The Moon out of Reach eBook

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Contents

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Page 1

CHAPTER

Away in the sky, high over our heads,
  With the width of a world between,
The far Moon sails like a shining ship
  Which the Dreamer's eyes have seen.

And empty hands are outstretched, in vain,
  While aching eyes beseech,
And hearts may break that cry for the Moon,
  The silver Moon out of reach!

But sometimes God on His great white Throne
  Looks down from the Heaven above,
And lays in the hands that are empty
  The tremulous Star of Love.

Margaret Pedler.

Note:—Musical setting by Adrian Butt. Published by Edward Schuberth & Co., 11 East 22nd Street, New York.

THE MOON OUT OF REACH

CHAPTER I

THE SHINING SHIP

She was kneeling on the hearthrug, grasping the poker firmly in one hand. Now and again she gave the fire a truculent prod with it as though to emphasise her remarks.

"'Ask and ye shall receive'! . . . '*Tout vient a point a celui qui sait attendre*'! Where on earth is there any foundation for such optimism, I'd like to know?"

A sleek brown head bent determinedly above some sewing lifted itself, and a pair of amused eyes rested on the speaker.

"Really, Nan, you mustn't confound French proverbs with quotations from the Scriptures. They're not at all the same thing."

"Those two run on parallel lines, anyway. When I was a kiddie I used to pray—I've prayed for hours, and it wasn't through any lack of faith that my prayers weren't answered. On the contrary, I was enormously astonished to find how entirely the Almighty had overlooked my request for a white pony like the one at the circus."

Page 2

“Well, then, my dear, try to solace yourself with the fact that ‘everything comes at last to him who knows how to wait.’”

“But it doesn’t!”

Penelope Craig reflected a moment.

“Do you—know—how to wait?” she demanded, with a significant little accent on the word “know.”

“I’ve waited in vain. No white pony has ever come, and if it trotted in now—why, I don’t want one any longer. I tell you, Penny”—tapping an emphatic forefinger on the other’s knee—“you never get your wishes until you’ve out-grown them.”

“You’ve reached the mature age of three-and-twenty”—drily. “It’s a trifle early to be so definite.”

“Not a bit! I want my wishes *now*, while I’m young and can enjoy them—lots of money, and amusement, and happiness! They’ll be no good to me when I’m seventy or so!”

“Even at seventy,” remarked Penelope sagely, “wealth is better than poverty—much. And I can imagine amusement and happiness being quite desirable even at three score years and ten.”

Nan Davenant grimaced.

“Philosophers,” she observed, “are a highly irritating species.”

“But what do you want, my dear? You’re always kicking against the pricks. What do you really *want*?”

The coals slipped with a grumble in the grate and a blue flame shot up the chimney. Nan stretched out her hand for the matches and lit a cigarette. Then she blew a cloud of speculative smoke into the air.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. Adding whimsically: “I believe that’s the root of the trouble.”

Penelope regarded her critically.

“I’ll tell you what’s the matter,” she returned. “During the war you lived on excitement—”

“I worked jolly hard,” interpolated Nan indignantly.

The other’s eyes softened.

“I know you worked,” she said quickly. “Like a brick. But all the same you did live on excitement—narrow shaves of death during air-raids, dances galore, and beautiful boys in khaki, home on leave in convenient rotation, to take you anywhere and everywhere. You felt you were working for them and they knew they were fighting for you, and the whole four years was just one pulsing, throbbing rush. Oh, I know! You were caught up into it just the same as the rest of the world, and now that it’s over and normal existence is feebly struggling up to the surface again, you’re all to pieces, hugely dissatisfied, like everyone else.”

“At least I’m in the fashion, then!”

Penelope smiled briefly.

“Small credit to you if you are,” she retorted. “People are simply shirking work nowadays. And you’re as bad as anyone. You’ve not tried to pick up the threads again—you’re just idling round.”

“It’s catching, I expect,” temporised Nan beguilingly.

But the lines on Penelope’s face refused to relax.

“It’s because it’s easier to play than to work,” she replied with grim candour.

Page 3

“Don’t scold, Penny.” Nan brought the influence of a pair of appealing blue eyes to bear on the matter. “I really mean to begin work—soon.”

“When?” demanded the other searchingly.

Nan’s charming mouth, with its short, curved upper lip, widened into a smile of friendly mockery.

“You don’t expect me to supply you with the exact day and hour, do you? Don’t be so fearfully precise, Penny! I can’t run myself on railway time-table lines. You need never hope for it.”

“I don’t”—shortly. Adding, with a twinkle: “Even I’m not quite such an optimist as that!”

As she spoke, Penelope laid down her sewing and stretched cramped arms above her head.

“At this point,” she observed, “the House adjourned for tea. Nan, it’s your week for domesticity. Go and make tea.”

Nan scrambled up from the hearthrug obediently and disappeared into the kitchen regions, while Penelope, curling herself up on a cushion in front of the fire, sat musing.

For nearly six years now she and Nan had shared the flat they were living in. When they had first joined forces, Nan had been at the beginning of her career as a pianist and was still studying, while Penelope, her senior by five years, had already been before the public as a singer for some considerable time. With the outbreak of the war, they had both thrown themselves heartily into war work of various kinds, reserving only a certain portion of their time for professional purposes. The double work had proved a considerable strain on each of them, and now that the war was past it seemed as though Nan, at least, were incapable of getting a fresh grip on things.

Luckily—or, from some points of view, unluckily—she was the recipient of an allowance of three hundred a year from a wealthy and benevolent uncle. Without this, the two girls might have found it difficult to weather the profitless intervals which punctuated their professional engagements. But with this addition to their income they rubbed along pretty well, and contrived to find a fair amount of amusement in life through the medium of their many friends in London.

Penelope, the elder of the two by five years, was the daughter of a country rector, long since dead. She had known the significance of the words “small means” all her life, and managed the financial affairs of the little menage in Edenhall Mansions with creditable success. Whereas Nan Davenant, flung at her parents’ death from the shelter of a home where wealth and reckless expenditure had prevailed, knew less than nothing of the elaborate art of cutting one’s coat according to the cloth. Nor could she ever be

brought to understand that there are only twenty shillings in a pound—and that at the present moment even twenty shillings were worth considerably less than they appeared to be.

There are certain people in the world who seem cast for the part of onlooker. Of these Penelope was one. Evenly her life had slipped along with its measure of work and play, its quiet family loves and losses, entirely devoid of the alarums and excursions of which Fate shapes the lives of some. Hence she had developed the talent of the looker-on.

Page 4

Naturally of an observant turn of mind, she had learned to penetrate the veil that hangs behind the actions of humanity, into the secret, temperamental places whence those actions emanate, and had achieved a somewhat rare comprehension and tolerance of her fellows.

From her father, who had been for thirty years the arbiter of affairs both great and small in a country parish and had yet succeeded in retaining the undivided affection of his flock, she had inherited a spice of humorous philosophy, and this, combined with a very practical sense of justice, enabled her to accept human nature as she found it—without contempt, without censoriousness, and sometimes with a breathless admiration for its unexpectedly heroic qualities.

She it was who alone had some slight understanding of Nan Davenant's complexities—-complexities of temperament which both baffled the unfortunate possessor of them and hopelessly misled the world at large.

The Davenant history showed a line of men and women gifted beyond the average, the artistic bias paramount, and the interpolation of a Frenchwoman four generations ago, in the person of Nan's great-grandmother, had only added to the temperamental burden of the race. She had been a strange, brilliant creature, with about her that mysterious touch of genius which by its destined suffering buys forgiveness for its destined sins.

And in Nan the soul of her French ancestress lived anew. The charm of the frail and fair Angele de Varincourt—baffling, elusive, but irresistible—was hers, and the soul of the artist, with its restless imagination, its craving for the beautiful, its sensitive response to all emotion—this, too, was her inheritance.

To Penelope, Nan's ultimate unfolding was a matter of absorbing interest. Her own small triumphs as a singer paled into insignificance beside the riot of her visions for Nan's future. Nevertheless, she was sometimes conscious of an undercurrent of foreboding. Something was lacking. Had the gods, giving so much, withheld the two best gifts of all—Success and Happiness?

While Penelope mused in the firelight, the clatter of china issuing from the kitchen premises indicated unusual domestic activity on Nan's part, and finally culminated in her entry into the sitting-room, bearing a laden tea-tray.

"Hot scones!" she announced joyfully. "I've made a burnt offering of myself, toasting them."

Penelope smiled.

"What an infant you are, Nan," she returned. "I sometimes wonder if you'll ever grow up?"

“I hope not”—with great promptitude. “I detest extremely grown-up people. But what are you brooding over so darkly? Cease those philosophical reflections in which you’ve been indulging—it’s a positive vice with you, Penny—and give me some tea.”

Penelope laughed and began to pour out tea.

“I half thought Maryon Rooke might be here by now,” remarked Nan, selecting a scone from the golden-brown pyramid on the plate and carefully avoiding Penelope’s eyes. “He said he might look in some time this afternoon.”

Page 5

Penelope held the teapot arrested in mid-air.

“How condescending of him!” she commented drily. “If he comes—then exit Penelope.”

“You’re an ideal chaperon, Penny,” murmured Nan with approval.

“Chaperons are superfluous women nowadays. And you and Maryon are so nearly engaged that you wouldn’t require one even if they weren’t out of date.”

“Are we?” A queer look of uncertainty showed in Nan’s eyes. One might almost have said she was afraid.

“Aren’t you?” Penelope’s counter-question flashed back swiftly. “I thought there was a perfectly definite understanding between you?”

“So you trot tactfully away when he comes? Nice of you, Penny.”

“It’s not in the least ‘nice’ of me,” retorted the other. “I happen to be giving a singing-lesson at half-past five, that’s all.” After a pause she added tentatively: “Nan, why don’t you take some pupils? It means—hard cash.”

“And endless patience!” commented Nan, “No, don’t ask me that, Penny, as you love me! I couldn’t watch their silly fingers lumbering over the piano.”

“Well, why don’t you take more concert work? You could get it if you chose! You’re simply throwing away your chances! How long is it since you composed anything, I’d like to know?”

“Precisely five minutes—just now when I was in the kitchen. Listen, and I’ll play it to you. It’s a setting to those words of old Omar:

’Ah, Love! could you and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
  Would not we shatter it to bits—and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart’s Desire!’

I was burning my fingers in the performance of duty and the appropriateness of the words struck me,” she added with a malicious little grin.

She seated, herself at the piano and her slim, nervous hands wandered soundlessly a moment above the keys. Then a wailing minor melody grew beneath them—-unsatisfied, asking, with now and then an ecstasy of joyous chords that only died again into the querying despair of the original theme. She broke off abruptly, humming the words beneath her breath.

Penelope crossed the room and, laying her hands on the girl's shoulders, twisted her round so that she faced her.

"Nan, it's sheer madness! You've got this wonderful talent—a real gift of the gods—and you do nothing with it!"

Nan laughed uncertainly and bent her bead so that all Penelope could see was a cloud of dusky hair.

"I can't," she said.

"Why not?" Penelope's voice was urgent. "Why don't you work up that last composition, for instance, and get it published? Surely"—giving her a little wrathful shake—"surely you've some ambition?"

"Do you remember what that funny old Scotch clairvoyant said to me? . . . 'You have ambition—great ambition—but not the stability or perseverance to achieve.'"

Page 6

Penelope's level brows contracted into a frown and she shook her head dissentingly.

"It's true—every word of it," asserted Nan.

The other dropped her hands from Nan's shoulders and turned away.

"You'll break everyone's heart before you've finished," she said. Adding in a lighter tone: "I'm going out now. If Maryon Rooke comes, don't begin by breaking his for him."

The door closed behind her and Nan, left alone, strolled restlessly over to the window and stood looking out.

"Break his!" she whispered under her breath. "Dear old Penny! She doesn't know the probabilities in this particular game of chance."

The slanting afternoon sunlight revealed once more that sudden touch of gravity—-almost of fear—in her face. It was rather a charming face, delicately angled, with cheeks that hollowed slightly beneath the cheek-bones and a chin which would have been pointed had not old Dame Nature changed her mind at the last moment and elected to put a provoking little cleft there. Nor could even the merciless light of a wintry sun find a flaw in her skin. It was one of those rare, creamy skins, with a golden undertone and the feature of a flower petal, sometimes found in conjunction with dark hair. The faint colour in her cheeks was of that same warm rose which the sun kisses into glowing life on the velvet skin of an apricot.

The colour deepened suddenly in her face as the sound of an electric bell trilled through the flat. Dropping her arms to her sides, she stood motionless, like a bird poised for flight. Then, with a little impatient shrug of her shoulders, she made her way slowly, almost unwillingly, across the hall and threw open the door.

"You, Maryon?" she said a trifle breathlessly. Then, as he entered: "I—I hardly expected you."

He took both her hands in his and kissed them.

"It's several years since I expected anything," he answered. "Now—I only hope."

Nan smiled.

"Come in, pessimist, and don't begin by being epigrammatic on the very doorstep. Tea? Or coffee? I'm afraid the flat doesn't run to whisky-and-soda."

"Coffee, please—and your conversation—will suffice. 'A Loaf of Bread . . . and Thou beside me singing in the Wilderness' . . ."

“You’d much prefer a whisky-and-soda and a grilled steak to the loaf and—the *et cetera*s,” observed Nan cynically. “There’s a very wide gulf between what a man says and what he thinks.”

“There’s a much wider one between what a man wants and what he gets,” he returned grimly.

“You’ll soon have all you want,” she answered. “You’re well on the way to fame already.”

“Do you know,” he remarked irrelevantly, “your eyes are exactly like blue violets. I’d like to paint you, Nan.”

“Perhaps I’ll sit for you some day,” she replied, handing him his coffee. “That is, if you’re very good.”

Page 7

Maryon Rooke was a man the merit of whose work was just beginning to be noticed in the art world. For years he had laboured unacknowledged and with increasing bitterness—for he knew his own worth. But now, though, still only in his early thirties, his reputation, particularly as a painter of women's portraits, had begun to be noised abroad. His feet were on the lower rungs of the ladder, and it was generally prophesied that he would ultimately reach the top. His gifts were undeniable, and there was a certain ruthlessness in the line of the lips above the small Van Dyck beard he wore which suggested that he would permit little to stand in the way of his attaining his goal—be it what it might.

"You'd make a delightful picture, Sun-kissed," he said, narrowing his eyes and using one of his most frequent names for her. "With your blue violet eyes and that rose-petal skin of yours."

Nan smiled involuntarily.

"Don't be so flowery, Maryon. Really, you and Penelope are very good antidotes to each other! She's just been giving me a lecture on the error of my ways. She doesn't waste any breath over my appearance, bless her!"

"What's the crime?"

"Lack of application, waste of opportunities, and general idleness."

"It's all true." Rooke leaned forward, his eyes lit by momentary enthusiasm. They were curious eyes—hazel brown, with a misleading softness in them that appealed to every woman he met. "It's all true," he repeated. "You could do big things, Nan. And you do nothing."

Nan laughed, half-pleased, half-vexed.

"I think you overrate my capabilities."

"I don't. There are very few pianists who have your technique, and fewer still, your soul and power of interpretation."

"Oh, yes, there are. Heaps. And they've got what I lack."

"And that is?"

"The power to hold their audience."

"You lack that? You who can hold a man—"

She broke in excitedly.

“Yes, I can hold one man—or woman. I can play to a few people and hold them. I know that. But—I can’t hold a crowd.”

Rooke regarded her thoughtfully. Perhaps it was true that in spite of her charm, of the compelling fascination which made her so unforgettable—did he not know how unforgettable!—she yet lacked the tremendous force of magnetic personality which penetrates through a whole concourse of people, temperamentally differing as the poles, and carries them away on one great tidal wave of enthusiasm and applause.

“It may be true,” he said, at last, reluctantly. “I don’t think you possess great animal magnetism! Yours is a more elusive, more—how shall I put it?—an attraction more spirituelle. . . . To those it touches, worse luck, a more enduring one.”

“More enduring?”

“Far more. Animal magnetism is a thing of bodily presence. Once one is away from it—apart—one is free. Until the next meeting! But *your* victims aren’t even free from you when you’re not there.”

Page 8

“It sounds a trifle boring. Like a visitor who never knows when it’s time to go.”

Rooke smiled.

“You’re trying to switch me off the main theme, which is your work.”

She sprang up.

“Don’t bully me any more,” she said quickly, “and I’ll play you one of my recent compositions.”

She sauntered across to the piano and began to play a little ripping melody, full of sunshine and laughter, and though a sob ran through it, it was smothered by the overlying gaiety. Rooke crossed to her side and quietly lifted her hands from the keys.

“Charming,” he said. “But it doesn’t ring true. That was meant for a sad song. As it stands, it’s merely flippant—insincere. And insincerity is the knell of art.”

Nan skimmed the surface defiantly.

“What a disagreeable criticism! You might have given me some encouragement instead of crushing my poor little attempt at composition like that!”

Rooke looked at her gravely. With him, sincerity in art was a fetish; in life, a superfluity. But for the moment he was genuinely moved. The poseur’s mask which he habitually wore slipped aside and the real man peeped out.

“Yours ought to be more than attempts,” he said quietly. “It’s in you to do something really big. And you must do it. If not, you’ll go to pieces. You don’t understand yourself.”

“And do you profess to?”

“A little.” He smiled down at her. “The gods have given you the golden gift—the creative faculty. And there’s a price to pay if you don’t use the gift.”

Nan’s “blue violet” eyes held a startled look.

“You’ve got something which isn’t given to everyone. To precious few, in fact! And if you don’t use it, it will poison everything. We artists *may not* rust. If we do, the soul corrodes.”

The sincerity of his tone was unmistakable. Art was the only altar at which Rooke worshipped, it was probably the only altar at which he ever would worship consistently. Nan suddenly yielded to the driving force at the back of his speech.

“Listen to this, then,” she said. “It’s a setting to some words I came across the other day.”

She handed him a slip of paper on which the words were written and his eyes ran swiftly down the verses of the brief lyric:

Empty hands

Away in the sky, high over our heads,
With the width of a world between,
The far Moon sails like a shining ship
Which the Dreamer’s eyes have seen.

And empty hands are out-stretched in vain,
While aching eyes beseech,
And hearts may break that cry for the Moon,
The silver Moon out of reach!

But sometimes God on His great white Throne
Looks down from the Heaven above,
And lays in the hands that are empty
The tremulous Star of Love.

Nan played softly, humming the melody in the wistful little pipe of a voice which was all that Mature had endowed her with. But it had an appealing quality—the heart-touching quality of the mezzo-soprano—while through the music ran the same unsatisfied cry as in her setting of the old Tentmaker’s passionate words—a terrible demand for those things that life sometimes withholds.

Page 9

As she ceased playing Maryon Rooke spoke musingly.

“It’s a queer world,” he said. “What a man wants he can’t have. He sees the good gifts and may not take them. Or, if he takes the one he wants the most—he loses all the rest. Fame and love and life—the great god Circumstance arranges all these little matters for us. . . . And mighty badly sometimes! And that’s why I can’t—why I mustn’t—”

He broke off abruptly, checking what he had intended to say. Nan felt as though a door had been shut in her face. This man had a rare faculty for implying everything and saying nothing.

“I don’t understand,” she said rather low.

“An artist isn’t a free agent—not free to take the things life offers,” he answered steadily. “He’s seen ‘the far Moon’ with the Dreamer’s eyes, and that’s probably all he’ll ever see of it. His ‘empty hands’ may not even grasp at the star.”

He had adapted the verses very cleverly to suit his purpose. With a sudden flash of intuition Nan understood him, and the fear which had knocked at her heart, when Penelope had assumed that there was a definite understanding between herself and Rooke, knocked again. Poetically wrapped up, he was in reality handing her out her conge—frankly admitting that art came first and love a poor second.

He twisted his shoulders irritably.

“Last talks are always odious!” he flung out abruptly.

“Last?” she queried. Her fingers were trifling nervously with the pages of an album of songs that rested against the music-desk.

He did not look at her.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “I’m going away. I leave for Paris to-morrow.”

There was a crash of jangled notes as the album suddenly pitched forward on to the keys of the piano.

With an impetuous movement he leaned towards her and caught her hand in his.

“Nan!” he said hoarsely, “Nan! Do you care?”

But the next moment he had released her.

“I’m a fool!” he said. “What’s the use of drawing a boundary line and then overstepping it?”

“And where”—Nan’s voice was very low—“where do you draw the line?”

He stood motionless a moment. Then he gestured a line with his hand—a line between, himself and her.

“There,” he said briefly.

She caught her breath. But before she could make any answer he was speaking again.

“You’ve been very good to me, Nan—pushed the gate of Paradise at least ajar. And if it closes now, I’ve no earthly right to grumble. . . . After all, I’m only one amongst your many friends.” He reclaimed her hands and drew them against his breast. “Good-bye, beloved,” he said. His voice sounded rough and uneven.

Instinctively Nan clung to him. He released himself very gently—very gently but inexorably.

“So it’s farewell, Sun-kissed.”

Mechanically she shook hands and her lips murmured some vague response. She heard the door of the flat close behind him, followed almost immediately by the clang of the iron grille as the lift-boy dragged it across. It seemed to her as though a curious note of finality sounded in the metallic clamour of the grille—a grim resemblance to the clank of keys and shooting of bolts which cuts the outer world from the prisoner in his cell.

Page 10

With a little strangled cry she sank into a chair, clasping her hands tightly together. She sat there, very still and quiet, staring blankly into space. . . .

And so, an hour later, Penelope found her. She was startled by the curious, dazed look in her eyes.

“Nan!” she cried sharply. “Nan! What’s the matter?”

Nan turned her head fretfully from one side to the other.

“Nothing,” she answered dully. “Nothing whatever.”

But Penelope saw the look of strain in her face. Very deliberately she divested herself of her hat and coat and sat down.

“Tell me about it,” she said practically. “Is it—is it that man?”

A gleam of humour shot across Nan’s face, and the painfully set expression went out of it.

“Yes,” she said, smiling a little. “It is ‘that man.’”

“Well, what’s happened? Surely”—with an accent of reproof—“surely you’ve not refused him?”

Nan still regarded her with a faintly humorous smile.

“Do you think I ought not—to have refused him?” she queried.

Penelope answered with decision.

“Certainly I do. You could see—anyone could see—that he cared badly, and you ought to have choked him off months ago if you only meant to turn him down at the finish. It wasn’t playing the game.”

Nan began to laugh helplessly.

“Penny, you’re too funny for words—if you only knew it. But still, you’re beginning to restore my self-respect. If you were mistaken in him, then perhaps I’ve not been quite such an incredible fool as I thought.”

“Mistaken?” There was a look of consternation in Penelope’s honest brown eyes. “Mistaken? . . . Nan, what do you mean?”

“It’s quite simple.” Nan’s laughter ceased suddenly. “Maryon Rooke has *not* asked me to marry him. I’ve not refused him. He—he didn’t give me the opportunity.” Her voice

shook a little. “He’s just been in to say good-bye,” she went on, after a pause. “He’s going abroad.”

“Listen to me, Nan.” Penelope spoke very quietly. “There’s a mistake somewhere. I’m absolutely sure Maryon cares for you—and cares pretty badly, too.”

“Oh, yes, he cares. But”—in a studiously light voice that hid the quivering pain at her heart—“a rising artist has to consider his art. He can’t hamper himself by marriage with an impecunious musician who isn’t able to pull wires and help him on. ’He travels the fastest who travels alone.’ You know it. And Maryon Rooke knows it. I suppose it’s true.”

She got up from her chair and came and stood beside Penelope.

“We won’t talk of this again, Penny. What one wants is a ‘far Moon’ and I’d forgotten the width of the world which always seems to lie between. My ‘shining ship’ has foundered. That’s all.”

CHAPTER II

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Page 11

Penelope tapped sharply at Nan's bedroom door.

"Nan, are you ready? Your taxi's waiting outside."

"Ticking tuppences away like the very dickens, too!" returned Nan, emerging from her room dressed for a journey.

It was a week or two later and in response to a wire—and as the result of a good deal of persuasion on the part of Penelope—Nan had accepted an engagement to play at a big charity concert in Exeter. Lady Chatterton, the organiser of the concert, had offered to put her up for the couple of nights involved, and Nan was now hurrying to catch the Paddington West-country train.

"I've induced the taxi-driver to come up and carry down your baggage," pursued Penelope. "You'll have to look fairly sharp if you're to catch the one-fifty."

"I *must* catch it," declared Nan. "Why, the Chattertons are fourteen miles from Abbencombe Station and it would be simply ghastly if they sent all that way to meet me—and there *was* no me! Besides, there's a rehearsal fixed for ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

While she spoke, the two girls were making their way down the circular flight of stone steps—since the lift was temporarily out of order—preceded by the driver grumblingly carrying Nan's suit-case and hat-box. A minute or two later the taxi emitted a grunt from somewhere within the depths of its being and Nan was off, with Penelope's cheery "Good luck!" ringing in her ears.

She sat back against the cushions and gasped a sigh of relief. She had run it rather close, but now, glancing down at her wrist-watch, she realised that, failing a block in the traffic, she would catch her train fairly easily.

It was after they had entered the Park that the first contre-temps occurred. The taxi jibbed and came abruptly to a standstill. Nan let down the window and leaned out.

"What's the matter?" she asked with some anxiety.

The driver, descending leisurely from his seat, regarded her with a complete lack of interest.

"That's just w'ot I'm goin' to find out," he replied in a detached way.

Nan watched him while he poked indifferently about the engine, then sank back into her seat with a murmur of relief as he at last climbed once more into his place behind the wheel and the taxi got going again.

But almost before two minutes had elapsed there came another halt, followed by another lengthy examination of the engine's internals. Engine trouble spelt disaster, and Nan hopped out and joined the driver in the road.

"What's wrong?" she asked. She looked down anxiously at her wrist-watch. "I shall miss my train at this rate."

"*I* cawn't 'elp it if you do," returned the man surlily. He was one of the many drivers who had taken advantage of a long-suffering public during the war-time scarcity of taxi-cabs and he hoped to continue the process during the peace. Incivility had become a confirmed habit with him.

Page 12

“But I can’t miss it!” declared Nan.

“And this ’ere taxi cawn’t catch it.”

“Do you mean you really can’t get her to go?” asked Nan.

“‘Aven’t I just bin sayin’ so?”—aggressively. “That’s just ’ow it stands. She won’t go.”

He ignored Nan’s exclamation of dismay and renewed his investigation of the engine.

“No,” he said at last, straightening himself. “I cawn’t get you to Paddington—or anyw’ere else for the matter o’ that!”

He spoke with a stubborn unconcern that was simply maddening.

“Then get me another taxi—quick!” said Nan.

“W’ere from?”—contemptuously. “There ain’t no taxi-rank ’ere in ’Yde Park.”

Nan looked hopelessly round. Cars and taxis, some with luggage and some without, went speeding past her, but never a single one that was empty.

“Oh”—she turned desperately to her driver—“can’t you do *anything*? Run down and see if you can hail one for me. I’ll stay by the taxi.”

He shook his bead.

“Callin’ taxis for people ain’t my job,” he remarked negligently. “I’m a driver, I am.”

Nan, driven by the extreme urgency of her need, stepped out into the middle of the road and excitedly hailed the next taxicab that passed her carrying luggage. The occupant, a woman, her attention attracted by Nan’s waving arm, leaned out from the window and called to her driver to stop. Nan ran forward.

“Oh, *are* you by any chance going to Paddington?” she asked eagerly. “My taxi’s broken down and I’m afraid I’ll miss my train.”

The woman smiled her sympathy. She had a delightful smile.

“How awful for you! But I’m not going anywhere near there. I’m so sorry I can’t help.”

The taxicab slid away and Nan stood once more forlornly watching the stream go by. The precious moments were slipping past, and no one in the world looked in the least as if they were going to Paddington. The driver, superbly unconcerned, lit up a cigarette, while Nan stood in the middle of the road, which seemed suddenly to have almost emptied of traffic.

All at once a taxi sped up the wide road with only a single suit-case up-ended in front beside the chauffeur. She planted herself directly in its path, and waved so frantically that the driver slowed up, although with obvious reluctance. Someone looked out of the window, and with a vague, troubled surprise Nan realised that the cab's solitary passenger was of the masculine persuasion. But she was far beyond being deterred by a mere detail of that description.

"Are you going to Paddington?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, I am," came the answer. The speaker's voice had a slight, well-bred drawl in it, reminiscent of the public school. "Can I do anything for you?"

"You can drive me there, if you will," she replied, with the bluntness of despair. "My taxi's broken down."

Page 13

“But with pleasure.”

The man was out of his own cab in an instant, and held the door open while she paid her fare and ordered her luggage to be transferred. The driver showed no very energetic appreciation of the idea; in fact, he seemed inclined to dispute it, and, at the end of her patience, Nan herself made a grab at her hat-box with the intention of carrying it across to the other taxicab. In the same moment she felt it quietly taken from her and heard the same drawling voice addressing her recalcitrant driver.

“Bring that suit-case across and look sharp about it.”

There was a curious quality of authority in the lazy voice to which the taxi-man responded in spite of himself, and he proceeded to obey the order with celerity. A minute later the transference was accomplished and Nan found herself sitting side by side in a taxi with an absolute stranger.

“He was a perfect *beast* of a driver!” was her first heart-felt ejaculation.

The man beside her smiled.

“I’m sure he was—a regular ‘down-with-everything’ type,” he replied.

She stole a veiled glance at him. His face was lean, with a squarish jaw, and the very definitely dark brows and lashes contrasted oddly with his English-fair hair and blue-grey eyes. In one eye he wore a horn-rimmed monocle from which depended a narrow black ribbon.

“I can’t thank you enough for coming to my rescue,” said Nan, after her quick scrutiny. “It was so frightfully important that I should catch this train.”

“Was it?”

Somehow the brief question compelled an explanation, although it held no suggestion of curiosity—nothing more than a friendly interest.

“Yes. I have a concert engagement to-morrow, and if I missed this train I couldn’t possibly make my connection at Exeter. I change on to the South-Western line there.”

“Then I’m very glad I sailed in at the crucial moment. Although you’d have been able to reach your destination in time for the concert even had the worst occurred to-day. You could have travelled down by an earlier train to-morrow; if everything else had failed.”

“But they’ve fixed a rehearsal for ten o’clock to-morrow morning.”

“That certainly does complicate matters. And I suppose, in any case, you’d rather not have to play in public immediately after a long railway journey.”

“How do you know I play?” demanded Nan. “It’s just conceivable I might be a singer!”

A distinct twinkle showed behind the monocle.

“There are quite a number of ‘conceivable’ things about you. But I heard Miss Nan Davenant play several times during the war—at concerts where special seats were allotted to the wounded. I’m sorry to say I haven’t heard you lately. I’ve only just come back from America.”

“Oh, were you in the war?” she asked quickly.

“Why, naturally.” He smiled a little. “I was perfectly sound in wind and limb—then.”

Page 14

Nan flushed suddenly. She knew of one man who had taken no fighting part. Maryon Rooke's health was apparently more delicate than anyone had imagined, and his artistes hands were, so he explained, an asset to the country, not to be risked like hands made of commoner clay. This holding back on his part had been the thing that had tortured Nan more than anything else during the long years of the war, in spite of the reasons he had offered in explanation, not least of which was the indispensability of his services at Whitehall—in which he genuinely believed.

"It's simply a choice between using brains or brawn as cannon-fodder," he used to say. "I'm serving with my brain instead of with my body."

And Nan, attracted by Rooke's odd fascination, had womanlike, tried to believe this and to thrust aside any thoughts that were disloyal to her faith in him. But, glancing now at the clever, clean-cut face of the man beside her, with its whimsical, sensitive mouth and steady eyes, she realised that he, at least, had kept nothing back—had offered brain and body equally to his country.

"And now? You look quite sound in wind and limb still," she commented.

"Oh, I've been one of the lucky ones. I've only got a game leg as my souvenir of hell. I just limp a bit, that's all."

"I'm so sorry you've a souvenir of any kind," said Nan quickly, with the spontaneousness which was part of her charm.

"Now that's very nice of you," answered the man. "There's no reason why you should burden yourself with the woes of a perfect stranger."

"I don't call you a perfect stranger," replied Nan serenely. "I call you a Good Samaritan."

"I'm generally known as Peter Mallory," he interjected modestly.

"And you know my name. I think that constitutes an introduction."

"Thank you," he said simply.

Nan laughed.

"The thanks are all on my side," she answered. "Here we are at Paddington, and it's entirely due to you that I shall catch my train."

The taxi pulled up and stood panting.

"Shares, please!" said Nan, when he had paid the driver.

For an instant a look of swift negation flashed across Mallory's face, then he replied composedly:

"Your share is two shillings."

Nan tendered a two-shilling piece, blessing him in her heart for refraining from putting her under a financial obligation to a stranger. He accepted the money quite simply, and turning away to speak to a porter, he tucked the two-shilling piece into his waistcoat pocket, while an odd, contemplative little smile curved his lips.

There was some slight confusion in the mind of the porter, who exhibited a zealous disposition to regard the arrivals as one party and to secure them seats in the same compartment.

Mallory, unheard by Nan, enlightened him quietly.

"I see, sir. You want a smoker?"

Page 15

Mallory nodded and tipped him recklessly.

“That’s it. You find the lady a comfortable corner seat. I’ll look after myself.”

He turned back to Nan.

“I’ve told the porter to find you a good seat. I think you ought to be all right as the trains aren’t crowded. Good-bye.”

Nan held out her hand impulsively.

“Good-bye,” she said. “And, once more, thank you ever so much.”

His hand closed firmly round hers.

“There’s no need. I’m only too glad to have been of any service.”

He raised his hat and moved away and Nan could see the slight limp of which he had spoken—his “souvenir of hell.”

The porter fulfilled his obligations and bestowed her in an empty first-class carriage, even exerting himself to fetch a newspaper boy from whom she purchased a small sheaf of magazines. The train started and very soon the restaurant attendant came along. Since she detested the steamy odour of cooking which usually pervades the dining-car of a train, she gave instructions that her lunch should be served to her in her own compartment. This done, she settled down to the quiet monotony of the journey, ate her lunch in due course, and finally drowsed over a magazine until she woke with a start to find the train at a standstill. Thinking she had arrived at St. David’s Station, where she must change on to another line, she sprang up briskly. To her amazement she found they were not at a station at all. Green fields sloped away from the railway track and there was neither house nor cottage in sight. The voices of the guard and ticket-collector in agitated conference sounded just below and Nan thrust her head out of the window.

“Why are we stopping?” she asked. “Have we run into something?”

The guard looked up irritably. Then, seeing the charming face bent above him, he softened visibly. Beauty may be only skin deep, but it has an amazing faculty for smoothing the path of its possessor.

“Pretty near, miss. There’s a great piece of timber across the line. Luckily the driver saw it and just pulled up in time, and a miss is as good as a mile, isn’t it?”

“How horrible!” ejaculated Nan. “Who d’you think put it there?”

“One of they Bolshies, I expect. We’ve got more of them in England than we’ve any need for.”

“I hope you’ll soon get the line clear?”

The guard shook his head discouragingly.

“Well, it’ll take a bit of time, miss. Whoever did, the job did it thoroughly, and even when we get clear we’ll have to go slow and keep a sharp look-out.”

“Then I shall miss my connection at Exeter—on to Abbencombe by the South-Western?”

“I’m afraid you will, miss.”

Her face fell.

“It’s better than missing a limb or two, or your life, maybe,” observed the guard with rebuke in his tones.

She nodded and tipped him.

Page 16

“Much better,” she agreed.

And the guard, with a beaming smile, moved off to the other end of the train, administering philosophic consolation to the disturbed passengers on his way.

It was over half-an-hour before the obstruction on the line was removed and the train enabled to steam ahead once more.

Nan, strung up by the realisation of how close she had been to probable death, found herself unable to continue reading and gazed out of the window, wondering in a desultory fashion how long she would have to wait at St. David’s before the next train ran to Abbencombe. It was impossible now for her to catch the one she had originally proposed to take. She was faintly disquieted, too, by the fact that she could not precisely recollect noticing any later train quoted in the time-table.

The train proceeded at a cautious pace and finally pulled into St. David’s an hour late. Nan jumped out and made enquiry of a porter, only to learn that her suspicions were true. There was no later train to Abbencombe that day!

Rather shaken by the misadventures of the journey, she felt as though she could have screamed at the placidly good-natured porter: “But there must be! There *must* be another train!” Instead, she turned hopelessly away from him, and found herself face to face with Peter Mallory.

“In trouble again?” he asked, catching sight of her face.

She was surprised into another question, instead of a reply.

“Did you come down by this train, then, too?” she asked.

“Yes. I travelled smoker, though.”

“So did I. At least”—smiling—“I converted my innocent compartment into a temporary smoker.”

But she was pleased, nevertheless, that neither their unconventional introduction, nor the fact that he had rendered her a service, had tempted him into assuming he might travel with her. It showed a rarely sensitive perception.

“I suppose you’ve missed your connection?” he pursued.

“Yes. That’s just it. The last train to Abbencombe has gone, and my friends’ car was to meet me there. I’m stranded.”

He pondered a moment.

“So am I. I must get on to Abbencombe, though, and I propose to hire a car and drive there. Will you let me give you a lift? Probably your chauffeur will still be at the Station. The side-line train is a very slow one and stops at every little wayside place on the way. To make sure, we could telephone from here to the Abbencombe station-master, asking him to tell your man to wait for you as you’re coming on by motor.”

“Oh—” Nan almost gasped at his quick masculine grip of the situation. Before she had time to make any answer he had gone off to see about telephoning.

It was some little time before he returned, but when he finally reappeared, his face wore an expression of humorous satisfaction.

“I’ve fixed it all,” he said. “Your car has just arrived at Abbencombe and the chauffeur told to wait there. I’ve got hold of another one here for our journey. Now let me put you into it and then I’ll see about your luggage.”

Page 17

Nan took her seat obediently and reflected that there was something tremendously reliable about this man. He had a genius for appearing at the critical moment and for promptly clearing away all difficulties. Almost unconsciously she was forced into comparing him with Maryon Rooke—Rooke, with his curious fascination and detached, half-cynical outlook on life, his beautiful ideals and—Nan's inner self flinched from the acknowledgment—his frequent fallings-short of them. Unwillingly she had to confess to the fact that Maryon was something both of poseur and actor, with an ineradicable streak of cynicism in his composition added to a strange undercurrent of passion which he rarely allowed to carry him away. Apart from this he was genuine, creative artist. Whereas Peter Mallory, beautifully unself-conscious, was helpful in a simple, straightforward way that gave one a feeling of steadfast reliance upon him. And she liked his whimsical smile.

She was more than ever sure of the latter fact when he joined her in the car, remarking smilingly:

"This is a great bit of luck for me. I should have had a long drive of twenty-five miles all by myself if you hadn't been left high and dry as well."

"It's very nice of you to call it luck," replied Nan, as the car slid away into the winter dusk of the afternoon. "Are you usually a lucky person? You look as if you might be."

Under the light of the tiny electric bulb which illuminated the car she saw his face alter suddenly. The lines on either side the sensitive mouth seemed to deepen and a weary gravity showed for an instant in his grey-blue eyes.

"Appearances are known to be deceitful, aren't they?" he answered, with an attempt at lightness. "No, I'm afraid I've not been specially lucky."

"In love or in cards?"

The words left Nan's lips unthinkingly, almost before she was aware, and she regretted them the moment they were spoken. She felt he must inevitably suspect her of a prying curiosity.

"I'm lucky at cards," he replied quietly.

There was something in his voice that appealed to Nan's quick, warm sympathies.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she said, rather tremulously. "Perhaps, some day, the other kind of luck will come, too."

"That's out of the question"—harshly.

“Do you know a little poem called ’Empty Hands’?” she asked. “I set it to music one day because I liked the words so much. Listen.”

In a low voice, a trifle shaken by reason of the sudden tensity which had crept into the atmosphere, she repeated the brief lyric:

“But sometimes God on His great white Throne
Looks down from the Heaven above,
And lays in the hands that are empty
The tremulous Star of Love.”

As she spoke the last verse Nan’s voice took on a tender, instinctive note of consolation. Had she been looking she would have seen Peter Mallory’s hand clench itself as though to crush down some sudden, urgent motion. But she was gazing straight in front of her into the softly lit radiance of the car.

Page 18

“Only sometimes there isn’t any star, and your hands would be ‘outstretched in vain,’ as the song says,” he commented.

“Oh, I hope not!” cried Nan. “Try to believe they wouldn’t be!”

Mallory uttered a short laugh.

“I’m afraid it’s no case for ‘believing.’ It’s hard fact.”

Nan remained silent. There was an undertone so bitter in his voice that she felt as though her poor little efforts at consolation were utterly trivial and futile to meet whatever tragedy lay behind the man’s curt speech. It seemed as though he read her thought, for he turned to her quickly with that charming smile of his.

“You’d make a topping pal,” he said. And Nan knew that in some indefinable way she had comforted him.

They drove on in silence for some time and when, later on, they began to talk again it was on ordinary commonplace topics, by mutual consent avoiding any by-way that might lead them back to individual matters. The depths which had been momentarily stirred settled down once more into misleading tranquillity.

In due course they arrived at Abbencombe, and the car purred up to the station, where the Chattertons’ limousine, sent to meet Nan, still waited for her. The transit from one car to the other was quickly effected, and Peter Mallory stood bareheaded at the door of the limousine.

“Good-bye,” he said. “And thank you, little pal. I hope you’ll never find *your* moon out of reach.”

Nan held out her hand. In the grey dusk she felt him carry it to his lips.

“Good-bye,” he said once more.

CHAPTER III

A QUESTION OF EXTERNALS

It was a grey November afternoon two days later. A faint, filmy suggestion of fog hung about the streets, just enough to remind the Londoner of November possibilities, but in the western sky hung a golden sun, and underfoot there was the blessing of dry pavements.

Penelope stood at one of the windows of the flat in Edenhall Mansions, and looked down at the busy thoroughfare below. Hither and thither men and women hurried about their business; there seemed few indeed nowadays of the leisured loiterers through life. A tube strike had only recently been brought to a conclusion, and Londoners of all classes were endeavouring to make good the time lost during those days of enforced stagnation. Unfortunately, time that is lost can never be recovered. Even Eternity itself can't give us back the hours which have been flung away.

Rather bitterly Penelope reflected that, in spite of all our vaunted civilisation and education, men still resorted, as did their ancestors of old, to brute force in order to obtain their wishes. For, after all, a strike, however much you may gloss over the fact, is neither more nor less than a modern substitute for the old-time revolt of men armed with pikes and staves. That is to say, in either instance you insist on what you want by a process of making other people thoroughly uncomfortable till you get your way—unless they happen to be stronger than you! And incidentally a good many innocent folk who have nothing to do with the matter get badly hurt in the fray.

Page 19

All the miseries which inevitably beset the steadfast worker when a strike occurs had fallen to Penelope's lot. She had scrambled hopelessly for a seat on a motor-'bus, or, driven by extremity into a fit of wild extravagance, had vainly hailed a taxi. Sometimes she had been compelled to tramp the whole way home, through drenching rain, from some house at which she had been giving a lesson, in each case enduring the very kind of physical stress which plays such havoc with a singer's only capital—her voice. She wondered if the strikers ever realised the extra strain they inflicted on people so much less able to contend with the hardships of a worker's life than they themselves.

The whirr and snort of a taxi broke the thread of her thoughts. With a grinding of brakes the cab came to a standstill at the entrance to the block of flats, and after a few minutes Emily, the unhurried maid-of-all-work, whom Nan's sense of fitness had re-christened "our Adagio," jerked the door open, announcing briefly:

"A lidy."

Penelope turned quickly, and a look of pleasure flashed into her face.

"Kitty! Back in town at last! Oh, it's good to see you again!"

She kissed the new-comer warmly and began to help off her enveloping furs. When these—coat, stole, and a muff of gigantic proportions—were at last shed, Mrs. Barry Seymour revealed herself as a small, plump, fashionable little person with auburn hair—the very newest shade—brown eyes that owed their shadowed lids to kohl, a glorious skin (which she had had the sense to leave to nature), and, a chic little face at once so kind and humorous and entirely delightful, that all censure was disarmed.

Her dress was Paquin, her jewellery extravagant, but her heart was as big as her banking account, and there was not a member of her household, from her adoring husband down to the kitchen-maid who evicted the grubs from the cabbages, who did not more or less worship the ground she walked on. Even her most intimate women friends kept their claws sheathed—and that, despite the undeniable becomingness of the dyed hair.

"We only got back to town last night," she said, returning Penelope's salute with fervour. "So I flew round this morning to see how you two were getting on. I can't think how you've managed without the advantage of my counsels for three whole months!"

"I don't think we have managed too well," admitted Penelope drily.

"There! What did I say?"—with manifest delight. "I told Barry, when he would go up to Scotland just for the pleasure of killing small birds, that I was sure something would happen in my absence. What is it? Nothing very serious, of course. By the way, where's Nan this morning?"

“Playing at a concert in Exeter. At least, the concert took place last night. I’m expecting her back this afternoon.”

“Well, that’s good news, not bad. How did you induce her to do it? She’s been slacking abominably lately.”

Page 20

Penelope nodded sombrely.

“I know. I’ve been pitching into her for it. The Peace has upset her.”

“She’s like every other girl. She can’t settle down after four years of perpetual thrills and excitement. But if she’d had a husband fighting”—Kitty’s gay little face softened incredibly—“she’d be thanking God on her knees that the war is over—however beastly,” she added characteristically, “the peace may be.”

“She worked splendidly during the war,” interposed Penelope, her sense of justice impelling the remark.

“Yes”—quickly. “But she’s done precious little work of any kind since. What’s she been doing lately? Has she written anything new?”

Penelope laughed grimly.

“Oh, a song or two. And she’s composed one gruesome thing which makes your blood run cold. It’s really for orchestra, and I believe it’s meant to represent the murder of a soul. . . . It does!”

“She’s rather inclined to err on the side of tragedy,” observed Kitty.

“Especially just now,” added Penelope pointedly.

Kitty glanced sharply across at her.

“What do you mean? Is anything wrong with Nan?”

“Yes, there’s something very wrong. I’m worried about her.”

“Well, what is it?”—impatiently.

“It’s all the fault of that wretched artist man we met at your house.”

“Do you mean Maryon Rooke?”

“Yes”—briefly. “He’s rather smashed Nan up.”

“*He*? *Nan*?” Kitty’s voice rose in a crescendo of incredulity. “But he was crazy about her! Has been, all through the war. Why, I thought there was practically an understanding between them!”

“Yes. So did most people,” replied Penelope shortly.

“For goodness’ sake be more explicit, Penny! Surely she hasn’t turned him down?”

“He hasn’t given her the chance.”

“You mean—you *can’t* mean that he’s chucked her?”

“That’s practically what it amounts to. And I don’t understand it. Nan is so essentially attractive from a man’s point of view.”

“How do you know?” queried Kitty whimsically. “You’re only a woman.”

“Why, because I’ve used my eyes, my dear! . . . But in this case it seems we were all mistaken. If ever a man deliberately set himself to make a woman care, Maryon Rooke was the man. And when he’d succeeded—he went away.”

Kitty produced a small gold cigarette case from the depths of an elaborate bead bag and extracted a cigarette. She lit it and began smoking reflectively.

“And I suppose all this, coming on top of the staleness of things in general after the war, has flattened her out?”

“It’s given her a bad knock.”

“Did she tell you anything about it?”

“A little. He came here to say good-bye to her before going to France—”

“I know,” interpolated Kitty. “He’s going there to paint Princess Somebody-or-other while she’s staying in Paris.”

Page 21

“Well, I came in when he’d left and found Nan sitting like a stone statue, gazing blankly in front of her. She wouldn’t say much, but bit by bit I dragged it out of her. Since then she has never referred to the matter again. She is quite gay at times in a sort of artificial way, but she doesn’t do any work, though she spends odd moments fooling about at the piano. She goes out morning, noon, and night, and comes back dead-beat, apparently not having enjoyed herself at all. Can you imagine Nan like that?”

“Not very easily.”

“I believe he’s taken the savour out of things for her,” said Penelope, adding slowly, in a voice that was quite unlike her usual practical tones: “Brushed the bloom off the world for her.”

“Poor old Nan! She must be hard hit. . . . She’s never been hurt badly before.”

“Never—before she met that man. I can’t forgive him, Kitty. I’m horribly afraid what sort of effect this miserable affair is going to have on a girl of Nan’s queer temperament.”

Kitty turned the matter over in her mind in silence. Then with a small, sage nod of her red head, she advanced a suggestion.

“Bring her over to dinner to-morrow—no, not to-morrow, I’m booked. Say Thursday, and I’ll have a nice man to meet her. She needs someone to play around with. There’s nothing like another man to knock the first one out of a woman’s head. It’s cure by homeopathy.”

Penelope smiled dubiously.

“It’s a bit of bad luck on the second man, isn’t it—if he’s nice? You know, Nan is rather fatal to the peace of the male mind.”

“Oh, the man I’m thinking of has himself well in hand. He’s a novelist—and finds safety in numbers. His mother was French.”

“And Nan’s great-grandmother. Kitty, is it wise?”

“Extreme measures are sometimes necessary. He and she will hit it off together at once, I know.”

As Kitty finished speaking there came a trill at the front-door bell, followed a minute later by a masculine knock on the door.

“Come in,” cried Penelope.

The door opened to admit a tall, fair man who somehow reminded one of a big, genial Newfoundland.

“I’ve called for my wife,” he said, shaking hands with. Penelope, and smiling down at her with a pair of lazily humorous blue eyes. “Can I have her?”

“In a minute, Barry”—Kitty nodded at him cheerfully. “We’re just settling plans about Nan.”

“Nan? I should have imagined that young woman was very capable of making her own plans,” returned Barry Seymour, letting his long length down into a chair. “In fact, I was under the impression she’d already made ’em,” he added with a grin.

“No, they’re unsettled at present,” returned Kitty. “She’s not very keen about Maryon Rooke now.” Kitty was of the opinion that you should never tell even the best of husbands more than he need know. “So we think she requires distraction,” she pursued firmly.

Page 22

“And who’s the poor devil you’ve fixed on as a burnt-offering?” enquired Seymour, tugging reflectively at his big, fair moustache.

“It certainly is a man,” conceded Kitty.

“Naturally,” agreed her husband amicably.

“But I’m not going to tell you who it is or I know you’d let the cat out of the bag, and then Nan will be put off at the beginning. Men”—superbly—“never can keep a secret.”

“But they can use their native observation, my dear,” retorted Barry calmly. “And I bet you five to one in gloves that I tell you the name of the man inside a week.”

“In a week it won’t matter,” pronounced Kitty oracularly. “Give me a week—and you can have all the time that’s left.”

“Well, we’d better occupy what’s left of this afternoon in getting back home, old thing,” returned her husband. “Or you’ll never be dressed in time for the Granleys’ dinner to-night.”

Kitty looked at the clock and jumped up quickly.

“Good heavens! I’d forgotten all about them! Penelope, I must fly! Thursday, then—-don’t forget. Dinner at eight.”

She caught up her furs. There was a faint rustle of feminine garments, a fleeting whiff of violets in the air, and Kitty had taken her departure, followed by her husband.

A short time afterwards a taxi pulled up at Edenhall Mansions and Nan stepped out of it. Penelope sprang up to welcome her as she entered the sitting-room. She was darning stockings, foolish, pretty, silken things—Nan’s, be it said.

“Well, how did it go?” she asked eagerly.

“The concert? Oh, quite well. I had a very good reception, and this morning’s notices in the newspapers were positively calculated to make me blush.”

There was an odd note of indifference in her voice; the concert did not appear to interest her much. Penelope pursued her interrogation.

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

A curious look of reminiscence came into Nan’s eyes.

“Oh, yes. I enjoyed myself. Very much.”

“I’m so glad. I thought the Chattertons would look after you well.”

“They did.”

She omitted to add that someone else had looked after her even better—someone distinctly more interesting than dear old Lady Chatterton, kindest soul alive though she might be. For some reason or other Nan felt reluctant to share with Penelope—or with anyone else just at present—the fact of her meeting with Peter Mallory.

“You caught your train all right at Paddington?” went on Penelope.

Nan’s mouth tilted in a faint smile.

“Quite all right,” she responded placidly.

Finding that the question and answer process was not getting them very far, Penelope resumed her darning and announced her own small item of news.

“Kit’s been here this afternoon,” she said.

Nan shrugged her shoulders.

“Just my luck to miss her,” she muttered irritably.

Page 23

“No, it isn’t ‘just your luck,’ my dear. It’s anyone’s luck. You make such a grievance of trifles.”

In an instant Nan’s charming smile flashed out.

“I *am* a *beast*,” she said in a tone of acquiescence. “What on earth should I do without you, Penny, to bully me and generally lick me into shape?” She dropped a light kiss on the top of Penelope’s bent head. “But, truly, I hate to miss Kit Seymour. She’s as good as a tonic—and just now I feel like a bottle of champagne that’s been uncorked for a week.”

“You’re overtired,” replied Penelope prosaically. “You’re so—so *excessive* in all you do.”

Nan laughed.

“The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” she acknowledged. “Well, what’s the Kitten’s news? What colour is her hair this season?”

“Red. It suits her remarkably well.”

Nan rippled with mirth.

“I never knew a painted Jezebel so perfectly delightful as Kitty. Even Aunt Eliza can’t resist her.”

Mrs. McBain, generally known to her intimates as “Aunt Eliza,” was a connection of Nan’s on the paternal side. She was a lady of Scottish antecedents and Early Victorian tendencies, to whom the modern woman and her methods were altogether anathema. She regarded her niece as walking—or, more truly, pirouetting aggressively—along the road which leads to destruction.

Penelope folded a pair of renovated stockings and tossed them into her work-basket.

“The Seymours want us to dine there on Thursday. I suppose you can?” she asked.

“With all the pleasure in life. Their chef is a dream,” murmured Nan reminiscently.

“As though you cared!” scoffed Penelope.

Nan lit a cigarette and seated herself on the humpty-dumpty cushion by the fire.

“But I do care—extremely.” she averred. “It isn’t my little inside which cares. It’s a purely external feeling which likes to have everything just right. If it’s going to be a dinner, I want it perfect from soup to savoury.”

Penelope regarded her with a glint of amusement.

“You’re such a demanding person.”

“I know I am—about the way things are done. What pleasure is there in anything which offends your sense of fitness?”

“You bestow far too much importance on the outside of the cup and platter.”

Nan shook her head.

“*Mon verre n’est pas grand, mais—Je bois dans mon verre.*” she quoted, frivolously obstinate.

“Bah!” Penelope grunted, “The critical faculty is over-developed in you, my child.”

“Not a bit! Would you like to drink champagne out of a kitchen tea-cup? Of course not. I merely apply the same principle to other things. For instance, if the man I married ate peas with a knife and made loud juicy noises when he drank his soup, not all the sterling qualities he might possess would compensate. Whereas if he had perfect manners, I believe I could forgive him half the sins in the Decalogue.”

Page 24

“Manners are merely an external,” protested Penelope, although privately she acknowledged to a sneaking agreement with Nan’s point of view.

“Well,” retorted Nan. “We’ve got to live with externals, haven’t we? It’s only on rare occasions that people admit each other on to their souls’ doorsteps. Besides”—-argumentatively—“decent manners *aren’t* an external. They’re the ‘outward and visible sign.’ Why”—waxing enthusiastic—“if a man just opens a door or puts some coal on the fire for you, it involves a whole history of the homage and protective instinct of man for woman.”

“The theory may be correct,” admitted Penelope, “though a trifle idealistic for the twentieth century. Most men,” she added drily, “Regard coaling up the fire as a damned nuisance rather than a ’history of homage.’”

“It oughtn’t to be idealistic.” There was a faint note of wistfulness in Nan’s voice. “Why should everything that is beautiful be invariably termed ‘idealistic’? Oh, there are ten thousand things I’d like altered in this world of ours!”

“Of course there are. You wouldn’t be you otherwise! You want a specially constructed world and a peculiarly adapted human nature. In fact—you want the moon!”

Nan stared into the fire reflectively.

“I wonder,” she said slowly, “if I shall get it?”

Penelope glanced at her sharply.

“It’s highly improbable,” she said. “But a little philosophy would be quite as useful—and a far more likely acquisition.”

As she finished speaking a bell pealed through the flat—pealed with an irritable suggestion that it had been rung unavailingly before. Followed the abigail’s footstep as she pursued her unhurried way to answer its imperative demand, and presently a visitor was shown into the room. He was a man of over seventy, erect and well-preserved, with white hair and clipped moustache. There was an indefinable courtliness of manner about him which recalled the days of lace ruffles and knee-breeches. The two girls rose to greet him with unfeigned delight.

“Uncle!” cried Nan. “How dear of you to come just when our spirits were at their lowest ebb!”

“My dears!” He kissed his niece and shook hands with Penelope. Nan pushed an armchair towards the fire and tendered her cigarette case.

“You needn’t be afraid of them, Uncle David,” she informed him reassuringly. “They’re not gaspers.”

“Sybarite! With the same confidence as if they were my own.” And Lord St. John helped himself smilingly.

“And why,” he continued, “has the barometer fallen?”

Nan laughed.

“You can’t expect it to be always ’set fair’!”

“I’d like it to be,” returned St. John simply.

A fugitive thought flashed through Nan’s mind that he and Peter Mallory were merely young and old representatives of a similar type of man. She could imagine Mallory growing into the same gracious old manhood as her uncle.

Page 25

“A propos,” pursued Lord St. John, with a twinkle, “your handmaiden appears to me a quite just cause and impediment.”

“Oh, our ’Adagio’?” exclaimed Nan. “We’ve long since ceased to expect much from her. Did she keep you waiting on the doorstep long?”

“Only about ten minutes,” murmured St. John mildly. “But seriously, why don’t you—er—give her warning?”

“My dear innocent uncle!” protested Nan amusedly. “Don’t you know that that sort of thing isn’t done nowadays—not in the best circles?”

“Besides,” added Penelope practically, “we should probably be only out of the frying pan into the fire. The jewels in the domestic line are few and far between and certainly not to be purchased within our financial limits. And frankly, there are very few jewels left at any price. Most of the nice ones got married during the war—the servants you loved and regarded as part of the family—and nine-tenths of those that are left have no sense of even giving good work in return for their wages—let alone civility! The tradition of good service has gone.”

“Have you been having much bother, then?” asked St. John concernedly. “You never used to have trouble with maids.”

“No. But everyone has now. You wouldn’t believe what they’re like! I don’t think it’s in the least surprising so many women have nervous break-downs through nothing more nor less than domestic worry. Why, the home-life of women these days is more like a daily battlefield than anything else!”

Penelope spoke strongly. She had suffered considerably at the hands of various inefficient maids and this, added to the strain of her own professional work, had brought her at one time to the verge of a break-down in health.

“I’d no idea you were so strong on domestic matters, Penelope,” chaffed St. John, smiling across at her.

“I’m not. But I’ve got common sense, and I can see that if the small wheels of the machine refuse to turn, the big wheels are bound to stick.”

“If only servants knew how much one liked and respected a really good maid!” murmured Nan with a recrudescence of idealism.

“Do wages make any difference?” ventured St. John somewhat timidly. Penelope was rather forcible when the spirit moved her, and he was becoming conscious of the fact that he was a mere ignorant man.

“Of course they do—to a certain extent,” she replied.

“Money makes a difference to most things, doesn’t it?”

“There are one or two things it can’t taint,” he answered quietly, but now you’ve really brought me to the very object of my visit.”

“I thought it was a desire to enquire after the health of your favourite niece,” hazarded Nan impertinently.

“So it was. And as finance plays a most important part in that affair, the matter dovetails exactly!”

He smoked in silence for a moment. Then he resumed:

Page 26

“I should like, Nan, with your permission, to double your allowance and make it six hundred a year.”

Nan gasped.

“You see,” he pursued, “though I’m only a mere man, I know the cost of living has soared sky-high, including”—with a sly glance at Penelope—“the cost of menservants and maidservants.”

“Well, but really, Uncle, I could manage with less than that,” protested Nan. “Four or five hundred, with what we earn, would be quite sufficient—quite.”

St. John regarded her reflectively.

“It might be—for some people. But not for you, my child. I know your temperament too well! You’ve the Davenant love of beauty and the instinct to surround yourself with all that’s worth having, and I hate to think of its being thwarted just for lack of money. After all, money is only of value for what it can procure—what it does for you. Well, being a Davenant, you want a lot of the things that money can procure—things which wouldn’t mean anything at all to many people. They wouldn’t even notice whether they were there or not. So six hundred a year it will be, my dear. On the same understanding as before—that you renounce the income should you marry.”

Nan gripped his hand hard.

“Uncle,” she began. “I can’t thank you—”

“Don’t, my dear. I merely want to give you a little freedom. You mayn’t have it always. You won’t if you marry”—with a twinkle. “Now, may I have my usual cup of coffee—*not* from the hands of your Hebe!”

She nodded and slipped out of the room to make the coffee, while Penelope turned towards the visitor with an expression of dismay on her face.

“Do forgive me, Lord St. John,” she said. “But is it wise? Aren’t you taking from her all incentive to work?”

“I don’t believe in pot-boiling,” he replied promptly. “The best work of a talent like Nan’s is not the work that’s done to buy the dinner.”

He lit another cigarette before he spoke again. Then he went on rather wistfully:

“I may be wrong, Penelope. But remember, my wife was a Davenant, nearer than Nan by one generation to Angele de Varincourt. And she was never happy! Though I loved her, I couldn’t make her happy.”

“I should have thought you would have made her happy if any man could,” said Penelope gently.

“My dear, it’s given to very few men to make a woman of temperament happy. And Nan is so like my dear, dead Annabel that, if for no other reason, I should always wish to give her what happiness I can.” He paused, then went on thoughtfully: “Unfortunately money won’t buy happiness. I can’t do very much for her—only give her what money can buy. But even the harmony of material environment means a great deal to Nan—-the difference between a pert, indifferent maid and a civil and experienced one; flowers in your rooms; a taxi instead of a scramble for a motor-’bus. Just small things in such a big thing as life, but they make an enormous difference.”

Page 27

“You of all men surely understand a temperamental woman!” exclaimed Penelope, surprised at his keen perception of the details which can fret a woman so sorely in proportion to their apparent unimportance.

St. John hardly seemed to hear her, for he continued:

“And I want to give her freedom—freedom from marriage if she wishes it. That’s why I stipulate that the income ceases If she marries. I’m trying to weight the balance against her marrying.”

Penelope looked at him questioningly.

“But why? Surely love is the best thing of all?”

“Love and marriage, my dear, are two very different things,” commented St. John, with an unwonted touch of cynicism. After a moment he went on: “Annabel and I—we loved. But I couldn’t make her happy. Our temperaments were unsuited, we looked out on life from different windows. I’m not at all sure”—reflectively—“that the union of sympathetic temperaments, even where less love is, does not result in a much larger degree of happiness than the union of opposites, where there is great love. The jar and fret is there, despite the attraction, and love starves in an atmosphere of discord. For the race, probably the mysterious attraction of opposites will produce the best results. But for individual happiness the sympathetic temperament is the first necessity.”

There was a silence, Penelope feeling that Lord St. John had crystallised in words, thoughts and theories that she sensed as being the foundation of her own opinions, hitherto unrecognised and nebulous.

Presently he spoke again.

“And I don’t really think men are at all suited to have the care and guardianship of women.”

“Unfortunately they’re all that Providence has seen fit to provide,” replied Penelope, with her usual bluntly philosophical acceptance of facts.

“And yet—we men don’t understand women. We’re constantly hurting them with our clumsy misconceptions—with our failure to respond to their complexities.”

Penelope’s eyes grew kind.

“I don’t think you would,” she said.

“Ah, my dear, I’m an old man now and perhaps I understand. But there was a time when I understood no better than the average youngster who gaily asks some nice

woman to trust her future in his hands—without a second thought as to whether he's fit for such a trust. And that was just the time when a little understanding would have given happiness to the woman I loved best on earth."

He spoke rather wearily, but contrived a smile as Nan entered, carrying a cup of coffee in her hand.

"My compliments, Nan. Your coffee equals that of any Frenchwoman."

"A reversion to type. Don't forget that Angele de Varincourt is always at the back of me."

St. John laughed and drank his coffee appreciatively, and after a little further desultory conversation took his departure, leaving the two girls alone together.

Page 28

“Isn’t he a perfect old dear?” said Nan.

“Yes,” agreed Penelope. “He is. And he absolutely spoils you.”

Nan gave a little grin.

“I really think he does—a bit. Imagine it, Penny, after our strenuous economies! Six hundred a year in addition to our hard-earned pence! Within limits it really does mean pretty frocks, and theatres, and taxis when we want them.”

Penelope smiled at her riotous satisfaction. Nan lived tremendously in the present—her capacity for enjoyment and for suffering was so intense that every little pleasure magnified itself and each small fret and jar became a minor tragedy.

But Penelope was acutely conscious that beneath all the surface tears and laughter there lay a hurt which had not healed, the ultimate effect and consequence of which she was afraid to contemplate.

CHAPTER IV

THE SKELETON IN THE CUPBOARD

“Nan, may I introduce Mr. Mallory?”

It was the evening of Kitty’s little dinner—a cosy gathering of sympathetic souls, the majority of whom were more or less intimately known to each other.

“As you both have French blood in your veins, you can chant the Marseillaise in unison.” And with a nod and smile Kitty passed on to where her husband was chatting with Ralph Fenton, the well-known baritone, and a couple of members of Parliament. Each of them had cut a niche of his own in the world, for Kitty was discriminating in her taste, and the receptions at her house in Green Street were always duly seasoned with the spice of brains and talent.

As Nan looked up into the face of the man whose acquaintance she had already made in such curious fashion, the thought flashed through her mind that here, in his partly French blood was the explanation of his unusual colouring—black brows and lashes contrasting so oddly with the kinky fair hair which, despite the barber’s periodical shearing and the fervent use of a stiff-bristled hair-brush, still insisted on springing into crisp waves over his head and refused to lie flat.

