gorse, right in the centre of the property," said John, "rented by the man who lives outside Youlestone, at what they call Pott's farm, for his wretched, half-starved

beasts to graze upon. He's saved us the trouble of exterminating the rabbits there, I notice."

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“He’s an inveterate poacher. A good thing to give him no further excuse to hang about the place. What do you propose to do?”

“Compensate him, burn the gorse, cut the bracken, and plant larch. There are enough picturesque commons on the top of the hill, where the soil is poor, and land is cheap. We don’t want them in the valley. Now I propose to give our minds to the restoration of the house, the drains, the stables, and the home farm. Here are my estimates.”

Though Mr. Crawley was so loyal a supporter of the regent of Barracombe, yet John’s projected improvements were far too thorough-going to gain the approval of the pottering old retainers of the Crewys family, though they were unable to question his knowledge or his judgment.

“I telled ’im tu du things by the littles,” said the woodman, who was kept at work marking trees and saplings as he had never worked before; though John was generous of help, and liberal of pay. “But lard, he bain’t one tu covet nobody’s gude advice. I was vair terrified tu zee arl he knowed about the drees. The squoire ’ee wur like a babe unbarn beside ’un. He lukes me straight in the eyes, and ‘Luke,’ sezzee, ’us ‘a’ got tu git the place in vamous arder vur young Zur Peter,’ sezzee, ‘An’ I be responsible, and danged but what ‘a’ll du’t,’ ‘ee zays. An’ I touched my yead, zo, and I zays, ‘Very gude, zur,’ ’a zays. ‘An’ zo ‘twill be, yu may depend on’t.’”

Perhaps the unwonted stir and bustle, the coming and going of John Crewys, the confusion of workmen, the novel interest of renovating and restoring the old house, helped to brace and fortify Lady Mary during the months which followed; months, nevertheless, of suspense and anxiety, which reduced her almost to a shadow of her former self.

For Peter’s career in South Africa proved an adventurous one.

He had the good luck to distinguish himself in a skirmish almost immediately after his arrival, and to win not only the approval of his noble relative and commander, but his commission. His next exploit, however, ended rather disastrously, and Peter found himself a prisoner in the now historic bird-cage at Pretoria, where he spent a dreary, restless, and perhaps not wholly unprofitable time, in the society of men greatly his superior in soldierly and other qualities.

John feared that his mother’s resolution not to follow her boy must inevitably be broken when the news of his capture reached Barracombe; but perhaps Peter’s letters had repeated the peremptory injunctions of his telegram, for she never proposed to take the journey to South Africa.

The wave of relief and thankfulness that swept over the country, when the release of the imprisoned officers became known, restored not a little of Lady Mary’s natural courage

and spirits. She became more hopeful about her son, and more interested daily in the beautifying and restoration of his house.

She said little in her letters to Peter of the work at Barracombe, for John advised her that the boy would probably hardly understand the necessity for it, and she herself was doubtful of Peter's approval even if he had understood. She had too much intelligence to be doubtful of John's wisdom, or of Mr. Crawley's zeal for his interest.

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The letters she received were few and scanty, for Peter was but a poor correspondent, and he made little comment on the explanatory letter regarding his father's will which John and Mr. Crawley thought proper to send him. The solicitor was justly indignant at Sir Peter's neglect to reply to this carefully thought-out and faultlessly indited epistle.

"He is just a chip of the old block," said Mr. Crawley.

But his mother divined that Peter was partly offended at his own utter exclusion from any share of responsibility, and partly too much occupied to give much attention to any matter outside his soldiering. She said to herself that he was really too young to be troubled with business; and she began to believe, as the work at Barracombe advanced, that the results of so much planning and forethought must please him, after all. The consolation of working in his interests was delightful to her. Her days were filling almost miraculously, as it seemed to her, with new occupations, fresh hopes, and happier ideas, than the idle dreaming which was all that had hitherto been permitted to her. John desired her help, or her suggestions, at every turn, and constantly consulted her taste. Her artistic instinct for decoration was hardly less strong than his own, though infinitely less cultivated. He sent her the most engrossing and delightful books to repair the omission, and he brought her plans and drawings, which he begged her to copy for him. The days which had hung so heavily on her hands were scarcely long enough.

The careful restoration of the banqueting-hall necessitated new curtains and chair-covers. Lady Mary looked doubtfully at John when this matter had been decided, and then at the upholstery of the drawing-rooms facing the south terrace.

The faded magenta silk, tarnished gilded mirrors, and gold-starred wall-paper which decorated these apartments had offended her eye for years. John laughed at her hesitation, and advised her to consult her sisters-in-law on the subject; and this settled the question.

"They would choose bottle-green" she said, in horror; and she salved her conscience by paying for the redecoration of the drawing-rooms out of her own pocket.

John discovered that Lady Mary had never drawn a cheque in her life, and that Mr. Crawley's lessons in the management of her own affairs filled her with as much awe as amusement.

* * * * *

So the old order changed and gave place to the new at Barracombe; and the summer grew to winter, and winter to summer again; and Peter did not return, as he might, with the corps in which he had the honour to serve.

Want of energy was not one of his defects; he was a strong, hardy young man, a fine horseman and a good shot, and eager to gain distinction for himself. He passed into a fresh corps of newly raised Yeomanry, and went through the Winter Campaign of 1901, from April to September, without a scratch. His mother implored him to come home; but Peter's letters were contemptuous of danger. If he were to be shot, plenty of better fellows than he had been done for, he wrote; and coming home to go to Oxford, or whatever his guardian might be pleased to order him to do, was not at all in his line, when he was really wanted elsewhere.

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To do him justice, he had no idea how boastfully his letters read; he had not the art of expressing himself on paper, and he was always in a hurry. The moments when he was moved by a vague affection for his home, or his mother, were seldom the actual moments which he devoted to correspondence; and the passing ideas of the moment were all Peter knew how to convey.

Lady Mary could not but be aware of her son's complete independence of her, but the realization of it no longer filled her with such dismay as formerly. Her outlook upon life was widening insensibly. The young soldier's luck deserted him at last. Barely six weeks before the declaration of peace, Peter was wounded at Rooiwal. The War Office, and the account of the action in the newspapers, reported his injuries as severe; but a telegram from Peter himself brought relief, and even rejoicing, to Barracombe—

"*Shot in the arm. Doing splendidly. Invalided home. Sailing as soon as doctor allows*."

CHAPTER X

"I never complain, Canon Birch," said Lady Belstone, resignedly; "but it is a great relief, as I cannot deny, to open my mind to you, who know so well what this place used to be like in my dear brother's time."

The canon had been absent from Youlestone on a long holiday, and on his return found that the workmen, who had reigned over Barracombe for nearly two years, had at length departed.

The inhabitants had been hunted from one part of the house to another as the work proceeded; but now the usual living-rooms had been restored to their occupants, and peace and order prevailed, where all had been noise and confusion.

"I should not have known the place," said the canon, gazing round him.

"Nor I. We make a point of *saying* nothing," said Miss Crewys, pathetically, "but it's almost impossible not to *look* now and then."

"Speak for yourself, Georgina," said her sister, with asperity. "One can't *look* furniture out of one room and into another."

The old ladies sat forlornly in their corner by the great open hearth, whereon the logs were piled in readiness for a fire, because they often found the early June evenings chilly. But the sofa with broken springs, which they specially affected, had been mended, and recovered; and was no longer, they sadly agreed, near so comfortable as in its crippled past.

The banqueting-hall, which was the very heart of Barracombe House, had been carefully and skilfully restored to its ancient dignity.

The paint and graining, which had disfigured its mighty beams and solid panelling, had been removed; and the freshly polished oak shone forth in its noble age, shorn of all tawdry disguise.

The spaces of wall and roof between the beams, and above the panels, were now of a creamy tint not far removed, as the two indignant critics pointed out, from common whitewash. A great screen of Spanish leather sheltered the door from the vestibule, and secured somewhat more privacy for the hall as a sitting-room.

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The Vandyck commanded the staircase, attracting immediate attention, as it faced the principal entry. In the wide space between the two great windows were two portraits of equal size; the famous Sir Peter Crewys, by Lely, painted to resemble, as nearly as possible, his royal master, in dress and attitude; and his brother Timothy, by Kneller.

Farmer Timothy's small, shrewd, grey eyes appeared to follow the gazer all over the hall; and his sober wearing apparel, a plain green coat without collar or cape, contrasted effectively with the cavalier's laced doublet and feathered hat.

Gone were the Early Victorian portraits; gone the big glass cases of stuffed birds and weasels; gone the round mahogany table, the waxen bouquets, and the horsehair chairs. The ancient tapestry beside the carven balustrade of the staircase remained, but it had been cleaned, and even mended.

An oak dresser, black with age, and laden with blue and white china, lurked in a shadowy corner. Comfortable easy-chairs and odd, old-fashioned settees furnished the hall. In the oriel window stood a spinning-wheel and a grandfather's chair. A great bowl of roses stood on the broad window-seat. There were roses, indeed, everywhere, and books on every table. But the crowning grievance of all was the cottage piano which John had sent to Lady Mary. The case had been specially made of hand-carven oak to match the room as nearly as might be. It was open, and beside it was a heap of music, and on it another bowl of roses.

"Ay, you may well look horrified," said Miss Crewys to the canon, whose admiration and delight were very plainly depicted on his rubicund countenance. "Where are our cloaks and umbrellas? That's what I say to Isabella. Where are our goloshes? Where is anything, indeed, that one would expect to find in a gentleman's hall? Not so much as a walking-stick. Everything to be kept in the outer hall, where tramps could as easily step in and help themselves; but our poor foolish Mary fancies that Peter will be delighted to find his old home turned upside down."

"My belief is," said Lady Belstone, "that Peter will just insist on all this wooden rubbish trotting back to the attics, where my dear granny, not being accustomed to wooden furniture, very properly hid it away. If you will believe me, canon, that dresser was brought up from the *kitchen*, and every single pot and pan that decorates it used to be kept in the housekeeper's room. That lumbering old chest was in the harness-room. Pretty ornaments for a gentleman's sitting-room! If Peter has grown up anything like my poor brother, he won't put up with it at all."

"I suppose, in one sense, it's Peter's house, or will be very shortly?" said the canon.

"In *every* sense it's Peter's house," cried Lady Belstone; "and he comes of age, thank Heaven, in October."

“I had hoped to hear he had sailed,” said the canon. “No news is good news, I hope.”

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“The last telegram said his wound was doing well, but did not give any date for his return. Young John says we may expect him any time. I do not know what he knows about it more than any one else, however,” said Miss Crewys.

“His letters give no details about himself,” said Lady Belstone; “he makes no fuss about his wounded arm. He is a thorough Crewys, not given to making a to-do about trifles.”

“He could only write a few words with his left hand,” said Miss Crewys; “more could not have been expected of him. Yet poor Mary was quite put out, as I plainly saw, though she said nothing, because the boy had not written at greater length.”

“I find they’ve made a good many preparations for his welcome down in the village,” said the canon, “in case he should take us by surprise. So many of the officers have got passages at the last moment, unexpectedly. And we shall turn out to receive him *en masse*. Mr. Crewys has given us *carte blanche* for fireworks and flags; and they are to have a fine bean-feast.”

“Our cousin John takes a great deal upon himself, and has made uncommonly free with Peter’s money,” said Lady Belstone, shaking her head. “I wish he may not find himself pretty nigh ruined when he comes to look into his own affairs. In my opinion, Fred Crawley is little better than a fool.”

“He is most devoted to Peter’s interests, my dear lady,” said the canon, warmly, “and he informed me that Mr. John Crewys had done wonders in the past two years.”

“He has turned the whole place topsy-turvy in two years, in my opinion,” said Miss Crewys. “I don’t deny that he is a rising young man, and that his manners are very taking. But what can a Cockney lawyer know, about timber, pray?”

“No man on earth, lawyer or no lawyer,” said Lady Belstone, emphatically, “will ever convince me that one can be better than *well*.”

“My sister alludes to the drains. It is a sore point, canon,” said Miss Crewys. “In my opinion, it is all this modern drainage that sets up typhoid fever, and nothing else.”

“Bless me!” said the canon.

“Our poor Mary has grown so dependent on John, however, that she will hear nothing against him. One has to mind one’s p’s and q’s,” said Lady Belstone.

“He planned the alterations in this very hall,” said Miss Crewys, “and the only excuse he offered, so far as I could understand, was that it would amuse poor Mary to carry them out.”

“Does a widow wish to be amused?” said Lady Belstone, indignantly.

“And was she amused, dear lady?” asked the canon, anxiously.

“When she saw our horror and dismay she smiled.”

“Did you call that a smile, Georgina? I called it a laugh. It takes almost nothing to make her laugh nowadays.”

“You would not wish her to be too melancholy,” said the canon, almost pleadingly; “one so—so charming, so—”

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“Canon Birch,” said Lady Belstone, in awful tones, “she is a widow.”

The canon was silent, displaying an embarrassment which did not escape the vigilant observation of the sisters, who exchanged a meaning glance.

“Well may you remind us of the fact, Isabella,” said Miss Crewys, “for she has discarded the last semblance of mourning.”

“Time flies so fast,” said the canon, as though impelled to defend the absent. “It is—-getting on for three years since poor Sir Timothy died.”

“It is but two years and four months,” said Miss Crewys.

“It is thirty-three years since the admiral went aloft,” said Lady Belstone, who often became slightly nautical in phrase when alluding to her departed husband; “and look at me.”

The pocket-handkerchief she held up was deeply bordered with ink. Orthodox streamers floated on either side her severe countenance.

The canon looked and shook his head. He felt that the mysteries of a widow’s garments had best not be discussed by one who dwelt, so to speak, outside them.

“Poor Mary can do nothing gradually,” said Miss Crewys. “She leapt in a single hour out of a black dress into a white one.”

“Her anguish when our poor Timothy succumbed to that fatal operation surpassed even the bounds of decorum,” said Lady Belstone, “and yet—she would not wear a cap!”

She appealed to the canon with such a pathetic expression in her small, red-rimmed, grey eyes that he could not answer lightly.

They faced him with anxious looks and drooping, tremulous mouths. They had grown curiously alike during the close association of nearly eighty years, though in their far-off days of girlhood no one had thought them to resemble each other.

Miss Crewys crocheted a shawl with hands so delicately cared for and preserved, that they scarce showed any sign of her great age; her sister wore gloves, as was the habit of both when unoccupied, and she grasped her handkerchief in black kid fingers that trembled slightly with emotion.

The canon realized that the old ladies were seriously troubled concerning their sister-in-law’s delinquencies.

“We speak to you, of course, as our *clergyman*,” said Miss Crewys; and the poor gentleman could only bow sympathetically.

“I am an old friend,” he said feelingly, “and your confidences are sacred. But I think in your very natural—er—affection for Lady Mary”—the word stuck in his throat—“you are, perhaps, over-anxious. In judging those younger than ourselves,” said the canon, gallantly coupling himself with his auditors,’ though acutely conscious that he was some twenty years the junior of both, “we must not forget that they recover their spirits, by a merciful dispensation of Providence, more quickly than we should ourselves in the like circumstances,” said the canon, who was as light-hearted a cleric as any in England.

“They do, indeed,” said Lady Belstone, emphatically; “when they can sing and play all the day and half the night, like our dear Mary and young John.”

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“You see the piano blocking up the hall, though Sir Timothy hated music?” said Miss Crewys.

Her own mourning was thoughtfully graduated to indicate the time which had elapsed since Sir Timothy’s decease. She wore a violet silk of sombre hue, ornamented by a black silk apron and a black lace scarf. The velvet bow which served so very imperfectly as a skull-cap was also violet, intimating a semi-assuaged, but respectfully lengthened, grief for the departed.

“And now this maddest scheme of all,” said Miss Crewys.

“Bless me! What mad scheme?”

“A house in London is to be hired as soon as Peter comes home.”

“Is that all? But surely that is very natural. For my part, I have often wondered why none of you ever cared to go to London, if only for your shopping. I am very fond of a trip to town myself, now and then, for a few days.”

“A few days, it seems, would not suffice our cousin John’s notions. He is pleased to think Peter may require skilled medical attendance; and, since he wrote he was in rags, a new outfit. These, it seems, can only be obtained in the Metropolis nowadays. My brother’s tailor still lives in Exeter; and with all his faults—and nobody can dislike him more than I do—I have never heard it denied that Dr. Blundell is a skilful apothecary.”

“*Very* skilful,” added Miss Crewys. “You remember, Isabella, how quickly he put your poor little Fido out of his agony.”

“That is nothing; all doctors understand animals’ illnesses. They kill numbers of guinea-pigs before they are allowed to try their hands on human beings,” said Lady Belstone. “The point is, that if my poor brother Timothy had not been mad enough to go to London, he would have been alive at this moment. I have never heard of Dr. Blundell finding it necessary—much as I detest the man—to perform an operation on anybody.”

“Apart from this painful subject, my dear lady,” murmured the canon, “I presume it is only a furnished house that Lady Mary contemplates?”

“During all the years of his married life Sir Timothy never hired a furnished house,” said Miss Crewys. “The home of his fathers sufficed him.”

“She may want a change?” suggested the canon.

Miss Crewys interpreted him literally. “No; she is in the best of health.”

“Better than I have ever seen her, and—and *gayer*” said Lady Belstone, with emphasis.

“People who are gay and bright in disposition are the very ones who—who pine for a little excitement at times,” said the courageous canon. “There is so much to be seen and done and heard in London. For instance, as you say—she is passionately fond of music.”

“She gets plenty. *We* get more than enough,” said Miss Crewys, grimly.

“I mean *good* music;” then he recollected himself in alarm. “No, no; I don’t mean hers is not charming, and Mr. John’s playing is delightful, but—”

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“There is an organ in the parish church,” said Miss Crewys, crocheting more busily than ever. “I have heard no complaints of the choir. Have you?”

“No, no; but—besides music, there are so many other things,” he said dismally. “She likes pictures, too.”

“It does not look like it, canon,” said Lady Belstone, sorrowfully. She waved her handkerchief towards the panelled walls. “She has removed the family portraits to the lumber-room.”

“At least the Vandyck has never been seen to greater advantage,” said the canon, hopefully; “and I hear the gallery upstairs has been restored and supported, to render it safe to walk upon, which will enable you to take pleasure in the fine pictures there.”

“I am sadly afraid that it is not pictures that poor Mary hankers after, but *theatres*,” said Miss Crewys. “John has persuaded her, if persuasion was needed, which I take leave to doubt, that there is nothing improper in visiting such places. My dear brother thought otherwise.”

“You know I do not share your opinions on that point,” said the canon. “Though not much of a theatre-goer myself, still—”

“A widow at the theatre!” said Lady Belstone. “Even in the admiral’s lifetime I did not go. Being a sailor, and *not* a clergyman,” she added sternly, “he frequented such places of amusement. But he said he could not have enjoyed a ballet properly with me looking on. His feelings were singularly delicate.” “I am afraid people must be talking about dear Mary a good deal, canon,” said Miss Crewys, whisking a ball of wool from the floor to her knee with much dexterity.

Her keen eyes gleamed at her visitor through her spectacles, though her fingers never stopped for a moment.

“I hope not. I’ve heard nothing.”

“My experience of men,” said Lady Belstone, “is that they never *do* hear anything. But a widow cannot be too cautious in her behaviour. All eyes are fixed, I know not why, upon a widow,” she added modestly.

“We do our best to guard dear Mary’s reputation,” said Miss Crewys.

The impetuous canon sprang to his feet with a half-uttered exclamation; then recollecting the age and temperament of the speaker, he checked himself and tried to laugh.

“I do not know,” he said, “who has said, or ever could say, one single word against that —against our dear and sweet Lady Mary. But if there *is* any one, I can only say that such word had better not be uttered in my presence, that’s all.”

“Dear me, Canon Birch, you excite yourself very unnecessarily,” said Lady Belstone, with assumed surprise. “You are just confirming our suspicions.”

“What suspicions?” almost shouted the canon,

“That our dear Lady Mary’s extraordinary partiality for our cousin John has *not* escaped the observation of a censorious world.”

“Though we have done our best never to leave him alone with her for a single moment,” interpolated Miss Crewys.

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The canon turned rather pale. “There can be no question of censure,” he said. “Lady Mary is a very charming and beautiful woman. Who could dare to blame her if she contemplated such a step as—as a second marriage?”

“A second marriage! We said nothing of a second marriage,” said Lady Belstone, sharply. “You go a great deal too fast, canon. Luckily, our poor Mary is debarred from any such act of folly. I have no patience with widows who re-marry.”

“Debarred from a second marriage!”

“Is it possible you don’t know?”

The sisters exchanged meaning glances.

He looked from one to the other in bewilderment.

“If our sister-in-law remarries,” said Miss Crewys, “she forfeits the whole of her jointure.”

“Is that all?” he cried.

“Is that all!” echoed Miss Crewys, much offended. “It is no less than two thousand a year. In my opinion, far too heavy a charge on poor Peter’s estate.”

“No man with any self-respect,” said Lady Belstone, “would desire to marry a widow without a jointure. I should have formed a low opinion, indeed, of any gentleman who asked *me* to marry him without first making sure that the admiral had provided for me as he ought, and as he *has*.”

The canon, though mentally echoing the sentiment with much warmth, thought it wiser to change the topic of conversation. Experience had taught him to discredit most of the assumptions of Lady Mary’s sisters-in-law, where she was concerned, and he rose in hope of effecting his escape without further ado.

“I believe I am to meet Mr. Crewys at luncheon,” he said, “and with your permission I will stroll out into the grounds, and look him up. He told me where he was to be found.”

“He is to be found all over the place. He seizes every opportunity of coming down here. I cannot believe in his making so much money in London, when he manages to get away so often. As for Mary, you know her way of inviting people to lunch, and then going out for a walk, or up to her room, as likely as not. But I suppose she will be down directly, if you like to wait here,” said Lady Belstone, who had plenty more to say.

“I should be glad of a turn before luncheon,” said the canon, who had no mind to hear it. “And there is an hour and a half yet. You lunch at two? I came straight from the school-house, as Lady Mary suggested. I wanted to have a look at the improvements.”

“Sarah Hewel is coming to lunch,” said Miss Crewys. “I cannot say we approve of her, since she has been out so much in London, and become such a notorious young person.”

“It’s very odd to me,” said the canon, benevolently, “little Sarah growing up into a fashionable beauty. I often see her name in the papers.”

“She is exactly the kind of person to attract our cousin John, who is quite foolish about her red hair. In my young days, red hair was just a misfortune like any other,” said Miss Crewys. “Dr. Blundell is lunching here also, I need hardly say. Since my dear brother’s death we keep open house.”

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“It used not to be the fashion to encourage country doctors to be tame cats,” said Lady Belstone, viciously; “but he pretends to like the innovations, and gets round young John; and inquires after Peter, and pleases Mary.”

“Ay, ay; it will be a great moment for her when the boy comes back. A great moment for you all,” said the canon, absently.

He stood with his back to the tall leather screen which guarded the entrance to the hall, and did not hear the gentle opening of the great door.

“I trust,” said Miss Crewys, “that we are not a family prone to display weak emotion even on the most trying occasions.”

“To be sure not,” said the canon, disconcerted; “still, I cannot think of it myself without a little—a great deal—of thankfulness for his preservation through this terrible war, now so happily ended. And to think the boy should have earned so much distinction for himself, and behaved so gallantly. God bless the lad! You are well aware,” said the canon, blowing his nose, “that I have always been fond of Peter.”

“Thank you, canon,” said Peter.

For a moment no one was sure that it was Peter, who had come so quietly round the great screen and into the hall, though he stood somewhat in the shadow still.

A young man, looking older than his age, and several inches taller than Peter had been when he went away; a young man deeply tanned, and very wiry and thin in figure; with a brown, narrow face, a dark streak of moustache, a long nose, and a pair of grey eyes rendered unfamiliar by an eyeglass, which was an ornament Peter had not worn before his departure.

The old ladies sat motionless, trembling with the shock; but the canon seized the hand which Peter held out, and, scarcely noticing that it was his left hand, shook it almost madly in both his own.

“Peter! good heavens, Peter!” he cried, and the tears ran unheeded down his plump, rosy cheeks. “Peter, my boy, God bless you! Welcome home a thousand thousand times!”

“Peter!” gasped Lady Belstone. “Is it possible?”

“Why, he’s grown into a man,” said Miss Crewys, showing symptoms of an inclination to become hysterical.

Peter was aghast at the commotion, and came hurriedly forward to soothe his agitated relatives.

“Is this your boasted self-command, Georgina?” said Lady Belstone, weeping.

“We cannot always be consistent, Isabella. It was the unexpected joy,” sobbed Miss Crewys.

“Peter! your *arm*!” screamed Lady Belstone and she fell back almost fainting upon the sofa.

Peter stood full in the light now, and they saw that he had lost his right arm. The empty sleeve was pinned to his breast.

His aunt tottered towards him. “My poor boy!” she sobbed.

“Oh, that’s all right,” said Peter, in rather annoyed tones. “I can use my left hand perfectly well. I hardly notice it now.”

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Something in the tone of this speech caused his aunts to exclaim simultaneously—

“Dear boy, he has not changed one bit!”

“You never told us, Peter,” said the canon, huskily.

“I didn’t want a fuss,” Peter said, very simply, “so I just got the newspaper chap to cork it down about my being shot in the arm, without any details. It had to be amputated first thing, as a matter of fact.”

“It has given your aunt Georgina and me a terrible shock,” said Lady Belstone, faintly.

“You can’t expect a fellow who has been invalided home to turn up without a single scratch,” said Peter, in rather surly tones.

“How like his father!” said Miss Crewys.

“Besides, you know very well my mother would have tormented herself to death if I had told her,” said Peter. “I want her to see with her own eyes how perfectly all right I am before she knows anything about it.”

“It was a noble thought,” said the canon.

“Where is she?” demanded Peter.

He seemed about to cross the hall to the staircase but the canon detained him.

“Oughtn’t some one to prepare her?”

“Oh, joy never kills,” said Peter. “She’s quite well, isn’t she?”

“Quite well.”

“Very well *indeed*” said Miss Crewys, with emphasis that seemed to imply Lady Mary was better than she had any need to be.

“I have never,” said the canon, with a nervous side-glance at Peter, “seen her look so well, nor so—so lovely, nor so—so brilliant. Only your return was needed to complete—her happiness.”

Peter looked at the canon through his newly acquired eyeglass with some slight surprise.

“Well,” he said, “I wouldn’t telegraph. I wanted to slip home quietly, that’s the fact; or I knew the place would be turned upside down to receive me.”

“The people are preparing a royal welcome for you,” said the canon, warmly. “Banners, music, processions, addresses, and I don’t know what.”

“That’s awful rot!” said Peter. “Tell them I hate banners and music and addresses, and everything of the kind.”

“No, no, my dear boy,” said the canon, in rather distressed tones. “Don’t say that, Peter, pray. You must think of *their* feelings, you know. There’s hardly one of them who hasn’t sent somebody to the war; son or brother or sweetheart. And all that’s left for—for those who stay behind—not always the least hard thing to do for a patriot, Peter—is to honour, as far as they can, each one who returns. They work off some of their accumulated feelings that way, you know; and in their rejoicings they do not forget those who, alas! will never return any more.”

There was a pause; and Peter remained silent, embarrassed by the canon’s emotion, and not knowing very well how to reply.

“There, there,” said the canon, saving him the trouble; “we can discuss it later. You are thinking of your mother now.”

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As he spoke, they all heard Lady Mary's voice in the corridor above. She was humming a song, and as she neared the open staircase the words of her song came very distinctly to their ears—

Entends tu ma pensee qui le respond tout bas?
Ton doux chant me rappelle les plus beaux de mes jours.

"My mother's voice," said Peter, in bewildered accents; and he dropped his eyeglass.

The canon showed a presence of mind that seldom distinguished him.

He hurried away the old ladies, protesting, into the drawing-room, and closed the door behind him.

Peter scarcely noticed their absence.

Ah! le rire fidele prouve un coeur sans detours,
Ah! riez, riez—ma belle—riez, riez toujours,

sang Lady Mary.

"I never heard my mother sing before," said Peter.

CHAPTER XI

Lady Mary came down the oak staircase singing. The white draperies of her summer gown trailed softly on the wide steps, and in her hands she carried a quantity of roses. A black ribbon was bound about her waist, and seemed only to emphasize the slenderness of her form. Her brown hair was waved loosely above her brow; it was not much less abundant, though much less bright, than in her girlhood. The freshness of youth had gone for ever; but her loveliness had depended less upon that radiant colouring which had once been hers than upon her clear-cut features, and exquisitely shaped head and throat. Her blue eyes looked forth from a face white and delicate as a shell cameo, beneath finely pencilled brows; but they shone now with a new hopefulness—a timid expectancy of happiness; they were no longer pensive and downcast as Peter had known them best.