“What luck!” he exclaimed boyishly. “I must be in the Fates’ good books to-night. What virtuous deed can I have done to deserve it?”

“Playing the part of Good Samaritan might have counted,” suggested Nan, smiling. “Unless you can recall any particularly good action which you’ve performed in the interval.”

“I don’t think I’ve been guilty of a solitary one,” he replied seriously. “May I?” He offered his arm as the guests began trooping in to dinner—Penelope appropriately paired off with Fenton, whom she had come to know fairly well in the course of her professional work. Although, as she was wont to remark, “Ralph Fenton’s a big fish and I’m only a little one.” They were chattering happily together of songs and singers.

“So France has a partial claim, on you, too?” remarked Mallory, unfolding his napkin.

Page 29

“Yes—a great-grandmother. I let her take the burden of all my sins.”

“Not a very heavy one, I imagine,” he returned, smiling.

“I don’t know. Sometimes”—Nan’s eyes grew suddenly pensive—“sometimes I feel that one day I shall do something which will make the burden too heavy to be shunted on to great-grandmamma! Then I’ll have to bear it myself, I suppose.”

“There’ll be a pal or two around, to give you a hand with it, I expect,” answered Mallory.

“I don’t know if there will even be that,” she answered dreamily. “Do you know, I’ve always had the idea that sometime or other I shall get myself into an awful hole and that there won’t be a single soul in the world to get me out of it.”

She spoke with an odd note of prescience in her voice. It was so pronounced that the sense of foreboding communicated itself to Mallory.

“Don’t talk like that. If you think it, you’ll be carried forward to just such disaster on the current of the thought. Be sure—quite, quite sure—that there will be someone at hand, even if it’s only me”—quaintly.

“The Good Samaritan again? But you mightn’t know I was in a difficulty,” she protested.

“I think I should always know if you were in trouble,” he said quietly.

There was a new quality in the familiar lazy drawl—something that was very strong and steady. Although he had laid no stress on the word “you,” yet Nan was conscious in every nerve of her that there was an emphatic individual significance in the brief words he had just uttered. She shied away from it like a frightened colt.

“Still you mightn’t come to the rescue, even if I were struggling in the quicksands,” she answered.

“I should come,” he said deliberately, “whether you wanted me to come or not.”

Followed a brief pause, charged with a curious emotional tensity. Then Mallory remarked lightly:

“I enjoyed the Charity Concert at Exeter.”

“Were you there?” exclaimed Nan in surprise.

“Certainly I was there. When I was as near as Abbencombe, you don’t suppose I was going to miss the chance of hearing you play, do you?”

“I never thought of your being there,” she answered.

“And now that I know you’ve French blood in your veins, I can understand what always puzzled me in your playing.”

“What was that?”

“The un-English element in it.”

Nan smiled.

“Am I too unreserved then?” she shot at him.

His grey-blue eyes smiled back at her.

“One doesn’t ask reserve of a musician. He must give himself—as you do.”

She flushed a little. The man’s perception was unerring.

“As no Englishwoman could,” he pursued. “We English aren’t dramatic—it’s bad form, you know.”

“‘We’ English?” repeated Nan. “That hardly applies to you, does it?”

“My mother is French. But I’m very English in most ways,” he returned quickly. Adding, with a good-humoured laugh: “I’m a disappointment to my mother.”

Page 30

Nan laughed with him out of sheer friendly enjoyment.

“Oh, surely not?” she dissented.

“But yes!” A foreign turn of phrase occasionally betrayed his half-French nationality. “But yes—I’m too English to please her. It’s an example of the charming inconsistency of women. My mother loves the English; she chooses an Englishman for her husband. But she desires her son to be a good Frenchman! . . . She is delightful, my mother.”

Dinner proceeded leisurely. Nan noticed that her companion drank very little and exhibited a most unmasculine lack of interest in the inspirations of the chef. Yet she knew intuitively that he was alertly conscious of the quiet perfection of it all. She dropped into a brief reverie of which the man beside her was the subject and from which his voice presently recalled her.

“I hope you’re going to play to us this evening?”

“I expect so—if Kitty wishes it.”

“That’s sufficient command for most of those to whom she gives the privilege of friendship, isn’t it?”

There was a quiet ring of sincerity in his voice as he spoke of Kitty, and Nan’s heart warmed towards him.

“Yes,” she assented eagerly. “One can’t say ‘no’ to her. But I don’t care for it—playing in a drawing-room after dinner.”

“No.” Again that quick comprehension of his. “The chosen few and the chosen moment are what you like.”

“How do you know?” she asked impulsively.

“Because I think the ‘how’ and the ‘where’ of things influence you enormously.”

“Don’t they influence you, too?” she demanded.

“Oh, they count—decidedly. But I’m not a woman, nor an artiste, so I’m not so much at the mercy of my temperament.”

The man’s insight was extraordinarily keen, but touched with a little insouciant tenderness that preserved it from being critical in any hostile sense. Nan heaved a small sigh of contentment at finding herself in such an atmosphere.

“How well you understand women,” she commented with a smile.

“It’s very nice of you to say so, though I haven’t got the temerity to agree with you.”

Then, looking down at her intently, he added:

“I’m not likely, however, to forget that you’ve said it. . . . Perhaps I may remind you of it some day.”

The abrupt intensity of his manner startled her. For the second time that evening the vivid personal note had been struck, suddenly and unforgettably.

The presidential uprising of the women at the end of dinner saved her from the necessity of a reply. Mallory drew her chair aside and, as he handed her the cambric web of a handkerchief she had let fall, she found him regarding her with a gently humorous expression in his eyes.

“This quaint English custom!” he said lightly. “All you women go into another room to gossip and we men are condemned to the society of one another! I’m afraid even I’m not British enough to appreciate such a droll arrangement. Especially this evening.”

Page 31

Nan passed out in the wake of the other women to while away in desultory small talk that awkward after-dinner interval which splits the evening into halves and involves a picking up of the threads—not always successfully accomplished—when the men at last rejoin the feminine portion of the party. And what is it, after all, but a barbarous relic of those times when a man must needs drink so much wine as to render himself unfit for the company of his womenkind?

“Well,” demanded Kitty, “how do you like my lion?”

“Mr. Mallory? I didn’t know he was a lion,” responded Nan.

“Of course you didn’t. You musicians never realise that the human Zoo boasts any other lions but yourselves.”

Nan laughed.

“He didn’t roar,” she said apologetically, “so how could I know? You never told me about him.”

“Well, he’s just written what everyone says will be the book of the year—*Lindley’s Wife*. It’s made a tremendous hit.”

“I thought that was by G. A. Petersen?”

“But Peter is G. A. Petersen. Only his intimate friends know it, though, as he detests publicity. So go don’t give the fact away.”

“I won’t. You’ve read this new book, I suppose?”

“Yes. And you must. It’s the finest study of a woman’s temperament I’ve ever come across. . . . Goodness knows he’s had opportunity enough to study the subject!”

Nan froze a little.

“Oh, is he a gay Lothario sort of person?” she asked coldly. “He didn’t strike me in that light.”

“No. He’s not in the least like that. He’s an ideal husband wasted.”

Nan’s eyes twinkled.

“Don’t poach on preserved ground, Kitty. Marriages are made in heaven.”

As she spoke the door opened to admit the men, and somebody claiming Kitty’s attention at the moment she turned away without reply. For a few minutes the

conversation became more general until, after a brief hum and stir, congenial spirits sought and found each other and settled down into little groups of twos and threes. Somewhat to Nan's surprise—and, although she would not have acknowledged it, to her annoyance—Peter Mallory ensconced himself next to Penelope, and Ralph Fenton, the singer, thus driven from the haven where he would be, came to anchor beside Nan.

"I've not seen you for a long time, Miss Davenant. How's the world been treating you?"

"Rather better than usual," she replied gaily. "More ha'pence than kicks for once in a way."

"You're booking up pretty deep for the winter, then, I suppose?"

Nan winced at the professional jargon. There was certain aspects of a musician's life which repelled her, more particularly the commercial side of it.

She responded indifferently.

"No. I haven't booked a single further engagement. The ha'pence are due to an avuncular relative who has a quite inexplicable penchant for an idle niece."

Page 32

“My congratulations. Still, I hope this unexpected windfall isn’t going to keep you off the concert platform altogether?”

“Not more than my own distaste for playing in public,” she answered. “I’d much rather write music than perform.”

“I can hardly believe you really dislike the publicity? The fascination of it grows on most of us.”

“I know it does. I suppose that accounts for the endless farewell concerts a declining singer generally treats us to.”

There was an unwonted touch of sharpness in her voice, and Fenton glanced at her in some surprise. It was unlike her to give vent to such an acid little speech. He could not know, of course, that Kitty’s light-hearted remark concerning Peter Mallory’s facilities for studying the feminine temperament was still rankling somewhere at the back of her mind.

“There’s a big element of pathos in those farewell concerts,” he submitted gently. “You pianists have a great advantage over the singer, whose instrument must inevitably deteriorate with the passing years.”

Nan’s quick sympathies responded instantly.

“I think I must be getting soured in my old age,” she answered remorsefully. “What you say is dreadfully true. It’s the saddest part of a singer’s career. And I always clap my hardest at a farewell concert. I do, really!”

Fenton smiled down at her.

“I shall count on you, then, when I give mine.”

Nan laughed.

“It’s a solemn pledge—provided I’m still cumbering the ground. And now, tell me, are you singing here this evening?”

“I promised Mrs. Seymour. Would you be good enough to accompany?”

“I should love it. What are you going to sing?”

“Miss Craig and I proposed to give a duet.”

“And here comes Kitty—to claim your promise, I guess.”

A few minutes later the two singers' voices were blending delightfully together, while Nan's slight, musician's fingers threaded their way through intricacies of the involved accompaniment.

She was a wonderful accompanist—rarest of gifts—and when, at the end of the song, the restrained, well-bred applause broke out, Peter Mallory's share of it was offered as much to the accompanist as to the singers themselves.

"Stay where you are, Nan," cried Kitty, as the girl half rose from the music-seat. "Stay where you are and play us something."

Knowing Nan's odd liking for a dim light, she switched off most of the burners as she spoke, leaving only one or two heavily shaded lights still glowing. Mallory crossed the room so that, as he stood leaning with one elbow on the chimney-piece, he faced the player, on whose aureole of dusky hair one of the lights still burning cast a glimmer. While he waited for her to begin, he was aware of a little unaccustomed thrill of excitement, as though he were on the verge of some discovery.

Page 33

Hesitatingly Nan touched a chord or two. Then without further preamble she broke into the strange, suggestive music which Penelope had described as representing the murder of a soul. It opened joyously, the calm beginnings of a happy spirit; then came a note of warning, the first low muttering of impending woe. Gradually the simple melody began to lose itself in a chaos of calamity, bent and swayed by wailing minor cadences through whose torrent of hurrying sound it could be heard vainly and fitfully trying to assert itself again, only to be at last weighed down, crushed out, by a cataclysm of despairing chords. Then, after a long, pregnant pause—the culminating silence of defeat—the original melody stole out once more, repeated in a minor key, hollow and denuded.

As the music ceased the lights sprang up again and Nan, looking across the room, met Mallory's gaze intently bent upon her. In his expression she could discern that by a queer gift of intuition he had comprehended the whole inner meaning of what she had been playing. Most people would have thought that it was a magnificent bit of composition, particularly for so young a musician, but Mallory went deeper and knew it to be a wonderful piece of self-revelation—the fruit of a spirit sorely buffeted.

Almost instantaneously Nan realised that he had understood, and she was conscious of a fierce resentment. She felt as though an unwarrantable intrusion had been made upon her privacy, and her annoyance showed itself in the quick compression of her mouth. She was about to slip away under cover of the applause when Mallory laid a detaining hand upon her arm.

"Don't go," he said. "And forgive me for understanding!"

Nan, sorely against her will, looked, up and met his eyes—eyes that were irresistibly kind and friendly. She hesitated, still anxious to escape.

"Please," he begged. "Don't leave me"—his lips endeavouring not to smile—"in high dudgeon. It's always seemed such an awful thing to be left in—like boiling oil."

Suddenly she yielded to the man's whimsical charm and sank down again into her chair.

"That's better." He smiled and seated himself beside her. "I couldn't help it, you know," he said quaintly. "It was you yourself who told me."

"Told you what?"

"That the world hadn't been quite kind."

Nan felt a sudden reckless instinct to tempt fate. There was already a breach in her privacy; for this one evening she did not care if the wall were wholly battered down.

"Tell me," she queried with averted head, "how—how much did you understand?"

Mallory scrutinised her reflectively.

“You really wish it?”

“Yes, really.”

He was silent a moment. Then he spoke slowly, as though choosing his words.

“Fate has given you one of her back-handers, I think, and you want the thing you can’t have—want it rather badly. And just now—nothing seems quite worth while.”

Page 34

“Go on,” she said very low.

He hesitated. Then, as if suddenly making up his mind to hit hard, as a surgeon might decide to use the knife, he spoke incisively:

“The man wasn’t worth it.”

Nan gave a faint, irrepressible start. Recovering herself quickly, she contrived a short laugh.

“You don’t know him—” she began.

“But I know you.”

“This is only our second meeting.”

“What of that? I know you well enough to be sure—quite sure—that you wouldn’t give unasked. You’re too proud, too analytical, and—at present—too little passionate.”

Nan’s face whitened. It was true; she had not given unasked, for although Maryon Rooke had never actually asked her to marry him, his whole attitude had been that of the demanding lover.

“You’re rather an uncanny person,” she said at last, slowly. “You understand—too much.”

“*Tout comprendre—c’est tout pardonner*,” quoted Mallory gently.

Nan fenced.

“And do I need pardon?” she asked.

“Yes,” he answered simply, “You’re not the woman God meant you to be. You’re too critical, too cold—without passion.”

“And I a musician?”—incredulously.

“Oh, it’s in your music right enough. The artist in you has it. But the woman—so far, no. You’re too introspective to surrender blindly. Artiste, analyst, critic first—only *woman* when those other three are satisfied.”

Nan nodded.

“Yes,” she said slowly. “I believe that’s true.”

“I think it is,” he affirmed quietly. “And because men are what they are, and you are you, it’s quite probable you’ll fail to achieve the triumph of your womanhood.” He paused, then added: “You’re not one of those who would count the world well lost for love, you know—except on the impulse of an imaginative moment.”

“No, I’m not,” she answered reflectively. “I wonder why?”

“Why? Oh, you’re a product of the times—the primeval instincts almost civilised out of you.”

Nan sprang to her feet with a laugh.

“I won’t stay here to be vivisected one moment longer!” she declared. “People like you ought to be blindfolded.”

“Anything you like—so long as I’m forgiven.”

“I think you’ll have to be forgiven—in remembrance of the day when you took up a passenger in Hyde Park!”—smiling.

Soon afterwards people began to take their departure, Nan and Penelope alone making no move to go, since Kitty had offered to send them home in her car “at any old time.” Mallory paused as he was making his farewells to the two girls.

“And am I permitted—may I have the privilege of calling?” he asked with one of his odd lapses into a quaintly elaborate manner that was wholly un-English.

“Yes, do. We shall be delighted.”

“My thanks.” And with a slight bow he left them.

Page 35

Later on, when everyone else had gone, the Seymours, together with Penelope and Nan, drew round the fire for a final few minutes' yarn.

"Well, how do you like Kitty's latest lion?" asked Barry, lighting a cigarette.

"I think he's a dear," declared Penelope warmly. "I liked him immensely—what I saw of him."

"He's such an extraordinary faculty for reading people," chimed in Kitty, puffing luxuriously at a tiny gold-tipped cigarette.

"Part of a writer's stock in trade, of course," replied Barry. "But he's a clever chap."

"Too clever, I think," said Nan. "He fills one with a desire to have one's soul carefully fitted up with frosted glass windows."

Penelope laughed.

"What nonsense! I think he's a delightful person."

"Possibly. But, all the same, I think I'm frightened of people who make me feel as if I'd no clothes on."

"Nan!"

"It's quite true. Your most dazzling get-up wouldn't make an atom of difference to his opinion of the real 'you' underneath it all. Why, one might just as well have no pretensions to good looks when talking to a man like that! It's sheer waste of good material."

"Well, he's rather likely to want to get at the real 'you' of anybody he meets," interpolated Barry. "He was badly taken in once. His wife was one of the prettiest women I've ever struck—and she was an absolute devil."

"He's a widower, then!" exclaimed Penelope.

Barry shook his head regretfully.

"No such luck! That's the skeleton in poor old Peter's cupboard. Celia Mallory is very much alive and having as good a time as she can squeeze out of India."

"They live apart," explained Kitty. "She's one of those restless, excitable women, always craving to be right in the limelight, and she simply couldn't stand Peter's literary work. She was frantically jealous of it—wanted him to be dancing attendance on her all day long. And when his work interfered with the process, as of course it was bound to do,

she made endless rows. She has money of her own, and finally informed Peter that she was going to India, where she has relatives. Her uncle's a judge, and she's several Army cousins married out there."

"Do you mean she has never come back?" gasped Penelope.

"No. And I don't think she intends to if she can help it. She's the most thoroughly selfish little beast of a woman I know, and cares for nothing on earth except enjoyment. She's spoiled Peter's life for him"—Kitty's voice shook a little—"and through it all he's been as patient as one of God's saints."

"Still, they're better apart," commented Barry. "While she was living with him she made a bigger hash of his life than she can do when she's away. She was spoiling his work as well as his life. And old Peter's work means a lot to him. He's still got that left out of the wreckage."

Page 36

"Yes," agreed Kitty, "and of course he's writing better than ever now. Everyone says *Lindley's Wife* is a masterpiece."

Nan had been very silent during this revelation of Mallory's unfortunate domestic affairs. The discovery that he was already married came upon her as a shock. She felt stunned. Above all, she was conscious of a curious sense of loss, as though the Peter she had just began to know had suddenly receded a long way off from her and would never again be able to draw nearer.

When the Seymours' car at length bore the two girls back to Edenhall Mansions, Penelope found Nan an unwontedly silent companion. She responded to Penny's remarks in monosyllables and appeared to have nothing to say regarding the evening's happenings.

Mingled with the even throb of the engine, she could hear a constant iteration of the words:

"Married! Peter's married!"

And she was quite unconscious that in her mind he was already thinking of him as "Peter."

CHAPTER V

"PREUX CHEVALIER"

In due course Mallory paid his call upon the occupants of the flat, and entertained both girls immensely by the utter lack of self-consciousness with which he assisted in the preparations for tea—toasting scones and coaxing the kettle to boil as naturally as they themselves would have done.

He had none of the average Englishman's *mauvaise honte*—though be it thankfully acknowledged that, in the case of the younger generation, the experiences of the war have largely contributed towards rubbing it off. Mallory appeared serenely unconscious of any incongruity in the fact of a man whose clothes breathed Savile Row and whose linen was immaculate as only that of the Londoner—determinedly emergent from the grime of the city—ever is, pottering about in the tiny kitchen, and brooding over the blackly obstinate kettle.

This first visit was soon followed by others, and then by a foursome dinner at the Carlton, Ralph Fenton being invited to complete the party. Before long Peter was on a pleasant footing of intimacy with the two girls at the flat, though beyond this he did not seek to progress.

The explanation was simple enough. Primarily he was always aware of the cord which shackled him to a restless, butterfly woman who played at life out in India, and secondly, although he was undoubtedly attracted by Nan, he was not the type of man to fall headlong in love. He was too fastidious, too critical, altogether too much master of himself. Few women caused him a single quickened heart-beat. But it is to such men as this that when at last love grips them, binding them slowly and secretly with its clinging tendrils, it comes as an irresistible force to be reckoned with throughout the remainder of their lives.

So it came about that as the weeks grew into months, Mallory perceived—dimly and with a quaint resignation to the inevitable—that Nan and Love were coming to him hand in hand.

Page 37

His first thought had been to seek safety in flight; then that gently humorous philosophy with which he habitually looked life in the face asserted itself, and with a shrug and a muttered “Kismet,” he remained.

Nan appealed to him as no other woman had ever done. The ineffaceable quality of race about her pleased his fastidious taste; the French blood in her called to his; nor could he escape the heritage of charm bequeathed her by the fair and frail Angele de Varincourt. Above all, he understood her. Her temperament—idealistic and highly-strung, responsive as a violin to every shade of atmosphere—invoked his own, with its sensitiveness and keen, perceptive faculty.

But this very comprehension of her temperament blinded him to the possibility that there was any danger of her growing to care for him other than as a friend. He appreciated the fact that she had just received a buffeting from fate, that her confidence was shaken and her pride hurt to breaking-point, and the thought never entered his head that a woman so recently bruised by the hands of love—or more truly, love’s simulacrum—-could be tempted to risk her heart again so soon.

Feeling very safe, therefore, in the fact of his marriage, which was yet no marriage, and sure that there was no chance of his hurting Nan, he let himself love her, keeping his love tenderly in one of those secret empty rooms of the heart—empty rooms of which only the thrice-blessed in this world have no knowledge.

Outwardly, all that Peter permitted himself was to give her an unfailing friendship, to surround her with an atmosphere of homage and protection and adapt himself responsively to her varying moods. This he did untiringly, demanding nothing in return—and he alone knew the bitter effort it cost him.

Gradually Nan began to lean upon him, finding in the restfulness of such a friendship the healing of which she stood in need. She worked at her music with suddenly renewed enthusiasm, secure in the knowledge that Peter was always at hand to help and criticise with kindly, unerring judgment. She ceased to rail at fate and almost learned to bring a little philosophy—the happy philosophy of laughter—to bear upon the ills of life.

Consciously she thought of him only as Peter—Peter, her good pal—and so long as the pleasant, even course of their friendship remained uninterrupted she was never likely to realise that something bigger and more enduring than mere comradeship lay at the back of it all. She, too, like Mallory, reassured herself with the fact of his marriage—-though the wife she had never seen and of whom Peter never spoke had inevitably receded in her mind into a somewhat vague and nebulous personality.

“Well?” demanded Kitty triumphantly one day. “And what is your opinion of Peter Mallory now?”

As she spoke, she caressed with light finger-tips a bowl of sun-gold narcissus—Mallory habitually kept the Edenhall flat supplied with flowers.

Page 38

“We’re frankly grateful to you for introducing him,” replied Penelope. “He’s been an absolute godsend all through this hateful long winter.”

“What’s so perfect about him,” added Nan, “is that he never jars on one. He’s never Philistine.”

“In fact,” interpolated Penelope somewhat ruefully, “he’s so far from being Philistine that he has a dreadful faculty for making me feel deplorably commonplace.”

Kitty gurgled.

“What rubbish! I’m sure nothing in the world would make Peter more unhappy than to think he affected anyone like that. He’s the least assuming and most tender-hearted soul I know. You may be common-sense, Penny dear, but you’re not in the least commonplace. They’re two quite different things.”

Nan lit a cigarette with deliberation.

“I’ll tell you what is remarkable about Peter Mallory,” she said. “He’s *sahib*—right through. Very few men are.”

Kitty, always tolerant and charitable, patted her arm deprecatingly.

“Oh, come, Nan, that’s rather sweeping. There are heaps of nice men in the world.”

“Heaps,” assented Nan agreeably. “Heaps—bless ’em! But very few *preux chevaliers*. I only know two—one is my lamb of an uncle and the other is Peter.”

“And where does my poor Barry come in?”

Nan smiled across at her indulgently.

“Barry? Pooh! He’s just a delightful overgrown schoolboy—and you know it!”

* * * * * *

July in London, hot, dusty, and oppressive. Even the breezy altitude of the top-floor flat could not save its occupants from the intense heat which seemed to be wafted up from the baking streets below. The flat was “at home” to-day, the festive occasion indicated by the quantities of flowers which adorned it—big bowls of golden-hearted roses, tall vases of sweet peas—the creamy-yellow ones which merge into oyster pink, while the gorgeous royal scarlet of “King Edward” glowed in dusky corners.

Penelope trailed somewhat lethargically hither and thither, adding last touches to the small green tables, arranged in readiness for bridge, and sighing at the oppressive heat

of the afternoon. First she opened the windows to let in the air, then closed them to shut out the heat, only to fling them open once again, exclaiming impatiently:

“Phew! I really don’t know which is the cooler!”

“Neither!” responded a gay voice from the doorway. “The bottomless pit would probably be refreshingly draughty in comparison with town just now.”

Penelope whirled round to find Kitty, immaculate in white from head to foot and looking perfectly cool and composed, standing on the threshold.

“How do you manage it?” she said admiringly. “Even in this sweltering heat, when the rest of us look as though we had run in the wash, you give the impression that you’ve just stepped out of a refrigerated bandbox.”

Page 39

“Appearances are as deceitful as usual, then,” replied Kitty, sinking down into an arm-chair and unfurling a small fan. “I’m simply melted! Am I the first arrival?” she continued. “Where’s Nan?”

“She and Peter are decorating the tea-table—smiles and things, you know”—Penelope waved an explanatory hand.

Kitty nodded.

“I think my plan was a good one, don’t you? Peter’s been an excellent antidote to Maryon Rooke,” she observed complacently.

“I’m not so sure,” returned Penelope with characteristic caution. “I think a married man—especially such an *un*married married man as Pete—is rather a dangerous antidote.”

“Nonsense! They both *know* he’s married! And they’ve both got normal common-sense.”

“But,” objected Penelope, suddenly and unexpectedly, “love has nothing whatever to do with common-sense.”

Kitty gazed at her in frank amazement.

“Penelope! What’s come to you? We’ve always regarded you as the severely practical member of the community, and here you are talking rank heresy!”

Penelope laughed a little, and a faint flush stole up into her cheeks.

“I’m not unobservant, remember,” she returned, lightly, her eyes avoiding Kitty’s. “And my observations have led me to the conclusion that love and common-sense are distinctly antipathic.”

“Well, Nan seems quite happy and cheerful again, anyway,” retorted Kitty. “And if she’d fallen in love with Peter, knowing that there was a very much alive Mrs. Peter in the background, she would hardly be feeling particularly cheery.”

“Oh, I don’t think Nan’s fallen in love—yet. And as to her present joyful mood, that’s easily accounted for by the doubled income Lord St. John is allowing her—I never knew anyone extract quite so much satisfaction as Nan from the actual spending of money. Besides, although she doesn’t realise it, Peter has made himself rather indispensable to her.”

Kitty spoke with nervous sharpness:

“But you don’t think she cares for him?”

The other reflected a moment before replying. Finally she said:

“If she does, it is quite unconsciously. Consciously, I feel almost sure that Maryon Rooke still occupies her thoughts.”

“I wonder where she finds the great attraction in him?” queried Kitty thoughtfully.

“Simply this: That he was the first and, go far, the only man who has ever appealed to her at all. And as he has treated her rather badly, he’s succeeded in fixing himself in her mind.”

“Well, I’ve never understood the affair at all. Rooke was in love if ever a man was.”

“Yes,” agreed Penelope slowly. “But I think Maryon Rooke is what I should describe as —a born bachelor.”

“Then he’s no business philandering round with women who aren’t born spinsters,” retorted Kitty promptly.

Penelope’s brown eyes twinkled.

Page 40

“You’re rather limiting his horizon,” she observed.

Kitty laughed.

“Possibly. But I’m furious with him for hashing up Nan’s life. . . . As he has done,” she added.

“Not necessarily,” suggested Penelope. “I think Nan’s rather like a little hard, unopened bud. He’s bruised the bud, perhaps, but I don’t think he’s injured the flower.”

“Good gracious, Penny, you’re not trying to find excuses for the man!”

“Not a bit of it. But I believe that Nan has such a tremendous fascination for him that he simply can’t resist her. In fact, I think if the question of finance didn’t enter into the matter he’d be ready to shoulder the matrimonial yoke. . . But I don’t see Maryon Rooke settling down to matrimony on a limited income! And of course Nan’s own income ceases if she marries.”

“It was very queer of Lord St. John to make that stipulation,” commented Kitty.

“I don’t think so at all. He wants to make quite sure that the man who marries Nan does so for love—and nothing else. And also to give her a free hand. How many women, if they had money of their own, as Nan has, would marry, do you suppose?” Penelope spoke heatedly. She was a modern of the moderns in her ideas. “Subconsciously it’s the feeling of economical dependence, the dread of ultimate poverty, which has driven half the untrained women one knows into unhappy marriages. And Lord St. John recognises it. He’s progressed with the times, bless him!”

“But Rooke will be making big money before very long,” protested Kitty, keeping firmly to the point and declining to be led aside into one of Penelope’s argumentative byeways. “He’ll be able to settle a decent income on his wife in a few years.”

“Very possibly. He’ll be one of the most fashionable portrait painters of the day. But until that day comes, Maryon isn’t going to tie himself up with a woman whose income ceases when she marries. Besides”—drily—“an unattached bachelor is considerably more in demand as a painter of society women’s portraits than a Benedict.”

“So Nan is to be sacrificed?” threw out Kitty.

“It seems like it. And as long as Maryon Rooke occupies the foreground in her mind, no other man will occur to her as anything but a friend.”

“Then I wish somebody—or something—would sweep him out of her mind!”

“Well, he’s away now, at any rate,” said Penelope soothingly. “So let’s be thankful for small mercies.”

As she spoke, the maid—an improvement on their original “Adagio”—entered with a telegram on a salver which she offered to Penelope. The latter slit open the envelope without glancing at the address and uttered a sharp exclamation of dismay as she read the brief communication it contained.

Kitty leaned forward.

“What is it, Penny? Not bad news?”

“It’s for Nan,” returned Penelope shortly. “You can read it.”

Page 41

Kitty perused it in silence.

"*Am in town. Shall call this afternoon on chance of finding you in*.—ROOKE."

"The very last person we wanted to blow in here just now," commented Kitty as she returned the wire.

Penelope slipped it back into its envelope and replaced it on the salver.

"Take it to Miss Davenant," she told the maid quietly. "And explain that you brought it to me by mistake."

CHAPTER VI

A FORGOTTEN FAN

Meanwhile, in the next room, Peter and Nan, having completed their scheme of decoration with "smilax and things," were resting from their labours and smoking sociably together.

Nan cast a reflective eye upon the table.

"You don't think it looks too much like a shrubbery where you have to hunt for the cakes, do you?" she suggested.

"Certainly I don't," replied Peter promptly. "If there is some slight confusion occasioned by that trail of smilax round the pink sugar-icing cake it merely adds to its attractiveness. The charm of mystery, you know!"

"I believe if Maryon were here he would sweep it all on to the floor in disgust!" observed Nan suddenly. "He'd say we'd forfeited simplicity."

"Maryon Rooke, the artist, you mean?"

The warm colour rushed into Nan's face, and she glanced at Peter with startled—almost frightened—eyes. She could not conceive why the sudden recollection of Rooke should have sprung into her mind at this particular moment. With difficulty her lips framed the monosyllable "Yes."

Peter bent forward. They were sitting together on the wide window-seat, the sound of the traffic from below coming murmuringly to their ears like some muted diapason.

"Nan"—Peter spoke very quietly—"Nan—was he the man?"

She nodded voicelessly. Peter made a quick gesture as though to lay his hand over hers, then checked it abruptly.

“My dear,” he said, “do you still care?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she answered uncertainly. “I—I’m not sure. Oh, Peter, how difficult life is!”

He assented briefly. He knew very well how difficult.

“I can’t imagine why I thought of Maryon just now,” went on Nan, a puzzled frown wrinkling her brows. “I never do, as a rule, when I’m with you.”

She smiled rather wistfully and with a restless movement he sprang to his feet and began pacing the room. A little cry of dismay broke from her and she came quickly to his side, lifting a questioning face to his.

“Why, Peter—Peter—What have I said? You’re not angry, are you?”

“*Angry*!” His voice roughened a bit. “If I could only tell you the truth!”

“Tell it me,” she said simply.

For a moment he was silent. Then:

“Don’t ask me, Nan. There are some things that can’t be told.”

Page 42

As he spoke, his eyes, dark and passionate with some forcibly restrained emotion, met hers, and in an instant it seemed as though the thing he must not speak were spoken.

Nan flushed scarlet from brow to throat, her eyes widened, and the breath fluttered unevenly between her parted lips. She knew—*she knew* what Mallory had left unsaid.

“Peter——”

She held out her hands to him with a sudden childish gesture of surrender, and involuntarily he gathered them into his own. At the same moment the door opened to admit the maid and he drew back quickly, while Nan’s outstretched hands fell limply to her side.

“This wire’s just come for you, miss,” said the maid, and from her manner it was quite impossible to guess whether she had observed anything unusual or not. “I took it to Miss Craig by mistake.”

Mechanically Nan extracted the thin sheet from its torn envelope. As her eyes absorbed the few lines of writing, her face whitened and she drew her breath in sharply.

The next instant, however, she recovered her poise, and crumpling the telegram into a ball she addressed the maid composedly.

“There’s no answer,” she said. Adding: “Has anyone arrived yet?”

“Mrs. Seymour is here, miss. And”—listening—“I think Lord St. John must have arrived.”

Nan turned to Mallory.

“Then we’d better go, Peter. Come along.”

Mallory, as he followed her into the sitting-room, realised that she had all at once retreated a thousand miles away from him. He wondered what the contents of the telegram could have been. The oblong red envelope seemed to have descended suddenly between them like a shutter.

Lord St. John, having only just arrived, was still standing as they entered the room, and Nan rushed into apologies as she shook hands with him and kissed Mrs. Seymour.

“Heaps of apologies for not being here when you arrived. I really haven’t any excuse to offer except”—with a small *gamin* smile—“that I was otherwise occupied!”

“If the occupation was a matter of toilette, we’ll excuse you,” observed St. John, surveying her with the usual masculine approbation of a white frock defined with touches of black. “The time wasn’t wasted.”

Nan slipped her arm affectionately into his.

“Oh, *why* aren’t you forty years younger and someone else’s uncle? You’d be such a charming young man!” she exclaimed.

St. John smiled.

“I was, my dear—forty years ago.” And he sighed.

During the next half hour the remainder of the guests came dropping in by twos and threes, and after a little desultory conversation everyone settled down to the serious business of bridge. Now and then those who were not playing ventured a subdued murmur of talk amongst themselves, but for the most part the silence of the room was only broken by voices declaring trumps in a rapidly ascending scale of values, and then, after a hectic interval, by the same voices calling out the score in varying degrees of satisfaction or otherwise.

Page 43

Nan, as a rule, played a good game, but to-day her play was nervous and erratic, and Mallory, her partner of the moment, instinctively connected this with the agitation she had shown on receiving the wire. Ignorant of its contents, he awaited developments.

He had not very long to wait. Shortly afterwards the trill of the door-bell pealed through the flat, followed by a sound of footsteps in the hall, and, a minute later, Maryon Rooke came into the room. A brief stir succeeded his entrance, as Penelope and one or two other non-players exchanged greetings with him. Then he crossed over to where Nan was playing. She was acutely conscious of his tall, loose-limbed figure as he threaded his way carefully between the tables.

“Gambling as usual?” he queried, when he had shaken hands. “And winning—also as usual—I suppose?”

“On the contrary,” she retorted. “I’ve just thrown away a perfectly good trick. Your arrival distracted my attention.”

Oddly enough, she had complete control of her voice, although her play and the slight trembling of her fingers as she held her cards fan-wise were sufficient indication to Mallory of the deep waters that had been stirred beneath the surface.

“I’m sorry my return has proved so—inopportune,” returned Rooke. As he spoke his eyes rested for a reflective moment upon Peter Mallory, then returned challengingly to Nan’s face. The betraying colour flew up under her skin. She understood what he intended to convey as well as though he had clothed his thought in words.

“Having none, partner?”

Mallory’s kindly, drawling voice recalled her to the game, and she made an effort to focus her attention on the cards. But it was quite useless. Her play grew wilder and more erratic with each hand that was dealt, until at last a good no-trump call, completely thrown away by her disastrous tactics, brought the rubber to an end.

“You’re not in your usual form this afternoon, Nan,” remarked one of her opponents as they all rose from the table. Other tables, too, were breaking up and some of the guests preparing to leave.

“No. I’ve played abominably,” she acquiesced. “I’m sorry, partner”—turning to Peter. “It must be the weather. This heat’s intolerable.”

He put her apology aside with a quick gesture.

“There’s thunder in the air, I think. You shouldn’t have troubled to play if you didn’t feel inclined.”

Nan threw him a glance of gratitude—Peter never seemed to fail her either in big or little things. Then, having settled accounts with her opponents, she moved away to join the chattering knot of departing guests congregated round the doorway.

Page 44

Mallory's eyes followed her thoughtfully. He had already surmised that Maryon Rooke was the sender of the telegram, and he could see how unmistakably his sudden reappearance had shaken her. He felt baffled. Did the man still hold her? Was all the striving of the last few months to prove useless? Those long hours of self-effacement when he had tried by every means in his power to restore Nan to a normal interest in life, to be the good comrade she needed at no matter what cost to himself, demanding nothing in return! For it had been a hard struggle to be constantly with the woman he loved and yet keep himself in hand. To Mallory, Rooke's return seemed grotesquely inopportune.

He was roused from his thoughts to the realisation that people were leaving. Everyone appeared to be talking at once and the air was full of the murmur of wins and losses and of sharp-edged criticism of "my partner's play." Maryon Rooke alone showed no signs of moving, but remained standing a little apart near the window, an unlit cigarette in his hand.

"Penelope, do come back to Green Street with me." Kitty's voice was beseeching. "My little milliner was to have had a couple of hats ready for me this afternoon, which means she will arrive with a perfect avalanche of boxes, each containing a dinkier hat than the last, and I shall fall a helpless victim."

Her husband grinned unkindly.

"Yes, do come along, Penny," he urged. "Then you can lay a restraining hand on Kitty when she's bought the first half dozen."

"There'll just be time before dinner, and the car shall bring you back again," entreated Kitty, and Penelope, knowing that the former would be but clay in the practised hands of her "little milliner," smiled acquiescence.

"Barry"—Kitty tapped her husband's arm—"go down and see if the car is there. Peter, can I drop you anywhere?"

In a couple of minutes the room was cleared, and Kitty, shepherding her flock before her, departed in a gale of good-byes, leaving Nan and Maryon Rooke together.

Each was silent. The girl's small head was thrown back, and in the poise of her slim young body there was a mingling of challenge and appealing self-defence. She looked like some trapped wild thing at bay.

Slowly Rooke crossed the room and came towards her, and as she met those odd, magnetic eyes of his—passionately expressive as only hazel eyes can be—she felt the old fascination stealing over her once more. Her heart sank. She had dreaded this, fought against it, and in her inmost soul believed that she had conquered it. Yet now his

mere presence sent the blood racing through, her veins with a hurrying, leaping speed that frightened her.

“Nan!” As he spoke he bent and took her two hands gently into his. Then, as though the touch of her slight fingers roused some slumbering fire within him, his grasp tightened suddenly. He drew her nearer, his eyes holding hers, and her slim body swayed towards him, yielding to the eager clasp of his arms.

Page 45

“Kiss me, Nan!” he said, the roughness of passion in his voice. “You never kissed me—never in all those beautiful months we were together. And now—now when there’s only parting ahead of us—”

His eyes burned down on to her tilted face. She could hear his hurried breathing. His lips were almost touching hers.

. . . Then the door opened quickly and Peter Mallory stood upon the threshold.

Swiftly though they started apart, it was impossible that he should not have seen Rooke holding Nan close in his arms, his head bent above hers. Their attitude was unmistakable—it could have but one significance.

Mallory paused abruptly in the doorway. Then, in a voice entirely devoid of expression, he said quietly:

“Mrs. Seymour left her fan behind—I came back to fetch it.” With a slight bow he picked up the forgotten fan and turned to go. “Good-bye once more.”

The door closed behind him, and Nan stood very still, her arms hanging down at her sides. But Maryon could read the stricken expression in her eyes—the desperate appeal of them. They betrayed her.

“What’s that man to you?” he demanded.

“Nothing.”

He caught her roughly by the shoulders.

“I don’t believe it!” he exclaimed hotly. “He’s the man you love. The very expression of your face gave it away.”

“I’ve told you,” she answered unemotionally. “Peter Mallory is nothing to me, never can be anything, except”—her voice quivered a little despite herself—“just a friend.”

Maryon’s eyes searched her face.

“Then kiss me!” He repeated his earlier demand, imperiously.

She drew back.

“Why should I kiss you?”

The quietly uttered question seemed to set him very far apart from her. In an instant he knew how much he had forfeited by his absence.

“Nan,” he said, in his voice a curious charm of appeal, “do you know it’s nearly a year since I saw you? And now—now I’ve only half an hour!”

“Only half an hour?” she repeated vaguely.

“Yes, I go back to Devonshire to-night. But I craved a glimpse of the ‘Beloved’ before I went.”

The words brought Nan sharply back to herself. He was still the same incomprehensible, unsatisfactory lover as of old, and with the realisation a cold fury of scorn and resentment swept over her, blotting out what she had always counted as her love for him. It was as though a string, too tightly stretched, had suddenly snapped.

She answered him indifferently.

“To cheer you on your way, I suppose?”

“No. I shouldn’t”—significantly—“call it cheering. I’ve been back in England a month, alone in the damned desolation of Dartmoor, fighting—fighting to keep away from you.”

She looked at him with steady, scrutinising eyes.

“Why need you have kept away?” she asked incisively.

Page 46

“At the bidding of the great god Circumstance. Oh, my dear, my dear”—speaking with passionate vehemence—“don’t you know . . . don’t you understand that if only I weren’t a poor devil of a painter with my way to make in a world that can only be bought with gold—nothing should part us ever again? . . . But as it is—”

Nan listened to the outburst with down-bent head. She understood now—oh, yes, she understood perfectly. He loved her well enough in his own way—but Maryon’s way meant that the love and happiness of the woman who married him would always be a matter of secondary importance. The bitterness of her resentment deepened within her, flooding her whole being.

“‘If only!’” repeated Rooke. “It’s the old story, Nan—the desire of the moth for the flame.”

“The moth is a very blundering creature,” said Nan quietly. “He makes mistakes sometimes—perhaps imagining a flame where there is none.”

“No!” exclaimed Rooke violently. “I made no mistake! You loved me as much as I loved you. I know it! By God, do you think a man can’t tell when the woman he loves, loves him?”

“Well, you must accept the only alternative then,” she answered coolly. “Sometimes a flame flickers out—and dies.”

It was as though she had cut him across the face with a whip. In a sudden madness he caught her in his arms, crushing her slender body against his, and kissed her savagely.

“There!” he cried, a note of fierce triumph ringing in his voice. “Whether your love is dead or no, I’ll not go out of your life with nothing to call my own, and I’ve made your lips—mine.”

Loosening his hold of her he stumbled from the room.

Nan remained just where he had left her. She stood quite motionless for several minutes, almost as though she were waiting for something. Then with a leap of her breath, half-sigh, half-exultation, the knowledge of what had happened to her crystallised into clear significance.

In one swift, overwhelming moment of illumination she realised that the frail blossom of love which had been tentatively budding in the garden of her heart was dead—withered, starved out of existence ere it had quite believed in its own reality.

Maryon Rooke no longer meant anything to her. She felt completely indifferent as to whether she ever saw him again or not. She was free! While he had been with her she had felt unsure, uncertain of herself. The interview had shaken her. Yet actually, after

those first dazzled moments, the emotion she felt partook more of the dim, sad ache that the memory-haunted scent of a flower may bring than of any more vital sentiment. But now that he had gone, it came upon her with a shock of joyful surprise that she was free—beautifully, gloriously free!

The ecstasy only lasted for a moment. Then with a sudden childish movement she put her hand resentfully to her face where the roughness of his beard had grazed it. She wished he had not kissed her—it would be a disagreeable memory.

Page 47

“I shall never forget now,” she muttered. “I shall never be able to forget.”

There was an odd note of fear in her voice.

CHAPTER VII

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE DOOR

Having secured Kitty’s forgotten fan, Mallory absent-mindedly descended the long stone flight of steps instead of taking the lift and, regaining the street, hailed a passing taxi and drove towards Green Street, whither the Seymours’ car had already proceeded.

As the driver threaded his way through the traffic, Peter’s thoughts revolved round the scene which his unexpected return to the flat had interrupted. There was only one deduction to be drawn from it, which was that Nan, after all, still cared for Maryon Rooke. The old love still held her.

The realisation was bitter. Even though the woman who was his wife must always stand betwixt himself and Nan, yet loving her as he did, it had meant a good deal to Mallory to know that no other man had any claim upon her.

And earlier in the afternoon, just before the maid had intruded on them to deliver Rooke’s telegram, it had seemed almost as though Nan, too, had cared. One moment more alone together and he would have known—been sure.

A vague vision of the future had even flashed through his mind—he and Nan never any more to one another than good comrades, but each knowing that underneath their friendship lay something stronger and deeper—the knowledge that, though unavowed, they belonged to each other. And even a love that can never be satisfied is better than life without love. It may bring its moments of unbearable agony, but it is still love—the most beautiful and glorious thing in the world. And the pain of knowing that a great gulf is for ever set between two who love is a penalty that real love can face and triumph over.

But now the whole situation was altered. Unmistakably Maryon Rooke still meant a good deal to Nan, although Peter felt a certain consciousness that if he were to pit himself against Rooke he could probably make the latter’s position very insecure. But was it fair? Was it fair to take advantage of the quick responsiveness of Nan’s emotions—that sensitiveness which gave reply as readily as a violin to the bow?

She was not a woman to find happiness very easily, and he himself had nothing to offer her except a love that must always be forbidden, unconsummated. In God’s Name, then, if Maryon Rooke could give her happiness, what right had he to stand in the way?

By the time the taxi had brought him to the door of Kitty's house, his decision was taken. He would clear out—see as little of Nan as possible. It was the best thing he could do for her, and the consideration of what it would cost him he relegated to a later period.

His steps lagged somewhat as he followed the manservant upstairs to Kitty's own particular den, and the slight limp which the war had left him seemed rather more marked than usual. Any great physical or nervous strain, invariably produced this effect. But he mustered up a smile as he entered the room and held out the recovered fan.

Page 48

The “little milliner” was nowhere to be seen, and Kitty herself was ensconced on the Chesterfield, enjoying an iced lemon-squash and a cigarette, while Penelope and Barry were downstairs playing a desultory game of billiards. The irregular click of the ivory balls came faintly to Mallory’s ears.

“Got my fan, Peter? Heaps of thanks. What will you have? A whisky-and-soda? . . . Why—Peter—”

She broke on abruptly as she caught sight of his face. He was rather pale and his eyes had a tired, beaten look in them.

“What’s wrong, Peter?”

He smiled down at her as she lay tucked up amongst her cushions.

“Why should there be anything wrong?”

“Something is,” replied Kitty decidedly. “Did I swish you away from the flat against your will?”

“I should be a very ungrateful person if I failed to appreciate my present privileges.”

She shook her head disgustedly.

“You’re a very annoying person!” she returned. “You invariably take refuge in a compliment.”

“Dear Madame Kitty”—Mallory leaned forward and looked down at her with his steady grey-blue eyes—“dear Madame Kitty, I say to you *what I mean*. I do not compliment my friends”—his voice deepened—“my dear, trusted friends.”

His foreign twist of phrase was unusually pronounced, as always in moments of strong feeling.

“But that’s just it!” she declared emphatically. “You’re *not* trusting me—you’re keeping me outside the door.”

“Believe me, there’s nothing you’d wish to see—the other side.”

“Which means that in any case it’s no use knocking at a door that won’t be opened,” said Kitty, apparently yielding the point. “So we’ll switch off that subject and get on to the next. We go down to Mallow Court at the end of this week. I can’t stand town in July. What date are you coming to us?”

Peter was silent a moment, his eyes bent on the ground. Then he raised his head suddenly as though he had just come to a decision.

“I’m afraid I shan’t be able to come down,” he said quietly.

“But you promised us!” objected Kitty. “Peter, you can’t go back on a promise!”

He regarded her gravely. Then:

“Sometimes one has to do—even that.”

Kitty, discerning in his refusal another facet of that “something wrong” she had suspected, clasped her hands round her knees and faced him with deliberation.

“Look here, Peter, it isn’t you to break a promise without some real good reason. You say you can’t come down to us at Mallow. Why not?”

He met her eyes steadily.

“I can’t answer that,” he replied.

Kitty remained obdurate.

“I want an answer, Peter. We’ve been pals for some time now, and”—with vigour—“I’m not going to be kept out of whatever it is that’s hurting you. So tell me.”

He made no answer, and she slipped down from the Chesterfield and came to his side.

Page 49

“Is it anything to do with Nan?” she asked gently, her thoughts going back to the talk she had had with Penelope before the bridge party began.

A rather weary smile curved his lips.

“It doesn’t seem much use trying to keep you in the dark, does it?”

“I must know,” she urged. Adding with feminine guile:

“Of course I should be frightfully hurt if I thought you weren’t coming just because you didn’t want to. But still I’d rather know—even if that were the reason.”

“Not want to?” he broke out, his control suddenly snapping. “I’d give my soul to come!”

The bitterness in his voice—in the lazy, drawling tones she knew so well—let in a flood of light upon the darkness in which she had been groping.

“Peter—oh, Peter!” she cried tremulously. “You’re not—you don’t mean that you care for Nan—seriously?”

“I don’t think many men could be with her much without caring,” he answered simply.

“Oh, I’m sorry—I’m sorry! . . . I—I never thought of that when I asked you to be a pal to her.” Her voice shook uncontrollably.

He smiled again—the game half-weary, half-tenderly amused smile which was so characteristic.

“You needn’t be sorry,” he said, speaking with great gentleness. “I shall never be sorry that I love her. It’s only that just now she doesn’t need me. That’s why I won’t come down to Mallow.”

“Not need you!”

“No. The man she needs has come back. I can’t tell you *how* I know—you’ll have to trust me over that—but I do know that Maryon Rooke has come back to her and that he is the man who means everything to her.”

Kitty’s brows drew together as she pondered the question whether Peter were right or wrong in his opinion.

“I don’t think you’re right,” she said at last in tones of conviction. “I don’t believe she ‘needs’ him at all. I dare-say he still fascinates her. He has”—she hesitated—“a curious sort of fascination for some women. And the sooner Nan is cured of it the better.”

“I’ve done—all that I could,” he answered briefly.

“Don’t I know that?” Kitty slipped her arm into his. “You’ve been splendid! That’s just why I want you to come down to us in Cornwall.”

“But if Rooke is there—”

“Maryon?” She paused, then went on with a chilly little note of haughtiness in her voice. “I certainly don’t propose to invite Maryon Rooke to Mallow.”

“Still, you can’t prevent him from taking a summer holiday at St. Wennys.”

St. Wennys was a small fishing village on the Cornish coast, barely a mile away from Mallow Court.

“He won’t come—I’m sure!” asserted Kitty. “Sir Robert Burnham lives quite near there—he’s Maryon’s godfather—and they hate each other like poison.”

“Why?”

Page 50

“Oh, old Sir Robert was Maryon’s guardian till he came of age, and then, when Maryon decided to go in for painting, he presented him with the small patrimony to which he was entitled and declined to have anything further to do with him—either financially or otherwise. Simply chucked him. Maryon went through some very bad times, I believe, in his early days,” continued Kitty, striving to be just. “That’s the one thing I respect him for. He stuck to it and won through to where he stands now.”

“It shows he’s got some grit, anyway,” agreed Peter. “And do you think”—smiling—“that that’s the type of man who’s going to give in over winning the woman he wants? . . . Should I, if things were different—if I were free?”

Kitty laughed reluctantly.

“You? No. But you’re not Maryon Rooke. He could never be the kind of lover you would be, my Peter. With him, his art counts first of anything in the wide world. And that’s why I don’t think he’ll come to St. Wennys. He’s in love with Nan—as far as his type can be in love—but he’s not going to tie himself up with her. So he’ll keep away.”

She paused, then went on urgently:

“Peter dear, we shall all of us hate it so if you don’t come down to Cornwall with us this year. Look, if Rooke doesn’t show up down there, so that we know he’s only philandering with Nan and has no real intention of marrying her, will you come then?”

He still hesitated. And all at once Kitty saw the other side of the picture—Peter’s side. She wanted him at Mallow—they all wanted him. But she had not thought of the matter from his point of view. Now that she knew he cared for Nan she recognised that it would be a bitterly hard thing for him to be under the same roof with the woman he loved, yet from whom he was barred by every law of God and man, and who, as far as Kitty knew, regarded him solely in the light of a friend. Even if Nan were growing to care for Peter—the bare possibility flashed through Kitty’s mind only to be instantly dismissed—even so, it would serve only to complicate matters still further.

When she spoke again it was in a very subdued tone of voice and with an accent of keen self-reproach.

“Peter, I’m a selfish pig! All this time I’ve never been thinking of you—only of ourselves. I believe it’s your own fault”—with a rather quavering laugh. “You’ve taught us all to expect so much from you—and to give so little.”

Mallory made a quick gesture of dissent.

“Oh, yes, you have,” she insisted. “You’re always giving and we just—take! I never thought how hard a thing I was asking when I begged you to come down to Mallow

while Nan was with us. It was sheer brutality to suggest it." Her voice trembled. "Please forgive me, Peter!"

"My dear, there's nothing to forgive. You know I love Nan, that she'll always be the one woman for me. But you know, too, that there's Celia, and that Nan and I can never be more to each other than we are now—just friends. I'm not going to forfeit that friendship—unless it happens it would be best for Nan that we should forget we were even friends. And I won't say it doesn't hurt to be with her. But there are some hurts that one would rather bear than lose what goes with them."

Page 51

The grave voice, with the undertone of pain running through it, ceased. Kitty's tears were flowing unchecked.

"Oh, Peter, Peter!" she cried sobbingly. "Why aren't you free? You and Nan are just made for each other."

He winced a little, as though she had laid her finger on a raw spot.

"Hush, Kitten," he said quietly. "Don't cry so! These things happen and we've got to face them."

Kitty subsided into a chair and mopped her eyes.

"It's wicked—wicked that you should be tied up to a woman like Celia—a woman who's got no more soul than this chair!"—banging the chair-arm viciously.

"And you mustn't say things like that, either," chided Peter, smiling at her very kindly.

As he spoke there came the sound of footsteps, and the voices of Barry and Penelope could be heard as they approached Kitty's den, by way of the corridor.

"I owe you a bob, then," Barry was saying in his easy, good-natured tones. "You beat me fair and square that last game, Penny."

Kitty sprang up, suddenly conscious of her tear-stained face.

"Oh, I can't see them——not now! Peter, stop them from coming here!"

A moment later Mallory came out of the room and met the approaching couple before they had reached the door.

"I was just coming to say good-bye to Kitty," began Penelope. "I'd no idea the time had flown so quickly."

"Charm of my society," murmured Barry.

Peter's face was rather white and set, but he managed to reply in a voice that sounded fairly normal.

"Kitty's very fagged and she's going to rest for a few minutes before dressing for dinner. She asked me to say good-bye to you for her, Penelope."

"Then it falls to my lot to speed the parting guest," said Barry cheerily. "Peter, old son, can the car take you on anywhere after dropping Penny at the Mansions?"

Peter was conscious of a sudden panic. He had just come from baring the rawness of his wound to Kitty, and, gently as her fingers had probed, even the kind hands of a friend may sometimes hurt excruciatingly. He felt that at the moment he could not endure the companionship of any living soul.

“No, thanks,” he answered jerkily. “I’ll walk.”

CHAPTER VIII

THE MIDDLE OF THE STAIRCASE

Mallow Court, the Seymours’ country home, lay not a mile from the village of St. Wennys. A low, two-storied house of creeper-clad stone, it stood perched upon the cliffs, overlooking the wild sea which beats up against the Cornish coast.

The house itself had been built in a quaint, three-sided fashion, the central portion and the two wings which flanked it rectangularly serving to enclose a sunk lawn round which ran a wide, flagged path. A low, grey stone wall, facing the sea, fenced the fourth side of the square, at one end of which a gate gave egress on to the sea-bitten grassy slope that led to the edge of the cliff itself.

Page 52

A grove of trees half-girdled the house, and this, together with the sheltering upward trend of the downs on one side of it, tempered the violence of the fierce winds which sometimes swept the coast-line even in summer.

Behind the house, under the lee of the rising upland, lay the gardens of Mallow, witness to the loving care of generations. Stretches of lawn, coolly green and shaven, sloped away from a terrace which ran the whole length of the house, meeting the gravelled drive as it curved past the house-door. Beyond lay dim sweet alleys, over-arched by trees, and below, where a sudden dip in the configuration of the land admitted of it, were grassy terraces, gay with beds of flowers, linked together by short flights of grass-grown steps.

“I can’t understand why you spend so much time in stuffy old London, Kitty, when you have this heavenly place to come to.”

Nan spoke from a nest of half-a-dozen cushions heaped together beneath the shade of a tree. Here she was lounging luxuriously, smoking innumerable Turkish cigarettes, while Kitty swung tranquilly in a hammock close by. Penelope had been invisible since lunch time. They had all been down at Mallow the better part of a month, and she and Ralph Fenton quite frequently absented themselves, “hovering,” as Barry explained, “on the verge of an engagement.”

“My dear, the longer I stay in town, the more thoroughly I enjoy the country when we come here. I get the quintessence of enjoyment by treating Mallow as a liqueur.”

Nan laughed. There was a faint flavour of bitterness in her laughter.

“Practically most of our good times in this world are only to be obtained in the liqueur form. The gods don’t make a habit of offering you a big jug of enjoyment.”

“If they did, you’d be certain to refuse it because you didn’t like the shape of the jug!” retorted Kitty.

Nan smiled whole-heartedly.

“What a miserable, carping, discontented creature I must be!”

“I’ll swear that’s not true!” An emphatic masculine voice intervened, and round the corner of the clump of trees beneath which the two girls had taken refuge, swung a man’s tall, well-setup figure clad in knickerbockers and a Norfolk coat.

“Good gracious, Roger, how you made me jump!” And Kitty hurriedly lowered a pair of smartly-shod feet which had been occupying a somewhat elevated position in the hammock.

“I’m sorry. How d’you do, Kit? And how are you, Miss Davenant?” answered the newcomer.

The alteration in his voice as he addressed Nan was quite perceptible to anyone well-versed in the symptoms of the state of being in love, and his piercing light-grey eyes beneath their shaggy, sunburnt brows—fierce, far-visioned eyes that reminded one of the eyes of a hawk—softened amazingly as they rested upon her charming face.

“Oh, we’re quite all right, thanks,” she answered. “That is, when people don’t drop suddenly from the clouds and galvanise us into action this warm weather.”

Page 53

She regarded him with a faintly quizzical smile. He was not particularly attractive in appearance, though tall and well-built. About forty-two, a typical English sportsman of the out-door, cold-tub-in-the-morning genus, he had a square-jawed, rather ugly face, roofed with a crop of brown hair a trifle sunburnt at its tips as a consequence of long days spent in the open. His mouth indicated a certain amount of self-will, the inborn imperiousness of a man who has met with obedient services as a matter of course, and whose forebears, from one generation to another, have always been masters of men. And, it might be added, masters of their women-kind as well, in the good, old-fashioned way. There was, too, more than a hint of obstinacy and temper in the long, rather projecting chin and dominant nose.

But the smile he bestowed on Nan when he answered her redeemed the ugliness of his face considerably. It was the smile of a man who could be both kindly and generous where his prejudices were not involved, who might even be capable of something rather big if occasion warranted it.

“It was too bad of me to startle you like that,” he acknowledged. “Please forgive me. I caught sight of you both through the trees and declared myself rather too suddenly.”

“Always a mistake,” commented Nan, nodding wisely.

Roger Trenby regarded her doubtfully. She was extraordinarily attractive, this slim young woman from London who was staying at Mallow, but she not infrequently gave utterances to remarks which, although apparently straight-forward enough, yet filled him with a vague, uneasy feeling that they held some undercurrent of significance which had eluded him.

He skirted the quicksand hastily, and turned the conversation to a subject where be felt himself on sure ground.

“I’ve been exercising hounds to-day.”

Trenby was Master of the Trevithick Foxhounds, and had the reputation of being one of the finest huntsmen in the county, and his heart and his pluck and a great deal of his money went to the preserving of it.

“Oh,” cried Nan warmly, “why didn’t you bring them round by Mallow before you went back to the kennels?”

“We didn’t come coastward at all,” he replied. “I never thought of your caring to see them.”

Nan was not in the least a sportswoman by nature, though she had hunted as a child—-albeit much against her will—to satisfy the whim of a father who had been a dare-devil rider across country and had found his joy in life—and finally his death—in the hunting

field he had loved. But she was a lover of animals, like most people of artistic temperament, and her reply was enthusiastic.

“Of course I’d like to have seen them!”

Roger’s face brightened.

“Then will you let me show you the kennels one day? I could motor over for you and bring you back afterwards.”

Nan nodded up at him.

Page 54

“I’d like to come very much. When shall we do it?”

Kitty stirred idly in her hammock.

“You’ve let yourself in for it now, Roger,” she remarked. “Nan is the most impatient person alive.”

Once more Nan looked up, with lazy “blue violet” eyes whose seductive sweetness sent an unaccustomed thrill down Roger’s spine. She was so different, this slender bit of womanhood with her dusky hair and petal skin, from the sturdy, thick-booted, sporting type of girl to which he was accustomed. For Roger Trenby very rarely left his ancestral acres to essay the possibilities of the great outer world, and his knowledge of women had been hitherto chiefly gleaned from the comely—if somewhat stolid—damsels of the countryside, with whom he had shot and fished and hunted since the days of his boyhood.

“Don’t be alarmed by what Kitty tells you, Mr. Trenby,” Nan smiled gently as she spoke and Roger found himself delightedly watching the adorable way her lips curled up at the corners and the faint dimple which came and went. “She considers it a duty to pick holes in poor me—good for my morals, you know.”

“It must be a somewhat difficult occupation,” he returned, bowing awkwardly.

Into Nan’s mind flashed the recollection of a supple, expressive, un-English bow, and of a deftness of phrase compared with which Trenby’s laboured compliment savoured of the elephantine. Swiftly she dismissed the memory, irritably chasing it from her mind, for was it not five long, black, incomprehensible weeks since Peter had vanished from her ken? From the day of the bridge-party at the Edenhall flat, she had neither seen nor heard from him, and during those five silent weeks she had come to recognise the fact that Peter meant much more to her than merely a friend, just as he himself had realised that she was the one woman in the world for him. And between them, now and always, stood Celia, the woman in possession.

“Well, then, what about Thursday next for going over to the kennels? Are you disengaged?”

Trenby’s voice broke suddenly across her reverie. She threw him a brilliant smile.

“Yes. Thursday would do very well.”

“Agreed, then. I’ll call for you at half-past ten,” said Trenby. “Well”—rising reluctantly to his feet—“I must be moving on now. I have to go over one of my off-farms before dinner, so I’ll say good-bye.”

He lifted his cap and strode away, Nan watching his broad-shouldered well-knit figure with reflective eyes, the while irrepressible little gurgles and explosions of mirth emanated from the hammock.

At last Nan burst out irritably:

“What on earth are you giggling about, Kitty?”

“At the lion endeavouring to lie down with the lamb,” submitted Kitty meekly.

“Don’t talk in parables.”

“It’s a very easy one to interpret”—Kitty succumbed once more to a gale of laughter. “It was just too delicious to watch you and Roger together! You’d much better leave him alone, my dear, and play with the dolls you’re used to.”

Page 55

“How detestable you are, Kitty. I promise you one thing—it’s going to be much worse for the lion than the lamb.”

Mrs. Barry Seymour sat up suddenly, the laughter dying out of her eyes.

“Nan,” she admonished, “you leave Roger alone. He’s as Nature made him and not fair game for such as you. Leave him to some simple country maiden—Edna Langdon, for instance, who rides straight to hounds and whose broad acres—or what will be her broad acres when Papa Langdon is gathered—’march’ with his.”

“Surely I can out-general her?”—impertinently.

“Out-general her? Of course you can. But that’s just what you mustn’t do. I won’t allow you to play with Roger. He’s too good a sort—even if he is a bit heavy in hand.”

“I agree. He’s quite a good sort. But he needs educating. . . . And perhaps I’m not going to ‘play’ with him.”

“Not? Then what . . . Nan, you never mean to suggest that you’re in earnest?”

Nan regarded her consideringly.

“And why not, pray? Isn’t he well-seeming? Hasn’t he broad acres of his own? Do I not find favour in his eyes? . . . Surely the last four weeks have shown you that much?”

Kitty made a small grimace.

“They certainly have. But seriously, this is all nonsense, Nan. You and Roger Trenby are about as unsuited to each other as any man and woman could possibly be. In addition to which he has the temper of a fiend when roused—and you’d be sure to rouse him! You know a dozen men more suitable!”

“Do I? It seems to me I’m particularly destitute of men friends just now, either ‘suitable’ or otherwise. They’ve been giving me the cold shoulder lately with commendable frequency. So why not the M.F.H. and his acres?”

Kitty detected the bitter, hurt note in her voice, and privately congratulated herself on a letter she had posted only the previous evening telling Peter that everything was obviously over between Nan and Maryon Rooke, as the latter had failed to put in an appearance at St. Wennys—and would he come down to Mallow Court? With Peter once more at hand, she felt sure he would be able to charm Nan’s bitterness away and even prevent her, in some magical way of his own, from committing such a rash blunder as marriage with Trenby could not fail to be.

She had been feeling rather disturbed about Nan ever since they had come to Mallow. The Nan she knew, wayward, tantalising, yet always lovable, seemed to have disappeared, and instead here was this embittered, moody Nan, very surely filled with some wild notion of defying fate by marrying out of hand and so settling for ever the disappointments of the past—and whatever chances of happiness there might be waiting for her in the lap of destiny. Settling them in favour of one most final and lasting disappointment of them all—of that Kitty felt convinced.

“Nan, don’t be a fool!” she insisted vehemently. “You’d be wretched if you married the wrong man—far, far more wretched in the future than you’ve ever been in the past. You’d only repent that last step once, and that would be—always!”

Page 56

“My dear Kit, I’ve taken so many steps that I’ve repented! But when you’re in the middle of a staircase you must inevitably continue taking steps—either up or down. And if I take this one, and repent it—well, at all events it will be the last step.”

“Not necessarily,” replied Kitty drily.

“Where are you wandering now?” gibed Nan. “Into the Divorce Courts—or the Thames? Surely you know me better than that! I value my creature comforts far too much to exploit either, I assure you. The Divorce Courts are muddy—and the Thames is wet.”

Kitty was silent a moment, her heart torn by the bitterness in the girl’s voice.

“You’d regret it, I know,” she insisted gravely.

Nan rose from her cushions, swinging her hat in her hand.

“Always remembering that a prophet hath no honour in his own country,” she commented curtly over her shoulder, and sauntered away towards the house, defiantly humming the air of a scandalous little French song as she went.

Kitty sank back into the hammock, lighting a cigarette to aid her meditations. Truly matters had gone very crookedly. Maryon Rooke had been the first cause of all the trouble. Then she herself had intervened to distract Nan’s thoughts by asking Peter to be a pal to her. And the net result of it all was that Peter, irrevocably bound to another woman, had fallen in love with Nan, while the latter was philandering desperately with a totally unsuitable second string.

“Dreaming, Kitty?” said a voice, and looking up with the frown still wrinkling her pretty brows, she saw Lord St. John approaching.

“If I am, it must be a nightmare, I think!” she answered lugubriously.

The old man’s kindly face took on a look of concern.

“Any nightmare that I can dispel, my dear?”

Kitty patted the fine-bred, wrinkled old hand that rested on the edge of the hammock.

“I know you love to play the fairy godfather to us all, but in this case I’m afraid you can’t help. In fact, you’ve done all you could—made her free to choose.”

“It’s Nan, then?” he said quickly.

Kitty laughed rather mirthlessly.

“’M. Isn’t it always Nan who is causing us anxiety one way or another?”

“And just now?”

“Haven’t you guessed? I’m sure you have!”

St. John’s lips twisted in a whimsical smile.

“I suppose you mean that six-foot-odd of bone and muscle from Trenby Hall?”

“Of course I mean him! Just because she’s miserable over that Rooke business and because Roger is as insistent as a man with that kind of chin always is, she’ll be Mrs. Roger before we can stop her—and miserable ever after!”

“Isn’t the picture a trifle overdrawn?” St. John pulled forward one of the garden chairs and sat down. “Trenby’s a very decent fellow, I should imagine, and comes of good old stock.”

Page 57

“Oh, yes, he’s all that.” Kitty metaphorically tossed the whole pack of qualifications into the dustbin. “But he’s got the devil’s own temper when he’s roused and he’s filled to the brim with good old-fashioned notions about a man being master in his own house, et cetera. And no man will ever be master in his own house while Nan’s in it—unless he breaks her.”

St. John stirred restlessly.

“Things are a bit complicated sometimes, aren’t they?” he said in a rather tired voice. “Still”—with an effort—“we must hope for the best. You’ve jumped far ahead of the actual state of affairs at present.”

“Roger’s tagging round after her from morning to night.”

“He’s not the first man to do that,” submitted Lord. St. John, smiling, “Nan is—Nan, you know, and you mustn’t assume too much from Roger’s liking to be with her. I’m sure if I were one of her contemporary young men, I should ‘tag round’ just like the rest of ’em. So don’t meet trouble half way.”

“Optimist!” said Kitty.

“Oh, no.” The disclaimer came quickly. “Philosopher.”

“I can’t be philosophical, unluckily.”

“My dear, we have no choice. It isn’t we who move the pieces in the game.”

A silence followed. Then, as Kitty vaguely murmured something about tea, St. John helped her out of the hammock, and together they strolled towards the house. They found tea in progress on the square lawn facing the sea and every one foregathered there. Nan, apparently in wild spirits, was fooling inimitably, and she bestowed a small, malicious smile on Kitty as she and Lord St. John joined the group around the tea-table.

It was a glorious afternoon. The sea lay dappled with light and shade as the sun and vagrant breezes played with it, while for miles along the coast the great cliffs were wrapt in a soft, quivering haze so that the lines and curves of their vari-coloured strata, and the bleak, sheer menace of their height, as they overhung the blue water lapping on the sands below, were screened from view.

“There are some heavenly sandwiches here,” announced Nan. “That is, if Sandy has left any. Have you, Sandy?”

Sandy McBain grinned responsively. He was the somewhat surprising offspring of the union between Nan’s Early Victorian aunt, Eliza, and a prosaic and entirely uninteresting Scotsman. Red-haired and freckled, with the high cheekbones of his Celtic forebears,

he was a young man of undeniable ugliness, redeemed only by a pair of green eyes as kind and honest as a dog's, and by a voice of surprising charm and sweetness.

"Not many," he replied easily. "I gave you all the largest, anyway."

"Sandy says he hasn't left any," resumed Nan calmly.

"At least, only small ones. We mustn't blame him. What are they made of, Kitty? They'd beguile a fasting saint—let alone a material person like Sandy."

Page 58

“Salmon paste and cress,” replied Mrs. Seymour mildly.

“I bet any money its salmon and shrimp paste,” declared Sandy. “And it’s the vulgar shrimp which appeals.”

He helped himself unostentatiously to another sandwich.

“Your eighth,” commented Nan.

“It’s the shrimpness of them,” he murmured plaintively. “I can’t help it.”

“Well, draw the line somewhere,” she returned. “If we’re going to play duets after tea and you continue to absorb sandwiches at your present rate of consumption, you’ll soon be incapable of detecting the inherent difference between a quaver and a semibreve.”

“Then I shall count,” said Sandy.

“No.”

“Aloud,” he added firmly.

“Sandy, you’re a beast!”

“Not a bit. I believe I could compose a symphonic poem under the influence of salmon and shrimp sandwiches—if I had enough of them.”

“You’ve had enough,” retorted Nan promptly. “So come along and begin.”

She swept him away to the big music-room, where a polished floor and an absence of draperies offered no hindrance to the tones of the beautiful Bluethner piano. Some of the party drifted in from the terrace outside as Sandy’s long, boyish fingers began to move capably over the keys, extemporising delightfully.

“If he were only a little older,” whispered Kitty to Lord St. John.

“Inveterate match-maker!” he whispered back.

Sandy pulled Nan down on to the music seat beside him.

“*The Shrimp Symphony* in A flat minor, arranged for four hands,” he announced. “Come on, Nan. Time, seven-four—”

“Sandy, don’t be ridiculous!”

“Why not seven-four?”—innocently. “You have five-four. Come along. *One*, two, three, four, five, six, sev’n; *one*, two, three, four, five—”

And the next moment the two were improvising a farcical duet that in its way was a masterpiece of ingenious musicianship. Thence they passed on to more serious music until finally Sandy was persuaded to produce his violin—he had two, one of which, as he was wont to remark, “lodged” at Mallow. With the help of Penelope and Ralph Fenton, the afternoon was whiled away until a low-toned gong, reverberating through the house was a warning that it was time to dress for dinner, brought the impromptu concert to an abrupt end.

CHAPTER IX

A SKIRMISH WITH DEATH

It was a soft, misty day when Trenby called to drive Nan over to the Trevithick Kennels—one of those veiled mornings which break about noon into a glory of blue sky and golden sunlight.

As she stepped into the waiting car, Roger stopped her abruptly.

“Go back and put on something thicker,” he commanded. “It’ll be chilly driving in this mist.”

“But it’s going to be hot later on,” protested Nan.

Page 59

“Yes, only it happens to be now that we’re driving—and it will be cool again, in the evening when I bring you back.”

Nan laughed.

“Nonsense!” she said and put her foot on the step of the car. Trenby, standing by to help her in, closed his hand firmly round her arm and held her back. His hawk’s eyes flashed a little.

“I shan’t take you unless you do as I say,” he observed.

She stared at him in astonishment. Then she turned away as though to re-enter the house.

“Oh, very well,” she replied airily.

Roger bit his lip, then followed her rapidly. He did not in the least like yielding his point.

“Come back, then—and catch a cold if you like!” he said ungraciously.

Nan paused and looked up at him.

“Do you think I should catch cold?”

“It’s ten to one you would.”

“Then I’ll do as I’m bid and get an extra coat.”

She went into the house, leaving Trenby rather taken aback by her sudden submission. But it pleased him, nevertheless. He liked a woman to be malleable. It seemed, to him a truly womanly quality—certainly a wifely one! Moreover, almost any man experiences a pleasant feeling of complacency when he thinks he has dominated a woman, even over so small a matter as to whether she shall wear an extra coat or not—although he generally fails to guess the origin of that attractive surrender and comfortably regards it as a tribute to his strong, masculine will-power. Few women are foolish enough to undeceive him.

“Will I do now?” asked Nan, reappearing and stepping lightly into the car.

Roger smiled approvingly and proceeded to tuck the rugs well round her. Then he started the engine and soon they were spinning down the drive which ran to the left of Mallow Court gardens towards the village. They flashed through St. Wennys and turned inland along the great white road that swept away in the direction of Trenby Hall, ten miles distant. The kennels themselves lay a further four miles beyond the Hall.

“Oh, how gorgeous it is!” exclaimed Nan, as their road cut through a wild piece of open country where, with the sea and the tall cliffs behind them, vista after vista of wooded hills and graciously sloping valleys unfolded in front of them.

“Yes, you get some fine scenery inland,” replied Trenby. “And the roads are good for motoring. I suppose you don’t ride?” he added.

“Why should you suppose that?”

“Well”—a trifle awkwardly—“one doesn’t expect a Londoner to know much about country pursuits.”

Nan smiled.

“Are you imagining I’ve spent all my life in a Seven Dials slum?” she asked serenely.

“No, no, of course not. But—”

“But country people take a very limited view of a Londoner. We *do* sometimes get out of town, you know—and some of us can ride and play games quite nicely! As a matter of fact I hunted when I was about six.”

Page 60

Roger's face lightened, eagerly.

"Oh, then I hope you're staying at Mallow till the hunting season starts? I've a lovely mare I could lend you if you'd let me."

Nan shook her head and made a hasty gesture of dissent.

"Oh, no, no. Quite honestly, I've not ridden for years—and even if I took up riding once more I should never hunt again. I think"—she shrank a little—"it's too cruel."

Trenby regarded her with ingenuous amazement.

"Cruel!" he exclaimed. "Why, it's sport!"

"Magic word!" Nan's lips curled a little. "You say it's 'sport' as though that made it all right."

"So it does," answered Trenby contentedly.

"It may—for the sportsman. But as far as the fox is concerned, it's sheer cruelty."

Trenby drove on without speaking for a short time. Then he said slowly:

"Well, in a way I suppose you're right. But, all the same, it's the sporting instinct—the cultivated sporting instinct—which has made the Englishman what he is. It's that which won the war, you know."

"It's a big price to pay. Couldn't you"—a sudden charming smile curving her lips—-"couldn't you do it—I mean cultivate the sporting instinct—by polo and things like that?"

"It's not the same." Trenby shook his head. "You don't understand. It's the desire to find your quarry, to go through anything rather than to let him beat you—no matter how done or tired you feel."

"It may be very good for you," allowed Nan. "But it's very bad luck on the fox. I wouldn't mind so much if he had fair play. But even if he succeeds in getting away from you—-beating *you*, in fact—and runs to earth, you proceed to dig him out. I call that *mean*."

Trenby was silent again for a moment. Then he asked suddenly:

"What would you do if your husband hunted?"

"Put up with it, I suppose, just as I should put up with his other faults—if I loved him."

Roger made no answer but quickened the speed of the car, letting her race over the level surface of the road, and when next he spoke it was on some quite other topic.

Half an hour later a solid-looking grey house, built in the substantial Georgian fashion and surrounded by trees, came into view. Roger slowed up as the car passed the gates which guarded the entrance to the drive.

“That’s Trenby Hall,” he said. And Nan was conscious of an impishly amused feeling that just so might Noah, when the Flood began, have announced: “That’s my Ark.’”

“You’ve never been over yet,” continued Roger. “But I want you to come one day. I should like you to meet my mother.”

A queer little dart of fear shot through her as he spoke.

She felt as though she were being gradually hemmed in.

“It looks a beautiful place,” she answered conventionally, though inwardly thinking how she would loathe to live in a solid, square mansion of that type, prosaically dull and shut away from the world by enclosing woods.

Page 61

Roger looked pleased.

“Yes, it’s a fine old place,” he said. “Now for the kennels.”

Nan breathed a sigh of relief. She had had one instant of anxiety lest he should suggest that, instead of lunching, as arranged, from the picnic basket safely bestowed in the back of the car, they should lunch at the Hall.

Another fifteen minutes brought them to the kennels, Denman, the first whip, meeting them at the gates. He touched his hat and threw a keen glance at Nan. The Master of the Trevithick was not in the habit of bringing ladies to see the kennels, and the whip and his wife had discussed the matter very fully over their supper the previous evening, trying to guess what it might portend. “A new mistress up at the ’All, I shouldn’t wonder,” asserted Mrs. Denman confidently.

“Hounds all fit, Denman?” asked Trenby in quick, authoritative tones.

“Yes, sir. All ’cept ’Wrangler there—’e’s still a bit stiff on that near hind leg he sprained.”

As he spoke, he held open the gate for Nan to pass in, and she glanced round with lively interest. A flagged path ran straight ahead, dividing the large paved enclosure reserved for youngsters from the iron-fenced yards inhabited by the older hounds of the pack; while at the back of each enclosure lay the sleeping quarters of roofed and sheltered benches. At the further end of the kennels stood a couple of cottages, where the whips and kennelman lived.

“How beautifully clean it all is!” exclaimed Nan.

The whip smiled with obvious delight.

“If you keep ’ounds, miss, you must keep ’em clean—or they won’t be ‘ealthy and fit to do their day’s work. An’ a day’s hunting is a day’s work for ‘ounds, an’ no mistake.”

“How like a woman to remark about cleanliness first of all!” laughed Roger. “A man would have gone straight to look at the hounds before anything else!”

“I’m going now,” replied Nan, approaching the bars of one of the enclosures.

It seemed to her as though she were looking at a perfect sea of white and tan bodies with slowly waving sterns, while at intervals from the big throats came a murmurous sound, rising now and again into a low growl, or the sharp snap of powerful jaws and a whine of rage as a couple or more hounds scuffled together over some private disagreement. At Nan’s appearance, drawn by curiosity, some of them approached her gingerly, half-suspicious, half as though anxious to make friends, and, knowing no fear

of animals, she thrust her hand through the bars and stroked the great heads and necks.

“Can’t we go in? They’re such dear things!” she begged.

“Better not,” answered Roger. “They don’t always like strangers.”

“I’m not afraid,” she replied mutinously. “Do just open the gate, anyway—*please*!”

Trenby hesitated.

“Well—” He yielded unwillingly, but Nan’s eyes were rather difficult to resist when they appealed. “Open the gate, then, Denman.”

Page 62

He stood close behind her when the gate was opened, watching the hounds narrowly, and now and again uttering an imperative, “Down, Victor! Get down, Marquis!” when one or other of the great beasts playfully leapt up against Nan’s side, pawing at her in friendly fashion. Meanwhile Denman had quietly disappeared, and when he returned he carried a long-lashed hunting-crop in his hand.

Nan was smoothing first one tan head, then another, receiving eager caresses from rough, pink tongues in return, and insensibly she had moved step by step further into the yard to reach this or that hound as it caught her attention.

“Come back!” called Trenby hastily. “Don’t go any further.”

Perhaps the wind carried his voice away from her, or perhaps she was so preoccupied with the hounds that the meaning of his words hardly penetrated her mind. Whichever it may have been, with a low cry of, “Oh, you beauty!” she stepped quickly towards Vengeance, one of the best hounds in the pack, a fierce-looking beast with a handsome head and sullen month, who had been standing apart, showing no disposition to join the clamorous, slobbering throng at the gate.

His hackles rose at Nan’s sudden movement towards him, and as she stretched out her hand to stroke him the sulky head lifted with a thunderous growl. As though at a given signal the whole pack seemed to gather round her.

Simultaneously Vengeance leaped, and Nan was only conscious of the ripping of her garments, the sudden pressure of hot bodies round her, and of a blurred sound of hounds baying, the vicious cracking of a whip, and the voices of men shouting.

She sank almost to her knees, instinctively shielding her head and throat with her arms, borne to the ground by the force of the great padded feet which had struck her. Open jaws, red like blood, and gleaming ivory fangs fenced her round. Instantaneously there flashed through her mind the recollection of something she had once been told—that if one hound turns on you, the whole pack will turn with him—like wolves.

This was death, then—death by those worrying, white-fanged mouths—the tearing of soft, warm flesh from her living limbs and afterwards the crushing of her bones between those powerful jaws.

She struck out, struggling gamely to her feet, and visioned Denman cursing and slashing at the hounds as he drove them off. But Vengeance, the untamed, heedless of the lash which scored his back a dozen times, caught at her ankle and she pitched head foremost into the stream of hot-breathed mouths and struggling bodies. She felt a huge weight fling itself upon her—Vengeance, springing again at his prey—and even as she waited for the agony of piercing fangs plunged into her flesh, Trenby’s voice roared in

her ears as he caught the big, powerful brute by its throat and by sheer, immense physical strength dragged the hound off her.

Page 63

Meanwhile the second whip had rushed out from his cottage to render assistance and the whistling of the long-lashed hunting-crops drove through the air, gradually forcing the yelping hounds into submission. In the midst of the shouting and commotion Nan felt herself lifted up by Roger as easily as though she were a baby, and at the same moment the whirling lash of one of the men's hunting-crops cut her across the throat and bosom. The red-hot agony of it was unbearable, and as Trenby bore her out of the yard he felt her body grow suddenly limp in his arms and, glancing down, saw that she had lost consciousness.

When Nan came to herself again it was to find she was lying on a hard little horse-hair sofa, and the first object upon which her eyes rested was a nightmare arrangement of wax flowers, carefully preserved from risk of damage by a glass shade.

She was feeling stiff and sore, and the strangeness of her surroundings bewildered her—the sofa upholstered in slippery American cloth and hard as a board to her aching limbs, the waxen atrocity beneath its glass shade standing on a rickety table at the foot of the couch, the smallness of the room in which she found herself.

"Where am I?" she asked in a weak voice that was hardly more than a whisper.

Someone—a woman—said quickly: "Ah, she's coming round!" and bustled, out of the room. Then came Roger's voice:

"You're all right, Nan—all right." And she felt his big hands close round her two slender ones reassuringly. "Don't be frightened."

She raised her head to find Roger kneeling beside the sofa on which she lay.

"I'm not frightened," she said. "Only—what's happened? . . . Oh, I remember! I was in the yard with the hounds. Did one of them bite me?"

"Yes, Vengeance just caught your ankle. But we've bathed it thoroughly—luckily he's only torn the skin a bit—and now I'm going to bind it up for you. Mrs. Denman's just gone to fetch some stuff for me to bind it with. You'll be quite all right again to-morrow."

With some difficulty Nan raised herself to a sitting position and immediately caught sight of a bowl on the ground filled with an ominous-looking reddish-coloured liquid.

"Good gracious! Has my foot been bleeding like that?" she asked, going rather white.

"Bless you, no, my dear!" Mrs. Denman, a cheery-faced countrywoman, had bustled in again, with some long strips of linen to serve as a bandage. "Bless you, no! That's just a drop of Condy's fluid, that is, so's your foot shouldn't get any poison in it."

“That’s right, Mrs. Denman,” said Roger. “Give me that linen stuff now, and then get me some more hot water.”

Nan watched him lift and skilfully bandage the slightly damaged foot. He held it carefully, as though it were something very precious, but delicate as was his handling she could not help wincing once as the bandage accidentally brushed a rather badly scratched ankle. Trenby paused almost breathlessly. The hand in which he held the white, blue-veined foot shook a little.

Page 64

“Did I hurt? I’m awfully sorry.” His voice was gruff. “What he wanted to do was to crush the slim, bruised foot against his lips. The very touch of its satiny skin against his hand sent queer tremors through every nerve of his big frame.

“There!” he said at last, gently letting her foot rest once more on the sofa. “Is that comfortable?”

“Quite, thanks.” Then, turning to the whip’s wife as she re-entered the room carrying a jug of hot water, she went on, with that inborn instinct of hers to charm and give pleasure: “What a nice, sunny room you have here, Mrs. Denman. I’m afraid I’m making a dreadful mess of it. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t mention it, miss. ’Tis only a drop of water to clear away, and it’s God mercy you weren’t killed, by they savage ’ounds.”

Nan bestowed one of her delightful smiles upon the good woman, who, leaving the hot water in readiness; hurried out to tell her husband that if Miss Davenant was going to be mistress of the Hall, why, then, ’twould be a lucky day for everyone concerned, for a nicer, pleasanter-spoken young lady—and she just come round from a faint and all!—-she never wished to meet.

Nan put her hand up to her throat.

“Something hurts here,” she said in a troubled voice. “Did one of the hounds leap up at my neck?”

“No,” replied Trenby, frowning as his eyes rested on the long red weal striping the white flesh disclosed by the Y-shaped neck of her frock. “One of those dunder-headed fools cut you with his whip by mistake. I’d like to shoot him—and Vengeance too!”

With a wonderfully gentle touch he laid a cloth wrung out in hot water across the angry-looking streak, and repeated the process until some of the swelling went down. At last he desisted, wiping dry the soft girlish throat as tenderly as a nurse might wipe the throat of a baby.

More than a little touched, Nan smiled at him.

“You’re making a great fuss of me,” she said. “After all, I’m not seriously hurt, you know.”

“No,” he replied briefly. “But you might have been killed. For a moment I thought you *were* going to be killed in front of my eyes.”

“I don’t know that it would have mattered, very much if I had been,” she responded indifferently.

“It would have mattered to me.” His voice roughened again: “Nan—Nan—”

He broke off huskily and, casting a swift glance at his face, she realised that the tide which had been gradually rising throughout the foregoing weeks of close companionship had suddenly come to its full and that no puny effort of hers could now arrest and thrust it back.

Roger had risen to his feet. His face was rather white as he stood looking down at her, and the piercing eyes beneath the oddly sunburnt brows held a new light in them. They were no longer cold, but burned down upon her with the fierce ardour of passion.

Page 65

“What is it?” she whispered. The words seemed wrung from her against her will.

For a moment he made no answer, and in the pulsing silence which followed her low-breathed question Nan was aware of a swiftly gathering fear. She would have to make a decision within the next few moments—and she was not ready for it.

“Do you know”—Roger spoke very slowly—“Do you know what it would have meant to me if you had been killed just now?”

Nan shook her head.

“It would have meant the end of everything.”

“Oh, I don’t see why!” she responded quickly.

“Don’t you?” He stooped over her and took her two slight wrists in his. “Then I’ll tell you. I love you and I want you for my wife. I didn’t intend to speak so soon—you know so little of me. But this last hour! . . . I can’t wait any longer. I want you, Nan, I want you so unutterably that I won’t *take* no.”

She tried to rise from the sofa. But in an instant his arms were round her, pressing her back, tenderly but determinedly, against the cushions.

“No, don’t get up! See, I’ll kneel here beside you. Tell me, Nan, when will you marry me?”

She was silent. What answer could she give him—she who had found one man’s love vain and betwixt whom and the man she really loved there was a stern barrier set?

At her silence a swift fear seized him.

“Nan,” he said, his voice a little hoarse. “Nan, is it—no good?” Then, as she still made no answer, he let his arms fall heavily to his side.

“God!” he muttered. And his eyes held a blank, dazed look like those of a man who has just received a blow.

Nan caught him by the arm.

“No, no, Roger!” she cried quickly. “Don’t look like that! I didn’t mean—”

The sudden expression of radiance that sprang into his face silenced the remainder of the words upon her lips—the words of explanation that should have been spoken.

“Then you do care, after all! Nan, there’s no one else, is there?”

“No,” she said very low.

He stretched out his arms and drew her gently within them, and for a moment she had neither the heart nor the courage to wipe that look of utter happiness from his face by telling him the truth, by saying blankly: “I don’t love you.”

He turned her face up to his and, stooping, kissed her with sudden passion.

“My dear!” he said, “my dear!” Then, after a moment:

“Oh, Nan, Nan, I can hardly believe that you really belong to me!”

Nan could hardly believe it either. It seemed just to have *happened* somehow, and her conscience smote her. For what had she to give in return for all the love he was offering her? Merely a little liking of a lonely heart that wanted to warm itself at someone’s hearth, and beyond that a terrified longing to put something more betwixt herself and Peter Mallory, to double the strength of the barrier which kept them apart. It wasn’t giving Trenby a fair deal!

Page 66

“Roger,” she said, at last, “I don’t think I’d better belong to you. No, listen!”—as he made a sudden movement—“I must tell you. There *is* someone else—only we can’t ever be more than friends.”

Roger stared, at her with the dawning of a new fear in his eyes. When he spoke it was with a savage defiance.

“Then don’t tell me! I don’t want to hear. You’re mine now, anyway.”

“I think I ought—” she began weakly.

But he brushed her scruples aside.

“I’m not going to listen. You’ve said you’ll marry me. I don’t want to hear anything about the other men who were. I’m the man who is. And I’m going to drive you straight back to Mallow and tell everybody about it. Then I’ll feel sure of you.”

Faced by the irrevocableness of her action, Nan was overtaken by dismay. How recklessly, on the impulse of the moment, she had bartered her freedom away! She felt as though she were caught in the meshes of some net from which there was no escaping. A voice inside her head kept urging: “*Time*! *Time*! *Give me time*!”

“Please, Roger,” she began with unwonted humility. “I’d rather you didn’t tell people just yet.”

But Trenby objected.

“I don’t see that there’s anything gained by waiting,” he said doggedly.

“Time! . . . *Time*!” reiterated the voice inside Nan’s head.

“To please me, Roger,” she begged. “I want to think things over a bit first.”

“It’s too late to think things over,” he answered jealously. “You’ve given me your promise. You don’t want to take it back again?”

“Perhaps, when you know everything, you’ll want me to.”

“Tell me ‘everything’ now, then,” he said grimly, “and you’ll soon see whether I want you to or not.”

Nan was fighting desperately to gain time. She needed it more than anything—time to think, time to weigh the pros and cons of the matter, time to decide. The past was pulling at her heart-strings, filling her with a sudden terror of the promise she had just given Roger.

“I can’t tell you anything now,” she said rather breathlessly. “I did try—a little while ago, and you wouldn’t listen. You—you *must* give me a few days—you must! If you don’t, I’ll say ‘no’ now—at once!” her voice rising excitedly.

She was overwrought, strung up to such a pitch that she hardly knew what she was saying. She had been through a good deal in the last hour or two and Trenby realised it. Suddenly that grim determination of his to force her promise, to bind her his here and now, yielded to an overwhelming flood of tenderness.

“It shall be as you wish, Nan,” he said very gently. “I know I’m asking everything of you, and that you’re frightened and upset to-day. I ought not to have spoken. And—and I’m a lot older than you.”

“Oh, it isn’t that,” replied Nan hastily, fearing he might be feeling sore over the disparity in their respective ages. She did not want him to be hurt about things that would never have counted at all had she loved him.

Page 67

“Well, if I wait till Monday—that’s four days—will that do?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll tell you then.”

“Thank you”—very simply. He lifted her hands to his lips. “And remember,” he added desperately, “that I love you, Nan—you’re my whole world.”

He paced the short length of the room and back, and when he came to her side again, every trace of emotion was wiped out of his face.

“Now I’m going to take you back home. Mrs. Denman”—smiling faintly—“says she’ll put ’an ‘assock’ in the car for your damaged leg to rest on, so with rugs and that coat you were so averse to bringing I think you’ll be all right.”

He went to the table and poured out something in a glass.

“Drink that,” he said, holding it towards her. “It’ll warm you up.”

Nan sniffed at the liquid in the glass and tendered it back to him with a grimace.

“It’s brandy,” she said. “I hate the stuff.”

“You’ll drink it, though, won’t you?”—persuasively.

“No,” shaking her head. “I can’t bear the taste of it.”

“But it’s good for you.” He stood in front of her, glass in hand.
“Come, Nan, don’t be foolish. You need something before we start.
Drink it up.”

He held it to her lips, and Nan, too proud to struggle or resist like a child, swallowed the obnoxious stuff. As Trenby drove her home she had time to reflect upon the fact that if she married him there would be many a contest of wills between them. He roused a sense of rebellion in her, and he was unmistakably a man who meant to be obeyed.

Her thoughts went back to Peter Mallory. Somehow she did not think she would ever have found it difficult to obey *him*.

CHAPTER X

INDECISION

Kitty and her husband were strolling together on the terrace when Trenby’s car purred up the drive to Mallow.

“You’re back very early!” exclaimed Kitty gaily. “Did you get bored stiff with each other, or what?” Then, as Roger opened the car door and she caught sight of Nan’s leg stretched out in front of her under the rugs and evidently resting upon something, she asked with a note of fear in her voice: “Is Nan hurt? You’ve not had an accident?”

Roger hastily explained what had occurred, winding up:

“She’s had a wonderful escape.”

He was looking rather drawn about the month, as though he, too, had passed through a big strain of some kind.

“I’m as right as rain really,” called out Nan reassuringly. “If someone will only unpack the collection of rugs and coats I’m bundled up with, I can hop out of the car as well as anybody.”

Barry was already at the car side and as he lifted off the last covering, revealing beneath a distended silk stocking the bandaged ankle, he exclaimed quickly:

“Hullo! This looks like some sort of damage. Is your ankle badly hurt, old thing?”

Page 68

“Not a bit—nothing but a few scratches,” she answered. “Only Mrs. Denman insisted on my driving back with my leg up, and it would have broken her heart if I hadn’t accepted her ‘’assock’ for the journey.”

She stepped rather stiffly out of the car, for her joints still ached, and Barry, seeing her white face and the heavy shadows beneath her eyes, put a strong, friendly arm round her shoulders to steady her.

“You’ve had a good shaking up, my dear, anyway,” he observed with concern in his voice. “Look, I’m going to help you into the hall and put you on the big divan straight away. Then we’ll discuss what’s to be done with you,” he added, smiling down at her.

“You won’t let them keep me in bed, Barry, will you?” urged Nan as he helped her up the steps and into the great hall, its ancient panelling of oak gleaming like polished ebony in the afternoon sunlight.

Barry pulled thoughtfully at his big fair moustache.

“If Kitty says ‘bed,’ you know it’ll have to be bed,” he answered, his eyes twinkling a little.

Nan subsided on to the wide, cushioned divan.

“Nonsense!” she exclaimed crossly, “You don’t stay in bed because you’ve scratched your ankle.”

“No. But you must remember you’ve had a bit of a shock.”

By this time Kitty and Roger had joined them, overhearing the last part of the conversation.

“Of *course* you’ll go to bed at once,” asserted Kitty firmly. “Will you give her a hand upstairs, Barry?”

“You see?” said Barry, regarding the patient humorously. “Come along, Nan! Shall I carry you or will you hobble?”

“I’ll *walk*,” returned Nan with emphasis.

“Bed’s much the best place for you,” put in Roger.

He followed her to the foot of the staircase and, as he shook hands, said quietly:

“Till Monday, then.”

“Where’s Penelope?” asked Nan, as Barry assisted her upstairs with a perfectly unnecessary hand under her arm, since—as she curtly informed him—she had “no intention of accomplishing two faints in one day.”

“Penelope is out with Fenton—need you ask?” And Barry chuckled good-humouredly. “Kitty fully expects them to return an engaged couple.”

“Oh, I do hope they will!” cried Nan, bubbling up with the instantaneous feminine excitement which generally obtains when a love-affair, after seeming to hang fire, at last culminates in a *bona fide* engagement. “Penny has kept him off so firmly all this time,” she continued. “I can’t think why, because it’s perfectly patent to everybody that they’re head over ears in love with each other.”

Barry, who could have hazarded a very fair idea as to the reason why from odd scraps of information on the subject elicited from his wife, was silent a moment. Finally he said slowly:

“I shouldn’t ask Penelope anything about it when she comes in, if I were you. If matters aren’t quite settled between them yet, it might upset everything again.”

Page 69

Nan paused outside the door of her bedroom.

“But, my dear old Barry, what on earth is there to upset? There’s no earthly obstacle to their marrying that I can see!”

As she spoke she felt a sudden little qualm of apprehension. It was purely selfish, as she told herself with a twinge of honest self-contempt. But what should she do without Penelope? It would create a big blank for her if her best friend left her for a home of her own. Somehow, the inevitable reaction of Penelope’s marriage upon her own life had not occurred to her before. It hurt rather badly now that the thought had presented itself, but she determined to ignore that aspect of the matter firmly.

“Well, I hope they *will* come back engaged,” she declared. “Anyway, I won’t say a word till one or other of them announces the good news.”

“Better not,” agreed Barry. “I think part of the trouble is this big American tour Fenton’s been offered. It seems to have complicated matters.”

There came a light footstep on the staircase and Kitty swished round the bend. Barry and Nan started guiltily apart, smiling deprecatingly at her.

“Nan, you ought to be in bed by now!” protested Kitty severely. “You’re not to be trusted one minute, Barry, keeping her standing about talking like this.”

She shoo’d her big husband away with a single wave of her arm and marshalled Nan into the bedroom. In her hand she carried a tray on which was a glass of hot milk.

“There,” she continued, addressing Nan. “You’ve got to drink that while you’re undressing, and then you’ll sleep well. And you’re not to come down to-morrow except for dinner. I’ll send your meals up—you shan’t be starved! But you must have a thorough rest.”

“Oh, Kitty!” Nan’s exclamation was a positive wail of dismay.

Kitty cheerfully dismissed any possibility of discussion.

“It’s quite settled, my dear. You’ll be feeling it all far worse to-morrow than to-day. So get into bed now as quickly as possible.”

“This milk’s absolutely boiling,” complained Nan irritably. “I can’t drink it.”

“Then undress first and drink it when you’re in bed. I’ll brush your hair for you.”

It goes without saying that Kitty had her way—it was a very kind-hearted way—and before long Nan was sipping her glass of milk and gratefully realising the illimitable comfort which a soft bed brings to weary limbs.

“By the way, I’ve some news for you,” announced Kitty, as she sat perched on the edge of the bed, smoking one of the tiny gold-tipped cigarettes she affected.

“News? What news?”

“Well, guess who’s coming here?”

Nan named one or two mutual friends, only to be met by a triumphant negative. Finally Kitty divulged her secret.

“Why, Peter Mallory!”

The glass in Nan’s hand jerked suddenly, spilling a few drops of the milk.

Page 70

“Peter?” She strove to keep all expression out of her voice.

“Yes. He finds he can come after all. Isn’t it jolly?”

“Very jolly.”

Nan’s tones were so non-committal that Kitty looked at her with some surprise.

“Aren’t you pleased?” she asked blankly. She was relying tremendously on Peter’s visit to restore Nan to normal, and to prevent her from making the big mistake of marrying Roger Trenby, so that the lukewarm reception accorded to her news gave her a qualm of apprehension lest his advent might not accomplish all she hoped.

“Of course I’m pleased!” Nan forced the obviously expected enthusiasm into her affirmative, then, swallowing the last mouthful of milk with an effort, she added: “It’ll be topping.”

Kitty took the glass from her and with an admonishing, “Now try and have a good sleep,” she departed, blissfully unconscious of how effectually she herself had just destroyed any possibility of slumber.

Peter coming! The first thrill of pure joy at the thought of seeing him again was succeeded by a rush of apprehension. She felt herself caught up into a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. The idea of marriage with Roger Trenby seemed even more impossible than ever with the knowledge that in a few days Peter would be there, close beside her with that quiet, comprehending gaze of his, while every nerve in her body would be vibrating at the mere touch of his hand.

In the dusk of her room, against the shadowy background of the blind-drawn windows, she could visualise each line of his face—the level brows and the steady, grey-blue eyes under them—eyes that missed so little and understood so much; the sensitive mouth with those rather tired lines cleft each side of it that deepened when he smiled; the lean cheek-bones and squarish chin.

She remembered them all, and they kept blotting out the picture of Roger as she had so often seen him—big and bronzed by the sun—when he came striding over the cliffs to Mallow Court. The memory was like a hand holding her back from casting in her lot with him.

And then the pendulum swung back and she felt that to marry—someone, anyone—was the only thing left to her. She was frightened of her love for Peter. Marriage, she argued, would be—*must* be—a shield and buckler against the cry of her heart. If she were married she would be able to stifle her love, crush it out, behind those solid, unyielding bars of conventional wedlock.

The fact of Peter's own marriage seemed to her rather dream-like. There lay the danger. They had never met until after his wife had left him, so that her impression of him as a married man was necessarily a somewhat vague and shadowy one.

Page 71

But there would be nothing vague or shadowy about marriage with Trenby! That Nan realised. And, utterly weary of the persistent struggle in her heart, she felt that it might cut the whole tangle of her life once and for all if she passed through the strait and narrow gate of matrimony into the carefully shepherded fold beyond it. After all, most women settled down to it in course of time, whether their husbands came up to standard or not. If they didn't, the majority of wives contrived to put up with the disappointment, and probably she herself would be so fully occupied with the putting up part of the business that she would not have much time in which to remember Peter.

But perhaps, had she known the inner thoughts of those women who have been driven into the "putting up" attitude towards their husbands, she would have realised that memories do not die so easily.

CHAPTER XI

GOING WITH THE TIDE

As Nan, who had reluctantly complied with Kitty's stern decree that she must rest in bed during the greater part of the following day, at last descended from her room, she discovered, much to her satisfaction, that her ankle had ceased to pain her. But she still felt somewhat stiff and sore after the knocking about of the previous day.

At dinner she was astonished to find that the house-party had decreased by one. Ralph Fenton was absent.

"He left for town this morning, by the early train from St. Wennys Halt," explained Kitty. "He was—was called away very suddenly," she added blandly, in answer to Nan's surprised enquiries.

A somewhat awkward pause ensued, then everybody rushed into conversation at once, so that Nan could only guess that some contretemps must have occurred between Penelope and the singer of which she was in ignorance. As soon as dinner was at an end she manoeuvred Kitty into a corner and demanded an explanation.

"Why has Ralph gone away?" she asked. "And why did you look so uncomfortable when I asked about him? And why did Penelope blush?"

"Could I have them one at a time?" suggested Kitty mildly.

"You can have them combined into one. Tell me, what's been happening to-day?"

"Well, I gather that Ralph has been offering his hand and heart to Penelope."

"It seems to be epidemic," murmured Nan *sotto voce*.

“What did you say?”

“Only that it seems an odd proceeding for a newly-engaged young man to go careering off to London immediately.”

“But he isn’t engaged—that’s just it. Penelope refused him.”

“Refused him? But—but why?” asked Nan in amazement.

“You’d better ask her yourself. Perhaps you can get some sense out of her—since you appear to be the chief stumbling-block.”

“I?”

“Yes. I saw Ralph before he went away. He seemed very down on his luck, poor dear! He’s been trying to persuade Penelope to say yes and to fix an early date for their wedding, as he’s got the offer of a very good short tour in America—really thumping fees—and he won’t accept it unless she’ll marry him first and go with him.”

Page 72

“Well, I don’t see how that’s my fault.”

“In a way it is. The only reason Penelope gave him as to why she wouldn’t consent was that she will never marry as long as you need her.”

Nan digested this information in silence. Then she said quietly:

“If that’s all, you can take off your sackcloth and ashes and phone Ralph at his hotel to come back here to-morrow. I’ll—I’ll talk to Penelope to-night.”

Kitty stared at her in surprise.

“You seem very sure of the effect of your persuasions,” she answered dubiously.

“I am. Quite sure. It won’t take me five minutes to convince Penelope that there is no need for her to remain in a state of single blessedness on my account. And now, I’m going out of doors to have a smoke all by myself. You were quite right”—smiling briefly—“when you said I should feel everything more to-day than yesterday. Do keep people away from me, there’s a good soul.”

Kitty gave her a searching glance. But for two spots of feverishly vivid colour in her cheeks, the girl’s face was very pale, and her eyes over-bright, with heavy shadows underlying them.

“Very well,” she said kindly. “Tuck yourself up in one of the lounge chairs and I’ll see that no one bothers you.”

But Nan was in no mood for a lounge chair. Lighting a cigarette, she paced restlessly up and down the flagged path of the quadrangular court, absorbed in her thoughts.

It seemed to her as though Fate had suddenly given her a gentle push in the direction of marriage with Roger. She knew now that Penny had refused Ralph solely on her account—so that she might not be left alone. If she could go to her and tell her that she herself was about to marry Trenby, then the only obstacle which stood in the way of Penelope’s happiness would be removed. Last night her thoughts had swung from side to side in a ceaseless ding-dong struggle of indecision, but this new factor in the matter weighted the scales heavily in favour of her marrying Trenby.

At last she made up her mind. There were two chances, two avenues which might lead away from him. Should both of these be closed against her, she would yield to the current of affairs which now seemed set to sweep her into his arms.

She would use her utmost persuasions to induce Penelope to marry Ralph Fenton, irrespective of whether she herself proposed to enter the matrimonial state or not. That was the first of her two chances. For if she succeeded in prevailing upon Penelope to

retract her refusal of Ralph, she would feel that she had dealt at least one blow against the fate which seemed to be driving her onward. The urgency of that last push towards Roger would be removed! Then if Penelope remained obdurate, to-morrow she would tell Trenby frankly that she had no love, but only liking, to give him, and she would insist upon his facing the fact that there had been someone else

Page 73

in her life who had first claim upon her heart. That would be her other chance. And should Roger—as well he might—refuse to take second best, then willy-nilly she would be once more thrust forth into the troublous sea of longing and desire. But if he still wanted her—why, then she would have been quite honest with him and it would seem to be her destiny to be his wife. She would leave it at that—leave it for chance, or fate, or whatever it is that shapes our ends, to settle a matter that, swayed as she was by opposing forces, she was unable to decide for herself.

She heaved a sigh of relief. After those wretched, interminable hours of irresolution, when love, and fear of that same love, had tortured her almost beyond bearing, it was an odd kind of comfort to feel that she had given herself two chances, and, if both failed, to know that she must abide by the result.

The turmoil of her mind drove her at last almost insensibly towards the low, wide wall facing the unquiet sea. Here she sat down, still absorbed in her thoughts, her gaze resting absently on the incoming tide below. She was conscious of a strange feeling of communion with the shifting, changeful waters.

As far as eye could see the great billows of the Atlantic, silver-crested in the brilliant moonlight, came tumbling shoreward, breaking at last against the inviolate cliffs with a dull, booming noise like the sound of distant guns. Then came the suction of retreat, as the beaten waves were hurled backwards from the fierce headlands in a grey tumult of surging waters, while the big stones and pebbles over which they swirled clashed and ground together, roaring under the pull of the outgoing current—that “drag” of which any Cornish seaman will warn a stranger in the grave tones of one who knows its peril.

To right and left, at the foot of savage cliffs black against the silver moonlight, Nan could see the long combers roll in and break into a cloud of upflung spray, girdling the wild coast with a zone of misty, moonlit spray that must surely have been fashioned in some dim world of faery.

She sat very still, watching the eternal battle between sea and shore, and the sheer splendour of it laid hold of her, so that for a little while everything that troubled her was swept away. For the moment she felt absolutely happy.

Always the vision, of anything overwhelmingly beautiful seemed to fill her soul, drawing with it the memories of all that had been beautiful in life. And watching this glory of moon and sea and shore, Nan felt strangely comforted. Maryon Rooke had no part in it, nor Roger Trenby. But her love for Peter and his for her seemed one and indivisible with it. That, and music—the two most beautiful things which had entered into her life.

. . . A bank of cloud, slowly spreading upward from the horizon, suddenly clothed the moon in darkness, wiping out the whole landscape. Only the ominous boom of the waves and the roar of the struggling beach still beat against Nan's ears.

Page 74

The vision had fled, and the grim realities of life closed round her once again.

Late that evening she slipped into a loose wrapper—a very characteristic little garment of lace and ribbons and clinging silk—and marched down the corridor to Penelope's room. The latter was diligently brushing her hair, but at Nan's abrupt entrance she laid down the brush resignedly. She had small doubt as to the primary cause of this late visit.

"Well?" she said, a faintly humorous twinkle gleaming in the depths of her brown eyes, although there were tired shadows underneath them. "Well?"

"Yes, you dear silly woman, of course you know what I've come about," responded Nan, ensconcing herself on the cushioned window seat.

"I'd know better if you were to explain."

"Then—in his words—why have you refused Ralph Fenton?"

"Oh, is that it?"—indifferently. "Because I don't want to marry—at present." And Penelope picked up her brush and resumed the brushing of her hair as though the matter were at an end.

"So that's why you told him—as your reason for refusing him—that you wouldn't marry him as long as I needed you?"

The hair-brush clattered to the floor.

"The idiot!—I suppose he told Kitty?" exclaimed Penelope, making a dive after her brush.

"Yes, he did. And Kitty told me. And now I've come to tell you that I entirely decline to be a reason for your refusing to marry a nice young man like Ralph."

Penelope was silent, and Nan, coming over to her side, slipped an arm about her shoulders.

"Dear old Penny! It was just like you, but if you think I'm going to let you make a burnt-offering of yourself in that way, you're mistaken. Do you suppose"—indignantly—"that I can't look after myself?"

"I'm quite sure of it."

"Rubbish! Why, I've got Kitty and Uncle David and oh! dozens of people to look after me!"

Penelope's mouth set itself in an obstinate line.

"I shall never marry till you do, Nan . . . because not one of the 'dozens' understand your —your general craziness as well as I do."

Nan laughed.

"That's rude—though a fairly accurate statement. But still, Penny dear, just to please me, will you marry Ralph?"

"No"—with promptitude—"I certainly won't. If I married him at all, it would be to please myself."

"Well," wheedled Nan, "wouldn't it please you—really?"

"We can't always do as we please in this world."

Nan grimaced.

"Hoots, lassie! Now you're talking like Aunt Eliza."

Penelope continued brushing her hair serenely and vouchsafed no answer.

Nan renewed the attack.

"It amounts to this, then—that I've got to get married in order to let Ralph marry you!"

"Of course it doesn't!"

"Well, answer me this: If I were going to be married, would you give Ralph a different answer?"

Page 75

“I might”—non-committally.

“Then you may as well go and do it. As I *am* going to be married—to Roger Trenby.”

“To Roger! Nan, you don’t mean it? It isn’t true?”

“It is—perfectly true. Have you anything to say against it?”—defiantly.

“Everything. He’s the last man in the world to make you happy.”

“Time will decide that. In any case he’s coming on Monday for my answer. And that will be ‘yes.’ So you and Ralph can have your banns put up with a clear conscience—as the only just cause and impediment is now removed.”

Penelope was silent.

“You ought to be rather pleased with me than otherwise,” insisted Nan.

When at length Penelope replied, it was with a certain gravity.

“My dear, matrimony is one of the affairs of life in which it is fatal to accept second best. You can do it in hats and frocks—it’s merely a matter of appearances—although you’ll never get quite the same satisfaction out of them. But you can’t do it in boots and shoes. You have to walk in those—and the second best wear out at once. Matrimony is the boots and shoes of life.”

“Well, at least it’s better to have the second quality—than to go barefoot.”

“I don’t think so. Nan, do wait a little. Don’t, in a fit of angry pique over Maryon Rooke, go and bind yourself irrevocably to someone else.”

“Penny, the bluntness of your methods is deplorable. Instead of insinuating that I am accepting Roger as a *pis-aller*, it would be more seemly if you would congratulate me and—wish me luck.”

“I do—oh, I do, Nan. But, my dear—”

“No buts, please. Surely I know my own business best? I assure you, Roger and I will be a model couple—an example, probably, to you and Ralph! You’ll—you’ll say ‘yes’ to him to-morrow when he comes back again, won’t you, Penny?”

“He isn’t coming back to-morrow.”

“I think he is.” Nan smiled. “You’ll say ‘yes’ then?”

Penelope looked at her very straightly.

“Would you marry Roger in any case—whether I accepted Ralph or not?” she asked.

Nan lied courageously.

“I should marry Roger in any case,” she answered quietly.

A long silence ensued. Presently Nan broke it, her voice a little sharpened by the tension of the moment.

“So when Ralph comes back you’ll be—kind to him, Penny? You’ll give him the answer he wants?”

Penelope’s face was hidden by a curtain of dark hair. After a moment an affirmative came softly from behind the curtain.

With a sudden impulse Nan threw her arms round her and kissed her.

“Oh, Penny! Penny! I do hope you’ll be *very* happy!” she exclaimed in a stifled voice. Then slipped from the room like a shadow—very noiselessly and swiftly—to lie on her bed hour after hour staring up into the blackness with wide, tearless eyes until sheer bodily exhaustion conquered the tortured spirit which could find neither rest nor comfort, and at last she slept.

Page 76

CHAPTER XII

THE DOUBLED BARRIER

Except for one of Trenby's frequent telephone calls, enquiring as to Nan's progress, Saturday passed uneventfully enough until the evening. Then, through the clear summer dusk Kitty discerned the Mallow car returning from the station whither it had been sent to meet Ralph's train.

Hurrying down the drive, she saw Ralph lean forward and speak to the chauffeur who slowed down to a standstill, while he himself sprang out and came eagerly to her side.

"You angelic woman!" he exclaimed fervently. "How did you manage it? Will she—will she really—"

"I think she will," answered Kitty, smiling. "So you needn't worry. But I'm not the *dea ex machina* to whom you owe the 'happy ending.' Nan managed it—in some incomprehensible way of her own."

"Then blessed be Nan!" said Ralph piously, as he opened the door of the car for her to enter. Two minutes' further driving brought them to the house.

Following his hostess's instructions, Ralph remained outside, and as Kitty entered the great hall, alone, a white-clad figure suddenly made as though to escape by a further door.

"Come back, Penny," called Kitty, a hint of kindly mischief in her voice. "You'll just get half an hour to yourselves before the dressing-bell rings. Afterwards we shall expect to see you both, clothed and in your right minds, at dinner."

The still look of happiness that had dwelt all day in Penelope's eyes woke suddenly into radiance, just as you may watch the calm surface of the sea, when the tide is at its full, break into a hundred sparkling ripples at the vivifying touch of a wandering breeze.

She turned back hesitatingly, looking all at once absurdly young and a little frightened—this tall and stately Penelope—while a faint blush-rose colour ran swiftly up beneath the pallor of her skin, and her eyes—those nice, humorous brown eyes of hers that always looked the world so kindly and honestly in the face—held the troubled shyness of a little child.

Kitty laid a gentle hand on her arm.

"Run along, my chicken," she said, suddenly feeling a thousand years old as she saw Penelope standing, virginal and sweet, at the threshold of the gate through which she

herself had passed with happy footsteps years ago—that gate which opens to the wondering fingers of girlhood, laid so tremulously upon love's latch, and which closes behind the woman, shutting her into paradise or hell.

"Run along, my chicken. . . . And give Ralph my blessing!"

* * * * * *

It was not until the next day, towards the end of lunch, that Ralph shot his bolt from the blue. Other matters—which seemed almost too good to be true in the light of Penelope's unqualified refusal of him three days ago—had occupied his mind to the exclusion of everything else. Nor, to give him his due, was he in the least aware that he was administering any kind of shock, since he was quite ignorant as to the actual state of affairs betwixt Nan and Maryon Rooke.

Page 77

It was Kitty herself who inadvertently touched the spring which let loose the bolt.

“What’s the news in town, Ralph?” she asked. “Surely you gleaned *something*, even though you were only there for a single night?”

Fenton laughed.

“Would I dare to come back to you without the latest?” he returned, smiling. “The very latest is that Maryon Rooke is to be married.”

A silence followed, as though a bombshell had descended in their midst and scattered the whole party to the four winds of heaven.

Then Kitty, making a desperate clutch at her self-possession, remarked rather superficially:

“Surely that’s not true? I thought Maryon was far too confirmed a bachelor to be beguiled into the holy bonds.”

“It’s perfectly true,” returned Fenton. “First-hand source. I ran across Rooke himself and it was he who told me. They’re to be married very shortly, I believe.”

Fell another awkward silence. Then:

“So old Rooke will be in the cart with the rest of us poor married men,” observed Barry, whose lazy blue eyes had yet contrived to notice that Nan’s slim fingers were nervously occupied in crumbling her bread into small pieces.

“In the car, rather,” responded Ralph, “The lady is fabulously wealthy, I believe. Former husband, a steel magnate or something of the sort.”

“Well, that will help Maryon in his profession,” said Nan, “with a quiet composure that was rather astonishing. But, as usual, in a social crisis of this nature, she seemed able to control her voice, though her restless fingers betrayed her.

“Yes, presumably that’s why he’s marrying her,” replied Ralph. “It can’t be a case of love at first sight”—grimly.

“Isn’t she pretty, then?” asked Penelope.

“Plain as a pikestaff”—with emphasis. “I’ve met her once or twice—Lady Beverley.”

It appeared from the chorus which followed that everyone present knew her more or less.

“I should think she is plain!” exclaimed Kitty heartily.

“Yes, she’d need to be very well gilded,” commented her husband.

“You’re all rather severe, aren’t you?” suggested Lord St. John. “After all, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

“Not with an artist,” asserted Nan promptly. “He can’t see beauty where there isn’t any.”

To the depths of her soul she felt that this was true, and inwardly she recoiled violently from the idea of Maryon’s marriage. She had been bitterly hurt by his treatment of her, but to a certain extent she had been able to envisage the whole affair from his point of view and to understand it.

A rising young artist, if he wishes to succeed, cannot afford to hamper himself with a wife and contend with the endless sordid details of housekeeping conducted on a necessarily economical scale. It slowly but surely deadens the artist in him—the delicate creative inspiration that is so easily smothered by material cares and worries. Nan refused to blame Maryon simply because he had not married her then and there. But she could not forgive him for deliberately seeking her out and laying on her that strange fascination of his when, in his own heart, he must have known that he would always ultimately place his art before love.

Page 78

And that he should marry Lady Beverley, a thoroughly commonplace woman hung round with the money her late husband had bequeathed her, Maryon's very antithesis in all that pertained to the beautiful—this sickened her. It seemed to her as though he were yielding his birthright in exchange for a mess of pottage.

Where was his self-respect that he could do this thing? The high courage of the artist to conquer single-handed? Not only had he trampled on the love which he professed to have borne her—and which, in her innermost heart, she knew he *had* borne her—but he was trampling on everything else in life that mattered. She felt that his projected marriage with Lady Beverley was like the sale of a soul.

When lunch was over, the whole party adjourned to the terrace for coffee, and as soon as she decently could after the performance of this sacred rite, Nan escaped into the rose-garden by herself, there to wrestle with the thoughts to which Ralph's carelessly uttered news had given rise.

They were rather bitter thoughts. She was aware of an odd sense of loss, for whatever may have come between them, no woman ever quite believes that the man who has once loved her will eventually marry some other woman. Whether it happens early or late, it is always somewhat of a shock. These marriages deal such a blow at faith in the deathlessness of love, and whether the woman herself is married or not, there remains always a secret and very tender corner in her heart for the man who, having loved her unavailingly, has still found no other to take her place even twenty or thirty years later.

Nan was conscious of an unspeakably deserted feeling. Maryon had gone completely out of her life; Peter, the man she loved, could never come into it; and the only man who strove for entrance was, as Penelope had said, the last man in the world to make her happy.

Nevertheless, it seemed as though with gentle taps and pushes Fate were urging them together—forcing her towards Roger so that she might escape from forbidden love and the desperate fear and pain of it.

And then she saw him coming—it seemed almost as though her thought had drawn him—coming with swift feet over the grassy slopes of the park, too eager to follow the winding carriage-way, while the fallow-deer bounded lightly aside at the sound of his footsteps, halting at a safe distance to regard the intruder with big, timorous, velvety eyes.

Nan paused in the middle of the rose-garden, where a stone sundial stood—grey and weather-beaten, its warning motto half obliterated by the tender touches of the years:

> "Time flies. Remember that each breath
> But wafts thy erring spirit nearer death."

Rather nervously, while she waited for Trenby to join her, she traced the ancient lettering with a slim forefinger. He crossed the lawn rapidly, pausing beside her, and without looking up she read aloud the grim couplet graven round the dial.

Page 79

“That’s a nice cheery motto,” commented Trenby lightly. “They must have been a lugubrious lot in the good old days!”

“They weren’t so afraid of facing the truth as we are,” Nan made answer musingly. “I wonder why we always try to shut our eyes against the fact of death? . . . It’s there waiting for us round the corner all the time.”

“But there’s life and love to come first,” flashed out Roger.

Nan looked at him thoughtfully.

“Not for everyone,” she said. Then suddenly: “Why are you here to-day, Roger? I told you to come on Monday.”

“I know you did. But I couldn’t wait. It was horrible, Nan, just getting a few words over the ’phone twice a day to say how you were. I had to see for myself.”

His eyes sought her throat where the lash of the hunting-crop had wealed it. The mark had almost disappeared. With a sudden, passionate movement he caught her in his arms and pressed his lips against the faint scar.

“Nan!” he said hoarsely. “Nan, say ‘yes’! Say it quickly!”

She drew away from him, freeing herself from the clasp of his arms.

“I’m not sure it is ‘yes.’ You must hear what I have to say first. You wouldn’t listen the other day. But to-day, Roger, you must—you *must*.”

“You’re not going to take back your promise?” he demanded jealously.

“It wasn’t quite a promise, was it?” she said gently. “But it’s for you to decide—when you know everything.”

“Then I’ll decide now,” he answered quickly. “I want you—Nan, how I want you! I don’t care anything at all about the past—I don’t want to know anything—”

“But you must know”—steadily. “Perhaps when you know—you won’t want me.”

“I shall always want you.”

Followed a pause. Then Nan, with an effort, said quietly:

“Do you want to marry a woman who has no love to give you?”

He drew a step nearer.

“I’ll teach you how to love,” he said unevenly. “I’ll make you love me—love me as I love you.”

“No, no,” she answered. “You can’t do that, Roger. You can’t.”

His face whitened. Then, with his piercing eyes bent on her as though to read her inmost thoughts, he asked:

“What do you mean? Is there—anyone else?”

“Yes.” The answer came very low.

“And you care for him?”

She nodded.

“But we can never be anything to each other,” she said, still in that same low, emotionless voice.

“Then—then—you’d grow to care—”

“No. I shall never care for anyone else again. That love has burnt up everything—like a fire.” She paused. “You don’t want to marry—an empty grate, do you?” she asked, with a sudden desperate little laugh.

Roger’s arm drew her closer.

“Yes, I do. And I’ll light another fire there and by its warmth we’ll make our home together. I won’t ask much, Nan dear—only to be allowed to love you and make you happy. And in time—in time, I’ll teach you to love me in return and to forget the past. Only say yes, sweetheart! I’ll keep you so safe—so safe!”

Page 80

What magic is it teaches men how to answer the women they love—endows them with a quickness of perception denied them till the flame of love flares up within them, and doubly denied them should that flame burn low behind the bars of matrimony? Surely it must be some cunning wile of old Dame Nature's—whose chief concern is, after all, the continuation of the species. She it is who knows how to deck the peacock in fine feathers to the undoing of the plain little peahen, to crown the stag with the antlers of magnificence so that the doe's velvet eyes melt in adoration. And shall not the same wise old Dame know how to add a glamour to the sons of men when one of them goes forth to seek his mate?

Had Roger been just his normal self that afternoon—his matter-of-fact, imperceptive self—he would never have known how to answer Nan's half-desperate question, and the rose-garden might have witnessed a different ending to the scene. But Mother Mature was fighting on the side of this man-child of hers, whispering her age-old wisdom into his ears, and the tender comprehension of his answer fell like balm on Nan's sore heart.

"I'll keep you safe!"

It was safety she craved most of all—the safety of some stronger barrier betwixt herself and Peter. Once she were Roger's wife she knew she would be well-guarded. The barrier would be too high for her to climb, even though Peter called to her from the other side.

A momentary terror of giving up her freedom assailed her, and for an instant she wavered. Then she remembered her bargain with Fate—and if, finally, Roger were willing to take her when he knew everything, she would marry him.

Her hand crept out and slid into his big palm.

"Very well, Roger," she said quietly. "If—knowing everything—you still want me . . . I'll marry you."

And as his arms closed round her, crushing her in his embrace, she seemed to hear a distant sound like the closing of a door—the door of the forbidden might-have-been.

CHAPTER XIII

BY THE LOVERS' BRIDGE

The usual shower of congratulations descended upon the heads of Nan and Roger when, on their return from the rose-garden, the news of their engagement filtered through the house-party and the little bunch of friends who had "dropped in" for tea, sure of the unfailing hospitality of Mallow Court. Those amongst the former who had

deeper and more troubled thoughts about the matter were perforce compelled to keep them in abeyance for the time being.

It was only when the visitors had departed that Kitty succeeded in getting Nan alone for a few minutes.

“Are you quite—quite happy, Nan?” she asked somewhat wistfully.

Nan’s eyes met hers with a blankness of expression which betrayed nothing.

“Yes, thank you. What a funny question to ask!” she responded promptly.

Page 81

And Kitty felt as though she had laid her hand on the soft folds of a velvet curtain, only to come sharply up against a shutter of steel concealed beneath it.

In duty bound, however, she invited Trenby to remain for dinner, an invitation which he accepted with alacrity, and throughout the meal Nan was at her gayest and most sparkling. It seemed impossible to believe that all was not well with her, and if the brilliant mood were designed to prevent Penny from guessing the real state of affairs it was eminently successful. Even Lord St. John and the Seymours were almost persuaded into the belief that she was happy in her engagement. But as each and all of them were arguing from the false premise that the change in Nan had been entirely due to Rooke's treatment of her, they were inevitably very far from the truth.

That Peter was in love with Nan, Kitty was aware, but she knew nothing of that brief scene at the flat, interrupted by the delivery of Rooke's telegram, and during which, with hardly a word spoken, Nan had suddenly realised that Peter loved her and that she, too, returned his love. Perhaps had any of them known of that first meeting between the two, when Peter had come to Nan's rescue in Hyde Park and helped her to her journey's end, it might have gone far towards enlightening them, but neither Peter nor Nan had ever supplied any information on the subject. It almost seemed as though by some mental process of thought transference, each had communicated with the other and resolved to keep their secret—an invisible bond between them.

"You're not frightened, are you, Nan?" asked Roger, when the rest of the household had tactfully left them alone together a few minutes before his departure.

He spoke very gently and tenderly. Like most men, he was at his best just now, when he had so newly gained the promise of the woman he loved—rather humble, even a little awed at the great gift bestowed upon him, and thinking only of Nan and of what he would do to compass her happiness in the future when she should be his wife.

"No, I'm not frightened." replied Nan. "I think"—quietly—"I shall be so—safe—with you."

"Safe?"—emphatically. "I should think you would be safe! I'm strong enough to guard my wife from most dangers, I think!"

The violet-blue eyes meeting his held a somewhat weary smile. It was beginning already—that inevitable noncomprehension of two such divergent natures. They did not sense the same things—did not even speak the same language. Trenby took everything quite literally—the obvious surface meaning of the words, and the delicate nuances of speech, the significant inflections interwoven with it, meant about as much to him as the frail Venetian glass, the dainty porcelain figures of old Bristol or Chelsea ware, would mean to the proverbial bull in a china-shop.

“And now, sweetheart,” he went on, rather conventionally, “when will you come to see my mother? She will be longing to meet you.”

Page 82

Nan shuddered inwardly. Of course she knew one always *did* ultimately meet one's future mother-in-law, but the prompt and dutiful way in which Roger brought out his suggestion seemed like a sentence culled from some Early Victorian book. Certainly it was altogether alien to Nan's ultra-modern, semi-Bohemian notions.

"Suppose you come to lunch to-morrow? I should like you to meet her as soon as possible."

There was something just the least bit didactic in the latter part of the sentence, a hint of the proprietary note. Nan recoiled from it instinctively.

"No, not to-morrow," she exclaimed hastily. "I'm going over to see Aunt Eliza—Mrs. McBain, you know—and I can't put it off. I haven't been near her for a fortnight, and she'll he awfully offended if I don't go."

"Then it must be Tuesday," said Roger, with an air of making a concession.

Nan felt that nothing could save her from Tuesday, and agreed meekly. At the same moment, to her unspeakable relief, Kitty looked into the room to enquire gaily:

"Are you two still saying good-bye?"

Trenby rose reluctantly.

"No. We were just making arrangements about Nan's coming to the Hall to meet my mother. We've fixed it all up, so I must be off now."

It was with a curious sense of freedom regained that Nan watched the lights of Roger's car speed down the drive.

At least she was her own mistress again till Tuesday!

* * * * * *

Although Nan had conferred the brevet rank of aunt upon Eliza McBain, the latter was in reality only the sister of an uncle by marriage and no blood relation—a dispensation for which, at not infrequent intervals of Nan's career, Mrs. McBain had been led to thank the Almighty effusively. Born and reared in the uncompromising tenets of Scotch Presbyterianism, her attitude towards Nan was one of rigid disapproval—a disapproval that warred somewhat pathetically against the affection with which the girl's essential lovableness inspired her. For there was no gainsaying the charm of the Davenant women! But Eliza still remembered very clearly the sense of shocked dismay which, years ago, had overwhelmed her righteous soul on learning that her only brother, Andrew McDermot, had become engaged to one of the beautiful Davenant sisters.

In those days the insane extravagances and lawlessness of the Davenant family had become proverbial. There had been only three of them left to carry on the wild tradition—Timothy, Nan's father, who feared neither man nor devil, but could wile a bird off a tree or a woman's heart from her keeping, and his two sisters, whose beauty had broken more hearts than their kindness could ever mend. And not one of the three had escaped the temperamental heritage which Angele de Varincourt had grafted on to a parent stem of dare-devil, reckless English growth.