The future had been shrouded by a heavy mist of hopelessness always—for Lady Mary. But the fog had lifted, and a fair landscape lay before her. Not bright, alas! with the brightness and the promise of the morning-time; but yet—there are sunny afternoons; and the landscape was bright still, though long shadows from the past fell across it.

Peter saw only that his mother, for some extraordinary reason, looked many years younger than when he had left her, and that she had exchanged her customary dull, old-fashioned garb for a beautiful and becoming dress. He gave an involuntary start, and immediately she perceived him.

She stretched out her arms to him with a cry that rang through the rafters of the hall. The roses were scattered.

“My boy! O God, my darling boy!”

In the space of a flash—a second—Lady Mary had seen and understood. Her arms were round him, and her face hidden upon his empty sleeve. She was as still as death. Peter stooped his head and laid his cheek against her hair; he felt for one fleeting moment that he had never known before how much he loved his mother.

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“Forgive me for keeping it dark, mother,” he whispered presently; “but I knew you’d think I was dying, or something, if I told you. It had to be done, and I don’t care—much—-now; one gets used to anything. My aunts nearly had a fit when I came in; but I knew *you’d* be too thankful to get me home safe and sound, to make a fuss over what can’t be helped. It’s—it’s just the fortune of war.”

“Oh, if I could meet the man who did it!” she cried, with fire in her blue eyes.

“It wasn’t a man; it was a gun,” said Peter. “Let’s forget it. I say—doesn’t it feel rummy to be at home again?”

“But you have come back a man, Peter. Not a boy at all,” said Lady Mary, laughing through her tears. “Do let me look at you. You must be six feet three, surely.”

“Barely six feet one in my boots,” said Peter, reprovingly.

“And you have a moustache—more or less.”

“Of course I have a moustache,” said Peter, gravely stroking it. He mechanically replaced his eyeglass.

Lady Mary laughed till she cried.

“Do forgive me, darling. But oh, Peter, it seems so strange. My boy grown into a tall gentleman with an eyeglass. Nothing has happened to your eye?” she cried, in sudden anxiety.

“No, no; I am just a little short-sighted, that is all,” he mumbled, rather awkwardly.

He found it difficult to explain that he had travelled home with a distinguished man who had captivated his youthful fancy, and caused him to fall into a fit of hero-worship, and to imitate his idol as closely as possible. Hence the eyeglass, and a few harmless mannerisms which temporarily distinguished Peter, and astonished his previous acquaintance.

But there was something else in Peter’s manner, too, for the moment. A new tenderness, which peeped through his old armour of sulky indifference; the chill armour of his boyhood, which had grown something too strait and narrow for him even now, and from which he would doubtless presently emerge altogether—but not yet.

Though Lady Mary laughed, she was trembling and shaken with emotion. Peter came to the sofa and knelt beside her there, and she took his hand in both hers, and laid her face upon it, and they were very still for a few moments.

“Mother dear,” said Peter presently, without looking at her, “coming home like this, and not finding my father here, makes me *realize* for the first time—though it’s all so long ago—what’s happened.”

“My poor boy!”

“Poor mother! You must have been terribly lonely all this time I’ve been away.”

“I’ve longed for your return, my darling,” said Lady Mary.

Her tone was embarrassed, but Peter did not notice that.

“You see—I went away a boy, but I’ve come back a man, as you said just now,” said Peter.

“You’re still very young, my darling—not one-and-twenty,” she said fondly.

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“I’m older than my age; and I’ve been through a lot; more than you’d think, all this time I’ve been away. I dare say it hasn’t seemed so long to you, who’ve had no experiences to go through,” he said simply.

She kissed him silently.

“Now just listen, mother dear,” said Peter, firmly. “I made up my mind to say something to you the very first minute I saw you, and it’s got to be said. I’m sorry I used to be such a beast to you—there.”

“Oh, Peter!”

“I dare say,” said Peter, “that it’s all this rough time in South Africa that’s made me feel what a fool I used to make of myself, when I was a discontented ass of a boy; that, or being ill, or something, used to—make one think a bit. And that’s why I made up my mind to tell you. I know I used to disappoint you horribly, and be bored by your devotion, and all that. But you’ll see,” said Peter, decidedly, “that I mean to be different now; and you’ll forgive me, won’t you?”

“My darling, I forgave you long ago—if there was anything to forgive,” she cried,

“You know there was,” said Peter; and he sounded like the boy Peter again, now that she could not see his face. “Well, my soldiering’s done for.” A faint note of regret sounded in his voice. “I had a good bout, so I suppose I oughtn’t to complain; but I had hoped—however, it’s all for the best. And there’s no doubt,” said Peter, “that my duty lies here now. In a very few months I shall be my own master, and I mean to keep everything going here exactly as it was in my father’s time. You shall devote yourself to me, and I’ll devote myself to Barracombe; and we’ll just settle down into all the old ways. Only it will be me instead of my father—that’s all.”

“You instead of your father—that’s all,” echoed Lady Mary. She felt as though her mind had suddenly become a blank.

“I used to rebel against poor papa,” said Peter, remorsefully. “But now I look back, I know he was just the kind of man I should like to be.”

She kissed his hand in silence. Her face was hidden.

“I want you—and my aunts, to feel that, though I am young and inexperienced, and all that,” said Peter, tenderly, “there are to be no changes.”

“But, Peter,” said his mother, rather tremulously, “there are—sure to be—changes. You will want to marry, sooner or later. In your position, you are almost bound to marry.”

“Oh, of course,” said Peter. He released his hand gently, in order to stroke the cherished moustache. “But I shall put off the evil day as long as possible, like my father did.”

“I see,” said Lady Mary. She smiled faintly.

“And when it *does* arrive,” said Peter, “my wife will just have to understand that she comes second. I’ve no notion of being led by the nose by any woman, particularly a young woman. I’m sure my father never dreamt of putting his sisters on one side, or turning them out of their place, when he married *you*, did he?”

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“Never,” said Lady Mary.

“Of course they were snappish at times. I suppose all old people get like that. But, on the whole, you managed to jog along pretty comfortably, didn’t you?”

“Oh yes,” said Lady Mary. “We jogged along pretty comfortably.”

“Then don’t you see how snug we shall be?” said Peter, triumphantly. “I can tell you a fellow learns to appreciate home when he has been without one, so to speak, for over two years. And home wouldn’t be home without you, mother dear.”

Lady Mary sank suddenly back among the cushions. Her feelings were divided between dismay and self-reproach. Yet she was faintly amused too—amused at Peter and herself. Her boy had returned to her with sentiments that were surely all that a mother could desire; and yet—yet she felt instinctively that Peter was Peter still; that his thoughts were not her thoughts, nor his ways her ways. Then the self-reproach began to predominate in Lady Mary’s mind. How could she criticize her boy, her darling, who had proved himself a son to be proud of, and who had come back to her with a heart so full of love and loyalty?

“And *you* couldn’t live without *me*, could you?” said Peter, affectionately; and he laughed. “I suppose you meant to go into that little, damp, tumble-down Dower House, and watch over me from there; now didn’t you, mummy?”

“I—I thought, when you came of age,” faltered Lady Mary, “that I should give up Barracombe House to you, naturally. I could come and stay with you sometimes—-whether you were married or not, you know. And—and, of course, the Dower House *does* belong to me.”

“I won’t hear of your going there,” said Peter, stoutly, “whether I’m married or not. It’s a beastly place.”

“It’s very picturesque,” said Lady Mary, guiltily; “and I—I wasn’t thinking of living there all the year round.”

“Why, where on earth else could you have gone?” he demanded, regarding her with astonishment through the eyeglass.

“There are several places—London,” she faltered.

“London!” said Peter; “but my father had a perfect horror of London. He wouldn’t have liked it at all.”

“He belonged—to the old school,” said Lady Mary, meekly; “to younger people, perhaps—an occasional change might be pleasant and profitable.”

“Oh! to *younger* people,” said Peter, in mollified tones. “I don’t say I shall *never* run up to London. I dare say I shall be obliged, now and then, on business. Not often though. I hate absentee landlords, as my father did.”

“Travelling is said to open the mind,” murmured Lady Mary, weakly pursuing her argument, as she supposed it to be.

“I’ve seen enough of the world now to last me a lifetime,” said Peter, in sublime unconsciousness that any fate but his own could be in question.

“I didn’t think you would have changed so much as this, Peter,” she said, rather dismally. “You used to find this place so dull.”

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“I know I used,” Peter agreed; “but oh, mother, if you knew how sick I’ve been now and then with longing to get back to it! I made up my mind a thousand times how it should all be when I came home again; and that you and me would be everything in the world to each other, as you used to wish when I was a selfish boy, thinking only of getting away and being independent. I’m afraid I used to be rather selfish, mother?”

“Perhaps you were—a little,” said Lady Mary.

“You will never have to complain of *that* again,” said Peter.

She looked at him with a faint, pathetic smile.

“I shall take care of you, and look after you, just as my father used to do,” said Peter. “Now you rest quietly here”—and he gently laid her down among the cushions on the sofa—“whilst I take a look round the old place.”

“Let me come with you, darling.”

“Good heavens, no! I should tire you to death. My father never liked you to go climbing about.”

“I am much more active than I used to be,” said Lady Mary.

“No, no; you must lie down, you look quite pale.” Peter’s voice took an authoritative note, which came very naturally to him. “The sudden joy of my return has been too much for you, poor old mum.”

He leant over her fondly, and kissed the sweet, pale face, and then regarded her in a curious, doubtful manner.

“You’re changed, mother. I can’t think what it is. Isn’t your hair done differently—or something?”

Poor Lady Mary lifted both hands to her head, and looked at him with something like alarm in her blue eyes.

“Is it? Perhaps it is,” she faltered. “Don’t you like it, Peter?”

“I like the old way best,” said Peter.

“But this is so much more becoming, Peter.”

“A fellow doesn’t care,” said Peter, loftily, “whether his mother’s hair is becoming or not. He likes to see her always the same as when he was a little chap.”

“It is—sweet of you, to have such a thought,” murmured Lady Mary. She took her courage in both hands. “But the other way is out of fashion, Peter.”

“Why, mother, you never used to follow the fashions before I went away; you won’t begin now, at your age, will you?”

“*At my age*” repeated Lady Mary, blankly. Then she looked at him with that wondering, pathetic smile, which seemed to have replaced already, since Peter came home, the joyousness which had timidly stolen back from her vanished youth. “At my age!” said Lady Mary; “you are not very complimentary, Peter.”

“You don’t expect a fellow to pay compliments to his mother,” said Peter, staring at her. “Why, mother, what has come to you? And besides—”

“Besides?”

“I’m sure papa hated compliments, and all that sort of rot,” Peter blurted out, in boyish fashion. “Don’t you remember how fond he was of quoting, ’Praise to the face is open disgrace’?”

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The late Sir Timothy, like many middle-class people, had taken a compliment almost as a personal offence; and regarded the utterer, however gracious or sincere, with suspicion. Neither had the squire himself erred on the side of flattering his fellow-creatures.

“Oh yes, I remember,” said Lady Mary; and she rose from the sofa.

“Why, what’s the matter?” asked Peter. “I haven’t vexed you, have I?”

She turned impetuously and threw her arms round him as he stood by the hearth, gazing down upon her in bewilderment.

“Vexed with my boy, my darling, my only son, on the very day when God has given him back to me?” she cried passionately. “My poor wounded boy, my hero! Oh no, no! But I want only love from you to-day, and no reproaches, Peter.”

“Why, I wasn’t dreaming of reproaching you, mother.” He hesitated. “Only you’re a bit different from what I expected—that’s all.”

“Have I disappointed you?”

“No, no! Only I—well, I thought I might find you changed, but in a different way,” he said, half apologetically. “Perhaps older, you know, or—or sadder.”

Lady Mary’s white face flushed scarlet from brow to chin; but Peter, occupied with his monocle, observed nothing.

“I’d prepared myself for that,” he said, “and to find you all in black. And—”

“I threw off my mourning,” she murmured, “the very day I heard you were coming home.” She paused, and added hurriedly, “It was very thoughtless. I’m sorry; I ought to have thought of your feelings, my darling.”

“Aunt Isabella has never changed hers, has she?” said Peter.

“Aunt Isabella is a good deal more conventional than I am; and a great many years older,” said Lady Mary, tremulously.

“I don’t see what that has to do with it,” said Peter.

She turned away, and began to gather up her scattered roses. A few moments since the roses had been less than nothing to her. What were roses, what was anything, compared to Peter? Now they crept back into their own little place in creation; their beauty and fragrance dumbly conveyed a subtle comfort to her soul, as she lovingly laid one against another, until a glowing bouquet of coppery golden hue was formed. She

lifted an ewer from the old dresser, and poured water into a great silver goblet, wherein she plunged the stalks of her roses. Why should they be left to fade because Peter had come home?

“You remember these?” she said, “from the great climber round my bedroom window? I leant out and cut them—little thinking—”

Peter signified a gloomy assent. He stood before the chimneypiece watching his mother, but not offering to help her; rather as though undecided as to what his next words ought to be.

“Peter, darling, it’s so funny to see you standing there, so tall, and so changed—” But though it was so funny the tears were dropping from her blue eyes, which filled and overflowed like a child’s, without painful effort or grimaces. “You—you remind me so of your father,” she said, almost involuntarily.

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“I’m glad I’m like him,” said Peter.

She sighed. “How I used to wish you were a little tiny bit like me too!”

“But I’m not, am I?”

“No, you’re not. Not one tiny bit,” she answered wistfully. “But you do love me, Peter?”

“Haven’t I proved I love you?” said Peter; and she perceived that his feelings were hurt. “Coming back, and—and thinking only of you, and—and of never leaving you any more. Why, mother”—for in an agony of love and remorse she was clinging to him and sobbing, with her face pressed against his empty sleeve—“why, mother,” Peter repeated, in softened tones, “of course I love you.”

The drawing-room door was cautiously opened, and Peter’s aunts came into the hall on tiptoe, followed by the canon.

“Ah, I thought so,” said Lady Belstone, in the self-congratulatory tones of the successful prophet, “it has been too much for poor Mary. She has been overcome by the joy of dear Peter’s return.”

CHAPTER XII

“Try my salts, dear Mary,” said Miss Crewys, hastening to apply the remedies which were always to be found in her black velvet reticule.

“I blame myself,” said the canon, distressfully—“I blame myself. I should have insisted on breaking the news to her gently.”

Lady Mary smiled upon them all. “On the contrary,” she said, “I was offering, not a moment ago, to take Peter round and show him the improvements. We have been so much occupied with each other that he has not had time to look round him.”

“I wish he may think them improvements, my love,” said Lady Belstone.

Miss Crewys, joyously scenting battle, hastened to join forces with her sister.

“We are far from criticizing any changes your dear mother may have been induced to make,” she said; “but as your Aunt Isabella has frequently observed to me, what *can* a Londoner know of landscape gardening?”

“A Londoner?” said Peter.

“Your guardian, my boy,” said the canon, nervously. “He has slightly opened out the views; that is all your good aunt is intending to say.”

Peter’s good aunt opened her mouth to contradict this assertion indignantly, but Lady Mary broke in with some impatience.

“I do not mean the trees. Of course the house was shut in far too closely by the trees at the back and sides. We wanted more air, more light, more freedom.” She drew a long breath and flung out her hands in unconscious illustration. “But there are many very necessary changes that—that Peter will like to see,” said Lady Mary, glancing almost defiantly at the pursed-up mouths and lowered eyelids of the sisters.

Peter walked suddenly into the middle of the banqueting-hall and looked round him.

“Why, what’s come to the old place? It’s—it’s changed somehow. What have you been doing to it?” he demanded.

“Don’t you—don’t you like it, Peter?” faltered Lady Mary. “The roof was not safe, you know, and had to be mended, and—and when it was all done up, the furniture and curtains looked so dirty and ugly and inappropriate. I sent them away and brought down some of the beautiful old things that belonged to your great-grandmother, and made the hall brighter and more livable.”

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Peter examined the new aspect of his domain with lowering brow.

“I don’t like it at all,” he announced, finally. “I hate changes.”

The sisters breathed again. “So like his father!”

Their allegiance to Sir Timothy had been transferred to his heir.

“Your guardian approved,” said Lady Mary.

She turned proudly away, but she could not keep the pain altogether out of her voice. Neither would she stoop to solicit Peter’s approval before her rejoicing opponents.

“Mr. John Crewys is a very great connoisseur,” said the canon. He taxed his memory for corroborative evidence, and brought out the result with honest pride. “I believe, curiously enough, that he spends most of his spare time at the British Museum.”

Lady Mary’s lip quivered with laughter in the midst of her very real distress and mortification.

But the argument appeared to the canon a most suitable one, and he was further encouraged by Peter’s reception of it.

“If my guardian approves, I suppose it’s all right,” said the young man, with an effort. “My father left all that sort of thing in his hands, I understand, and he knew what he was doing. I say, where’s that great vase of wax flowers that used to stand on the centre table under a glass shade?”

“Darling,” said Lady Mary, “it jarred so with the whole scheme of decoration.”

“I am taking care of that in my room, Peter,” said Miss Crewys.

“And the stuffed birds, and the weasels, and the ferrets that I was so fond of when I was a little chap. You don’t mean to say you’ve done away with those too?” cried Peter, wrathfully.

“They—they are in the gun-room,” said Lady Mary. “It seemed such a—such—an appropriate place for them.”

“I believe,” said the canon, nervously, “that stuffing is no longer considered decorative. After all, *why* should we place dead animals in our sitting-rooms?”

He looked round with the anxious smile of the would-be peacemaker.

“They were very much worm-eaten, Peter,” said Lady Mary. “But if you would like them brought back—”

Perhaps the pain in her voice penetrated even Peter’s perception, for he glanced hastily towards her.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said magnanimously. “If you and my guardian decided they were rotten, there’s an end of it. Of course I’d rather have things as they used to be; but after all this time, I expect there’s bound to be a few changes.” He turned from the contemplation of the hall to face his relatives squarely, with the air of an autocrat who had decreed that the subject was at an end.

“By-the-by,” said Peter, “where *is* John Crewys? They told me he was stopping here.”

“He will be in directly,” said Lady Mary, “and Sarah Hewel ought to be here presently too. She is coming to luncheon.”

“Sarah!” said Peter. “I should like to see her again. Is she still such a rum little toad? Always getting into scrapes, and coming to you for comfort?”

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“I think,” said Lady Mary, and her blue eyes twinkled—“I think you may be surprised to see little Sarah. She is grown up now.”

“Of course,” said Peter. “She’s only a year younger than I am.”

Lady Mary wondered why Peter’s way of saying *of course* jarred upon her so much. He had always been brusque and abrupt; it was the family fashion. Was it because she had grown accustomed to the tactful and gentle methods of John Crewys that it seemed to have become suddenly such an intolerable fashion? Sir Timothy had quite honestly believed tactfulness to be a form of insincerity. He did not recognize it as the highest outward expression of self-control. But Lady Mary, since she had known John Crewys, knew also that it is consideration for the feelings of others which causes the wise man to order his speech carefully.

The canon shook his head when Peter stated that Miss Hewel was his junior by a twelvemonth.

“She might be ten years older,” he said, in awe-struck tones. “I have always heard that women were extraordinarily adaptable, but I never realized it before. However, to be sure, she has seen a good deal more of the world than you have. More than most of us, though in such a comparatively short space of time. But she is one in a thousand for quickness.”

“Seen more of the world than I have?” said Peter, astonished. “Why, I’ve been soldiering in South Africa for over two years.”

“I don’t think soldiering brings much worldly wisdom in its train. I should be rather sorry to think it did,” said Lady Mary, gently. “But Sarah has been with Lady Tintern all this while.”

“A very worldly woman, indeed, from all I have heard,” said Miss Crewys, severely.

“But a very great lady,” said Lady Mary, “who knows all the famous people, not only in England, but in Europe. The daughter of a viceroy, and the wife of a man who was not only a peer, and a great landowner, but also a distinguished ambassador. And she has taken Sarah everywhere, and the child is an acknowledged beauty in London and Paris. Lady Tintern is delighted with her, and declares she has taken the world by storm.”

“We never thought her a beauty down here,” said Peter, rather contemptuously.

“Perhaps we did not appreciate her sufficiently down here,” said Lady Mary, smiling.

“Why, who is she, after all?” cried Peter.

“A very beautiful and self-possessed young woman, and Lady Tintern’s niece, ‘whom not to know argues yourself unknown,’” said Lady Mary, laughing outright. “John says people were actually mobbing her picture in the Academy; he could not get near it.”

“I mean,” said Peter, almost sulkily, “that she’s only old Colonel Hewel’s daughter, whom we’ve known all our lives.”

“Perhaps one is in danger of undervaluing people one has known all one’s life,” said Lady Mary, lightly.

Peter muttered something to the effect that he was sorry to hear Sarah had grown up like that; but his words were lost in the tumultuous entry of Dr. Blundell, who pealed the front door bell, and rushed into the hall, almost simultaneously.

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His dark face was flushed and enthusiastic. He came straight to Peter, and held out his hand.

“A thousand welcomes, Sir Peter. Lady Mary, I congratulate you. I came up in my dog-cart as fast as possible, to let you know the people are turning out *en masse* to welcome you. They’re assembling at the Crewys Arms, and going to hurry up to the house in a regular procession, band and all.”

“We’re proud of our young hero, you see,” said the canon; and he laid his hand affectionately on Peter’s shoulder.

“You will have to say a few words to them,” said Lady Mary.

“Must I?” said the hero. “Let’s go out on the terrace and see what’s going on. We can watch them the whole way up.”

He opened the door into the south drawing-rooms; and through the open windows there floated the distant strains of the village band.

“Canon, your arm,” said Lady Belstone.

Lady Mary and her son had hastened out on to the terrace.

The old ladies paused in the doorway; they were particular in such matters.

“I believe I take precedence, Georgina,” said Lady Belstone, apologetically.

“I am far from disputing it, Isabella,” said Miss Crewys, drawing back with great dignity. “You are the elder.”

“Age does not count in these matters. I take precedence, as a married woman. Will you bring up the rear, Georgina, as my poor admiral would have said?”

Miss Crewys bestowed a parting toss of the head upon the doctor, and followed her victorious sister.

The doctor laughed silently to himself, standing in the pretty shady drawing-room; now gay with flowers, and chintz, and Dresden china.

“I wonder if she would not have been even more annoyed with my presumption if I *had* offered her my arm,” he said to himself, amusedly, “than she is offended by my neglect to do so?”

He did not follow the others into the blinding sunshine of the terrace. He had had a long morning’s work, and was hot and tired. He looked at his watch.

“Past one o’clock; h’m! we are lucky if we get anything to eat before half-past two. All the servants have run out, of course. No use ringing for whisky and seltzer. All the better. But, at least, one can rest.”

The pleasantness of the room refreshed his spirit. The interior of his own house in Brawnton was not much more enticing than the exterior. The doctor had no time to devote to such matters. He sat down very willingly in a big armchair, and enjoyed a moment’s quiet in the shade; glancing through the half-closed green shutters at the brilliant picture without.

The top level of the terrace garden was carpeted with pattern beds of heliotrope, and lobelia, and variegated foliage. Against the faint blue-green of the opposite hill rose the grey stone urns on the pillars of the balcony; and from the urns hung trailing ivy geraniums with pink or scarlet blossom, making splashes of colour on the background of grey distance. Round the pillars wound large blue clematis, and white passion-flowers.

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Lady Mary stood full in the sunshine, which lent once more the golden glory of her vanished youth to her brown hair, and the dazzle of new-fallen snow to her summer gown.

Close to her side, touching her, stood the young soldier; straight and tall, with uncovered head, towering above the little group.

The old sisters had parasols, and the canon wore his shovel hat; but the doctor wasted no time in observing their manifestations of delight and excitement.

“So my beautiful lady has got her precious boy back safe and sound, save for his right arm, and doubly precious because that is missing. God bless her a thousand times!” he thought to himself. “But her sweet face looked more sorrowful than joyful when I came in. What had he been saying, I wonder, to make her look like that, *already*?”

John Crewys entered from the hall. “What’s this I hear,” he said, in glad tones—“the hero returned?”

“Ay,” said the doctor. “Sir Timothy is forgotten, and Sir Peter reigns in his stead.”

“Where is Lady Mary?”

The doctor drew him to the window. “There,” he said grimly. “Why don’t you go out and join her?”

“She has her son,” said John, smiling.

He looked with interest at the group on the terrace; then he started back with an exclamation of horror.

“Why, good heavens—”

“Yes,” said the doctor quietly, “the poor fellow has lost his right arm.”

There was a sound of distant cheering, and the band could be heard faintly playing the *Conquering Hero*.

“He said nothing of it,” said John.

“No; he’s a plucky chap, with all his faults.”

“Has he so many faults?” said John.

The doctor shook his head. “I’m mistaken if he won’t turn out a chip of the old block. Though he’s better-looking than his father, he’s got Sir Timothy’s very expression.”

“He’s turned out a gallant soldier, anyway,” said John, cheerily. “Don’t croak, Blundell; we’ll make a man of him yet.”

“Please God you may, for his mother’s sake,” said the doctor; and he returned to his armchair.

John Crewys stood by the open French window, and drank in the refreshing breeze which fluttered the muslin curtains. His calm and thoughtful face was turned away from the doctor, who knew very well why John’s gaze was so intent upon the group without.

“Shall I warn him, or shall I let it alone?” thought Blundell. “I suppose they have been waiting only for this. If that selfish cub objects, as he will—I feel very sure of that—will she be weak enough to sacrifice her happiness, or can I trust John Crewys? He looks strong enough to take care of himself, and of her.”

He looked at John’s decided profile, silhouetted against the curtain, and thought of Peter’s narrow face. “Weak but obstinate,” he muttered to himself. “Shrewd, suspicious eyes, but a receding chin. What chance would the boy have against a man? A man with strength to oppose him, and brains to outwit him. None, save for the one undoubted fact—the boy holds his mother’s heart in the hollow of his careless hands.”

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There was a tremendous burst of cheering, no longer distant, and the band played louder.

Lady Mary came hurrying across the terrace. Weeping and agitated, and half blinded by her tears, she stumbled over the threshold of the window, and almost fell into John's arms. He drew her into the shadow of the curtain.

"John," she cried; she saw no one else. "Oh, I can't bear it! Oh, Peter, Peter, my boy, my poor boy!"

The doctor, with a swift and noiseless movement, turned the handle of the window next him, and let himself out on to the terrace.

When John looked up he was already gone. Lady Mary did not hear the slight sound.

"Oh, John," she said, "my boy's come home—but—but—"

"I know," John said, very tenderly.

"I was afraid of breaking down before them all," she whispered. "Peter was afraid I should break down, and I felt my weakness, and came away."

"To me," said John.

His heart beat strongly. He drew her more closely into his arms, deeply conscious that he held thus, for the first time, all he loved best in the world.

"To you," said poor Lady Mary, very simply; as though aware only of the rest and support that refuge offered, and not of all of its strangeness. "Alas! it has grown so natural to come to *you* now."

"It will grow more natural every day," said John.

She shook her head. "There is Peter now," she said faintly. Then, looking into his face, she realized that John was not thinking of Peter.

For a moment's space Lady Mary, too, forgot Peter. She leant against the broad shoulder of the man who loved her; and felt as though all trouble, and disappointment, and doubt had slidden off her soul, and left her only the blissful certainty of happy rest.

Then she laid her hand very gently and entreatingly on his arm.

"I will not let you go," said John. "You came to me—at last—of your own accord, Mary."

She coloured deeply and leant away from his arm, looking up at him in distress.

“I could not help it, John,” she said, very simply and naturally. “But oh, I don’t know if I can—if I ought—to come to you any more.”

“What do you mean?” said John.

“I—we—have been thinking of Peter as a boy—as the boy he was when he went away,” she said, in low, hurrying tones; “but he has come home a man, and, in some ways, altogether different. He never used to want me; he used to think this place dull, and long to get away from it—and from me, for that matter. But now he’s—he’s wounded, as you know; maimed, my poor boy, for life; and—and he’s counting on me to make his home for him. We never thought of that. He says it wouldn’t be home without me; and he asked my pardon for being selfish in the past; my poor Peter! I used to fear he had such a little, cold heart; but I was all wrong, for when he was so far away he thought of me, and was sorry he hadn’t loved me more. He’s come home wanting to be everything to me, as I am to be everything to him. And I should have been so glad, so thankful, only two years ago. Oh, have I changed so much in two little years?”