Page 83

The McDermots of Tarn, on the other hand, traced their descent in a direct line from one of the unbending old Scotch Covenanters of 1638, and it had always been a source of vague bewilderment to Eliza that a race sprang from so staunchly Puritan a stock should have been juggled by that inimitable trickster, Fate, into allying itself with a family in whose veins ran the hot French blood of the Varincourts.

Perhaps old Dame Nature in her garnered wisdom could have explained the riddle. Certain it was that no sooner had Andrew McDermot set eyes upon Gabrielle Davenant—sister to that Annabel whom Lord St. John had loved and married—than straightway the visions of his youth, in which he had pictured some staid and modest-seeming Scotswoman as his helpmeet, were swept away by an overwhelming Celtic passion of love and romance of which he had not dreamed that he could be possessed.

It was a meeting of extremes, and since Gabrielle had drooped and pined in the bleak northern castle where the lairds of Tarn had dwelt from time immemorial, McDermot laid even his ancestral home upon love's altar and, coming south, had bought Trevarthen Wood, a tree-girt, sheltered house no great distance from Mallow, though further inland.

But the change was made too late to accomplish its purpose of renewing Gabrielle's enfeebled health. Almost imperceptibly, with slow and kindly footsteps, Death had drawn daily nearer, until at last, quite happily and like a little child that is tired of playing and only wants to rest, Gabrielle slipped out of the world and her place knew her no more.

After his wife's death, McDermot had returned to his old home in Scotland and had reassumed his duties there as laird of the district, and when, later on, Death struck again, this time leaving his sister Eliza a widow in none too affluent circumstances, he had presented her with his Cornish home, glad to be rid of a place so haunted by poignant memories.

In such wise had Mrs. McBain and Sandy come to dwell in Cornwall, and since this, their third summer there, had brought his adored Nan Davenant once more to Mallow Court on a lengthy visit, Sandy's cup of joy was filled to the brim.

Mrs. McBain regarded her offspring from much the same standpoint as does a hen the brood of enterprising ducklings which, owing to some stratagem on the part of the powers that be, have hatched out from the eggs upon which she has been conscientiously sitting in the fond belief that they were those of her own species.

Sandy was a source of perpetual surprise to his mother, and of not inconsiderable anxiety. How she and the late Duncan McBain of entirely prosaic memory had contrived to produce more or less of a musical genius by way of offspring she had never been able to fathom. Neither parent had ever shown the slightest tendency in that direction, and it is very certain that had such a development manifested itself, they would have

speedily set to work to correct it, regarding music—other than hymnal—as a lure of Satan.

Page 84

They had indeed done their best for Sandy himself in that respect, negativing firmly his desire for proper musical tuition, with the result that now, at twenty years of age, he was a musician spoilt through lack of training. Most of his pocket-money in early days had been expended upon surreptitious violin lessons, and he had frequently practised for hours out of doors in the woods, at a distance from the house which secured the parental ear from outrage.

Since her husband's death, however, Eliza, chiding herself the while for her weakness, had yielded to a pulsing young enthusiasm that would not be denied, and music of a secular nature was permitted at Trevarthen—unchecked though disapproved.

Thus it came about that on the afternoon of Nan's visit Sandy was to be found zealously absorbed in the composition of a triumphal march. The blare of trumpets, the swinging tramp of marching men and the thunderous roll of drums—this last occurring very low down in the bass—were combining to fill the room with joyful noise when there came a light tap at the open French window and Nan herself stood poised on the threshold.

"Hullo, Sandy, what's that you're playing?"

Sandy sprang off the music stool, beaming with delight, and, seizing her by both arms, drew her rapturously into the room.

"You're the very person I want," he exclaimed without further greeting. "It's a march, and I don't know whether I like this modulation into D minor or not. Listen."

Nan obeyed, gave her opinion, and finally subsided rather listlessly into a low arm-chair.

"Give me a cigarette, Sandy. It's an awfully tiring walk here. Is Aunt Eliza in? I hope she is, because I want some tea."

"She is. But I'd give you tea if she wasn't."

"And set the whole of St. Wennys gossiping! It wouldn't be proper, boy."

"Oh, yes, it would. I count as a kind of cousin, you know."

"All the same, Mrs. Petherick at the lodge would confide the information that we'd had tea alone together to Miss Penwarne at the Post Office, and in half an hour the entire village would be all agog to know when the subsequent elopement was likely to occur."

Sandy grinned. He had proposed to Nan several times already, only to be good-naturedly turned down.

"I'd supply a date with pleasure."

Nan shook her head at him.

“A man may not marry his grandmother.”

He struck a match and held it while she lit her cigarette. Then, blowing out the flame, he enquired:

“Does that apply when she’s only three years his senior?”

“Oh, Sandy, I’m aeons older than you. A woman always is.
Besides”—her words hurrying a little—“I’m engaged already.”

“Engaged?”

He dropped the dead match he was still holding and stared out of the window a moment. Then, squaring his shoulders, he said quietly:

Page 85

“Who’s the lucky beggar?”

“Roger Trenby.”

Sandy’s lips pursed themselves to whistle, but he checked himself in time and no sound escaped. Turning to Nan, he spoke with a gravity that sat strangely on him.

“Old girl, I hope you’ll be very happy—the happiest woman in the world.” But there was a look of dissatisfaction in his eyes which had nothing whatever to do with his own disappointment. He had known all along that he had really no chance with her.

“But we’re pals, Nan—pals, just the same?” he went on.

She slipped her hand into his.

“Pals—always, Sandy,” she replied.

“Thank you,” he said simply. “And remember, Nan”—the boyish voice took on a note of earnestness—“if you’re ever in need of a pal——I’m here, mind.”

Nan was conscious of a sudden sharp pain—like the stab of a nerve. The memory of just such another pledge swept over her: “I think I should always know if you were in trouble—and I should come.” Only it had been uttered by a different voice—the quiet, drawling voice of Peter Mallory.

“Thank you, Sandy dear. I won’t forget.”

There was a faint weariness in her tones, despite the smile which accompanied them. Sandy’s nice green eyes surveyed her critically, noting the slight hollowing of the outline of her cheek and the little tired droop of her lips as the smile faded.

“I tell you what it is,” he said, “you’re fagged out, tramping over here in all this heat. I’ll ring and tell them to hurry up tea.”

But before he could reach the bell a servant entered, bringing in the tea paraphernalia. Sandy turned abruptly to the piano, thrumming out a few desultory minor chords which probably gave his perturbed young soul a certain amount of relief, while Nan sat gazing with a half-maternal, half-humorous tenderness at the head of flaming red hair which had earned him his sobriquet.

“Weel, so ye’ve come to see me at last—or is it Sandy that you’re calling on?”

The door had opened to admit Mrs. McBain—a tall, gaunt woman with iron-grey hair and shrewd, observant eyes that glinted with the grey flash of steel.

Nan jumped up at her entrance.

“Oh, Aunt Eliza? How are you? I should have been over to see you before, but there always seems to be something or other going on at Mallow.”

“I don’t doubt it—in yon house of Belial,” retorted Mrs. McBain, presenting a chaste cheek to Nan’s salute. The young red lips pressed against the hard-featured face curved into a smile. Nan was no whit in awe of her aunt’s bitter tongue, and it was probably for this very reason that Mrs. McBain could not help liking her. Most sharp-spoken people appreciate someone who is not afraid to stand up to them, and Nan and Mrs. McBain had crossed swords in many a wordy battle.

“Are you applying the name of Belial to poor old Barry?” enquired Sandy with interest. “I don’t consider he’s half earned it.”

Page 86

“Barry Seymour’s a puir weak fule and canna rule his ain hoose,” came the curt answer.

Mrs. McBain habitually spoke as excellent English as only a Scotswoman can, but it pleased her on occasion to assume the Doric—much as a duchess may her tiara.

“Barry’s a dear,” protested Nan, “and he doesn’t need to play at being master in his own house.”

“I’m willing to believe you. That red-headed body is mistress and master too.”

Sandy grinned.

“I consider that remark eminently personal. The hue of one’s hair is a misfortune, not a fault,” he submitted teasingly. “In Kitty you must at least allow that the red takes a more pleasing form than it does with me.”

Mrs. McBain sniffed.

“You’ll be tellin’ me next that her hair’s the colour God made it,” she observed indignantly.

Sandy and Nan broke into laughter.

“Well, mine is, anyway,” said the former. “It would never have been this colour if I’d had a say in the matter.”

Eliza surveyed her offspring with disfavour.

“It’s an ill thing, Sandy McBain, to question the ways of the Almighty who made you.”

“I don’t. It’s you who seem far more disposed to disparage the completed article than I.” He beamed at her seraphically.

Eliza’s thin lips relaxed into an unwilling smile. Sandy was as equally the joy of her heart as he was the flagellation of her conscience.

“Well, I’ll own you’re the first of the McBains to go daft over music.”

She handed a cup of tea to Nan as she spoke. Then asked;

“And how’s your uncle, St. John?”

“He’s at Mallow, too. We all are—Penelope and Uncle David, and Ralph Fenton—”

“And who may Mr. Fenton be? I’ve never met him—have I, Sandy?”

“No. He’s a well-known singer Kitty’s recently admitted into the fold.”

“Do you mean he earns his living by singing at concerts?”

“Yes. And a jolly good living, too.”

A shadow fell across Sandy’s pleasant freckled face. It was a matter of unavailing regret to him that owing to his parents’ prejudice against music and musicians he had been debarred from earning a living in like manner with his long, capable fingers. Eliza saw the shadow, and her brows contracted in a slight frown. Vaguely she was beginning to realise some small part of the suffering which the parental restriction had imposed upon her son—the perpetual irritation of a thwarted longing which it had entailed. But she had not yet advanced sufficiently along the widening road of thought to grasp the pitiful, irreparable waste it had involved of a talent bordering on genius.

She pursed her lips obstinately together.

“There’ll come no blessing with money that’s earned by mere pleasuring,” she averred.

“If you only knew what hard work it means to be a successful musician, Aunt Eliza, you’d be less drastic in your criticism,” interposed Nan, with warmth.

Page 87

Eliza's shrewd eyes twinkled.

"You work hard, don't you, my dear?" she observed drily.

Nan laughed, colouring a little.

"Perhaps I should work harder if Uncle David didn't spoil me so. You know he's increased my allowance lately?"

Eliza snorted indignantly.

"I always kent he was mair fulish than maist o' his sex."

"It's rather an endearing kind of foolishness," remarked Sandy.

His mother eyed him sharply.

"We're not put into the world to be endearing," she retorted, "but to do our duty."

"It might be possible to combine both," suggested Sandy.

"Well, you're not the one to do it," she answered grimly. "And what's Penelope doing?" she continued, turning to Nan. "She's more sense than the rest of ye put together, for all she's so daft about music."

"Penelope," said Sandy solemnly, "is preparing to enter upon the duties and privileges of matrimony."

"What may you mean by that?"

Sandy stirred his tea while Eliza waited impatiently for his answer.

"She's certainly 'walking out,'" he maintained.

"And that's by no means the shortest road to matrimony," snapped Eliza. "My cook's been walking out with the village carpenter ever since she came to St. Wennys, but she's no nearer a wedding ring than she was twelve months ago."

"I think," observed Sandy gravely, "that greater success will attend Penelope's perambulations. Kitty was so cock-a-hoop over it that she couldn't refrain from 'phoning the good news on Sunday morning. I meant to tell you when you came back from church, but clean forgot."

"And who's the man?"

“Penelope’s young man? Oh, Ralph Fenton, the fellow who makes ‘pleasuring’ pay so uncommonly well. He’s been occupying an ignominious position at the wheels of Penelope’s chariot ever since they both came to Mallow. I think Kitty Seymour would make a matrimonial agent *par excellence*—young men and maidens introduced under the most favourable circumstances and *no* fee when suited!”—Sandy flourished his arms expressively.

“And if she could find a good, sensible lassie to tak’ ye in hand, Sandy McBain, I’d no be grudgin’ a fee.”

“No good, mother of mine. I lost my heart to Nan here too long ago, and now”—with a lightness of tone that effectually concealed his feelings—“not to be outdone by Penny, she herself has gone and got engaged. So I shall live and die alone.”

“And what like is the man ye’ve chosen?” demanded Eliza, turning to Nan. “Not another of these music-daft creatures, I hope?”

“I think you’ll quite approve, Aunt Eliza,” answered Nan with a becoming meekness. “I’m engaged to marry Roger Trenby.”

“Well, I hope ye’ll be happier than maist o’ the married folks I ken. Eh!”—with a chuckle—“but Roger’s picked a stick for his own back!”

Page 88

Nan smiled.

“Do you think I’ll be so bad to live with, then?”

“’Tisn’t so much that you’ll be bad with intent. But you’re that Varincourt woman’s own great-grand-daughter. Not that ye can help it, and I’m no blamin’ ye for it. But ’tis wild blood!”

Nan rose, laughing, and kissed her aunt.

“After such a snub as that, I think I’d better take myself off. It’s really time I started, as I’m walking.”

“Let me run you back in the car,” suggested Sandy eagerly.

“No, thanks. I’m taking the short cut home through the woods.”

Sandy accompanied her down the drive. At the gates he stopped abruptly.

“Nan,” he said quietly. “Is it quite O.K. about your engagement? You’ll be really happy with Trenby?”

Nan paused a moment. Then she spoke, very quietly and with a touch of cynicism quite foreign to the fresh, sweet outlook upon life which had been hers before she had ever met Maryon Rooke.

“I don’t suppose I should be really happy with anyone, Sandy. I want too much. . . . But it’s quite O.K. and you needn’t worry.”

With a parting nod she started off along the ribbon of road which wound its way past the gates of Trevarthen Wood, and then, dipping into the valley, climbed the hill beyond and lost itself in the broad highway of light which shimmered from the western sky. Presently she turned aside from the road and, scrambling through a gap in a stone wall, plunged into the cool shadows of the woods. A heavy rain had fallen during the night, soaking the thirsty earth, and the growing green things were all responsively alive and vivid once again, while the clean, pleasant smell of damp soil came fragrantly to her nostrils.

Though she tramped manfully along, Nan found her progress far from swift, for the surface of the ground was sticky and sodden after the rain. Her boots made soft little sucking sounds at every step. Nor was she quite sure of her road back to Mallow by way of the woods. She had been instructed that somewhere there ran a tiny river which she must cross by means of a footbridge, and then ascend the hill on the opposite side. “And after that,” Barry had told her, “you can’t lose yourself if you try.”

But prior to that it seemed a very probable contingency, and she was beginning to weary of plodding over the boggy land, alternately slapped by outstanding branches or —when a little puff of wind raced overhead—drenched by a shower of garnered raindrops from some tree which seemed to shake itself in the breeze just as a dog may shake himself after a plunge in the sea, and with apparently the same intention of wetting you as much as possible in the process.

At last from somewhere below came the sound of running water, and Nan bent her steps hopefully in its direction. A few minutes' further walking brought her to the head of a deep-bosomed coombe, and the mere sight of it was almost reward enough for the difficulties of the journey. A verdant cleft, it slanted down between the hills, the trees on either side giving slow, reluctant place to big boulders, moss-bestrewn and grey, while athwart the tall brown trunks which crowned it, golden spears, sped by the westering sun, tremulously pierced the summer dusts.

Page 89

Nan made her way down the coombe's steep side with feet that slipped and slid on the wet, shelving banks of mossy grass. But at length she reached the level of the water and here her progress became more sure. Further on, she knew, must be the footbridge which Barry had described—probably beyond the sharp curve which lay just ahead of her. She rounded the bend, then stopped abruptly, startled at seeing the figure of a man standing by the bank of the river. He had his back towards her and seemed engrossed in his thoughts. Almost instantly, however, as though subconsciously aware of her approach, he turned.

Nan stood quite still as he came towards her, limping a little. She felt that if she moved she must surely stumble and fall. The beating of her heart thundered in her ears and for a moment the river, and the steep sides of the coombe, and the figure of Peter Mallory himself all seemed to grow dim and vague as though seen through a thick mist.

"Nan!"

The dear, familiar voice, with an ineffable tenderness in its slow drawl, reached her even through the thrumming beat of her heart.

"Peter—oh, Peter—"

Her voice failed her, and the next moment they were shaking hands conventionally just as though they were two quite ordinary people with whom love had nothing to do.

"I didn't know you were coming to-day," she said, making a fierce effort to regain composure.

"I wired Kitty on the train. Hasn't she had the telegram?"

"Yes, I expect so. Only I've been out all afternoon, so knew nothing about it. And now I've lost my way!"

"Lost your way?"

"Yes. I expected to find a footbridge round the corner."

"It's round the next one. I sent the car on with my kit, and thought I'd walk up from the station. So we're both making for the same bridge. It's only about two minutes' walk from here."

They strolled on side by side, Peter rather silent, and each of them vibrantly conscious of the other's nearness. Suddenly Mallory pulled up and a quick exclamation broke from him as he pointed ahead.

"We're done! The bridge is gone!"

Nan's eyes followed the direction of his hand. Here the river ran more swiftly, and swollen by last nights storm of wind and rain, it had swept away the frail old footbridge which spanned it. Only a few decayed sticks and rotten wooden stumps remained of what had once been known as the Lovers' Bridge—the trysting place of who shall say how many lovers in the days of its wooden prime?

Somehow a tinge of melancholy seemed to hang about the few scraps of wreckage. How many times the little bridge must have tempted men and maidens to linger of a summer evening, dreaming the big dreams of youth—visions which the spreading wings of Time bear away into the Land of Lost Desires. Perhaps some kind hand garners them—those tender, wonderful, courageous dreams of our wise youth and keeps them safely for us against the Day of Reckoning, so that they may weight the scales a little in our favour.

Page 90

Peter stood looking down at the scattered fragments of the bridge with an odd kind of gravity in his eyes. It seemed a piece of trenchant symbolism that the Lovers' Bridge should break when he and Nan essayed to cross it. There was a slight, whimsical smile, which held something of pain, on his lips when he turned to her again.

"I shall have to carry you across," he said.

She shook her head.

"No, thanks. You might drop me. I can wade over."

"It's too deep for you to do that. I won't let you drop."

But Nan still hesitated. She was caught by sudden panic. She felt that she couldn't let Peter—Peter, of all men in the world—carry her in his arms!

"It isn't so deep higher up, is it?" she suggested. "I could wade there."

"No, it's not so deep, but the river bed is very stony. You'd cut your feet to pieces."

"Then I suppose you'll have to carry me," she agreed at last, with obvious reluctance.

"I promise I won't drop you," he assured her quietly.

He gathered her up into his arms, and as he lifted her the rough tweed of his coat brushed her cheek. Then, holding her very carefully, he stepped down from the bank into the stream and began to make his way across.

Nan had no fear that he might let her fall. The arms that held her felt pliant and strong as steel, and their clasp about her filled her with a strange, new ecstasy that thrilled her from head to foot. It frightened her.

"Am I awfully heavy?" she asked, nervously anxious to introduce some element of commonplace.

And Peter, looking down at the delicately angled face which lay against his shoulder, drew his breath hard.

"No," he answered briefly. "You're not heavy."

There was that in his gaze which brought the warm colour into her face. Her lids fell swiftly, veiling her eyes, and she turned her face quickly towards his shoulder. All that remained visible was the edge of the little turban hat she wore and, below this, a dusky sweep of hair against her white skin.

He went on in silence, conscious in every fibre of his being of the supple body gathered so close against his own, of the young, sweet, clean-cut curve of her cheek, and of the warmth of her hair against his shoulder. He jerked his head aside, his mouth set grimly, and crossed quickly to the other bank of the river.

As he let her slip to the ground, steadying her with his arms about her, he bent swiftly and for an instant his lips just brushed her hair. Nan scarcely felt the touch of his kiss, it fell so lightly, but she sensed it through every nerve of her. Standing in the twilight, shaken and clutching wildly after her self-control, she knew that if he touched her again or took her in his arms, she would yield helplessly—gladly!

Peter knew it, too, knew that the merest thread of courage and self-respect kept them apart. His arms strained at his sides. Forcing his voice to an impersonal, level tone, he said practically:

Page 91

“It’s getting late. Come on, little pal, we must make up time, or they’ll be sending out a search party for us from Mallow.”

It was late in the evening before Nan and Peter found themselves alone together again. Everyone was standing about in the big hall exchanging good nights and last snippets of talk before taking their several ways to bed. Peter drew Nan a little to one side.

“Nan, is it true that you’re engaged to Trenby?” he asked.

“Quite true.” She had to force the answer to her lips. Mallory’s face was rather stern.

“Why didn’t you tell me this afternoon?”

“I—I couldn’t, Peter,” she said, under her breath. “I couldn’t.”

His face still wore that white, unsmiling look. But he drew Nan’s shaking hands between his own and held them very gently as he put his next question.

“You don’t care for him.” It was more an assertion, than a question, though it demanded a reply.

“No.”

His grasp of her hands tightened.

“Then, for God’s sake, don’t make the same hash of your life as I made of mine. Believe me, Nan”—his voice roughened—“it’s far worse to be married to someone you don’t love than to remain unmarried all your days.”

CHAPTER XIV

RELATIONS-IN-LAW

“I am very glad to meet you, my dear.”

The frosty voice entirely failed to confirm the sense of the words as Lady Gertrude Trenby bent forward and imprinted a somewhat chilly kiss on Nan’s cheek.

She was a tall woman, thin and aristocratic-looking, with a repressive manner that inspired her domestic staff with awe and her acquaintances with a nervous anxiety to placate her.

Nan shrank sensitively, and glanced upward to see if there were anything in her future mother-in-law’s face which might serve to contradict the coldness of her greeting. But

there was nothing. It was a stern, aquiline type of face, with a thin-lipped mouth and hard, obstinate chin, and the iron-grey hair, dressed in a high, stiff fashion, which suggested that no single hair would ever be allowed to stray from its lawful place, seemed to emphasise its severity.

The chilly welcome, then, was intentional—not the result of shyness or a natural awkwardness with strangers. Lady Gertrude was perfectly composed, and Nan felt an inward conviction that the news of Roger's engagement had not met with her approval. Perhaps she resented the idea of relinquishing the reins of government at Trenby Hall in favour of a daughter-in-law. It was quite possible, few mothers of sons who have retained their bachelorhood as long as Roger enjoy being relegated to the position of dowager. They have reigned too long to relish abdication.

Page 92

As Nan replied conventionally to Lady Gertrude's greeting, some such thoughts as these flashed fugitively through her mind, and with them came a rather tender, girlish determination, to make the transition as easy as possible to the elder woman when the time came for it. The situation made a quick appeal to her eager sympathies. She could imagine so exactly how she herself would detest it if she were in the other woman's position. Somewhat absorbed in this line of thought, she followed her hostess into a stiff and formal-looking drawing-room which conveyed the same sense of frigidity as Lady Gertrude's welcome.

There are some rooms you seem to know and love almost the moment you enter them, while with others you feel that you will never get on terms of friendliness. Nan suddenly longed for the dear, comfortable intimacy of the panelled hall at Mallow, with its masses of freshly-cut flowers making a riot of colour against the dark oak background, its Persian rugs dimmed to a mellow richness by the passage of time, and the sweet, "homey" atmosphere of it all.

Behind her back she made a desperate little gesture to Roger that he should follow her, but he shook his head laughingly and went off in another direction, thinking in his unsubtle mind that this was just the occasion for his mother and his future wife to get well acquainted.

He felt sure that Nan's charm would soon overcome the various objections which Lady Gertrude had raised to the engagement when he had first confided his news to her. She had not minced matters.

"But, my dear Roger, from all I've heard, Nan Davenant is a most unsuitable woman to be your wife. For one thing, she is, I believe, a professional pianist." The thin lips seemed to grow still thinner as they propounded the indictment.

Most people, nowadays, would have laughed outright, but Roger, being altogether out of touch with the modern attitude towards such matters, regarded his mother's objection as quite a normal and reasonable one. It must be overcome in this particular instance, that was all.

"But, of course, Nan will give up everything of that kind when she's my wife," he asserted confidently. And quite believed it, since he had a touching faith in the idea that a woman can be "moulded" by her husband.

"Roger has rather taken me by surprise with the news of his engagement," said Lady Gertrude, after she and Nan had exchanged a few laboured platitudes. "Do you think you will be happy with him? We live a very simple country existence here, you know."

To Nan, the use of the word "we" sounded rather as though she were proposing to marry the family.

“Oh, I like country life very much,” she replied. “After all, you can always vary the monotony by running up to town or going abroad, can’t you?”

“I don’t think Roger cares much for travelling about. He is extremely attached to his home. We have always made everything so easy and comfortable for him here, you see,” responded Lady Gertrude, with a certain significance.

Page 93

Nan surmised she was intended to gather that it would be her duty to make everything "so easy and comfortable" for him in the future! She almost smiled. Most of the married men she knew were kept busy seeing that everything was made easy and comfortable for their wives.

"Still," continued Lady Gertrude, "there could be no objection to your making an occasional trip to London."

She had a dry, decisive method of speech which gave one the impression she was well accustomed to laying down the law—and that her laws were expected to remain unbroken. The "occasional trip to London" sounded bleakly in Nan's ears. Still, she argued, Lady Gertrude would only be her mother-in-law—and she was sure she could "manage" Roger. There is a somewhat pathetic element in the way in which so many people light-heartedly enter into marriage, the man confident in his ability to "mould" his wife, the woman never doubting her power to "manage" him. It all seems quite simple during the adaptable period of engagement, when romance spreads a veil of glamour over the two people concerned, effectually concealing for the time being the wide gulf of temperament that lies between them. It is only after the knot has been tied that the unlooked-for difficulties of managing and moulding present themselves.

Nan found it increasingly difficult to sustain her side of the conversation with Lady Gertrude. The latter's old-fashioned views clashed violently with her own modern ones, and there seemed to be no mutual ground upon which they could meet. Like her son, Lady Gertrude clung blindly to the narrow outlook of a bygone period, and her ideas of matrimony were based strictly upon the English Marriage Service.

She had not realised that the Great War had created a different world from the one she had always known, and that women had earned their freedom as individuals by sharing the burden of the war side by side with men. Nor had Roger infused any fresh ideas into her mind on his return from serving in the Army. He had volunteered immediately war broke out, his sense of duty and loyalty to his country being as sturdy as his affection for every foot of her good brown earth he had inherited. But he was not an impressionable man, and when peace finally permitted him to return to his ancestral acres, he settled down again quite happily into the old routine at Trenby Hall.

So it was hardly surprising that Lady Gertrude had remained unchanged, expecting and requiring that the world should still run smoothly on—without even a side-slip!—in the same familiar groove as that to which she had always been accustomed. This being so, it was quite clear to her that Nan would require a considerable amount of tutelage before she was fit to be Roger's wife. And she was equally prepared to give it.

In some inexplicable manner her attitude of mind conveyed itself to Nan, and the latter was rebelliously conscious of the older woman's efforts to dominate her. It came as an inexpressible relief when at last their tete-a-tete was interrupted.

Page 94

Through the closed door Nan could hear Roger's voice. He was evidently engaged in cheerful conversation with someone in the hall outside—a woman, from the light trill of laughter which came in response to some remark of his—and a moment later the door opened and Nan could see his head and shoulders towering above those of the woman who preceded him into the room.

"Isobel, my dear!"

For the first time since the beginning of their interview Nan heard Lady Gertrude's voice soften to a more human note. Turning to Nan she continued, still in the same affectionate tone of voice:

"This is my niece, Isobel Carson—though she is really more like a daughter to me."

"So it looks as though we shall be sisters!" put in the newcomer lightly. "Really"—with a quick, bird-like glance, that included everyone in the room—"our relationships will get rather mixed up, won't they?"

She held out a rather claw-like little hand for Nan to shake, and the unexpectedly tense and energetic grip of it was somewhat surprising. She was a small, dark creature with bright, restless brown eyes set in a somewhat sallow face—its sallowness the result of several husband-hunting years spent in India, where her father had held a post in the Indian Civil Service.

It was one of those rather incomprehensible happenings of life that she had been left still blooming on her virgin stem. It would have been difficult to guess her exact age. She owned to thirty-four, and a decade ago, when she had first joined her father in India, she must have possessed a certain elfish prettiness of her own. Now, thanks to those years spent under a tropical sun, she was a trifle faded and passee-looking.

Following upon the advent of Roger and his cousin the conversation became general for a few minutes, then Lady Gertrude drew her son towards a French window opening on to the garden—a garden immaculately laid out, with flower-beds breaking the expanse of lawn at just the correct intervals—and eventually she and Roger passed out of the room to discuss with immense seriousness the shortcomings of the gardener as exemplified in the shape of one of the geranium beds.

"*You* won't like it here!" observed Isobel Carson rather bluntly, when the two girls were left alone.

"Why shouldn't I?" Nan smiled.

"Because you won't fit in at all. You'll be like a rocket battering about in the middle of a set piece."

Isobel lacked neither brains nor observation, though she had been wise enough to conceal both these facts from Lady Gertrude.

“Don’t you like it here, then?”

Isobel regarded her thoughtfully, as though speculating how far she dared be frank.

“Of course I like it. But it’s Hobson’s choice with me,” she replied rather grimly. “When my father died I was left with very little money and no special training. Result—I spent a hateful year as nursery governess to a couple of detestable brats. Then Aunt Gertrude invited me here on a visit—and that visit has prolonged itself up till the present moment. She finds me very useful, you know,” she added cynically.

Page 95

“Yes, I suppose she does,” answered Nan, with some embarrassment. She felt no particular desire to hear a resume of Miss Carson’s past life. There was something in the girl which repelled her.

As though she sensed the other’s distaste to the trend the conversation had taken, Miss Carson switched briskly off to something else, and by the time Lady Gertrude returned with Roger, suggesting that they should go in to lunch, Nan had forgotten that odd feeling of repulsion which Isobel had first aroused in her, and had come to regard her as “quite a nice little thing who had had rather a rotten time.”

This was the impression Lady Gertrude’s niece contrived to make on most people. It suited her very well and secured her many gifts and pleasures which would not otherwise have come her way. She had accepted her aunt’s invitation to stay at Trenby Hall rather guardedly in the first instance, but when, as the visit drew towards its end, Lady Gertrude had proposed that she should make her home there altogether, she had jumped at the offer.

She speedily discovered that she and Trenby had many tastes in common, and with the sharp instinct of a woman who has tried hard to achieve a successful marriage and failed, there appeared to her no reason why in this instance “something should not come of it”—to use the time-honoured phrase which so delicately conveys so much. And but for the fact that Nan Davenant was staying at Mallow, something might have come of it! Since community of tastes is responsible for many a happy and contented marriage.

Throughout the time she had lived at Trenby Hall, Isobel had contrived to make herself almost indispensable to Roger. If a “damned button” flew off his coat, she was always at hand with needle and thread, and a quaint carved ivory thimble crowning one small finger, to sew it on again. Or should his dress tie decline to adorn his collar in precisely the proper manner, those nimble, claw-like little fingers could always produce a well-tied bow in next to no time. It was Isobel who found all the things which, manlike, he so constantly mislaid, who tramped over the fields with him, interesting herself in all the outdoor side of his life, and she was almost as good at landing a trout as he himself.

There seemed small likelihood of Roger’s going far afield in search of a wife, so that Isobel had not apprehended much danger to her hopes—more especially as she had a shrewd idea that Lady Gertrude would look upon the marriage with the selfish approval of a woman who gains a daughter without losing the services of a niece who is “used to her ways.”

Such a union need not even upset existing arrangements. Isobel had learned by long experience how to “get on” amicably with her autocratic relative, and the latter could remain—as her niece knew very well she would wish to remain at Trenby Hall, still nominally its chatelaine.

Lady Gertrude and Isobel had never been frequent visitors at Mallow, and it had so happened that neither they, nor Roger on the rare occasions when he was home on leave from the Front, had chanced to meet Nan Davenant during her former visits to Mallow Court.

Page 96

Now that she had seen her, Isobel's ideas were altogether bouleversee. Never for a single instant would she have imagined that a woman of Nan's type—artistic, emotional, elusive—could attract a man like Roger Trenby. The fact remained, however, that Nan had succeeded where hitherto she herself had failed, and Isobel's dreams of a secure future had come tumbling about her ears. She realised bitterly that love is like quicksilver, running this way or that at its own sweet will—and rarely into the channel we have ordained for it.

CHAPTER XV

KING ARTHUR'S CASTLE

The first person whom Nan encountered on her return from Trenby Hall was Mrs. Seymour. The latter's eyebrows lifted quizzically.

"Well?" she asked. "How did it go?"

"It didn't 'go' at all!" answered Nan. "I was enveloped in an atmosphere of severe disapproval. In fact, I think Lady Gertrude considers I require quite a long course of training before I'm fitted to be Roger's wife."

"Nonsense!" Kitty smiled broadly.

"Seriously"—nodding. "Apparently the kind of wife she really wants for him is a combination of the doormat and fetch-and-carry person who always stays at home, and performs her wifely and domestic duties in a spirit of due subservience."

"She'll live and learn, then, my dear, when she has you for a daughter-in-law," commented Kitty drily.

"I think I'm a bit fed up with 'in-laws,'" returned Nan a trifle wearily. "I'll go out and walk it off. Or, better still, lend me your bike, Kitty, and I'll just do a spin to Tintagel. By the time I've climbed up to King Arthur's Castle, I'll feel different. It always makes me feel good to get to the top of anywhere."

"But, my dear, it's five o'clock already! You won't have time to go there before dinner."

"Yes, I shall," persisted Nan. "Half an hour to get there—easily! An hour for the castle, half an hour for coming back, and then just time enough to skip into a dinner-frock. . . . I must go, really, Kitten," she went on with a note of urgency in her voice. "That appalling drawing-room at Trenby and almost equally appalling dining-room have got into my system, and I want to blow the germs away." She gesticulated expressively.

“All right, you ridiculous person, take my bicycle then,” replied Kitty good-humouredly. “But what will you do when you have to *live* in those rooms?”

“Why, I shall alter them completely, of course. I foresee myself making the Hall ‘livable in’ throughout the first decade of my married existence!”—with a small grimace of disgust.

A few minutes later Nan was speeding along the road to Tintagel, the cool air, salt with brine from the incoming tide, tingling against her face.

Page 97

In less than the stipulated half-hour she had reached the village—that bleak, depressing-looking village, with its miscellany of dull little houses, through which one must pass, as through some dreary gateway, to reach the wild, sea-girt beauty of the coast itself. Leaving her cycle in charge at a cottage, Nan set out briskly on foot down the steep hill that led to the shore. She was conscious of an imperative need for movement. She must either cycle, or walk, or climb, in order to keep at bay the nervous dread with which her visit to Trenby had inspired her. It had given her a picture of Roger's home and surroundings—a brief, enlightening glimpse as to the kind of life she might look forward to when she had married him.

It was all very different from what she had anticipated. Even Roger himself seemed different in the environment of his home—less spontaneous, less the adoring lover. Lady Gertrude's influence appeared to dominate the whole house and everyone in it. But, as Nan realised, she had given her promise to Roger, and too much hung on that promise for her to break it now—Penelope's happiness, and her own craving to shut herself away in safety, to bind herself so that she could never again break free.

Her unexpected meeting with Peter the previous evening had shown her once and for all the imperative need for this. The clasp of his hand, the strong hold of his arms about her as he bore her across the stream, the touch of his lips against her hair—the memory of these things had been with her all night. She had tried to thrust them from her, but they refused to be dismissed. More than once she had buried her hot face in the coolness of the pillows, conscious of a sudden tremulous thrill that ran like fire through all her veins.

And that Peter, too, knew they stood on dangerous quicksands when they were alone together, she was sure. This morning, beyond a briefly-worded greeting at breakfast, he had hardly spoken to her, carefully avoiding her, though without seeming to do so, until her departure to Trenby Hall made it no longer necessary. She hoped he would not stay long at Mallow. It would be unbearable to meet him day after day—to feel his eyes resting upon her with the same cool gravity to which he had compelled them this morning, to pretend that he and she meant no more to one another than any two other chance guests at a country house.

Nan's thoughts drove her swiftly down the steep incline which descended towards the cove and, arriving at its foot, she stopped, as everyone must, to obtain the key of the castle from a near-by cottage. The old dame who gave her the key—accepting a shilling in exchange with voluble gratitude—impressed upon her the urgent necessity for returning it on her way back.

"If you please, lady, I've lost more than one key with folks forgettin' to return them," she explained.

“I won’t forget,” Nan assured her, and forthwith started to make her way to the top of the great promontory on which stands all that still remains of King Arthur’s Castle—the fallen stones of an ancient chapel, and a ruined wall enclosing a grassy space where sheep browse peacefully.

Page 98

Quitting the cottage and turning to the left, she bent her steps towards a footbridge spanning a gap in the cliff side and, pausing at the bridge, let her eyes rest musingly on the great, mysterious opening picturesquely known as Merlin's Cave. The tide was coming in fast, and she could hear the waves boom hollowly as they slid over its stony floor, only to meet and fight the opposing rush of other waves from the further end—-since what had once been the magician's cave was now a subterranean passage, piercing right through the base of the headland.

For a while Nan loitered on the bridge, gazing at the wild beauty of the scene—the sombre cove where the inrushing waves broke in a smother of spume on the beach, and above, to the left, the wind-scarred, storm-beaten crag rising sheer and wonderful out of the turbulent sea and crowned by those ancient walls about which clung so much of legend and romance.

Perhaps the magic of old Merlin's enchantments still lingered there, for as Nan stood silently absorbing the mysterious glamour of the place, the petty annoyances of the day, the fret of Lady Gertrude's unwelcoming reception of her, seemed to dwindle into insignificance. They were only external things, after all. They could not mar the loveliness of this mystic, legend-haunted corner of the world.

At length, with a faint sigh of regret, she crossed the bridge and walked slowly up a path which appeared to be little more than a rough track hewn out of the rocky side of the cliff itself, uneven and strewn with loose stones. Nan picked her steps gingerly. At the top of the track her way turned sharply at right angles to where a narrow ridge—so narrow that two people could not walk it abreast—led to Tintagel Head. It was the merest neck of land, very steep on either hand, like a slender bridge connecting what the Cornish folk generally speak of as "the Island" with the mainland.

Nan proceeded to cross the narrow ridge. She was particularly surefooted as a rule, her supple body balancing itself instinctively. But to-day, for the first time, she felt suddenly nervous as she neared the crag and, glancing downward, caught sight of the sullen billows thundering far below on either side. Perhaps the events of the day had frayed her nerves more than she knew. It was only by an effort that she dismissed the unaccustomed sensation of malaise which had assailed her and determinedly began the ascent to the castle by way of a series of primitively rough-hewn steps. They were slippery and uneven, worn and polished by the tread of the many feet which had ascended and descended them, and guarded only by a light hand-rail that seemed almost to quiver in her grasp as, gripped by another unexpected rush of fear, Nan caught at it in feverish haste.

She stood quite still—suddenly panic-stricken. Here, half-way up the side of the steep promontory, the whole immensity of the surrounding height and depth came upon her in a terrifying flash of realisation. From below rose the reiterated boom of the baulked waves, each thud against the base of the great crag seeming to shake her whole being,

while, whichever way she looked, menacing headlands towered stark and pitiless above the sea. She felt like a fly on the wall of some abysmal depth—only without the fly's powers of adhesion.

Page 99

Very carefully she twisted her body sideways, intending to retrace her steps, but in an instant the sight of the surging waters—miles and miles below, as it seemed—sent her crouching to the ground. She could not go back! She felt as though her limbs were paralysed, and she knew that if she attempted to descend some incalculable force would drive her straight over the edge, hurtling helplessly to the foot of those rugged cliffs.

For a moment she closed her eyes. Only by dogged force of will could she even retain her present position, half crouching, half lying on the ill-matched steps. It almost seemed as though some power were drawing her, compelling her to relax her muscles and slide down, down into those awful depths. Then the memory of a half-caught phrase she had overheard flashed across her mind: "If you feel giddy, always look up, not down." As though in obedience to some inner voice, she opened her eyes and looked up to where, only a few battered steps above, she could see the door of the castle.

If she could only make it! Rising cautiously to her knees she crawled up one more step and rested a moment, digging her fingers into the crevices of the rock and finding a precarious foothold against a projecting ledge. Keeping her eyes fixed upon the door she scrambled up a few inches further, then paused again, exhausted with the strain.

Two more steps remained. Two more desperate efforts, while she fought the hideous temptation to look downwards. For an instant she almost lost all knowledge of what she was doing. Guided only by instinct—the instinct of self-preservation—her eyes still straining painfully in that enforced upward gaze, she at last reached the door.

With a strangled sob of relief she knelt up against it and inserted the big iron key, with numbed fingers turning it in the lock. The heavy door opened, and Nan clung to it with both hands till it had swung back sufficiently to admit her. Then, from the security of the castle itself, she pushed it to and locked it on the inside, as the old woman at the cottage had bidden her, thrusting the key into the pocket of her sports coat.

She was safe! Around her were the walls of the ancient castle—walls that seemed almost part of the solid rock itself standing betwixt her and that horrible abyss below! . . . Her limbs gave way suddenly and she toppled over in a dead faint, lying in a little crumpled heap at the foot of the wall.

It was very quiet up there within King Arthur's Castle. The tourists who, mayhap, had visited it earlier in the day were gone; no one would come again to-night to disturb the supreme stillness. The wan cry of the gulls drifted eerily across the sea. Once an enquiring sheep approached the slim young body lying there, stirless and inert, and sniffed at it, then moved away again and lay down to chew the cud.

The golden disc of the sun dropped steadily lower in the sky. . . .

Page 100

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“Nan’s very late.”

Mrs. Seymour made the statement rather blankly. Dinner had been announced and the house-party were gathered together in the hall round the great hearth fire. The summer day had chilled to a cool evening, as so often happens by the sea, and the ruddy flames diffused a cheery glow of warmth.

“Perhaps Lady Gertrude is keeping her to dinner,” said Lord St. John. “It’s very probable.” As he spoke he held out his hands to the fire—withered old hands that looked somehow frailer than their wont.

Kitty shook her head.

“No. She—I don’t think she enjoyed her visit overmuch, and, when she came back she went out cycling—to ‘work it off,’” she said.

“Where did she go?” inquired Penelope.

“To Tintagel. I told her she wouldn’t have time enough to get there and back before dinner. Never mind. We’ll begin, and I’ll order something to be kept hot for her.”

Accordingly they all adjourned to the dining-room and dinner proceeded in its usual leisurely fashion, although the gay chatter that generally accompanied it was absent. Everyone seemed conscious of a certain uneasiness.

“I wish young Nan would come back,” remarked Barry at last, looking up abruptly from the fish he was dissecting. A shade of anxiety clouded his lazy blue eyes. “I hope she’s not come a cropper down one of these confounded hills.”

He voiced the restless feeling of suspense which was beginning to pervade the whole party.

“What time did she start, Kit?” he went on.

“About five o’clock, I should think, or soon after.”

“Then she’d have had loads of time to get back by now.”

The general tension took the form of a sudden silence. Then Peter Mallory spoke, very quietly:

“She didn’t propose going up to the castle, did she?” In spite of its quietness his voice had a certain clipped sound that drove home the significance of his question.

“Yes, she did.” Kitty tried to reassure herself. “But she’s as surefooted as a deer. We all went up the other day and Nan was by far the best climber amongst us.”

Almost simultaneously Peter and Barry were on their feet.

“Something may have happened, all the same,” said Barry with concern. “She might have sprained her ankle—or—or anything.”

He turned to the servant nearest him.

“Tell Atkinson to get the car round and to be quick about it.”

“Very good, sir.” And the man disappeared on his errand.

In a moment the thought that a possible accident might have befallen Nan broke up the party. Kitty and Penelope hurried off in quest of rugs and sandwiches and brandy—-anything that might be of service, while the men drew together, conversing in low voices while they waited for the car.

“You’ll find her, Barry?” St. John’s voice shook a little. “You’ll bring her back safe?”

Page 101

“I’ll bring her back.” Barry laid kindly hands on the old man’s shoulders which had seemed suddenly to stoop as though beneath a burden. “Don’t worry. I expect she’s only had some trifling mishap. Burst a tyre probably and is walking back.”

St. John’s look of acute anxiety relaxed a little.

“I hope so,” he muttered, “I hope so.”

A servant opened the door.

“The car’s waiting, sir.”

“Good.” Barry strode into the hall, Mallory following him.

“Barry, I must go with you,” he said hoarsely.

In the blaze of the electric light the two men looked hard into each other’s faces. Then Barry nodded.

“Right. I’ll leave the chauffeur behind and drive myself. We must have plenty of room at the back in case Nan’s hurt.” He paused, then held out his hand. “I’m damned sorry, old man.”

“I suppose Kitty told you?”

“Yes. She told me.”

“I think I’m rather glad you know,” said Peter simply.

Then, hurrying into their coats, the two men ran out to the car and a moment later they were tearing along the road, their headlights blazing like angry stars beneath the calm, sweet light of the moon overhead.

The old dame who kept the keys of the castle rose from her supper as the honk, honk of a motor-horn broke on her startled ears. People didn’t come to visit the castle at this time of night! But the purr of the engine outside her cottage, and the long beams of light flung seawards by the headlights, brought her quickly to the door.

“We want a key—for the castle,” shouted Barry, while to expedite matters Peter sprang out of the car and went to the floor of the cottage.

“The key!” he cried out.

She extended her hand, thinking he had brought one back.

“Ah, I knew I’d missed one,” she said. She shook a lean forefinger at him reprovingly: “So ’twas you run off with it! I’m obliged to you for bringing it again, sir. I couldn’t rightly remember whether ’twas a young lady or gentleman who’d had it. There’s so many comes for a key and—”

“It was a lady. She’s up there now, we think. And I want another key to get in with. She may have been taken ill.”

Peter’s curt explanation stemmed her ready stream of talk abruptly. Snatching the key which she took down from a peg on the wall he returned to the car with it. Barry was still sitting behind the steering wheel. He bent forward, as Peter approached.

“You go,” he said, with a bluntness that masked an infinite understanding. “There’s the brandy flask”—bringing it out of a side pocket. “If you want help, blow this hooter.” He had detached one of the horns from the car. “If not—well, I shall just wait here till you come back.”

CHAPTER XVI

SACRED TROTH

The tide was at its full when Peter began the ascent to King Arthur’s Castle—the sea a vast stretch of quivering silver fringed with a mist of flying spray. In the strange, sharp lights and shadows cast by the round moon overhead, the great crags of the promontory jutted out like the turrets of some ancient fortress—blackly etched against the tender, irresolute blue of the evening sky.

Page 102

But Peter went on unheedingly. The mystic charm had no power to hold him to-night. The only thing that mattered was Nan—her safety. Was she lying hurt somewhere within the crumbling walls of the castle? Or had she missed her footing and plunged headlong into that sea which boomed incessantly against the cliffs? It wasn't scenery that mattered. It was life—and death!

Very swiftly he mounted to the castle door, looking from side to side as he went for any trace which might show that Nan had passed this way. As he climbed the last few feet he shouted her name: "Nan! Nan!" But there came no answer. Only the sea still thundered below and a startled gull flew out from a cranny, screaming as it flew.

Mallory's hand shook a little as he thrust the key into the heavy lock. Practically all that remained of hope lay behind that closed door. Then, as it opened, a great cry broke from him, hoarse with relief from the pent-up agony of the last hour.

She lay there just like a child asleep, snuggled against the wall, one arm curved behind her head, pillowing it. At the sound of his voice she stirred, opening bewildered, startled eyes. In an instant he was kneeling beside her.

"Don't be frightened, Nan. It's I—Peter. Are you hurt?"

"Peter?" She repeated the name dreamingly, hardly yet awake, and her voice held almost a caress in its soft tones.

Mallory bit back a groan. To hear her speak his name on that little note of happiness hurt incredibly.

"Nan—wake up!" he urged gently.

She woke then—came back to a full sense of her surroundings.

"You, Peter?" she murmured surprisedly. She made an effort to sit up, then sank back against the wall, uttering a sharp cry of distress.

"Where are you hurt?" asked Mallory with quick anxiety.

She shook her head at him, smiling reassuringly.

"I'm not hurt. I'm only stiff. You'll have to help me up, Peter."

He stooped and raised her, and at last she stood up, ruefully rubbing the arm which had been curled behind her head while she slept.

"My arm's gone to sleep. It's all pins and needles!" she complained.

Slung over his shoulders Peter carried an extra wrap for her. Whatever had happened, whether she were hurt or merely stranded somewhere, he knew she would not be warmly enough clad to meet the sudden coolness of the evening.

“You must be nearly perished with cold—asleep up here! Put this on,” he said quickly.

“No, really”—she pushed aside the woollen coat he tendered. “I’m not cold. It was quite sheltered here under this wall.”

“Put it on,” he repeated quietly. “Do as I tell you—little pal.”

At that she yielded and he helped her on with the coat, fastening it carefully round her.

“And now tell me what possessed you to go to sleep up here?” he demanded.

Page 103

In a few words she related what had happened, winding up:

“Afterwards, I suppose I must have fainted. Oh!”—with a shiver of remembrance—“It was simply ghastly! I’ve never felt giddy in my life before—and hope I never may again! It’s just as if the bottom of the world had fallen out and left you hanging in mid-air! . . . I knew I couldn’t face the climb down again, so—so I just went to sleep. I thought some of you would be sure to come to look for me.”

“You knew I should come,” he said, a sudden deep insistence in his voice. “Nan, didn’t you *know* it?”

She lifted her head.

“Yes. I think—I think I knew you would come, Peter,” she answered unsteadily.

The moonlight fell full upon her—upon a white, strained face with passionate, unkissed lips, and eyes that looked bravely into his, refusing to shirk the ultimate significance which underlay his question.

With a stifled exclamation he swept her up into his arms and his mouth met hers in the first kiss that had ever passed between them—a kiss which held infinite tenderness, and the fierce passion that is part of love, and a foreshadowing of the pain of separation.

“My beloved!” He held her a little away from him so that he might look into her face. Then with a swift, passionate eagerness; “Say that you love me, Nan?”

“Why, Peter—Peter, you know it,” she cried tremulously. “It doesn’t need telling, dear. . . . Only—it’s forbidden.”

“Yes,” he assented gravely. “It’s forbidden us. But now—just this once—let us have a few moments, you and I alone, when there’s no need to pretend we don’t care—when we can be *ourselves*!”

“No—no—” she broke in breathlessly.

“It’s not much, to ask—five minutes together out of the whole of life! Roger can’t grudge them. He’ll have you—always.” His arms closed jealously round her.

“Yes—always,” she repeated. With a sudden choked cry she clung to him despairingly.

“Peter, sometimes I feel I can’t bear it! Oh, why were we *allowed* to care like this?”

“God knows!” he muttered.

He released his hold of her abruptly and began pacing up and down—savagely, like some caged beast. Nan stood staring out over the moon-washed sea with eyes that saw nothing. The five minutes they had snatched together from the rest of life were slipping by—each one a moment of bitter and intolerable anguish.

Presently Peter swung round and came to her side. But he did not touch her. His face looked drawn, and his eyes burned smoulderingly—like fire half-quenched.

“Nan, if I didn’t care so much, I’d ask you to go away with me. I—don’t quite know what life will be like without you—hell, probably. But at least it’s going to be my own little hell and I’m not going to drag you down into it. I’m bound irrevocably. And you—you’re bound, too. You can’t play fast and loose with the promise you’ve given Trenby. So we’ve just got to face it out.” He broke off abruptly. Tiny beads of sweat rimmed his upper lip and his hands hung clenched at his sides. Even Nan hardly realised the effort his restraint was costing him.

Page 104

“What—what do you mean, Peter?” she asked haltingly.

“I mean that I’m going away—that I mustn’t see you any more.”

A cry fled from her lips—denying, supplicating, and at the desolate sound of it a tremor ran through his limbs. It was as though his body fought and struggled against the compelling spirit within it.

“We mustn’t meet again,” he went on steadily.

“Not meet—ever—do you mean?” There was something piteous in the young, shaken voice.

“Never, if we can help it. We must go separate ways, Nan.”

She tried to speak, but her lips moved soundlessly. Only her eyes, meeting his, held a mute agony that tortured him. All at once his self-control gave way, and the passion of love and longing against which he had been fighting swept aside the barriers which circumstance had placed about it. His arms went round her, holding her close while he rained kisses on her throat and lips and eyes—fierce, desperate kisses that burned against her face. And Nan kissed him back, yielding up her soul upon her lips, knowing that after this last passionate farewell there could he no more giving or receiving. Only a forgetting.

. . . At last they drew apart from one another, though Peter’s arms still held her, but only tenderly as for the last time.

“This is good-bye, dearest of all,” he said presently.

“Yes,” she answered gravely. “I know.”

“Heart’s beloved, try not to be too sad,” he went on. “Try to find happiness in other things. We can never be together—never be more than friends, but I shall be your lover always—always, Nan—through this world into the next.”

Her hand stole into his.

“As I yours, Peter.”

It was as though some solemn pledge had passed between them—a spiritual troth which nothing in this world could either touch or tarnish. Neither Peter’s marriage nor the rash promise Nan had given to Roger could impinge on it. It would carry them through the complex disarray of this world to the edge of the world beyond.

Some time passed before either of them spoke again. Then Peter said quite simply:

“We must go home, dear.”

She nodded, and together, hand in hand, they descended from the old castle which must have witnessed so many loves and griefs and partings in King Arthur’s time, keeping them secret in its bosom as it would keep secret this later farewell.

They were very silent on the way back. Just at the end, before they turned the corner where the car awaited them, Peter spoke to her again, taking both her hands in his for the last time and holding them in a firm, steady clasp.

“Don’t forget, Nan, what we said just now. We can each remember that—our troth. Hang on to it—*hard*, when life seems a bit more uphill than usual.”

CHAPTER XVII

Page 105

“THE KEYS OF HEAVEN”

Nan awoke the next morning to find the sunlight pouring into her room. Outside, the notes of a bird’s song lilted very sweetly on the air, while the creamy head of a rose tapped now and again at the window as though bidding her come out and share in the glory of the summer’s day. She had slept far into the morning—the deep, dreamless slumber of utter mental and physical exhaustion. And now, waking, she stared about her bewilderedly, unable at first to recall where she was or what had happened.

But that blessed lack of realisation did not last for long. Almost immediately the recollection of all that had occurred yesterday rushed over her with stunning force, and the sunlight, the bird song, and that futile rose tapping softly there against the window-pane, seemed stupidly incongruous.

Nan felt she almost hated them. Only a few hours before she had said good-bye to the man she loved. Not good-bye for a month or a year, but for the rest of life. Possibly, at some distant time, they might chance to meet at the house of a mutual friend, but they would meet merely as acquaintances, never again as lovers. Triumphing in spirit over the desire of the heart, they had taken their farewell of love—bowed to the destiny which had made of that love a forbidden thing.

But last night, even through the anguish of farewell, they had been unconsciously upheld by a feeling of exultation—that strange ecstasy of sacrifice which sometimes fires frail human beings to live up to the god that is within them.

To-day the inevitable reaction had succeeded and only the bleak, bitter facts remained. Nan faced them squarely, though it called for all the pluck of which she was possessed. Peter had gone, and throughout the years that stretched ahead she saw herself travelling through life step by step with Roger, living the same dull existence year in, year out, till at last, when they were both too old for anything to matter very much—too supine for romance to send the quick blood racing through their veins, too dull of sight to perceive the glamour and glory of the world—merciful death would step in and take one or other of them away.

She shivered a little with youth’s instinctive dread of the time when age shall quieten the bounding pulses, slowly but surely taking the savour out of things. She wanted to live first, to gather up the joy of life with both hands. . . .

Her thoughts were suddenly scattered by the sound of the opening door and the sight of Mrs. Seymour’s inquiring face peeping round it.

“Awake?” queried Kitty.

With a determined mental effort Nan pulled herself together, prepared to face the world as it was and not as she wanted it to be. She answered promptly:

“Yes. And hungry, please. May I have some breakfast?”

“Good child!” murmured Kitty approvingly. “As a matter of fact, your brekkie is coming hard on my heels”—gesturing, as she spoke, towards the trim maid who had followed her into the room, carrying an attractive-looking breakfast tray. When she had taken her departure, Kitty sat down and gossiped, while Nan did her best to appear as hungry as she had rashly implied she was.

Page 106

Somehow she must manage to throw dust in Kitty's keen eyes—and a simulated appetite made quite an excellent beginning. She was determined that no one should ever know that she was anything other than happy in her engagement to Roger. She owed him that much, at least. So when Kitty, making an effort to speak quite naturally, mentioned that Peter had been obliged to return to town unexpectedly, she accepted the news with an assumption of naturalness as good as Kitty's own. Half an hour later, leaving Nan to dress, Kitty departed with any suspicions she might have had entirely lulled.

But her heart ached for the man whose haggard, stern-set face, when he had told her last night that he must go, had conveyed all, and more, than his brief words of explanation.

"Must you really go, Peter?" she had asked him wistfully. "I thought—you told me once—that you didn't mean to break off your friendship? . . . Can't you even be friends with her?"

His reply came swiftly and with a definiteness there was no mistaking.

"No," he said. "I can't. It's true what you say—I did once think I might keep her friendship. I was wrong."

There was a pause. Then Kitty asked quickly:

"But you won't refuse to meet her? It isn't as bad as that, Peter?"

He looked down at her oddly.

"It's quite as bad as that."

She felt herself trembling a little at the queer intensity of his tone. It was as though the man beside her were keeping in check, by sheer force of will, some big emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. She hesitated, then spoke very quietly and simply:

"That was a perfectly selfish question on my part, Peter. Don't take any notice of it."

"How—selfish?" he asked, with a faint smile.

"Because, if you refuse to meet Nan, I shall always have to see you separately—never together. I love you both and I can't give up either of you, so it will be rather like cutting myself in half."

Mallory took her hand in both his.

“You shall not have to cut yourself in half for me, dear friend,” he said, with that touch of foreignness in his manner which revealed itself at times—not infrequently when he was concealing some strong feeling. “We shall meet again—some day—Nan and I. But not now—not at present.”

“She’ll miss you, Peter. . . . You’re *such* a good pal!” Kitty gripped his hands hard and her voice was a trifle unsteady. After Barry, there was no one in the whole world she loved as much as she loved Peter. And she was powerless to help him.

“You’ll be back in town soon,” he answered her. “I shall come and see you sometimes. After all”—smiling a little—“Nan isn’t constantly with you. She has her music.” He paused a moment, then added gravely, with a quiet note of thankfulness in his voice: “As I, also, shall have my work.”

Page 107

There remained always that—work, the great palliative, a narcotic dulling the pain which, without it, would be almost beyond human endurance.

* * * * * *

“Everything’s just about as bad as it could be!”

Kitty’s voice was troubled and the eyes that sought Lord St. John’s lacked all their customary vivacity. The tall old man, pacing the quadrangle beside her in the warmth of the afternoon sunshine, made no comment for a moment. Then he said slowly:

“Yes, it’s pretty bad. I’m sorry Mallory had to leave this morning.”

“Oh, well,” murmured Kitty vaguely, “a well-known writer like that often has to dash off to town in the middle of a holiday. Things crop up, you know”—still more vaguely.

St. John paused in the middle of his pacing and, putting his hand under Kitty’s chin, tilted her face upward, scrutinising it with a kindly, quizzical gaze.

“Lookers-on see most of the game, my dear,” he observed, “I’ve no doubts about the ‘business’ which called Mallory away.”

“You’ve guessed, then?”

“I was there when we first thought Nan might be in danger last night—and I saw his face. Then I was sure. I’d only suspected before.”

“I knew,” said Kitty simply. “He told me in London. At first he didn’t intend coming down to Mallow at all.”

“Better, perhaps, if he’d kept to his intention,” muttered St. John abstractedly. He was thinking deeply, his fine brows drawn together.

“You see, he—some of us thought Maryon had come back meaning to fix up things with Nan. So Peter kept out of the way. He thinks only of her—her happiness.”

“His own is out of the question, poor devil!”

Kitty nodded.

“And the worst of it is,” she went on, “I can’t feel quite sure that Nan will be really happy with Roger. They’re the last two people in the world to get on well together.”

Lord St. John looked out across the sea, his shoulders a little stooped, his hands clasped behind his back. No one regretted Nan’s precipitate engagement more than

he, but he recognised that little good could be accomplished by interference. Moreover, to his scrupulous, old-world sense of honour, a promise, once given, was not to be broken at will.

“I’m afraid, my dear,” he said at last, turning back to Kitty, “I’m afraid we’ve reached a *cul-de-sac*.”

His tones were despondent, and Kitty’s spirits sank a degree lower. She looked at him bleakly, and he returned her glance with one equally bleak. Then, into this dejected council of two—cheerful, decided, and aboundingly energetic swept Aunt Eliza.

“Good afternoon, my dear,” she said, making a peck at Kitty’s cheek. “That flunkey, idling his life away on the hall mat, said I should find you here, so I saved him from overwork by showing myself in. How are you, St. John? You’re looking a bit peaky this afternoon, aren’t you?”

Page 108

“It’s old age beginning to tell,” laughed Lord St. John, shaking hands.

“Old age?—Fiddlesticks!” Eliza fumed contemptuously. “I suppose the truth is you’re fashin’ yourself because Nan’s engaged to be married. I’ve always said you were just like an old hen with one chick.”

“I’d like to see the child with a nest of her own, all the same, Eliza.”

“Hark to the man! And when ’tis settled she shall have the nest, he looks for all the world as though she had just fallen out of it!”

St. John wheeled round suddenly.

“That’s exactly what I’m afraid of—that some day she may . . . fall out of this particular nest that’s building.”

“And why should she do that?” demanded Eliza truculently. “Roger’s as bonnie and brave a mate as any woman need look for, and Trenby Hall’s a fine home to bring his bride to.”

“Yes. But don’t you see,” explained Kitty, “it’s all happened so suddenly. A little while ago we thought Nan cared for someone else and now we don’t want her to rush off and tie herself up with anyone in a hurry—and be miserable ever after.”

“I’m no’ in favour of long engagements.”

“In this case a little delay might have been wiser before any engagement was entered upon,” said Lord St. John.

“I don’t hold with delays—nor interfering between folks that have promised to be man and wife. The Almighty never intended us to play at being providence. If it’s ordained for Nan to marry Roger Trenby—marry him she will. And the lass is old enough to know her own mind; maybe you’re wrong in thinking her heart’s elsewhere.”

Then, catching an expression of dissent on Kitty’s face, she added shrewdly:

“Oh, I ken weel he’s nae musician—but it’s no’ a few notes of the piano will be binding husband and wife together. ’Tis the wee bairns build the bridges we can cross in safety.”

There was an unwontedly tender gleam in her hard-featured face. Kitty jumped up and kissed her impulsively.

“Aunt Eliza dear, you’ve a much softer heart than you pretend, and if Nan weren’t happily married you’d be just as sorry as the rest of us.”

“Perhaps Eliza’s right,” hazarded St. John rather uncertainly. “We may have been too ready to assume Nan won’t be happy with the man she’s chosen.”

“I know Nan,” persisted Kitty obstinately. “And I know she and Roger have really nothing in common.”

“Then perhaps they’ll find something after they’re married,” retorted Eliza, “and the looking for it will give a spice to life. There’s many a man—ay, and woman, too!—who have fallen deeper in love after they’ve taken the plunge than ever they did while they were hovering on the brink.”

“That may be true in some cases,” responded St. John. “But you’re advocating a big risk, Eliza.”

“And there’s mighty few things worth having in this world that aren’t obtained at a risk,” averred Mrs. McBain stoutly. “You’ve always been for wrapping Nan up in cotton wool, St. John—shielding her from this, protecting her from that! Sic’ havers! She’d be more of a woman if you’d let her stand on her own feet a bit.”

Page 109

Lord St. John sighed.

“Well, she’ll have to stand on her own feet henceforth,” he said.

“What about the money?” demanded Eliza. “Are you still going to allow her the same income?”

“I think not,” he answered thoughtfully. “That was to give her freedom of choice—-freedom from matrimony if she wished. Well, she’s chosen. And I believe Nan will be all the better for being dependent on her husband for—everything. At any rate, just at first.”

Kitty looked somewhat dubious, but Mrs. McBain nodded her approval vigorously.

“That’s sound common-sense,” she said decidedly. “More than I expected of ye, St. John.”

He smiled a little. Then, seeing the unspoken question in Kitty’s eyes, he turned to her reassuringly.

“No need to worry, Madame Kitty. Remember, I’m always there, if need be, with the money-bags. My idea is that if Nan doesn’t like entire dependence on her husband, it may spur her into working at her music. I’m always waiting for her to do something big. And the desire for independence is a different spur—and a better one——than the necessity of boiling the pot for dinner.”

“You seem to have forgotten that being a professional musician is next door to a crime in Lady Gertrude’s eyes,” observed Kitty. “She doesn’t care for anyone to do more than ‘play a little’ in a nice, amateur, lady-like fashion!”

“Then Lady Gertrude will have to learn better,” replied St. John sharply. Adding, with a grim smile: “One of my wedding-presents to Nan will be a full-sized grand piano.”

So, in accordance with Eliza’s advice, everyone refrained from “playing providence” and Nan’s engagement to Roger Trenby progressed along conventional lines. Letters of congratulation poured in upon them both, and Kitty grew unmistakably bored by the number of her friends in the neighbourhood who, impelled by curiosity concerning the future mistress of Trenby Hall, suddenly discovered that they owed a call at Mallow and that the present moment was an opportune time to pay it.

Nan herself was keyed up to a rather high pitch these days, and it was difficult for those who were watching her with the anxious eyes of friendship to gauge the extent of her happiness or otherwise. From the moment of Mallory’s departure she had flung herself with zest into each day’s amusement behaving precisely as though she hadn’t a care in

life—playing about with Sandy, and flirting so exasperatingly with Roger that, although she wore his ring, within himself he never felt quite sure of her.