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John put her out of his arms very gently, and walked towards the window. His face was pale, but he still smiled, and his hazel eyes were bright.

“You’re angry, John,” said Lady Mary, very sweetly and humbly. “You’ve a right to be angry.”

“I am not angry,” he said gently. “I may be—a little—disappointed.” He did not look round.

“You know I was too happy,” said poor Lady Mary. She sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands. “It was wicked of me to be so happy, and now I’m going to be punished for it.”

John’s great heart melted within him. He came swiftly back to her and knelt by her side, and kissed the little hand she gave him.

“Too happy, were you?” he said, with a tenderness that rendered his deep voice unsteady. “Because you promised to marry me when Peter came home?”

“That, and—and everything else,” she whispered. “Life seemed to have widened out, and grown so beautiful. All the dull, empty hours were filled. Our music, our reading, our companionship, our long walks and talks, our letters to each other—all those pleasures which you showed me were at once so harmless and so delightful. And as if that were not enough—came love. Such love as I had only dreamed of—such understanding of each other’s every thought and word, as I did not know was possible between man and woman—or at least”—she corrected herself sadly—“between any man and a woman—of my age.”

“You talk of your age,” said John, smiling tenderly, “as though it were a crime.”

“It is not a crime, but it is a tragedy,” said Lady Mary. “Age is a tragedy to every woman who wants to be happy.”

“No more, surely, than to every man who loves his work, and sees it slipping from his grasp,” said John, slowly. “It’s a tragedy we all have to face, for that matter.”

“But so much later,” said Lady Mary, quickly.

“I don’t see why women should leave off wanting to be happy any sooner than men,” he said stoutly.

“But Nature does,” she answered.

John’s eyes twinkled. “For my part, I am thankful to fate, which caused me to fall in love with a woman only ten years my junior, instead of with a girl young enough to be my

daughter. I have gained a companion as well as a wife; and marvellously adaptive as young women are, I am conceited enough to think my ideas have travelled beyond the ideas of most girls of eighteen; and I am not conceited enough to suppose the girl of eighteen would not find me an old fogey very much in the way. Let boys mate with girls, say I, and men with women."

Lady Mary smiled in spite of herself. "You know, John, you would argue entirely the other way round if you happened to be in love with—Sarah," she said.

"To be sure," said John; "it's my trade to argue for the side which retains my services. I am your servant, thank Heaven, and not Sarah's. And I have no intention of quitting your service," he added, more gravely. "We have settled the question of the future."

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“The empty future that suddenly grew so bright,” said Lady Mary, dreamily. “Do you remember how you talked of—Italy?”

“Where we shall yet spend our honeymoon,” said John. “But I believe you liked better to hear of my shabby rooms in London which you meant to share.”

“Of course,” she said simply. “I knew I should bring you so little money.”

“And you thought barristers always lived from hand to mouth, and made no allowance for my having got on in my profession.”

“Ah! what did it matter?”

“I think you will find it makes just a little difference,” John said, smiling.

“Outside circumstances make less difference to women than men suppose,” said Lady Mary. “They are, oh, so willing to be pampered in luxury; and, oh, so willing to fly to the other extreme, and do without things.”

“Are they really?” said John, rather dryly.

He glanced at the little, soft, white hand he held, and smiled. It looked so unfitted to help itself.

Lady Mary was resting in her armchair, her delicate face still flushed with emotion. A transparent purple shade beneath the blue eyes betrayed that she had been weeping; but she was calmed by John’s strong and tranquil presence. The shady room was cool and fragrant with the scent of heliotrope and mignonette.

The band had reached a level plateau below the terrace garden, and was playing martial airs to encourage stragglers in the procession, and to give the principal inhabitants of Youlestone time to arrive, and to regain their wind after the steep ascent.

Every time a batch of new arrivals recognized Peter’s tall form on the terrace, a fresh burst of cheering rose.

From all sides of the valley, hurrying figures could be seen approaching Barracombe House.

The noise and confusion without seemed to increase the sense of quiet within, and the sounds of the gathering crowd made them feel apart and alone together as they had never felt before.

“So all our dreams are to be shattered,” said John, quietly, “because your prayer has been granted, and Peter has come home?”

“If you could have heard all he said,” she whispered sadly. “He has come home loving me, trusting me, dependent on me, as he has never been before, since his babyhood. Don’t you see—that even if it breaks my heart, I couldn’t fail my boy—just now?”

There was a pause, and she regarded him anxiously; her hands were clasped tightly together in the effort to still their trembling, her blue eyes looked imploring.

John knew very well that it lay within his powers to make good his claim upon that gentle heart, and enforce his will and her submission to it. But the strongest natures are those which least incline to tyranny; and he had already seen the results of coercion upon that bright and joyous, but timid nature. He knew that her love for him was of the fanciful, romantic, high-flown order; and as such, it appealed to every chivalrous instinct within him. Though his love for her was, perhaps, of a different kind, he desired her happiness and her peace of mind, as strongly as he desired her companionship and the sympathy which was to brighten his lonely life. He was silent for a moment, considering how he should act. If love counselled haste, common sense suggested patience.

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“I couldn’t disappoint him now. You see that, John?” said the anxious, gentle voice.

“I am afraid I do see it, Mary,” he said. “Our secret must remain our secret for the present.”

“God bless you, John!” said Lady Mary, softly. “You always understand.”

“I am old enough, at least, to know that happiness cannot be attained by setting duty aside,” he said, as cheerfully as he could.

There was a pause in the music outside, and a voice was heard speaking.

John rose and straightened himself.

“Have you decided what is to be done—what we had best do?” she said timidly.

“I am going to prove that a lover can be devoted, and yet perfectly reasonable; in defiance of all tradition to the contrary,” he said gaily. “I shall return to town as soon as I can decently get away—probably to-morrow.”

She uttered a cry. “You are going to leave me?”

“I must give place to Peter.”

She came to his side, and clung to his arm as though terrified by the success of her own appeal.

“But you’ll come back?”

“I have to account for my stewardship when Peter comes of age in the autumn,” he said, smiling down upon her.

She was too quick of perception not to know that strength, and courage, too, were needed for the smile wherewith John strove to hide a disappointment too deep for words. He answered the look she gave him; a look which implored forgiveness, understanding, even encouragement.

“I’m not yielding a single inch of my claim upon you when the time comes, my darling; only I think, with you, that the time has not come yet. I think Peter may reasonably expect to be considered first for the present; and that you should be free to devote your whole attention to him, especially as he has such praiseworthy intentions. We will postpone the whole question until the autumn, when he comes of age; and when I shall, consequently, be able to tackle him frankly, man to man, and not as one having authority and abusing that same,” he laughed. “Meantime, we must be patient. Write often, but not so often as to excite remark; and I shall return in the autumn.”

“To stay?”

“Ah!” said John, “that depends on you.”

He had not meant to be satirical, but the slight inflection of his tone cut Lady Mary to the heart.

Her vivid imagination saw her conduct in its worst light: vacillating, feeble, deserting the man she loved at the moment she had led him to expect triumph; dismissing her faithful servant without his reward. Then, in a flash, came the other side of the picture—the mother of a grown-up son—a wounded soldier dependent on her love—seeking her personal happiness as though there existed no past memories, no present duties, to hinder the fulfilling of her own belated romance.

“Oh, John,” said Lady Mary, “tell me what to do? No, no; don’t tell me—or I shall do it—and I mustn’t.”

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“My darling,” he said, “I only tell you to wait.” He rallied himself to speak cheerfully, and to bring the life and colour back to her sad, white face.

“Just at this moment I quite realize I should be a disturbing element, and I am going to get myself out of the way as quickly as politeness permits. And you are to devote yourself to Peter, and not to be torn with self-reproach. If we act sensibly, and don’t precipitate matters, nobody need have a grievance, and Peter and I will be the best of friends in the future, I hope. There is little use in having grown-up wits if we snatch our happiness at the expense of other people’s feelings, as young folk so often do.”

The twinkle in his bright eyes, and the kindly humour of his smile, restored her shaken self-confidence.

“Oh, John, no one else could ever understand—as you understand. If only Peter—”

“Peter is a boy,” said John, “dreaming as a boy dreams, resolving as a boy resolves; and his dreams and his resolutions are as light as thistledown: the first breath of a new fancy, or a fresh interest, will blow them away. I put my faith in the future, in the near future. Time works wonders.”

He stooped and kissed her hands, one after the other, with a possessive tenderness that told her better than words, that he had not resigned his claims.

“Now I’ll go and offer my congratulations to the hero of the day,” said John. “I must not put off any longer; and it is quite settled that our secret is to remain our secret—for the present.”

Then he stepped out on to the terrace, and Lady Mary looked after him with a little sigh and smile.

She lifted a hand-mirror from the silver table that stood at her elbow, and shook her head over it.

“It’s all very well for him, and it’s all very well for Peter,” she said; “but Time—Time is *my* worst enemy.”

CHAPTER XIII

Sarah Hewel ran into the drawing-room before Lady Mary found courage to put her newly gained composure to the test, by joining the crowd on the terrace.

“Oh, Lady Mary, are you there?” she cried, pausing in her eager passage to the window. “I thought you would be out-of-doors with the others!”

“Sarah, my dear!” said Lady Mary, kissing her.

“I—I saw all the people,” said Sarah, in a breathless, agitated way, “I heard the news, and I wasn’t sure whether I ought to come to luncheon all the same or not; so I slipped in by the side door to see whether I could find some one to ask quietly. Oh!” cried Sarah, throwing her arms impetuously round Lady Mary’s neck, “tell me it isn’t true?”

“My boy has come home,” said Lady Mary.

Sarah turned from red to white, and from white to red again.

“But they said,” she faltered—“they said he—”

“Yes, my dear,” said Lady Mary, understanding; and the tears started to her own eyes. “Peter has lost an arm, but otherwise—otherwise,” she said, in trembling tones, “my boy is safe and sound.”

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Sarah turned away her face and cried.

Lady Mary was touched. “Why, Sarah!” she said; and she drew the girl down beside her on the sofa and kissed her softly.

“I am sorry to be so silly,” said Sarah, recovering herself. “It isn’t a bit like me, is it?”

“It is like you, I think, to have a warm heart,” said Lady Mary, “though you don’t show it to every one; and, after all, you and Peter are old friends—playmates all your lives.”

“It’s been like a lump of lead on my heart all these months and years,” said Sarah, “to think how I scoffed at Peter in the Christmas holidays before he went to the war, because my brothers had gone, whilst he stayed at home. Perhaps that was the reason he went. I used to lie awake at night sometimes, thinking that if Peter were killed it would be all my fault. And now his arm has gone—and Tom and Willie came back safely long ago.” She cried afresh.

“It may not have been that at all,” said Lady Mary, consolingly. “I don’t think Peter was a boy to take much notice of what a goose of a little girl said. He felt he was a man, and ought to go—and his grandfather was a soldier—it is in the blood of the Setouns to want to fight for their country,” said Lady Mary, with a smile and a little thrill of pride; for, after all, if her boy were a Crewys, he was also a Setoun. “Besides, poor child, you were so young; you didn’t think; you didn’t know—”

“You always make excuses for me,” said Sarah, with subdued enthusiasm; “but I understand better now what it means—to send an only son away from his mother.”

“The young take responsibility so lightly,” said Lady Mary. “But now he has come home, my darling, why, you needn’t reproach yourself any longer. It is good of you to care so much for my boy.”

“It—it isn’t only that. Of course, I was always fond of Peter,” said Sarah; “but even if I had nothing to do with his going”—her voice sounded incredulous—“you know how one feels over our soldiers coming home—and a boy who has given his right arm for England. It makes one so choky and yet so proud—I can’t say all I mean—but you know—”

“Yes, I know,” said Lady Mary; and she smiled, but the tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“And what it must be to *you*,” sobbed Sarah, “the day you were to have been so happy, to see him come back like *that*! No wonder you are sad. One feels one could never do enough to—to make it up to him.”

“But I’m far more happy than sad,” said Lady Mary; and to prove her words she leant back upon the cushions and cried.

“You’re not,” said Sarah, kneeling by her; “how can you be, my darling, sweet Lady Mary? But you *must* be happy,” she said; and her odd, deep tones took a note of coaxing that was hard to resist. “Think how proud every one will be of him, and how—-how all the other mothers will envy you! You—you mustn’t care so terribly. It—it isn’t as if he had to work for his living. It won’t make any real difference to his life. And he’ll let you do everything for him—even write his letters—”

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“Oh, Sarah, Sarah, stop!” said Lady Mary, faintly. “It—it isn’t that.”

“Not that!” said Sarah, changing her tone. She pounced on the admission like a cat on a mouse. “Then why do you cry?”

Lady Mary looked up confused into the severely inquiring young face.

Sarah’s apple-blossom beauty, as was to have been expected, had increased a thousand-fold since her school girl days. She had grown tall to match the plumpness of her figure, which had not decreased. Her magnificent hair showed its copper redness in every variety of curl and twist upon her white forehead, and against her whiter throat.

She was no longer dressed in blue cotton. Lady Tintern knew how to give such glorious colouring its true value. A gauzy, transparent black flowed over a close-fitting white gown beneath, and veiled her fair arms and neck. Black bebe ribbon gathered in coquettishly the folds which shrouded Sarah’s abundant charms, and a broad black sash confined her round young waist. A black chip hat shaded the glowing hair and the face, “ruddier than the cherry, and whiter than milk;” and the merry, dark blue eyes had a penthouse of their own, of drooping lashes, which redeemed the boldness of their frank and open gaze.

“If it is not that—why do you cry?” she demanded imperiously.

“It’s—just happiness,” said Lady Mary.

Sarah looked wise, and shook her head. “Oh no,” she quoth. “Those aren’t happy tears.”

“You’re too old, dear Sarah, to be an *enfant terrible* still,” said Lady Mary; but Sarah was not so easily disarmed.

“I will know! Come, I’m your godchild, and you always spoil me. He’s not come back in one of his moods, has he?”

“Who?” cried Lady Mary, colouring.

“Who! Why, who are we talking of but Peter?” said Sarah, opening her big-pupilled eyes.

“Oh no, no! He’s changed entirely—”

“Changed!”

“I don’t mean exactly changed, but he’s—he’s grown so loving and so sweet—not that he wasn’t always loving in his heart, but—

“Oh,” cried Sarah, impatiently, “as if I didn’t know Peter! But if it wasn’t *that* which made you so unhappy, what was it?” She bent puzzled brows upon her embarrassed hostess.

“Let me go, Sarah; you ask too much!” said Lady Mary. “Oh no, my darling, I’m not angry! How could I be angry with my little loyal Sarah, who’s always loved me so? It’s only that I can’t bear to be questioned just now.” She caressed the girl eagerly, almost apologetically. “I must have a few moments to recover myself. I’ll go quietly away into the study—anywhere. Wait for me here, darling, and make some excuse for me if any one comes. I want to be alone for a few moments. Peter mustn’t find me crying again.”

“Yes—that’s all very well,” said Sarah to herself, as the slight form hurried from the drawing-room into the dark oak hall beyond. “But *why* is she unhappy? There is something else.”

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It was Dr. Blundell who found the answer to Sarah's riddle.

He had seen the signs of weeping on Lady Mary's face as she stumbled over the threshold of the window into the very arms of John Crewys, and his feelings were divided between passionate sympathy with his divinity, and anger with the returned hero, who had no doubt reduced his mother to this distressful state. The doctor was blinded by love and misery, and ready to suspect the whole world of doing injustice to this lady; though he believed himself to be destitute of jealousy, and capable of judging Peter with perfect impartiality.

His fancy leapt far ahead of fact; and he supposed, not only that Lady Mary must be engaged to John Crewys, but that she must have confided her engagement to her son, and that Peter had already forbidden the banns.

He wandered miserably about the grounds, within hearing of the rejoicings; and had just made up his mind that he ought to go and join the speechmakers, when he perceived John Crewys himself standing next to Peter, apparently on the best possible terms with the hero of the day.

The doctor hastened round to the hall, intending to enter the drawing-room unobserved, and find out for himself whether Lady Mary had recovered, or whether John Crewys had heartlessly abandoned her to her grief.

The brilliant vision Miss Sarah presented, as she stood, drawn up to her full height, in the shaded drawing-room, met his anxious gaze as he entered.

"Why, Miss Sarah! Not gone back to London yet? I thought you only came down for Whitsuntide."

"Mamma wasn't well, so I am staying on for a few days. I am supposed to be nursing her," said Sarah, demurely.

She was a favourite with the doctor, as she was very well aware, and, in consequence, was always exceedingly gracious to him.

"Where is Lady Mary?" he asked.

She stole to his side, and put her finger on her lips, and lowered her voice.

"She went through the hall—into the study. And she's alone—crying."

"Crying!" said the doctor; and he made a step towards the open door, but Sarah's strong, white hand held him fast.

“Play fair,” she said reproachfully; “I told you in confidence. You can’t suppose she wants *you* to see her crying.”

“No, no,” said the poor doctor, “of course not—of course not.”

She closed the doors between the rooms. “Look here, Dr. Blundell, we’ve always been friends, haven’t we, you and me?”

“Ever since I had the honour of ushering you into the world you now adorn,” said the doctor, with an ironical bow.

“Then tell me the truth,” said Sarah. “Why is she unhappy, to-day of all days?”

The doctor looked uneasily away from her. “Perhaps—the joy of Peter’s return has been too much for her,” he suggested.

“Yes,” said Sarah. “That’s what we’ll tell the other people. But you and I—why, Dr. Blunderbuss,” she said reproachfully, using the name she had given him in her saucy childhood, “you know how I’ve worshipped Lady Mary ever since I was a little girl?”

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“Yes, yes, my dear, I know,” said the doctor.

“You love her too, don’t you?” said Sarah.

He started. “I—I love Lady Mary! What do you mean?” he said, almost violently.

“Oh, I didn’t mean *that* sort of love,” said Sarah, watching him keenly. Then she laid her plump hand gently on his shabby sleeve. “I wouldn’t have said it, if I’d thought—”

“Thought what?” said the doctor, agitated.

“What I think now,” said Sarah.

He walked up and down in a silence she was too wise to break. When he looked at her again, Sarah was leaning against the piano. She had taken off the picture-hat, and was swinging it absently to and fro by the black ribbons which had but now been tied beneath her round, white chin. She presented a charming picture—and it is possible she knew it—as she stood in that restful pose, with her long lashes pointed downwards towards her buckled shoes.

The doctor stopped in front of her. “You are too quick for me, Sarah. You always were, even as a little girl,” he said. “You’ve surprised my—my poor secret. You can laugh at the old doctor now, if you like.”

“I don’t feel like laughing,” said Sarah, simply. “And your secret is safe with me. I’m honest; you know that.”

“Yes, my dear; I know that. God bless you!” said the doctor.

“I’m sorry, Dr. Blundell,” said Sarah, softly.

The deep voice which came from the full, white chest, and which had once been so unmanageable, was one of Sarah’s surest weapons now.

When she sang, she counted her victims by the dozen; when she lowered it, as she lowered it now, to speak only to one man, every note went straight to his heart—if he had an ear for music and a heart for love.

When Sarah said, in these dulcet tones, therefore, that she was sorry for her old friend, the tears gathered to the doctor’s kind, tired eyes.

“For me!” he said gratefully. “Oh, you mustn’t be sorry for me. She—she could hardly be further out of *my* reach, you know, if she were—an angel in heaven, instead of being what she is—an angel on earth. It is—of *her* that I was thinking.”

“I know,” said Sarah; “but she has been looking so bright and hopeful, ever since we heard Peter was coming home—until to-day—when he has actually come; and that is what puzzles me.”

“To-day—to-day!” said the doctor, as though to himself. “Yes; it was to-day I saw her touch happiness timidly, and come face to face with disappointment.”

“You saw her?”

“Oh, when one loves,” he said bitterly, “one has intuitions which serve as well as eyes and ears. You will know all about it one day, little Sarah.”

“Shall I?” said Sarah. She turned her face away from the doctor.

“You’ve not been here very much lately,” he said, “but you’ve been here long enough to guess her secret, as you—you’ve guessed mine. Eh? You needn’t pretend, for my sake, to misunderstand me.”

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“I wasn’t going to,” said Sarah, gently.

“John Crewys is the very man I would have chosen—I did choose him,” said the doctor, looking at her almost fiercely. It was an odd consolation to him to believe he had first led John Crewys to interest himself in Lady Mary. He recognized his rival’s superior qualifications very fully and humbly. “You know all about it, Miss Sarah, don’t tell me; so quick as you are to find out what doesn’t concern you.”

“I saw that—Mr. John Crewys—liked *her*,” said Sarah, in a low voice; “but, then, so does everybody. I wasn’t sure—I couldn’t believe that *she*—”

“You haven’t watched as I have,” he groaned; “you haven’t seen the sparkle come back to her eye, and the colour to her cheek. You haven’t watched her learning to laugh and sing and enjoy her innocent days as Nature bade; since she has dared to be herself. It was love that taught her an that.”

“Love!” said Sarah.

Her soft, red lips parted; and her breath quickened with a sudden sensation of mingled interest, sympathy, and amusement.

“Ay, love,” said the doctor, half angrily. He detected the deepening of Sarah’s dimples. “And I am an old fool to talk to you like this. You children think that love is reserved for boys and girls, like you and—and Peter.”

“I don’t know what Peter has to do with it,” said Sarah, pouting.

“I heard Peter explaining to his tenants just now,” said the doctor, with a harsh laugh, “that he was going to settle down here for good and all—with his mother; that nothing was to be changed from his father’s time. Something in his words would have made me understand the look on his mother’s face, even if I hadn’t read it right—already. She will sacrifice her love for John Crewys to her love for her son; and by the time Peter finds out—as in the course of nature he will find out—that he can do without his mother, her chance of happiness will be gone for ever.”

Sarah looked a little queerly at the doctor.

“Then the sooner Peter finds out,” she said slowly, “that he can live without his mother, the better. Doesn’t that seem strange?”

“Perhaps,” said the doctor, heavily. “But life gives us so few opportunities of a great happiness as we grow older, little Sarah. The possibilities that once seemed so boundless, lie in a circle which narrows round us, day by day. Some day you’ll find that out too.”

There was a sudden outburst of cheering.

Sarah started forward. “Dr. Blundell,” she said energetically, “you’ve told me all I wanted to know. She sha’n’t be unhappy if *I* can help it.”

“You!” said the doctor, shrugging his shoulders rather rudely. “I don’t see what *you* can do.”

Sarah reddened with lofty indignation. “It would be very odd if you did,” she said spitefully; “you’re only a man, when all is said and done. But if you’ll only promise not to interfere, I’ll manage it beautifully all by myself.”

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“What will you do?” said the doctor, inattentively; and his blindness to Sarah’s charms and her powers made her almost pity such obtuseness.

“I will go and fetch Lady Mary, for one thing, and cheer her up.”

“Not a word to her!” he cried, starting up; “remember, I told you in confidence—though why I was such a fool—”

“Am I likely to forget?” said Sarah; “and you will see one day whether you were a fool to tell *me*.” She said to herself, despairingly, that the stupidity of mankind was almost past praying for. As the doctor opened the door for Sarah, Lady Mary herself walked into the room.

She had removed all traces of tears from her face, and, though she was still very pale, she was quite composed, and ready to smile at them both.

“Were you coming to fetch me?” she said, taking Sarah’s arm affectionately. “Dr. Blundell, I am afraid luncheon will be terribly late. The servants have all gone off their heads in the confusion, as was to be expected. The noise and the welcome upset me so that I dared not go out on the terrace again. Ash has just been to tell me it’s all over, and that Peter made a capital speech; quite as good as Mr. John’s, he said; but that is hardly a compliment to our K.C.,” she laughed. “I’m afraid Ash is prejudiced.”

“Ash was doing the honours with all his might,” said the doctor, gruffly; “handing round cider by the hogshead. Hallo! the speeches must be really all over,” he said, for, above vociferous cheering, the strains of the National Anthem could just be discerned.

Peter came striding across the terrace, and looked in at the open window.

“Are you better again, mother?” he called. “Could you come out now? They’ve done at last, but they’re calling for you.”

“Yes, yes; I’m quite ready. I won’t be so silly again,” said Lady Mary.

But Peter did not listen. “Why—” he said, and stopped short.

“Surely you haven’t forgotten Sarah,” said Lady Mary, laughing—“your little playmate Sarah? But perhaps I ought to say Miss Hewel now.”

“How do you do, Sir Peter?” said Sarah, in a very stately manner. “I am very glad to be here to welcome you home.”

Peter, foolishly embarrassed, took the hand she offered with such gracious composure, and blushed all over his thin, tanned face.

“I—I should hardly have known you,” he stammered.

“Really?” said Sarah.

“Won’t you,” said Peter, still looking at her, “join us on the terrace?”

“The people aren’t calling for *me*” said Sarah.

“But it might amuse you,” said Peter, deferentially.

He put up his eyeglass—but though Sarah’s red lip quivered, she did not laugh.

“It’s rather jolly, really,” he said. “They’ve got banners, and flags, and processions, and things. Won’t you come?”

“Well—I will,” said Sarah. She accepted his help in descending the step with the air of a princess. “But they’ll be so disappointed to see me instead of your mother.”

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“Disappointed to see *you*!” said Peter, stupefied.

She stepped forth, laughing, and Peter followed her closely. John Crewys stood aside to let them pass. Lady Mary, half amazed and half amused, realized suddenly that her son had forgotten he came back to fetch her. She hesitated on the threshold. More cheers and confused shouting greeted Peter’s reappearance on the balcony. He turned and waved to his mother, and the canon came hurrying over the grass.

“The people are shouting for Lady Mary; they want Lady Mary,” he cried.

John Crewys looked at her with a smile, and held out his hand, and she stepped over the sill, and went away across the terrace garden with him.

The doctor turned his face from the crowd, and went back alone into the empty room.

“Who *doesn’t* want Lady Mary?” he said to himself, forlornly.

CHAPTER XIV

Peter stood on his own front door steps, on the shady side of the house, in the fresh air of the early morning. The unnecessary eyeglass twinkled on his breast as he looked forth upon the goodliness and beauty of his inheritance. The ever-encroaching green of summer had not yet overpowered the white wealth of flowering spring; for the season was a late one, and the month of June still young.

The apple-trees were yet in blossom, and the snowy orchards were scattered over the hillsides between patches of golden gorse. The lilacs, white and purple, were in flower, amid scarlet rhododendrons and branching pink and yellow tree-azaleas. The weeping barberry showered gold dust upon the road.

On the lower side of the drive, the rolling grass slopes were thriftily left for hay; a flowering mass of daisies, and buttercups, and red clover, and blue speedwell.

A long way off, but still clearly visible in the valley below, glistened the stone-tiled roof of the old square-towered church, guarded by its sentinel yews.

A great horse-chestnut stood like a giant bouquet of waxen bloom beside a granite monument which threw a long shadow over the green turf mounds towards the west, and marked the grave of Sir Timothy Crewys.

Peter saw that monument more plainly just now than all the rest of his surroundings, although he was short-sighted, and although his eyes were further dimmed by sudden tears.

His memories of his father were not particularly tender ones, and his grief was only natural filial sentiment in its vaguest and lightest form. But such as it was—the sight of the empty study, which was to be his own room in future; the strange granite monument shining in the sun; the rush of home associations which the familiar landscape aroused—augmented it for the time being, and made the young man glad of a moment's solitude.

There was the drooping ash—which had made such a cool, refreshing tent in summer—where he had learnt his first lessons at his mother's knee, and where he had kept his rabbit-hutch for a season, until his father had found it out, and despatched it to the stable-yard.

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His punishments and the troubles of his childhood had always been associated with his father, and its pleasures and indulgences with his mother; but neither had made any very strong impression on Peter's mind, and it was of his father that he thought with most sympathy, and even most affection. Partly, doubtless, because Sir Timothy was dead, and because Peter's memories were not vivid ones, any more than his imagination was vivid; but also because his mind was preoccupied with a vague resentment against his mother.

He could not understand the change which was, nevertheless, so evident. Her new-born brightness and ease of manner, and her strangely increased loveliness, which had been yet more apparent on the previous evening, when she was dressed for dinner, than on his first arrival.

It was absurd, Peter thought, in all the arrogance of disdainful youth, that a woman of her age should have learnt to care for her appearance thus; or to wear becoming gowns, and arrange her hair like a fashion plate.

If it had been Sarah he could have understood.

At the thought of Sarah the colour suddenly flushed across his thin, tanned face, and he moved uneasily.

Sarah, too, was changed; but not even Peter could regret the change in Sarah.