Kitty used every endeavour to get the girl to herself for half an hour, hoping she might be able to extract the truth from her. But Nan had developed an extraordinary elusiveness and she skilfully avoided tete-a-tete talks with anyone other than Roger. Moreover, there was that in her manner which utterly forbade even the delicate probing of a friend. The Nan who was wont to be so frank and ingenuous—surprisingly so at times—seemed all at once to have retired behind an impenetrable wall of reticence.

Page 110

Meanwhile Fenton and Penelope had mutually decided to admit none but a few intimate friends into the secret of their engagement. As Ralph sagely observed: "We shall be married so soon that it isn't worth while facing a barrage of congratulations over such a short engagement."

They were radiantly happy, with the kind of happiness that keeps bubbling up from sheer joy of itself—in love with each other in such a delightfully frank and barefaced manner that everyone at Mallow regarded them with gentle amusement and loved them for being lovers.

Nothing pleased Nan better than to persuade them into singing that quaintly charming old song, *The Keys of Heaven*—the words of which hold such a tender, whimsical understanding of the feminine heart. Perhaps the refusal of the coach and four black horses "as black as pitch," and of all the other good things wherewith the lover in the song seeks to embellish his suit, was not rendered with quite as much emphasis as it should have been. One might almost have suspected the lady of a desire not to be too discouraging in her denials. But the final verse lacked nothing in interpretation.

Passionate and beseeching, as the lover makes his last appeal, offering the greatest gift of all, Ralph's glorious baritone entreated her:

"Oh, I will give you the keys of my heart,
And we'll be married till death us do part,
Madam, will you walk?
Madam, will you talk?
Madam, will you walk and talk with me?"

Then Penelope's eyes would glow with a lovely inner light, as though the beautiful possibilities of that journey through life together were envisioned in them, and her voice would deepen and mellow till it seemed to hold all the laughter and tears, and all the kindness and tender gaiety and exquisite solicitude of love.

Sometimes, as she was playing the accompaniment, Nan's own eyes would fill unexpectedly with tears and the black and white notes of the piano run together into an oblong blur of grey.

For though Peter had given her the keys of his heart that night of moon and sea at Tintagel, she might never use them to unlock the door of heaven.

CHAPTER XVIII

"TILL DEATH US DO PART"

Within a fortnight of Mallory's departure from St. Wennys, the whole of the house-party at Mallow had scattered. Lord St. John was the first to go—leaving in order to pay a short visit to Eliza McBain before returning to town. Often though she might scarify him with her sharp tongue, she was genuinely attached to him, and her clannishly hospitable soul would have been sorely wounded if he had not spent a few days at Trevarthen Wood while he was in the neighbourhood. Ralph Fenton had been obliged to hurry north to fulfil an unexpected concert engagement; and on the same day Barry left home to join a shooting-party in Scotland. A few days later Nan and Penelope returned to London, accompanied by Kitty, who asserted an unshakable determination to take part in the orgy of spending which Penelope's forthcoming wedding would entail.

Page 111

Meanwhile Ralph, being “a big fish” as Penny had once commented, had secured his future wife’s engagement as a member of the concert party—by the simple method of declining to accept the American tour himself unless she were included, so that to the joy of buying a trousseau was added the superlative delight of choosing special frocks for Penelope’s appearances on tour in the States. Lord St. John had insisted upon presenting the trousseau, Barry Seymour made himself responsible for the concert gowns, and Kitty announced that the wedding was to take place from her house in Green Street.

For the first time in the whole of her brave, hard-working life, Penelope knew what it was to spend as she had seen other women spend, without being driven into choosing the second-best material or the less becoming frock for the unsatisfying reason that it was the cheaper. The two men had given Kitty carte blanche as regards expenditure and she proceeded to take full advantage of the fact, promptly quelling any tentative suggestions towards economy which Penelope, rather overwhelmed by Mrs. Seymour’s lavish notions, occasionally put forth.

The date on which the concert party sailed was already fixed; leaving a bare month in which to accomplish the necessary preparations, and the time seemed positively to fly. Nan evaded taking part in the shopping expeditions which filled the days for Penelope and Kitty, since each new purchase, each frail, chiffony frock or beribboned box which arrived from dressmaker or milliner, served only to remind her that the approaching parting with Penelope was drawing nearer.

In women’s friendships there must always come a big wrench when one or other of two friends meets the man who is her mate. The old, tried friendship retreats suddenly into second place—sometimes for a little while it almost seems as though it had petered out altogether. But when once the plunge has been taken, and the strangeness and wonder and glory of the new life have become ordinary and commonplace with the sweet commonness of dear, familiar, daily things, then the old friendship comes stealing back—deeper and more understanding, perhaps, than in the days before one of the two friends had come into her woman’s kingdom.

Nan sat staring into the fire—for the first breath of autumn had already chilled the air—-trying to realise that to-day was actually the eve of Penelope’s wedding-day. It seemed incredible—even more incredible that Kitty and she should have gone off laughing together to see about some detail of the next day’s arrangements which had been overlooked.

She was suddenly conscious that if this were the eve of her own marriage with Roger laughter would be far enough away from her. Regarded dispassionately, her decision to marry him because she couldn’t marry the man she loved, seemed rather absurd and illogical. It was like going into a library and, having discovered that the book which you required was out, accepting one you didn’t really want instead—just because the

librarian, who knew nothing whatever about your tastes in literature, had offered it to you. You always began the substitute hopefully and generally ended up by being thoroughly bored with it and marvelling how on earth anybody could possibly have found it interesting! Nan wondered if she would get bored with her substituted volume.

Page 112

She had rushed recklessly into her engagement, regarding marriage with Roger much as though it were a stout set of palings with “No Right of Way” written across them in large letters. Outside, the waves of emotion might surge in vain, while within, she and Roger would settle down to the humdrum placidity of married life. But the dull, ceaseless ache at her heart made her sometimes question whether anything in the world could keep at bay the insistent claim of love.

She tried to reassure herself. At least there would always remain her music and the passionate delight of creative work. It was true she had written nothing recently. She had been living at too high an emotional strain to have any surplus energy for originating, and she knew from experience that all creative work demands both strength and spirit, heart and soul—everything that is in you, if it is to be worth while.

These and other disconnected thoughts flitted fugitively through her mind as she sat waiting for Penelope’s return. Vague visions of the future; memories—hastily slurred over; odd, rather frightened musings on the morrow’s ceremony, when Penny would bind herself to Ralph “. . . *in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation*.”

Rather curiously Nan reflected that she had never actually read the Marriage Service—-only caught chance phrases here and there in the course of other people’s marriages. She switched on the light and hunted about for a book of Common Prayer, turning the pages with quick, nervous fingers till she came to the one headed: *The Solemnization of Matrimony*. She began to read.

“*I require and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed . . .*”

How tremendously solemn and searching it sounded! She never remembered being struck with the awfulness of matrimony when she had so light-heartedly attended the weddings of her girl friends. Her principal recollection was of small, white-surpliced choir-boys shrilly singing “The Voice that breathed o’er Eden,” and then, for a brief space, of a confused murmur of responsive voices, the clergyman and the bride and bridegroom dividing the honours fairly evenly between them, while the congregation rustled their wedding garments as they craned forward in their efforts to obtain a good view of the bride.

Followed the withdrawal into the vestry for the signing of the register, when everybody seemed to be kissing everybody else with considerable lack of discrimination. Finally, to the inspiriting strains of Mendelssohn—who evidently saw nothing sad or sorrowful in a wedding, but only joy and triumph and the completing of life—the whole company, bride and bridegroom, relatives and guests, trooped down the aisle and dwindled away in cars and carriages, to meet once more, like an incoming tide, at the house of the bride’s parents.

Page 113

But this! . . . This solemn "*I charge ye both . . .*"—Nan read on—"*If either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony, ye do now confess it*."

There would certainly be an impediment in her own case, since the bride was in love with someone other than the bridegroom. Only, in the strange world we live in, that is not regarded in the light of a "lawful" impediment, so she wouldn't need to confess it—at least, not to anyone except Roger, and her sense of fair play had already impelled her to do that.

Her eyes flew along the words of the service, skimming hastily over the tender beauty of the vows the man and woman give each other. For they are only beautiful if love informs them. To Nan they were rather terrifying with their suggestion of irrevocability.

"*So long as ye both shall live . . .*"

Why, she and Roger were young enough to anticipate thirty or forty years together! Thirty or forty years—before death came and released them from each other.

"*Then shall the priest join their right hands together and say, Those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.*"

Nan stretched out a slender right hand and regarded it curiously. Some time to-morrow—at about half-past twelve, she supposed—the priest would join the hands of Penelope and Ralph and henceforth there would be no sundering "till death did them part."

Driven by circumstances, she had not stopped to consider the possible duration of marriage when she pledged her word to Roger, and during the time which had elapsed since she left Mallow the vision of the Roger who had sometimes jarred upon her, irritating her by his narrowed outlook and his lack of perception, had inevitably faded considerably, as the memory of temperamental irritations is apt to do as soon as absence has secured relief from them.

Latterly, Nan had been feeling quite affectionately disposed towards him—he was really rather a dear in some ways! And she had accepted an invitation to spend part of the winter at Trenby Hall.

The Seymours had planned to go abroad for several months and, since Penelope would be married and on tour, it had seemed a very natural solution of matters. So that when Lady Gertrude's rather stiffly-worded letter of invitation had arrived, Nan accepted it, determining in her own mind that, during the visit, she would try to overcome her mother-in-law's dislike to her. The knowledge of how much Roger loved her and of how little she was really able to give him in return, made her feel that it was only playing the game to please him in any way she could. And she recognised that to a man of Roger's

ideas, the fact that his wife and mother were on good terms with one another would be a source of very definite satisfaction.

But now, as she re-read the solemn phrase: *So long as ye both shall live*, she was seized with panic. To be married for ten, twenty, forty years, perhaps, with never the hand of happy chance—the wonderful, enthralling “might be” of life—to help her to endure it! With a little stifled cry she sprang up and began pacing the room restlessly—-up and down, up and down, her slim hands clenching and unclenching as she walked.

Page 114

Presently—she could, not have told whether it was five minutes or five hours later—she heard the click of a latch-key in the lock. At the sound, the imperative need for self-control rushed over her. Penelope, of all people, must never know—never guess that she wasn't happy in her engagement to Roger. She didn't intend to spoil Penny's own happiness by the faintest cloud of worry on her account.

She snatched up the prayer-book she had let fall and switching off the lights, dropped down on the hearthrug just as Penelope came in, fresh and glowing, from her walk.

"All in the dark?" she queried as she entered. "You look like a kitten curled up by the fire." She stooped and kissed Nan with unwonted tenderness. Then she turned up the lights and drew the curtains across the window, shutting out the grey October twilight.

"Penny," said Nan, fingering the prayer-book, "have you ever read the marriage service?"

Penelope's face lightened with a sudden radiance.

"Yes, isn't it beautiful?"

Nan stared at her.

"Beautiful?" She gave an odd little laugh. "It sounds to me much more like a commination service. Doesn't it frighten you?"

"Not a bit." Penelope's serenely happy eyes confirmed her quick denial.

"Well"—Nan regarded her contemplatively—"it rubs in all the dreadful things that may happen to you—like ill-health, and poverty, and 'for worse'—whatever that may mean—-and dins into your ears the fact that nothing but death can release you."

"You're looking at the wrong side of it, Nan. It seems to me to show just exactly *how much* a husband and wife may be to each other, and how—together—they can face all the ills that flesh is heir to."

"Reminds one of a visit to the dentist—you can screw your courage up more easily if someone goes with you," remarked Nan grimly.

"You're simply determined to look on the ugly side of things," protested Penelope.

"And yet, Penny dear, at one time you used to scold me for being too idealistic in my notions!"

But Penelope declined to shift from her present standpoint.

“And now you’re expecting so little that, when your turn comes, you’ll be beautifully disappointed,” she remarked as she left the room in order to finish some odds and ends of packing.

* * * * * *

In her capacity of sole bridesmaid Nan followed Penelope’s tall, white-clad figure up the aisle. Each step they made was taking her friend further away from her—nearer to the man whom the next half-hour would make her husband. With a swift leap of the imagination, she visioned herself in Penelope’s place, leaning on Lord St. John’s arm—-and the man who waited for her at the chancel steps was Roger! She swayed a moment, then by an immense effort forced herself back to the reality of things, following steadily once more in the wake of her uncle and Penelope.

Page 115

There seemed to her something dream-like in their slow progression. The atmosphere was heavy with the scent of flowers, a sea of blurred faces loomed up at her from the pews on either side, and the young, sweet voices of the choristers soared high above the organ. She stole a glance at her uncle. He looked frailer than usual, she thought, with a sudden pang of apprehension; perhaps the heat of the summer had told upon him a little. Then her gaze ran on to where the bridegroom stood, the tall altar-lights flickering behind him, his face turned towards the body of the church, and his eyes, very bright and steady, resting on Penelope as she approached.

He stepped forward quickly as she neared the chancel and Nan saw that a smile passed between them as he took his place beside her. A feeling of reassurance crept over her, quieting the sense of almost breathless panic which had for a moment overwhelmed her when she had pictured herself in Penny's place. There was dear old Ralph, looking quite ordinary and matter-of-fact, only rather sprucer than usual in his brand-new wedding garments. The feeling of reassurance deepened. Marriage wasn't so appalling. Good heavens! Dozens of people were married every day and she was quite sure they were not all wildly in love with each other.

Then the service commenced and the soft rise and fall of responsive voices murmured through the church a little space. . . .

It was over very quickly—Nan almost gasped to find how astonishingly short a time it takes to settle one of the biggest things in life. In a few minutes the scented dimness of the church was exchanged for the pale gold of the autumn sunlight, the hush of prayer for the throb of waiting cars.

Later still, when the afternoon was spent, came the last handshakings and kisses. A rising chorus of good wishes, a dust of confetti, the closing of a door, and then the purr of a car as Penelope and Ralph, were borne away on the first stage of that new, untried life into which they were adventuring together.

Nan's face wore a queer look of strain as she turned back into the house. Once more the shadow of the future had fallen across her—the shadow of her marriage with Roger Trenby.

"My dear"—she looked up to meet Lord St. John's kindly gaze. "My dear, come into the dining-room. A glass of champagne is what you want. You're overdone."

He poured it out and mechanically Nan lifted it to her lips, then set it down on the table, untasted, with a hand that shook.

"I don't want it," she said. Then, unevenly: "Uncle, I can't—I can't ever marry—"

“Drink this,” insisted St. John. He held out the champagne once more, quietly ignoring her stumbling utterance.

Nan pushed the glass aside. The whole of her misery was on the tip of her tongue.

“Listen Uncle David—you must listen!” she began rather wildly. “I don’t care for Ro—”

Page 116

“No, my dear. Tell me nothing.” He checked the impending confession hastily. He guessed that it had some hearing upon her marriage with Trenby. If so, it would be better left unsaid. Just now she was tired and unstrung; later, she might regret her impulsive confidence. He wanted to save her from that.

“Don’t tell me anything. What’s done is done.” He paused, then added: “Don’t forget, Nan, a Davenant’s word is his bond—always.”

She responded to the demand in his voice as a thoroughbred answers to the touch of the whip. The champagne glass trembled a little in her fingers, as she took it from him, and clicked against her teeth. She swallowed the wine and replaced the glass on the table.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. But it wasn’t the wine for which she thanked him. She knew, just as he had known, that she had been on the verge of utter break-down. Her nerves, on edge throughout the whole marriage ceremony she had just witnessed, had almost given way beneath the strain, undermining the courage with which she had hitherto faced the future.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PRICE

A sense of bustle and mild excitement pervaded Trenby Hall. The hounds were to meet some distance away, and on a hunting morning it invariably necessitated the services of at least two of the menservants and possibly those of an observant maid—who had noted where last he had left his tobacco pouch—to get Roger off successfully.

“My hunting boots, Jenkins!” he demanded as he issued from the library. “And look sharp with them! Flask and sandwich-case—that’s right.” He busied himself bestowing these two requisites in his pockets.

Nan, cool and unperturbed; joined him in the hall, a small, amused smile on her face. She had stayed at Trenby long enough by now to be well used to the cyclone which habitually accompanied Roger’s departure to the meet, and the boyish unreasonableness of it—seeing that the well-trained servants invariably had everything in readiness for him—rather appealed to her. He was like a big, overgrown school-boy returning to school and greatly concerned as to whether his cricket-bat and tuck-box were safely included amongst his baggage.

“You, darling?” Roger nodded at her perfunctorily, preoccupied with the necessities of the moment. “Now, have I got my pipe?”—slapping his pockets to ascertain. To miss his customary pipe as he trotted leisurely home after the day’s hunting was

unthinkable. “Matches! I’ve no matches! Here, Morton”—to the butler who was standing by with Roger’s hunting-crop in his hand. “Got any matches?”

Morton produced a box at once. He had been in Roger’s service from boyhood, fought side by side with him in Flanders, and no demand of his master’s had yet found him unprepared. Nan was wont to declare that had Roger requested the Crown jewels, Morton would have immediately produced them from his pocket.

Page 117

Outside, a groom was patiently walking a couple of horses up and down. Quivering, velvety nostrils snuffed the keen air while gleaming black hoofs danced gently on the gravel drive, executing little side steps of excitement—for no hunting day comes round but that in some mysterious way the unerring instinct of the four-legged hunter acquaints him of the fact. Further along clustered the pack, the hounds padding restlessly here and there, but kept within bounds by the occasional crack of a long-lashed crop or a gruff command from one of the whips.

Nan was always conscious of a curious intermingling of feeling when, as now, she watched Roger ride away at the head of his hounds. The day she had almost lost her life at the kennels recurred to her mind inevitably—those moments of swift and terrible danger when it seemed as though nothing could save her. And with that memory came another—the memory of Roger flinging himself forward to the rescue, forcing back with bare hands the great hound which had attacked her. A quick thrill—the thrill of primitive woman—ran through her at the recollection. No woman can remain unmoved by physical courage—more especially if it is her own imperative need which has called it forth.

That was the side of Roger which she liked best to dwell upon. But she was rapidly learning that he had other less heroically attractive sides. No man who has been consistently spoiled and made much of by a couple of women is likely to escape developing a certain amount of selfishness, and Nan had already discovered that Roger was somewhat inclined to play the autocrat. As he grew accustomed to her presence in the house he settled down more or less tranquilly into the normal ways of existence, and sometimes, when things went awry, he would lose his temper pretty badly, as is the natural way of man.

Unfortunately, Nan's honest endeavours to get on better terms with her future mother-in-law met with no success. Lady Gertrude had presented an imperturbably polite and hostile front almost from the moment of the girl's arrival at the Hall. Even at dinner the first evening, she had cast a disapproving eye upon Nan's frock—a diaphanous little garment in black: with veiled gleams of hyacinth and gold beneath the surface and apparently sustained about its wearer by a thread of the same glistening hyacinth and gold across each slender shoulder.

With the quickness of a squirrel Isobel Carson, demurely garbed as befitted a poor relative, noted the disapprobation conveyed by Lady Gertrude's sweeping glance.

"I suppose that's what they're wearing now in town?" she asked conversationally of Nan across the table.

Roger looked up and seeing the young, privet-white throat and shoulders which gleamed above the black, smiled contentedly.

“It’s jolly pretty, isn’t it?” he rejoined, innocently unaware that any intention lurked behind his cousin’s query.

Page 118

“It might be—if there were more of it,” said Lady Gertrude icily. She had not failed to notice earlier that Nan was wearing the abbreviated skirt of the moment—though in no way an exaggerated form of it—revealing delectable shoes and cobwebby stockings which seemed to cry out a gay defiance to the plain and serviceable footgear which she herself affected.

“It does look just a tiny bit daring—in the country,” murmured Isobel deprecatingly. “You see, we’re used to such quiet fashions here.”

“I don’t think anything can be much quieter than black,” replied Nan evenly.

There for the moment the matter rested, but the next day Roger had asked her, rather diffidently, if she couldn’t find something plainer to wear in an evening.

“I thought you liked the dress,” she countered.

“Well—yes. But—”

“But your mother has been talking t0 you about it? Is that it?”

Roger nodded.

“Even Isobel thought it a little outre for country wear,” he said eagerly, making matters worse instead of better, in the blundering way a man generally contrives to do when he tries to settle a feminine difference of opinion.

Nan’s foot tapped the floor impatiently and a spark of anger lit itself in her eyes.

“I don’t think my choice of clothes has anything to do with Miss Carson,” she answered sharply.

“No, sweetheart, of course it hasn’t, really. But I know you’d like to please my mother—-and she’s not used to these new styles, you see.”

He stumbled on awkwardly, then drew her into his arms and kissed her.

“To please me—wear something else,” he said. Although unformulated even to himself, Roger’s creed was of the old school. He quite honestly believed that a woman’s chief object in life was to please her male belongings, and it seemed to him a perfectly good arrangement.

Not to please him, but because she was genuinely anxious to win Lady Gertrude’s liking, Nan yielded. Perhaps if she conceded this particular point it would pave the way towards a better understanding.

“Very well,” she said, smiling. “That especial frock shan’t appear again while I’m down here. But it’s a duck of a frock, really, Roger!”—with a feminine sigh of regret.

She was to find, however, as time went on, that there were very many other points over which she would have to accept Lady Gertrude’s rulings. Punctuality at meals was regarded at Trenby Hall as one of the laws of the Medes and Persians, and Nan, accustomed to the liberty generally accorded a musician in such matters, failed on more than one occasion to appear at lunch with the promptness expected of her.

In the West Parlour——a sitting-room which Lady Gertrude herself never used—there was a fairly good piano, and here Nan frequently found refuge, playing her heart out in the welcome solitude the room afforded. Inevitably she would forget the time, remaining entirely oblivious of such mundane things as meals. Then she would be sharply recalled to the fact that she had committed an unforgivable sin by receiving a stately message from Lady Gertrude to the effect that they were waiting lunch for her.

Page 119

On such occasions Nan sometimes felt that it was almost a physical impossibility to enter that formal dining-room and face the glacial disapproval manifest on Lady Gertrude's face, the quick glance of condolence which Isobel would throw her—and which always somehow filled her with distrust—and the irritability which Roger was scarcely able to conceal.

Roger's annoyance was generally due to the veiled criticism which his mother and cousin contrived to exude prior to her appearance. Nothing definite—an intonation here, a double-edged phrase there—but enough to show him that his future wife fell far short of the standard Lady Gertrude had in mind for her. It nettled him, and accordingly he felt irritated with Nan for giving his mother a fresh opportunity for disapprobation.

They were all unimportant things—these small jars and clashes of habit and opinion. But to Nan, who had been used to such absolute freedom, they were like so many links of a chain which held and chafed her. She fretted under them as a caged bird frets. Gradually, too, she was awakening to the limitations of the life which would be hers when she married Roger, realising that, much as he loved her, he was quite unable to supply her with either the kind of companionship or the mental stimulus her temperament craved and which the little coterie of clever, brilliant people who had been her intimates in town had given her in full measure. The Trenbys' circle of friends interested her not at all. The men mostly of the sturdy, sporting type, bored her ineffably, and she found the women, with their perpetual local gossip and discussion of domestic difficulties, dull and uninspiring. Of the McBains, unfortunately, she saw very little, owing to the distance, between the Hall and Trevarthen Wood.

It was, therefore, with a cry of delight that she welcomed Sandy, who arrived in his two-seater shortly after Roger had ridden off to the meet. Lady Gertrude and Isobel had already gone out together, bent upon some parochial errand in the village, so that Nan was alone with her thoughts. And they were not particularly pleasant ones.

"Sandy!" She greeted him with outstretched hands. "You angel boy! I wasn't even hoping to see you for another few weeks or so."

"Just this minute arrived—thought it about time I looked you up again," returned Sandy cheerfully. "I met Trenby about a mile away and scattered his horses and hounds to the four winds of heaven with my stink-pot."

"Yes," agreed Nan reminiscently. "Why does your car smell so atrociously, Sandy?"

"It's only in slow movements—never in a presto. That's why I'm always getting held up for exceeding the speed limit. I'm bound to let her rip—out of consideration to the passersby."

“Well, I’m awfully glad you felt moved to come over here this morning. I’m—I’m rather fractious to-day, I think. Do you suppose Lady Gertrude will ask you to stay to lunch?”

Page 120

“I hope so. But as it’s only about ten-thirty a.m., lunch is merely a futurist dream at present.”

“I know. I wonder why there are such enormous intervals between meals in the country?” said Nan speculatively. “In town there’s never any time to get things in and meals are a perfect nuisance. Here they seem to be the only breaks in the day.”

“That,” replied Sandy sententiously, “is because you’re leading an idle existence. You’re not doing anything—so of course there’s no time to do it in.”

“Not doing anything? Well, what is there to do?” She flung out her hands with an odd little gesture of hopelessness. “Besides, I am doing something—I learned how to make puddings yesterday, and to-morrow I’m to be initiated into soup jellies—you know, the kind of stuff you trot around to old women in the village at Christmas time.”

“Can’t the cook make them?”

“Of course she can. But Lady Gertrude is appalled at my lack of domestic knowledge—so soup jellies it has to be.”

Sandy regarded her thoughtfully. She seemed spiritless, and the charming face held a gravity that was quite foreign to it. In the searching winter sunlight he could even discern one or two faint lines about the violet-blue eyes, while the curving mouth, with its provocative short upper lip, drooped rather wearily at its corners.

“You’re bored stiff,” he told her firmly. “Why don’t you run up to town for a few days and see your pals there?”

Nan shrugged her shoulders.

“For the excellent reason that half of them are away, or—or married or something.”

Only a few days previously she had seen the announcement of Maryon Rooke’s marriage in the papers, and although the fact that he was married had now no power to wound her, it was like the snapping of yet another link with that happy, irresponsible, Bohemian life which she and Penelope had shared together.

“Sandy”—she spoke impetuously. “After I’m—married, I don’t think I shall ever go to London again. It would be like peeping into heaven. Then the door would slam and I’d come back—here! I’m out of it now—out of everything. The others will all go on singing and playing and making books and pictures—right in the heart of it all. While I shall be stuck away here . . . by myself . . . making soup jellies!”

She sprang up and walked restlessly to the window, staring out at the undulating meadowland.

“I’m sick of the sight of those fields!” she exclaimed almost violently. “The same deadly dull green fields day after day. If—if one of them would only turn pink for a change it would be a relief!” Her breath caught in a strangled sob.

Sandy followed her to the window.

“Look here, Nan, you can’t go on like this.” There was an unaccustomed decision in his tones; the boyish inflection had gone. It was a man who was speaking, and determinedly, too. “You’ve no business to be everlastingly gazing at green fields. You ought to be turning ’em into music so that the people who’ve got only bricks and mortar to stare at can get a whiff of them.”

Page 121

Nan gazed at him in astonishment—at this new, surprising Sandy who was talking to her with the forcefulness of a man ten years his senior.

“As for being ‘out of it,’ as you say,” he went on emphatically. “If you are, it’s only by your own consent. Anyone who writes as you can need never be out of it. If you’d only do the big stuff you’re capable of doing, you’d be ‘in it’ right enough—half the time confabbing with singers and conductors, and the other half glad to get back to your green fields and the blessed quiet. If you were like me, now—not a damn bit of good because I’ve no technical knowledge . . .”

In an instant her quick sympathies responded to the note of regret which he could not keep quite out of his voice.

“Sandy, I’m a beast to grouse. It’s true—you’ve had much harder luck.” She spoke eagerly, then paused, checked by a sudden piercing memory. “But—but music . . . after all, it isn’t the only thing.”

“No,” he returned cheerfully. “But it will do quite well to go on with. Let’s toddle along to the piano and amuse each other.”

She nodded, and together they made their way to the West Parlour.

“Have you written anything new?” he asked, turning over some sheets of scribbled, manuscript that were lying on the piano. “Let’s hear it.”

Rather reluctantly she played him a few odd bits of her recent work—the outcome of dull, depressing days.

Sandy listened, and as he listened his lips set in an uncompromising straight line.

“Well, I never heard more maudlin piffle in my life!” was his frank comment when she had finished. “If you can’t do better than that, you’d better shut the piano and go digging potatoes.”

Nan laughed rather mirthlessly.

“I don’t know what sort of a hand you’d make at potato digging,” pursued Sandy. “But apparently this is the net result of your musical studies”—and, seating himself at the piano, he rattled off a caustic parody of her performance.

“Rank sentimentalism, Nan,” he said coolly, as he dropped his hands from the keys. “And you know it as well as I do.”

“Yes, I suppose it is. But it’s impossible to do any serious work here. Lady Gertrude fairly radiates disapproval whenever I spend an hour or two at the piano. Oh!”—her

sense of humour rising uppermost for a moment—“she asked me to play to them one evening, so I gave them some Debussy—out of sheer devilment, I think”—smiling a little—“and at the end Lady Gertrude said politely: ’Thank you. And now, might we have something with a little more tune in it?”

Sandy shouted with delight.

“After all, people like that are awfully refreshing,” he said at last.

“At times,” admitted Nan. “All the same,” she went on dispiritedly, “one must be in the right atmosphere to do anything worth while.”

“Well, I’m exuding as much as I can,” said Sandy. “Atmosphere, I mean. Look here, what about that concerto for pianoforte and orchestra which you had in mind? Have you done anything to it yet?”

Page 122

She shook her head.

“Then get on to it quick—and stick at it. Don’t waste your time writing the usual type of sentimental ballad-song—a degree or two below par.”

Nan was silent for a few minutes. Then:

“Sandy,” she said, “you’re rather like a dose of physic—wholesome but unpalatable. I’ll get to work to-morrow. Now let’s go and forage for some food. You’ve made me fearfully hungry—like a long sermon in church.”

Christmas came, bringing with it, at Roger’s suggestion, a visit from Lord St. John, and his presence at the house worked wonders in the way of transforming the general atmosphere. Even Lady Gertrude thawed beneath the charm of his kindly, whimsical personality, and to Nan the few days he spent at the Hall were of more value than a dozen tonics. She was no longer shut in alone with her own thoughts—with him she could talk freely and naturally. Even the under-current of hostile criticism of which she was almost hourly conscious ceased to fret her nerves.

Insensibly Lord St. John’s evident affection for his niece and quiet appreciation of her musicianship influenced Lady Gertrude for the time being, softening her attitude towards her future daughter-in-law, even though it brought her no nearer understanding her. Isobel, alertly capable of adapting herself to the prevailing atmosphere, reflected in her manner the same change. She had long since learned to keep the private workings of her mind locked up—when it seemed advisable.

“I’m glad to see you in what will one day be your own home, Nan,” said Lord St. John. They were sitting alone together in the West Parlour, chatting in the cosy intimacy of the firelight.

“I’d rather you saw it when it *is* my own home,” she returned with a rueful smile. “It will look very different then, I hope.”

“Yet I’m glad to see it now,” he repeated.

There was a slight emphasis on the word “now,” and Nan glanced up in surprise.

“Why now particularly?” she asked, smiling. “Are you going to cold-shoulder me after I’m married?”

Lord St. John shook his head.

“That’s very likely, isn’t it?” he said, smiling. “No, my dear, that’s not the reason.” He paused as though searching for words, then went on quietly: “The silver chord is getting a bit frayed, you know, Nan. I’m an old man, and I’m just beginning to know it.”

She caught her breath quickly and her face whitened. Then she forced a laugh.

“Nonsense, Uncle David! Kitty always declares you’re the youngest of us all.”

His eyes smiled back at her.

“Unfortunately, my dear, Time takes no account of a juvenile spirit. His job is with this body of ours. But the spirit,” he added dreamingly, “and its youthfulness—that’s for eternity.”

“But you look quite well—*quite* well,” she insisted. And her manner was the more positive because in her inmost mind she thought she could detect a slight increase of that frail appearance she had first noticed on Penelope’s wedding-day.

Page 123

“I’ve had hints, Nan—Nature’s wireless. So I saw Jermyn Carter a few weeks back—”

“What did he say?” She interrupted swiftly.

“That at my age a man mustn’t expect his heart to be the same as in his twenties.”

A silence fell between them. Then Nan’s hand stole out and clasped his. She had never imagined a world without this good comrade in it. The bare thought of it brought a choking lump into her throat, robbing her of words. Presently St. John spoke again.

“I’ve nothing to grizzle about. I’ve known love and I’ve known friendship—the two biggest things in life. And, after all, since . . . since she went, I’ve only been waiting. The world, without her, has never been quite the same.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“You Davenant women,” he went on more lightly, “are never loved and forgotten.”

“And we don’t love—and forget,” said Nan in a low voice.

St. John looked at her with eyes that held a very tender comprehension.

“Tell me, Nan, was it—Peter Mallory?”

She met his glance bravely for a moment.

“Yes,” she answered at last, very quietly. “It was Peter.” With a sudden shudder she bent forward and covered her face with her hands. “And I can’t forget,” she said hoarsely.

A long, heavy silence fell between them.

“Then why—” began Lord St. John.

Nan lifted her head.

“Why did I promise Roger?” she broke in. “Because it seemed the only way. I—I was afraid! And then there was Penelope—and Ralph. . . . Oh, it was a ghastly mistake. I know now. But—but there’s Roger . . . he cares . . .”

“Yes. There’s Roger,” he said gravely. “And you’ve given him your word. You can’t draw back now.” There was a note of sternness in the old man’s voice—the sternness of a man who has a high creed of honour and who has always lived up to it, no matter what it cost.

“Remember, Nan, no Davenant was ever a coward in the face of difficulties. They always pulled through somehow.”

“Or ran away—like Angele de Varincourt.”

“She only ran from one difficulty into the arms of a hundred others. No wrong can be righted by another wrong.”

“Can any wrong ever be really righted?” she demanded bitterly.

“We have to pay for our mistakes—each in our turn.” He himself had paid to the uttermost farthing. “Is it a very heavy price, Nan?”

She turned her face away a little.

“It will be . . . higher than I expected,” she acknowledged slowly.

“Well, then, pay up. Don’t make—Roger—pay for your blunder. You have other things—your music, for instance. Many people have to go through life with only their work for company. . . . Whereas you are Roger’s whole world.”

With the New Year Lord St. John returned to town. Nan missed him every minute of the day, but she had drawn new strength and steadfastness from his kindly counsels. He understood both the big tragedies of life—which often hold some brief, perfect memory to make them bearable—and those incessant, gnat-like irritations which uncongenial fellowship involves.

Page 124

Somehow he had the faculty of relegating small personal vexations to their proper place in the scheme of things—thrusting them far into the background. It was as though someone drew you to the window and, ignoring the small, man-made flower-beds of the garden with their insistent crop of weeds, the circumscribed lawns, and the foolish, twisting paths that led to nowhere, pointed you to the distant landscape where the big breadths of light and shadow, the broad draughtmanship of God, stretched right away to the dim blue line of the horizon.

CHAPTER XX

THE CAGE DOOR

For the first few days succeeding Lord St. John's departure from Trenby Hall, matters progressed comparatively smoothly. Then, as his influence waned with absence, the usual difficulties reappeared, the old hostilities—hostilities of outlook and generation—-arising once more betwixt Nan and Lady Gertrude. Mutual understanding is impossible between two people whose sense of values is fundamentally opposed, and music, the one thing that had counted all through Nan's life, was a matter of supreme unimportance to the older woman. She regarded it—or, indeed, any other form of art, for that matter—as amongst the immaterial fripperies of life, something to be put aside at any moment in favour of social or domestic duties. It signified even less to her than it did to Eliza McBain, to whom it at least represented one of the lures of Satan—and for this reason could not be entirely discounted.

Since Sandy's stimulating visit Nan had devoted considerable time to the composition of her concerto, working at it with a recrudescence of her old enthusiasm, and the work had been good for her. It had carried her out of herself, preventing her from dwelling continually upon the past. Unfortunately, however, the hours she spent in the seclusion of the West Parlour were not allowed to pass without comment.

"It seems to take you a long time to compose a new piece," remarked Isobel at dinner one day, the trite expression "new piece" very evidently culled from her school-day memories.

Nan smiled across at her.

"A concerto's a pretty big undertaking, you see," she explained.

"Rather an unnecessary one, I should have thought, as you are so soon to be married." Lady Gertrude spoke with her usual acid brevity. "It certainly prevents our enjoying as much of your society as we should wish."

Nan flushed scarlet at the implied slur on her behaviour as a guest in the house, even though she recognised the injustice of it. An awkward pause ensued. Isobel, having

started the ball rolling, seemed content to let things take their course without interference, while Roger's shaggy brows drew together in a heavy frown—though whether he were displeased by his mother's comment, or by Nan's having given her cause for it, it was impossible to say.

Page 125

“This afternoon, for instance,” pursued Lady Gertrude, “Isobel and I paid several calls in the neighbourhood, and in each case your absence was a disappointment to our friends—very naturally.”

“I—I’m sorry,” stammered Nan. She found it utterly incomprehensible that anyone should expect her to break off in the middle of an afternoon’s inspiration in order to pay a duty call upon some absolute strangers—whose disappointment was probably solely due to baulked curiosity concerning Roger’s future wife.

Isobel laughed lightly and let fly one of her little two-edged shafts.

“I expect you think we’re a lot of very commonplace people, Nan,” she commented. “Own up, now!” challengingly.

Lady Gertrude’s eyes flashed like steel.

“Hardly that, I hope,” she said coldly.

“Well, we’re none of us in the least artistic,” persisted her niece, perfectly aware that her small thrusts were as irritating to Lady Gertrude and Roger as the picador’s darts to the bull in the arena. “So of course we must appear rather Philistine compared with Nan’s set in London.”

Roger levelled a keen glance at Nan. There was suppressed anger and a searching, almost fierce enquiry in his eyes beneath which she shrank. That imperious temper of his was not difficult to rouse, as she had discovered on more than one occasion since she had come to Trenby Hall, and she felt intensely annoyed with Isobel, who was apparently unable to see that her ill-timed observations were goading the pride of both Roger and his mother.

“Silence evidently gives consent,” laughed Isobel, as Nan, absorbed in her own reflections for the moment, vouchsafed no contradiction to her last remark.

Nan met the other’s mocking glance defiantly. With a sudden wilfulness, born of the incessant opposition she encountered, she determined to let Miss Carson’s second challenge go unanswered. She had tried—tried desperately—to win the affection, or even the bare liking, of Roger’s women-kind, and she had failed. It was all just so much useless effort. Henceforward they might think of her what they chose.

The remainder of the meal passed in a strained and uncomfortable manner. Lady Gertrude and Isobel discussed various matters pertaining to the village Welfare Club, while Roger preserved an impenetrable silence, and though Nan made a valiant pretence at eating, lest Lady Gertrude’s gimlet eyes should observe her lack of appetite and her thin, disdainful voice comment on the fact, she felt all the time as though the next mouthful must inevitably choke her.

The long, formal meal came to an end at last, and she rose from the table with a sigh of relief and accompanied the other two women out of the room, leaving Roger to smoke his pipe alone as usual. An instant later, to her surprise, she heard his footstep and found that he had followed them into the hall and was standing on the threshold of the library.

Page 126

“Come in here, Nan,” he said briefly.

Somewhat reluctantly she followed him into the room. He closed the door behind her, then swung round on his heel so that they stood fronting one another.

At the sight of his face she recoiled a step in sheer nervous astonishment. It was a curious ashen-white, and from beneath drawn brows his hawk’s eyes seemed positively to blaze at her.

“Roger,” she stammered, “what—what is it?”

“Is it true?” he demanded, ignoring her halting question, and fixing her with a glance that seemed to penetrate right through her.

“Is—is what true?” she faltered.

“Is it true—what Isobel said—that you look down on us because we’re countrified, that you’re still hankering after that precious artistic crew of yours in London?”

He spoke violently—so violently that it roused Nan’s spirit. She turned away from him.

“Don’t be so absurd, Roger,” she said contemptuously. “Isobel was only joking. It was very silly of her, but it’s sillier still for you to take any notice of what she said.”

“She was *not* joking. You’ve shown it clearly enough—ever since you came here—that you’re dissatisfied—bored! Do you suppose I haven’t seen it? I’m not blind! And I won’t stand it! If your music is going to come between us, I’ll smash the piano—”

“Roger! You ridiculous person!”

She was smiling now. Something in his anger reminded her of an enraged small boy. It woke in her the eternal motherhood which lies in every woman and she felt that she wanted to comfort him. She could forgive him his violence. In his furious antagonism towards the art which meant so much to her, she traced the combined influence of Lady Gertrude and Isobel. Not merely the latter’s pin-pricks at dinner this particular evening, but the constant pressure of criticism of which she was the subject.

“You ridiculous person! If you did smash the piano, it wouldn’t make me any less a musician. And”—lightly—“I really can’t have you being jealous of an inanimate thing like a grand piano!”

Roger’s frown relaxed a little. His threat to smash the piano sounded foolish even in his own ears. But he hated the instrument none the less, although without precisely knowing why. Subconsciously he was aware that the real Nan still eluded him. She was his in the eyes of the world—pledged to be his wife—yet he knew that although he

might possess her body it would bring him no nearer the possession of her soul and spirit. That other man—the one for whom she had told him she once cared—held those! Trenby was not given to psychological analysis, but in a blind, bewildered fashion he felt that that thing of wood and ivory and stretched strings represented in concrete form everything that stood betwixt himself and Nan.

"Have I nothing else—*no one else*"—significantly——"to be jealous of?" he demanded. "Answer me!"

Page 127

With a swift movement he gripped her by the shoulder, forcing her to face him again, his eyes still stormy. She winced involuntarily under the pressure of his fingers, but forced herself to answer him.

“You know,” she said quietly. “I told you when you asked me to be your wife that—that there was—someone—for whom I cared. But, if you believed *all* I told you then—you know, too, that you have no reason to be jealous.”

“You mean because you can’t marry him?”—moodily.

“Yes.”

The brief reply acted like a spark to tinder. With a stifled exclamation he caught her up in his arms, crushing his mouth down on hers till her lips felt bruised beneath his kisses.

“It’s not enough!” he said, his voice hoarse and shaken. “It’s not enough! I want you—-the whole of you, Nan—Nan!”

For an instant she struggled against him—almost instinctively. Then, remembering she had given him the right to kiss her if he chose, she yielded, surrendering passively to the fierce tide of his passion.

“Kiss me!” he insisted hotly.

She kissed him obediently. But there was no warmth in her kiss, no answering thrill, and the man knew it. He held her away from him, his sudden passion chilled.

“Is that the best you can do?” he demanded, looking down at her with something grimly ironic in his eyes. She steadied herself to meet his glance.

“It is—really, Roger,” she replied earnestly. “Oh!”—flushing swiftly—“you must know it!”

“Yes”—with a shrug. “I suppose I ought to have known it. I’m only a second string, after all.”

There was so much bitterness in his voice that Nan’s heart was touched to a compassionate understanding.

“Ah! Don’t speak like that!” she cried tremulously. “You know I’m giving you all I can, Roger. I’ve been quite fair with you—quite honest. I told you I had no love to give you, that I could never care for anyone again,—like that. And you said you would be content,” she added with reproach.

“I know I did,” he answered sullenly. “But I’m not. No man who loved you would be content! . . . And I’m never sure of you. . . . You hate it here—”

“But it will be different when we are married,” she said gently. Surely it *would* be different when they were alone together in their own home without the perpetual irritation of Isobel’s malicious little thrusts and Lady Gertrude’s implacability?

“My God, yes! It’ll he different then. I shall have you to *myself*!”

“Your mother?” she questioned, a thought timidly.

“She—and Isobel—will go to the dower house. No”—reading her thoughts—“they won’t like it. They don’t want to go. That’s natural enough. Once I thought—” He checked himself abruptly, wondering how he could ever have conceived it possible that his mother might remain on at the Hall after his marriage. “But not now! I’ll have my wife to myself”—savagely. “Nan, how long am I to wait?”

Page 128

A thrill of dismay ran through her. So far, he had not raised the question as to the actual date of their marriage, and she had been thankful to leave it for settlement at some vaguely distant period.

“Why—why, I couldn’t he married till Kitty comes home,” she faltered.

“I suppose not. When do you expect her back?”

“About the end of the month, I think, or the beginning of February.”

“Then you’ll marry me in April.”

He made the statement with a certain grim arrogance that forbade all contradiction. He was in a curiously uncertain mood, and Nan, anxious not to provoke another storm, assented reluctantly.

“You mean that? You won’t fail me?” His keen eyes searched her face as though he doubted her and sought to wring the truth from her lips.

“Yes,” she said very low. “I mean it.”

He left her then, and a few minutes later, when she had recovered her poise, she rejoined Lady Gertrude and Isobel in the drawing-room.

“You and Roger have been having a very long confab,” remarked Isobel, looking up from the jumper she was knitting. “What does it portend?”

Her sallow, nimble fingers never paused in their work. The soft, even click of the needles went on unbrokenly.

“Nothing immediate,” answered Nan. “He wants me to settle the date of our wedding, that’s all.”

The clicking ceased abruptly.

“And when is it to be?” Isobel’s attention seemed entirely concentrated upon a dropped stitch.

“Some time in April. It will have to depend a little on Mrs. Seymour’s plans. She wants me to be married from her house, just as Penelope was.”

Lady Gertrude was busily engaged upon the making of a utilitarian flannel petticoat for one of her protegees in the village. She anchored her needle carefully in the material before she laid it aside.

“Do you mean from her house in town?” she asked.

“Why, yes, I suppose so.” Nan looked faintly puzzled.

“Then I hope you will re-arrange matters.”

Although Lady Gertrude’s manner was colder and infinitely more precise, yet the short speech held the same arrogance as Roger’s “Then you’ll marry me in April”—the kind of arrogance which calmly assumes that any opposition is out of the question.

“It would be the greatest disappointment to the tenantry,” she continued, “if they were unable to witness the marriage of my son—as they would have done, of course, if he’d married someone of the district. So I hope”—conclusively—“that Mrs. Seymour will arrange for your wedding to take place from Mallow Court.”

She picked up the flannel petticoat and recommenced work upon it again as though the matter were settled, supremely oblivious of the fact that she had succeeded, as usual, in rousing every rebellious feeling her future daughter-in-law possessed.

Page 129

Nan lay long awake that night. Roger's sudden gust of passion had taken her by surprise, filling her with a kind of terror of him. Never before had he shown her that side of himself, and she had somehow taken it for granted that he would not prove a demanding lover. He had been so diffident, so generous at the beginning, that she had been almost ashamed of the poor return which was all that she could make. But now she was suddenly face to face with the fact that he was going to demand far more of her than she was able to give.

She had not realised how much propinquity adds fuel to love's fire. Unknown, even to himself, Roger's passion had been gradually rising towards flood-tide. Man being by nature a contradictory animal, the attitude assumed by his mother and cousin towards the woman who was to be his wife had seemed to fan rather than smother the flame.

All at once the curb had snapped. He wanted Nan, the same Nan with whom he had fallen in love—the inconsequent feminine thing of elusive frocks and absurd, delicious faults and weaknesses—rather than a Nan moulded into shape by Lady Gertrude's iron hand. An intense resentment of his mother's interference had been gradually growing up within him. He would do all the moulding that was required, after matrimony!

Not that he put all this to himself in so many words. But a sense of revolt, an overwhelming jealousy of everyone who made any claim at all on Nan—jealousy even of that merry Bohemian life of hers in which he had had no share—had been slowly gathering within him until it was almost more than he could endure. Isobel's taunts at dinner had half maddened him. Whether he were Philistine or not, Nan had promised to marry him, and he would know neither rest nor peace of mind until that promise were fulfilled.

And Nan, as she lay in bed with wide eyes staring into the darkness, felt as though the door of the cage were slowly closing upon her.

CHAPTER XXI

LADY GERTRUDE'S POINT OF VIEW

It was a cheerless morning. Gusts of fine, sprinkling rain drove hither and thither on a blustering wind, while overhead hung a leaden sky with patches of black cloud scudding raggedly across it.

Nan, coming slowly downstairs to breakfast, regarded the state of the weather as merely in keeping with everything else. The constant friction of her visit to Trenby had been taking its daily toll of her natural buoyancy, and last night's interview with Roger had tried her frayed nerves to the uttermost. This morning, after an almost sleepless night, she felt that to remain there any longer would be more than she could endure.

She must get away—secure at least a few days' respite from the dreadful atmosphere of disapprobation and dislike which Lady Gertrude managed to convey.

The consciousness of it was never absent from her. Pride had upheld her so far, but underneath the pride lay a very sore heart. To anyone as sensitive as Nan, whose own lovableness had always hitherto evoked both love and friendship as naturally as flowers open to the sun, it was a new and bewildering experience to be disliked. She did not know how to meet it. It hurt inexpressibly, and she was tired of being hurt.

Page 130

She hesitated nervously outside the morning-room door, whence issued the soft clink of china and a murmur of voices. The clock in the hall had struck the hour five minutes ago. She was late, and she knew that the instant she entered the room she would feel that unfriendly atmosphere rushing to meet her like a great black wave. Finally, with an effort, she turned the door-handle and went in.

For once Lady Gertrude refrained from comment upon her lack of punctuality. She seemed preoccupied and, to judge from the pinched closing of her lips, her thoughts were anything but pleasing, while Roger was in the sullen, rather impenetrable mood which Nan had learned to recognise as a sign of storm. He hardly spoke at all, and then only to fling out one or two curt remarks in connection with estate matters. Immediately breakfast was at an end he rose from the table, remarking that he should not be in for lunch, and left the room.

Lady Gertrude looked up from her morning's letters.

"I suppose he's riding over to Berry Farm—the tenant wants some repairs done. He ought to take a few sandwiches with him if he won't be here for lunch."

Isobel jumped up from her seat.

"I'll see that he does," she said quickly, and went out of the room in search of him. Any need of Roger's must be instantly supplied.

Lady Gertrude waited until the servants had cleared away the breakfast, then she turned to Nan with a very definite air of having something to say.

"Have you and Roger quarrelled?" she asked abruptly.

The girl started nervously. She had not expected this as a consequence of Roger's taciturnity.

"No," she said, stumbling a little. "No, we haven't—quarrelled."

Lady Gertrude scrutinised her with keen, light-grey eyes that had the same penetrating glance as Roger's own, and Nan felt herself colouring under it.

"You've displeased him in some way or other," insisted Lady Gertrude, and waited for a reply.

Nan flared up at the older woman's arbitrary manner.

"That's rather a funny way to put it, isn't it?" she said quickly. "I'm—I'm not a child, you know."

“You behave very much like one at times,” retorted Lady Gertrude. “I’ve done my utmost since you came here to fit you to be Roger’s wife, and without any appreciable result. You seem to be exactly as irresponsible and thoughtless as when you arrived.”

The cold, contemptuous criticism flicked the girl’s raw nerves like the point of a lash. She sprang to her feet, her eyes very bright, as though tears were not far distant, her young breast rising and falling unevenly with her hurrying breath.

“Is that what you think of me?” she said unsteadily. “Because then I’d better go away. It’s what I want—to go away! I—I can’t bear it here any longer.” Her fingers gripped the edge of the table tensely. She was struggling to keep down the rising sobs which threatened to choke her speech. “I know you don’t want me to be Roger’s wife—you don’t think I’m fit for it! You’ve just said so! And—and you’ve let me see it every day. I’ll go—I’ll go!”

Page 131

Lady Gertrude's face remained quite unchanged. Only the steely gleam in her eyes hardened.

"When this hysterical outburst is quite over," she said scathingly, "I shall be better able to talk to you."

Nan made no answer. It was all she could do to prevent herself from bursting into tears.

"Sit down again." Lady Gertrude pointed to a chair, and Nan, who felt her legs trembling under her, sat down obediently. "You're quite mistaken in thinking I don't wish you to be Roger's wife," continued Lady Gertrude quietly. "I do wish it."

Nan glanced across at her in astonishment. This was the last thing she had expected her to say—irreconcilable with her whole attitude throughout the last two months. Lady Gertrude returned the glance with one of faint amusement. She could make a good guess at what the girl was thinking.

"I wish it," she pursued, "because Roger wishes it. I should like my son to have everything he wants. To be perfectly frank, I don't consider he has made a very suitable choice, but since he wants you—why, he must have you. No, don't interrupt me, please"—for Nan, quivering with indignation, was about to protest. "When—if ever you are a mother you will understand my point of view. Roger has made his choice—and of course he hasn't the least idea how unsuitable a one it is. Men rarely get beyond a pretty face. So it devolves upon me to make you better fitted to be his wife than you are at present."

The cold, dispassionate speech roused Nan to a fury of exasperation and revolt. Evidently, in Lady Gertrude's mind, Roger was the only person who mattered. She herself was of the utmost unimportance except for the fact that he wanted her for his wife! She felt as though she were a slave who had been bartered away to a new owner.

"You understand, now?"

Lady Gertrude's clear, unmoved accents dropped like ice into the midst of her burning resentment.

"Yes, I do understand!" she exclaimed, in a voice that she hardly recognised as her own. "And I think everything you've said is horrible! If I thought Roger looked at things like that, I'd break our engagement to-morrow! But he doesn't—I know he doesn't. It's only you who think such hateful things. And—and I won't stay here! I—I *can't*!"

"It's foolish to talk of breaking off your engagement," returned Lady Gertrude composedly. "Roger is not a man to be picked up and put down at any woman's whim—as you would find out if you tried to do it."

Inwardly Nan felt bitterly conscious that this was true. She didn't believe for a moment that Roger would release her, however much she might implore him to. And unless he himself released her, her pledge to him must stand.

"As to going away"—Lady Gertrude was speaking again. "Where would you go?"

"To the flat, of course."

"Do you mean to the flat you used to share with Mrs. Fenton?"—on a glacial note of incredulity.

Page 132

“Yes.”

“Who is living there?”

Nan looked puzzled. What did it matter to Lady Gertrude who lived there?

“No one, just now. The Fentons are going to stay there, when they come back, while they look for a house.”

“But they are not there now?” persisted Lady Gertrude.

Nan shook her head, wondering what was the drift of so much questioning. She was soon to know.

“Then, my dear child,” said Lady Gertrude decidedly, “of course it would be quite impossible for you to go there.”

“Why impossible?”

Lady Gertrude’s brows lifted, superciliously.

“I should have thought it was obvious,” she replied curtly. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that it would be hardly the thing for a young unmarried girl to be staying alone in a flat in London?”

“No, it hasn’t,” returned Nan bluntly. “Penelope and I have each stayed there alone—-heaps of times—when the other was away.”

“Very possibly.” There was an edge to Lady Gertrude’s voice which it was impossible to misinterpret. “Professional musicians are very lax—I suppose *you* would call it Bohemian—in their ideas. That I can quite believe. But you have someone else to consider now. Roger would hardly wish his future wife to be stopping alone at a flat in London.”

Nan was silent. Ridiculous as it seemed, she had to admit that Lady Gertrude was speaking no more than the bare truth concerning Roger’s point of view. She felt perfectly sure that he would object—very strenuously!

Lady Gertrude rose.

“I think there is no more to be said. You can put any idea of rushing off to London out of your head. Even if Roger were agreeable, I should not allow it while you are in my charge. Neither is it exactly complimentary to us that you should even suggest such a thing.”

With this parting comment she quitted the room, leaving Nan staring stonily out of the window.

She felt helpless—helpless to withstand the thin, steel-eyed woman who was Roger's mother. Nominally free, she was to all intents and purposes a prisoner at Trenby Hall till Kitty or Penelope came home. Of course she could write to Lord St. John if she chose. But even if she did, he most certainly could not ask her to stay with him at his chambers in London. Besides, she didn't want to appeal to him. She knew he would think she was running away—playing the coward, and that it would be a bitter disappointment to him to find her falling short of the high standard which he had always set before her.

"*No Davenant was ever a coward in the face of difficulties*," he had told her. And she loved him far too much to hurt him as grievously as she knew it would hurt him if she ran away from them.

She stood there for a long time, staring dumbly out at the falling rain and dripping trees. She was thinking along the lines which St. John had laid down for her. "*Don't make Roger pay for your own blunder*." Was she doing that? Remembering all that had passed between them last night she began to realise that this was just what she had been doing.

Page 133

She had no love to give him, but she had been keeping him out of everything else as well. She had not even tried to make a comrade of him, to let him into her interests and to try and share his own. Instead, she had shut herself away in the West Parlour with her music and her memories, and in his own blundering fashion Roger had realised it. Probably he had even guessed that that other man who had loved her had been able to go with her into the temple of music, comprehending it all and loving it even as she did.

She understood Roger's strange and sudden jealousy now. Although she was to be his wife, he was jealous of those invisible bonds of mutual understanding which had linked her to Peter Mallory—bonds which, had they two been free to marry, would have made of their marriage a perfect thing—the beautiful mating of spirit, soul, and body.

The doors of her soul—that innermost sanctuary of all—would never be opened for any other to enter in. But surely there was something more that she might give Roger than she had yet done. She could stretch out a friendly hand and try to link their interests together, however slight the link must be.

All at once, a plan to accomplish this formulated itself in her mind. He had wanted to "smash the piano." Well, he should never want that again. She would show him that her music was not going to stand between them—that she was willing to share it with him. She would talk to him about it, get him to understand something of what it meant to her, and when the concerto was quite finished, she would invite him into the West Parlour to listen to it. It was nearing completion—another week's work and what Sandy laughingly termed her "magnum opus" would be finished. Of course Roger wouldn't be able to give her a musician's understanding of it, but he would certainly appreciate the fact that she had played it to him first of anyone.

It would go far to heal that resentful jealousy if she "shared" the concerto with him. He would never again feel that she was keeping him outside the real interests of her life. Probably, later on, when it was performed by a big London orchestra, under the auspices of one of the best-known conductors of the day—who happened to be a particular friend of Nan's and a staunch believer in her capacity to do good work—-Roger would even begin to take a quaint kind of pride in her musical achievements.

What she purposed would involve a good deal of pluck and sacrifice. For it takes both of these to reveal yourself, as any true musician must, to an audience of one with whom you are not utterly in sympathy. But if by this road she and Roger took one step towards a better understanding, towards that comradeship which was all that she could ever give him, then it would have been worth the sacrifice.

Page 134

Gradually the stony look of despair lifted from her face, and a new spirit of resolution took possession of her. She was not the only person in the world who had to suffer. There were others, Peter amongst them, who were debarred by circumstances from finding happiness, and who went on doing their duty unflinchingly. It was only she who had failed—letting Roger bear the cost of her mistake. She had promised to marry him when it seemed the only way out of the difficulties which beset her, and now she was not honouring that promise. While Peter Mallory was still waiting quietly for the wife he no longer loved to come back to him—keeping the door of his house open to her whenever she should choose to claim fulfilment of the pledges he had given the day he married her.

Nan leaned her head against the window-pane, realising that, whatever Roger's faults might he, she, too, had fallen short.

"Our troth, Nan. Hang on to it—*hard*, when life seems a bit more uphill than usual."

She could hear Peter's voice, steady and clear and reassuring, almost as she had heard it that night on the headland at Tintagel. She felt her throat contract and a burning mist of tears blurred her vision. For a moment she fought desperately against her weakness. Then, with a little strangled cry, she buried her face against her arm and broke into a passion of tears.

CHAPTER XXII

THE OFFERING OF FIRST-FRUITS

The concerto was finished! Finished, at least, as far as it was possible without rehearsing the effect with orchestra, and as Nan turned over the sheets of manuscript, thickly dotted with their medley of notes and rests and slurs, she was conscious of that glorious thrill of accomplishment which is the creative artist's recompense for long hours of work and sacrifice,—and for those black moments of discouragement and self-distrust which no true artist can escape.

She sat very quietly in the West Parlour, thinking of the concerto and of what she meant to do with it. She was longing to show it to Sandy McBain, who would have a musician's comprehension of every bar, and she knew he would rejoice with her whole-heartedly over it. But that would have to wait until after Roger had heard it. The first-fruits, as it were, were to be offered to him.

She had it all planned out in her mind. Roger was out hunting to-day, so that she had been able to add certain final touches to the concerto uninterrupted, and after dinner she proposed to carry him off to the West Parlour and play it to him. There would be

only their two selves, alone together—for she had no intention of inviting Lady Gertrude and Isobel to attend this first performance.

She was nervously excited at the prospect, and when she heard the distant sound of a horseman trotting up the drive she jumped up and ran to the window, peering out into the dusk. It was Roger, and as horse and rider swung past the window she drew back suddenly into the fire-lit shadows of the room, letting the short window-curtains fall together.

Page 135

Five minutes later she heard his footsteps as he came striding along the corridor on to which the West Parlour opened. Then the door-handle was turned with imperious eagerness, someone switched on the light, and he came in—splashed with mud, his face red from the lash of the wind, his hair beaded with moisture from the misty air. He looked just what he was—a typical big sporting Englishman—as he tramped into the room and made his way to the warmth of the blazing log fire.

Nan looked up and threw him a little smile of greeting.

“Hullo, darling, there you are!” He stooped and kissed her, and she forced herself to sit quiet and unshrinking while his lips sought and found her own.

“Have you had a good day?” she asked.

“Topping. Best run of the season. We found at once and went right away.” And he launched out into an enthusiastic description of the day’s sport.

Nan listened patiently. She wasn’t in the least interested, really, but she had been trying very hard latterly not to let Roger pay for what had been her own blunder—not to let him pay even in the small things of daily life. So she feigned an interest she was far from feeling and discussed the day’s hunting with snatches of melody from the concerto running through her mind all the time.

The man and woman offered a curious contrast as they talked; he, big, virile, muddied with his day in the saddle, an aroma of mingled damp and leather exuding from his clothes as they steamed in front of the fire—she, slim, silken-clad, delicately wrought by nature and over-finely strung by reason of the high-pitched artist’s life she had led.

Roger himself seemed suddenly struck by the contrast.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed, surveying her rather ruefully. “We’re a pretty fair example of beauty and the beast, aren’t we?”

Nan looked back at him composedly—at the strong, ugly face and far-visioned eyes.

“Not in the least,” she replied judicially. “We’re—different, that’s all. And”—smiling faintly—“you’re rather grubby just at present.”

“I suppose I am.” He glanced ruefully down at his mud-bespattered coat. “I oughtn’t to have come in here like this,” he added with an awkward attempt at apology. “Only I couldn’t wait to see you.”

“Well, go and have your tub and a change,” she said, with a small, indulgent laugh. “And by dinner time you’ll have a better opinion of your outward man.”

It was not until after dinner that she mentioned the concerto to him, snatching an opportunity when they chanced to find themselves alone for a few minutes. Some distracted young married woman from the village had called to ask Lady Gertrude's advice as to how she should deal with a husband who seemed to find his chief entertainment in life in beating her with a broomstick and in threatening to "do her in" altogether if the application of the broomstick proved barren of wifely improvement. Accordingly, Lady Gertrude, accompanied by her aide-de-camp, Isobel, were interviewing the poor, terrified creature with a view to ameliorating her lot.

Page 136

“It’s good, Roger,” said Nan, when she had told him that the concerto was finished. “It’s really good. And I want you to hear it first of anyone.”

Roger smiled down at her. He was obviously pleased.

“Of course I must hear it first,” he answered. “I’m your lawful lord and master, remember.”

“Not yet?” she objected hastily.

He threw his arm round her and pulled her into his embrace.

“No. But very soon,” he said.

“You won’t beat me, I suppose—like Mrs. Pike’s husband?” she suggested teasingly, with a gesture towards the room where Lady Gertrude and Isobel were closeted with the woman from the village.

His arm tightened round her possessively.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “I might—if I couldn’t manage you any other way.”

“Roger!”

There was almost a note of fear in her quick, astonished exclamation. With his arm gripped round her she recognised how utterly powerless she would be against his immense strength, and something flint-like and merciless in the expression of those piercing eyes which were blazing down at her made her feel, with a sudden catch at her heart, as though he might actually do the thing he said.

“I hope it won’t come to beating you,” he resumed in a lighter tone of voice. “But”—-grimly—“not even you, when you’re my wife, shall defy me with impunity.”

Nan drew herself out of his arms.

“Well, I’m not your wife yet,” she said, trying to laugh away the queer, unexpected tensity of the moment. “Only a very hard-working young woman, who has a concerto to play to you.”

He frowned a little.

“There’s no need for you to work hard. I’d rather you didn’t. I want you just to enjoy life—have a good time—and keep your music as a relaxation.”

Her face clouded over.

“Oh, Roger, you don’t understand! I *must* do it. I couldn’t live without it. It fills my life.”

His expression softened. He reached out his arm again and drew her back to his side, but this time with a strange, unwonted tenderness.

“I suppose it does,” he conceded. “But some day, darling, after we’re married, I hope there’ll be something—someone—else to fill your life. And when that time comes,—-why, the music will take second place.”

Nan flushed scarlet and wriggled irritably in his embrace.

“Oh, Roger, do try to understand! As if . . . having a child . . . would make any difference. A baby’s a baby, and music’s music—the one can’t take the place of the other.”

Roger looked a trifle taken aback. He held old-fashioned views and rather thought that all women regarded motherhood as a duty and privilege of existence. And, inside himself, he had never doubted that if this great happiness were ever granted to Nan, she would lose all those funny, unaccountable ways of hers—which alternately bewildered and annoyed him—and turn into a nice, normal woman like ninety-nine per cent. of the other women of his somewhat limited acquaintance.

Page 137

Man has an odd trick of falling in love with the last kind of woman you would expect him to, the very antithesis of the ideal he has previously formulated to himself, and then of expecting her, after matrimony, suddenly to change her whole individuality—the very individuality which attracted him in the first instance—and conform to his preconceived notions of what a wife ought to he.

It is illogical, of course, with that gloriously pig-headed illogicalness not infrequently to be found in the supposedly logical sex, and it would be laughable were it not that it so often ends in tragedy.

So that Roger was quite genuinely dumbfounded at Nan's heterodox pronouncement on the relative values of music and babies.