The loveliness of his mother, refined and white and delicate as she was, did not appeal to him; but Sarah, in her radiant youth, with her brilliant colouring—fresh as a May morning, buxom as a dairymaid, scornful as a princess—had struck Sir Peter dumb with admiration, though he had hitherto despised young women. It almost enraged him to remember that this stately beauty had ever been an impudent little schoolgirl, with a turned-up nose and a red pigtail. In days gone by, Miss Sarah had actually fought and scratched the spoilt boy, who tried to tyrannize over his playmate as he tyrannized over his mother and his aunts. On the other hand, the recollection of those early days also became precious to Peter for the first time.

Sarah!

It was difficult to be sentimental on the subject, but difficulties are easily surmounted by a lover; and though Sarah's childhood afforded few facilities for ecstatic reverie, still—-there had been moments, and especially towards the end of the holidays, when he and Sarah had walked on the banks of the river, with arms round each other's necks, sharing each other's toffee and confidences.

Poor Sarah had been first despatched to a boarding school as unmanageable, at the age of seven, and thereafter her life had been a changeful one, since her father could

not live without her, and her mother would not keep her at home. She had always presented a lively contrast to her elder brothers, who were all that a parent's heart could desire, and too old to be much interested in their little rebellious sister.

Her high spirits survived disgrace and punishment and periodical banishment. Though not destitute of womanly qualities, she was more remarkable for hoydenish ones; and her tastes were peculiar and varied. If there were a pony to break in, a sick child to be nursed, a groom to scold, a pig to be killed—there was Sarah; but if a frock to try on, a visit to be paid, a note to be written—where was she?

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Peter, recalling these things, tried to laugh at himself for his extraordinary infatuation of the previous day; but he knew very well in his heart that he could not really laugh, and that he had lain awake half the night thinking of her.

Sarah had spent the rest of the day at Barracombe after Peter's return, and had been escorted home late in the evening. Could he ever forget those moments on the terrace, when she had paced up and down beside him, in the pleasant summer darkness; her white neck and arms gleaming through transparent black tulle; sometimes listening to the sounds of music and revelry in the village below, and looking at the rockets that were being let off on the river-banks; and sometimes asking him of the war, in that low voice which thrilled Peter as it had already thrilled not a few interested hearers before him?

Those moments had been all too few, because John Crewys also had monopolized a share of Miss Sarah's attention. Peter did not dislike his guardian, whose composed courtesy and absolute freedom from self-consciousness, or any form of affectation, made it difficult indeed not to like him. His remarks made Peter smile in spite of himself, though he could not keep the ball of conversation rolling like Miss Sarah, who was not at all afraid of the great counsel, but matched his pleasant wit, with a most engaging impudence all her own.

Lady Mary had stood clasping her son's arm, full of thankfulness for his safe return; but she, too, had been unable to help laughing at John, who purposely exerted himself to amuse her and to keep her from dwelling upon their parting on the morrow.

Her thoughtful son insisted that she must avoid exposure to the night air, and poor Lady Mary had somewhat ruefully returned to the society of the old ladies within; but John Crewys did not, as he might, and as Peter had supposed he would, join the other old folk. Peter classed his mother and aunts together, quite calmly, in his thoughts. He listened to Sarah's light talk with John, watching her like a man in a dream, hardly able to speak himself; and it is needless to say that he found her chatter far more interesting and amusing than anything John could say.

Who could have dreamt that little Sarah would grow up into this bewitching maiden? There was a girl coming home on board ship, the young wife of an officer, whom every one had raved about and called so beautiful. Peter almost laughed aloud as he contrasted Sarah with his recollections of this lady.

How easy it was to talk to Sarah! How much easier than to his mother; whom, nevertheless, he loved so dearly, though always with that faint dash of disapproval which somehow embittered his love.

He could not shake off the impression of her first appearance, coming singing down the oak staircase, in her white gown. *His mother!* Dressed almost like a girl, and, worst of

all, looking almost like a girl, so slight and white and delicate. Peter recollected that Sir Timothy had been very particular about his wife's apparel. He liked it to be costly and dignified, and she had worn stiff silks and poplins inappropriate to the country, but considered eminently suited to her position by the Brawnton dressmaker. And her hair had been parted on her forehead, and smoothed over her little ears. Sir Timothy did not approve of curling-irons and frippery.

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Peter did not know that his mother had cried over her own appearance often, before she became indifferent; and if he had known, he would have thought it only typical of the weakness and frivolity which he had heard attributed to Lady Mary from his earliest childhood.

His aunts were not intentionally disloyal to their sister-in-law; but their disapproval of her was too strong to be hidden, and they regarded a little boy as blind and deaf to all that did not directly concern his lessons or his play. Thus Peter had grown up loving his mother, but disapproving of her, and the disapproval was sometimes more apparent than the love.

After breakfast the new squire took an early walk with his guardian, and inspected a few of the changes which had taken place in the administration of his tiny kingdom. Though Peter was young and inexperienced, he could not be blind to the immense improvements made.

He had left a house and stables shabby and tumble-down and out of repair; rotting woodwork, worn-off paint, and missing tiles had been painfully evident. Broken fences and hingeless gates were the rule, and not the exception, in the grounds.

Now all deficiencies had been made good by a cunning hand that had allowed no glaring newness to be visible; a hand that had matched old tiles, and patched old walls, and planted creepers, and restored an almost magical order and comfort to Peter's beautiful old house.

Where Sir Timothy's grumbling tenants had walked to the nearest brook for water, they now found pipes brought to their own cottage doors. The home-farm, stables, yards, and cowsheds were drained and paved; fallen outbuildings replaced, uneven roads gravelled and rolled; dead trees removed, and young ones planted, shrubberies trimmed, and views long obscured once more opened out.

Peter did not need the assurances of Mr. Crawley to be aware that his inheritance would be handed back to him improved a thousand-fold.

He was astounded to find how easily John had arranged matters over which his father had grumbled and hesitated for years. Even the dispute with the Crown had been settled by Mr. Crawley without difficulty, now that Sir Timothy's obstinacy no longer stood in the way of a reasonable compromise.

John Crewys had faithfully carried out the instructions of the will; and there were many thousands yet left of the sum placed at his disposal for the improvements of the estate; a surplus which would presently be invested for Peter's benefit, and added to that carefully tied-up capital over which Sir Timothy had given his heir no discretionary powers.

Peter spent a couple of hours walking about with John, and took an intelligent interest in all that had been done, from the roof and chimney-pots of the house, to the new cider-mill and stable fittings; but though he was civil and amiable, he expressed no particular gratitude nor admiration on his return to the hall, where his mother eagerly awaited him.

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It consoled her to perceive that he was on excellent terms with his guardian, offering to accompany him in the dog-cart to Brawnton, whither John was bound, to catch the noon express to town.

“You will have him all to yourself after this,” said John Crewys, smiling down upon Lady Mary during his brief farewell interview, which took place in the oriel window of the banqueting-hall, within sight, though not within hearing, of the two old sisters. “I am sorry to take him off to Brawnton, but I could hardly refuse his company.”

“No, no; I am only glad you should take every opportunity of knowing him better,” she said.

“And you will be happier without any divided feelings at stake,” he said. “Give yourself up entirely to Peter for the next three or four months, without any remorse concerning me. For the present, at least, I shall be hard at work, with little enough time to spare for sentiment.” There was a tender raillery in his tone, which she understood. “When I come back we will face the situation, according to circumstances. By-the-by, I suppose it is not to be thought of that Miss Sarah should prolong her Whitsuntide holidays much further?”

“She ought to have returned to town earlier, but Mrs. Hewel was ill,” said Lady Mary. “She is a tiresome woman. She moved heaven and earth to get rid of poor Sarah, and, now the child has had a *succes*, she is always clamouring for her to come back.”

“Ah!” said John, thoughtfully, “and you will moot to Peter the scheme for taking a house in town? But I should advise you to be guided by his wishes over that. Still, it would be very delightful to meet during our time of waiting; and that would be the only way. I won’t come down here again until I can declare myself. It is a—false position, under the circumstances.”

“I know; I understand,” said Lady Mary; “but I am afraid Peter won’t want to stir from home. He is so glad to be back, poor boy, one can hardly blame him; and he shares his father’s prejudices against London.”

“Does he, indeed?” said John, rather dryly. “Well, make the most of your summer with him. *You* will get only too much London—in the near future.”

“Perhaps,” Lady Mary said, smiling.

But, in spite of herself, John’s confidence communicated itself to her.

When Peter and John had departed, Lady Mary went and sat alone in the quiet of the fountain garden, at the eastern end of the terrace. The thick hedges and laurels which sheltered it had been duly thinned and trimmed, to allow the entrance of the morning sunshine. Roses and lilies bloomed brightly round the fountain now, but it was still

rather a lonely and deserted spot, and silent, save for the sighing of the wind, and the tinkle of the dropping water in the stone basin.

A young copper beech, freed from its rankly increasing enemies of branching laurel and encroaching bramble, now spread its glory of transparent ruddy leaf in the sunshine above trim hedges, here and there diversified by the pale gold of a laburnum, or the violet clusters of a rhododendron in full flower. Rare ferns fringed the edges of the little fountain, where diminutive reptiles whisked in and out of watery homes, or sat motionless on the brink, with fixed, glassy eyes.

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Lady Mary had come often to this quiet corner for rest and peace and solitude in days gone by. She came often still, because she had a fancy that the change in her favourite garden was typical of the change in her life,—the letting-in of the sunshine, where before there had been only deepest shade; the pinks and forget-me-nots which were gaily blowing, where only moss and fungi had flourished; the blooming of the roses, where the undergrowth had crossed and recrossed withered branches above bare, black soil.

She brought her happiness here, where she had brought her sorrow and her repinings long ago.

A happiness subdued by many memories, chastened by long anxiety, obscured by many doubts, but still happiness.

There was to be no more of that heart-breaking anxiety. Her boy had been spared to come home to her; and John—John, who always understood, had declared that, for the present, at least, Peter must come first.

The whole beautiful summer lay before her, in which she was to be free to devote herself to her wounded hero. She must set herself to charm away that shadow of discontent—of disapproval—that darkened Peter's grey eyes when they rested upon her; a shadow of which she had been only too conscious even before he went to South Africa.

She made a thousand excuses for him, after telling herself that he needed none.

Poor boy! he had been brought up in such narrow ways, such an atmosphere of petty distrust and fault-finding and small aims. Even his bold venture into the world of men had not enabled him to shake off altogether the influence of his early training, though it had changed him so much for the better; it had not altogether cured Peter of his old ungraciousness, partly inherited, and partly due to example.

But he had returned full of love and tenderness and penitence, though his softening had been but momentary; and when she had brought him under the changed influences which now dominated her own life, she could not doubt that Peter's nature would expand.

He should see that home life need not necessarily be gloomy; that all innocent pleasures and interests were to be encouraged, and not repressed. If he wanted to spend the summer at home—and after his long absence what could be more natural?—she would exert herself to make that home as attractive as possible. Why should they not entertain? John had said there was plenty of money. Peter should have other young people about him. She remembered a scene, long ago, when he had brought a boy of his own age in to lunch without permission. She would have to let Peter

understand how welcome she should make his friends; he must have many more friends now. While she was yet *chatelaine* of Barracombe, it would be delightful to imbue him with some idea of the duties and pleasures of hospitality. Lady Mary's eyes sparkled at the thought of providing entertainment for many young soldiers, wounded or otherwise. They should have the best of everything. She was rich, and Peter was rich, and there was no harm in making visitors welcome in that great house, and filling the rooms, that had been silent and empty so long, with the noise and laughter of young people.

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She would ask Peter about the horses to-morrow. John had purposely refrained from filling the stables which had been so carefully restored and fitted. There were very few horses. Only the cob for the dog-cart, and a pair for the carriage, so old that the coachman declared it was tempting Providence to sit behind them. They were calculated to have attained their twentieth year, and were driven at a slow jog-trot for a couple of hours every day, except Sundays, in the barouche. James Coachman informed Lady Belstone and Miss Crewys that either steed was liable to drop down dead at any moment, and that they could not expect the best of horses to last for ever; but the old ladies would neither shorten nor abandon their afternoon drive, nor consent to the purchase of a new pair. They continued to behave as though horses were immortal.

Sir Timothy's old black mare was turned out to graze, partly from sentiment, and partly because she, too, was unfitted for any practical purposes; and Peter had outgrown his pony before he went away, though he had ridden it to hounds many times, unknown to his father. Lady Mary thought it would be a pleasure to see her boy well mounted and the stables filled. John had said that the loss of his arm would certainly not prevent Peter from riding. She found herself constantly referring to John, even in her plans for Peter's amusement.

Strong, calm, patient John—who was prepared to wait; and who would not, as he said, snatch happiness at the expense of other people's feelings. How wise he had been to agree that, for the present, she must devote herself only to Peter! She and Peter would be all in all to each other as Peter himself had suggested, and as she had once dreamed her son would be to his mother; though, of course, it was not to be expected that a boy could understand everything, like John.

She must make great allowances; she must be patient of his inherited prejudices; above all, she must make him happy.

Afterwards, perhaps, when Peter had learned to do without her—as he would learn too surely in the course of nature—she would be free to turn to John, and put her hand in his, and let him lead her whithersoever he would.

Peter saw his guardian off at Brawnton, dutifully standing at attention on the platform until the train had departed, instead of starting home as John suggested.

When he came out of the station he stood still for a moment, contemplating the stout, brown cob and the slim groom, who was waiting anxiously to know whether Sir Peter would take the reins, or whether he was to have the honour of driving his master home.

"I think I'll walk back, George," said Peter, with a nonchalant air. "Take the cob along quietly, and let her ladyship know directly you get in that I'm returning by Hewelscourt woods, and the ferry."

“Very good, Sir Peter,” said the youth, zealously.

“It would be only civil to look in on the Hewels as Sarah is going back to town so soon,” said Peter to himself. “And it’s rot driving all those miles on the sunny side of the river, when it’s barely three miles from here to Hewelscourt and the ferry, and in the shade all the way. I shall be back almost as soon as the cart.”

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A little old lady, dressed in shabby black silk, looked up from the corner of the sofa next the window, when Peter entered the drawing-room at Hewelscourt, after the usual delay, apologies, and barking of dogs which attends the morning caller at the front door of the average country house.

Peter, who had expected to see Mrs. Hewel and Sarah, repented himself for a moment that he had come at all when he beheld this stranger, who regarded him with a pair of dark eyes that seemed several times too large for her small, wrinkled face, and who merely nodded her head in response to his awkward salutation.

“Ah!” said the old lady, rather as though she were talking to herself, “so this is the returned hero, no doubt. How do you do? The rejoicing over your home-coming kept me awake half the night.”

Peter was rather offended at this free-and-easy method of address. It seemed to him that, since the old lady evidently knew who he was, she might be a little more respectful in her manner.

“The festivities were all over soon after eleven,” he said stiffly. “But perhaps you are accustomed to early hours?”

“Perhaps I am,” said the old lady; she seemed more amused than abashed by Peter’s dignity of demeanour. “At any rate, I like my beauty sleep to be undisturbed; more especially in the country, where there are so many noises to wake one up from four o’clock in the morning onwards.”

“I have always understood,” said Peter, who inherited his father’s respect for platitudes, “that the country was much quieter than the town. I suppose you live in a town?”

“I suppose I do,” said the old lady.

Peter put up his eyeglass indignantly, to quell this disrespectful old woman with a frigid look, modelled upon the expression of his board-ship hero.

The door opened suddenly.

He dropped his eyeglass with a start. But it was only Mrs. Hewel who entered, and not Sarah, after all.

Her *embonpoint*, and consequently her breathlessness, had much increased since Peter saw her last.

“Oh, Peter,” she cried, “this is nice of you to come over and see us so soon. We were wondering if you would. Dear, dear, how thankful your mother must be! I know what I was with the boys—and decorated and all—though poor Tom and Willie got nothing;

but, as the papers said, it wasn't always those who deserved it most—still, I'm glad *you* got something, anyway; it's little enough, I'm sure, to make up for—" Then she turned nervously to the old lady. "Aunt Elizabeth, this is Sir Peter Crewys, who came home last night."

"I have already made acquaintance with Sir Peter, since you left me to entertain him," said the old lady, nodding affably.

"Lady Tintern arrived unexpectedly by the afternoon train yesterday," explained Mrs. Hewel, in her flustered manner, turning once more to Peter. "She has only been here twice before. It was such a surprise to Sarah to find her here when she came back."

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Peter grew very red. Who could have supposed that this shabby old person, whom he had endeavoured to snub, was the great Lady Tintern?

“She *didn’t* find me,” said the old lady. “I was in bed long before Sarah came back. I presume this young gentleman escorted her home?”

“I always send a servant across for Sarah whenever she stays at all late at Barracombe, and always have,” said Mrs. Hewel, in hurried self-defence. “You must remember we are old friends; there never was any formality about her visits to Barracombe.”

“My guardian and I walked down to the ferry, and saw her across the river, of course,” said Peter, rather sulkily.

“But her maid was with her,” cried Mrs. Hewel.

“Of course,” Peter said again, in tones that were none too civil.

After all, who was Lady Tintern that she should call him to task? And as if there could be any reason why her oldest playmate should not see Sarah home if he chose.

At the very bottom of Peter’s heart lurked an inborn conviction that his father’s son was a very much more important personage than any Hewel, or relative of Hewel, could possibly be.

“That was very kind of you and your guardian,” said the old lady, suddenly becoming gracious. “Emily, I will leave you to talk to your *old friend*. I dare say I shall see him again at luncheon?”

“I cannot stay to luncheon. My mother is expecting me,” said Peter.

He would not express any thanks. What business had the presuming old woman to invite him to luncheon? It was not her house, after all.

“Oh, your mother is expecting you,” said Lady Tintern, whose slightly derisive manner of repeating Peter’s words embarrassed and annoyed the young gentleman exceedingly. “I am glad you are such a dutiful son, Sir Peter.”

She gathered together her letters and her black draperies, and tottered off to the door, which Peter, who was sadly negligent of *les petits soins* forgot to open for her; nor did he observe the indignant look she favoured him with in consequence.

Sarah came into the drawing-room at last; fresh as the morning dew, in her summer muslin and fluttering, embroidered ribbons; with a bunch of forget-me-nots, blue as her eyes, nestling beneath her round, white chin. Her bright hair was curled round her pretty ears and about her fair throat, but Peter did not compare this *coiffure* to a fashion

plate, though, indeed, it exactly resembled one. Neither did he cast the severely critical glance upon Sarah's *toilette* that he had bestowed upon the soft, grey gown, and the cluster of white moss-rosebuds which poor Lady Mary had ventured to wear that morning.

"How have you managed to offend Aunt Elizabeth, Peter?" cried Sarah, with her usual frankness. "She is in the worst of humours."

"Sarah!" said her mother, reprovingly.

"Well, but she *is*," said Sarah. "She called him a cub and a bear, and all sorts of things."

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She looked at Peter and laughed, and he laughed back. The cloud of sullenness had lifted from his brow as she appeared.

Mrs. Hewel overwhelmed him with unnecessary apologies. She could not grasp the fact that her polite conversation was as dull and unmeaning to the young man as Sarah's indiscreet nothings were interesting and delightful.

"I'm sure I don't mind," said Peter; and his tone was quite alert and cheerful. "She told me the country kept her awake. If she doesn't like it, why does she come?"

"She has come to fetch me away," said Sarah. "And she came unexpectedly, because she wanted to see for herself whether mamma was really ill, or whether she was only shamming."

"Sarah!"

"And she has decided she is only shamming," said Sarah. "Unluckily, mamma happened to be down in the stables, doctoring Venus. You remember Venus, her pet spaniel?"

"Of course."

"Nothing else would have taken me off my sofa, where I ought to be lying at this moment, as you know very well, Sarah," cried Mrs. Hewel, showing an inclination to shed tears.

"To be sure you ought," said Sarah; "but what is the use of telling Aunt Elizabeth that, when she saw you with her own eyes racing up and down the stable-yard, with a piece of raw meat in your hand, and Venus galloping after you."

"The vet said that if she took no exercise she would die," said Mrs. Hewel, tearfully, "and neither he nor Jones could get her to move. Not even Ash, though he has known her all her life. I know it was very bad for me; but what could I do?"

"I wish I had been there," said Sarah, giggling; "but, however, Aunt Elizabeth described it all to me so graphically this morning that it is almost as good as though I had been."

"She should not have come down like that, without giving us a notion," said Mrs. Hewel, resentfully.

"If she had only warned us, you could have been lying on a sofa, with the blinds down, and I could have been holding your hand and shaking a medicine-bottle," said Sarah. "That is how she expected to find us, she said, from your letters."

“I am sure I scarcely refer to my weak health in my letters,” said Mrs. Hewel, plaintively, “and it is natural I should like my only daughter to be with me now and then. Aunt Elizabeth has never had a child herself, and cannot understand the feelings of a mother.”

Sarah and Peter exchanged a fleeting glance. She shrugged her shoulders slightly, and Peter looked at his boots. They understood each other perfectly.

Freshly to the recollection of both rose the lamentations of a little red-haired girl, banished from the Eden of her beloved home, and condemned to a cheap German school. Mrs. Hewel, in her palmiest days, had never found it necessary to race up and down the stable-yard to amuse Sarah; and when her only daughter developed scarlatina, she had removed herself and her spaniels from home for months to escape infection.

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“Here is papa,” said Sarah, breaking the silence. “He was so vexed to be out when you arrived yesterday. He heard nothing of it till he came back.”

Colonel Hewel walked in through the open window, with his dog at his heels. He was delighted to welcome his young neighbour home. A short, sturdy man, with red whiskers, plentiful stiff hair, and bright, dark blue eyes. From her father Sarah had inherited her colouring, her short nose, and her unfailing good spirits.

“I would have come over to welcome you,” he said, shaking Peter’s hand cordially, “only when I came home there was all the upset of Lady Tintern’s arrival, and half a hundred things to be done to make her sufficiently comfortable. And then I would have come to fetch Sarah after dinner, only I couldn’t be sure she mightn’t have started; and if I’d gone down by the road, ten to one she’d have come up by the path through the woods. So I just sat down and smoked my pipe, and waited for her to come back. You’ll stay to lunch, eh, Peter?”

“I must get back to my mother, sir,” said Peter. His respect for Sarah’s father, who had once commanded a cavalry regiment, had increased a thousand-fold since he last saw Colonel Hewel. “But won’t you—I mean she’d be very glad—I wish you’d come over and dine to-night, all of you—as you could not come yesterday evening?”

Thus Peter delivered his first invitation, blushing with eagerness.

“I’m afraid we couldn’t leave Lady Tintern—or persuade her to come with us,” said the colonel, shaking his head. Then he brightened up. “But as soon as she and Sally have toddled back to town I see no reason why we shouldn’t come, eh, Emily?” he said, turning to his wife.

Peter looked rather blank, and a laugh trembled on Sarah’s pretty lips.

“You know I’m not strong enough to dine out, Tom,” said his wife, peevishly. “I can’t drive so far, and I’m terrified of the ferry at night, with those slippery banks.”

“Well, well, there’s plenty of time before us. Later on you may get better; and I don’t suppose you’ll be running away again in a hurry, eh, Peter?” said the colonel. “I’m told you made a capital speech yesterday about sticking to your home, and living on your land, as your father, poor fellow, did before you.”

“I wish Sarah felt as you do, Peter,” said Mrs. Hewel; “but, of course, she has grown too grand for us, who live contentedly in the country all the year round. Her home is nothing to her now, it seems; and the only thing she thinks of is rushing back to London again as fast as she can.”

Sarah, contrary to her wont, received this attack in silence; but she bestowed a fond squeeze on her father's arm, and cast an appealing glance at Peter, which caused the hero's heart to leap in his bosom.

"Of course I mean to live at Barracombe," said Peter, polishing his eyeglass with reckless energy. "But I said nothing to the people about living there all the year round. On the contrary, I think it more probable that I shall—run up to town myself, occasionally—just for the season."

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CHAPTER XV

On a perfect summer afternoon in mid-July, Lady Mary sat in the terrace garden at Barracombe, before the open windows of the silent house, in the shade of the great ilex; sometimes glancing at the book she held, and sometimes watching the haymakers in the valley, whose voices and laughter reached her faintly across the distance.

Some boys were playing cricket in a field below. She noted idly that the sound of the ball on the bat travelled but slowly upward, and reached her after the striker had begun to run. The effect was curious, but it was not new to her, though she listened and counted with idle interest.

The old sisters had departed for their daily drive, which she daily declined to share, having no love for the high-road, and much for the peace which their absence brought her.

It was an afternoon which made mere existence a delight amid such surroundings.

Long shadows were falling across the bend of the river, below the wooded hill which faced the south-west; whilst the cob-built, whitewashed cottages, and the brown, square-towered church lay full in sunshine still. The red cattle stood knee-deep in the shallows, and an old boat was moored high and dry upon the sloping red banks.

The air was sweet with a thousand mingled scents of summer flowers: carnations, stocks, roses, and jasmine. The creamy clusters of Perpetual Felicity rioted over the corner turret of the terrace, where a crumbling stair led to the top of a small, half-ruined observatory, which tradition called the look-out tower.

Flights of steps led downwards from the garden, where the bedded-out plants blazed in all their glory of ordered colour, to the walks on the lower levels. Here were long herbaceous borders, backed by the mighty sloping walls of old red sandstone, which, like an ancient fortification, supported the terrace above.

The blue larkspur flourished beside scarlet gladioli, feather-headed spirea, and hardy fuchsia. There were no straight lines, nor any order of planting. The Madonna lilies stood in groups, lifting up on thin, ragged stems their pure and spotless clusters, and overpowering with their heavy scent the fainter fragrance of the mignonette. Tall, green hollyhocks towered higher yet, holding the secret of their loveliness, until these should wither; when they too would burst into blossom, and forestall the round-budded dahlia.

In the silence, many usually unheeded sounds made themselves very plainly heard.

The tapping of the great magnolia-leaves upon the windows of the south front; the rustling of the ilex; the ceaseless murmur of the river; the near twittering or distant song

of innumerable birds; the steady hum of the saw-mill below; the call of the poultry-woman at the home-farm, and the shrieking response of a feathered horde flying and fighting for their food—sounds all so familiar as to pass unnoticed, save in the absence of companionship.

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As Lady Mary mused alone, she could not but recall other summer afternoons, when she had not felt less lonely because her husband's voice might at any moment break the silence, and summon her to his side. Days when Peter had been absent at school, instead of, as now, at play; and when the old ladies had also been absent, taking their regular and daily drive in the big barouche.

Then she had prized and coveted the solitude of a summer afternoon on the lawn, and had stolen away to read and dream undisturbed in the shadow of the ilex.

It was now, when no vexatious restraint was exercised over her—when there was no one to reprove her for dreaming, or to criticize or forbid her chosen book—that solitude had become distasteful to her. She was restless and dissatisfied, and the misty sunlit landscape had lost its charm, and her book its power of enchaining her attention.

She had tasted the joy of real companionship; the charm of real sympathy; of the fearless exchange of ideas with one whose outlook upon life was as broad and charitable as Sir Timothy's had been narrow and prejudiced.

She had scarcely dared to acknowledge to herself how dear John Crewys had become to her, even though she knew that she rested thankfully upon the certainty of his love; that she trusted him in all things; that she was in utter sympathy with all his thoughts and words and ways.

Yet she had wished him to go, that she might be free to devote herself to her boy—to be very sure that she was not a light and careless mother, ready to abandon her son at the first call of a stranger.

And John Crewys had understood as another might not have understood. His clear head and great heart had divined her feelings, though perhaps he would never quite know how passionately grateful she was because he had divined them; because he had in no way fallen short of the man he had seemed to be.

She had sacrificed John to Peter; and John, who had shown so much wisdom and delicacy in leaving her alone with her son, was avenged; for only his absence could have made clear to her how he had grown into the heart she had guarded so jealously for Peter's sake.

She knew now that Peter's companionship made her more lonely than utter solitude.

The *joie de vivre*, which had distinguished her early days, and was inherent in her nature, had been quenched, to all appearance, many years since; but the spark had never died, and John had fanned it into brightness once more.

His strong hand had swept away the cobwebs that had been spun across her life; and the drooping soul had revived in the sunshine of his love, his comradeship, his warm approval.

Timidly, she had learnt to live, to laugh, to look about her, and dare utter her own thoughts and opinions, instead of falsely echoing those she did not share. Lady Mary had recovered her individuality; the serene consciousness of a power within herself to live up to the ideal her lover had conceived of her.

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But now, in his absence, that confidence had been rudely shaken. She had come to perceive that she, who charmed others so easily, could not charm her sullen son. It was part of the penalty she paid for her quick-wittedness, that she could realize herself as Peter saw her, though she was unable to present herself before him in a more favourable light.