A baby was not in the least an object of absorbing interest to her. It cried out of tune and made ear-piercing noises that were not included in even the most modern of compositions. Moreover, she was not by nature of the maternal type of woman, to whom marriage is but the beautiful path which leads to motherhood. She was essentially one of the lovers of the world. Had she married her mate, she would have demanded nothing more of life, though, if a child had been born of such mating, it would have seemed to her so beautiful and sure a link, so blent with love itself, that her arms would have opened to receive it.

But of all these intricacies of the feminine heart and mind Roger was sublimely ignorant. So he chided her, still with that same unwonted gentleness which the thought of fatherhood sometimes brings to men of strong and violent temper.

"That's all nonsense, you know, sweetheart. And some day . . . when there's a small son to be thought about and planned for and loved, you'll find that what I say is true."

"It might chance to be a small daughter," suggested Nan snubbily, and Roger's face fell a little. "So, meanwhile, as I haven't a baby and I *have* a concerto, come along and listen to it."

He nodded and followed her into the West Parlour. A cheerful fire was blazing on the hearth, a big lounge chair drawn up invitingly beside it, while close at hand stood a small table with pipe, tobacco pouch, and matches lying on it in readiness.

Roger smiled at the careful arrangement.

"What a thoughtful child it's becoming!" he commented, taking up his pipe.

"Well, you can listen to music much better if you're really comfy," said Nan. "Sit down and light your pipe—there, I'll light it for you when you've finished squashing the 'baccy down into it."

Roger dropped leisurely into the big chair, filled and lit his pipe, and when it was drawing well, stretched out his legs to the logs' warm glow with a sigh of contentment.

"Now, fire away, sweetheart," he said. "I'm all attention."

She looked across at him, feeling for the first time a little anxious and uncertain of the success of her plan.

Page 138

“Of course, it’ll sound very bald—just played on the piano,” she explained carefully. “You’ll have to try and imagine the difference the orchestral part makes.”

Switching off the lights, so that nothing but the flickering glow of the fire illumined the room, she began to play.

For half an hour she played on, lost to all thoughts of the world around her, wrapped in the melody and meaning of the music. Then, as the *finale* rushed in a torrent of golden chords to its climax and the last note was struck, her hands fell away from the piano and she sank back on her seat with a little sigh of exhaustion and happiness.

A pause followed. How well she remembered listening for that pause when she played, in public!—The brief, pulsating silence which falls while the thought of the audience steal back from the fairyland whither they have wandered and readjust themselves reluctantly to the things of daily life. And then, the outburst of applause.

In silence she awaited Roger’s approval, her lips just parted, her face still alight with the joy of the creator who knows that his work is good.

But the words for which she was listening did not come. . . . Instead—utter silence! . . . Wondering, half apprehensive of she knew not what, Nan twisted round on the music-seat and looked across to where Roger was sitting. The sharp, quick intake of her breath broke the silence as might a cry. Weary after his long day in the saddle, soothed by the warmth of the fire and the rhythm of the music, Roger was sleeping peacefully, his head thrown back against a cushion!

Nan rose slowly and, coming forward into the circle of the firelight, stared down at him incredulously. It was unbelievable! She had been giving him all the best that was in her—the work of her brain, the interpretation of her hands—baring her very heart to him during the last half-hour. And he had slept through it all!

In any other circumstances, probably, the humorous side of the matter would have struck her, and the sting and smart of it been washed away in laughter.

But just now it was impossible for her to feel anything but bitterness and hopeless disappointment. For weeks she had been working hard, without the fillip of congenial atmosphere, doggedly sticking to it in spite of depression and discouragement, and now that the results of her labour were ready to be given to the world, she was strung up to a high pitch and ill-prepared to receive a sudden check.

She had counted so intensely on winning Roger’s sympathy and understanding—on putting an end to that blundering, terrible jealousy of his by playing the game to the limit of her ability. It had been like making a burnt-offering for her to share the thing she loved best with Roger—to let him into some of the secret places where dwelt her inmost

dreams and emotions. And she had nerved herself to do it, made her sacrifice—in vain! Roger was even unconscious that it was a sacrifice!

Page 139

She looked down at him as he lay with the firelight flickering across his strong-featured face, and a storm of fury and indignation swept over her. She could have struck him!

Presently he stirred uneasily. Perhaps he felt the cessation of the music, the sense of someone moving in the room. A moment later he opened his eyes and saw her standing beside him.

“You, darling?” he murmured drowsily. He stretched his arms. “I think . . . I’ve been to sleep.” Then, recollection returning to him: “By Jove! And you were playing to me—”

“Yes,” she answered slowly. Her lips felt dry. “And I’ll never play to you again as long as I live!”

He smiled indulgently.

“That’s putting it rather strong, isn’t it?” he said, making a long arm and pulling her down on to his knee.

She sprang up again instantly and stood a little away from him, her hands clenched, her breast heaving tumultuously.

“Come back, small firebrand!” he commanded laughingly.

A fresh gust of indignation, swept over her. Even now he didn’t comprehend, didn’t realise in the very least how he had wounded her. Her nails dug into the flesh of her palms as she took a fresh grip of herself and answered him—very slowly and distinctly so that he might not miss her meaning.

“It’s not putting it one bit too strong. It’s what I feel—that I can’t ever play to you again.” She paused, then burst out impetuously: “You’ve always disliked my love of music! You were jealous of it. And to-night I wanted to show you—to—to share it with you. You hated the piano—you wanted to smash it, because you thought it came between us. And so I tried to make you understand!” Her words came rushing out headlong now, bitter, sobbing words, holding all the agony of mind which she had been enduring for so long.

“You’ve no idea what music means to me—and you’ve not tried to find out. Instead, you’ve laughed indulgently about it, been impatient over it, and behaved as though it were some child’s toy of which you didn’t quite approve.” Her voice shook. “And it isn’t! It’s *part* of me—part of the woman you want to marry . . .”

She broke off, a little breathlessly.

Roger was on his feet now and there was a deep, smouldering anger in his eyes as he regarded her.

“And is all this outburst because I fell asleep while you were playing?” he asked curtly.

She was silent, battling with the emotion that was shaking her.

“Because”—he went on with a tinge of contempt in his voice—“if so, it’s a ridiculous storm in a tea-cup.”

“‘Ridiculous’! . . . Yes, that’s all it would be to you,” she answered bitterly. “But to me it’s just like a light flashed on our future life together. We’re miles apart—miles! We haven’t a thought, an idea, in common. And when it comes to music—to the one big thing in my life—you brush it aside as if it could be taken up or put down like a child’s musical box!”

Page 140

Roger looked at her. Something of her passionate pain and resentment was becoming clear to him.

“I didn’t know it meant as much to you as that,” he said slowly.

“It’s everything to me now!” she burst out wildly. “The only thing I have left—left of my world as I knew it.”

His face whitened, and a curious, strained brilliance came into his eyes. She had touched him an the raw, roused his mad jealousy of all that had been in her life of which, he had had no share.

“The only thing you have left?” he repeated, with a slow, dangerous inflection in his voice. “Do you mean that?”

“Yes!”—smiting her hands together. “Can’t you see it? There’s . . . *nothing* . . . here for me. Are we companions, you and I? We’re absolute strangers! We don’t think, or feel, or move in the same world.”

“No?”

Just the brief monosyllable, spoken as coolly as though she had remarked that she didn’t like the colour of his tie. She looked up, bewildered, and met his gaze. His eyes frightened her. They were ablaze, remorseless as the eyes of a bird of prey. A sudden terror of him overwhelmed her.

“Roger!” she cried. “We can’t marry! Let me go—release me from my promise! Oh!”—-breaking down all at once—“I can’t bear it! I can’t marry you! Let me go—oh, please let me go!”

There was a pause—a pause during which Nan could feel her heart leaping in her body like some terrified captive thing. Then, Roger made a movement. Instinctively she knew it was towards her and flung out her arms to ward him off. But she might as well have opposed him with two straws. He caught both wrists in one of his big hands and bent her arms downwards, drawing her close to him till she lay unwillingly against his breast, held there in a grasp like iron.

“Will I release you?” he said savagely. “No, I will *not*! Neither now, nor at any future time. You’re *mine*! Do you understand what that means? It means if you’d one day left to live, it would be *my* day—one night, *mine*! And I swear to you if any man takes you from me I’ll kill him first and you after. *Now* do you understand?”

She tried to speak, but her voice failed her. It was as though he had pronounced sentence on her—a life sentence! She could never get away from him—never, never!

A shudder ran through her whole body. He felt it, and it stung him to fresh anger. Her head was pressed into his shoulder as though for shelter.

“Look up!” he demanded imperiously. “Don’t hide your face. It’s mine. And I want to see it!”

Reluctantly, compelled by his voice, she lifted a white, tortured face to his. Then, meeting his eyes, savagely alight with the fire of conquest, she turned her head quickly aside. But it was useless. She was powerless in the vice-like grip of his arms, and the next moment he was kissing her, eyes and mouth and pulsing throat, with terrible, burning kisses that seemed to sear their way through her whole body, branding her indelibly his.

Page 141

It was useless to struggle. She hung nervelessly in his straining arms, mute and helpless to withstand him, while his passion swept over her like a tidal wave, submerging her utterly.

When at last he set her free she swayed unsteadily, catching at the table for support. Her knees seemed to be giving way under her. She was voiceless, breathless from his violence. The tide had receded, leaving her utterly spent and exhausted.

He regarded her in silence for a moment.

“I don’t think you’ll ask me to release you from your engagement again,” he said slowly.

“No,” she whispered tonelessly. “No.”

She tottered almost as though she were going to fall. With a sort of rough kindliness he put out his hand to steady her, but she shrank from him like a beaten child.

“Don’t do that!” he exclaimed unevenly. Adding: “I’ve frightened you, I suppose?”

She bent her head.

“Well”—sulkily—“it was your own fault. You roused the wild beast in me.” Then, with a queer, half-shamed laugh, he added: “There’s Spanish blood in the Trenbys, you know—as there is in many of the Cornish folk.”

Nan supposed this avowal was intended as an apology, or at least as an explanation of sorts. It was rather appealing in its boyish clumsiness, but she felt too numb, too utterly weary, to respond to it.

“You’re tired,” he said abruptly. “You’d better go to bed.” He put a hand beneath her arm, but she shrank away from him with a fresh spasm of terror.

“Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to kiss you again.” He spoke reassuringly. “Come, let me help you. You can hardly stand.”

Once more he took her arm, and, too stunned to offer any resistance, she allowed him to lead her from the room.

“Will you be all right, now?” he asked anxiously, as they paused at the foot of the staircase.

She gripped the banister.

“Yes,” she answered mechanically. “I shall be all right.”

He remained at the bottom of the stairs, watching until her slight figure had disappeared round the bend of the stairway.

CHAPTER XXIII

A QUESTION OF HONOUR

“Your Great-aunt Rachel is dead, Roger.”

Lady Gertrude made this announcement the following morning at breakfast. In her hand she held the letter which contained the news—written in an old-fashioned, sloping style of penmanship on thin, heavily black-bordered note-paper. No one made any reply unless a sympathetic murmur from Isobel could be construed as such.

“Cousin Emily writes that the funeral is to take place next Thursday,” pursued Lady Gertrude, referring to the letter she held. “We shall have to attend it, of course.”

“Must we?” asked Roger, with obvious lack of enthusiasm. “I haven’t seen her for at least five years.”

Page 142

“I know.” The reply came so sharply that it was evident he had touched upon a sore subject. “It is very much to be regretted that you haven’t. After all, she must have left at least a hundred thousand to divide.”

“Even the prospect of a share of the spoil wouldn’t have compensated for the infliction of visiting an old termagant like Great-aunt Rachel,” averred Roger unrepentantly.

“I shall be interested to hear the will read, nevertheless,” rejoined Lady Gertrude. “After all, you were her only great-nephew and, in spite of your inattentiveness, I don’t suppose she has overlooked you. She may even have remembered Isobel to the extent of a piece of jewellery.”

Isobel’s brown eyes gleamed—like the alert eyes of a robin who suddenly perceives the crumbs some kindly hand has scattered on the lawn.

“I’m afraid we shall have to leave you alone for a night, Nan,” pursued Lady Gertrude with a stiff air of apology.

Nan, engrossed in a long epistle from Penelope, failed to hear and made no answer. The tremendous fact of great-aunt’s death, and the possible disposition of her property, had completely passed her by. It was little wonder that she was so much absorbed. Penelope’s letter had been written on board ship and posted from Liverpool, and it contained the joyful tidings that she and her husband had returned to England and proposed going straight to the Edenhall flat. “You must come up and see us as soon as your visit to Trenby comes to an end,” wrote Penelope, and Nan devoutly wished it could end that very moment.

“I don’t think you heard me, Nan.” Lady Gertrude’s incisive voice cut sharply across the pulsing excitement of the girl’s thoughts.

“I—I—no. Did you speak to me?” she faltered. Her usual dainty assurance was fast disappearing beneath the nervous strain of living with Lady Gertrude.

The facts concerning great-aunt’s death were recapitulated for her benefit, together with the explanation that, since Lady Gertrude, Roger, and Isobel would be obliged to stay the night with “Cousin Emily” in order to attend the funeral, Nan would be reluctantly left to her own devices.

“I can’t very well take you with us—on such an occasion,” meditated Lady Gertrude aloud. “To Cousin Emily you would be a complete stranger, you see. Besides, she will no doubt have other relatives besides ourselves to put up at the house. Would you care for me to ask someone over to keep you company while we’re away?”

“Oh, no, thank you,” replied Nan hastily. “Please don’t worry about me at all, Lady Gertrude. I don’t in the least mind being left alone—really.”

A sudden ecstatic thought had come into her mind which could only be put into execution if she were left alone at Trenby, and the bare possibility of any other arrangement now being made filled her with alarm.

“Well, I regret the necessity of leaving you,” said Lady Gertrude, meticulous as ever in matters of social observance. “But the servants will look after you well, I hope. And in any case, we shall be home again on Thursday night. We shall be able to catch the last train back.”

Page 143

During the day or two which intervened before the family exodus, Nan could hardly contain her impatience. Their absence would give her the opportunity she longed for—-the opportunity to get away from Trenby! The idea had flashed into her mind the instant Lady Gertrude had informed her she would be left alone there, and now each hour that must elapse before she could carry out her plan seemed an eternity.

Following upon the prolonged strain of the preceding three months, that last terrible scene with Roger had snapped her endurance. She could not look back upon it without shuddering. Since the day of its occurrence she had hardly spoken to him, except at meal times when, as if by mutual consent, they both conversed as though nothing had happened—for Lady Gertrude's benefit. Apart from this, Nan avoided him as much as possible, treating him with a cool, indifferent reserve he found difficult to break down. At least, he made no very determined effort to do so. Perhaps he was even a little ashamed of himself. But it was not in his nature to own himself wrong.

Like many men, he had a curiously implicit faith in the principle of "letting things blow over." On occasion this may prove the wisest course to adopt, but very rarely in regard to a quarrel between a man and woman. Things don't "blow over" with a woman. They lie hidden in her heart, gradually permeating her thoughts until her whole attitude towards the man in question has hardened and the old footing between them become irrecoverable.

Nan felt that she had made her effort—and failed. Roger had missed the whole meaning of her attempt to bring about a mutual feeling of good comradeship, brushed it aside as of no importance. And instead, he had substituted his own imperious demands, rousing her, once the stress of the actual interview itself was past, to fierce and bitter revolt. No matter what happened in the future, she must get away now—-snatch a brief respite from the daily strain of her life at the Hall.

But with an oddly persistent determination she put away from her all thought of breaking off her engagement. To most women similarly situated this would have been the obvious and simplest solution of the problem. But it seemed to Nan that her compact with Roger demanded a finer, more closely-knit interpretation of the word honour than would have been necessary in the case of an engagement entered into under different circumstances. The personal emergency which had driven her into giving Roger her promise weighed heavily upon her, and she felt that nothing less than his own consent would entitle her to break her pledge to him. When she gave it she had thought she was buying safety for herself and happiness for Penelope—cutting the tangled threads in which she found herself so inextricably involved—and now, as Lord St. John had reminded her, she could not honourably refuse to pay the price. She could not plead that she had mistaken her feelings towards him. She had pledged her word to him, open-eyed, and she was not free, as other women might be, to retract the promise she had given.

Page 144

Added to this, Roger's sheer, dominant virility had imbued her with a fatalistic sense of her total inability to escape him. She had had a glimpse of the primitive man in him—of the man with the club. Even were she to violate her conscience sufficiently to end the engagement between them, she knew perfectly well that he would refuse to accept or acknowledge any such termination. Wherever she hid herself he would find out her hiding-place and come in search of her, and insist upon the fulfilment of her promise. And supposing that, in desperation, she married someone else, what was it he had said? "I swear to you if any man takes you from me I'll kill him first and you after!"

So, there was no escape for her. Roger would dog her footsteps round the world and back again sooner than let her go free of him. In a vaguely aloof and apathetic manner she felt as though it was her destiny to marry him. And no one can escape from destiny. Life had shown her many beautiful things—even that rarest thing of all, a beautiful and unselfish love. But it had shown them only to snatch them away again once she had learned to value them.

If only she had never met Peter, never known the secret wonder and glory, the swift, sudden strength, the exquisite mingling of passion and selflessness which go to the making of the highest in love, she might have been content to become Roger's wife and bear his children.

His big strength and virile, primitive possessiveness would appeal to many women, and Nan reflected that had she cared for him it would have been easy enough to tame him—with his tempestuous love, his savage temper, and his shamefaced "little boy" repentances! A woman who loved him in return might have led him by a thread of gossamer! It was the very fact that Nan did not love him, and that he knew it, which drove the brute in him uppermost in his dealings with her. He wanted to *make* her care, to bend her to his will, to force from her some response to his own over-mastering passion.

Wearily she faced the situation for the hundredth time and knew that in the long run she must abide by it. She had learned not to cry for the moon any longer. She wanted nothing now either in this world or the next except the love that was denied her.

Her thoughts went back to the day when she and Peter had first met and driven together through the twilit countryside to Abbencombe. She remembered the sudden sadness which had fallen upon him and how she had tried to cheer him by repeating the verses of a little song. It all seemed very long ago:

"But sometimes God on His great white Throne
  Looks down from the Heaven above,
And lays in the hands that are empty
  The tremulous Star of Love."

The words seemed to speak themselves in her brain just as she herself had spoken them that day, with the car slipping swiftly through the winter dusk. She could feel again the throb of the engine—see Peter's whimsical grey-blue eyes darken suddenly to a stern and tragic gravity.

Page 145

For him and for her there could be no star. To the end of life they two must go empty-handed.

CHAPTER XXIV

FLIGHT!

The big limousine was already at the door when Lady Gertrude and Isobel, clothed from head to foot in sombre black, descended from their respective rooms. Roger, also clad in the same funereal hue and wearing a black tie—and looking as though his garments afforded him the acme of mental discomfort—stood waiting for them, together with Nan, in the hall.

Lady Gertrude bestowed one of her chilly kisses upon her son's fiancee and stepped into the car, Isobel followed, and Roger, with a muttered: "Confound Great-aunt Rachel's fortune!" brought up the rear. A minute later the car and its black-garbed occupants disappeared down the drive.

Nan turned back into the house. There was a curiously lightened feeling in the atmosphere, she thought—as though someone had lifted the roof of a dungeon and let in the sunlight and fresh air. She stretched her arms luxuriously above her head and exhaled a long sigh of relief. Then, running like a child let out of school, she fled down the long hall to the telephone stand. Lifting the receiver, her fingers fairly danced upon the forked clip which had held it.

Her imperative summons was answered with a most unusual promptness by the exchange—it was going to be a lucky day altogether, she told herself. Demanding, "Trunks, please!" she gave the number of the Edenhall flat and prepared to possess her soul in patience till her call came through.

At lunch she was almost too excited to eat, and when finally Morton, entering quietly, announced: "You are wanted on the telephone, miss," she hardly waited to hear the end of the sentence but flew past him to the telephone stand and snatched up the instrument.

"Hello! Hello! That you, Penny? . . . Yes, of *course* it's Nan! Oh, my dear, I'm so glad you're back! Listen. I want to run up to town for a few days. . . . Yes. Roger's away. They're all away. . . . You can put me up? To-morrow? Thanks awfully, Penny. . . . Yes, Waterloo. At 4.16. Good-bye. Give my love to Ralph. . . . Good-bye."

She hung up the receiver and, returning to the dining-room, made a pretence of finishing her lunch. Afterwards, with as much composure as she could muster up—-seeing that she wanted to dance and sing out of pure happiness—she informed Morton that she had been called away suddenly to London and would require the car early the

next morning to take her to the station. Whatever curiosity Morton may have felt concerning this unexpected announcement, he concealed it admirably, merely replying with his usual imperturbability: "Very good, miss."

"I'm leaving a letter for Mr. Trenby—to explain. See that he has it as soon as he gets back to-morrow."

And once again Morton answered respectfully:

Page 146

“Very good, miss.”

The writing of the letter did not occupy much time. She reflected that she must take one of two courses. Either she must write him at length, explaining everything—and somehow she felt it would be impossible to explain to Roger her desperate need for flight, for a respite from things as they were—or she must leave a brief note merely stating that she had gone away. She decided on the latter and after several abortive attempts, which found their ultimate fate in the fire, she achieved the following telegraphic epistle:

“DEAR ROGER,—Have gone to town. Stopping with Penelope.—NAN.”

Afterwards she packed with gleeful hands. It seemed too good to be true that in twenty-four hours she would actually find herself back in London—away from this gloomy, tree-girdled house with its depressing atmosphere both outside and in, away from Lady Gertrude’s scathing tongue and Isobel’s two-edged speeches, and, above all, secure for a time from Roger’s tumultuous love-making and his unuttered demand for so much more than she could ever give him.

She craved for the rush and bustle of London, for the play that might keep her from thinking, the music which should minister to her soul, and, more than all, she longed to see the beloved familiar faces—to see Penelope and Ralph and Lord St. John. She felt as though for the last three months she had been dwelling in some dreadful unknown world, with only boy Sandy to cling to out of the whole unnerving chaos.

* * * * * *

“You blessed child! I *am* glad to see you!”

Penelope, looking the happiest and most blooming of youthful matrons, was on the platform when the Cornish express steamed into Waterloo station and Nan alighted from it. The two girls embraced warmly.

“You can’t—you can’t possibly be as glad as I am, Penny mine,” returned Nan. “Hmf!”—wrinkling up her nose. “*How* nice London smells!”

Penelope burst out laughing. Nan nodded at her seriously.

“I mean it. You’ve no idea how good that smoky, petrolly smell is after the innocuous breezes of the country. It’s full of gorgeous suggestions of cars and people and theatres and—and life!”

They hurried to the other end of the platform where the porters were disinterring the luggage from the van and dumping it down on the platform with a splendid disregard for the longevity of the various trunks and suit-cases they handled. Nan’s attendant porter

quickly extricated her baggage from the motley pile, and very soon she and Penelope were speeding away from the station as fast as their chauffeur—whose apparent recklessness was fortunately counter-balanced by consummate skill—could take them.

“How nice and familiar it all looks,” said Nan, as the car granted up the Haymarket. “And it’s heavenly to be going back to the dear old flat. Whereabouts are you looking for a house, by the way?”

Page 147

“Somewhere in Hampstead, we think, where the air—and the rents!—are more salubrious than nearer in.”

“Of course.” Nan nodded. “All singers live at Hampstead. You’d be quite unfashionable if you didn’t. I suppose you and Ralph are frightfully busy?”

“Yes. But we’re free to-night, luckily. So we can yarn to our hearts’ content. To-morrow evening we’re both singing at the Albert Hall. And, oh, in the afternoon we’re going to tea at Maryon’s studio. His new picture’s on view—private, of course.”

“What new picture?”

“His portrait of the famous American beauty, Mrs. T. Van Decken. I believe she paid a fabulous sum for it; Maryon’s all the rage now, you know. So he asked us to come down and see it before it’s shipped off to New York. By the way, he enquired after you in his letter—I’ve got it with me somewhere. Oh, yes, here it is! He says: ’*What news have you of Nan? I’ve lost sight of her since her engagement. But now it seems likely I shall be seeing her again before any of you*.’ I can’t think what he means by that.”

“Nor I,” said Nan, somewhat mystified. “But anyway,” she added, smiling, “he will be seeing me even sooner than he anticipates. How has his marriage turned out?”

Penelope laughed.

“Very much as one might have expected. They live most amicably—apart!”

“They’ve surely not quarrelled already?”

“Oh, no, they’ve not quarrelled. But of course they didn’t fit into each other’s scheme of life one bit, and they’ve re-arranged matters to suit their own convenience. She’s in the south of France just now, and when she comes to town they’ll meet quite happily and visit at each other’s houses. She has a palatial sort of place in Mayfair, you know, while Maryon has a duck of a house in Westminster.”

“How very modern!” commented Nan, smiling. “And—how like Maryon!”

“Just like him, isn’t it? And”—drily—“it was just like him, too, to see that the marriage settlement arrangements were all quite water-tight. However, on the whole, it’s a fair bargain between them. She rejoices in the honour and glory of being a well-known artist’s wife, while he has rather more money than is good for him.”

Ralph, broadened out a bit since his successful trip to America, was on the steps of the Mansions to welcome them, and the lift conveyed them all three up to the flat—the dear, home-like flat of which Nan felt she loved every inch.

“You’re in your old room,” Penelope told her, and Nan gave vent to a crow of delight.

Dinner was a delightful meal, full of the familiar gossip of the artistes’ room, and the news of old friends, and fervent discussions on matters musical and artistic, with running through it all a ripple of humour and the cheery atmosphere of camaraderie and good-fellowship. When it was over, the three drew cosily together round the fire in Ralph’s den. Nan sank into her chair with a blissful sigh.

Page 148

“That’s not a sigh of repletion, Penny,” she explained. “Though really your cook might have earned it? . . . But oh! *isn’t* this nice?” Inwardly she was reflecting that at just about this time Roger, together with Lady Gertrude and Isobel, would be returning from Great-aunt Rachel’s funeral, only to learn of her own flight from Trenby Hall.

“Yes,” agreed Penelope. “It really was angelic of Roger to spare you at a moment’s notice.”

Nan gave a grim little smile.

“You dear innocent! Roger—didn’t know—I was coming.”

“What!”

“No, I just thought I’d come . . . and he—they were all away . . . and I came! I left a note behind, telling him I was going to stay with you. So he won’t be anxious!”

“Roger didn’t know you were coming!” repeated Penelope. “Nan”—a sudden light illuminating the dark places—“have you had a quarrel?”

“Yes”—shortly. “A sort of quarrel.”

“And you came straight off here? . . . Oh, Nan, what a fool’s trick! He will be furious!”

Once or twice Penelope had caught a glimpse of that hot-headed temper which lay hidden beneath Roger’s somewhat blunt exterior.

“Lady Gertrude will be furious!” murmured Nan reminiscently.

“I think she’ll have the right to be,” answered Penelope, with quiet rebuke in her tones. “It really was abominable of you to run away like that.”

Nan shrugged her shoulders, and Ralph looked across at her, smiling broadly.

“You’re a very exasperating young person, Nan,” he said. “If you were going to be my wife, I believe I should beat you.”

“Well, that would at least break the monotony of things,” she retorted. But her lips set themselves in a straight, hard, line at the remembrance of Roger’s stormy threat: “I might even do that.”

“Is it monotony you’re suffering from?” asked Ralph quickly.

She nodded.

“I’m fed up with the country and its green fields—never anything but green fields! They’re so eternally, *damnably* green!”

“Oh, Nan! And the scenery in Cornwall is perfectly lovely!” protested Penelope feebly.

“Man cannot live by bread alone, Penny—nor scenery either. I just yearned for London. So I came.”

The next morning, much to Nan’s surprise, brought neither letter nor telegram from Roger.

“I quite expected a wire: ‘Return at once. All will be forgiven,’” she said frivolously, as lunch time came and still no message.

“Perhaps he isn’t prepared to forgive you,” suggested Ralph.

Nan stared at him without answering, her eyes dilating curiously. She had never even dreamed of such a possibility, and a sudden wild hope flamed up within her.

“It’s rather a knock to a man’s pride, you know, if the girl he’s engaged to does a bolt the moment his back’s turned,” pursued Ralph.

“It was madness!” said Penelope with the calmness of despair.

Page 149

Nan remained silent. Neither their praise nor blame would have affected her one iota at the moment. All that mattered was whether, without in the least intending to do it, she had cut the cords which bound her so irrevocably. Was it conceivable that Roger's pride would be so stung by her action in running away from Trenby Hall during his absence that he would never wish to see her again—far less make her his wife?

She had never contemplated the matter from that angle. But now, as Ralph put it before her, she realised that the attitude he indicated might reasonably be that of most men in similar circumstances.

Her heart beat deliriously at the very thought. If release came this way—by Roger's own decision—she would be free to take it! The price of the blunder she had made when she pledged herself to him—a price which was so much heavier than she could possibly have imagined—would be remitted.

And from the depths of her soul a fervent, disjointed prayer went up to heaven:

"God, God, please don't let him forgive me—don't let him ever forgive me!"

CHAPTER XXV

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

Nan was rather silent as the Fentons' big car purred its way through the crowded streets towards Westminster. For the moment the possible consequences of her flight from Trenby Hall had been thrust aside into a corner of her mind and her thoughts had slipped back to that last meeting with Maryon, when she had shown him so unmistakably that she, at least, had ceased to care.

She had hated him at the moment, rejoicing to be free from the strange, perverse attraction he held for her. But, viewed through the softening mists of memory, a certain romance and charm seemed to cling about those days when she had hovered on the border-line of love for him, and her heart beat a little faster at the thought of meeting him again.

Ralph Fenton had only a vague knowledge of the affair, but he dimly recollected that there had been something—a passing flirtation, he fancied—between Maryon and Nan in bygone days, and he proceeded to chaff her gently on the subject as they drove to the studio.

"Poor old Rooke will get a shock, Nan, when we dump you on to him this afternoon," he said. "He won't be anticipating the arrival of an old flame."

She flushed a little, and Ralph continued teasingly:

“You’ll really have to be rather nice to him! He’s paid pretty dearly for his foolishness in bartering love for filthy lucre.”

Penelope frowned at her husband, much as one endeavours to frown down the observations of an *enfant terrible*.

“Don’t be such an idiot, Ralph,” she said severely.

He grinned delightedly.

“Old fires die hard, Penny. Do you think it is quite right of us to introduce Nan on the scene again? She’s forbidden fruit now, remember.”

Page 150

“And doubtless Maryon *will* remember it,” retorted Penelope tartly.

“I think,” pursued Fenton, “it’s not unlike inserting a match into a powder barrel. Rooke”—reflectively—“always reminds me somewhat of a powder barrel. And Nan is by no means a safety match—warranted to produce a light from the legitimate box and none other!”

“I wish,” observed Nan plaintively, “that you wouldn’t discuss me just as if I weren’t here.”

They all laughed, and then, as the car slowed down to a standstill at Maryon’s door, the conversation came to an end.

Rooke had established himself in one of the big and comparatively inexpensive houses in Westminster, in that pleasant, quiet backwater which lies within the shadow of the beautiful old Abbey, away from the noisy stream of general traffic. The house had formerly been the property of another artist who had built on to it a large and well-equipped studio, so that Rooke had been singularly fortunate in his purchase.

Nan looked about her with interest as the door swung open, admitting them into a fair-sized hall. The thick Eastern carpet, the dim, blue-grey hangings on the walls, the quaint brazen lamps—hushing the modern note of electric light behind their thick glass panes—spoke eloquently of Maryon. A faint fragrance of cedar tinged the atmosphere.

The parlourmaid—unmistakably a twentieth-century product—conducted them into a beautiful Old English room, its walls panelled in dark oak, while heavy oaken beams traversed the ceiling. Logs burned merrily on the big open hearth, throwing up showers of golden sparks. Above the chimneypiece there was a wonderful old plaster coat-of-arms, dating back to the seventeenth century, and the watery gleams of sunshine, filtering in through the diamond panes of latticed windows, fell lingeringly on the waxen surface of an ancient dresser. On the dresser shelves were lodged some willow-pattern plates, their clear, tender blue bearing witness to an early period.

“How like Maryon it all is!” whispered Nan.

And just then Rooke himself came into the room. He had altered very little. It was the same supple, loose-limbed figure that approached. The pointed Van Dyck beard was as carefully trimmed, the hazel eyes, with their misleading softness of appeal, as arresting as of old. Perhaps he bore himself with a little more assurance. There might have been a shade less of the Bohemian and a shade more of the successful artist about him.

But Rooke would never suffer from the inordinate complacency which spoils so many successful men. Always it would be tempered by that odd, cynical humour of his. Beautiful ladies who gushed at him merely amused him, and received in return some

charming compliment or other that rang as hollow as a kettle-drum. Politicians who came to him for their portraits were gently made to feel that their favourite oratorical attitude—which they inevitably assumed when asked to pose themselves quite naturally—was not really overwhelmingly effective, while royalties who perforce condescended to attend his studio—since he flatly declined to paint them in their palaces—found that he was inclined to overlook the matter of their royal blood and to portray them as though they were merely men and women.

Page 151

There was an amusing little story going the rounds in connection with a certain peeress—one of the “new rich” fraternity—who had recently sat to Rooke for her portrait. Her husband’s title had presumably been conferred in recognition of the arduous services—-of an industrial and financial nature—which he had rendered during the war. The lady was inclined to be refulgent on the slightest provocation, and when Rooke had discussed with her his ideas for her portrait she had indignantly repudiated his suggestion that only a simple evening gown and furs should be worn.

“But it will look like the picture of a mere nobody,” she had protested. “Of—of just anyone!”

“Of anyone—or someone,” came Rooke’s answer. “The portrait of a great lady should be able to indicate . . . which.”

The newly-fledged peeress proceeded to explain that her own idea had been that she should be painted wearing her state robes and coronet—plus any additional jewels which could find place on her person.

Maryon bowed affably.

“But, by all means,” he agreed. “Only, if it is of them you require a portrait, you must go to Gregoire Marni. He paints still-life.”

Rooke came into the room and greeted his visitors with outstretched hands.

“My dear Penelope and Ralph,” he began cordially. “This is good of busy people like yourselves—”

He caught sight of the third figure standing a little behind the Fentons and stopped abruptly. His eyes seemed to flinch for a moment. Then he made a quick step forward.

“Why, Nan!” he exclaimed. “This is a most charming surprise.”

His voice and manner were perfectly composed; only his intense paleness and the compression of his fine-cut nostrils betrayed any agitation. Nan had seen that “white” look on his face before.

Then Penelope rushed in with some commonplace remark and the brief tension was over.

“Come and see my Mrs. T. Van Decken,” said Rooke presently. “The light’s pretty fair now, but it will be gone after tea.”

They trooped out of the room and into the studio, where several other people, who had already examined the great portrait, were still strolling about looking at various paintings and sketches.

It was a big bare barn of a place with its cold north light, for Rooke, sybarite as he was in other respects, treated his work from a Spartan standpoint which permitted necessities only in his studio.

“Empty great barrack, isn’t it?” he said to Nan. “But I can’t bear to be crowded up with extraneous hangings and draperies like some fellows. It stifles me.”

She nodded sympathetically.

“I know. I like an empty music-room.”

“You still work? Ah, that’s good. You shall tell me about it—afterwards—when this crowd has gone. Oh, Nan, there’ll be such a lot to say!”

His glance held her a moment, and she flushed under it. Those queer eyes of his had lost none of their old magnetic power. He turned away with a short, amused laugh, and the next moment was listening courteously to an elderly duchess’s gushing eulogy of his work.

Page 152

Nan remained quietly where she was, gazing at the big picture of the famous American beauty. It was a fine piece of work; the lights and shadows had been handled magnificently, and it was small wonder that the man who could produce such work had leaped into the foremost rank of portrait-painters. She felt very glad of his success, remembering how bitter he had been in former days over his failure to obtain recognition. She turned and, finding him beside her again, spoke her thought quite simply.

“You’ve made good at last, Maryon. You’ve no grudge against the world now.”

He looked down at her oddly.

“Haven’t I? . . . Well, you should know,” he replied.

She gave a little impatient twist of her shoulders. He hadn’t altered at all, it seemed; he still possessed his old faculty for implying so much more than was contained in the actual words he spoke.

“Most people would be content with the success you’ve gained,” she answered steadily.

“Most people—yes. But to gain the gold and miss . . . the rainbow!—*A quoi bon*?”

His voice vibrated. This sudden meeting with Nan was trying him hard.

There had been two genuine things in the man’s life—his love for Nan and his love of his art. He had thrust the first deliberately aside so that he might not be handicapped in the second, and now that the race was won and success assured he was face to face with the realisation of the price that must be paid. Nan was out of his reach for ever. Standing here at his side with all her old elusive charm—out of his reach!

“What did you mean”—she was speaking to him again—“by telling Penny that you expected to see me soon—before she would?”

“Ah, that’s my news. Of course, when I wrote, I thought you were still down in Cornwall, with the Trenbys. I’d no idea you were coming up to town just now.”

“I’m up unexpectedly,” murmured Nan. “Well? What then?”

He smiled, as though enjoying his secret.

“Isn’t Burnham Court somewhere in your direction?”

“Yes. It’s about midway between the Hall and Mallow Court. It belonged to a Sir Robert Burnham who’s just died. Why do you ask?”

“Because Burnham was my godfather. The old chap disapproved of me strongly at one time—thought painting pictures a fool’s job. But since luck came my way, his opinion apparently altered, and when he died he left me all his property—Burnham Court included.”

“Burnham Court!” exclaimed Nan in astonishment.

“Yes. Droll, isn’t it? So I thought of coming down some time this spring and seeing how it feels to be a land-owner. My wife is taking a trip to the States then—to visit some friends.”

“How nice!” Nan’s exclamation was quite spontaneous. It would be nice to have another of her own kind—one of her mental kith and kin—near at hand after she was married.

Page 153

“I shan’t be down there all the time, of course, but for week-ends and so on—in the intervals between transferring commonplace faces, and still more frequently commonplace souls, to canvas.” He paused, then asked suddenly: “So you’re glad, Nan?”

“Of course I am,” she answered heartily. “It will be like old times.”

“Unfortunately, old times never—come back,” he said shortly.

And then a quaint, drumming noise like the sound of a distant tom-tom summoned them to tea.

Most of the visitors took their departure soon afterwards, but Nan and the Fentons lingered on, returning to the studio to enjoy the multitude of sketches and studies stored away there, many of them carelessly stacked up with their faces to the wall. Rooke made a delightful host, pulling out one canvas after another and pouring out a stream of amusing little tales concerning the oddities of various sitters.

Presently the door opened and the maid ushered in yet another visitor.

Nan, standing rather apart by one of the bay windows at the far end of the room, was examining a rough sketch, in black and white. She caught her breath suddenly at the sound of the newcomer’s voice.

“I couldn’t get here earlier, as I promised, Rooke, and I’m afraid the daylight’s gone. However, I’ve no doubt Mrs. Van Decken will look equally charming by artificial light. In fact, I should have said it was her natural element.”

Nan, screened from the remainder of the room by the window embrasure, let the sketch she was holding flutter to the ground.

The quiet, drawling voice was Peter’s! And he didn’t know she was here! It would be horrible—horrible to meet him suddenly like this . . . here . . . in the presence of other people.

She pressed herself closely against the wall of the recess, her breath coming gaspingly between parched lips. The mere tones of his voice, with their lazy, distinctive drawl, set her heart beating in great suffocating leaps. She had never dreamed of the possibility of meeting him—here, of all places, and the knowledge that only a few yards separated them from one another, that if she stepped out from the alcove which screened her she would be face to face with him, drained her of all strength.

She stood there motionless, her back to the wall, her palms pressed rigidly against its surface.

Was he coming towards here? . . . Now? It seemed hours since his voice had first struck upon her ears.

At last, after what appeared an infinity of time, she heard the hum of talk and laughter drift out of the room . . . the sound of footsteps retreating . . . the closing of a door.

Her stiff muscles relaxed and, leaning forward, she peered into the studio. It was empty. They had all gone, and with a sigh of relief she stepped out from her hiding-place.

Page 154

She wandered aimlessly about for a minute or two, then came to anchor in front of Mrs. T. Van Decken's portrait. With a curious sense of detachment, she fell to criticising it afresh. It had been painted with amazing skill and insight. All the beauty was there, the exquisite tinting of flesh, the beautiful curve of cheek and throat and shoulder. But, behind the lovely physical presentment, Nan felt she could detect the woman's soul—-predatory, feline, and unscrupulous. It was rather original of Maryon to have done that, she thought—painted both body and spirit—and it was just like that cynical cleverness of his to have discerned so exactly the soulless type of woman which the beautiful body concealed and to have insolently reproduced it, daring discovery.

She looked up and found him standing beside her. She had not heard the quiet opening and closing of the door.

"An old friend of yours has just come in to see my Van Decken," he said quietly. His eyes were slightly quizzical.

Nan turned her face a little aside.

"I know. Where—where is he?"

"I took him along to have some tea. I've left him with the Fentons; they can prepare him for the . . . shock."

She flushed angrily.

"Maryon! You're outrageous!" she protested.

"I imagined. I was showing great consideration, seeing I've no cause to bear Mallory any overwhelming goodwill."

"I thought you had only met him once or twice?"

Rooke looked down at her with an odd expression.

"True—in the old days, only once. At your flat. But we've knocked up against each other several times since then. And Mrs. Van Decken asked him to come and see her portrait."

"You and he can have very little in common," observed Nan carelessly.

"Nothing"—promptly—"except the links of art. I've always been true in my art—if in nothing else. Besides, all's grist that comes to Mallory's mill. He regards me as a type. Ah!"—as the door opened once more—"here they come."

Her throat contracted with nervousness and she felt that it would be a physical impossibility for her to speak. She turned mechanically as Penelope re-entered the room, followed by her husband and Peter Mallory. Uppermost in Nan's mind was the thought, to which she clung as to a sheet-anchor, that of the three witnesses to this meeting between Peter and herself, the Fentons were ignorant of the fact that she cared for him, and Maryon, whatever he might suspect, had no certain knowledge.

The dreaded ordeal was quickly over. A simple handshake, and in a few moments they were all five chatting together, Mrs. Van Decken's portrait prominent in the conversation.

Mallory had altered in some indefinable way. In the fugitive glances she stole at him Nan could see that he was thinner, his face a trifle worn-looking, and the old whimsical light had died out of his eyes, replaced by a rather bitter sadness.

Page 155

“You’d better come and dine with us to-night, Mallory,” said Fenton, pausing as they were about to leave. “Penelope and I are due at the Albert Hall later on, but we shall be home fairly early and you can entertain Nan in our absence. It’s purely a ballad concert, so she doesn’t care to go with us—it’s not high-brow enough!”—with a twinkle in Nan’s direction.

She glanced at Peter swiftly. Would he refuse?

There was the slightest pause. Then—

“Thank you very much,” he said quietly. “I shall be delighted.”

“We dine at an unearthly hour to-night, of course,” volunteered Penelope. “Half-past six.”

“As I contrived to miss my lunch to-day, I shan’t grumble,” replied Peter, smiling. “Till to-night, then.”

And the Fentons’ motor slid away into the lamplit dusk.

“Wasn’t that rather rash of you, Ralph?” asked Penelope later on, when they were both dressing for the evening. “I think—last summer—Peter was getting too fond of Nan for his own peace of mind.”

Ralph came to the door of his dressing-room in his shirt-sleeves, shaving-brush in hand.

“Good Lord, no!” he said. “Mallory’s married and Nan’s engaged—what more do you want? They were just good pals. And anyway, even if you’re right, the affair must he dead embers by this time.”

“It may be. Still, there’s nothing gained by blowing on them,” replied Penelope sagely.

CHAPTER XXVI

“THE WIDTH OF A WORLD BETWEEN”

Nan gave a final touch to Penelope’s hair, drawing the gold fillet which bound it a little lower down on to the broad brow, then stood back and regarded the effect with critical eyes.

“That’ll do,” she declared. “You look a duck, Penelope! I hope you’ll get a splendid reception. You will if you smile at the audience as prettily as you’re smiling now! Won’t she, Ralph?”

“I hope so,” answered Fenton seriously. “It would be a waste of a perfectly good smile if she doesn’t.” And amid laughter and good wishes the Fentons departed for the concert, Peter Mallory accompanying them downstairs to speed them on their way.

Meanwhile Nan, left alone for the moment, became suddenly conscious of an overpowering nervousness at the prospect of spending the evening alone with Peter. There was so much—so much that lay behind them that they must either restrict their conversation to the merest trivialities, avoiding all reference to the past, or find themselves plunged into dangerous depths. Dinner had passed without incident. Sustained by the presence of Penelope and Ralph, Nan had carried through her part in it with a brilliance and reckless daring which revealed nothing at all of the turmoil of confused emotions which underlay her apparent gaiety.

Page 156

She seemed to have become a new being this evening, an enchanting creature of flame and fire. She said the most outrageous things at dinner, talking a lot of clever nonsense but sheering quickly away if any more serious strain of thought crept into the conversation. For an instant she might plumb the depths, the next she would be winging lightly over the surface again, while a spray of sparkling laughter rose and fell around her. With butterfly touch she opened the cupboard of memory, daring Peter the while with her eyes, skimming the thin ice of bygone times with the adroitness of an expert skater.

She was wearing the frock which had called forth Lady Gertrude's ire, and from its filmy folds her head and shoulders emerged like a flower from its sheath, vividly arresting, her scarlet lips and "blue-violet" eyes splashes of live colour against the warm golden ivory of her skin.

It was Nan at her most emotionally distracting, now sparkling with an almost feverish vivacity, now drooping into sudden silence, while the lines of her delicately angled face took on a touching, languorous appeal.

But now, now that the need for playing a part was over, and she stood waiting for Mallory's return, something tragic and desperate looked out of her eyes. She paced the room restlessly. Outside a gale was blowing. She could hear the wind roaring through the street. A sudden gust blew down the chimney and the flames flickered and bent beneath it, while in the distance sounded a low rumble of thunder—the odd, unexpected thunder that comes sometimes in winter.

Presently the lift gates clanged apart. She heard Mallory's step as he crossed the hall. Then the door of the room opened and shut.

She did not speak. For a moment she could not even look up. She was conscious of nothing beyond the one great fact that she and Peter were alone together—alone, yet as much divided as though the whole world lay between them.

At last, with an effort, she raised her eyes and saw him standing beside her. A stifled cry escaped her. Throughout dinner, while the Fentons had been present, he had smiled and talked much as usual, so that the change in the man had been less noticeable. But the mask was off now, and in repose his face showed, so worn and ravaged by grief that Nan cried out involuntarily in pitiful dismay.

Her first impulse was to fold her arms about him, drawing that lined and altered face against her bosom, hiding from sight the stark bitterness of the eyes that met her own, and comforting him as only the woman who loves a man knows how.

Then, like a black, surging flood, the memory of all that kept them apart rushed over her and she drew back her arms, half-raised, falling limply to her sides. He made no effort

to approach her. Only his eyes remained fixed on her, hungrily devouring every line of the beloved face.

“Why did you come?” she asked at last. Her voice seemed to herself as though it came from a great distance. It sounded like someone else speaking.

Page 157

“I couldn’t keep away. Life without you has become one long, unbearable hell.”

He spoke with a strange, slow vehemence which seemed to hold the aggregated bitterness and pain of all those solitary months.

A shudder ran through her slight frame. Her own agony of separation had been measurable with his.

“But you said . . . at Tintagel . . . that we mustn’t meet again. You shouldn’t have come—oh, you shouldn’t have come!” she cried tremulously.

He drew a step nearer to her.

“I *had* to come, I’m a man—not a saint!” he answered.

She looked up swiftly, trying to read what lay behind the harsh repression in his tones. She felt as though he were holding something in leash—something that strained and fought against restraint.

“*I’m a man—not a saint*!” The memory of his renunciation at King Arthur’s Castle swept over her.

“Yet I once thought you—almost that, Peter,” she said slowly.

But he brushed her words aside.

“Well, I’m not. When I saw you to-day at the studio . . . God! Did you think I’d keep away? . . . Nan, did you *want* me to?”

The leash was slipping. She trembled, aching to answer him as her whole soul dictated, to tell him the truth—that she wanted him every minute of the day and that life without him stretched before her like a barren waste.

“I—we—oh, you’re making it so hard for me!” she said imploringly. “Please go—go, now!”

Instead, he caught her in his arms, holding her crushed against his breast.

“No, I’m not going. Oh, Nan—little Nan that I love! I can’t give you up again. Beloved!—Soul of me!” And all the love and longing, against which he had struggled unavailingly throughout those empty months of separation, came pouring from his lips in a torrent of passionate pleading that shook her heart.

With an effort she tore herself free—wrenched herself away from the arms whose clasp about her body thrilled her from head to foot. Somewhere in one of the cells of her

brain she was conscious of a perfectly clear understanding of the fact that she must be quite mad to fight for escape from the sole thing in life she craved. Celia Mallory didn't really count—nor Roger and her pledge to him. . . . They were only shadows. What counted was Peter's love for her and hers for him. . . . Yet in a curious numbed way she felt she must still defer to those shadows. They stood like sentinels with drawn swords at the gate of happiness, and she would never be able to get past them. So it was no use Peter's staying here.

"You must go, Peter!" she exclaimed feverishly. "You must go!"

A new look sprang into his eyes—a sudden, terrible doubt and questioning.

"You want me to go?"

"Yes—yes!" She turned away, gesturing blindly in the direction of the door. The room seemed whirling round her. "I—I *want* you to go!"

Page 158

Then she felt his hand on her shoulder and, yielding to its insistent pressure, she faced him again.

“Nan, is it because you’ve ceased to care that you tell me to go?” He spoke very quietly, but there was something in the tense, hard-held tones before which she blenched—a note of intolerable fear.

Her shaking hands went up to her face. It would be better if he thought that of her—-better for him, at least. For her, nothing mattered any more.

“Don’t ask me, Peter!” she gasped, sobbingly. “Don’t ask me!”

Slowly his hand fell away from her shoulder.

“Then it’s true? You don’t care? Trenby has taken my place?”

A heavy silence dropped between them, broken only by the sullen roll of thunder. Nan shivered a little. Her face was still hidden in her hands. She was struggling with herself—trying to force from her lips the lie which would send the man’s reeling faith in her crashing to earth and drive him from her for ever. She knew if he went from her like that, believing she had ceased to care, he would never come back again. He would wipe her out utterly from his thoughts—out of his heart. Henceforward she would be only a dead memory to him—the symbol of a shattered faith.

It was more than she could bear. She could not give up that—Peter’s faith in her! It was all she had to cling to—to carry her through life.

She stretched out her arms to him, crying brokenly:

“Oh, Peter—Peter—”

At the sound, of her low, shaken voice, with its infinite appeal for understanding, the iron control he had been forcing on himself snapped asunder, and he caught her in his arms, kissing her with the fierce hunger of a man who has been starved of love.

She leaned against him, physically unable to resist, and deep down in her heart glad that she could not. For the moment everything was swept away in an anguish of happiness—in the ecstasy of burning kisses crushed against her mouth and throat and the strained clasp of arms locked round her.

“My woman!” he muttered unsteadily. “My woman!”

She could feel the hard beating of his heart, and her slender body trembled in his arms with an answering passion that sprang from the depths of her being. Forgetful of everything, save only of each other and their great love, their lips clung together.

Presently he tilted her head back. Her face was white, the shadowed eyes like two dark stains on the ivory bloom of a magnolia.

“Beloved! . . . Nan, say that you love me—let me hear you say it!”

“You know!” Her voice shook uncontrollably. “You don’t need to ask me, Peter. It—it *hurts* to love anyone as I love you.”

His hold tightened round her.

“You’re mine . . . mine out of all the world . . . my beloved. . . .”

Page 159

A flare of lightning and again the menacing roll of thunder. Then, sudden as the swoop of a bat, the electric burners quivered and went out, leaving only the glow of the fire to pierce the gloom. In the dim light she could see his face bent over her—the face of her man, the man she loved, and all that was woman and lover within her leaped to answer the call of her mate—the infinite, imperious demand of human love that has waited and hungered through empty days and nights till at last it shall be answered by the loved one.

For a moment she lay unresisting in his arms, helpless in the grip of the passion of love which had engulfed them both. Then the memory of the shadows—the sentinels with drawn swords—came back to her. The swords flashed, cleaving the dividing line afresh before her eyes.

Slowly she leaned away from his breast, her face suddenly drawn and tortured.

“Peter, I must go back—”

“Back? To Trenby?” Then, savagely: “You can’t. I want you!”

He stooped his head and she felt his mouth on hers.

A glimmer of pale firelight searched out the two tense faces; the shadowy room seemed listening, waiting—waiting—

“I want you!” he reiterated hoarsely. “I can’t live without you any longer. Nan . . . come with me . . .”

A tremulous flicker of lightning shivered across the darkness. The dead electric burners leaped into golden globes of light once more, and in the garish, shattering glare the man and woman sprang apart and stood staring at each other, trembling, with passion-stricken faces. . . .

The long silence was broken at last, broken by a little inarticulate sound—half-sigh, half-sob—from Nan.

Peter raised his head and looked at her. His face was grey.

“God!” he muttered. “Where were we going?”

He stumbled to the chimneypiece, and, leaning his arms on it, buried his face against them.

Presently she spoke to him, timidly.

“Peter?” she said. “Peter?”

At the sound of her voice he turned towards her, and the look in his eyes hurt her like a physical blow.

“Oh, my dear . . . my dear!” she cried, trembling towards him. “Don’t look like that . . . Ah! don’t look like that!”

And her hands went fluttering out in the mother-yearning that every woman feels for her man in trouble.

“Forgive me, Nan . . . I’m sorry.”

She hardly recognised the low, toneless voice.

Her eyes were shining. “Sorry for loving me?” she said.

“No—not for loving you. God knows, I can’t help that! But because I would have taken you and made you mine . . . you who are not mine at all.”

“I’m all yours, really, Peter.”

She came a few steps nearer to him, standing sweet and unafraid before him, her grave eyes shining with a kind of radiance.

“Dear,” she went on simply, throwing out her hands in a little defenceless gesture, “if you want me, I’ll come to you. . . . Not—not secretly . . . while I’m still pledged to Roger. But openly, before all the world. I’ll go with you . . . if you’ll take me.”

Page 160

She stood very still, waiting for his answer. Right or wrong, in that moment of utter sacrifice of self, she had risen to the best that was in her. She was willing to lay all on love's altar—body, soul, and spirit, and that honour of the Davenants which she had been so schooled to keep untarnished. Her pledge to Roger, her uncle's faith in her—-all these must be tossed into the fire to make her gift complete. But the agony in Peter's face when the mask had fallen from it had temporarily destroyed for her all values except the value of love.

Peter took the fluttering, outstretched fingers and laid his lips against them. Then he relinquished them slowly, lingeringly. Passion had died out of his face. His eyes held only a grave tenderness, and the sternly sweet expression of his mouth recalled to Nan the man as she had first known him, before love, terrible and beautiful, had come into their lives to destroy them.

"I should never take you, dear," he said at last. "A man doesn't hurt the thing he loves—not in his right senses. What he'll do when the madness is on him—only his own soul knows."

She caught his arm impetuously.

"Peter, let me come! I'm not afraid of being hurt—not if we're together. It's only the hurt of being without you that I can't bear. . . . Oh, I know what you're thinking"—as she read the negation in his face—"that I should regret it, that I should mind what people said. Dear, if I can give you happiness, things like that simply wouldn't count. . . . Ah, believe me, Peter!"

He looked down at her with the tenderness one accords a child, ignorantly pleading to have its way. He knew Nan's temperament—knew that, in spite of all her courage, when the moment of exaltation had passed not even love itself could make up for the bitterness of its price, if bought at such a cost. He pictured her exposed to the slights of those whose position was still unassailable, waiting drearily at Continental watering-places till the decree absolute should be pronounced, and finally, restored to respectability in so far as marriage with him could make it possible, but always liable to be unpleasantly reminded, as she went through life, that there had been a time when she had outraged convention. It was unthinkable! It would break her utterly.

"Even if that were all, it still wouldn't be possible," he said gently. "You don't know what you would have to face. And I couldn't let you face it. But it isn't all. . . . There's honour, dear, and duty. . . ."

Her gaze met his in dreary interrogation.

"Then—then, you'll go away?" Her voice faltered, broke.

“Yes, I shall go away . . . out of your life.”

He fell silent a moment. Then, with an effort, he went on:

“This is good-bye. We mustn’t see each other again—”

“No, no,” she broke in a little wildly. “Don’t go, Peter, I can’t bear it.” She clung to him, repeating piteously: “Don’t go . . . don’t go!”

Page 161

He stooped and pressed his lips to her hair, holding her in his arms.

“My dear!” he murmured. “My very dear!”

And so they remained for a little space.

Presently she lifted her face, white and strained, to his.

“*Must* you go, Peter?”

“Heart’s beloved, there is no other way. We may not love . . . and we can’t be together and not love. . . . So I must go.”

She lay very still in his arms for a moment. Then he felt a long, shuddering sigh run through her body.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes. . . . Peter, go very quickly. . . .”

He took her face between his hands and kissed her on the mouth—not passionately, but with the ineffably sad calmness of farewell.

“God keep you, dear,” he said.

The door closed behind him, shutting him from her sight, and she stood for a few moments staring dazedly at its wooden panels. Then, with a sudden desperate impulse, she tore it open again and peered out.

But there was only silence—silence and emptiness. He had gone.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DARK ANGEL

The following morning Ralph and Penelope breakfasted alone, the latter having given orders that Nan was on no account to be disturbed. It was rather a dreary meal. They were each oppressed by the knowledge which last night had revealed to them—the knowledge of the tragedy of love into which their two friends had been thrust by circumstances.

On their return from the concert at the Albert Hall they had encountered Mallory in the vestibule of the Mansions, and the naked misery stamped upon his face had arrested them at once.

“Peter, what is it?”

The question had sped involuntarily from Penelope's lips as she met his blank, unseeing gaze. The sound of her voice seemed to bring him back to recognition.

"Go to Nan!" he said in queer, clipped tones. "She'll need you. Go at once!"

And from a Nan whose high courage had at last bent beneath the storm, leaving her spent and unresisting, Penelope had learned the whole unhappy truth.

Since breakfast the Fentons had been dejectedly discussing the matter together.

"Why doesn't she break off this miserable engagement with Trenby?" asked Ralph moodily.

"She won't. I think she would have done if—if—for Peter's sake. But not otherwise. She's got some sort of fixed notion that it wouldn't be playing fair." Penelope paused, then added wretchedly: "I feel as if our happiness had been bought at her expense!"

"Ours?" Completely mystified, Ralph looked across at her inquiringly.

"Yes, ours." And she proceeded to fill in the gaps, explaining how, when she had refused to marry him, down at Mallow the previous summer, it was Nan who had brought about his recall from London.

Page 162

“I asked her if she intended to marry Roger, anyway—whether it affected my marriage or not,” she said. “And she told me that she should marry him ‘in any case.’ But now, I believe it was just a splendid lie to make me happy.”

“It’s done that, hasn’t it?” asked Ralph, smiling a little.

Penelope’s eyes shone softly.

“You know,” she answered. “But—Nan has paid for it.”

The telephone hell buzzed suddenly into the middle of the conversation and Penelope flew to answer it. When she came back her face held a look of mingled apprehension and relief.

“Who rang up?” asked Ralph.

“It was Kitty. She’s back in town. I’ve told her Nan is here, and she’s coming round at once. She said she’d got some bad news for her, but I think it’ll have to be kept from her. She isn’t fit to stand anything more just now.”

Ralph pulled out his watch.

“I’m afraid I can’t stay to see Kitty,” he said. “I’ve that oratorio rehearsal fixed for half-past ten.”

“Then, my dear, you’d better get off at once,” answered Penelope with her usual common sense. “You can’t do any good here, and it’s quite certain you’ll upset things there if you’re late.”

So that when Kitty arrived, a few minutes later, it was Penelope alone who received her. She was looking very blooming after her sojourn in the south of France.

“I’ve left Barry behind at Cannes,” she announced. “The little green tables have such a violent attraction for him, and he’s just evolved a new and infallible system which he wants to try. Funnily enough, I had a craving for home. I can’t think why—just in the middle of the season there! But I’m glad, now, that I came.” Her small, piquant face shadowed suddenly. “I’ve bad news,” she began abruptly, after a pause. Penelope checked her.

“Hear mine first,” she said quickly. And launched into an account of the happenings of the last three days—Nan’s quarrel with Roger, her sudden rush up to town and unexpected meeting with Peter at Maryon’s studio, and finally the distraught condition in which she had discovered her last night after Peter had gone.

“Oh, Penny! How dreadful! How dreadful it all is!” exclaimed Kitty pitifully, when the other had finished. “I knew that Peter cared a long time ago. But not Nan! . . . Though I remember once, at Mallow, wondering the tiniest bit if she were losing her heart to him.”

“Well, she’s done it. If you’d seen them last night, after they’d parted, you’d have had no doubts. They were both absolutely broken up.”

Kitty moved restlessly.

“And I suppose it’s really my fault,” she said unhappily. “I brought them together in the first instance. Penny, I was a fool. But I was so afraid—so afraid of Nan with Maryon. He might have made her do anything! He could have twisted her round his little finger at the time if he’d wanted to. Thank goodness he’d the decency not to try—that.”

Page 163

Penelope regarded her with an odd expression.

“Maryon’s still in love with Nan,” she observed quietly, “I saw that at the studio.”

Kitty laughed a trifle harshly.

“Nan must be ‘Maryon-proof’ now, anyway,” she asserted.

Penelope remained silent, her eyes brooding and reflective. That odd, magician’s charm which Rooke so indubitably possessed might prove difficult for any woman to resist—doubly difficult for a woman whose entire happiness in life had fallen in ruins.

The entrance of the maid with a telegram gave her the chance to evade answering. She tore open the envelope and perused the wire with a puzzled frown on her face. Then she read it aloud for Kitty’s benefit, still with the same rather bewildered expression.

“*Is Nan with you? Reply Trenby, Century Club, Exeter.*”

“I don’t understand it,” she said doubtfully.

“*I* do!”

She and Kitty both looked up at the sound of the mocking, contemptuous voice, Nan was standing, fully dressed, on the threshold of the room.

“Nan!” Penelope almost gasped. “I thought you were still asleep!”

Nan glanced at her curiously.

“I’ve not been asleep—all night,” she said evenly. “I asked your maid for a cup of tea some time ago. How d’you do, Kitty?”

She kissed the latter perfunctorily, her thoughts evidently preoccupied. She was very pale and heavy violet shadows lay beneath her eyes. To Penelope it seemed as though she had become immensely frailer and more fragile-looking in the passage of a single night. Refraining from comment, however, she held out the telegram.

“What does it mean, Nan?” she asked. “I thought you said you’d left a note telling Roger you were coming here?”

Nan read the wire in silence. Her face turned a shade whiter than before, if that were possible, and there was a smouldering anger in her eyes as she crushed the flimsy sheet in suddenly tense fingers and tossed it into the fire.

“No answer,” she said shortly. As soon as the maid had left the room, she burst out furiously:

“How dare he? How *dare* he think such a thing?”

“What’s the matter?” asked Penelope in a perturbed voice.

Nan turned to her passionately.

“Don’t you see what he means? *Don’t you see*? . . . It’s because I didn’t write to him yesterday from here. He doesn’t *believe* the note I left behind—he doesn’t believe I’m with you!”

“But, my dear, where else should you be?” protested Penelope. “And why shouldn’t he believe it?”

Nan shrugged her shoulders.

“I told you we’d had a row. It—it was rather a big one. He probably thinks I’ve run away and married—oh, well”—she laughed mirthlessly—“anyone!”

“Nan!”

“That’s what’s happened”—nodding. “It was really . . . quite a big row.” She paused, then continued, indignantly:

Page 164

“As if I’d have tried to deceive him over it—writing that I was going to you when I wasn’t! Roger’s a fool! He ought to have known me better. I’ve never yet been coward enough to lie about anything I wanted to do.”

“But, my dear”—Penelope was openly distressed—“we must send him a wire at once. I’d no idea you’d quarrelled—like that! He’ll be out of his mind with anxiety.”

“He deserves to be”—in a hard voice—“for distrusting me. No, Penny”—as Penelope drew a form towards her preparatory to inditing a reassuring telegram. “I won’t have a wire sent to him. D’you hear? I won’t have it!” Her foot beat excitedly on the floor.

Penelope signed and laid the telegraph form reluctantly aside.

“You agree with me, Kitten?” Nan whirled round upon Kitty for support.

“I’m not quite sure,” came the answer. “You see, I’ve been away so long I really hardly know how things stand between you and Roger.”

“They stand exactly as they were. I’ve promised to marry him in April. And I’m going to keep my promise.”

“Not in April,” said Kitty very quietly. “You won’t be able to marry him so soon. Nan, dear, I’ve—I’ve bad news for you.” She hesitated and Nan broke in hastily:

“Bad news? What—who is it? Not—*not* Uncle David?” Her voice rose a little shrilly.

Kitty nodded, her face very sorrowful. And now Nan noticed that she had evidently been crying before she came to the flat.

“Yes. He died this morning—in his sleep. They sent round to let me know. He had told his man to do this if—whenever it happened. He didn’t want you to have the shock of receiving a wire.”

“I don’t think it would have been a shock,” said Nan at last, quietly. “I think I knew it wouldn’t be very long before—before he went away. I’ve known . . . since Christmas.”

Her thoughts went back to that evening when she and St. John had sat talking together by the firelight in the West Parlour. Yes, she had known—ever since then—that the Dark Angel was drawing near. And now, now that she realised her old friend had stepped painlessly and peacefully across the border-line which divides this world we know from that other world whose ways are hidden from our sight, it came upon her less as a shock than as the inevitable ending of a long suspense.

“I wish—I wish I’d seen him just once more,” she said wistfully. “To—to say good-bye.”

Kitty searched the depths of her bag and withdrew a sealed envelope.

“I think he must have known that,” she said gently. “He left this to be given to you.”

She gave the letter into the girl’s hands and, signing to Penelope to follow her, quitted the room, leaving Nan alone with her dead.

In the silence of the empty room Nan read the last words, of her beloved Uncle David that would ever reach her.

Page 165

“I think this is good-bye, Nan,” he had written. “But don’t grieve overmuch, my dear. If you knew how long a road to travel it has seemed since Annabel went away, you would be glad for me. Will you try to be? Always remember that the road was brightened by many flowers along the wayside—and one of those flowers has been our good friendship, yours and mine. We’ve been comrades, Nan, which is a far better thing than most relatives achieve. And if sometimes you feel sad and miss the old friendship—as I know you will—just remember that I’m only in the next room. People are apt to make a great to-do about death. But, after all, it’s merely stepping from one of God’s rooms into the next.

“I don’t want to talk much about money matters, but I must just say this—that all I have will be yours, just as all my heart was yours.

“I hope life will be kind to you, my dear—kinder than you hope or expect.”

There were many who would find the world the poorer for lack of the kindly, gallant spirit which had passed into “God’s next room,” but to Nan the old man’s death meant not only the loss of a beloved friend, but the withdrawal from her life of a strong, restraining influence which, unconsciously to herself, had withheld her from many a rash action into which her temperament would otherwise have hurried her.

It seemed a very climax of the perversity of fate that now, at the very moment when the pain and bitterness of things were threatening to submerge her, Death’s relentless fingers should snatch away the one man on earth who, with his wise insight and hoarded experience of life, might have found a way to bring peace and healing to her troubled soul.

She spent the rest of the day quietly in her room, and when she reappeared at dinner she was perfectly composed, although her eyes still bore traces of recent tears. Against the black of the simple frock she wore, her face and throat showed pale and clear like some delicate piece of sculpture.

Penelope greeted her with kindly reproach.

“You hardly touched the lunch I sent up for you,” she said.

Nan, shook her head, smiling faintly.

“I’ve been saying good-bye to Uncle David,” she answered quietly. “I didn’t want anything to eat.”

Kitty, who had remained at the flat, regarded her with some concern. The girl had altered immensely since she had last seen her before going abroad. Her face had worn rather fine and bore an indefinable look of strain. Kitty sighed, then spoke briefly.

“Well, you’ll certainly eat some dinner,” she announced with firmness. “And, Ralph, you’d better unearth a bottle of champagne from somewhere. She wants something to pick her up a bit.”

Under Kitty’s kindly, lynx-eyed gaze Nan dared not refuse to eat and drink what was put before her, and she was surprised, when dinner was over, to find how much better she felt in consequence. Prosaic though it may appear, the fact remains that the strain and anguish of parting, even from those we love best on earth, can be mitigated by such material things as food and drink. Or is it that these only strengthen the body to sustain the tortured soul within it?

Page 166

After dinner Ralph deserted to his club, and the three women drew round the fire, talking desultorily, as women will, and avoiding as though by common consent matters that touched them too nearly. Presently the maid, came noiselessly into the firelit room.

“A gentleman has called to see Miss Davenant,” she said, addressing her mistress.

Nan’s heart missed a beat. It was Peter—she was sure of it—Peter, who had come back to her! In the long watches of the night he had found out that they could not part . . . not like this . . . never to see each other any more! It was madness. And he had come to tell her so. The agony of the interminable night had been his as well as hers.

“Did he give any name?” Her violet eyes were almost black with excitement.

“No, miss. He is in the sitting-room.”

Slowly Nan made her way across the hall, one hand pressed against her breast to still the painful throbbing of her heart. Outside the room she hesitated a moment; then, with a quick indrawing of her breath, she opened the door and went in.

“*Roger*!”

She shrank back and stood gazing at him dumbly, silent with the shock of sudden and undreamed-of disappointment. She had been so sure, so *sure* that it was Peter! And yet, jerked suddenly back to the reality of things, she almost smiled at her own certainty. Peter was too strong a man to renounce and then retract his renunciation twenty-four hours later.

Trenby, who had been standing staring into the fire, turned at the sound of her entrance. He looked dog-tired, and his eyes were sunken as though sleep had not visited them recently. At the sight of her a momentary expression of what seemed to be unutterable relief flashed across his face, then vanished, leaving him with bent brows and his under-jaw thrust out a little.

“Roger!” repeated Nan in astonishment.

“Yes,” he replied gruffly. “Are you surprised to see me?”

“Certainly I am. Why have you come? Why have you followed me here?”

“I’ve come to take you back,” he said arrogantly.

Her spirit rose in instant revolt.

“You might have saved yourself the trouble,” she flashed back angrily. “I’m not coming. I’ll return when I’ve finished my visit to Penelope.”

“You’ll come back with me now—to-night,” he replied doggedly. “We can catch the night mail and I’ve a car waiting below.”

“Then it can wait! Good heavens, Roger! D’you think I’ll submit to be made a perfect fool of—fetched back like a child?”

He took a step towards her.

“And do you think that *I’ll* submit to be made a fool of?” he asked in a voice of intense anger. “To be made a fool of by your rushing away from my house in my absence—to have the servants gossiping—not to know what has become of you—”

“I left a note for you,” she interrupted. “And you didn’t believe what I told you in it.”

Page 167

“No,” he acknowledged. “I didn’t. I was afraid . . . Good God, Nan!” he broke out with sudden passion. “Haven’t you any idea of what I’ve been through this last forty-eight hours? . . . It’s been hell!”

She looked at him as though amazed.

“I don’t understand,” she said impatiently. “Please explain.”

“Explain? Can’t you understand?” His face darkened. “You said you couldn’t marry me—you asked me to release you! And then—after that!—I come home to find you gone—gone with no word of explanation, and the whole household buzzing with the story that you’ve run away! I waited for a letter from you, and none came. Then I wired—to safeguard you I wired from Exeter. No answer! What was I to think? . . . What *could* I think but that you’d gone? Gone to some other man!”

“Do you suppose if I’d left you for someone else I should have been afraid to tell you? That I should have written an idiotic note like that? . . . How dared you wire to Penelope? It was abominable of you!”

“Why didn’t she reply? I thought they must be away—”

“That clinched matters in your mind, I suppose?” she said contemptuously. “But it’s quite simple. Penelope didn’t wire because I wouldn’t let her.”

He was silent. It was quite true that since Nan’s disappearance from Trenby Hall he had been through untold agony of mind. The possibility that she might have left him altogether in a wild fit of temper had not seemed to him at all outside the bounds of probability. And it was equally true that when another day had elapsed without bringing further news of her, he had become a prey to the increasing atmosphere of suspicion which, thanks to the gossip that always gathers in the servants’ hall, had even spread to the village.

Nor had either his mother or cousin made the least attempt to stem his rising anger. Far from it. Lady Gertrude had expressed her opinion with a conciseness that was entirely characteristic.

“You made an unwise choice, my son. Nan has no sense of her future position as your wife.”

Isobel had been less blunt in her methods, but a corrosive acid had underlain her gentle speech.

“I can’t understand it, Roger. She—she was fond of you, wasn’t she? Oh”—with a quick gesture of her small brown hands—“she *must* have been!”

“I don’t know so much about the ‘must have been,’” Roger had admitted ruefully. “She cared—once—for someone else.”

“Who was it?”

Isobel’s question shot out as swiftly as the tongue of an adder.

“I can’t tell you,” he answered reluctantly. He wished to God he could! That other unknown man of whom, from the very beginning, he had been unconsciously afraid! He was actively, consciously jealous of him now.

Then Isobel’s subdued, shocked tones recalled him from his thoughts.

“Oh, Roger, Nan couldn’t—she would never have run away to be—with him?”

Page 168

She had given words to the very fear which had been lurking at the back of his mind from the moment he had read the briefly-worded note which Nan had left for him.

Throughout the night this belief had grown and deepened within him, and with the dawn he had motored across country to Exeter, driving like a madman, heedless of speed limits. There he had dispatched a telegram to Penelope, and having waited unavailingly for a reply he had come straight on to town by rail. The mark of those long hours of sickening apprehension was heavily imprinted on the white, set face he turned to Nan when she informed him that it was she who had stopped Penelope from sending any answer.

“And I suppose,” he said slowly, “it merely struck you as . . . amusing . . . to let me think what I thought?”

“You had no right to think such a thing,” she retorted. “I may be anything bad that your mother believes me, but at least I play fair! I left Trenby to stay with Penelope, exactly as I told you in my note. If—if I proposed to break my promise to you, I wouldn’t do it on the sly—meanly, like that.” Her eyes looked steadily into his. “I’d tell you first.”

He snatched her into his arms with a sudden roughness, kissing her passionately.

“You’d drive a man to madness!” he exclaimed thickly. “But I shan’t let you escape a second time,” he went on with a quiet intensity of purpose. “You’ll come back with me now—to-night—to Trenby.”

She made a quick gesture of negation.

“No, no, I can’t—I couldn’t come now!”

His grip of her tightened.

“Now!” he repeated in a voice of steel. “And I’ll marry you by special licence within a week. I’ll not risk losing you again.”

Nan shuddered in his arms. To go straight from that last farewell with Peter into marriage with a man she did not love—it was unthinkable! She shrank from it in every fibre of her being. Some day, perhaps, she could steel herself to make the terrible surrender. But not now, not yet!

“No! No!” she cried strickenly. “I can’t marry you! Not so soon! You must give me time—wait a little! Kitty—”

She struggled to break from him, but he held her fast.

“We needn’t wait for Kitty to come back,” he said.

“No.” The door had opened immediately before he spoke and Kitty herself came quickly into the room. “No,” she answered him. “You needn’t wait for me to come back. I returned yesterday.”

“Kitty!”

With a cry like some tortured captive thing Nan wrenched herself free and fled to Kitty’s side.

“Kitty! Tell him—tell him I can’t marry him now! Not yet—oh, I can’t!”

Kitty patted her arm reassuringly.

“Don’t worry,” she answered. Then she turned to Roger.

“Your wedding will have to be postponed, Roger,” she said Quietly. “Nan’s uncle died early this morning.”

Page 169

She watched the tense anger and suspicion die swiftly out of his eyes. The death of a relative, necessarily postponing Nan's marriage, appealed to that curious conventional strain in him, inherited from Lady Gertrude.

"Lord St. John dead?" he repeated. "Nan, why didn't you tell me? I should have understood if I'd known that. I wouldn't have worried you." He was full of shocked contrition and remorse.

Kitty felt she had been disingenuous. But she had sheltered Nan from the cave-man that dwelt in Roger—oddly at variance with the streak of conventionality which lodged somewhere in his temperamental make-up. And she was quite sure that, if Lord St. John knew, he would be glad that his death should have succoured Nan, just as in life he had always sought to serve her.

"I want Nan to come and stay with me for a time," pursued Kitty steadily, on the principle of striking while the iron is hot. "Later on I'll bring her down to Mallow, and later still we can talk about the wedding. You'll have to wait some months, Roger."

He assented, and Nan, realising that it was his mother in him, for the moment uppermost, making these concessions to convention, felt conscious of a wild hysterical desire to burst out laughing. She made a desperate effort to control herself.

The room seemed to be growing very dark. Far away in the sky—no, it must be the ceiling—she could see the electric lights burning ever more and more dimly as the waves of darkness surged round her, rising higher and higher.

"But there's honour, dear, and duty. . . ." Peter's words floated up to her on the shadowy billows which swayed towards her.

"Honour! Duty!"

There was a curious singing in her head. It sounded like the throb of a myriad engines, rhythmically repeating again and again:

"Honour! Duty! Honour! Duty!"

The words grew fainter, vaguer, trailing off into a regular pulsation that beat against her ears.

"*Honour*!" She thought she said it very loudly.

But all that Kitty and Roger heard was a little moan as Nan slipped to the ground in a dead faint.

CHAPTER XXVIII

GOOD-BYE!

A chesterfield couch had been pulled well into the bay window of one of Kitty's big rooms so that Nan, from the nest of cushions amid which she lay, could see all that was passing in the street below. The warm May sunshine poured into the room, revealing with painful clarity the changes which the last three months had wrought in her. Never at any time robust in appearance, she seemed the slenderest, frailest thing as she lay there, the delicate angles of her face sharpened by fever and weakness, her cheeks so hollowed that the violet-blue eyes looked almost amazingly big and wide-open in her small face.

Kitty was sitting near her, a half-knitted jumper lying across her knees, the inevitable cigarette in her hand, while Barry, who had returned from Cannes some weeks ago—-entirely unperturbed at finding his new system a complete "wash-out"—leaned, big and debonair, against the window.

Page 170

“When are we going to Mallow?” asked Nan fretfully. “I’m so tired of staring at those houses across the way.”

Barry turned his head and regarded the houses opposite reflectively.

“They’re not inspiring, I admit,” he answered, “even though many of them *are* the London habitations of belted earls and marquises.”

“We’ll go to Mallow as soon as you like,” interposed Kitty. “I think you’re quite fit to stand the journey now.”

“Fit? Of course I’m fit. Only”—Nan’s face clouded—“it will mean your leaving town just when the season’s in full swing. I shan’t like dragging you away.”

“Season?” scoffed Kitty. “Season be blowed! The only thing that matters is whether you’re strong enough to travel.”

She regarded Nan affectionately. The latter had no idea how dangerously ill she had been. She remembered Roger’s visit to the flat perfectly clearly. But everything which followed had been more or less a blank, with blurred intervals of doubtful clarity, until one day she found herself lying in a bed with Kitty standing at its foot and Peter sitting beside it. She recollected quite well observing:

“Why, Peter, you’ve got some grey hairs! I never noticed them before.”

Peter had laughed and made some silly reply about old age creeping on, and presently it seemed to her that Kitty, crying blindly, had led him out of the room while she herself was taken charge of by a cheerful, smiling person in a starched frock, whose pretty, curling hair insisted on escaping from beneath the white cap which coifed it.

Unknown to Nan, those were the first rational words she had spoken since the night on which she had fainted, after refusing to return to Trenby Hall with Roger. Moved by some inexplicable premonition of impending illness, Kitty had insisted on driving her, carefully pillowed and swaddled in rugs, to her house in Green Street that same evening.

“If she’s going to be ill,” she remarked practically, “it will be much easier to nurse her at my place than at the flat.”

Results had justified her. During the attack of brain fever which followed, it had required all the skill of doctors and nurses to hold Nan back from the gates of death. The fever burnt up her strength like a fire, and at first it had seemed as though nothing could check the delirium. All the strain and misery of the last few months poured itself out in terrified imaginings. Wildly she besought those who watched beside her to keep Roger

away from her, and when the fear of Roger was not present, the whole burden of her speech had been a pitiful, incessant crying out for Peter—Peter!

Nothing would soothe her, and at last, in desperation, Kitty had gone to Mallory and begged him to come. His first impulse had been to refuse, not realising the danger of Nan's illness. Then, when it was made clear to him that her sole chance of life lay in his hands, he had stifled his own feelings and consented at once.

Page 171

But when he came Nan did not even recognise him. Instead, she gazed at him with dry, feverishly brilliant eyes and plucked at his coat-sleeve with restless fingers.

“Oh, you *look* kind!” she had exclaimed piteously. “Will you bring Peter back to me? Nobody here”—she indicated Kitty and one of the nurses standing a little apart—-“nobody here will let him come to me. . . . I’m sure he’d come if he knew how much I wanted him!”

Mallory had been rather wonderful with her.

“I’m sure he would,” he said gently, though his heart was wrung at the sight of her flushed face and bright, unrecognising eyes. “Now will you try to rest a little before I fetch him? See, I’ll put my arm round you—so, and if you’ll go to sleep I’ll send for him. He’ll be here when you wake.”

He had gathered her into his arms as he spoke, and his very touch seemed to soothe and quiet her.

“You’re . . . rather like . . . Peter,” she said, staring at him with a troubled frown on her face.

Holding that burningly bright gaze with his own steady one, he answered quietly:

“I *am* Peter. They said you wanted me, so of course I came. You knew I would.”

“Peter? Peter?” she whispered. Then, shaking her head: “No. You can’t be Peter. He’s dead, I think. . . . I know he went away somewhere—right away from me.”

Mallory’s arms closed firmly round her and she yielded passively to his embrace. Perhaps behind the distraught and weary mind which could not recognise him, the soul that loved him felt his presence and was vaguely comforted. She lay very still for some time, and presently one of the nurses, leaning over her, signed to Peter that she was asleep.

“Don’t move,” she urged in a low voice. “This sleep may be the saving of her.”

So, hour after hour, Peter had knelt there, hardly daring to change his position in the slightest, with Nan’s head lying against his shoulder, and her hand in his. Now and again one of the nurses fed him with milk and brandy, and after a time the intolerable torture of his cramped arms and legs dulled into a deadly numbness.

Once, watching from the foot of the bed, Kitty asked him softly:

“Can you stand it, Peter?”

He looked up at her and smiled.

“Of course,” he answered, as though there were no question in the matter.

It was only when the early dawn was peering in at the window that at last Nan stirred in his arms and opened her eyes—eyes which held once more the blessed light of reason. Then in a voice hardly audible for weakness, but from which the wild, delirious note had gone, she had spoken.

“Why, Peter, you’ve got some grey hairs!”

And Peter, forcing a smile to his drawn lips, had answered with his joking remark about old age creeping on. Then, letting the nurse take her from his arms, he had toppled over on to the floor, lying prone while the second nurse rubbed his limbs and the agony of returning life coursed like a blazing fire through his veins. Afterwards, with the tears running down her face, Kitty had helped him out of the room.

Page 172

Nan's recovery had been slow, and Peter had been compelled to abandon his intention to see no more of her. She seemed restless and uneasy if he failed to visit her at least once a day, and throughout those long weeks of convalescence he had learned anew the same self-sacrifice and chivalry of spirit which had carried him forward to the utter renunciation he had made that summer night in King Arthur's Castle.

There was little enough in the fragile figure, lying day after day on a couch, to rouse a man's passion. Rather, Nan's utter weakness called forth all the solicitude and ineffable tenderness of which Peter was capable—such tenderness—almost maternal in its selfless, protective quality, as is only found in a strong man—never in a weak one.

At last, with the May warmth and sunshine, she had begun to pick up strength, and now she was actually on the high road to recovery and demanding for the third or fourth time when they might go to Mallow.

Inwardly she was conscious of an intense craving for the sea, with its salt, invigorating breath, for the towering cliffs of the Cornish coast, and the wide expanse of downland that stretched away to landward till it met and mingled with the tender blue of the sky.

"Strong enough to stand the journey?" she exclaimed in answer to Kitty's remark. "I should think I am strong enough! I was outdoors for a couple of hours this morning, and I don't feel the least bit tired. I'm only lying here"—indicating the Chesterfield with a humorous little smile that faintly recalled the Nan of former days—"because I find it so extremely comfortable."

"That may be a slight exaggeration," returned Kitty. "Still, I think you could travel now. And your coming down to Mallow will rather ease things."

"Ease things? What things?"

"Your meeting with Lady Gertrude, for one. You may have forgotten—though you can be sure she hasn't!—that you left Trenby Hall rather unceremoniously! And then your illness immediately afterwards prevented your making your peace with her."

Nan's face changed. The light seemed to die out of her eyes.

"I'd almost forgotten Lady Gertrude," she said painfully.

"I don't think you'll find it difficult to meet her again," replied Kitty. "Roger stopped in town all through the time you were really dangerously ill—"

"Did he?" interrupted Nan. "That was—rather nice of him, considering how I'd treated him."

"Do you still mean to marry the fellow?" asked Barry, bluntly.

“Yes.” The monosyllable fell slowly but quite convincingly. “Why hasn’t he been to see me lately?” she added after a moment.

“Because I asked him not to,” answered Kitty. “He stayed in London till you were out of danger. After that I bustled him off home, and told him I should only bring you down to Mallow if he could induce Lady Gertrude to behave decently to you.”

Page 173

“You seem to have ordered him about pretty considerably,” remarked Nan with a faint smile.

“Oh, he was quite meek with me,” returned Kitty. “He had to be. I told him his only chance was to keep away from you, to manage Lady Gertrude properly, and not to worry you with letters.”

“So that’s why he hasn’t written? I’ve wondered, sometimes.”

Nan was silent for a time. Then she said quietly:

“You’re a good pal, Kitten.”

Followed a still longer pause. At last Kitty broke it reluctantly:

“I’ve something else to tell you.”

Nan glanced up quickly, detecting some special significance in her tones.

“What is it?” she asked.

Kitty made a gesture to her husband that he should leave them alone. When he had gone:

“It’s about Peter,” she said, then paused unhappily.

“Yes. Go on. Peter and I are only friends now. We’ve—we’ve worked up quite a presentable sort of friendship since my illness, you know. What is there to tell me?”

“You know that Celia, his wife, has been out in India for some years. Well—”

Nan’s frail body stiffened suddenly.

“She’s coming home?” she said swiftly.

Kitty nodded.

“Yes. She’s been very ill with sunstroke. And she’s ordered home as soon as she is able to travel.”

Nan made no answer for a moment. Then she said almost under her breath:

“Poor Peter!”

It was late in the afternoon when Peter came to pay his usual daily visit. Kitty brought him into the room and vanished hastily, leaving the two alone together.

“You know?” he said quietly.

Nan bent her head.

“Yes, I know,” she answered. “Oh, Peter, I’m so sorry!” Adding, after a pause: “Must you have her with you?”

“I must, dear.”

“You’d be happier alone.”

“Less unhappy, perhaps.” He corrected her gently. “But one can’t always consider one’s own personal wishes. I’ve a responsibility towards Celia. She’s my wife. And though she’s been foolish and treated life rather as though it were a game of battledore and shuttlecock, she’s never done anything to unfit herself to be my wife. Even if she had—well, I still shouldn’t consider I was absolved from my responsibility towards her. Marriage is ‘for better, for worse,’ and I can’t be coward enough to shirk if it turns out ‘for worse.’ If I did, anything might happen—anything! Celia’s a woman of no will-power—-driven like a bit of fluff by every breeze that blows. So you see, beloved, I must be waiting to help her when she comes back.”

Nan lifted her eyes to his face.

“I see that you’re just the best and bravest man I know—*preux chevalier*, as I once called you. . . . Oh, Peter! She’s the luckiest woman in the world to be your wife! And she doesn’t even know it!”

Page 174

He drew her hands into his.

“Not really lucky to be my wife, Nan,” he said quietly, “because I can give her so little. Everything that matters—my love, my utter faith, all my heart and soul—are yours, now and for ever.”

Her hands quivered in his clasp. She dared not trust herself to speak, lest she should give way and by her own weakness try his strength too hard.

“Good-bye, dear,” he said with infinite tenderness. Then, with a ghost of the old whimsical smile that reminded her sharply, cruelly, of the Peter of happier days: “We seem always to be saying good-bye, don’t we? And then Fate steps in and brings us together again. But this time it is really good-bye—good-bye for always. When we meet again—if we do—I shall have Celia to care for, and you will be Roger’s wife.”

He stooped his head and pressed his lips against first one soft palm and then the other. She heard him cross the room and the door close behind him. With a little cry she covered her face with her hands, crushing the palms where his kiss had lain against her shaking lips.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON THIN ICE

May had slipped away into the ranks of the dead months, and June—a June resplendent with sunshine and roses—had taken her place.

Nan, an open letter in her hand, sat perched on the low wall of the quadrangular court at Mallow, delicately sniffing the delicious salt tang which wafted up from the expanse of blue sea that stretched in front of her. Physically she felt a different being from the girl who had lain on a couch in London and grumbled fretfully at the houses opposite. A month at Mallow had practically restored her health. The good Cornish cream and butter had done much towards rounding the sharpened contours of her face, and to all outward appearance she was the same Nan who had stayed at Mallow almost a year ago.

But within herself she knew that a great gulf lay fixed between those insouciant, long-ago days and this golden, scented morning. The world had not altered. June was still vivid and sweet with the rapture of summer. It was she herself who had changed.

Looking backward, she almost wondered how she had endured the agony of love and suffering and sacrifice which had been compressed into a single year. She wished sometimes that they had let her die when she was so ill—let her slip easily out of the world while the delirium of fever still closed the door on conscious knowledge of all that

she had lost. It seemed foolish to make so much effort to hold on to life when everything which had made it lovely and pleasant and desirable had gone out of it. Yet there were still moments, as to-day, when the sheer beauty of the earth so thrilled her that for the time being life was a thousand times worth living.

And behind it all—back of the tears and suffering which seemed so cruelly incomprehensible—there lay always the inscrutable and splendid purposes of God, and the Ultimate Light beyond. Lord St. John had taught her that. It had been his own courageous, unshakable belief. But now he had gone from her she found her faith faltering. It was too difficult—well-nigh impossible—to hold fast to the big uplift of such thought and faith as had been his.

Page 175

Her marriage loomed ahead in the near future, and in spite of her dogged intention to fulfil her bargain, she dreaded unspeakably the actual day which would make her Roger's wife—compelling her to a physical and spiritual bondage from which she shrank with loathing.

But there could be no escape. None. Throughout her illness, and since then, while she had groped her way slowly back to health here at Mallow, Roger had been thoughtful and considerate to an astonishing degree. Never once, during all the hours they had passed together, had he let that strong passion of his break loose, though once or twice she thought she had heard it leap against the bars which prisoned it—the hot, imperious desire to which one day she must submit unmurmuringly.

Drilled by Kitty, he had been very undemanding up till now. Often he had left her with only a kindly pressure of the hand or a light kiss on her forehead, and she had been grateful to him. Grateful, too, that she had been spared a disagreeable scene with his mother. Lady Gertrude had met her without censure, even with a certain limited cordiality, and accordingly Nan, whose conscience was over-sensitive just now, had reproached herself the more severely for her treatment of her future mother-in-law.

Perhaps she would have felt rather less self-reproachful if she had known the long hours of persuasion and argument by which Roger had at last prevailed upon his mother to refrain from pouring out the vials of her wrath on Nan's devoted head. Only fear lest she might alienate the girl so completely that Roger would lose the wife he wanted had induced her to yield. She had consented at last, but with a mental reservation that when Nan was actually Roger's wife she would tell her precisely what she thought of her whenever occasion offered. Nothing would persuade her to overlook such flagrant faults in any daughter-in-law of hers!

Latterly, however, she had been considerably mollified by the Seymours' tactful agreement to her cherished scheme that Nan's marriage should take place from Mallow Court. Actually, Kitty had consented because she considered that the longer Nan could lead an untrammelled life at Mallow, prior to her marriage, the better, and thanks to her skilful management the date was now fixed for the latter end of July.

Roger had chafed at the delay, but Kitty had been extremely firm on the point, assuring him that she required as long as possible to recuperate from her recent illness. In her own mind she felt that, since Nan must inevitably go through with the marriage, every day's grace she could procure for her would help to restore her poise and strengthen nerves which had already been tried to the uttermost.

Between them, Barry and Kitty and the two Fentons—who had joined the Mallow party for a short holiday—did their utmost to make the time that must still elapse before the wedding a little space of restfulness and peace, shielding Nan from every possible

worry and annoyance. Even the question of trousseau was swept aside by Kitty of the high hand.

Page 176

“Leave it to me. I’ll see to it all,” she proclaimed. “Good gracious, there’s a post in the country, isn’t there? Patterns can be sent and everything got under way, and finally Madame Veronique shall come down here for the fittings. So that’s that!”

But in spite of Kitty’s good offices, Nan was beginning to find the thorns in her path. Now that her health was more or less restored, Roger no longer exercised the same self-control. The postponing of the wedding-day to a date six weeks ahead roused him to an impatience he made no effort to conceal.

“But for your uncle’s death and Kitty’s prolonging your convalescence so absurdly, we should have been married by now,” he told her one day with a thwarted note in his voice.

Nan shivered a little.

“Yes,” she said. “We should have been married.”

“Well”—his keen, grey eyes swept her face—“there’ll be no further postponement. I shall marry you if the whole of your family chooses to die at the same moment. Even if you yourself were dying you should be my wife—*my wife*—first.”

Roger’s nature seemed to have undergone a curious change—an intensifying of his natural instincts, as it were. Those long hours of apprehension during which he had really believed that Nan had left him, followed by her illness, when death so nearly snatched her from him, had strengthened his desire for possession, rousing his love to fever heat and setting loose within him a corresponding jealousy.

Nan could not understand his attitude towards her in the very least. In the first instance he had yielded with a fairly good grace to Kitty’s advice regarding the date of the wedding, but within a few days he had suddenly become restive and dissatisfied. Had Nan known it, an apparently careless remark of Isobel Carson’s had sown the seed.

“It’s curious that your marriage with Nan still seems to hang on the horizon, Roger,” she had remarked reflectively. “It’s always ’jam to-morrow,’ isn’t it? You’d better take care she doesn’t give you the slip altogether!”—smilingly.

Very often, since then, he would sit watching Nan with a sullen, brooding look in his eyes, and on occasion he seemed a prey to morose suspicion, when he would question her dictatorially as to what she had been doing since they had last met. At times he was roughly tender with her, abruptly passionate and demanding, and she grew to dread these moods even more than his outbreaks of temper.

It was now more than ever impossible for her to respond, and only yesterday, when he had suddenly caught her in his arms, kissing her fiercely yet feeling her lips lie stiff and unresponsive beneath his own, he had almost flung her from him. Then, gripping her by

the arm until the delicate flesh showed red and bruised beneath the pressure, he had said savagely:

“By God, Nan! I’ll make you love me—or break you!”

Page 177

Nan turned back her sleeve and looked at the red weals now darkening into a bruise which his grasp had made on the white skin of her arm. Then she re-read the letter in her hand. It bore yesterday's date and was very brief.

"I'm hoping to get out of town very soon now, and I propose to come down and inspect my new property with a view to re-decorating the house. I could never live with dear godfather's Early Victorian chairs and tables! So you may expect to see me almost any day now on the doorstep of Mallow Court.

"Yours as always.

"MARYON."

Nan's first impulse was to beg him not to come. She had screwed up her courage to fulfil her pledge to marry Roger, and she felt that the presence in the neighbourhood of Maryon—Maryon with his familiar charm and attraction, and his former love for her intensified by losing her—might be a somewhat disturbing factor.

Looking out over the sea, she smiled to think how futile Maryon's charm would be to touch her if she were going to marry Peter Mallory. She would have no wish even to see him. But yesterday's scene with Roger had increased her fear and dread of her coming marriage, and she was conscious of a captive's longing for one more taste of freedom, for one more meeting with the man who had played a big part in the old Bohemian life she had loved so well.

For long she hesitated how to answer Maryon's letter, sitting there on the seaward wall, her chin cupped in her hand. Should she write and ask him to postpone his visit? Or reply just as though she were expecting him? At last her decision was taken. She tore up his letter and, strolling to the edge of the cliff, tossed the pieces into the sea. She would send no answer at all, leaving it to the shuttle of fate to weave the next strand in her life.

And a week later Maryon Rooke came down to take possession of his new domain.

"I can take six clear weeks now," he told Nan. "That's better than my first plan of week-ending down here. I have been working hard since you blew into my studio one good day, and now for six weeks I toil not, neither do I spin. Unless." he added suddenly, "I paint a portrait of you while I'm here!"

Nan glanced at him delightedly.

"I should love it. Only you won't paint my soul, will you, Maryon, as you did Mrs. T. Van Decken's?"

His eyes narrowed a little.

“I don’t know, Nan. I think I should rather like to paint it. Your soul would be an intricate piece of work.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t make nearly as nice a picture as my face. I think it’s rather a plain soul.”

“The answer to that is obvious,” he replied lightly. “Well, I shall talk to Trenby about the portrait. I suppose permission from headquarters would be advisable?”

Nan made a small grimace.

“Of the first importance, my friend.”

Rather to Nan’s surprise, Roger quite readily gave permission for Rooke to paint her portrait. In fact, he appeared openly delighted with the idea that her charming face should be permanently transferred to canvas. In his own mind he had promptly decided to buy the portrait when completed and add it to the picture gallery at the Hall, where many a lovely Trenby of bygone generations looked down, smiling or sad, from the walls.

Page 178

The sittings were begun out of doors in the tranquil seclusion of the rose garden, Rooke motoring across to Mallow almost daily, and Nan posed in a dozen different attitudes while he made sketches of her both in line and colour, none of which, however, satisfied him in the least.

“My dear Nan,” he exclaimed one day, as he tore up a rough charcoal sketch in disgust, “you’re the worst subject I’ve ever encountered——or else my hand has lost its cunning! I can’t get you—*you*—in the very least!”

“Oh, Maryon”—breaking her pose to look across at him with a provoking smile—“can’t you find my soul, after all?”

“I don’t believe you’ve got one. Anyway, it’s too elusive to pin down on canvas. Even your face seems out of my reach. You won’t look as I want you to. Any other time of the day I see just the expression on your face want to catch—the expression”—his voice dropped a shade—“which means Nan to me. But the moment you come out here and pose, it’s just a pretty, meaningless mask which isn’t you at all.”

He surveyed her frowningly.

“After all, it *is* your soul I want!” he said vehemently.

He took a couple of quick strides across the grass to her side.

“Give it me, Nan—the heart and soul that looks out of your eyes sometimes. This picture will never be sold. It’s for me . . . me! Surely”—with a little uneven laugh—“as I’ve lost the substance, you won’t grudge me the shadow?”

A faint colour ran up under her clear skin.

“Oh, I know it was my own fault,” he went on. “There was a time, Nan, when I had my chance, wasn’t there?”

She hesitated. Then:

“Perhaps there was—once,” she acknowledged slowly.

“And I lost it! Well, I’ve paid for it every day of my life,” he said shortly. “And twice a day since your engagement,” he added, with one of those odd touches of whimsicality which were liable to cross even his moments of deep feeling, giving a sense of unreality to them—a something insincere.

“To get back to the picture—” suggested Nan.

He laughed.

“We can’t get *back*—seeing we’ve never got there at all yet. These”—with a gesture to the various sketches littering the lawn—“are merely preliminary. When I begin the portrait itself, we’ll retire indoors. I think the music-room here will answer the purpose of a studio very well.”

“Two whole weeks!” observed Nan meditatively. “I fancy Roger will be somewhat surprised that progress is so slow.”

“Trenby? Pooh! It’s not his picture. I shall have to explain to him”—smiling—“that art is long.”

“He’ll get fidgety about it. You see, already we’ve stayed at home several times when the others have arranged a picnic expedition.”

“Choosing the better part,” he retorted. “I should like to make one more attempt this afternoon, if you’re not too tired. See, your arms . . . so! And I want your face the least bit tilted.”

Page 179

He put his hand very gently beneath her chin, posing her head as he wished it. For a moment he held her so, her face cupped in his hand, while his hazel eyes stared down at her with a smouldering fire in their depths.

Slowly the hot colour crept into her face beneath his scrutiny.

“Maryon!” Her lips moved protestingly.

“I think you’ve got the shortest upper lip of any woman I know,” he said, calmly releasing her and going back to his easel. “And women with short upper lips are the very devil.”

He sketched rapidly for a time.

Her pose at the moment was practically perfect—the small head tilted a little on the long round throat, while the slanting rays of the sun turned the dusky hair into a shadowy, gold-flecked nimbus.

Rooke worked on in silence, though once as he looked across at her he caught his underlip suddenly betwixt his teeth. She was so utterly desirable—the curve of her cheek, the grace of her lissom body, the faint blue veins that showed beneath the warm, ivory skin. And she was going to be Trenby’s wife!

“There!” he said abruptly. “That’s the idea at last. Tomorrow we’ll begin the portrait itself.”

Nan rose, stretching her arms above her head.

“I’m sure I shall die of fatigue, Maryon,” she observed, coming round to his side to inspect the sketch.

“Nonsense! I shall allow due intervals for rest and—mental refreshment. What do you think of it?”

“I look rather—attractive”—impertinently.

“You do. Only I could suggest a substitute for the word ‘rather.’”

Her eyes defied him.

“Could you? . . . What would it be?”

Before he could make any answer, there came a sound of voices close at hand, and a minute later Trenby and Isobel Carson appeared from round the corner of a high box hedge.

“We’ve been farming,” announced Isobel. “I’ve been looking at Roger’s prize sheep and cattle. I mean”—with a laughing, upward glance at her companion—“at the ones that are *going* to be his prize sheep and cattle as soon as they come under the judged eye. Then we thought we’d motor across and inspect the portrait. How’s it going, Mr. Rooke?”

“The portrait isn’t yet begun, Miss Carson,” he replied blandly.

“It seems to take a long time to get under way,” she retorted. “Is it so difficult to make a start? Surely not—for the great Mr. Rooke!”—with delicate mockery.

There was a perpetual warfare between herself and Rooke. She was the kind of woman he cordially detested—the pseudo sporting, outdoor type, with a strong tendency towards the feline—“Neither male nor female created He them,” as he had once said. And when Rooke disliked man or woman he took small pains to conceal the fact. Isobel had winced, more than once, under the lash of his caustic tongue.

“I’ve made a start, Miss Carson, as these sketches testify”—waving his arm towards them. “But some subjects require very much more delicate handling than—others would do.” And his half-closed eyes swept her insolently from head to foot.

Page 180

Isobel reddened and her mouth took on a somewhat disagreeable expression.

“Then Nan must be an unusually difficult subject, mustn’t she, Roger? Why, you’ve been at it two weeks and have literally nothing to show for it! You want speeding up.”

Meanwhile Roger had been regarding the sketches in silence, an uneasy feeling of dissatisfaction stirring in his mind.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “You don’t seem to have made much progress.” And his eyes travelled rather sombrely from Nan’s face to that of the artist.

“You must have a little patience, Trenby,” replied Rooke pleasantly. “The start is the difficult part. Tell me”—placing a couple of sketches on the easel as he spoke—“which of those two poses do you like the better?”

For the moment Roger’s thoughts, slowly moving towards a vague suspicion, were directed into another channel, precisely as Rooke had intended they should be, and he examined the sketches carefully. Finally he gave his opinion with surprisingly good judgment.

“That’s Nan,” he said, indicating one of them—the last of the afternoon’s efforts.

“Yes,” agreed Rooke. “That’s my choice.” Then, turning laughingly to Nan, he went on: “The die is cast. To-morrow we’ll begin work in good earnest.”

“To-morrow?” broke in Isobel. “Oh, Roger, you mustn’t let him take possession of Nan to-morrow! We’re all motoring over to Denleigh Abbey for lunch, and the Peabodys will think it most odd if Nan doesn’t come.”

“The Peabodys?” queried Rooke. “Are those the ‘new rich’ people who’ve bought the Abbey?”

“Yes. And they want us all to go—Mrs. Peabody made a special point of it the other day. She asked everyone from Mallow as well as ourselves.”

“What extensive hospitality!” murmured Rooke.

“They’re quite nice people,” asserted Isobel defiantly.

“Dear lady, they must indeed be overflowing with the milk of human kindness—and Treasury notes.”

Isobel’s bird-like eyes gleamed maliciously.

“They want to hear Nan play,” she persisted.

“And to see me paint?” he suggested ironically.

She ignored his retort and, turning to Nan, appealed to her directly.

“Shan’t you come?” she asked bluntly.

“Well, if Maryon wants me to sit for him—” Nan began hesitatingly.

“The sooner the portrait’s begun, the sooner it will be finished,” interposed Rooke. “Can’t you dispense with your fiancee to-morrow, Trenby? . . . But just as you like, of course,” he added courteously.

Roger hesitated. The frank appeal was disarming, shaking the suspicion he was harbouring.

“Let’s leave it like this,” continued Rooke, following up his advantage. “If the light’s good, you’ll let me have Nan, but if it’s a dull day she shall be swept into the gilded portals of the Peabodys.”

“Very well,” agreed Roger, rather reluctantly.

Page 181

“I think you’ll find,” said Isobel, as she and Roger strolled back to the car, “that the light *will* be quite good enough for painting.”

And that seemingly harmless remark lodged in Roger’s mind and rankled there throughout the whole of the following day when the Peabody lunch took place as arranged—but lacking the presence of Maryon Rooke and Nan.

CHAPTER XXX

SEEKING TO FORGET

“And this is my holiday!” exclaimed Maryon, standing back from his easel the better to view the effect of his work. “Nan, you’ve a lot to answer for.”

Another fortnight had gone by, and the long hours passed is the music-room, which had been temporarily converted into a studio, were beginning to show fruit in the shape of a nearly completed portrait.

Nan slipped down from the makeshift “throne.”

“May I come and look?”

Rooke moved aside.

“Yes, if you like. I’ve been working at the face to-day.”

She regarded the picture for some time in silence, Rooke watching her intently the while.

“Well?” he said at last, interrogatively.

“Maryon”—she spoke slowly—“do I really look like—that?”

He nodded.

“Yes,” he replied quietly. “When you let yourself go—when you take off the meaningless mask I complained of.”

With that uncanny discernment of his—that faculty for painting people’s souls, as Nan described it—he had sensed the passionate, wistful, unhappy spirit which looked out from her eyes, and the face on the canvas gave back a dumb appeal that was almost painfully arresting.

Nan frowned.

“You’d no right to do it,” she exclaimed a little breathlessly.

“I painted what I saw.”

She was silent, tremulously disturbed. He could see the quick rise and fall of her breast beneath the filmy white of her gown.

“Nan,” he went on in low, tense tones. “Did you think I could be with you, day after day like this, and not—find out? Could I have painted your face, loving each line of it, and not learned the truth?” She stretched out her hand as though to check him, but he paid no heed. “The truth that Roger is nothing to you—never will be!”

“He’s the man I’m going to marry,” she said unevenly.

“And I’m only the man who loves you! . . . But because I failed once, putting love second, must I be punished eternally? I’m ready to put it first now—to lay all I have and all I’ve done on its altar.”

“What—what do you mean?” she stammered.

He put his hands lightly on her shoulders and drew her nearer to him.

“Is it hard to guess, Nan? . . . I want you to leave this life you hate and come with me. Let me take you away—right away from it all—and, somewhere we’ll find happiness together.”

She stared at him with wide, horrified eyes.

Page 182

“Oh, you’re mad—you’re mad!”

With a struggle she freed herself from his grasp and stood away from him.

“Listen,” she said. “Listen to me and then you’ll understand what you’re asking. I’m not happy—that’s true. But it’s my own fault, not Roger’s. I ought never to have given him my promise. There was someone else—”

“Mallory!” broke in Rooke.

“Yes—Peter. It’s quite simple. We met too late. But I learned then what love means. Once I asked him—I *begged* him—to take me away with him. And he wouldn’t. I’d have gone to the ends of the earth with him. I’d go to-morrow if he’d take me! But he won’t. And he never will.” She paused, panting a little. “And now,” she went on, with a hard laugh, “I don’t think you’ll ask me again to go away with you!”

“Yes, I shall. Mallory may be able to live at such high altitudes that he can throw over his life’s happiness—and yours, too—for a scruple. I can’t—and I don’t want to. I love you, and I’m selfish enough to be ready to take you any minute that you’ll come.”

Throwing one arm about her shoulders, he turned her face up to his.

“Don’t you understand?” he went on hoarsely. “I’m flesh and blood man, and you’re the woman I love.”

The hazel eyes blazed with a curious light, like flame, and she shivered a little, fighting the man’s personality—battling against that strange kinship of temperament by which he always drew her.

“I can wait,” he said, quietly releasing her. “You can’t go on long as you’re living now; the tension’s too high. And when you’re through with it—come to me, Nan! I’d at least make you happier than Trenby ever will.”

Without reply she moved towards the door and he stood aside, allowing her to pass out of the room in silence.

In the hall she encountered Roger, who had ridden over, accompanied by a trio of dogs, and the sight of his big, tweed-clad figure, so solidly suggestive of normal, everyday things, filled her with an unexpected sense of relief. He might not be the man she loved, but he was, at any rate, a sheet-anchor in the midst of the emotional storms that were blowing up around her.

To-day, however, his face wore a clouded, sullen expression when he greeted her.

“What have you been doing with yourself?” he asked, his eyes fastening suspiciously on her flushed cheeks.

She answered him with a poor attempt at her usual nonchalance.

“Oh, Maryon came over this morning, so I’ve been sitting to him.”

“All day? I don’t like it too well.” The look of displeasure deepened on his face. “People will talk. You know what country folks are like.”

Nan’s eyes flashed.

“Let them talk! I’m not going to regulate my conduct according to the villagers’ standard of propriety,” she replied indignantly.

“It isn’t merely the villagers,” pursued Roger. “Isobel said, only yesterday, she thought it was rather indiscreet.”

Page 183

“Isobel!” interrupted Nan scornfully. “It would be better if she kept her thoughts for home consumption. The neighbourhood might conceivably comment on the number of times you and she go ‘farming’ together.”

Roger looked quickly at her, a half-smile on his lips.

“Why, Nan!” he said, a note of surprise, almost of satisfaction, in his voice. “I believe you’re growing jealous?”

She laughed contemptuously. She was intensely angry that he should have quoted Isobel’s opinion to her, and she struck back as hard as she could.

“My dear Roger, surely by this time it must be clear to you that I’m not very likely to be afflicted by—jealousy!”

The shaft went home, and in an instant the dawning smile on his face was replaced by an expression of bitter resentment.

“No, I suppose not,” he returned sullenly.

He stared down at her, and something in the indifferent pose of her slim figure made him realise afresh for how little—how pitifully little—he counted in this woman’s life.

He gripped her shoulder in sudden anger.

“But *I* am jealous!”—vehemently. “Do you hear, Nan? Jealous of your reputation and your time—the time you give to Rooke.”

She shrank away from him, and the movement seemed to rouse him to a white heat of fury. Instead of releasing her, he pulled her closer to him.

“Don’t shrink like that!” he exclaimed savagely. “By God! Do you think I’ll stand being treated as though I were a leper? You avoid me all you can—detest the sight of me, I suppose! But remember one thing—you’re going to be my wife. Nothing can alter that, and you belong—to—me”—emphasising each word separately. “You mayn’t give me your smiles—but I’m damned if you shall give them to any other man.”

He thrust his face, distorted with anger, close to hers.

“*Now* do you understand?”

She struggled in his grasp like a frightened bird, her eyes dilating with terror. She knew, only too well, what this big primitive-souled man could be like when the devil in him was roused, and his white, furious face and blazing eyes filled her with panic.

“Roger! Let me go!” she cried, her voice quick with fear. “Let me go! You’re hurting me!”

“Hurting you?” With an effort he mastered himself, slackening his grasp a little, but still holding her. “Hurting you? I wonder if you realise what a woman like you can do to a man? When I first met you I was just an ordinary decent man, and I loved and trusted you implicitly. But now, sometimes, I almost feel that I could kill you—to make sure of you!”

“But why should you distrust me? It’s Isobel—Isobel Carson who’s put these ideas into your head.”

“Perhaps she’s opened my eyes,” he said grimly. “They’ve been shut too long.”

“You’ve no right to distrust me—”

“Haven’t I, Nan, haven’t I?” He held her a little away from him and searched her face. “Answer me! Have I no right to doubt you?”

Page 184

His big chest heaved under the soft fabric of his shirt as he stood looking down at her, waiting for her answer.

She would have given the world to be able to answer him with a simple “No.” But her lips refused to shape the word. There was so much that lay between them, so much that was complicated and difficult to interpret.

Slowly her eyes fell before his.

“I utterly decline to answer such a question,” she replied at last. “It’s an insult.”

His hands fell from her shoulders.

“I think I’m answered,” he said curtly, and, turning on his heel, he strode away, leaving Nan shaken and dismayed.

As far as Maryon was concerned, he refrained from making any allusion to what had taken place that day in the music-room, and gradually the sense of shocked dismay with which his proposal had filled Nan at the time, grew blurred and faded, skilfully obliterated by his unfailing tact. But the remembrance of it lingered, tucked away in a corner of her mind, offering a terrible solution of her difficulties.

He still demanded from her a large part of each day, on the plea that much yet remained to be done to the portrait, while Roger, into whose ears Isobel continued to drop small poisoned hints, became correspondingly more difficult and moody. The tension of the situation was only relieved by the comings and goings of Sandy McBain and the enforced cheerfulness assumed by the members of the Mallow household.

Neither Penelope nor Kitty sensed the imminence of any real danger. But Sandy, in whose memory the recollection of the winter’s happenings was still alive and vivid, felt disturbed and not a little anxious. Nan’s moods were an open book to him, and just now they were not very pleasant reading.

“What about the concerto?” he asked her one day. “Aren’t you going to do anything with it?”

“Do anything with it?” she repeated vaguely.

“Yes, of course. Get it published—push it! You didn’t write it just for fun, I suppose?”

A faintly mocking smile upturned the corners of her mouth.

“I think Roger considers I wrote it expressly to annoy him,” she submitted.

“Rot!” he replied succinctly. “Just because he’s not a trained musician you appear to imagine he’s devoid of ordinary appreciation.”

“He is,” she returned. “He hates my music. Yes, he does”—as Sandy seemed about to protest. “He hates it!”

“Look here, Nan”—he became suddenly serious—“you’re not playing fair with Trenby. He’s quite a good sort, but because he isn’t a scatter-brained artist like yourself, you’re giving him a rotten time.”

From the days when they had first known each other Sandy had taken it upon himself at appropriate seasons to lecture Nan upon the error of her ways, and it never occurred to her, even now, to resent it. Instead, she answered him with unwonted meekness.

Page 185

“I can’t help it. Roger and I never see things in the same light, and—and oh, Sandy, you might try to understand!” she ended appealingly.

“I think I do,” he returned. “But it isn’t cricket, Nan. You can kick me out of the house if you like for saying it, but I don’t think you ought to have Maryon Rooke around so much.”

She flushed hotly.

“He’s painting my portrait,” she protested.

“Taking a jolly long time over it, too—and making love to you in the intervals, I suppose.”

“Sandy!”

“Well, isn’t he?” Sandy’s green eyes met hers unflinchingly.

“Anyway, *I’m* not in love with *him*.”

“I should hope not,” he observed drily, “seeing that you’re going to be Mrs. Trenby.”

She gave an odd little laugh.

“That wouldn’t make an insuperable barrier, would it? I don’t suppose—love—notices whether we’re married or single when it comes along.”

Something in the quality of her voice filled him with a sudden sense of fear. Hitherto he had attributed the trouble between Nan and Roger entirely to the difference in their temperaments. Now, for the first time, a new light was flashed upon the matter. Her tone was so sharply bitter, like that of one chafing against some actual happening, that his mind leaped to the possibility that there might be some more tangible force arrayed against Roger’s happiness. And if this were the case, if Nan’s love were really given elsewhere, then, knowing her as he did, Sandy foresaw the likelihood of some rash and headlong ending to it all.

He was silent, pondering this aspect of the matter. She watched him curiously for a few moments, then, driven, by one of those strange impulses which sometimes fling down all the barriers of reserve, she broke into rapid speech.

“You needn’t grudge me Maryon’s friendship! I’ve lost everything in the world worth having—everything real, I mean. Sometimes I feel as though I can’t bear it any longer! And Maryon interests me . . . he’s a sort of mental relation. . . . When I’m with him I can forget even Peter for a little. . . .”

She broke off, pacing restlessly backwards and forwards, her hands interlocked, her face set in a white mask of tragedy. All at once she came to a standstill in front of Sandy and remained staring at him with an odd kind of surprise in her eyes.

"What on earth have I been talking about?" she exclaimed, passing her hand across her forehead and peering at him questioningly. "Sandy, have you been listening? You shouldn't listen to what other people are thinking. It's rude, you know." She laughed a little hysterically. "You must just forget it all, Sandy boy."

Sandy had been listening with a species of horror to the sudden outpouring. He felt as though he had overheard the crying of a soul which has reached the furthest limit of its endurance. In Nan's disjointed, broken sentences had been revealed the whole piteous truth, and in those two short words, "*Even Peter*!" lay the key to all he had found so difficult to understand. It was Peter Mallory she loved—not Roger, nor Maryon Rooke!

Page 186

He had once met Mallory and had admired the man enormously. The meeting had occurred during the summer preceding that which had witnessed Nan's engagement to Roger. Peter had been paying a flying week-end visit to the Seymours, and Sandy had taken a boy's instinctive liking to the brilliant writer who never "swanked," as the lad put it, but who understood so well the bitter disappointment of which Duncan McBain's uncompromising attitude towards music had been the cause. And this was the man Nan loved and who loved her!

With instinctive tact, Sandy refrained from any comment on Nan's outburst. Instead, he pushed her gently into a chair, talking the while, so that she might have time to recover herself a little.

"I tell you what it is, Nan," he said with rough kindness. "You've overdone it a bit working at that concerto, and instead of giving yourself a holiday, you've been tiring yourself still more by sitting for your portrait. You may find Rooke mentally refreshing if you like, but posing for him hour after hour is a confounded strain, physically. Now, you take your good Uncle Sandy's advice and let the portrait slide for a bit. You might occupy yourself by making arrangements for the production of the concerto."

"I don't feel any interest in it," she said slowly. "It's funny, isn't it, Sandy? I was so keen about it when I was writing it. And now I think it's rotten."

"It isn't," said Sandy. "It's good stuff, Nan. Anyone would tell you so."

"Do you think so?" she replied, without enthusiasm.

He regarded her with an expression of anxiety.

"Oh, you mustn't drop the concerto," he protested. "That's always been your trick, Nan, to go so far and no further."

"It's a very good rule to follow—in some things," she replied enigmatically.

"Well, look here, will you hand the manuscript over to me and let me show it to someone?"

"No, I won't," she said with decision. "I hate the concerto now. It has—it has unpleasant associations. Let it rest in oblivion."

He shrugged his shoulders in despair.

"You're the most aggravating woman I know," he remarked irritably.

In an instant Nan was her own engaging self once more. It was instinctive with her to try and charm away an atmosphere of disapproval.

“Don’t say that, Sandy,” she replied, making a beseeching little *moue*. “You know it would be awfully boring if I always did just exactly what you were expecting me to do. It’s better to be aggravating than—dull!”

Sandy smiled. Nan was always quite able to make her peace with him when she chose to.

“Well, no one can complain that you’re dull,” he acknowledged.

CHAPTER XXXI

TOWARDS UNKNOWN WAYS

The afternoon post had just been delivered and the postman was already whizzing his way down the drive on his scarlet-painted bicycle as Lady Gertrude unlocked the private post-bag appertaining to Trenby Hall. This was one of the small jobs usually delegated to her niece, but for once the latter was away on holiday, staying with friends at Penzance.

Page 187

The bag yielded up some bills and a solitary letter, addressed in Isobel's looped and curly writing. It was not an easy hand to read, and Lady Gertrude produced her pince-nez to assist in deciphering it. For the most part it dealt with small incidents of her visit and dutiful enquiries concerning the progress of estate and domestic affairs at the Hall during her absence. But just before the end—where it might linger longest in the memory—came a paragraph which riveted Lady Gertrude's attention.

"And how about Nan's portrait?" Isobel had written. "I suppose by this time it is finished and adorning the picture gallery? That is, if Roger has really succeeded in persuading Mr. Rooke to part with it. It certainly ought to be an *exceptional* portrait, judging by the length of time it has taken to accomplish! Dear Aunt Gertrude, I cannot help thinking it was a mistake that Nan didn't give Mr. Rooke the sittings at his studio in town or, better still, have waited until after her marriage. People in the country are so apt to be censorious, aren't they? And there has been a good deal of comment on the matter, I *know*. I didn't wish to worry you about it, but I feel you and Roger really ought to know this."

"Letter from Isobel, mother? What's her news?"

Roger came striding into the room exactly as Lady Gertrude finished the perusal of her niece's epistle. She looked up with eyes that gleamed like hard, bright pebbles behind her pince-nez.

"The kind of news to which I fear we shall have to grow accustomed," she said acidly. "It appears that Nan is getting herself talked about in connection with that artist who is painting her portrait."

By the time she had finished speaking Roger's face was like a thundercloud.

"What do you mean? What does Isobel say?" he demanded.

"You had better read the letter for yourself," replied his mother, pushing it towards him.

He snatched it up and read it hastily, then stood silently staring at it, his face white with anger, his eyes as hard as Lady Gertrude's own.

"It's a great pity you ever met Nan Davenant," pursued his mother, breaking the silence. "There's bad blood in the Davenants, and Nan will probably create a scandal for us one day. I understand she strongly resembles her notorious great-grandmother, Angele de Varincourt."

"My wife will lead a very different kind of life from Angele de Varincourt," remarked Roger. "I'll see to that."

“It’s a pity you didn’t look nearer home for a wife, Roger,” she observed. “I always hoped you would learn to care for Isobel.”

“Isobel!”—with blank amazement. “I do care for her—she’s a jolly good sort—but not in that way. Besides, she doesn’t care for me in the slightest—except in a sisterly fashion.”

“Are you sure of that? Remember, you’ve never asked her the question.” And with this final thrust, Lady Gertrude left him to his thoughts.

Page 188

No doubt, later on, the thought of Isobel in the new light presented by his mother would recur to his mind, but for the moment he was entirely preoccupied with the matter of Nan's portrait and his determination to put an end to the sittings.

It would be quite easy, he decided. The only thing that stood in the way of his immediately carrying out his plan, was the fact that he had promised to go away the following morning on a few days' fishing expedition, together with Barry Seymour and the two Fentons. The realisation that Maryon Rooke would probably spend the best part of those few days in Nan's company set the blood pounding furiously through his veins. His decision was taken instantly. The fishing party must go without him.

As a natural sequence to his engagement to Nan he had an open invitation to Mallow, and this evening he availed himself of it by motoring across to dinner there. The question of the fishing party was easily disposed of on the plea of unexpected estate matters which required his supervision. Barry brushed his apologies aside.

"My dear chap, it doesn't matter a scrap. We three'll go as arranged and you must join us on our next jaunt. Kitty'll be here to look after Nan," he added, smiling good-naturedly. "She hates fishing—it bores her stiff."

After dinner Roger made an opportunity to broach the matter of the portrait to Nan.

"When's Rooke going to finish that portrait of you?" he asked her. "He's taking an unconscionable time over it."

She coloured a little under the suspicion she read in his eyes.

"I—I think he'll finish it to-morrow," she stammered. "It's nearly done, you know."

"So I should think. I'll see him about it. I'm going to buy the thing."

"To—to buy it?"—nervously.

"Yes." His keen eyes flashed over her. "Is there anything extraordinary in a man's purchasing the portrait of his future wife?"

"No. Oh, no. Only I don't fancy Maryon painted it with any idea of selling it."

"And I didn't allow you to sit for it with any idea of his keeping it," retorted Roger grimly.

Nan remained silent, feeling that further discussion of the matter while he was in his present humour would serve no purpose. The curt, almost hectoring manner of his speech irritated her, while the jealousy from which it sprang made no appeal to her by way of an excuse, as it might have done had she loved him. She was glad when the

evening came to an end, but she was still in a sore and angry frame of mind when she joined Rooke in the music-room the following day.

He speedily divined that something had occurred to ruffle her, and without endeavouring to elicit the cause—possibly he felt he could make a pretty good guess at it!—he set himself to amuse and entertain her. He was so far successful in his efforts that before very long she had almost forgotten her annoyance of the previous evening and was deep in a discussion regarding the work of a certain modern composer.

Page 189

Engrossed in argument, neither Maryon nor Nan noticed, the hum of a motor approaching up the drive, and when the door of the room was thrown open to admit Roger Trenby neither of them was able to repress a slight start. Instantly a dark look of anger overspread Roger's face as he advanced into the room.

"Good morning, Rooke," he said, nodding briefly but not offering his hand. "So the portrait is finished at last, I see."

Nan glanced across at him anxiously. There was something in his manner that filled her with a quick sense of apprehension.

"Not quite," replied Rooke easily. "I'm afraid we've been idling this morning. There are still a few more touches I should like to add."

Roger crossed the room, and, standing in front of the picture, surveyed it in silence.

"I think," he said at last, "that I'm satisfied with it as it is. . . . It will look very well in the gallery at Trenby."

Rooke's eyes narrowed suddenly.

"The portrait isn't for sale," he observed.

"Of course not—to anyone other than myself," replied Roger composedly.

"Not even to you, I'm afraid," answered Rooke. "I painted it for the great pleasure it gave me and not from any mercenary motive."

Nan, watching the two men as they fenced, saw a sudden flash in Roger's eyes and his under jaw thrust itself out in a manner with which she was only too familiar.

"Then may I ask what you intend to do with it?" he demanded. There was something in the dead level of his tone which suggested a white-hot anger forcibly held in leash.

"I thought—with Nan's permission—of exhibiting it first," said Rooke placidly. "After that, there is a wall in my house at Westminster where it would hang in an admirable light."

The cool insolence of his manner acted like a lighted torch to gunpowder. Roger swung round upon him furiously, his hands clenched, his forehead suddenly gnarled with knotted veins.

"By God, Rooke!" he exclaimed. "You go too far! *You* will exhibit Nan's portrait . . . *you* will hang it in your house! . . . And you think I'll stand by and tolerate such impertinence? Understand . . . Nan's portrait hangs at Trenby Hall—or nowhere!"

Rooke regarded him apparently unmoved.

“I’ve yet to learn the law which compels a man to part with his work,” he remarked indifferently.

Roger took an impetuous step towards him, his clenched hand raised as though to strike.

“You hound—” he began hoarsely.

Nan rushed between them, catching the upraised hand.

“Roger! . . . Roger!” she cried, her voice shrill with the fear that in another moment the two men would be at grips.

But he shook off her hand, flinging her aside with such force that she staggered helplessly backwards.

“As for you,” he thundered, his eyes blazing with concentrated anger, “it’s you I’ve to thank that any man should hold my future wife so cheap as to imagine he may paint her portrait and then keep it in his house as though it were his own! . . . But I’m damned if he shall!”

Page 190

White and shaken, she leaned against the window frame, clutching at the wood-work for support and staring at him with affrighted eyes as he turned once more to Rooke.

In his big, brawny strength, doubled by the driving force of anger, he seemed to tower above the slim, supple figure of the artist, who stood leaning negligently against the side of the piano, watching him with narrowed eyes and a faintly supercilious smile on his lips.

“Take your choice, Rooke,” he said shortly. “My cheque for five hundred and get out of this, or—” He paused significantly.

“Or? . . . The other alternative?” murmured Rooke. Roger laughed roughly, fingering something he held concealed in his hand.

“You’ll know that later,” he said grimly. “I advise you to close with the five hundred.”

Rooke shook his head.

“Sorry it’s impossible. I prefer to keep the picture.”

“Oh, Maryon, give in to him! Do give in to him!”

The words came sobbingly from Nan’s white lips, and Rooke turned to her instantly.

“Have I your permission to keep the picture, Nan?” he asked, fixing her with his queer, magnetic eyes.

An oath broke from Roger.

“You’ll have the original, you see, Trenby,” explained Rooke urbanely, glancing towards him.

Then he turned again to Nan.

“Have I, Nan?”

She opened her lips to reply, but no words came. She stood there silently, her eyes wide and terror-stricken, her cheeks stained with the tears that dripped down them unheeded.

Roger’s glance swept her as though there were something distasteful to him in the sight of her and she flinched under it, moaning a little.

“Well,” he said to Rooke. “Is the picture mine—or yours?”

“Mine,” answered Rooke.

Roger made a single stride towards the easel. Then his hand shot out, and the next moment there was a grinding sound of ripping and tearing as, with the big blade of his clasp-knife, he slashed and rent and hacked at the picture until it was a wreck of split and riven canvas.

With a cry like that of a wounded animal Rooke leaped forward to gave it, but Roger hurled him aside as though he were a child, and once more the knife bit its way remorselessly through paint and canvas.

There was something indescribably horrible in this deliberate, merciless destruction of the exquisite work of art. Nan, watching the keen blade sweep again and again across the painted figure of the portrait, felt as though the blows were being rained upon her actual body. Distraught with the violence and horror of the scene she tried to scream, but her voice failed her, and with a hoarse, half-strangled cry she covered her eyes, rocking to and fro. But the raucous sound of rending canvas still grated hideously against her ears.

Suddenly Roger ceased to cut and slash at the portrait. Seizing it in both hands, he dragged it from the easel and flung it on the floor at Rooke's feet.

Page 191

“There’s your picture!” he said. “Take it—and hang it in your ’admirable light’!” And he strode out of the room.

A long silence fell between the two who were left. Then Rooke, who was staring at the ruin of his work with his mouth twisted, into an odd, cynical smile, murmured beneath his breath:

“*Sic transit* . . .”

Once more the silence wrapped them round. Wan-faced and with staring eyes, Nan drew near the heap of mangled canvas.

At last:

“I can’t bear it! I can’t bear it!” she whispered, and a shuddering sob shook her slight frame from head to foot. “Oh, Maryon—”

She stretched her hands towards him gropingly, like a child that is frightened in the dark.

. . . Half an hour later found them still together, standing with linked hands. In Rooke’s eyes there was a quiet light of triumph, while Nan’s attitude betrayed a kind of hesitancy, as of one driven along strange and unknown ways.

“Then you’ll come, Nan, you’ll come?” he said eagerly.

“I’ll come,” she answered dully. “I can’t bear my life any longer.”

“I’ll make you happy. . . . I swear it!”

“Will you, Maryon?” She shook her head and the eyes she raised to his were full of a dumb, hopeless misery. “I don’t think anything could ever make me—happy. But I’d have gone on . . . I’d have borne it . . . if Uncle David were still here. What we are going to do would have hurt him so”—and her voice trembled. “But he’s gone, and now nothing seems to matter very much.”

A sudden overwhelming tenderness for this pain-racked, desolate spirit surged up in Maryon’s heart.

“You poor little child!” he murmured. “You poor child!”

And gathering her into his arms he held her closely, leaning his cheek against her hair, with no passion, but with a swift, understanding sympathy that sprang from the best that was in the man.

She clung to him forlornly, so tired and hopeless she no longer felt any impulse to resist him. She had tried—tried to withstand him and to go on treading the uphill path that lay before her. But now she had come to the end of her strength. She would go away with Maryon . . . go out of it all . . . and somewhere, perhaps, together they would build up a new and happier life.