“I must be myself—or nobody,” she thought despairingly. But Peter wanted her to be once more the meek, plainly dressed, low-spirited, silent being whom Sir Timothy had created; and who was not in the least like the original laughing, loving, joyous Mary Setoun.

It did not occur to her, in her sorrowful humility, that possibly her qualities stood on a higher level than Peter’s powers of appreciation. Yet it is certain that people can only admire intelligently what is good within their comprehension; and their highest flights of imagination may sometimes scarcely touch mediocrity.

The noblest ideals, the fairest dreams, the subtlest reasoning, the finest ethics, contained in the writings of the mighty dead, meant nothing at all to Sir Timothy. His widow knew that she had never heard him utter one high or noble or selfless thought. But with, perhaps, pardonable egotism, she had taken it for granted that Peter must be different. Whatever his outward humours, he was *her* son; rather a part of herself, in her loving fancy, than a separate individual.

The moment of awakening had been long in coming to Lady Mary; the moment when a mother has to find out that her personality is not necessarily reproduced in her child; that the being who was once the unconscious consoler of her griefs and troubles may develop a nature perfectly antagonistic to her own.

She had kept her eyes shut with all her might for a long time, but necessity was forcing them open.

Perhaps her association with John Crewys made it easier to see Peter as he was, and not as she had wished him to be.

And yet, she thought miserably to herself, he had certainly tried hard to be affectionate and kind to her—and probably it did not occur to him, as it did to his mother, how pathetic it was that he should have to try.

Peter did not think much about it.

Sometimes, during his short stay at Barracombe, he had walked through a game of croquet with his mother—it was good practice for his left hand—or he listened disapprovingly to something she inadvertently (forgetting he was not John) read aloud for his sympathy or admiration; or he took a short stroll with her; or bestowed his

company upon her in some other dutiful fashion. But these filial attentions over, if he yawned with relief—why, he never did so in her presence, and would have been unable to understand that Lady Mary saw him yawning, in her mind's eye, as plainly as though he had indulged this bad habit under her very nose. He bestowed a portion of his time on his aunts in much the same spirit, taking less trouble to be affectionate, because they were less exacting, as he would have put it to himself, than she was.

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The scheme of renting a house in London had duly been laid before him, and rejected most decisively by the young gentleman. His father had never taken a house in town, and he could see no necessity for it. His aunts were lost in admiration for their nephew's firmness. Peter had inherited somewhat of his father's dictatorial manner, and their flattery did not tend to soften it. When his aged relatives mispronounced the magic word *kopje*, or betrayed their belief that a *donga* was an inaccessible mountain—he brought the big guns of his heavy satire to bear on the little target of their ignorance without remorse. He mistook a loud voice, and a habit of laying down the law, for manly decision, and the gift of leadership; and imagined that in talking down his mother's gentle protests he had convinced her of his superior wisdom.

When he had made it sufficiently clear, however, that he did not wish Lady Mary to accompany him to town, young Sir Peter made haste to depart thither himself, on the very reasonable plea that he required a new outfit of clothes.

Was it possible that his departure brought a dreadful relief to the mother who had prayed day and night, for eight-and-twenty months, that her son might return to her?

She tried and tried, on her knees in her own room, to realize what her feelings would have been if Peter had been killed in South Africa. She tried to recall the first ecstasy of joy at his home-coming. She remembered, as she might have remembered a dream, the hours of agony she had passed, looking out over these very blue hills, and dumbly beseeching God to spare her boy—her only son—out of all the mothers' sons who were laying down their lives for England.

A terrible thought assailed her now and then, like an ugly spectre that would not be laid—that if Peter had died of his wound—if he had fallen as so many of his comrades had fallen, in the war—he would have been a hero for all time; a glorious memory, safely enshrined and enthroned above all these miserable petty doubts and disappointments. She cast the thought from her in horror and piteous grief, and reiterated always her passionate gratitude for his preservation. But, nevertheless, the living, breathing Peter was a daily and hourly disappointment to the mother who loved him. His ways were not her ways, nor his thoughts her thoughts; and often she felt that she could have found more to say to a complete stranger, and that a stranger would have understood her better.

The old ladies, returning from their drive, generally took a little turn upon the terrace. This constituted half their daily exercise, since their morning walk consisted of a stroll round the kitchen garden.

"It prevents cramp after sitting so long," one would say to the other.

"And it is only right to show the gardener that we take an interest," the other would reply.

The gardener translated the interest they took into a habit of fault-finding, which nearly drove him mad.

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“It du spile the vine weather vor I,” he would frequently grumble to his greatest crony, James Coachman, who, for his part, bitterly resented the abnormal length of the daily drives. “Zure as vate, when I zits down tu my tea, cumes a message from one are t’other on ’em, an’ oop I goes. ‘Yu bain’t been lukin’ round zo careful as ’ee shude; there be a bit o’ magnolia as want nailding oop, my gude man.’ ’Oh, be there, mum?’ zays I. ‘Yiss, there be; an’ thart I’d carl yure attention tu it,’ zess she, are zum zuch. ‘Thanky, mum, I’m zure,’ zezz I.”

“I knows how her goes on,” groaned James Coachman.

“Mother toime ’tis zummat else,” said the aggrieved gardener. “’Thic ’ere geranum’s broke, Willum; but ef yu tuke it vor cuttings, zo vast’s iver yu cude, ’twon’t take no yarm, Willum. Yu zee as how us du take a turble interest.’ Ah! ‘tis arl I can du tu putt oop wi’ ’un; carling a man from’s tea, tu tark zuch vamous vule’s tark.”

Lady Mary was not much less weary than the gardener and coachman of the old sisters’ habits of criticism. But only the shadow of their former power of vexing her remained, now that they could no longer appeal to Sir Timothy to join them in reproving his wife. She was no more to be teased or exasperated into alternate submission and rebellion.

Their cousin John, the administrator of Barracombe, had chosen from the first to place her opinions and wishes above all their protests or advice. They said to each other that John, before he grew tired of her and went away, had spoilt poor dear Mary completely; but their hopes were centred on Peter, who was a true Crewys, and who would soon be his own master, and the master of Barracombe; when he would, doubtless, revert to his father’s old ways.

They chose to blame his mother for his sudden departure to London, and remarked that the changes in his home had so wrought upon the poor fellow, that he could not bear to look at them until he had the power of putting them right again.

A deeply resented innovation was the appearance of the tea-table on the lawn before the windows, in the shade of the ilex-grove, which sheltered the western end of the terrace from the low rays of the sun.

During the previous summer, on their return from a drive, they had found their cousin John in his white flannels, and Lady Mary in her black gown, serenely enjoying this refreshment out-of-doors; and the poor old ladies had hardly known how to express their surprise and annoyance.

In vain did their sister-in-law explain that she had desired a second tea to be served in the hall, in their usual corner by the log fireplace.

It had never been the custom in the family. What would Ash say? What would he think? How could so much extra trouble be given to the servants?

“The servants have next to nothing to do,” Lady Mary had said; and young John had actually laughed, and explained that he had had a conversation with Ash which had almost petrified that tyrant of the household.

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Either Ash would behave himself properly, and carry out orders without grumbling, or he would be superseded. *Ash* superseded!

This John had said with quite unruffled good humour, and with a smile on his face, as though such an upheaval of domestic politics were the simplest thing in the world. Though for years the insolence and the idleness of Ash had been favourite grievances with Lady Belstone and Miss Crewys, they were speechlessly indignant with young John.

Habit had partially inured, though it could never reconcile them, to the appearance of that little rustic table and white cloth in Lady Mary's favourite corner of the terrace; and though they would rather have gone without their tea altogether than partake of it there, they could behold her pouring it out for herself with comparative equanimity.

"I trust you are rested, dear Mary, after your terrible long climb in the woods this morning?"

"It has been very restful sitting here. I hope you had a pleasant drive, Isabella?" "No; it was too hot to be pleasant. We passed the rectory, and there was that idle doctor lolling in the canon's verandah—keeping the poor man from his haymaking. Has the second post come in? Any news of dear Peter?"

"None at all. You know he is not much of a correspondent, and his last letter said he would be back in a few days."

"For my part," said Lady Belstone, "I think Peter will come home the day he attains his majority, and not a moment before."

"He is hardly likely to stay in London through August and September," said Lady Mary, in rather displeased tones.

"Perhaps not in London; but there are other places besides London," said Miss Crewys, significantly. "We met Mrs. Hewel driving. *She*, poor thing, does not expect to see Sarah before Christmas, if then, from what she told us."

"She should not have let Lady Tintern adopt Sarah if she is to be for ever regretting it. It was her own doing," said Lady Mary.

"That is just what I told her," said Lady Belstone, triumphantly. "Though how she can be regretting such a daughter I cannot conjecture."

"Sarah is a saucy creature," said Miss Crewys. "The last time I saw her she made one of her senseless jokes at me."

“She has no tact,” said Lady Belstone, shaking her head; “for when Peter saw you were annoyed, and tried to pass it off by telling her the Crewys family had no sense of humour, instead of saying, ’What nonsense!’ she said, ‘What a pity!’”

“Her mother was full of a letter from Lady Tintern about some grand lord or other, who wanted to marry Sarah. I did my best to make her understand how very unlikely it was that any man, noble or otherwise, would care to marry a girl with carroty hair.”

“I doubt if you succeeded in convincing her, Georgina, though you spoke pretty plain, and I am very far from blaming you for it. But she is ate up with pride, poor thing, because Sarah gets noticed by Lady Tintern’s friends, who would naturally wish to gratify her by flattering her niece.”

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“I am afraid the girl is setting her cap at Peter,” said Miss Crewys; “but I took care to let her mother know, casually, what our family would think of such a marriage for him.”

“Peter is a boy,” said Lady Mary, quickly; “and Sarah, for all practical purposes, is ten years older than he. She is only amusing herself. Lady Tintern is much more ambitious for her than I am for Peter.”

“How you talk, Mary!” said Miss Crewys, indignantly. “She is hardly twenty years of age, and the most designing monkey that ever lived. And Peter is a fine young man. A boy, indeed! I hope if she succeeds in catching him that you will remember I warned you.”

“I will remember, if anything so fortunate should occur,” said Lady Mary, with a faint smile. “I cannot think of any girl in the world whom I would prefer to Sarah as a daughter.”

“I, for one, should walk out of this house the day that girl entered it as mistress, let Peter say what he would to prevent me,” said Lady Belstone, reddening with indignation.

“I wonder where you would go to?” said Lady Mary, with some curiosity. “Of course,” she added, hastily, “there is the Dower House.”

“I am sure it is very generous of you to suggest the Dower House, dear Mary,” said Miss Crewys, softening, “since our poor brother, in his unaccountable will, left it entirely to you, and made no mention of his elder sisters; though we do not complain.”

“It is in accordance with custom that the widow should have the Dower House. A widow’s rights should be respected; but I thought our names would be mentioned,” said Lady Belstone, dejectedly.

“Of course he knew,” said Lady Mary, in a low voice, “that Peter’s house would be always open to us all, as my boy said himself.”

“Dear boy! he has said it to us too,” said the sisters, in a breath.

“I don’t say that, in my opinion,” said Lady Mary, “it would not be wiser to leave a young married couple to themselves; I have always thought so. But Peter would not hear of your turning out of your old home; you know that very well.”

“Peter would not; but nothing would induce *me* to live under the same roof as that red-haired minx,” said Lady Belstone, firmly. “And besides, as you say, my dear Mary, you could not very well live by yourself at the Dower House.”

“Since Mary has been so kind as to mention it, there would be many advantages in our accompanying her there, in case Sarah should succeed in her artful aims,” said Miss

Crewys. “It would be near Peter, and yet not *too* near, and we could keep an eye on *her*.”

“If she does not succeed, somebody else will,” said Lady Belstone, sensibly; “and, at least, we know her faults, and can put Peter on his guard against them.”

A host of petty and wretched recollections poured into Lady Mary’s mind as she listened to these words.

Poor Timothy; poor little hunted, scolded, despairing bride; poor married life—of futile reproaches and foolish quarrelling.

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How many small miseries she owed to those ferret searching eyes, and those subtly poisonous tongues! But such miseries lurked in the dull shadows of the past. Standing now in the bright sunshine of the present, she forgave the sisters with all her heart, and thought compassionately of their great age, their increasing infirmities, their feeble hold on life.

Not to them did she owe real sorrow, after all; for nothing that does not touch the heart can reach the fountain of grief.

Peter's hand—the hand she loved best in the world—had set the waters of sorrow flowing not once, but many times; but she had become aware lately of a stronger power than Peter's guarding the spring.

She looked from one sister to the other.

Despite the narrowness of brow, and sharpness of eye and feature, they were both venerable of aspect, as they tottered up and down the terrace where they had played in their childhood and sauntered through youth and middle age to these latter days, when they leant upon silver-headed sticks, and wore dignified silk attire and respectable poke-bonnets.

"Don't you think it would be better," said Lady Mary, slowly, "if you left Peter to find out his wife's faults for himself; whether she be Sarah—or another?"

CHAPTER XVI

Torrents of falling rain obscured the valley of the Youle. The grey clouds floated below the ridges of the hills, and wreathed the tree-tops. Against the dim purple of the distance, the October roses held up melancholy, rain-washed heads; and sudden gusts of wind sent little armies of dead, brown leaves racing over the stone pavement of the terrace.

Lady Mary leant her forehead against the window, and gazed out upon the autumn landscape; and John Crewys watched her with feelings not altogether devoid of self-reproach.

Perhaps he had carried his prudent consideration too far.

His reverence for his beautiful lady—who reigned in John's inmost thoughts as both saint and queen—had caused him to determine that she must come to him, when she did come, without a shadow of self-reproach to sully the joy of her surrender, the fulness, of her bliss, in the perfect sympathy and devotion which awaited her.

But John Crewys—though passionately desiring her companionship, and impatient of all barriers, real or imaginary, which divided her from him—yet lived a life very full of work and interest and pleasure on his own account. He was only conscious of his loneliness at times; and when he was as busy as he had been during the early half of this summer, he was hardly conscious of it at all.

He had not fully realized the effect that this time of waiting and uncertainty might have upon her, in the solitude to which he had left her, and which he had at first supposed would be altogether occupied by Peter. Her letters—infrequent as he, in his self-denial, had suggested—were characterized by a delicate reserve and a tacit refusal to take anything for granted in their relations to each other, which half charmed and half tantalized John; but scarcely enlightened him regarding the suspense and sadness which at this time she was called upon to bear.

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When he came to Barracombe, he knew that she had suffered greatly during these months of his absence, and reproached himself angrily for blindness and selfishness.

He had spent the first weeks of his long vacation in Switzerland, in order to bring the date of his visit to the Youle Valley as near as possible to the date of Peter's coming of age; but, also, he had been very much overworked, and felt an absolute want of rest and change before entering upon the struggle which he supposed might await him, and for which he would probably need all the good humour and good sense he possessed. So far as he was personally concerned, there was no doubt that his proceedings had been dictated by wisdom and judgment.

The fatigue and irritability, consequent upon too much mental labour, and too little fresh air and exercise, had vanished. John was in good health and good spirits, clear of brain and eye, and vigorous of person, when he arrived at Barracombe; in the mild, wet, misty weather which heralded the approach of a typical Devonshire autumn.

But when he looked at Lady Mary, he knew that he would have been better able to dispense with that holiday interval than she was to have endured it.

She had always been considered marvellously young-looking for her age. The quiet country life she had led had bestowed that advantage upon her; and her beauty, fair as she was, had always been less dependent on colouring than upon the exquisite delicacy of her features and general contour. But now a heaviness beneath the blue eyes,—a little fading of her brightness—a little droop of the beautifully shaped mouth,—-almost betrayed her seven and thirty years; and the soft, abundant, brown hair was threaded quite perceptibly with silver. Her sweet face smiled upon him; but the smile was no longer, he thought, joyous—but pathetic, as of one who reproaches herself wonderingly for light-heartedness.

John looked at her in silence, but the words he uttered in his heart were, "I will never leave you any more."

Perhaps his face said everything that he did not say, for Lady Mary had turned from him with a little sob, and leant her forehead on her hands, looking out at the rain which swept the valley. She felt, as she had always felt in John's presence, that here was her champion and her protector and her slave, in one; returned to restore her failing courage and her lost self-confidence.

"So you saw something of Peter in London?" she said tremulously, breaking the silence which had fallen between them after their first greeting. "Please tell me. You know I have seen almost nothing of him since he came home."

"So I gather," said John. "Yes, I saw something—not very much—of Master Peter in London. You see I am not much of a society man;" and he laughed.

“Was Peter a society man?” said his mother, laughing also, but rather sadly.

“He went out a good deal, and was to be met with in most places,” John answered.

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“I read his name in lists of dances given by people I did not know he had ever heard of. But I did not like to ask him how he managed to get invited. He rather dislikes being questioned,” said Lady Mary, describing Peter’s prejudices as mildly as possible.

“I fancy Miss Sarah could tell you,” said John, with twinkling eyes.

“I did not know—just a girl—could get a stranger, a boy like Peter, invited everywhere,” said Lady Mary, innocently.

John laughed. “Peter is a very eligible boy,” he said, “and Sarah is not ‘just a girl,’ but a very clever young woman indeed; and Lady Tintern is a ball-giver. But if he had been the most ordinary of youths, a bachelor’s foothold on the dance-lists is the easiest thing in the world to obtain. It means nothing in itself.”

“I think it meant a good deal to Peter,” said his mother, with a sigh. “If only I could think Sarah were in earnest.”

“I don’t see why not,” said John.

Then he came and took Lady Mary’s hand, and led her to a seat next the fire.

“Come and sit down comfortably,” he said, “and let us talk everything over. It looks very miserable out-of-doors, and nothing could be more delightful than this room, and nobody to disturb us. I want the real history of the last few months. Do you know your letters told me almost nothing?”

The room was certainly delightful, and not the less so for the Chill rain without, which beat against the windows, and enhanced the bright aspect of the scene within.

A little fire burned cheerfully in the polished grate, and cast its glow upon the burnished fender, and the silver ornaments and trifles on a rosewood table beyond. The furniture was bright with old-fashioned glossy chintz; the rose-tinted walls were hung with fine water-colour drawings; the windows with rose-silk curtains.

The hardy outdoor flowers were banished to the oaken hall. Lady Mary’s sense of the fitness of things permitted the silver cups and Venetian glasses of this dainty apartment to be filled only with waxen hothouse blooms and maidenhair fern.

She could not but be conscious of the restfulness of her surroundings, and of John’s calm, protecting presence, as he placed her tenderly in the corner of the fireside couch, and took his place beside her.

“I don’t think the last months have had any history at all,” she said dreamily. “I have missed you, John. But that—you know already. I—I have been very lonely—since—-

since Peter came home. I think it was Sarah who persuaded him to go away again so soon. I believe she laughed at his clothes."

"I suppose they *were* a little out of date, and he must surely have outgrown them, besides," said John, smiling.

"I suppose so; anyway, I think it must have been that which put it into his head to go to London and buy more. It was a little awkward for the poor boy, because he had just been scolding *me* for wishing to go to London. But he said he would only be a few days."

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“And he stayed to the end of the season?”

“Yes. Of course the aunts put it down to Sarah. I dare say it *was* her doing. I don’t know why she should wish to rob me of my boy just for—amusement,” said Lady Mary, rather resentfully. “But I have not understood Sarah lately; she has seemed so hard and flippant. You are laughing, John? I dare say I am jealous and inconsistent. You are quite right. One moment I want to think Sarah in earnest—and willing to marry my boy; and the next I remember that I began to hate his wife the very day he was born.”

“It appears to be the nature of mothers,” said John, indulgently. “But you will allow *me* to hope for Peter’s happiness, and quite incidentally, of course, for our own?”

She smiled. “Seriously, John, I wish you would tell me how he got on in London.”

“He dined with me once or twice, as you know,” said John, “and was very friendly. I think he was relieved that I made no suggestion of tutors or universities, and that I took his eyeglass for granted. In short, that I treated him as I should treat any other young man of my acquaintance; whereas he had greatly feared I might presume upon my guardianship to give him good advice. But I did not, because he is too young to want advice just now, and prefers, like most of us, to buy his own experience.”

“I hope he was really nice to you. You won’t hide anything? You’ll tell me exactly?”

“I am hiding nothing. The lad is a good lad at bottom, and a manly one into the bargain,” said John. “His defects are of the kind which get up, so to speak, and hit you in the eye; and are, consequently, not of a kind to escape observation. What is obviously wrong is easiest cured. He has yet to learn that ‘manners maketh man,’ but he was learning it as fast as possible. The mistakes of youth are rather pathetic than annoying.”

“Sometimes,” said Lady Mary.

“He fell, very naturally, into most of the conventional errors which beset the inexperienced Londoner,” said John, smiling slightly at the recollection. “He talked in a familiar manner of persons whose names were unknown to him the day before yesterday; and told well-known anecdotes about well-known people whom he hadn’t had time to meet, as though they had only just happened. The kind of stories outsiders tell to new-comers. And he professed to be bored at every party he attended. I won’t say that the *habitue* is always too well bred, or too grateful to his entertainers, to do anything of the kind; but he is certainly too wise or too cautious.”

“Perhaps he was bored?” said Lady Mary, wistfully. “Knowing nobody, poor boy.”

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“The first time I met him on neutral ground was at a dance,” said John. “He looked very tall and nervous and lonely, and, of course, he was not dancing; but, nevertheless, he was the hero of the evening, or so Miss Sarah gave me to understand. But you can imagine it for yourself. The war just over, and a young fellow who has lost so much in it; the gallant nephew of the gallant Ferries; besides his own romantic name, and his eligibility. I took him off to the National Gallery, to make acquaintance with the portrait of our cavalier ancestor there; and I declare there is a likeness. Miss Sarah had visited it long ago, it appears. For my part, I am glad to think that these fashionable young women can still be so enthusiastic about a wounded soldier. Sarah said they were all wild to dance with him, and ready to shed tears for his lost arm.”

“And was he much with Sarah?”

John laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “Miss Sarah is a star with many satellites. She raised my hopes, however, by appearing to have a few smiles to spare for Peter.”

“And she must have got him the invitation to Tintern Castle,” said Lady Mary. “That is why he went up to Scotland.”

“I see.”

“Then she got him another invitation, I suppose, for he went to the next house she stayed at; and to a third place for some yachting.”

“What did Lady Tintern say?”

“That’s just it. Sarah is in Lady Tintern’s black books just now. She is furious with her, Mrs. Hewel tells me, because she has refused Lord Avonwick.”

“Hum!” said John. “He has forty thousand a year.”

“I don’t think money would tempt Sarah to marry a man she did not love,” said Lady Mary, reproachfully. “There was Mr. Van Graaf, the African millionaire. She wouldn’t look at him, and he offered to settle untold sums upon her.”

“Did he? What a brute!”

“Why?”

“Never mind. You’ve not seen him. I’m glad he found Sarah wasn’t for sale. But doesn’t all this look as if it were Peter, after all?”

“If only I could think she were in earnest,” Lady Mary said again. “But he is such a boy. She has three times his cleverness in some ways, and three times his experience, though she is younger than he. I suppose women mature much earlier than men. It

galls my pride when she orders him about, and laughs at him. But he—he doesn't understand."

"Perhaps," said John, slowly, "he understands better than you think. Each generation has a freemasonry of its own. I must confess I have heard scraps of chatter and chaff in ballrooms and theatres which have filled me with amazement, wondering how it could be possible that such poor stuff should pass muster as conversation, or coquetry, or gallantry, with the youths and maidens of to-day. But when I have observed further, instead of an offended fair, or a disillusioned swain, behold! two young heads close together, two young faces sparkling with smiles and satisfaction. And the older person, who would fatuously join in with a sensible remark, spoils all the enjoyment. The fact is, the secret of real companionship is not quality, but equality. There's a punning platitude for you."

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“It may be a platitude, but I am beginning to discover that what are called platitudes by the young are biting truths to the old,” said Lady Mary. “I’ve felt it a thousand times. Words come so easily to my lips when I’m speaking to you, I am so certain you will understand and respond. But with Peter, I sometimes feel as though I were dumb or stupid. Perhaps you’ve been too—too kind; you’ve understood too quickly. I’ve been too ready to believe that you’ve found me—”

“Everything I wanted to find you,” interrupted John, tenderly; “and that was something quite out of the common.”

She smiled and shook her head. “I am ready to believe all the nice things you can say, as fast as you can say them, when I am with *you*” she said, with a raillery rather mournful than gay. “But when I am with Peter, I seem to realize dreadfully that I’m only a middle-aged woman of average capacity, and with very little knowledge of the world. He does his best to teach me. That’s funny, isn’t it?”

“It’s very like—a very young man,” said John, gently.

“You mustn’t think I’m mocking at my boy—like Sarah,” she said vehemently. “Perhaps I am wrong to tell you. Perhaps only a mother would really understand. But it makes me a little sad and bewildered. My boy—my little baby, who lay in my arms and learnt everything from me. And now he looks down and lectures me from such an immense height of superiority, never dreaming that I’m laughing in my heart, because it’s only little Peter, after all.”

“And he doesn’t lecture Sarah?”

“Oh no; he doesn’t lecture Sarah. She is too young to be lectured with impunity, and too wise. Besides, I think since he went away, and saw Sarah flattered and spoilt, and queening it among the great people who didn’t know him even by sight, that he has realized that their relative positions have changed a good deal. You see, little Sarah Hewel, as she used to be, would have been making quite a great match in marrying Peter. But Lady Tintern’s adopted daughter and heiress—old Tintern left an immense fortune to his wife, didn’t he?—is another matter altogether. And how could she settle down to this humdrum life after all the excitement and gaiety she’s been accustomed to?”

“Women do such things every day. Besides—”

“Yes?”

“Is Peter still so much enamoured of a humdrum life?” said John, dryly.

“I have had no opportunity of finding out; but I am sure he will want to settle down quietly when all this is over—”

“You mean when he’s no longer in love with Sarah?”

“He’s barely one-and-twenty; it can’t last,” said Lady Mary.

“I don’t know. If she’s so much cleverer than he, I’m inclined to think it may,” said John.

“Oh, of course, if he married her—it would last,” said Lady Mary.

“And then?” said John, smiling.

“Perhaps *then*,” said Lady Mary; and she laid her hand softly in the strong hand outstretched to receive it.

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CHAPTER XVII

There was a tap at the door of Lady Mary's bedroom, and Peter's voice sounded without.

"Mother, could I speak to you for a moment?"

"Come in," said Lady Mary's soft voice; and Peter entered and closed the door, and crossed to the oriel window, where she was sitting at her writing-table, before a pile of notes and account books.

Long ago, in Peter's childhood, she had learned to make this bedroom her refuge, where she could read or write or dream, in silence; away from the two old ladies, who seemed to pervade all the living-rooms at Barracombe. Peter had been accustomed all his life to seek his mother here.

She had chosen the room at her marriage, and had had an old-fashioned paper of bunched rosebuds put up there. It was very long and low, and looked eastward into the fountain garden, and over the tree-tops far away to the open country.

The sisters had thought one of the handsome modern rooms of the south front would be more suitable for the bride, but Lady Mary had her way. She preferred the older part of the house, and liked the steps down into her room, the uneven floor, the low ceiling, the quaint window-seats, and the powdering closet where she hung her dresses.

The great oriel window formed almost a sitting-room apart. Here was her writing-table, whereon stood now a green jar of scented arums and trailing white fuchsias.

A bunch of sweet peas in a corner of the window-seat perfumed the whole room, already fragrant with potpourri and lavender.

A low bookcase was filled with her favourite volumes; one shelf with the story-books of her childhood, from which she had long ago read aloud to Peter, on rainy days when he had exhausted all other kinds of amusement; for he had never touched a book if he could help it, therein resembling his father.

In the corner next the window stood the cot where Peter had slept often as a little boy, and which had been playfully designated the hospital, because his mother had always carried him thither when he was ill. Then she had taken him jealously from the care of his attendant, and had nursed and guarded him herself day and night, until even convalescence was a thing of the past. She had never suffered that little cot to be moved; the white coverlet had been made and embroidered by her own hands. A gaudy oleograph of a soldier on horseback—which little Peter had been fond of, and which had been hung up to amuse him during one of those childish illnesses—remained in its

place. How often had she looked at it through her tears when Peter was far away! Beside the cot stood a table with a shabby book of devotions, marked by a ribbon from which the colour had long since faded. The book had belonged to Lady Mary's father, young Robbie Setoun, who had become Lord Ferries but one short month before he met with a soldier's death. His daughter said her prayers at this little table, and had carried thither her agony and petitions for her boy in his peril, during the many, many months of the South African War.

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The morning was brilliant and sunny, and the upper casements stood open, to let in the fresh autumn air, and the song of the robin balancing on a swaying twig of the ivy climbing the old walls. White clouds were blowing brightly across a clear, blue sky.

Lady Mary stretched out her hand and pulled a cord, which drew a rosy curtain half across the window, and shaded the corner where she was sitting. She looked anxiously and tenderly into Peter's face; her quick instinct gathered that something had shaken him from his ordinary mood of criticism or indifference.

"Are you come to have a little talk with me, my darling?" she said.

She was afraid to offer the caress she longed to bestow. She moved from her stiff elbow-chair to the soft cushions in her favourite corner of the window-seat, and held out a timid hand. Peter clasped it in his own, threw himself on a stool at her feet, and rested his forehead against her knee.

"I have something to tell you, mother, and I am afraid that, when I have told you, you will be disappointed in me; that you will think me inconsistent."

Her heart beat faster. "Which of us is consistent in this world, my darling? We all change with circumstances. We are often obliged to change, even against our wills. Tell me, Peter; I shall understand."

"There's not really anything to tell," said Peter, nervously contradicting himself, "because nothing is exactly settled yet. But I think something might be—before very long, if you would help me to smooth away some of the principal difficulties."

"Yes, yes," said Lady Mary, venturing to stroke the closely cropped black head resting against her lap.

"You know—Sarah—has been teaching me the new kind of croquet, at Hewelscourt, since we came back from Scotland?" he said. "I don't get on so badly, considering."

"My poor boy!"

"Oh, I was always rather inclined to be left-handed; it comes in usefully now," said Peter, who generally hurried over any reference to his misfortune. "Well, this morning, whilst we were playing, I asked Sarah, for the third time, to—to marry me. The third's the lucky time, isn't it?" he said, with a tremulous laugh, "and—and—"

"She said yes!" cried Lady Mary, clasping her hands.

"She didn't go so far as that," said Peter, rather reproachfully. His voice shook slightly. "But she didn't say no. It's the first time she hasn't said no."

“What did she say?” said Lady Mary.

She tried to keep her feelings of indignation and offence against Sarah out of her voice. After all, who was Sarah that she should presume to refuse Peter? Or for the matter of that, to accept him? Either course seems equally unpardonable at times to motherly jealousy, and Lady Mary was half vexed and half amused to find herself not exempt from this weakness.

“Impudent little red-headed thing!” she said to herself, though she loved Sarah dearly, and admired her red hair with all her heart.

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“She told me a few of the reasons why she—she didn’t want to marry me,” said Peter.

Lady Mary’s dismay was rather too apparent. “Surely that doesn’t sound very hopeful.”

Peter moved impatiently. “Oh, mother, it is always so difficult to make you understand.”

“Is it, indeed?” she said, with a faint, pained smile. “I do my best, my darling.”

“Never mind; I suppose women are always rather slow of comprehension,” said the young lord of creation—“that is, except Sarah. *She* always understands. God bless her!”

“God bless her, indeed!” said Lady Mary, gently, and the tears started to her blue eyes, “if she is going to marry my boy.”

Peter repented his crossness. “Forgive me, mother. I know you mean to be kind,” he said. “You will help me, won’t you?”

“With all my heart,” she said, anxiously; “only tell me how.”

“You see, I can’t help feeling,” said Peter, bashfully, “that she wouldn’t have told me why she *couldn’t* marry me, if she hadn’t thought she might bring herself to do it in the end, if I got over the difficulties she mentioned. I’ve been—hopeful, ever since she refused that ass of an Avonwick, in spite of Lady Tintern. It wants some courage to defy Lady Tintern, I can tell you, though she’s such a little object to look at. By George! I’d almost rather walk up to a loaded gun than face that woman’s tongue. Of course, even if *my* share of the difficulties were removed, there’d still be Lady Tintern against us. But if Sarah can defy Lady Tintern in one thing, she might in another. She’s afraid of nobody.”

“Sarah certainly does not lack courage,” said Lady Mary, smiling.

“I never saw anybody like her,” said Peter, whose love possessed him, mind, body, and soul. “Why, I’ve heard her keep a whole roomful of people laughing, and every one of them as dull as ditch-water till she came in. And to see her hold her own against men at games—she’s more strength in one of her pretty, white wrists,” said Peter, looking with an air of disparagement at his mother’s slender, delicate hand, “than you have in your whole body, I do believe.”

“She is splendidly strong,” said Lady Mary; “the very personification of youth and health.” She sighed softly.

“And beauty,” said Peter, excitedly. “Don’t leave that out. And a good sort, through and through, as even *you* must allow, mother.”

He spoke as though he suspected her of begrudging his praise of Sarah, and she made haste to reply:

“Indeed, she is a good sort, dear little Sarah.”

“She is very fond of you,” Peter said, in a choking voice. It seemed to him, in his infatuation, so touching that Sarah should be fond of any one. “She was dreadfully afraid of hurting your feelings; but yet, as she said, she was bound to be frank with me.”

“Oh, Peter, do tell me what you mean. You are keeping me on thorns,” said Lady Mary.

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She grew red and white by turns. Was John's happiness in sight already, as well as Peter's?

"It's—it's most awfully hard to tell you," said Peter.

He rose, and leant his elbow against the stone mullion nearest her, looking down anxiously upon her as he spoke.

"After all I said to you when we first came home, it's awfully hard. But if you would only understand, you could make it all easy enough."

"I will—I do understand."

But Peter could not make up his mind even now to be explicit.

"You see," he said, "Sarah is—not like other girls."

"Of course not," said his mother.

She controlled her impatience, reminding herself that Peter was very young, and that he had never been in love before.

"She's a kind of—of queen," said Peter, dreamily. "I only wish you could have seen what it was in London."

"I can imagine it," said Lady Mary.

"No, you couldn't. I hadn't an idea what she would be there, until I went to London and saw for myself," said Peter, who measured everybody's imagination by his own.

"You see," he explained "my position here, which seems so important to you and the other people round here, and *used* to seem so important to me—is—just nothing at all compared to what has been cast at her feet, as it were, over and over again, for her to pick up if she chose. And this house," said Peter, glancing round and shaking his head—"this house, which seems so beautiful to you now it's all done up, if you'd only *seen* the houses *she's* accustomed to staying at. Tintern Castle, for instance—"

"I was born in a greater house than Tintern Castle, Peter," said Lady Mary, gently.

"Oh, of course. I'm saying nothing against Ferries," said Peter, impatiently. "But you only lived there as a child. A child doesn't notice."

"Some children don't," said Lady Mary, with that faint, wondering smile which hid her pain from Peter, and would have revealed it so clearly to John.

“It isn’t that Sarah *minds* this old house,” said Peter; “she was saying what a pretty room she could make of the drawing-room only the other day.”

Lady Mary felt an odd pang at her heart. She thought of the trouble John had taken to choose the best of the water-colours for the rose-tinted room—the room he had declared so bright and so charming—of the pretty curtains and chintzes; and the valuable old china she had collected from every part of the house for the cabinets.

“You see, she’s got that sort of thing at her fingers’ ends, Lady Tintern being such a connoisseur,” said the unconscious Peter. “But she’s so afraid of hurting your feelings—”

“Why should she be?” said Lady Mary, coldly, in spite of herself. “If she does not like the drawing-room, she can easily alter it.”

“That’s what I say,” said Peter, with a touch of his father’s pomposity. “Surely a bride has a right to look forward to arranging her home as she chooses. And Sarah is mad about old French furniture—Louis Seize, I think it is—but I know nothing about such things. I think a man should leave the choice of furniture, and all that, to his wife—-especially when her taste happens to be as good as Sarah’s.”

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“I—I think so too, Peter,” said Lady Mary.

Her thoughts wandered momentarily into the past; but his eager tones recalled her attention.

“Then you won’t mind, so far?” said Peter, anxiously.

“I—why should I mind?” said Lady Mary, starting. “I believe—I have read—that old French furniture is all the rage now.” Then she bethought herself, and uttered a faint laugh. “But I’m afraid your aunts might make it a little uncomfortable for her, if she—-tried to alter anything. I—go my own way now, and don’t mind—but a young bride—-does not always like to be found fault with. She might find that relations-in-law are sometimes—a little trying.” Lady Mary felt, as she spoke these words, that she was somehow opening a way for herself as well as for Peter. She wondered, with a beating heart, whether the moment had come in which she ought to tell him—

“That’s just it,” said Peter’s voice, breaking in on her thoughts. “That’s just what Sarah means, and what I was trying to lead up to; only I’m no diplomatist. But that’s one of the greatest objections she has to marrying me, quite apart from disappointing her aunt. I can’t blame Lady Tintern,” said Peter, with a new and strange humility, “for not thinking me good enough for Sarah; and *that’s* not a difficulty *I* can ever hope to remove. Sarah is the one to decide that point. But about relations-in-law—it’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all this time.” He cleared his throat, which had grown dry and husky. “She says that when she marries she—she intends to have her house to herself.”

There was a pause.

“I see,” said Lady Mary.

She was silent; not, as Peter thought, with mortification; but because she could not make up her mind what words to choose, in which to tell him that it was freedom and happiness he was thus offering her with both hands; and not, as he thought, loneliness and disappointment.

Twice she essayed to speak, and failed through sheer embarrassment. The second time Peter lifted her hand to his lips. She felt through all her consciousness the shy remorse which prompted that rare caress.

“The—the Dower House,” faltered Peter, “is only a few yards away.”

A sudden desire to laugh aloud seized Lady Mary. His former words returned upon her memory.

“It’s—it’s rather damp, isn’t it?” she said, in a shaking voice.

He looked into her face, and did not understand the brightness of the smile that was shining through her tears.

“But it’s very picturesque,” said Peter, “and—and roomy. You and my aunts would be quite snug there; and it could be very prettily decorated, Sarah says.”

“Perhaps Sarah would advise us on the subject?” said Lady Mary, unable to resist this thrust.

“I’m sure she’d be delighted,” said Peter, simply.

Lady Mary fell back on her cushions and laughed helplessly, almost hysterically.

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“I don’t see why you should laugh,” said Peter, in a rather sore tone. “I don’t know how it is, but I never *can* understand you, mother.”

“I see you can’t. Never mind, Peter,” said Lady Mary. She sat up, and lifted her pretty hands to smooth the soft waves of her brown hair. “So I’m to settle down happily in my Dower House, and take your aunts to live with me?”

“Why, you see,” said Peter, “we couldn’t very well let the poor old things wander away alone into the world, could we?”

“I think,” said Lady Mary, slowly, “that they can take care of themselves. And it is just possible that they may have foreseen—your change of intentions.”

“Women can never take care of themselves,” said Peter. “And how can they have foreseen? I had no idea myself of *this* happening. But they would be perfectly happy in the Dower House; it is close by, and I could see them very often. It wouldn’t be like leaving Barracombe.”

“Yes, I think they could be happy there,” said Lady Mary. She felt that the moment had come at last. Her heart beat thickly, and her colour came and went. “But if *they* were happily settled at the Dower House,” she said slowly, for her agitation was making her breathless, and she did not want Peter to notice it,”—I would willingly give it up to them altogether. It could not matter whether *I* were there or not. Though they are old, they are perfectly able to look after themselves—and other people; and if they were not, they would not like *me* to take care of them. They have their own servants and Mrs. Ash. And they have never liked me, Peter, though we have lived together so many years.”

“That is nonsense,” said Peter, very calmly; “and if *they* don’t want you there, mother, *I* do. Of course you must live at the Dower House; my father left it to you. And I shall want you more than ever now.”

“I don’t see how,” said Lady Mary.

“Why, *we*—Sarah and I,” said Peter, lingering fondly over the words which linked that beloved name with his own, “if we ever—if *it* ever came off—we shall naturally be away from home a good deal. I couldn’t ask Sarah to tie herself down to this dull old place, could I?”

“I suppose not,” said Lady Mary.

“She’s accustomed to going about the world a good deal,” said Peter.

“No doubt.”

“Even *I*,” said Peter, turning a flushed face towards his mother—“I am too young, as Sarah says—and I feel it myself since I have seen something of the life she lives—to become a complete fixture, like my father was. It’s—it’s, as Sarah says—it’s narrowing. I can see the effects of it upon you all,” said Peter, calmly, “when I come back here.”

He could not fathom the wistfulness which clouded the blue eyes she lifted to his face.

“It is very narrowing,” she said humbly.

“One may devote one’s self to one’s duties as a landed proprietor,” said Peter, with another recurrence of pomposity, “and yet see something of one’s fellow-men.”

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He replaced the eyeglass, and walked up and down the room for a few moments, as though he were pacing a quarter-deck. He looked very tall, and very, very slight and thin; older than his years, tanned and dried by the African sun, which had enhanced his natural darkness. Though he spoke as a boy, he looked like a man. His mother's heart yearned over him.

Peter had taken his lack of perception with him into the heart of South Africa, and brought it back intact. Because his body had travelled many hundreds of miles over land and sea, he believed that his mind had opened in proportion to the distance covered. He knew that men and women of action pick up knowledge of the world without pausing on their busy way; but he did not know that it is to the silent, the sorrowful, and the solitary—to those who have time to listen—that God reveals the secrets of life.

She said to herself that everything about him was dear to her; his grey eyes, that never saw below the surface of things; his thin, brown face; his youthful affectation; the strange, new growth which shaded his long upper lip, and softened the plainness of the Crewys physiognomy, which Peter would not have bartered for the handsomest set of Greek features ever imagined by a sculptor. Even for his faults Lady Mary had a tender toleration; for Peter would not have been Peter without them.

"It would not be fair on Sarah, knowing all London—worth knowing—as she does," said Peter with pardonable exaggeration, "to rob her of the season altogether. We shall go up regularly, every year, if—if she marries me. Of that I am determined, and so"—-incidentally—"is she."

"Nothing could be nicer," said Lady Mary, heartily enough to satisfy even Peter.

He spoke with more warmth and naturalness. "She likes to go abroad, mother, too, now and then," he said.

"That would be delightful," said Lady Mary, eagerly. Her blue eyes sparkled. Her interest and enthusiasm were easily roused, after all; and surely these new ideas would make it much easier to tell Peter. "Oh, Peter!" she said, clasping her hands, "Paris—-Rome—Switzerland!"

"Wherever Sarah fancies," said Peter, magnanimously. "I can't say I care much. All I am thinking of is—being with her. It doesn't matter *where*, so long as she is pleased. What does anything matter," he said, and his dark face softened as she had never seen it soften yet, "so long as one is with the companion one loves best in the world?"

"It would be—Paradise," said Lady Mary, in a low voice; and she thought to herself resolutely, "I will tell him now."

Peter ceased his walk, and came close to her and took her hand. The emotion had not altogether died out of his voice and face.

“But you are not to think, mother, that I shall ever again be the selfish boy I used to be—the boy who didn’t value your love and devotion.”

“No, dear, no,” she answered, with wet eyes; “I will never think so. We can love each other just the same, perhaps even batter, even though—Oh, Peter—”

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But Peter was in no mind to brook interruption. He was burning to pour out his plans for her future, and his own.

“Wherever we may go, and whatever we may be doing,” he said emotionally, “it will be a joy and a comfort to me to know that my dear old mother is always *here*. Taking care of the place and looking after the people, and waiting always to welcome me, with her old sweet smile on her dear old face.”

Peter was not often moved to such enthusiasm, and he was almost overcome by his own eloquence in describing this beautiful picture.

Lady Mary was likewise overcome. She sank back once more in her cushioned corner, looking at him with a blank dismay that could not escape even his dull observation. How impossible it was to tell Peter, after all! How impossible he always made it!

“I know you must feel it just at first,” he said anxiously; “but you—you can’t expect to keep me all to yourself for ever.”

She shook her head, and tried to smile.

He grew a little impatient. “After all,” he said, “you must be reasonable, mother. Every one has to live his own life.”

Then Lady Mary found words. A sudden rush of indignation—the pent-up feelings of years—brought the scarlet blood to her cheeks and the fire to her gentle, blue eyes.

“Every one—but *me*” she said, trembling violently.

“You!” said Peter, astonished.

She clasped her hands against her bosom to still the panting and throbbing that, it seemed to her, must be evident outwardly, so strong was the emotion that shook her fragile form.

“Every one—but me,” she said. “Does it never—strike you—Peter—that I, too, would like to live before I die? Whilst you are living your own life, why shouldn’t I be living mine? Why shouldn’t *I* go to London, and to Paris, and to Rome, and to Switzerland, or wherever I choose, now that you—*you*—have set me free?”

“Mother,” said Peter, aghast, “are you gone mad?”

“Perhaps I am a little mad,” said poor Lady Mary. “People go mad sometimes, who have been too long—in prison—they say.” Then she saw his real alarm, and laughed till she cried. “I am not really mad,” she said. “Do not be frightened, Peter. I—I was only joking.”

“It is enough to frighten anybody when you go on like that,” said Peter, relieved, but angry. “Talking of prison, and rushing about all over the world—I see no joke in that.”

“Why should I be the only one who must not rush all over the world?” said Lady Mary.

“You must know perfectly well it would be preposterous,” said Peter, sullenly, “to break up all your habits, and leave Barracombe and—and all of us—and start a fresh life—at your age. And if this is how you mock at me and all my plans, I’m sorry I ever took you into my confidence at all. I might have known I should repent it,” he said; and a sob of angry resentment broke his voice.

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“Indeed, I am not mocking at you, Peter,” she said, sorely repentant and ashamed of her outburst. “Forgive me, darling! I see it was—not the moment. You do not understand. You are thinking only of Sarah, as is natural just now. It was not the moment for me to be talking of myself.”

“You never used to be selfish,” said Peter, thawing somewhat, as she threw her arms about him, and rested her head against his shoulder.

She laughed rather sadly. “But perhaps I am growing selfish—in my old age,” said Peter’s mother.

Later, Lady Mary sought John Crewys in the smoking-room. He sprang up, smiled at her, and held out his hand.

“So Peter has been confiding his schemes to you?”

“How did you know?”

“I only guessed. When a man seeks a *tete-a-tete* so earnestly, it is generally to talk about himself. Did the schemes include—Sarah?”

“They include Sarah—marriage—travelling—London—change of every kind.”

“Already!” cried John, “Bravo, Peter! and hurray for one-and-twenty! And you are free?”

“Oh, no; I am not to be free.”

“What! Do his schemes include you?”

“Not altogether.”

“That is surely illogical, if yours are to include him?”

She smiled faintly. “I am to be always here, to look after the place when he and Sarah are travelling or in London. I am to live with his aunts. He wants to be able to think of me as always waiting here to welcome him home, as—as I have been all his life. Not actually in this house, because—Sarah—my little Sarah—wouldn’t like that, it seems; but in the Dower House, close by.”

“I see,” said John. “How delightfully ingenuous, and how pleasingly unselfish a very young man can sometimes be!”

“Ah! don’t laugh at me, John,” she said tremulously. “Indeed, just now, I cannot bear it.”

“Laugh at you, my queen—my saint! How little you know me!” said John, tenderly. “It was at Peter that I was presuming to smile.”

“Is it a laughing matter?” she said wistfully.

“I think it will be, Mary.”

“I tried so hard to tell him,” said Lady Mary, “but I couldn’t. Somehow he made it impossible. He looks upon me as quite, quite old.”

John laughed outright. A laugh that rang true even to Lady Mary’s sensitive perceptions.

“But didn’t *you* look upon everybody over thirty as, quite old when you were one-and-twenty? I’m sure I did.”

“Perhaps. But yet—I don’t know. I am his mother. It is natural he should feel so. He made me realize how preposterous it was for me, the mother of a grown-up son, to be thinking selfishly of my own happiness, as though I were a young, fresh girl just starting life.”

“I had hoped,” said John, quietly, “that you might be thinking a little of my happiness too.”

“Oh, John! But your happiness and mine seemed all the same thing,” she said ingenuously. “Yet he thinks of my life as finished; and I was thinking of it as though it were beginning all over again. He made me feel so ashamed, so conscience-stricken.” She hid her face in her hands. “How could I tell him?”

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“I think,” said John, “that the time has come when he must be told. I meant to put it off until he attained his majority; but since he has broached the subject of your leaving this house himself, he has given us the best opportunity possible. And I also think—that the telling had better be left to me.”

CHAPTER XVIII

John Crewys stood on the walk below the terrace, with Peter by his side, enjoying an after-breakfast smoke, and watching a party of sportsmen climbing up the bracken-clothed slopes of the opposite hillside. A dozen beaters were toiling after the guns, among whom the short and sturdy figure of Colonel Hewel was very plainly to be distinguished. A boy was leading a pony-cart for the game.

Sarah had accepted an invitation to dine and spend the evening with her beloved Lady Mary at Barracombe; but Peter had another appointment with her besides, of which Lady Mary knew nothing. He was to meet her at the ferry, and picnic on the moor at the top of the hill, on his side of the river. But through all the secret joy and triumph that possessed him at the remembrance of this rendezvous, he could not but sigh as he watched the little procession of sportsmen opposite, and almost involuntarily his regret escaped him in the half-muttered words—

“I shall never shoot again.”

“There are things even better worth doing in life,” said John, sympathetically.

“Colonel Hewel wouldn’t give in to that,” said Peter.

“He’s rather a one-idea’d man,” John agreed. “But if you asked him whether he’d sacrifice all the sport he’s ever likely to enjoy, for one chance to distinguish himself in action—why, you’re a soldier, and you know best what he’d say.”

Peter’s brow cleared. “You’ve got a knack,” he said, almost graciously, “of putting a fellow in a good humour with himself, Cousin John.”

“I generally find it easier to be in a good humour with myself than with other people,” said John, whimsically. “One expects so little from one’s self, that one is scarcely ever disappointed; and so much from other people, that nothing they can do comes up to one’s expectations.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Peter, bluntly. “Old Crawley says *you* take it out of yourself like anything. Since I came back this time, he’s been holding forth to me about all you’ve done for me and the estate, and all that. I didn’t know my father had left things in such a mess. And that was a smart thing you did about buying in the farm, and

settling the dispute with the Crown, which my father used to be so worried over. I see I've got a good bit to thank you for, Cousin John. I—I'm no end grateful, and all that."

"All right," said John. "Don't bother to make speeches, old boy."

"I must say one thing, though," said Peter, awkwardly. "I was against all the changes, and thought they might have been left till I came home; but I didn't realize it was to be now or never, as old Crawley puts it, and that I'm not to have the right to touch my capital when I come of age."

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“The whole arrangement was rather an unusual one; but everything’s worked out all right, and, as far as the estate goes, you’ll find it in pretty fair order to start upon, and values increased,” said John, quietly. “But Crawley has the whole thing at his fingers’ ends, and the interest of the place thoroughly at heart. You couldn’t have a better adviser.”

“He’s well enough,” said Peter, somewhat ungraciously.

“Shall we take a turn up and down?” said John. He lighted a fresh cigarette. “There is a chill feeling in the air, though it is such a lovely morning.”

“It will be warmer when the sun has conquered the mist,” said Peter, with a slight shiver.

The white dew on the long grass, and the gossamer cobwebs spun in a single night from twig to twig of the rose-trees, glittered in the sunshine.

The autumn roses bloomed cheerfully in the long border, and the robins were singing loudly on the terrace above. The heavy heads of the dahlias drooped beneath their weight of moisture, in these last days of their existence, before the frost would bring them to a sudden end. Capucines, in every shade of brown and crimson and gold, ran riot over the ground.

Peter drew a pipe from his pocket, put it in his mouth, took out his tobacco-pouch, and filled the pipe with his left hand.

John watched him with interest. “That was dexterously done.”

“I’m getting pretty handy,” said the hero, with satisfaction, striking a match; “but”—his face fell anew—“no more football; one feels that sort of thing just at the beginning of the season. No more games. It wouldn’t tell so much on a fellow like you, Cousin John, who’s perfectly happy with a book, and who—”

“Who’s too old for games,” suggested John.

“Oh, there’s always golf,” said Peter.

“A refuge for the aged, eh?” said John, and his eyes twinkled. “But Miss Sarah says you bid fair to beat her at croquet.”

“Oh, she was—just rotting,” said Peter; and the tone touched John, though he detested slang. “And what’s croquet, after all, to a fellow that’s used to exercise? I suppose I shall be all right again hunting, when I’ve got my nerve back a bit. At present it’s rotten. A fellow feels so beastly helpless and one-sided. However, that’ll wear off, I expect.”

“I hope so,” said John.

They reached the end of the long walk, and stood for a moment beneath the eastern turret, watching the sparkles on the brown surface of the river below, and the white mist floating away down the valley.

“Talking of advice,” said Peter, abruptly—“if I wanted *that*, I’d rather come to you than to old Crawley. After all, though you won’t be my guardian much longer, you’re still my mother’s trustee.”

“Yes,” said John, smiling; “the law still entitles me to take an interest in—in your mother.”

“Of course I shouldn’t dream of mentioning her affairs, or mine either, for that matter, to any one else,” said Peter.

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He made an exception in his own mind, but decided that it was not necessary to explain this to John, for the moment.

“Thank you, Peter,” said John.

“My mother—seems to me,” said Peter, slowly, “to have changed very much since I went to South Africa. Have you noticed it?”

“I have,” said John, dryly.

“I don’t suppose,” said Peter, quickening his steps, “that any one could realize exactly what I feel about it.”

“I think—perhaps—I could,” said John, without visible satire, “dimly and, no doubt, inadequately.”

“The fact is,” said Peter, and the warm colour rushed into his brown face, even to his thin temples, “I—I’m hoping to get married very soon; though nothing’s exactly settled yet.”

“A man in your position generally marries early,” said John. “I think you’re quite right.”

“As my mother likes—the girl I want to marry,” said Peter, “I hoped it would make everything straight. But she seems quite miserable at the thought of settling down quietly in the Dower House.”

“Ah! in the Dower House,” said John. “Then you will not be wanting her to live here with you, after all?”

“It’s the same thing, though,” said Peter, “as I’ve tried to explain to her. She’d be only a few yards off; and she could still be looking after the place and my interests, and all that, as she does now. And whenever I was down here, I should see her constantly; you know how devoted I am to my mother. Of course I can’t deny I did lead her to hope I should be always with her. But a man can’t help it if he happens to fall in love. Of course, if—if all happens as I hope, as I have reason to hope, I shall *have* to be away from her a good deal. But that’s all in the course of nature as a fellow grows up. I sha’n’t be any the less glad to see her when I *do* come home. And yet here she is talking quite wildly of leaving Barracombe altogether, and going to London, and travelling all over the world, and doing all sorts of things she’s never done in her life. It’s not like my mother, and I can’t bear to think of her like that. I tell you she’s changed altogether,” said Peter, and there were tears in his grey eyes.

John felt an odd sympathy for the boy; he recognized that though Peter’s limitations were obvious, his anxiety was sincere.

Peter, too, had his ideals; if they were ideals conventional and out of date, that was hardly his fault. John figured to himself very distinctly that imaginary mother whom Peter held sacred; the mother who stayed always at home, and parted her hair plainly, and said many prayers, and did much needlework; but who, nevertheless, was not, and never could be, the real Lady Mary, whom Peter did not know. But it was a tender ideal in its way, though it belonged to that past into which so many tender and beautiful visions have faded.

The maiden of to-day still dreams of the knightly armour-clad heroes of the twelfth century; it is not her fault that she is presently glad to fall in love with a gentleman on the Stock Exchange, in a top hat and a frock coat.

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“I have seen something of women of the world,” said Peter, who had scarcely yet skimmed the bubbles from the surface of that society, whose depths he believed himself to have explored. “I suppose that is what my mother wants to turn into, when she talks of London and Paris. *My mother*! who has lived in the country all her life.”

“I suppose some women are worldly,” said John, as gravely as possible, “and no doubt the shallow-hearted, the stupid, the selfish are to be found everywhere, and belonging to either sex; but, nevertheless, solid virtue and true kindness are to be met with among the dames of Mayfair as among the matrons of the country-side. Their shibboleth is different, that’s all. Perhaps—it is possible—that the speech of the town ladies is the more charitable, that they seek more persistently to do good to their fellow-creatures. I don’t know. Comparisons are odious, but so,” he added, with a slight laugh, “are general conclusions, founded on popular prejudice rather than individual experience—-odious.”

Here John perceived that his words of wisdom were conveying hardly any meaning to Peter, who was only waiting impatiently till he had come to an end of them; so he pursued this topic no further, and contented himself by inquiring:

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to explain to her,” said Peter, eagerly, “how unsuitable it would be; and to advise her to settle down quietly at the Dower House, as I’m sure my father would have wished her to do. That’s all.”

“I see,” said John, “you want me to put the case to her from your point of view.”

“I wish you would,” said Peter, earnestly; “every one says you’re so eloquent. Surely you could talk her over?”

“I hope I am not eloquent in private life,” said John, laughing. “But if you want to know how it appears to me—?”

Peter nodded gravely, pipe in mouth.

“Let us see. To start with,” said John, thoughtfully, “you went off, a boy from Eton, to serve your country when you thought, and rightly, that your country had need of you. You distinguished yourself in South Africa—”

“Surely you needn’t go into all that?” said Peter, staring.

“Excuse me,” said John, smiling. “In putting your case, I can’t bear to leave out vital details. Merely professional prejudice. Shortly, then, you fully sustained your share in a long and arduous campaign; you won your commission; you were wounded, decorated, and invalided home.”

He stopped short in the brilliant sunshine which now flooded their path, and looked gravely at Peter.

“Some of us,” said John, “have imagination enough to realize, even without the help of war-correspondents, the scenes of horror through which you, and scores of other boys, fresh from school, like you, had to live through. We can picture the long hours on the veldt—on the march—in captivity—in the hospitals—in the blockhouses—when soldiers have been sick at heart, wearied to death with physical suffering, and haunted by ghastly memories of dead comrades.”

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Peter hurriedly drew his left hand from the pocket where the beloved tobacco-pouch reposed, and pulled his brown felt hat down over his eyes, as though the October sunlight hurt them.

“I think at such times, Peter,” said John, quietly continuing his walk by the boy’s side, “that you must have longed now and then for your home; for this peaceful English country, your green English woods, and the silent hall where your mother waited for you, trembled for you, prayed for you. I think your heart must have ached then, as so many men’s hearts have ached, to remember the times when you might have made her happy by a word, or a look, or a smile. And you didn’t do it, Peter—*you didn’t do it*.”

Peter made a restless movement indicative of surprise and annoyance; but he was silent still, and John changed his tone, and spoke lightly and cheerfully.

“Well, then you came home; and your joy of life, of youth, of health all returned; and you looked forward, naturally, to taking your share of the pleasures open to other young men of your standing. But you never meant to forget your mother, as so many careless sons forget those who have watched and waited for them. Even though you fell in love, you still thought of her. When you were weary of travel, or pleasure connected with the outside world, you meant always to return to her. You liked to think she would still be waiting for you; faithfully, gratefully waiting, within the sacred precincts of your childhood’s home. And now, when you remember her submission to your father’s wishes in the past, and her single-hearted devotion to yourself, you are shocked and disappointed to find that she can wish to descend from her beautiful and guarded solitude here, and mix with her fellow-creatures in the work-a-day world. Why,” said John, in a tone rather of dreaming and tenderness than of argument, “that would be to tear the jewel from its setting—the noble central figure from the calm landscape, lit by the evening sun.”

There was a pause, during which Peter smoked energetically.

“Well,” he said presently, “of course I can’t follow all that highfalutin’ style, you know—”

“Of course not,” said John, “I understand. You’re a plain Englishman.”

“Exactly,” said Peter, relieved; “I am. But one thing I will say—you’ve got the idea.”

“Thank you,” said John.

“If you can put it like that to my mother,” said Peter, still busy with his pipe, but speaking very emphatically, “why, all I can say is, that I believe it’s the way to get round her. I’ve often noticed how useless it seems to talk common-sense to her. But a word of sentiment—and there you are. Strange to say, she likes nothing better than—er—-poetry. I hope you don’t mind my calling you rather poetical,” said Peter, in a tone of

sincere apology. “I wish, John, you’d go straight to my mother, and put the whole case before her, just like that.”

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“The whole case!” said John. “But, my dear fellow, that’s only half the case.”

“What do you mean?”

“The other half,” said John, “is the case from *her* point of view.”

“I don’t see,” said Peter, “how her point of view can be different from mine.”

John’s thoughts flew back to a February evening, more than two years earlier. It seemed to him that Sir Timothy stood before him, surprised, pompous, argumentative. But he saw only Peter, looking at him with his father’s grey eyes set in a boy’s thin face.

“My experience as a barrister,” he said, with a curious sense of repeating himself, “has taught me that it is possible for two persons to take diametrically opposite views of the same question.”

“And what happens then?” said Peter, stupidly.

“Our bread and butter.”

“But *why* should my mother leave the place she’s lived in for years and years, and go gadding about all over the world—at her time of life? I don’t see what can be said for the wisdom of that?”

“Nothing from your point of view, I dare say,” said John. “Much from hers. If you are willing to listen, and if,” he added smiling, as an afterthought, “you will promise not to interrupt?”

“Well,” said Peter, rather doubtfully, “all right, I promise. You won’t be long, I suppose?”

He glanced stealthily down towards the ferry, though he knew that Sarah would not be there for a couple of hours at least, and that he could reach it in less than ten minutes. But half the pleasure of meeting Sarah consisted in waiting for her at the trysting-place.

John observed the glance, and smiled imperceptibly. He took out his watch.

“I shall speak,” he said, carefully examining it, “for four minutes.”

“Let’s sit,” said Peter. “It’s warm enough now, in all conscience.”

They sat upon an old stone bench below the turret. Peter leant back with his black head resting against the wall, his felt hat tipped over his eyes and his pipe in his mouth. He looked comfortable, even good-humoured.

“Go ahead,” he murmured.

“To understand the case from your mother’s point of view, I am afraid it is necessary,” said John, “to take a rapid glance at the circumstances of her life which have—which have made her what she is. She came here, as a child, didn’t she, when her father died; and though he had just succeeded to the earldom, he died a very poor man? Your father, as her guardian, spared no pains, nor expense for that matter, in educating and maintaining her. When she was barely seventeen years old, he married her.”

There was a slight dryness in John’s voice as he made the statement, which accounted for the gruffness of Peter’s acquiescence.

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“Of course—she was quite willing,” said John, understanding the offence implied by Peter’s growl. “But as we are looking at things exclusively from her point of view just now, we must not forget that she had seen nothing of the world, nothing of other men. She had also”—he caught his breath—“a bright, gay, pleasure-loving disposition; but she moulded herself to seriousness to please her husband, to whom she owed everything. When other girls of her age were playing at love—thinking of dances, and games and outings—she was absorbed in motherhood and household cares. A perfect wife, a perfect mother, as poor human nature counts perfection.”

Lady Mary would have cried out in vehement contradiction and self-reproach, had she heard these words; but Peter again growled reluctant acquiescence, when John paused.

“In one day,” said John, slowly, “she was robbed of husband and child. Her husband by death; her boy, her only son, by his own will. He deserted her without even bidding, or intending to bid her, farewell. Hush—remember, this is from *her* point of view.”

Peter had started to his feet with an angry exclamation; but he sat down again, and bent his sullen gaze on the garden path as John continued. His brown face was flushed; but John’s low, deep tones, now tender, now scornful, presently enchained and even fascinated his attention. He listened intently, though angrily.

“Her grief was passionate, but—her life was not over,” said John. “She, who had been guided from childhood by the wishes of others, now found that, without neglecting any duty, she could consult her own inclinations, indulge her own tastes, choose her own friends, enjoy with all the fervour of an unspoilt nature the world which opened freshly before her: a world of art, of music, of literature, of a thousand interests which mean so much to some of us, so little to others. To her returns this formerly undutiful son, and finds—a passionately devoted mother, indeed, but also a woman in the full pride of her beauty and maturity. And this boy would condemn *her*—the most delightful, the most attractive, the most unselfish companion ever desired by a man—to sit in the chimney-corner like an old crone with a distaff, throughout all the years that fate may yet hold in store for her—with no greater interest in life than to watch the fading of her own sweet face in the glass, and to await the intervals during which he would be graciously pleased to afford her the consolation of his presence.”

“Have you done?” said Peter, furiously.

“I could say a good deal more,” said John, growing suddenly cool. “But”—he showed his watch—“my time is up.”

“What—what do you mean by all this?” said the boy, stammering with passion. “What is my mother to *you*?”

The time had come.

John's bright hazel eyes had grown stern; his middle-aged face, flushed with the emotion his own words had aroused, yet controlled and calm in every line of handsome feature and steady brow, confronted Peter's angry, bewildered gaze.

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“She is the woman I love,” said John. “The woman I mean to make my wife.”

He remained seated, silently waiting for Peter to imbibe and assimilate his words.

After a quick gasp of incredulous indignation, Peter, too, sat silent at his side.

John gave him time to recover before he spoke again.

“I hope,” he said, very gently, “that when you have thought it over, you won’t mind it so much. As it’s going to be—it would be pleasanter if you and I could be friends. I think, later on, you may even perceive advantages in the arrangement—under the circumstances; when you have recovered from your natural regret in realizing that she must leave Barracombe—”

“It isn’t that,” said Peter, hoarsely. He felt he must speak; and he also desired, it must be confessed, to speak offensively, and relieve himself somewhat of the accumulated rage and resentment that was burning in his breast. “It’s—it’s simply”—he said, flushing darkly, and turning his face away from John’s calm and friendly gaze—“that to me—to *me*, the idea is—ridiculous.”

“Ah!” said John. He rose from the stone bench. A spark of anger came to him, too, as he looked at Peter, but he controlled his voice and his temper. “The time will come,” he said, “when your imagination will be able to grasp the possibility of love between a man in the forties and a woman in the thirties. At least, for your sake, I hope it will.”

“Why for my sake?” said Peter.

“Because I should be sorry,” said John, “if you died young.”

CHAPTER XIX

Nearly a thousand feet above the fertile valley of the Youle, stretched a waste of moorland. Here all the trees were gnarled and dwarfed above the patches of rust-coloured bracken; save only the delicate silver birch, which swayed and yielded to the wind.

Great boulders were scattered among the thorn bushes, and over their rough and glistening breasts were flung velvet coverings of green moss and grey lichen.

On this October day, the heather yet sturdily bore a few last rosy blossoms, and the ripe blackberries shone like black diamonds on the straggling brambles. Here and there a belated furze-bush erected its golden crown.

Over the dim purple of the distant hills, a brighter purple line proclaimed the sea. Closer at hand, on a ridge exposed to every wind of heaven, sighed a little wood of stunted larch and dull blue pine, against a clear and brilliant sky.

Sarah was enthroned on a mossy stone, beneath the yellowing foliage of a sheltering beech.

Her glorious ruddy hair was uncovered, and a Tyrolese hat was hung on a neighbouring bramble, beside a little tweed coat. She wore a loose white canvas shirt, and short tweed skirt; a brown leather belt, and brown leather boots.

Being less indifferent to creature-comforts than to the preservation of her complexion, Miss Sarah was paying great attention to the contents of a market-basket by her side. She had chosen a site for the picnic near a bubbling brook, and had filled her glass with clear sparkling water therefrom, before seating herself to enjoy her cold chicken and bread and butter, and a slice of game-pie.

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Peter was very far from feeling any inclination towards displaying the hilarity which an outdoor meal is supposed to provoke. He was obliged to collect sticks, and put a senseless round-bottomed kettle on a damp reluctant fire; to himself he used much stronger adjectives in describing both; he relieved his feelings slightly by saying that he never ate lunch, and by gloomily eying the game-pie instead of aiding Sarah to demolish it.

“It wouldn’t be a picnic without a kettle and a fire; and we *must* have hot water to wash up with. I brought a dish-cloth on purpose,” said Sarah. “I can’t think why you don’t enjoy yourself. You used to be fond of eating and drinking—*anywhere*—and most of all on the moor—in the good old days that are gone.”

“I am not a philosopher like you,” said Peter, angrily.

“I am anything but that,” said Sarah, with provoking cheerfulness. “A philosopher is a thoughtful middle-aged person who puts off enjoying life until it’s too late to begin.”

“I hate middle-aged people,” said Peter.

“I am not very fond of them myself, as a rule,” said Sarah, indulgently. “They aren’t nice and amusing to talk to, like you and me; or rather” (with a glance at her companion’s face), “like *me*; and they aren’t picturesque and fond of spoiling us, as *really* old people are. They are just busy trying to get all they can out of the world, that’s all. But there are exceptions; or, of course, it wouldn’t be a rule. Your mother is an exception. No one, young or old, was ever more picturesque or—or more altogether delicious. It was I who taught her that new way of doing her hair. By-the-by, how do you like it?”

“I don’t like it at all,” growled Peter.

“Perhaps you preferred the old way,” said Sarah, turning up her short nose rather scornfully. “Parted, indeed, and brushed down flat over her ears, exactly like that horrid old Mrs. Ash!”

“Mrs. Ash has lived with us for thirty years,” said Peter, in a tone implying that he desired no liberties to be taken with the names of his faithful retainers.

“That doesn’t make her any better looking, however,” retorted Sarah. “In fact, she might have had more chance of learning how to do her hair properly anywhere else, now I come to think of it.”

“Of course everything at Barracombe is ugly and old-fashioned,” said Peter, gloomily.

“Except your mother,” said Sarah.

“Sarah! I can’t stand any more of this rot!” said Peter, starting from his couch of heather. “Will you talk sense, or let me?”

Sarah shot a keen glance of inquiry at his moody face.

“Well,” she said, in resigned tones, “I did hope to finish my lunch in peace. I saw there was something the matter when you came striding up the hill without a word, but I thought it was only that you found the basket too heavy. Of course, if I had known it was only to be lunch for one, I would not have put in so many things; and certainly not a whole bottle of papa’s best claret. In fact, if I had known I was to picnic practically alone, I would not have crossed the river at all.”

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Then she saw that Peter was in earnest, and with a sigh of regret, Sarah returned the dish of jam-puffs to the basket.

“I couldn’t talk sense, or even listen to it, with those heavenly puffs under my very nose,” she said. “Now, what is it?”

“I hate telling you—I hate talking of it,” said Peter, and a dark flush rose to his frowning eyebrows. He threw himself once more at Sarah’s feet, and turned his face away from her, and towards the blue streak of distant sea. “John Crewys wants to marry—my mother,” he said in choking tones.

“Is that all?” said Sarah. “I’ve seen that for ages. Aren’t you glad?”

“Glad!” said Peter.

“I thought,” Sarah said innocently, “that *you* wanted to marry *me*?”

“Sarah!”

“Well!” said Sarah. She looked rather oddly at Peter’s recumbent figure. Then she pushed the loosened waves of her red hair from her forehead with a determined gesture. “Well,” she said defiantly, “isn’t that one obstacle to our marriage removed? Your aunts will go to the Dower House, and your mother will leave Barracombe, and you’ll have the place all to yourself. And you dare to tell me you’re sorry?”

“Yes,” said Peter, sitting up and facing her, “I dare.”

“I’m glad of that,” said Sarah. Her deep voice softened. “I should have thought less of you if you hadn’t dared.”

Suddenly she rose from her mossy throne, shook the crumbs off her skirt, and looked down upon Peter with blue eyes sparkling beneath her long lashes, and the fresh red colour deepening and spreading in her cheeks, until even the tips of her delicate ears and her creamy throat turned pink.

“*Well*,” said Sarah, “go and stop it. Make your mother sorry and ashamed. It would be very easy. Tell her she’s too old to be happy. But say good-bye to me first.”

“Sarah!”

“Why is it to be all sunshine for you, and all shade for her?” said Sarah. “Hasn’t she wept enough to please you? Mayn’t she have her St. Martin’s summer? God gives it to her. Will *you* take it away?”

“Sarah!”

He looked up at her crimsoned tearful face in dismay. Was this Sarah the infantile—the pink-and-white—the seductive, laughing, impudent Sarah? And yet how passionately Peter admired her in this mood of virago, which he had never seen since the days of her childish rages of long ago.

"Why do you suppose," said Sarah, disdainfully, "that I've been letting you follow *me* about all this summer, and desert *her*; except to show her how little you are to be depended upon? To bring home to her how foolish she'd be to fling away her happiness for your sake. *You*, who at one word from me, were willing to turn her out of her own home, to live in a wretched little villa at your very door. Don't interrupt me," said Sarah, stamping, "and say you weren't willing. You told her so. I meant you to tell her, and yet —I could have killed you, Peter, when I heard her sweet voice faltering out to me, that she would be ready and glad to give up her place to her boy's wife, whenever the time should come."

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"*She* told you?" cried Peter.

"But she didn't say you'd asked her," cried Sarah, scornfully. "*I* knew it, but she never guessed I did. She was only gently smoothing away, as she hoped, the difficulties that lay in the path to *your* happiness. Oh, that she could have believed it of me! But she thinks only of your happiness. *You*, who would snatch away hers this minute if you could. She never dreamt I knew you'd said a word."

She paused in her impassioned speech, and the tears dropped from the dark blue eyes. Sarah was crying, and Peter was speechless with awe and dismay.

"I think she would have died, Peter," said Sarah, solemnly, "before she would have told me how brutal you'd been, and how stupid, and how selfish. I meant you to show her all that. I thought it would open her eyes. I was such a fool! As if anything could open the eyes of a mother to the faults of her only son."

Peter looked at her with such despair and grief in his dark face that her heart almost softened towards him; but she hardened it again immediately.

"Do you mean that you—you've been playing with me all this time, Sarah? They—-everybody told me—that you were only playing—but I've never believed it."

"I *meant* to play with you," said Sarah, turning, if possible, even redder than before; "I meant to teach you a lesson, and throw you over. And the more I saw of you, the more I didn't repent. You, who dared to think yourself superior to your mother; and, indeed, to any woman! Kings are enslaved by women, you know," said Miss Sarah, tossing her head, "and statesmen are led by them, though they oughtn't to be. And—and poets worship them, or how could they write poetry? There would be nothing to write about. It is reserved for boys and savages to look down upon them."

She sat scornfully down again on her boulder, and put her hands to her loosened hair.

"I can't think why a scene always makes one's hair untidy," said Sarah, suddenly bursting into a laugh; but the whiteness of Peter's face frightened her, and she had some ado to laugh naturally. "And I am lost without a looking-glass," she added, in a somewhat quavering tone of bravado.

She pulled out a great tortoise-shell dagger, and a heavy mass of glorious red-gold hair fell about her piquant face, and her pretty milk-white throat, down to her waist.

"Dear me!" said Miss Sarah. She looked around. Near the bubbling brook, dark peaty hollows held little pools, which offered Nature's mirror for her toilet.

She went to the side of the stream and knelt down. Her plump white hands dexterously twisted and secured the long burnished coil. Then she glanced slyly round at Peter.

He lay face downwards on the grass. His shoulders heaved. The pretty picture Miss Sarah's coquetry presented had been lost upon the foolish youth.

She returned in a leisurely manner to her place, and leaning her chin on her hand, and her elbow on her knee, regarded him thoughtfully.

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“Where was I? Yes, I remember. It is a lesson for a girl, Peter, never to marry a boy or a savage.”

“Sarah!” said Peter. He raised his face and looked at her. His eyes were red, but he was too miserable to care; he was, as she had said, only a boy. “Sarah, you’re not in earnest! You can’t be! I—I know I ought to be angry.” Miss Sarah laughed derisively. “Yes, you laugh, for you know too well I can’t be angry with you. I love you!” said Peter, passionately, “though you are—as cruel as though I’ve not had pretty well as much to bear to-day, as I know how to stand. First, John Crewys, and now you—saying—”

“Just the truth,” said Sarah, calmly.

“I don’t deny,” said Peter, in a quivering voice, “that—that some of the beastly things he said came—came home to me. I’ve been a selfish brute to *her*, I always have been. You’ve said so pretty plainly, and I—I dare say it’s true. I think it’s true. But to *you*—and I was so happy.” He hid his face in his hand.

“I’m glad you have the grace to see the error of your ways at last,” said Sarah, encouragingly. “It makes me quite hopeful about you. But I’m sorry to see you’re still only thinking of *our* happiness—I mean *yours*,” she corrected herself in haste, for a sudden eager hope flashed across Peter’s miserable young face. “Yours, yours, *yours*. It’s your happiness and not hers you think of still, though you’ve all your life before you, and she has only half hers. But no one has ever thought of her—except me, and one other.”

“John Crewys?” said Peter, angrily.

“Not John Crewys at all,” snapped Sarah. “He is just thinking of his own happiness like you are. All men are alike, except the one I’m thinking of. But though I make no doubt that John Crewys is just as selfish as you are, which is saying a good deal, yet, as it happens, John Crewys is the only man who could make her happy.”

“What man are you thinking of?” said Peter.

Jealousy was a potent factor in his love for Sarah. He forgot his mother instantly, as he had forgotten her on the day of his return, when Sarah had walked on to the terrace—-and into his heart.

“I name no names,” said Sarah, “but I hope I know a hero when I see him; and that man is a hero, though he is—nothing much to look at.”

It amused her to observe the varying expressions on her lover’s face, which her artless words called forth, one after another.

“If you are really not going to eat any luncheon, Peter,” she said, “I must trouble you to help me to wash up and pack the basket. The fire is out and the water is cold, but it can’t be helped. The picnic has been a failure.”

“We have the whole afternoon before us. I cannot see that there is any hurry,” said Peter, not stirring.

“I didn’t mean to break bad news to you,” said Sarah, “until we’d had a pleasant meal together in comfort, and rested ourselves. But since you insist on spoiling everything with your horrid premature disclosures, I don’t see why I shouldn’t do the same. I must be at home by four o’clock, because Aunt Elizabeth is coming to Hewelscourt this very afternoon.”

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“Lady Tintern!” cried Peter, in dismay. “Then you won’t be able to come to Barracombe this evening?”

“I am not in the habit of throwing over a dinner engagement,” said Sarah, with dignity. “But in case they won’t let me come,” she added, with great inconsistency, “I’ll put a lighted candle in the top window of the tower, as usual. But you can guess how many more of these enjoyable expeditions we shall be allowed to make. Not that we need regret them if they are all to be as lively as this one. Still—”

She helped herself to a jam-puff, and offered the dish to Peter, with an engaging smile. He helped himself absently.

“I don’t deny I am fond of taking meals in the open air, and more especially on the top of the moor,” said Sarah, with a sigh of content.

“What has she come for?” said Peter.

“I shall be better able to tell you when I have seen her.”

“Don’t you know?”

“I can pretty well guess. She’s going to forgive me, for one thing. Then she’ll tell me that I don’t deserve my good luck, but that Lord Avonwick is so patient and so long-suffering, that he’s accepted her assurance that I don’t know my own mind (and I’m not sure I do), and he’s going to give me one more chance to become Lady Avonwick, though I was so foolish as to say ‘No’ to his last offer.”

“You didn’t say ‘No’ to *my* last offer!” cried Peter.

“I don’t believe an offer of marriage is even legal before you’re one-and-twenty,” said Miss Sarah, derisively. “What did it matter what I said? Haven’t I told you I was only playing?”

“You may tell me so a thousand times,” said Peter, doggedly, “but I shall never believe you until I see you actually married to somebody else.”

CHAPTER XX

Lady Tintern was pleased to leave Paddington by a much earlier train than could have been expected. She hired a fly, and a pair of broken-kneed horses, at Brawnton, and once more took her relations at Hewelscourt by surprise. On this occasion, however, she was not fortunate enough to find her invalid niece at play in the stable-yard, though she detected her at luncheon, and warmly congratulated her upon her robust appearance and her excellent appetite.

Her journey had, no doubt, been undertaken with the very intentions Sarah had described; but another motive also prompted her, which Sarah had not divined.

Much as she desired to marry her grand-niece to Lord Avonwick, she was not blind to the young man's personal disadvantages, which were undeniable; and which Peter had rudely summed up in a word by alluding to his rival as an ass. He was distinguished among the admirers of Miss Sarah's red and white beauty by his brainlessness no less than by his eligibility.

Nevertheless, Lady Tintern had favoured his suit. She knew him to be a good fellow, although he was a simpleton, and she was very sure that he loved Sarah sincerely.

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“Whoever the girl marries, she will rule him with a rod of iron. She had better marry a fool and be done with it. So why not an eligible and titled and good-natured fool?” the old lady had written to Mrs. Hewel, who was very far from understanding such reasoning, and wept resentfully over the letter.

Why should Lady Tintern snatch her only daughter away from her in order to marry her to a fool? Mrs. Hewel was of opinion that a sensible young man like Peter would be a better match. She supposed nobody would call Sir Peter Crewys of Barracombe a fool; and as for his being young, he was only a few months younger than Lord Avonwick, and Sarah would have just as pretty a title, even if her husband were only a baronet instead of a baron. Thus she argued to herself, and wrote the gist of her argument to her aunt. Why was Sarah to go hunting the highways and byways for titled fools, when there was Peter at her very door,—a young man she had known all her life, and one of the oldest families in Devon, and seven thousand acres of land only next week, when he would come of age, and could marry whomever he liked? Though, of course, Sarah must not go against her aunt, who had promised to do so much for her, and given her so many beautiful things, whether young girls ought to wear jewellery or not.

This was the distracted letter which was bringing Lady Tintern to Hewelscourt. She had been annoyed with Sarah for refusing Lord Avonwick, and thought it would do the rebellious young lady no harm to return for a time to the bosom of her family, and thus miss Newmarket, which Sarah particularly desired to attend, since no society function interested her half so much as racing.

The old lady had not in the least objected to Sarah’s friendship for young Sir Peter Crewys. Sarah, as John had truly said, was a star with many satellites; and among those satellites Peter did not shine with any remarkable brilliancy, being so obviously an awkward country-bred lad, not at home in the surroundings to which her friendship had introduced him, and rather inclined to be surly and quarrelsome than pleasant or agreeable.

Lady Tintern had not taken such a boy’s attentions to her grand-niece seriously; but if Sarah were taking them seriously, she thought she had better inquire into the matter at once. Therefore the energetic old woman not only arrived unexpectedly at Hewelscourt in the middle of luncheon, but routed her niece off her sofa early in the afternoon, and proposed that she should immediately cross the river and call upon Peter’s mother.

“I have never seen the place except from these windows; perhaps I am underrating it,” said Lady Tintern. “I’ve never met Lady Mary Crewys, though I know all the Setouns that ever were born. Never mind who ought to call on me first! What do I care for such nonsense? The boy is a cub and a bear—*that* I know—since he stayed in my house for a fortnight, and never spoke to me if he could possibly

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help it. He is a nobody! Sir Peter Fiddlesticks! Who ever heard of him or his family, I should like to know, outside this ridiculous place? His name is spelt wrong! Of course I have heard of Crewys, K.C. Everybody has heard of him. That has nothing to do with it. Yes, I know the young man did well in South Africa. All our young men did well in South Africa. Pray, is Sarah to marry them all? If *that* is what she is after, the sooner I take it in hand the better. Lunching by herself on the moors indeed! No; I am not at all afraid of the ferry, Emily. If you are, I will go alone, or take your good man."

"The colonel is out shooting, as you know, and won't be back till tea-time," said Mrs. Hewel, becoming more and more flurried under this torrent of lively scolding.

"The colonel! Why don't you say Tom? Colonel indeed!" said Lady Tintern. "Very well, I shall go alone."

But this Mrs. Hewel would by no means allow. She reluctantly abandoned the effort to dissuade her aunt, put on her visiting things with as much speed as was possible to her, and finally accompanied her across the river to pay the proposed visit to Barracombe House.

Lady Mary received her visitors in the banqueting hall, an apartment which excited Lady Tintern's warmest approval. The old lady dated the oak carving in the hall, and in the yet more ancient library; named the artists of the various pictures; criticized the ceilings, and praised the windows.

Mrs. Hewel feared her outspokenness would offend Lady Mary, but she could perceive only pleasure and amusement in the face of her hostess, between whom and the worldly old woman there sprang up a friendliness that was almost instantaneous.

"And you are like a Cosway miniature yourself, my dear," said Lady Tintern, peering out of her dark eyes at Lady Mary's delicate white face. "Eh—the bright colouring must be a little faded—all the Setouns have pretty complexions—and carmine is a perishable tint, as we all know."

"Sarah has a brilliant complexion," struck in Mrs. Hewel, zealously endeavouring to distract her aunt from the personalities in which she preferred to indulge.

"Sarah looks like a milkmaid, my love," said the old lady, who did not choose to be interrupted, "And when she can hunt as much as she wishes, and live the outdoor life she prefers, she will get the complexion of a boatwoman." She turned to Lady Mary with a gracious nod. "But *you* may live out of doors with impunity. Time seems to leave something better than colouring to a few Heaven-blessed women, who manage to escape wrinkles, and hardening, and crossness. I am often cross, and so are younger

folk than I; and your boy Peter—though how he comes to be your boy I don't know—is very often cross too."

"You have been very kind to Peter," said Lady Mary, laughing. "I am sorry you found him cross."

"No; I was not kind to him. I am not particularly fond of cross people," said the old lady. "It is Sarah who has been kind," and she looked sharply again at Lady Mary.

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“I am getting on in years, and very infirm,” said Lady Tintern, “and I must ask you to excuse me if I lean upon a stick; but I should like to take a turn about the garden with you. I hear you have a remarkable view from your terrace.”

Lady Mary offered her arm with pretty solicitude, and guided her aged but perfectly active visitor through the drawing-room—where she stopped to comment favourably upon the water colours—to the terrace, where John was sitting in the shade of the ilex-tree, absorbed in the London papers.

Lady Mary introduced him as Peter’s guardian and cousin.

“How do you do, Mr. Crewys? Your name is very familiar to me,” said the old lady. “Though to tell you the truth, Sir Peter looks so much older than his age that I forgot he had a guardian at all.”

“He will only have one for a few days longer,” said John, smiling. “My authority will expire very shortly.”

“But you are, at any rate, the very man I wanted to see,” said Lady Tintern, who seldom wasted time in preliminaries. “I would always rather talk business with a man than with a woman; so if Mr. Crewys will lend me his arm to supplement my stick, I will take a turn with him instead of with you, my dear, if you have no objection.”

“Did you ever hear anything like her?” said poor Mrs. Hewel, turning to Lady Mary as soon as her aunt was out of hearing. “What Mr. Crewys must think of her, I cannot guess. She always says she had to exercise so much reticence as an ambassadress, that she has given her tongue a holiday ever since. But there is only one possible subject *they* can have to talk about. And how can we be sure her interference won’t spoil everything? She is quite capable of asking what Peter’s intentions are. She is the most indiscreet person in the world,” said Sarah’s mother, wringing her hands.

“I think *Peter* has made his intentions pretty obvious,” said Lady Mary. She smiled, but her eyes were anxious.

“And you are sure you don’t mind, dear Lady Mary? For who can depend on Lady Tintern, after all? She is supposed to be going to do so much for Sarah, but if she takes it into her head to oppose the marriage, I can do nothing with her. I never could.”

“I am very far from minding,” said Lady Mary. “But it is Sarah on whom everything depends. What does she say, I wonder? What does she want?”

“It’s no use asking *me* what Sarah wants,” said Mrs. Hewel, plaintively. “Time after time I have told her father what would come of it all if he spoilt her so outrageously. He is ready enough to find fault with the boys, poor fellows, who never do anything wrong; but he always thinks Sarah perfection, and nothing else.”

“Sarah is very fortunate, for Peter has the same opinion of her.”

“Fortunate! Lady Mary, if I were to tell you the chances that girl has had—not but what I had far rather she married Peter—though she might have done that all the same if she had never left home in her life.”

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“I am not so sure of that,” said Peter’s mother.

Lady Tintern’s turn took her no further than the fountain garden, where she sank down upon a bench, and graciously requested her escort to occupy the vacant space by her side.

“I started at an unearthly hour this morning, and I am not so young as I was,” she said; “but I am particularly desirous of a good night’s rest, and I never can sleep with anything on my mind. So I came over here to talk business. By-the-by, I should have come over here long ago, if any one had had the sense to give me a hint that I had only to cross a muddy stream, in a flat-bottomed boat, in order to see a face like *that*—” She nodded towards the terrace.

John’s colour rose slightly. He put the nod and the smile, and the sharp glance of the dark eyes together, and perceived that Lady Tintern had drawn certain conclusions.

“There is some expression in her face,” said the old lady, musingly, “which makes me think of Marie Stuart’s farewell to France. I don’t know why. I have odd fancies. I believe the Queen of Scots had hazel eyes, whereas this pretty Lady Mary has the bluest eyes I ever saw—quite remarkable eyes.”

“Those blue eyes,” said John, smiling, “have never looked beyond this range of hills since Lady Mary’s childhood.”

The old lady nodded again. “Eh—a State prisoner. Yes, yes. She has that kind of look.” Then she turned to John, with mingled slyness and humour, “On va changer tout cela?”

“As you have divined,” he answered, laughing in spite of himself. “Though how you have divined it passes my poor powers of comprehension.”

Lady Tintern was pleased. She liked tributes to her intelligence as other women enjoy recognition of their good looks.

“It is very easy, to an observer,” she said. “She is frightened at her own happiness. Yes, yes. And that cub of a boy would not make it easier. By-the-by, I came to talk of the boy. You are his guardian?”

“For a week.”

“What does it signify for how long? Five minutes will settle my views. Thank Heaven I did not come later, or I should have had to talk to him, instead of to a man of sense. You must have seen what is going on. What do you think of it?”

“The arrangement suits me so admirably,” said John, smiling, “that I am hardly to be relied upon for an impartial opinion.”

“Will you tell me his circumstances?”

John explained them in a few words, and with admirable terseness and lucidity; and she nodded comprehensively all the while.

“That’s capital. He can’t make ducks and drakes of it. All tied up on the children. I hope they will have a dozen. It would serve Sarah right. Now for my side. Whatever sum the trustees decide to settle upon Sir Peter’s wife, I will put down double that sum as Sarah’s dowry. Our solicitors can fight the rest out between them. The property is much better than I had

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been given any reason to suspect. I have no more to say. They can be married in a month. That is settled. I never linger over business. We may shake hands on it." They did so with great cordiality. "It is not that I am overjoyed at the match," she explained, with great frankness. "I think Sarah is a fool to marry a boy. But I have observed she is a fool who always knows her own mind. The fancies of some girls of that age are not worth attending to."

"Miss Sarah is a young lady of character," said John, gravely.

"Ay, she will settle him," said Lady Tintern. Her small, grim face relaxed into a witchlike smile.

"The lad is a good lad. No one has ever said a word against him, and he is as steady as old Time. I believe Miss Sarah's choice, if he is her choice, will be justified," said John.

"I didn't think he was a murderer or a drunkard," said Lady Tintern, cheerfully. Her phraseology was often startling to strangers. "But he is absolutely devoid of—what shall I say? Chivalry? Yes, that is it. Few young men have much nowadays, I am told. But Sir Peter has none—absolutely none."

"It will come."

"No, it will not come. It is a quality you are born with or without. He was born without. Sarah knows all about it. It won't hurt her; she has the methods of an ox. She goes direct to her point, and tramples over everything that stands in her way. If he were less thick-skinned she would be the death of him; but fortunately he has the hide of a rhinoceros."

"I think you do them both a great deal less than justice," said John; but he was unable to help laughing.

"Oh, you do, do you? I like to be disagreed with." Her voice shook a little. "You must make allowances—for an old woman—who is—disappointed," said Lady Tintern.

John said nothing, but his bright hazel eyes, looking down on the small, bent figure, grew suddenly gentle and sympathetic.

"It is a pleasure to be able to congratulate somebody," she said, returning his look. "I congratulate *you*—and Lady Mary."

"Thank you."

“Most of all, because there is nothing modern about her. She has walked straight out of the Middle Ages, with the face of a saint and a dreamer and a beautiful woman, all in one. I am an old witch, and I am never deceived in a woman. Men, I am sorry to say, no longer take the trouble to deceive me. Now our business is over, will you take me back?”

She took the arm he offered, and tottered back to the terrace.

“Bring her to see me in London, and bring her as soon as you can,” said. Lady Tintern. “She is the friend I have dreamed of, and never met. When is it going to be?”

“At once,” said John, calmly.

“You are the most sensible man I have seen for a long time,” said Lady Tintern.

* * * * *

Peter and Sarah hardly exchanged a word during their return journey from the moors after the unlucky picnic; and at the door of Happy Jack’s cottage in Youlestone village she commanded her obedient swain to deposit the luncheon basket, and bade him farewell.

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The aged road-mender, to his intense surprise and chagrin, had one morning found himself unable to rise from his bed. He lay there for a week, indignant with Providence for thus wasting his time.

“There bain’t nart the matter wi’ I! Then why be I a-farced to lie thic way?” he said faintly. “If zo be I wor bod, I cude understand, but I bain’t bod. There bain’t no pain tu speak on no-wheres. It vair beats my yunderstanding.”

“Tis old age be the matter wi’ yu, vather,” said his mate, a young fellow of sixty or so, who lodged with him.

“I bain’t nigh so yold as zum,” said Happy Jack, peevishly. “Tis a nice way vor a man tu be tuke, wi’out a thing the matter wi’ un, vor the doctor tu lay yold on.”

Dr. Blundell soothed him by giving his illness a name.

“It’s Anno Domini, Jack.”

“What be that? I niver yeard till on’t befar,” he said suspiciously.

“It’s incurable, Jack,” said the doctor, gravely.

Happy Jack was consoled. He rolled out the word with relish to his next visitor.

“Him’s vound it out at last. ’Tis the anny-dominy, and ’tis incurable. You’m can’t du nart vor I. I got tu go; and ‘taint no wonder, wi’ zuch a complaint as I du lie here wi’. The doctor were vair beat at vust; but him worried it out wi’ hisself tu the last. Him’s a turble gude doctor, var arl he wuden’t go tu the war.”

Sarah visited him every day. He was so frail and withered a little object that it seemed as though he could waste no further, and yet he dwindled daily. But he suffered no pain, and his wits were bright to the end.

This evening the faint whistle of his voice was fainter than ever, and she had to bend very low to catch his gasping words. He lay propped up on the pillows, with a red scarf tied round the withered scrag of his throat, and his spotless bed freshly arrayed by his mate’s mother, who lived with them and “did for” both.

“They du zay as Master Peter be *carting* of ’ee, Miss Zairy,” he whispered. “Be it tru?”

“Yes, Jack dear, it’s true. Are you glad?”

“I be glad if yu thinks yu’ll git ’un,” wheezed poor Jack. “’Twude be a turble gude job var ’ee tu git a yusband. But doan’t ’ee make tu shar on ’un, Miss Zairy. ’Un du zay as him

be turble vond on yu, and as yu du be playing vast and loose wi' he. That's the ways a young maid du go on, and zo the young man du slip thru' 'un's vingers."

"Yes, Jack," said Sarah, with unwonted meekness.

She looked round the little unceiled room, open on one side to the wooden staircase which led to the kitchen below; at the earth-stained corduroys hanging on a peg; at the brown mug which held Happy Jack's last meal, and all he cared to take—a thin gruel.

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"'Twude be a grand marriage vor the likes o' yu, Miss Zairy, vor the Crewys du be the yoldest vambly in all Devonsheer, as I've yeard tell; and yure volk bain't never comed year at arl befar yure grandvather's time. Eh, what a tale there were tu tell when old Sir Timothy married Mary Ann! 'Twas a vine scandal vor the volk, zo 'twere; but I wuden't niver give in tu leaving Youlestone. But doan't 'ee play the vule wi' Master Peter, Miss Zairy. Take 'un while yu can git 'un, will 'ee? And be glad tu git 'un. Yu listen tu I, vor I be a turble witty man, and I be giving of yu gude advice, Miss Zairy."

"I am listening, Jack, and you know I always take your advice."

"Ah! if 'twerent' for the anny-dominy, I'd be tu yure wedding," sighed Happy Jack, "zame as I were tu Mary Ann's. Zo I wude."

She took his knotted hand, discoloured with the labour of eighty years, and bade him farewell.

"Thee be a lucky maid," said Happy Jack, closing his eyes.

* * * * *

The tears were yet glistening on Sarah's long lashes, when she met the doctor on his way to the cottage she had just quitted.

She was in no mood for talking, and would have passed him with a hasty greeting, but the melancholy and fatigue of his bearing struck her quick perceptions.

She stopped short, and held out her hand impulsively.

"Dr. Blunderbuss," said Sarah, "did you *very* much want Peter to find out that—that he could live without his mother?"

"Has anything happened?" said the doctor; his thin face lighted up instantly with eager interest and anxiety.

"Only *that*" said Sarah. "You trusted me, so I'm trusting you. Peter's found out everything. And—and he isn't going to let her sacrifice her happiness to him, after all. I'll answer for that. So perhaps, now, you won't say you're sorry you told me?"

"For God's sake, don't jest with me, my child!" said the doctor, putting a trembling hand on her arm. "Is anything—settled?"

"Do I ever jest when people are in earnest? And how can I tell you if it's settled?" said Sarah, in a tone between laughing and weeping. "I—I'm going there to-night. I oughtn't to have said anything about it, only I knew how much you wanted her to be happy. And—she's going to be—that's all."

The doctor was silent for a. moment, and Sarah looked away from him, though she was conscious that he was gazing fixedly at her face. But she did not know that he saw neither her blushing cheeks, nor the groups of tall fern on the red earth-bank beyond her, nor the whitewashed cob walls of Happy Jack's cottage. His dreaming eyes saw only Lady Mary in her white gown, weeping and agitated, stumbling over the threshold of a darkened room into the arms of John Crewys.

"You said you wished it," said Sarah.

She stole a hasty glance at him, half frightened by his silence and his pallor, remembering suddenly how little the fulfilment of his wishes could have to do with his personal happiness.

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The doctor recovered himself. “I wish it with all my heart,” he said. He tried to smile. “Some day, if you will, you shall tell me how you managed it. But perhaps—not just now.”

“Can’t you guess?” she said, opening her eyes in a wonder stronger than discretion.

How was it possible, she thought, that such a clever man should be so dull?

The doctor shook his head. “You were always too quick for me, little Sarah,” he said. “I am only glad, however it happened, that—she—is to be happy at last.” He had no thoughts to spare for Sarah, or any other. As she lingered he said absently, “Is that all?”

She looked at him, and was inspired to leave the remorseful and sympathetic words that rushed to her lips unsaid.

“That is all,” said Sarah, gently, “for the present.”

Then she left him alone, and took her way down to the ferry.

CHAPTER XXI

“The very last of the roses,” said Lady Mary.

She looked round the banqueting hall. The wax candles shed a radiance upon their immediate surroundings, which accentuated the shadows of each unlighted corner. Bowls of roses, red and white and golden, bloomed delicately in every recess against the black oak of the panels.

The flames were leaping on the hearth about a fresh log thrown into the red-hot wood-ash. The two old sisters sat almost in the chimney corner, side by side, where they could exchange their confidences unheard.

Lady Belstone still mourned her admiral in black silk and *crepe*, whilst Miss Georgina’s respect for her brother’s memory was made manifest in plum-coloured satin.

Lady Mary, too, wore black to-night. Since the day of Peter’s return she had not ventured to don her favourite white. Her gown was of velvet; her fair neck and arms shone through the yellowing folds of an old lace scarf which veiled the bosom. A string of pearls was twisted in her soft, brown hair, lending a dim crown to her exquisite and gracious beauty in the tender light of the wax candles.

Candlelight is kind to the victims of relentless time; disdaining to notice the little lines and shadows care has painted on tired faces; restoring delicacy to faded complexions, and brightness to sad eyes.

The faint illumination was less kind to Sarah, in her white gown and blue ribbons. The beautiful colour, which could face the morning sunbeams triumphantly in its young transparency, was almost too high in the warmth of the shadowy hall, where her golden-red hair made a glory of its own.

The October evening seemed chilly to the aged sisters, and even Lady Mary felt the comfort of her velvet gown; but Sarah was impatient of the heat of the log fire, and longed for the open air. She envied Peter and John, who were reported to be smoking outside on the terrace.

“The very last of the roses,” said Lady Mary.

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“There will be a sharp frost to-night; they won’t stand that,” said Sarah, shaking her head.

“The poor roses of autumn,” said Lady Mary, rather dreamily, “they are never so sweet as the roses of June.”

“But they are much rarer, and more precious,” said Sarah.

Lady Mary looked at her and smiled. How quickly Sarah always understood!

Sarah caught her hand and kissed it impulsively. Her back was turned to the old sisters in the chimney corner.

“Lady Mary,” she said, “oh, never mind if I am indiscreet; you know I am always that.” A little sob escaped her. “But I *must* ask you this one thing—you—you didn’t really think *that* of me, did you?”

“Think what, dear child?” said Lady Mary, bewildered.

Sarah looked round at the two old ladies.

The head of Miss Crewys was inclined towards the crochet she held in her lap. She slumbered peacefully.

Lady Belstone was absently gazing into the heart of the great fire. The heat did not appear to cause her inconvenience. She was nodding.

“They will hear nothing,” said Lady Mary, softly. “Tell me, Sarah, what you mean. I would ask you,” she said, with a little smile and flush, “to tell me something else, only, I—too—am afraid of being indiscreet.”

“There is nothing I would not tell you,” murmured Sarah, “though I believe I would rather tell you—out in the dark—than here,” she laughed nervously.

“The drawing-room is not lighted, except by the moon,” said Lady Mary, also a little excited by the thought of what Sarah might, perhaps, be going to say; “but there is no fire there, I am afraid. The aunts do not like sitting there in the evening. But if you would not be too cold, in that thin, white gown—?”

“I am never cold,” said Sarah; “I take too much exercise, I suppose, to feel the cold.”

“Then come,” said Lady Mary.

They stole past the sleeping sisters into the drawing-room, and closed the communicating door as noiselessly as possible.

Here only the moonlight reigned, pouring in through the uncurtained windows and rendering the gay, rose-coloured room, with its pretty contents, perfectly weird and unfamiliar.

Sarah flung her warm, young arms about her earliest and most beloved friend, and rested her bright head against the gentle bosom.

“You never thought I meant all the horrid, cruel things I made Peter say to you? You never believed it of me, did you? That I wouldn’t marry him unless *you* went away. You whom I love best in the world, and always have,” she said defiantly, “or that I would ever alter a single corner of this dear old house, which used to be so hideous, and which you have made so beautiful?”

“Sarah! My—my darling!” said Lady Mary, in frightened, trembling tones.

“You needn’t blame Peter for saying any of it,” said Sarah, “for it was I who put the words into his mouth. It made him miserable to say them; but he could not help himself. He wasn’t really quite responsible for his actions. He isn’t now. When people are—are in love, I’ve often noticed they’re not responsible.”

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“But why—”

“I only wanted to show him what a goose he really was,” murmured Sarah, hanging her head. “He came back so pompous and superior; talking about his father’s place, and being the only man in the house, and obliged to look after you all; and it was all so ridiculous, and so out of date. I didn’t mean to hurt *you* except just for a moment, because it could not be helped,” said Sarah. She hid her face in Lady Mary’s neck, half laughing and half crying. “I was so afraid you—you were taking him seriously; and—-and he was so selfish, wanting to keep you all to himself.”

“Oh, Sarah, hush!” Lady Mary cried.

She divined it all in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. It was to Sarah that she owed the pain and mortification, not to her boy.

Sarah had said Peter was not responsible.

Was he only a puppet in the hands of the girl he loved? Could John ever have been thus blindly led and influenced? Her wounded heart said quickly that John was of a different, nobler, stronger nature. But the mother’s instinct leapt to defend her son, and cried also that John was a man, and Peter but a boy in love, ready to sacrifice the whole world to her he worshipped. His father would never have done that. Lady Mary was even capable of an unreasoning pride in Peter’s power of loving; though it was not her—alas! it never had been her—for whom her boy was willing to make the smallest sacrifice.

But he had honestly meant to devote himself to his mother, according to his lights, had Sarah’s influence not come in the way. Sarah, who must have divined her secret all the while, and who, with the dauntlessness of youth, had not hesitated to force open the door into a world so bright that Lady Mary almost feared to enter it, but trembled, as it were, upon the threshold of her own happiness—and Peter’s.

They were silent, holding each other in a close embrace, both conscious of the passing and repassing footsteps upon the gravel path without.

Sarah was the first to recover herself. She put Lady Mary into her favourite chair, and came and knelt by her side.

“That’s over, and I’m forgiven,” she said softly.

“You will make my boy—happy?” whispered Lady Mary.

“I can’t tell whether he will be happy or not, if—if he marries me,” said Sarah. She appeared to smother a laugh. “But Aunt Elizabeth seems reconciled to the idea. I think you bewitched her this afternoon. She is in love with you, and with this house, and with

Mr. John. But more particularly with you. When I said I had refused Peter over and over again, she said I was a fool. But she says that whatever I do. I—I suppose I let her think," said Sarah, leaning her head against Lady Mary's knee, "that *some day*—if he is still idiotic enough to wish it—and if *you* don't mind—"

"My pretty Sarah—my darling!"

"I'm sure it's only because he's your son," said Sarah, vehemently; "I've always wanted to be your child. What's the use of pretending I haven't? Think what a time poor mamma used to give me, and what an angel of goodness you were to the poor little black sheep who loved you so."

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Sarah's white dress, shining in the moonlight, caught the attention of John Crewys, through the open window. He paused in his walk outside. Peter's voice uttered something, and the two dark figures passed slowly on.

"They won't interrupt us," said Sarah, serenely. "I told Peter at dinner that I wanted to talk to you, and that he was to go and smoke with Mr. John, and behave as if nothing had happened. He said he hadn't spoken to him since this morning. He is all agog to know what Lady Tintern came for. But he won't dare to come and interrupt."

"What have you done to my boy," said Lady Mary, half laughing and half indignant, "that your lightest word is to be his law? And oh, Sarah"—her tone grew wistful—"it is strange—even though he loves you, that you should understand him better than I, who would lay down my life for him."

"It's very easy to see why," said Sarah, calmly. The deep contralto music of her voice contrasted oddly with her matter-of-fact manner and words. "It's just that Peter and I are made of common clay, and that you are not. So, of course, we understand each other. I don't mean to say that we don't quarrel pretty often. I dare say we always shall. I am good-tempered, but I like my own way; and, besides"—she spoke quite cheerfully—"anybody would quarrel with Peter. But you and he are a little like Aunt Elizabeth and me. *She* wants me to behave like a *grande dame*, and to know exactly who everybody is, and treat them accordingly, and be never too much interested in anything, but never bored; and always look beautiful, and, above all, *appropriate*. And *I* —would rather be taking the dogs for a run on the moors, in a short skirt and big boots; or up at four in the morning otter-hunting; or out with the hounds; or—or—digging in the garden, for that matter;—than be the prettiest girl in London, and going to a State ball or the opera. You see, I've tried both kinds of life now, and I know which I like best. And —and flirting with people is pleasant enough in its way, but it gives you a kind of sick feeling afterwards, which hunting never does. I don't think I'm really much of a hand at sentiment," said Sarah, with great truth.

"And Peter?" asked Lady Mary, gently.

"You wanted Peter to be a—a noble kind of person, a great statesman, or something of that sort, didn't you?" Her soft lips caressed Lady Mary's hand apologetically. "To be fond of reading and poetry, and all sorts of things; and *he* wanted to shoot rabbits and go fishing. But, of course, he couldn't help *knowing* you wanted him to be something he wasn't, and never could be, and didn't want to be."

"Oh, Sarah!" said poor Lady Mary. "But—yes, it is true what you are saying."

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“It’s true, though I say it so badly; and I know it, because, as I tell you, Peter and I are just the same sort at heart. I’ve been teasing him, pretending to be a worldling, but foreign travel and entertaining in London are just about as unsuited to me as to Peter. I—I’m glad”—she uttered a quick, little sob—“that I—I played my part well while it all lasted; but you know it wasn’t so much me as my looks that did it. And because I didn’t care, I was blunt and natural, and they thought it *chic*. But it wasn’t *chic*; it was that I *really* didn’t care. And I don’t think I’ve ever quite succeeded in taking Peter in either; for he *couldn’t* believe I could really think any sort of life worth living but the dear old life down here, which he and I love best in the world, in our heart of hearts.”

The twinkling, frosty blue points of starlight glittered in the cloudless vault of heaven, above the moonlit stillness of the valley. The clear-cut shadows of the balcony and the stone urns fell across the cold paths and whitened grass of the terrace.

Ghostlike, Sarah’s white form emerged from the darkness of the room, and stood on the threshold of the window.

John threw away the end of his cigar, and smiled. “I presume the interview we were not to interrupt is over?” he said, good-humouredly. “Surely it is not very prudent of Miss Sarah to venture out-of-doors in that thin gown; or has she a cloak of some kind—”

But Peter was not listening to him.

Sarah, wrapped in her white cloak and hood, had already flitted across the moonlit terrace, into the deep shadow of the ilex grove; and the boy was by her side before John could reach the window she had just quitted.

“Oh, is it you, Peter?” said Miss Sarah, looking over her shoulder. “I was looking for you. I have put on my things. It is getting late, and I thought you would see me home.”

“Must you go already?” cried Peter. “Have they sent to fetch you?”

“I dare say I could stay a few moments,” said Sarah; “but, of course, my maid came ages ago, as usual. But if there was anything you particularly wanted to say—you know how tiresome she is, keeping as close as she can, to listen to every word—why, it would be better to say it now. I am not in such a hurry as all that.”

“You know very well I want to say a thousand things,” said Peter, vehemently. “I have been walking up and down till I thought I should go mad, making conversation with John Crewys.” Peter was honestly unaware that it was John who had made the conversation. “Has Lady Tintern come to take you away, Sarah? And why did she call on my mother this afternoon, the very moment she arrived?”

“Your mother would be the proper person to tell you that. How should I know?” said Sarah, reprovingly. “Have you asked her?”

“How can I ask her?” said Peter. His voice trembled. “I’ve not spoken to her once—-except before other people—since John Crewys told me—what I told you this afternoon. I’ve scarcely seen any one since I left you. I wandered off for a beastly walk in the woods by myself, as miserable as any fellow would be, after all you said to me. Do you think I—I’ve got no feelings?”

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His voice sounded very forlorn, and Sarah felt remorseful. After all, Peter was her comrade and her oldest friend, as well as her lover. At the very bottom of her heart there lurked a remnant of her childish admiration for him, which would, perhaps, never quite be extinguished. The boy who got into scrapes, and was thrashed by his father, and who did not mind; the boy who vaulted over fences she had to climb or creep through; who went fishing, and threw a fly with so light and sure a hand, and filled his basket, whilst she wound her line about her skirts, and caught her hook, and whipped the stream in vain. He had climbed a tall fir-tree once, and brought down in safety a weeping, shame-stricken little girl with a red pigtail, whose daring had suddenly failed her; and he had gone up the tree himself like a squirrel afterwards, and fetched her the nest she coveted. Nor did he ever taunt her with her cowardice nor revert to his own exploit; but this was because Peter forgot the whole adventure in an hour, though Sarah remembered it to the end of her life. He climbed so many trees, and went birds'-nesting every spring to his mother's despair.

Sarah thought of him wandering all the afternoon in his own woods, lonely and mortified, listening to the popping of the guns on the opposite side of the hill, which echoed through the valley; she knew what those sounds meant to Peter—the boy who had shot so straight and true, and who would never shoulder a gun any more.

"I don't see why you should be so miserable," she said, as lightly as she could; but there were tears in her eyes, she was so sorry for Peter.

"I dare say you don't," said Peter, bitterly. "Nobody has ever made a fool of you, no doubt. A wretched, self-confident fool, who gave you his whole heart to trample in the dust. I suppose I ought to have known you were only—playing with me—as you said—-a wretched object as I am now, but—"

"An object!" cried Sarah, so anxious to stem the tide of his reproaches that she scarce knew what she was saying, "which appeals to the soft side of every woman's heart, high or low, rich or poor, civilized or savage—a wounded soldier."

"Do you think I want to be pitied?" said Peter, glowering.

"Pitied!" said Sarah, softly. "Do you call this pity?" She leant forward and kissed his empty sleeve.

Peter trembled at her touch.

"It is—because you are sorry for me," he said hoarsely.

"Sorry!" said Sarah, scornfully; "I glory in it." Then she suddenly began to cry. "I am a wicked girl," she sobbed, "and you *were a* fool, if you ever thought I could be happy anywhere but in this stupid old valley, or with—with any one but you. And I am rightly

punished if my—my behaviour has made you change your mind. Because I *did* mean, just at first, to throw you over, and to—to go away from you, Peter. But—but the arm that wasn't there—held me fast."

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“Sarah!”

She hid her face against his shoulder.

* * * * *

John Crewys was playing softly on the little oak piano in the banqueting hall, and Lady Mary stood before the open hearth, absently watching the sparks fly upward from the burning logs, and listening.

The old sisters had gone to bed.

Sarah’s bright face, framed in her white hood, fresh and rosy from the cold breath of the October night, appeared in the doorway.

“Peter is in there—waiting for you,” she whispered, blushing.

John Crewys rose from the piano, and came forward and held out his hand to Sarah, with a smile.

Lady Mary hurried past them into the unlighted drawing-room. Her eyes, dazzled by the sudden change, could distinguish nothing for a moment.

But Peter was there, waiting, and perhaps Lady Mary was thankful for the darkness, which hid her face from her son.

“Peter!”

“Mother!”

She clung to her boy, and a kiss passed between them which said all that was in their hearts that night—of appeal—of understanding—of forgiveness—of the love of mother and son.

And no foolish words of explanation were ever uttered to mar the gracious memory of that sacred reconciliation.

THE END