Dimly at the back of her mind floated the memory of Peter's words:

"But there's honour, dear, and duty . . ."

She crushed down the remembrance resolutely. If she were going away into a new world with Maryon, the door of memory must be closed fast.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE GREEN CAR

The atmosphere still held the chill of early morning as Sandy emerged, vigorous and glowing and amazingly hungry, from his daily swim in the sea. He dressed quickly in a small tent erected on the shore and then, whistling cheerfully and with his towel slung over his shoulders, took his way up the beach to where his bicycle stood propped against a boulder.

Page 192

A few minutes' pedalling brought him into St. Wennys, where he dismounted to buy a packet of "gaspers" dispensed by the village postmistress.

It was a quaint little village, typical of the West Country, with its double row of small houses climbing the side of a steep hill capped at the summit by an ancient church of weather-beaten stone. The bright June sunshine winked against the panes, of the cottage windows and flickered down upon the knobby surface of the cobbled pavements, while in the dust of the wide road an indiscriminate group of children and dogs played joyously together.

The warning hoot of a motor-horn sent them scuttling to the side of the road, and, as Sandy smilingly watched the grubby little crowd's hasty flight for safety, a big green car shot by and was swiftly lost to sight in a cloud of whirling dust.

But not before Sandy's keen eyes had noted its occupants.

"Nan and the artist fellow!" he muttered.

Then, remembering that Nan had promised to go with him that afternoon for a run in the "stink-pot," he stepped out into the middle of the street and stood staring up the broad white road along which the car had disappeared—the great road which led to London.

An ominous foreboding knocked at the door of his mind.

Where was Nan going with Rooke—driving at reckless speed at this hour of the day on the way to London, when, according to arrangement, she should have been ready later on to adventure herself in the "stink-pot"?

Of course it was just possible she had only gone out for a morning spin with Maryon and proposed returning in time to keep her appointment with him. But the hour was an unusually early one at which to make a start, and the green car was ripping along at a pace which rather precluded the idea of a pleasure jaunt.

Sandy was obsessed by a sense of misgiving that would not be denied. Wheeling his bicycle round, he mounted and headed straight for Mallow Court at break-neck speed.

He arrived to find Kitty composedly dividing her attention between her breakfast and an illustrated paper, and for a moment he felt reassured. She jumped up and greeted him joyfully.

"Hullo, Sandy! Been down to bathe? Come along and have some breakfast with me. Or have you had it already?"

He shook his head.

“No, I’ve not been home yet.”

“Then you must be famished. I’ll ring for another cup. I’m all alone in my glory. Barry and the Fentons departed yesterday on their fishing trip, and Nan—”

“Yes. Where’s Nan?” For the life of him he could not check the eager question.

“She’s gone off for the day with Maryon. He’s driving her over to Clovelly—she’s never been there, you know.”

Sandy’s heart sank. He knew the quickest route from St. Wennys to Clovelly—and the green car’s nose had been set in quite a different direction.

Page 193

“She’s fixed up to go out with me this afternoon,” he said slowly.

“Tch!” Kitty clicked her tongue sharply against her teeth and, crossing to the chimneypiece, took down a letter which, was resting there. “I’d forgotten this! She left it to be given to you when you called for her this afternoon. I wanted her to ’phone and put you off, but she said you would understand when you’d read the letter and that there was something she wanted you to do for her.”

Sandy ripped open the envelope and his eyes flew down the page. Its contents struck him like a blow—none the less hard because it had been vaguely anticipated—and a half-stifled exclamation broke from him.

“Sandy dear”—it ran—“I’m going to vanish out of your life, but we’ve been such good pals that I can’t do it without just a word of good-bye, not of justification—I know there’s none for what I’m going to do. But I know, too, that there’ll be a little pity in your heart for me, and that you, at least, will understand in a way why I’ve had to do this, and won’t blame me quite so much as the rest of the world. I’m going away with Maryon, and by this afternoon, when you come to fetch me for our motor spin, I shall have taken the first step on the new road. Nothing you could have said would have altered my determination, so you need never think that, Sandy boy. I know your first impulse will be to put the ‘stink-pot’ along at forty miles an hour in wild pursuit of me. But you can spare your petrol. Be very sure that even if you overtook me, I shouldn’t come back.

“I don’t expect to find happiness, but life with Maryon can never be dull. There’d never be anything to occupy my mind at Trenby—except soup jellies. So it would just go running round and round in circles—with the memory of all I’ve missed as the pivot of the circle. I’m sure Maryon will at least be able to stop me from thinking in circles. He’s always flying off at a tangent—and naturally I shall have to go flying after him.

“And now there’s just one thing I want you still to do for me. *Tell Kitty*. I couldn’t leave a letter for her, as it might have been found almost at once. You won’t get this till you come over for me in the afternoon, and by that time Maryon and I shall be far enough away. Give Kitty all my love, and tell her I feel a beast to leave her like this after her angel goodness to me. And say to her, too, that I will write very soon.

“Good-bye, Sandy boy.”

“Well? Well?” Kitty’s patience was getting exhausted. Moreover there was something in the set look on Sandy’s face that frightened her.

He handed her the letter.

“She’s bolted with Maryon Rooke,” he said simply.

When Kitty had absorbed the contents of the letter she looked up at him blankly. The shock of it held her momentarily speechless. Then, after what seemed to her an endless silence, she stammered out:

Page 194

“Nan—gone! And it’s too late to stop her!”

“It’s not!” The words leapt from Sandy’s lips. “We *must* stop her!”

The absolute determination in his voice infected Kitty. She felt her courage rising to the emergency.

“What can we do?” she asked quietly. She was as steady as a rock now.

Sandy dropped into a chair, absent-mindedly lighting one of the “gaspers” he had so recently purchased.

“We must work it out,” he said slowly. “Rooke told you they were going to Clovelly, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they’re not going anywhere near. That was just a blind. They took the London road.”

“Even that mightn’t mean they were going to London. They could branch off anywhere.”

“They could,” agreed Sandy, puffing thoughtfully at his cigarette. “But we’ve got to remember Rooke has a house in Westminster—nice little backwater. It’s just on the cards they might go there first—wherever else they intended going on to afterwards—-just to pick up anything Rooke might want, arrange about letters and so on.”

“Yes?” There was a keen light in Kitty’s eyes. She was following Sandy’s thought with all a woman’s quickness. “And you think you might overtake them there?”

“I must do more than that. I must *be there first*—to receive them.”

“Can you do it in the time?”

“Yes. By train. They’re travelling by car, remember.”

Kitty glanced at the clock.

“It’s too late for you to catch the early train from St. Wennys Halt. And there’s no other till the afternoon.”

“I shan’t risk the afternoon train. It stops at every little wayside station and if it were ten minutes late I’d miss the express from Exeter.”

“Then you’ll motor?”

“Yes, I’ll drive to Exeter, and catch the train that gets in to town about half-past seven. Maryon isn’t likely to reach London till about an hour or so after that.”

“That’s settled, then. The next thing is breakfast for two,” said Kitty practically. “I’d only just begun when you came, and I—I’ll start again to keep you company. You must be absolutely starving by now.”

She rang the bell and gave her orders to the servant who appeared in answer.

“What about Aunt Eliza?” she went on when they were alone again. “I’ll ’phone her you’re having breakfast here, shall I?”

“Yes. And, look here, we’ve got to make things appear quite ordinary. The mater knows I’m supposed to be taking Nan for a run this afternoon. You’d better say I’m coming straight back to fetch the car, as we’re starting earlier.”

Kitty nodded and hurried off to the telephone.

“It’s all right,” she announced, when she returned. “Aunt Eliza took it all in, and merely remarked that I spoilt you!” She succeeded in summoning up a faint smile.

“Then that coast’s clear,” said Sandy. “Who else? There’s Roger. What shall you do if he comes over to-day?”

Page 195

“He won’t. Lady Gertrude had a heart attack yesterday, and as Isobel Carson’s away, Roger, of course, has to stay with his mother. He ’phoned Nan last night.”

“I think that safeguards everything this end, then,” replied Sandy, heaving a sigh of relief. “Allah is very good!”

After that, being a man with a long journey in front of him, he sensibly applied himself to the consumption of bacon and eggs, while Kitty, being a woman, made a poor attempt at swallowing a cup of tea.

Half an hour later he was ready to start for home.

“It’s the slenderest chance, Kitty,” he reminded, her gravely. “They may not go near London. . . . But it’s the *only* chance!”

“I know,” she assented with equal gravity.

“And in any case I can’t get her back here till the morning. . . . Good heavens!”—a new thought striking him. “What about the mater? She’ll be scared stiff if I don’t turn up in the evening! Probably she’ll ring up the police, thinking we’ve had a smash-up in the car. That would settle everything!”

“Don’t worry about it,” urged Kitty. “I’ll invent something—’phone her later on to say you’re stopping here for the night.”

Sandy nodded soberly.

“That’ll do it, and I’ll—Oh, hang! What about your servants? They’ll talk.”

“And I shall lie,” replied Kitty valiantly. “Nan will be staying the night with friends. . . . Each of you stopping just where you aren’t!”—with a short strained laugh. “Oh, leave things to me at this end! I’ll manage, somehow. Only bring her back—bring her back, Sandy!”

CHAPTER XXXIII

KEEPING FAITH

It was not until Sandy was actually in the express heading for London that he realised quite all the difficulties which lay ahead. He was just a big-hearted, impulsive boy, and, without wasting time in futile blame or vain regrets, he had plunged straight into the maelstrom which had engulfed his pal, determined to help her back to shore.

But, assuming he was right in his surmise that Rooke would take Nan first of all to London, he doubted his own ability to persuade her to return with him, and even if he were successful in this, there still remained the outstanding fact that by no human means could she reach Mallow until the small hours of the morning. He could well imagine the consternation and scandal which would ensue should she arrive back at the Court about five o'clock A.M.!

In a place like Mallow, where there was a large staff of indoor and outdoor servants, it would be practically impossible to secure Nan's return there unobserved. And as far as the neighbourhood—and Roger Trenby—were concerned, she might just as well run away with Maryon Rooke as return with Sandy McBain at that ungodly hour! She would be equally compromised. Besides, Kitty would have informed her household that she was not expecting Miss Davenant back that night.

Page 196

Sandy began to see that the plans which he and Kitty had hastily thrown together in the dire emergency of the moment might serve well enough by way of temporary cover, but that in the long run they would rather complicate matters. Lies would have to be bolstered up with other lies. For example, what was he to do with Nan if he succeeded in persuading her to return? Where was she really to spend the night? It looked as though a veritable tissue of deceit must be woven if she were to be shielded from the consequences of her mad act. And Sandy was not a bit of good at telling lies. He hated them.

Suddenly into his harassed mind sprang the thought of Mallory. Of all men in the world, surely he, who loved Nan, would find a way to save her!

From the moment this idea took hold of him Sandy felt as though part of the insuperable load of trouble and anxiety had been lifted from his shoulders. His duty was now quite simple and straightforward. When he reached down he had only to seek out Peter, lay the whole matter before him, and then in some way or other he believed that Nan's errant feet would be turned from the dangerous path on which they were set.

There was something rather touching in his boyish faith that Peter would be able, even at the last moment, to save the woman he loved.

With unwonted forethought, born of the urgent need of the moment, he despatched the following telegram to Peter:

"*Coming to see you. Arrive London to-night seven-thirty. Very urgent. Sandy McBain.*"

"Well, young Sandy McBain?"

Peter looked up from a table littered with manuscript. His face, a moment before rather troubled and stern, relaxed into a friendly smile, although the fingers of one hand still tapped restlessly on a sheet of paper that lay beside him—a cablegram from India which had evidently been the subject of his thoughts at the moment of Sandy's arrival.

"What's the urgent matter? Have you got into a hole and want a friendly haul-out? If so, I'm your man."

Sandy looked down wretchedly at the fine-cut face with its kind eyes and sensitive mouth.

"Oh, don't!" he said hastily, checking the friendly welcome as though it hurt him. "It—it isn't me. . . . It's Nan."

Peter sat quite still, only the hand that held his pen tightened in its grip.

“Nan!” he repeated, and something in the tone of his voice as he uttered the little name seemed to catch at Sandy’s heart-strings and sent a sudden unmanageable lump up into his throat.

“Yes, Nan,” he answered. Then, with a rush: “She’s gone . . . gone away with Maryon Rooke.”

The penholder snapped suddenly. Peter tossed the pieces aside and rose quietly to his feet.

“When?” he asked tensely.

“Now—to-day. If they’ve come to London, they’ll be here very soon. They were in his car—I saw them on the London road. . . . And she left a letter for me. . . . Oh, good God, Mallory! Can’t you save her—can’t you save her?” And Sandy grabbed the older man by the shoulder and stared at him with feverish eyes.

Page 197

Throughout the whole journey from Exeter to London he had been revolving the matter in his mind, thinking . . . thinking . . . thinking . . . to the ceaseless throb and hum of the train as it raced over the metals, and now he felt almost as though his brain would burst.

Peter pushed him down into a chair.

“You shall tell me all about it in a minute,” he said quietly. Crossing the room to a cupboard in the wall, he took down a decanter and glass and poured out a stiff dose of whisky.

“There—drink that,” he said, squirting in the soda-water. “You’ll be all right directly,” he added.

In a few minutes he had drawn the whole story from Sandy’s eager lips, and as he listened his eyes grew curiously hard and determined.

“So we’ve just one chance—the house in Westminster,” he commented. “We’ll go there, Sandy. At once.”

They made their way quickly downstairs and out into the street. Hailing a passing taxi, Peter directed the man to drive to Maryon’s house, where he enquired for Rooke in a perfectly ordinary manner, as though expecting to find him in, and was told by the maid who opened the door that Mr. Rooke had only just arrived and had gone out again immediately, but that she expected him back at any moment.

“Then I’ll wait,” said Peter, easily. “Miss Davenant’s waiting here, too, isn’t she?”

An odd look of surprise crossed the girl’s face. She had thought—well, what matter what she had thought since it was evident there was really no secret about the lady’s presence in her master’s house. These people obviously expected to meet her there. Perhaps there were others coming as well, to an appointed rendezvous for a restaurant supper party or something of the sort.

“Yes, sir,” she answered civilly, “Miss Davenant is in the studio.”

Sandy heard Peter catch his breath at the reply as though some kind of tension had been suddenly slackened. Then the maid threw open the studio door and they saw Nan sitting in a chair beside a recently lit fire, her hands clasped round her knees.

She turned at the sound of their entrance and, as her eyes fell upon Peter, she rose slowly to her feet, staring at him, while every drop of colour drained away from her face.

“Peter!” she cried wonderingly. “Peter!” Her hands groped for the back of the chair from which she had risen and clung to it.

But her eyes never left his face. There was an expression in them as of the dawning of a great joy struggling against amazed unbelief, so that Sandy felt as though he had seen into some secret holy place. Turning, he stumbled out of the room, leaving those two who loved alone together.

“Peter, you’re asking me to do the hardest thing in the world,” said Nan at last.

She had listened in heavy silence while he urged her to return.

“I know I am,” he answered. “And do you think it’s—easy—for me to ask it? To ask you to go back? . . . If it were possible. . . . Dear God! If it were possible to take you away, would I have left it undone?”

Page 198

“I can’t go back—I can’t indeed! Why should I? I’ve only made Roger either furious or wretched ever since we were engaged. It isn’t as if I could do any good by going back!”

“Isn’t it something good to have kept faith?” There was a stern note in his voice.

She looked at him wistfully.

“If it had been you, Peter. . . . It’s easy to keep faith when one loves.”

“And are you being faithful—even to our love?” he asked quietly.

“To our love?” she whispered.

“There is a faithfulness of the Spirit, Nan—the only faithfulness possible to those who are set apart as we are.”

He broke off and stood silent a moment, looking down at her with hard, hurt eyes. Presently he went on:

“That was all we might keep, you and I—our faith. Honour binds each of us to someone else. But”—his voice vibrating—“honour doesn’t bind you to Maryon Rooke! If you go with him, you betray our love—the part of it that nothing can touch or spoil if we so will it. You won’t do that, Nan. . . . You *can’t* do it!”

She knew, then, that she would have to go back, go back and keep faith with Roger—-and keep that deeper faith which love itself demanded.

Her head drooped, and she stretched out her hands as though seeking something of which they might lay hold. Peter took them into his and held them.

After a while a slight tremor ran through her body, and she drew herself away from him, relinquishing his hands.

“I’ll go back,” she said. “You’ve won, Peter. I can’t . . . hurt . . . our love.”

To Sandy the time seemed immeasurably long as he waited on the further side of the closed door, but at last they came to him—Peter, stern and rather strained-looking, and Nan with tear-bright eyes and a face from which every vestige of colour had vanished.

“Get a taxi, will you, Sandy?” said Peter.

Perhaps Sandy’s face asked the question his lips dared not utter, for Nan nodded to him with a twisted little smile.

“Yes, Sandy boy, I’m going back.”

“Thank God!”

He wrung her hands and then went off in search of a taxi. Nan glanced round her a trifle nervously.

“Maryon may be here at any moment,” she said. “Something’s gone wrong with the car and he’s taken it round to the garage to get it put right.”

“We shall be off directly,” answered Peter. “See”—he pointed down the street—“here comes Sandy with a taxi for us.” He spoke reassuringly, as though to a frightened child.

In a few minutes they had started, the taxi slipping swiftly away through the lamp-lit streets. It had turned a corner and was out of sight by the time the parlourmaid, hearing the sound of the street door closing, had hurried upstairs only to find an empty studio. Nor could she give Rooke, on his return, the slightest information as to what had become of his guests—the lady, or the two gentlemen who, she told him, had called shortly afterwards, apparently expecting to find Miss Davenant there.

Page 199

Meanwhile the taxi had carried them swiftly to Peter's house, where he hurried Nan and Sandy up to his own sanctum, instructing the taxi-driver to wait below.

"We've just time for a few sandwiches before we start," he said. He rang the bell for his servant and gave his orders in quick, authoritative tones.

Nan shook her head. She felt as though a single mouthful would choke her. But Peter insisted with a quiet determination she found herself unable to withstand, and gradually the food and wine brought back a little colour into her wan face, though her eyes were still full of a dumb anguish and every now and then her mouth quivered piteously.

She felt dazed and bewildered, as though she were moving in a dream. Was it really true that she had run away from the man she was to marry and was being brought back by the man who loved her? The whole affair appeared topsy-turvy and absurd. She supposed she ought to feel ashamed and overwhelmed, but somehow the only thing that seemed to her to matter was that she had failed of that high ideal of love which Peter had expected of her. She knew instinctively, despite the grave kindness of his manner, that she had hurt him immeasurably.

"And what are you going to do with me now?" she asked at last, with an odd expression in her face. She felt curiously indifferent about her immediate future.

Mallory glanced up at her from the time-table he was studying.

"There's a ten o'clock express which stops at Exeter. We're taking you home by that."

"There's no connection on to St. Wennys," remarked Nan impassively.

It didn't seem to her a matter of great importance. She merely stated it as a fact.

"No. But Sandy left his car in Exeter and we shall motor from there."

"We can all three squash in," added Sandy.

"We won't be able to keep Roger ignorant of the fact I've been away," pursued Nan.

"He will know nothing about it," said Peter quietly.

She looked dubious.

"I think," she observed slowly, "that you may find it more difficult than you expect—to manage that. Someone's sure to find out and tell him."

"Not necessarily," he answered.

“What about the servants?” persisted Nan. “They’ll hardly allow my arrival at Mallow in the early hours of the morning to pass without comment! I really think, Peter,” she added with a wry smile, “that it would have been simpler all round if you’d allowed me to run away.”

His eyes sought hers.

“Won’t you trust me, Nan?” he said patiently. “I’m not going to take you to Mallow to-night. I’m going to take you to Sandy’s mother.”

“To the mater!”

Sandy fairly gasped with astonishment.

Eliza, narrow-minded and pre-eminently puritanical in her views, was the very last person in the world whose help he would have thought of requisitioning in the present circumstances.

Page 200

Peter nodded.

“Yes. I’ve only met her two or three times, but I’m quite sure she is the right person. I believe,” he added, smiling gently, “that I know your mother better than you do, Sandy.”

And it would appear that this was really the case. For when, in the small hours of the morning, the trio reached Trevarthen Wood and Sandy had effected an entry and aroused his mother, there followed a brief interview between Peter and Mrs. McBain, from which the latter emerged with her grim mouth all tremulous at the corners and her keen eyes shining through a mist of tears.

Sandy and Nan were waiting together in the hall, and both looked up anxiously as she bore down upon them.

To the ordinary eye she may have appeared merely a very plain old woman, arrayed in a hideous dressing-gown of uncompromising red flannel. But to Nan, as the bony arms went round her and the Scottish voice, harsh no longer but tender as an old song, murmured in her ears, she seemed the embodiment of beautiful, consoling motherhood, and her flat chest a resting-place where weary heads might gladly lie and sorrowful hearts pour out their grief in tears.

“Dinna greet, ma bairnie,” crooned Eliza. “Ma wee bairnie, greet nae mair.”

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE WHITE FLAME

It was not till late in the afternoon of the day following upon her flight from Mallow that Nan and Peter met again. He had, so Sandy informed her, walked over to the Court in order to see Kitty.

“I think he has some private affair of his own that he wants to talk over with her,” explained Sandy.

“It’s about his wife, I expect,” answered Nan dully. “She’s had sunstroke—and is ordered home from India.”

“Poor devil!” The words rushed from Sandy’s lips. “How rotten everything is!” he added fiercely, with youth’s instinctive revolt against the inevitableness of life’s pains and penalties.

“And I’ve hardly mended matters, have I?” she submitted rather bitterly.

He slipped a friendly arm round her neck.

“Don’t you worry any,” he said, with gruff sympathy. “Mallory’s fixed up everything—and it all dovetails in neatly with Kitty’s saying you were staying with friends for the night. You’re staying *here*—do you see? And Mallory and the mater between ’em have settled that you’re to prolong your visit for a couple of days—to give more colour to the proceedings, so to speak! You’ll emerge without a stain on your character!” he went on, trying with boyish clumsiness to cheer her up.

“Oh, don’t, Sandy!” Her lip quivered. “I—I don’t think I mind much about that. I feel as if I’d stained my soul.”

“Well, if there were no blacker souls around than yours, old thing, the world would be a darned sight nicer place to live in! And that’s that.”

Nan contrived a smile.

Page 201

“Sandy, you’re rather a dear!” she said gratefully.

And then Peter came in, and Sandy hastened to make himself scarce.

A dead silence followed his hurried exit. Nan found herself trembling, and for a moment she dared not lift her eyes to Peter’s face for fear of what she might read there. At last:

“Peter,” she said, without looking at him. “Are you still—angry with me?”

“What makes you think I am angry?”

She looked up at that, then shrank back from the bitter hardness in his face almost as though he had dealt her a blow.

“Oh, you are—you are!” she cried tremulously.

“Don’t you think most men would be in the same circumstances?”

“I don’t understand,” she said very low.

“No? I suppose you wouldn’t,” he replied. “You don’t seem to understand the meaning of the word—faithfulness. Perhaps you can’t help it—you’re half a Varincourt! . . . Don’t you realise what you’ve done? You’ve torn down our love and soiled it—made it nothing! I believed in you as I believed in God. . . . And then you run away with Maryon Rooke! One man or another—apparently it’s all the same to you.”

She rose and drew rather timidly towards him.

“Has it—hurt you—like that?” she said whisperingly. “You didn’t mind—about Roger. Not in the same way.”

“*Mind*?”

The word came hoarsely, and his hands, hanging loosely at his sides, slowly clenched. All the anguish of thwarting, the torture of a man who knows that the woman he loves will be another man’s wife, found utterance in that one short word. Nan shivered at the stark agony in his tone. She did not attempt to answer him. There was nothing she could say. She could only stand voiceless and endure the pain-racked silence which followed.

It seemed to her that an infinity of time dragged by before he spoke again. When he did, it was in quiet, level tones out of which every atom of emotion had been crushed.

“You were pledged to Trenby,” he said slowly. “That was different. I couldn’t ask you to break your pledge to him, even had I been free to do so. You were his, not mine. . . . But you had given no promise to Maryon Rooke.”

The incalculable reproach and accusation of those last words seemed to burn their way right into her heart. In a flash of revelation the whole thing became clear to her. She saw how bitterly she had failed the man she loved in that mad moment when she had thrown up everything and gone away with Maryon.

Dimly she acquiesced in the fact that there were excuses to be made—the long strain of the preceding months, her illness, leaving her with weakened nerves, and, finally, Roger’s outrageous behaviour in the studio that day. But of these she would not speak to Peter. Had he not saved her from herself she would have wrecked her whole life by now, and she felt that, to him, she could not make excuses—however valid they might be.

Page 202

She had failed him utterly—failed in that faithfulness of the spirit without which love is no more than a sex instinct. She knew it must appear like this to him, although deep within herself she was conscious that it was not really so. In her heart there was a white flame that would burn only for Peter—an altar flame which nothing could touch or defile. And the men who loved her knew it. It was this, the knowledge that the inmost soul and spirit of her eluded him, which had kept Roger's jealous anger at such a dangerous pitch.

"There is only one thing." Peter was speaking again, still in the same curiously detached tones as before. It was almost as though he were discussing the affairs of someone else—affairs which did not concern him very vitally. "There's only one more thing to be said. You've made it easier for me to do—what I have to do."

"What you have to do?" she repeated.

"Yes. I've had a cable from India. My wife is no better, and I'm going out to bring her home."

"I'm sorry she's no better," said Nan mechanically.

He murmured a formal word of thanks and then once more the dreadful silence hemmed them round. A hesitating knock sounded on the door and, after a moment's discreet delay, Sandy's freckled face peered round the doorway.

"I'm afraid you must leave now, Mallory, if you're to catch the up train," he said apologetically. "Kitty is here, waiting to drive you to the station."

Together they all three went out into the drive where Kitty was sitting behind the wheel of the car, Eliza perched skittishly on the rubbered step, talking with her. Aunt Eliza's opinion of "that red-headed body" had altered considerably during the course of the last year.

"And mind an' look in on your way back," she insisted.

Kitty nodded.

"I will. I want to talk to Nan."

"Ye'll no' be too hard on her?" besought Eliza.

Kitty laughed.

"Aunt Eliza dear, you're the biggest fraud I know! Your severity's just a pretence,"—-bending forward to kiss her—"and a very thin one at that."

Then she greeted Nan precisely as though nothing had happened since they had last met, and, with a handshake all round, Mallory stepped into the car beside her and was whirled away to the station.

“It seems years since yesterday morning,” said Nan, when, after Kitty’s return from the station, they found themselves alone together.

For once Kitty had diverged from her usual principle, and a little jar of red stuff was responsible for the colour in her cheeks. Her eyes still blenched at the remembrance of that day and night’s anxiety which she had endured alone.

“Yes,” she acquiesced simply. “It seems years.” And then, bit by bit, she drew from Nan the whole story of her flight from Mallow and of the violent scene which had preceded it, when Roger had so ruthlessly destroyed the portrait.

Page 203

“I don’t think—Peter—will ever forgive me,” went on Nan, with a quiet hopelessness in her voice that was infinitely touching. “He would hardly speak to me.”

The coolly aloof man from whom she had parted an hour ago did not seem as though he could ever have loved her. He had judged and condemned her as harshly as might a stranger. He was a stranger—this new, stonily indifferent Peter who had said very little but, in the few words he had spoken, had seemed to banish her out of his life and heart for ever.

“My dear”—Kitty’s accustomed vitality rose to meet the occasion. “He’ll forgive you some day, when he understands. Probably only a woman could really understand what made you do it. In any case, as far as Peter’s concerned, it was all so ghastly for him, coming when it did—last night! He must have felt as if the world were falling to pieces.”

“Last night? Why should it have been worse last night?”

“Because he’d just had a cable from India—about ten minutes before Sandy arrived—-telling him that his wife had gone mad, and asking him to fetch her home.”

“Gone mad?” Nan’s voice was hardly more than a whisper of horror.

“Yes. He’d had a letter a day or two earlier warning him that things weren’t going right with her. You know, she’s a frightfully restless, excitable woman, and after having sunstroke she was ordered to keep quiet and rest as much as possible until she was able to come home. She entirely declined to do either—rest, or come home. She continued to ride and dance and amuse herself exactly as if there were nothing the matter. Naturally, her brain became more and more excitable, and at the present moment she is practically mad. No one can manage her. So they’ve sent for Peter, and of course, like the angel he is, he goes. . . . I suppose it will end in his playing keeper to a half-crazed neurasthenic for the rest of his natural life. He’ll be far too tender-hearted to put her in a home of any kind, however expensive and luxurious. He’s—he’s too idealistic for this world, is Peter!” And Kitty’s voice broke a little.

Nan was silent. Her hands lay folded on her knee, but the slender fingers worked incessantly. Presently she got up very quietly and, without speaking, sought the sanctuary of her own room, where she could be alone.

She felt utterly crushed and despairing as she realised that just at the moment of Peter’s greatest need she had failed him—spoiled the one thing that had counted in a life bare of happiness by robbing him of his faith and trust in the woman he loved.

If the Death-Angel had come at that moment and beckoned her to follow him, she would have gone gladly. But Death is not so kind. He does not come just because life has grown so hard and difficult to endure that we are asking for him.

Later on, when Nan came downstairs to dinner, she spoke and moved almost mechanically. Only once did she show the least interest in anything that was said, and that was when Eliza remarked with relish:

Page 204

“Roger Trenby will be wishin’ Isobel Carson back home! I hear Lady Gertrude keeps him dancing attendance on her from morn till night, declaring she’s at death’s door the while.”

Sandy grinned.

“Yes, Roger ’phoned an hour ago and asked to speak to you, Nan—he’d heard you were staying here. I said you were taking a nap.”

Nan smiled faintly across at him.

“Thank you, Sandy,” she said. She had no wish either to see or speak to Roger just now. There was something that must be fought out and decided before he and she met again.

Aunt Eliza bustled her off early to bed that night and she went thankfully—not to sleep, but to search out her own soul and make the biggest decision of her life.

It was not till the moon-pale fingers of dawn came creeping in through the chinks betwixt blind and window that Nan lay back on her pillows knowing that for good or ill she had taken her decision.

Something of the immensity of love, its heights and depths, had been revealed to her in those tense silences she had shared with Peter, and she knew that she had been untrue to the love within her—untrue from the very beginning when she had first pledged herself to Roger.

She had rushed headlong into her engagement with him, driven by cross-currents that had whirled her hither and thither. Afterwards, when the full realisation of her love for Peter had overwhelmed her, her pride—the dogged, unyielding pride of the Davenants, whose word was their bond—had held her to her promise.

It had been a matter of honour with her. Now she was learning that utter loyalty to love involved a higher, finer honour than a spoken pledge given by a reckless girl who had thought to find safety for herself and happiness for her friend by giving it.

For Peter, that faithfulness of the spirit, of which he had spoken, alone was possible. The woman he had married had her claims upon him. But as far as she herself was concerned, Nan realised that she could yet keep her love pure and untouched, faithful to the mystic three-fold bond of spirit, soul, and body.

. . . She would never marry Roger now. To-morrow she would write and tell him so. That he would storm and rage and try to force her to retract this new decision she was well aware. But that would only be part of the punishment which she must be prepared to suffer. There would, too, be a certain amount of obloquy and gossip to be faced.

People in general would say she had behaved dishonourably. But, whatever the result, she was ready to bear it. It would be a very small atonement for her sin against love!

* * * * * *

The following day she returned to Mallow Court to be greeted warmly by Kitty. Once or twice the latter glanced at her a trifle uneasily as though she sensed something different in her, but it was not until later on, over a fire lit to cheat the unwonted coolness of the evening, that Nan unburdened herself.

Page 205

Kitty said very little. But she and Barry were as much lovers now as they had been the day they married, and she understood.

“I think you’re right,” she commented slowly.

“I know I am,” answered Nan with quiet conviction. “I feel as though all this time I had been profaning our love. Now I want to keep it quite, quite sacred—in my heart. It wouldn’t make any difference even if Peter ceased to care for me. It’s my caring for him that matters.”

“Shall you—do you intend to see Roger?”

“No. I shall write to him to-morrow. But if he still wishes to see me after that, of course I can’t refuse.”

“And Peter?”

“He will have gone.”

Kitty shook her head.

“No. He sails the day after to-morrow. He couldn’t get a berth before.”

“Then”—very softly and with a quiet radiance in her eyes—“then I will write to him to-morrow—after I’ve written to Roger.”

Nan fell silent, gazing absently into the fire. There was a deep sense of thankfulness in her heart that she would be able to heal the hurt she had done Peter before he went East to face the bitter and difficult thing which awaited his doing. A strange sense of comfort stole over her. When she had written her letter to Roger, retracting the promise she had given him, she would be free—free to belong wholly to the man she loved.

Though they might never be together, though their love must remain for ever unconsummated, still in her loneliness she would know herself utterly and entirely his.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE GATES OF FATE

The fishing party returned to Mallow the following morning. They were in high spirits, full of stories and cracking jokes about each other’s prowess or otherwise—especially the “otherwise,” although, both men united in praising Penelope’s exploits as a fisherwoman.

“Beginner’s luck, of course!” chaffed Barry. “It was your first serious attempt at fishing, wasn’t it, Penny?”

“Yes. But it’s not going to be my last!” she retorted. “And I’ll take a bet with you as to who catches the most trout next time.”

The advent of three people who were in complete ignorance of the happenings of the last few days went far to restore the atmosphere to normal. Amid the bustle of their arrival and the gay chatter which accompanied it, it would have been impossible for Kitty, at least, not to throw aside for the moment the anxieties which beset her and join in the general fun and laughter.

But Nan, although she played up pluckily, so that no suspicions were aroused in the minds of the returned wanderers, was still burdened by the knowledge of what yet remained for her to do, and when the jolly clamour had abated a trifle she escaped upstairs to write her letter to Roger. It was a difficult letter to write because, though nothing he could say or do would alter her determination, she realised that in his own way he loved her and she wanted to hurt him as little as possible.

Page 206

“I know you will think I am being both dishonourable and disloyal,” she wrote, after she had first stated her decision quite clearly and simply. “But to me it seems I am doing the only thing possible in loyalty to the man I love. And in a way it is loyal to you, too, Roger, because—as you have known from the beginning—I could never give you all that a man has a right to expect from the women he marries. One can’t ‘share out’ love in bits. I’ve learned, now, that love means all or nothing, and as I cannot give you all, it must be nothing. And of this you may be sure—perhaps it may make you feel that I have behaved less badly to you—I am not breaking off our engagement in order to marry someone else. I shall never marry anyone, now.”

Nan read it through, then slipped it into an envelope and sealed it. When she had directed it to “Roger Trenby, Esq.,” she leaned back in her chair, feeling curiously tired, but conscious of a sense of peace and tranquillity that had been absent from her since the day on which she had promised to marry Roger. . . . And the next day, by the shattered Lovers’ Bridge, Peter had carried her in his arms across the stream and kissed her hair. She had known then, known very surely, that love had come to her—-Peter loved her, and his slightest touch meant happiness so poignantly sweet as to be almost unbearable. Only the knowledge had come too late.

But now—now she was free! Though she would never know the supreme joy of mating with the man she loved, she had at least escaped the prison which the wrong man’s love can make for a woman. Just as no other man than Peter would ever hold her heart, so henceforth no kiss but his would ever touch her lips. But for Peter the burden would be heavier. It would be different—harder. Could she not guess how infinitely harder? And there was nothing in the world which might avail to lighten that burden. Only, perhaps, later on, it might comfort him to know that, though in this world they could never come together, the woman he loved was his completely, that she had surrendered nothing of herself to any other man.

She picked up her letter to Roger and made her way downstairs, intending to drop it herself into the post-box at the gates of Mallow. Once it had left her hands for the close guardianship of that scarlet tablet streaked against the roadside wall she would feel more at ease.

As she turned the last bend of the stairs she came upon an agitated little group of people clustering round Sandy McBain, who had apparently only recently arrived. Her hand tightened on the banister. Why had everyone collected in the hall? Even one or two scared-looking servants were discernible in the background, and on every face sat a strange, unusual gravity. Nan felt as though someone had suddenly slipped a band round her heart and were drawing it tighter and tighter.

Nobody seemed to notice her as with reluctant, dragging footsteps she descended the remainder of the staircase. Then Ralph caught sight of her and exclaimed: “Here’s

Nan!” and her name ran through the group in a shocked murmur of repetition, followed by a quick, hushed silence.

Page 207

“What is it?” she asked apprehensively.

Several voices answered, but only the words “Roger” and “accident” came to her clearly out of the blur of sound.

“What is it?” she repeated. “What has happened?”

“There’s been an accident,” began Barry awkwardly. “Lady Gertrude—”

“Is she killed?”—in shocked tones.

“No, no. But she had another attack this morning—heart, or temper—and as the doctor was out when they ’phoned for him, she sent Roger rushing off post-haste in the car to find him and bring him along. And”—he hesitated a little—“I’m afraid he’s had rather a bad smash-up.”

Nan’s face went very white, and half-unconsciously her grip tautened round the letter she was holding, crushing it together.

“Do you mean—in the car?” she asked in a queer, stiff voice.

“Yes.” It was Sandy who answered her, “He’d just swerved to avoid driving over a dog and the next minute a kiddy ran out from the other side of the road, right in his path, and he swerved again, so sharply that the car ran up the side of the hedge and overturned.

“And Roger?”

Sandy’s face twisted and he looked away.

“He was—underneath the car,” he said at last, reluctantly.

Nan took a step forward and laid a hand on his arm. She had read the meaning of that quick contraction of his face.

“You were there!” She spoke more as though stating a fact than asking a question. “You saw it!”

“Yes,” he acknowledged. “We got him out from under the car and carried him home on a hurdle. Then I found the doctor, and he’s with him now.”

“I’d better go right across and see if I can help,” said Nan impulsively.

“No need. Isobel will be back this afternoon—I’ve wired her. And they’ve already ’phoned for a couple of trained nurses. Besides, Lady Gertrude’s malady vanished the minute she heard Roger was injured. I think”—with a brief smile—“her illness was

mostly due to the fact that Isobel was away, so of course she wanted to keep Roger by her side all the time. Lady G. must always have a 'retinue' in attendance, you know!"

A general smile acknowledged the truth of Sandy's diagnosis, but it was quickly smothered. The suddenness and gravity of the accident which had befallen Roger had shocked them all.

"What does the doctor say?" asked Penelope.

"He hasn't said anything very definite yet," replied Sandy. "He's afraid there's some injury to the spine, so he's wired for a Plymouth consultant. When he comes, they'll make a thorough examination."

"Ah!" Nan drew in her breath sharply.

"I suppose we shall hear to-night?" said Kitty. "The Plymouth man will get here early this afternoon."

"I'll come over and let you know the report," answered Sandy. "I'm going back to Trenby now, to see if I can do any errands or odd jobs for them. A man's a useful thing to have about the place at a time like this."

Page 208

Kitty nodded soberly.

“Quite right, Sandy. And if there’s anything we can any of us do to help, ’phone down at once.”

A minute later Sandy was speeding back to the Hall as fast as the “stink-pot” could take him.

“It’s pretty ghastly,” said Kitty, as she and Nan turned away together. “Poor old Roger!”

“Yes,” replied Nan mechanically. “Poor Roger.”

A sudden thought had sprung into her mind, overwhelming her with its significance. The letter she had written to Roger—she couldn’t send it now! Common humanity forbade that it should go. It would have to wait—wait till Roger had recovered. The disappointment, cutting across a deep and real sympathy with the injured man, was sharp and bitter.

Very slowly she made her way upstairs. The letter, which she still clasped rigidly, seemed to burn her palm like red-hot iron. She felt as though she could not unclench the hand which held it. But this phase only lasted for a few minutes. When she reached her room she opened her hand stiffly and the crumpled envelope fell on to the bed.

She stared at it blankly. That letter—which had meant so much to her—could not be sent! She might have to wait weeks—months even, before it could go. And meanwhile, she would be compelled to pretend—pretend to Roger, because he was so ill that the truth must be hidden from him till he recovered. Then, swift as the thrust of a knife, another thought followed. . . . Suppose—suppose Roger *never* recovered? . . . What was it Sandy had said? An injury to the spine. Did people recover from spinal injury? Or did they linger on, wielding those terrible rights which weakness for ever holds over health and strength?

Nan flung herself on the bed and lay there, face downwards, trying to realise the awful possibilities which the accident to Roger might entail for her. Because if it left him crippled—a hopeless invalid—the letter she had written could never be sent at all. She could not desert him, break off her engagement, if she herself represented all that was left to him in life.

It seemed hours afterwards, though in reality barely half an hour had elapsed, when she heard the sound of footsteps racing up the staircase, and a minute later, without even a preliminary knock, Kitty burst into the room. Her face was alight with joyful excitement. In her hand she held an open telegram.

“Listen, Nan! Oh”—seeing the other’s startled, apprehensive face—“it’s *good* news this time!”

Good news! Nan stared at her with an expression of impassive incredulity. There was no good news that could come to her.

“It seems horrible to feel glad over anyone’s death, but I simply can’t help it,” went on Kitty. “Peter has just telegraphed me that Celia died yesterday. . . . Oh, Nan, *dearest*! I’m so glad for you—so glad for you and Peter!”

Page 209

Nan, who had risen at Kitty's entrance, swayed suddenly and caught at the bed-post to steady herself.

"What did you say?" she asked huskily.

"That Peter's wife is dead. That he's free"—with great tenderness—"free to marry you." She checked herself and peered into Nan's white, expressionless face. "Nan, why don't you—look glad? You *are* glad, surely?"

"Glad?" repeated Nan vaguely. "No, I can't be glad yet. Not yet."

"You're not worrying just because Peter was angry last time he saw you?"—keenly.

"No. I wasn't thinking of that."

"Then, my dear, why not be glad—glad and thankful that nothing stands between you? I don't think you realise it! You're quite free now. And so is Peter. Your letter to Roger has gone—poor Roger!"—sorrowfully—"it's frightfully rough luck on him, particularly just now. But still, someone always has to go to the wall in a triangular mix-up. And though I like him well enough, I love you and Peter. So I'd rather it were Roger, since it must be someone."

Nan pointed to the bed. On the gay, flowered coverlet lay the crumpled letter.

"My letter to Roger has *not* gone," she said, speaking very distinctly. "I was on my way to post it when I found you all in the hall, discussing Roger's accident. And now—it can't go."

Kitty's face lengthened in dismay, then a look of relief passed over it.

"Give it to me," she exclaimed impulsively. "I'll post it at once. It will catch precisely the same post as it would have done if you'd put it in the post-box when you meant to."

"Kitty! How can you suggest such a thing!" cried Nan, in horrified tones. "If—if I'd posted it unknowingly and it had reached him after the accident it would have been bad enough! But to post it now, deliberately, *when I know*, would be absolutely wicked and brutal."

There was a momentary silence. Then:

"You're quite right," acknowledged Kitty in a muffled voice. She lifted a penitent face. "I suppose it was cruel of me to suggest it. But oh! I do so want you and Peter to be happy—and quickly! You've had such a rotten time in the past."

Nan smiled faintly at her.

“I knew you couldn’t mean it,” she answered, “seeing that you’re about the most tender-hearted person I know.”

“I suppose you will have to wait a little,” conceded Kitty reluctantly. “At least till Roger is mended up a bit. It may not be anything very serious, after all. A man often gets a bad spill out of his car and is driving again within a few weeks.”

“We shall near soon,” replied Nan levelly. “Sandy said he would let us know the result of the doctor’s examination.”

“Well, come for a stroll in the rose-garden, then. It’s hateful—waiting to hear,” said Kitty rather shakily.

“Get Barry to go with you. I’d rather stay here, I think.” Nan spoke quickly. She felt she could not bear to go into the rose-garden where she had given that promise to Roger which bade fair to wreck the happiness of two lives—her own and Peter’s.

Page 210

Kitty threw her a searching glance.

“Very well,” she said. “Try to rest a little. I’ll come up the moment we hear any news.”

She left the room and, as the door closed behind her, Nan gave vent to a queer, hysterical laugh. Rest! How could she rest, knowing that now Peter was free—free to make her his wife—the great gates of fate might yet swing to, shutting them both out of lovers garden for ever!

For she had realised, with a desperate clearness of vision, that if Roger were incurably injured, she could not add to his burden by retracting her promise to be his wife. She must make the uttermost sacrifice—give up the happiness to which the death of Celia Mallory had opened the way—and devote herself to mitigating Roger’s lot in so far as it could be mitigated. There was no choice possible to her. Duty, with stern, sad eyes, stood beside her, bidding her follow the hard path of sacrifice which winds upward, through a blurred mist of tears, to the great white Throne of God. The words of the little song which had always seemed a link betwixt Peter and herself came back to her like some dim echo from the past.

She sank on her knees, her arms flung out across the bed. She did not consciously pray, but her attitude of thought and spirit was a wordless cry that she might be given courage and strength to do this thing if it must needs be.

It was late in the afternoon when Kitty, treading softly, came into Nan’s room.

“Have you been to sleep?” she asked.

“No.” Nan felt as though she had not slept for a year. Her eyes were dry and burning in their sockets.

“There’s very bad news about Roger,” said Kitty, in the low tones of one who has hardly yet recovered from the shock of unexpectedly grave tidings. “His spine is so injured that he’ll never be able to walk again. He”—she choked over the telling of it—“his legs will always be paralysed.”

Nan stared at her vacantly, as though she hardly grasped the meaning of the words. Then, without speaking, she covered her face with her hands. The room seemed to be full of silence—a heavy terrible silence, charged with calamity. At last, unable to endure the burden of the intense quiet any longer, Kitty stirred restlessly. The tiny noise of her movement sounded almost like a pistol-shot in that profound stillness. Nan’s hands dropped from her face and she picked up the letter which still lay on the bed and tore it into small pieces, very carefully, tossing them into the waste-paper basket.

Kitty watched her for a moment as though fascinated. Then suddenly she spoke.

“Why are you doing that? Why are you doing that?” she demanded irritably.

Nan looked across at her with steady eyes.

“Because—it’s finished! That letter will never be needed now.”

“It will! Of course it will!” insisted Kitty. “Not now—but later—when Roger’s got over the shock of the accident.”

Page 211

Nan smiled at her curiously.

“Roger will never get over the consequences of his accident,” she said, accenting the word “consequences.” “Can you imagine what it’s going to mean to him to be tied down to a couch for the rest of his days? An outdoor man, like Roger, who has hunted and shot and fished all his life?”

“Of course I can imagine! It’s all too dreadful to think of! . . . But now Peter’s free, you can’t—you can’t mean to give him up for Roger!”

“I must,” answered Nan quietly. “I can’t take the last thing he values from a man who’s lost nearly everything.”

Kitty grasped her by the arm.

“Do you mean,” she said incredulously, “do you mean you’re going to sacrifice Peter to Roger?”

“It won’t hurt Peter—now—as it would have done before.” Nan spoke rather tonelessly. “He’s already lost his faith and trust in me. The worst wrench for him is over. I—I think”—a little unevenly—“that I’m glad now he thought what he did—that he couldn’t find it in his heart to forgive me. It’ll make it easier for him.”

“Easier? Yes, if you actually do what you say you will. But—you’re deliberately taking away his happiness, robbing him of it, even though he doesn’t know he’s being robbed. Good heavens, Nan!”—harshly—“Did you ever love him?”

“I don’t think you want an answer to that question,” returned Nan gently. “But, you see, I can’t—divide myself—between Peter and Roger.”

“Of course you can’t! Only why sacrifice both yourself and Peter to Roger? It isn’t reasonable!”

“Because I think he needs me most. Just picture it, Kitty. He’s got nothing left to look forward to till he dies! Nothing! . . . Oh, I can’t add to what he’ll have to bear! He’s so helpless!”

“You’ll have plenty to bear yourself—tied to a helpless man of Roger’s temper,” retorted “Kitty.

“Yes”—soberly—“I think—I’m prepared for that.”

“Prepared?”

“Yes. It seems to me as though I’ve known all afternoon that this was coming—that Roger might be crippled beyond curing. And I’ve looked at it from every angle, so as to be quite sure of myself.” She paused. “I’m quite sure, now.”

The quiet resolution in her voice convinced Kitty that her mind was made up. Nevertheless, for nearly an hour she tried by every argument in her power, by every entreaty, to shake her decision. But Nan held her ground.

“I must do it,” she said. “It’s useless trying to dissuade me. It’s so clear to me that it’s the one thing I must do. Don’t any anything more about it, Kitten. You’re only wearing yourself out”—appealingly. “I wish—I wish you’d try to *help* me to do it! It won’t be the easiest thing in the world”—with a brief smile that was infinitely more sad than tears—“I know that.”

“Help you?” cried Kitty passionately. “Help you to ruin your life, and Peter’s with it? No, I won’t help you. I tell you, Nan, you can’t do this thing! You *shall not* marry Roger Trenby!”

Page 212

Nan listened to her patiently. Then, still very quietly:

“I must marry him,” she said. “It will be the one decent thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

CHAPTER XXXVI

ROGER’S REFUSAL

The next morning at breakfast only one letter lay beside Nan’s plate. As she recognised Maryon Rooke’s small, squarish handwriting, with its curious contrasts of heavy downstrokes and very light terminals, the colour deepened in her cheeks. Her slight confusion passed unnoticed, however, as everyone else was absorbed in his or her individual share of the morning’s mail.

For a moment Nan hesitated, conscious of an intense disinclination to open the letter. It gave her a queer feeling of panic, recalling with poignant vividness the day when she and Maryon had last been together. At length, somewhat dreading what it might contain, she opened it and began to read.

“I’ve had a blazing letter from young Sandy McBain, which has increased my respect for him enormously,” wrote Maryon. “I’ve come to the conclusion that I deserve all the names he called me. Nan, how do you manage to make everyone so amazingly devoted to you? I think it must be that ridiculously short upper lip of yours, or your ‘blue-violet’ eyes, or some other of your absurd and charming characteristics.

“I shall probably go abroad for a bit—to recover my self-respect. I’m not feeling particularly proud of myself just now, and it always spoils my enjoyment of things if I can’t be genuinely pleased with my ego. Don’t cut me when next we meet, if fortune is ever kind enough to me to let us meet again. Because, for once in my life, I’m really sorry for my sins.

“I believe that somewhere in the ramshackle thing I call my soul, I’m glad Sandy took you away from me. Though there are occasional moments when I feel murderous towards him.

“Yours

“MARYON.”

Nan laid down the closely-written sheet with a half-smile, half-sigh—could one ever regard Maryon Rooke without a smile overtaken by a sigh? The letter somewhat cheered her, washing away what remained of bitterness in her thoughts towards him. It was very characteristic of the man, with its intense egotism—almost every sentence beginning with an “I”—and its lightly cynical note. Yet beneath the surface flippancy

Nan could read a genuine remorse and self-reproach. And in some strange way it comforted her a little to know that Maryon was sorry. After all, there is something good even in the worst of us.

“Had a nice letter, Nan?” asked Barry, looking up from his own correspondence. “You’re wearing a smile of sorts.”

“Yes. It was—rather a nice letter. Good and bad mixed, I think,” she answered.

“Then you’re lucky,” observed Kitty. There was a rather frightened look in her eyes. “We’ll go into your study after breakfast, Barry. I want to consult you about one of my letters. It’s—it’s undiluted bad, I think.”

Page 213

Barry's blue eyes smiled reassuringly across at her. "All right, old thing. Two heads are generally better than one if you're up against a snag."

Half an hour later she beckoned him into the study.

"What's the trouble?" He slipped an arm round her shoulders. "Don't look like that, Kitten. We're sure to be able to put things right somehow."

She smiled at him rather ruefully.

"It's you who'll have to do the putting right, Barry—and it'll be a hateful business, too," she replied.

"Thanks," murmured Barry. "Well, what's in the letter that's bothering you?"

"It's from Peter," burst out Kitty. "He's going straight off to Africa—to-morrow! Celia, of course, will be buried out in India—her uncle has cabled him that he'll arrange everything. And Peter has had the chance of a returned berth in a boat that sails to-morrow, so he proposes to get his kit together and start at once."

"I should have thought he'd have started at once—in this direction," remarked Barry drily.

"He would have done, I expect, only he's so bitter over Nan's attempt to run away with Maryon Rooke that he's determined to bury himself in the wilds. If he only knew what she'd gone through before she did such a thing, he'd understand and forgive her. But that's just like a man! When the woman he cares for acts in a way that's entirely inconsistent with all he knows of her, he never thinks of trying to work backwards to find out the *cause*. The effect's enough for him! Oh!"—with a sigh—"I do think Peter and Nan are most difficult people to manage. If it were only that—just a lovers' squabble—-one might fix things up. But now, just when every obstacle in the world is removed and they could be happily married, Nan must needs decide that it's her duty to marry Roger!"

"Her duty?"

"Yes." And Kitty plunged forthwith into a detailed account of all that had happened.

"Good old Nan! She's a well-plucked 'un," was Barry's comment when she had finished.

"Of course it's splendid of her," said Kitty. "Nan was always an idealist in her notions—-but in practice it would just mean purgatory. And I won't *let* her smash up the whole of her own life, and Peter's for an ideal!"

"How do you propose to prevent it, m'dear?"

"I propose that *you* should prevent it."

"I? How?"

Kitty laid an urgent hand on his arm.

"You must go over to Trenby and see Roger."

"See Roger? My dear girl, he won't be able to see visitors for days yet."

"Oh, yes, he will," replied Kitty. "Isobel Carson rang up just now to ask if Nan would come over. It appears that, barring the injury to his back, he escaped without a scratch. He didn't even *know* he was hurt till he found he couldn't use his legs. Of course, he'll be in bed. Isobel says he seems almost his usual self, except that he won't let anyone sympathise with him over his injury. He's just savage about it."

Page 214

Barry made no answer. He reflected that it was quite in keeping with all be knew of the man for him to bear in silence the shock of knowing that henceforward he would be a helpless cripple. Just as a wild animal, mortally hurt, seeks solitude in which to die, so Roger's arrogant, primitive nature refused to tolerate the pity of his fellows.

"Well," queried Barry grudgingly. "If I do see him, what then?"

"You must tell him that Peter is free and make him release Nan from her engagement. In fact, he must do more than that," she continued emphatically. "In her present mood Nan would probably decline to accept her release. He must absolutely *refuse* to marry her."

"And supposing he doesn't see doing that?"

Kitty's lip curled.

"In the circumstances, I should think that any man who cared for a woman and who wasn't a moral and physical coward, would see it was the one and only thing he could do."

Her husband remained silent.

"You'll go, Barry?"

"I don't care for interfering in Trenby's personal affairs. Poor devil! He's got enough to bear just now!"

Sudden tears filled Kitty's eyes. She pitied Roger from the bottom of her heart, but she must still fight for the happiness of Nan and Peter.

"I know," she acquiesced unhappily. "But, don't you see, if he doesn't bear just this, too, Nan will have to endure a twofold burden for the rest of her life. Oh, Barry!"—choking back a sob—"Don't fail me! It's a man's job—this. No woman could do it, without making Roger feel it frightfully. A man so hates to discuss any physical disablement with a woman. It hurts his pride. He'd rather ignore it."

"But where's the use?" protested Barry. "If Peter is off to-morrow to the back of beyond, you're still no further on. You've only made things doubly hard for that poor devil up at the Hall without accomplishing anything else."

"Peter won't go to-morrow," asserted Kitty. "I've settled that. I wired him to come down here—I sent the wire the minute after breakfast. He'll be here to-night."

"Pooh! He'll take no notice of a telegram like that! A man doesn't upset the whole of his plans to go abroad because a pal in the country wires him 'to come down'!"

“Precisely. So I worded my wire in a way which will ensure his coming,” replied Kitty, with returning spirit.

Barry looked, at her doubtfully.

“What did you put on it?”

“I said: ‘*Bad accident here. Come at once*.’ I know that will bring him. . . . And it has the further merit of being the truth!” she added with a rather shaky little laugh.

“That will certainly bring him,” agreed Barry, a brief flash of amusement in his eyes. It was so like Kitty to dare a wire of this description and chance how her explanation of it might be received by the person most concerned. “But suppose Trenby declines point-blank to release Nan?” he pursued. “What will you do then—with Peter on your hands?”

Page 215

“Well, at least Peter will understand what Nan is doing and why she’s doing it. Given that he knew the whole truth, I think he’d probably run away with her. I know *I* should—-if I were a man! Now, will you go and see Roger, please?”

“I suppose I shall have to. But it’s a beastly job.” Barry’s usually merry eyes were clouded.

“Beastly,” agreed Kitty sympathetically. “But it’s got to be done.”

Ten minutes later she watched her husband drive away in the direction of Trenby Hall, and composed herself to wait patiently on the march of events.

* * * * * *

Barry looked pitifully down at the big, helpless figure lying between the sheets of the great four-poster bed. Except for an unwonted pallor and the fact that no movement of the body below the waist was visible, Roger looked very much as usual. He waved away the words of sympathy which were hovering on Barry’s lips.

“Nice of you to come so soon,” he said curtly. “But, for God’s sake, don’t condole with me. I don’t want condolences and I won’t have ’em.” There was a note in his voice which told of the effort which his savage self-repression cost him.

Barry understood, and for a few minutes they discussed, things in general, Roger briefly describing the accident.

“Funny how things happen,” he observed. “I suppose I’m about as expert a driver as you’d get. There was practically nothing I couldn’t do with a car—and along come a dog and a kiddy and flaw me utterly in two minutes. I’ve had much nearer shaves a dozen times before and escaped scot-free.”

They talked on desultorily for a time. Then suddenly Roger asked:

“When’s Nan coming to see me? I told Isobel to ’phone down to Mallow this morning.”

“You’re hardly up to visitors,” said Barry, searching for delay. “I don’t suppose I ought to have come, really.”

Roger looked at him with eyes that burned fiercely underneath his shaggy brows.

“I’m as right as you are—except for my confounded back,” he answered. “I’ve not got a scratch on me. Only something must have struck me as the car overturned—and a bit of my spinal anatomy’s gone phut.”

“You mayn’t be as badly injured as you think,” ventured Barry. “Some other doctor might give you a different report.”

“Oh, he’s quite a shining light—the man who came down here. Spine’s his job. And his examination was thorough enough. There’s nothing can be done. My legs are useless—and I’m a strong, healthy man who may live to a ripe old age.”

He turned his head on the pillow and Barry saw him drag the sheet between his teeth and bite on it. He crossed to the window, giving the man time to regain his self-command.

“Well, what about Nan?” Roger demanded at last harshly. “When’s she coming?”

Barry faced round to the bed again.

Page 216

“I came to talk to you about Nan,” he replied with reluctance. “But—”

“Talk away, then!”

“Well, it’s very difficult to say what I have to tell you. You see, Trenby, this ghastly accident of yours makes a difference in—”

Roger interrupted with a snarl. His arms waved convulsively.

“Lift me up,” he commanded. “I can’t do it myself. Prop me up a bit against the pillows. . . . Oh, get on with it, man!” he cried, as Barry hesitated. “Nothing you do can either help or hurt me. Lift me up!”

Obediently Barry stooped and with a touch as strong as a man’s and as tender as a woman’s, lifted Roger into the desired position.

“Thanks.” Roger blurted out the word ungraciously. “Well, what about Nan?” he went on, scowling. “I suppose you’ve come to ask me to let her off? That’s the natural thing! Is that it?” he asked sharply.

“Yes,” answered Barry simply. “That’s it.”

Rogers face went white with anger.

“Then you may tell her,” he said, pounding the bed with his fist to emphasise his words, “tell her from me that I haven’t the least intention of releasing her. She’s a contemptible little coward even to suggest it. But that’s a woman all over!”

“It’s nothing of the sort,” returned Barry, roused to indignation by Roger’s brutal answer. He spoke with a quiet forcefulness there was no mistaking. “Nan knows nothing whatever about my visit here, nor the purpose of it. On the contrary, had she known, I’m quite sure she would have tried to prevent my coming, seeing that she has made up her mind to marry you as soon as you wish.”

“Oh, she has, has she?” Roger paused grimly. A moment later he broke out: “Then—-then—what the devil right have you to interfere?”

“None,” said Barry gravely. “Except the right of one man to remind another of his manhood—if he sees him in danger of losing it.”

The thrust, so quietly delivered, went home. Roger bit his under lip and was silent, his eyes glowering.

“So that’s what you think of me, is it?” he said at last, sullenly.

The look in Barry's eyes softened the stern sincerity of his reply.

"What else can I think? In your place a man's first thought should surely be to release the woman he loves from the infernal bondage which marriage with him must inevitably mean."

"On the principle that from him who hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath, I suppose?" gibed the bitter voice from the bed.

"No," answered Barry, with simplicity. "But just because if you love a woman you can't possibly want to hurt her."

"And if she loved you, a woman couldn't possibly want to turn you down because you've had the damnedest bad luck any man could have."

"But does she love you?" asked Barry. "I know—and you know—that she does *not*. She cares for someone else."

Page 217

Roger made a sudden, violent movement.

“Who is it? She has never told me who it was. I suppose it’s that confounded cad who painted her portrait—Maryon Rooke?”

Barry smile a little.

“No,” he answered. “The man she loves is Peter Mallory.”

“Mallory!”—in blank astonishment. Then, swiftly and with a gleam of triumph in his eyes: “But he’s married!”

“His wife has just died—out in India.”

There was a long pause. Then:

“So *that’s* why you came?” sneered Roger. “Well, you can tell Nan that she won’t marry Peter Mallory with my consent. I’ll never set her free to be another man’s wife”—his dangerous temper rising again. “There’s only one thing left to me in the world, and that’s Nan. And I’ll have her!”

“Is that your final decision?” asked Barry. He was beginning to recognise the hopelessness of any effort to turn or influence the man.

“Yes”—with a snarl. “Tell Nan”—derisively—“that I shall expect my truly devoted fiancee here this afternoon.”

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE GREAT HEALER

It was late in the afternoon when the Mallow car once more purred up to the door of Trenby Hall and Nan descended from it. She was looking very pale, her face like a delicate white cameo beneath the shadow of her hat, while the clinging black of her gown accentuated the slender lines—too slender, now—of her figure. She had not yet discarded her mourning for Lord St. John, but in any case she would have felt that gay colours could have no part in to-day.

Kitty had told her of Barry’s interview with Trenby and of its utter futility, and, although Nan had been prepared to sacrifice her whole existence to the man who had suffered so terrible an injury, she was bitterly disappointed that he proposed exacting it from her as a right rather than accepting it as a free gift.

If for once he could have shown himself generous and offered to give her back her freedom—an offer she would have refused to accept—how much the fact that each of them had been willing to make a sacrifice might have helped to sweeten their married life! Instead, Roger had forced upon her the realisation that he was unchanged—still the same arrogant “man with the club” that he had always been, insisting on his own way, either by brute force or by the despotism of a moral obligation which was equally compelling.

But these thoughts fled—driven away by a rush of overwhelming sympathy—when her eyes fell on the great, impotent hulk of a man who lay propped up against his pillows. A nurse slipped past her in the doorway and paused to whisper, as she went:

“Don’t stay too long. He’s run down a lot since this morning. I begged him not to see any more visitors to-day, but he insisted upon seeing you.”

The nurse recalled very vividly the picture of her patient when she had endeavoured to dissuade him from this second interview—his white, rather drawn face and the eyes which blazed feverishly at her beneath their penthouse brows.

Page 218

“You’ve got to let me see my best girl to-day, nurse,” he had said, forcing a smile. “After that you shall have your own way and work your wicked will on me.”

And the nurse, thinking that perhaps a visit from his “best girl” might help to allay the new restlessness she found in him, had yielded, albeit somewhat reluctantly.

“Oh, Roger!” With a low cry of dismay Nan ran to the bed and slipped down on her knees beside it.

“It’s a rotten bit of luck, isn’t it?” he returned briefly.

She expected the fierce clasp of his arms about her and had steeled herself to submit to his kisses without flinching. But he did not offer to kiss her. Instead, pointing to a chair, he said quietly:

“Pull up that chair—I’m sorry I can’t offer to do it for you!—and sit down.”

She obeyed, while he watched her in silence. The silence lasted so long that at last, finding it almost unbearable, she broke it.

“Roger, I’m so—so grieved to see you—like this.” She leaned forward in her chair, her hands clasped tightly together. “But don’t give up hope yet,” she went on earnestly. “You’ve only had one specialist’s opinion. He might easily be wrong. After a time, you may be walking about again as well as any other man. I’ve heard of such cases.”

“And I suppose you’re banking on the hope that mine’s one of them, so that you’ll not be tied to a helpless log for a husband. Is that it?”

She shrank back, hurt to the core of her. If he were to be always like this—prey to a kind of ferocious suspicion of every word and act of hers, then the outlook for the future was dark indeed. The burden of it would be more than she could bear.

Roger, seeing her wince, gestured apologetically.

“I didn’t mean quite all that,” he said quickly. “I’m rather like a newly-caged wild beast—savage even with its keeper. Still, any woman might be forgiven for preferring to marry a sound man rather than a cripple. You’re ready to go on with the deal, Nan?”

“Yes, I’m ready,” she answered in a low voice.

“Have you realised all it means? I’m none too amiable at the best of times”—grimly. “And my temper’s not likely to improve now I’m tied by the leg. You’ll have to fetch and carry, and put up with all the whims and tantrums of a very sick man. Are you really sure of yourself?”

“Quite sure.”

His hawk’s eyes flashed over her face, as though he would pierce through the veil of her grave and tranquil expression.

“Even though Peter Mallory’s free to marry you now?” he demanded suddenly.

“Peter!” The word came in a shrinking whisper. She threw out her hands appealingly. “Roger, can’t we leave the past behind? We’ve each a good deal”—her thoughts flew back to that dreadful episode in the improvised studio—“a good deal to forgive. Let us put the past quite away—on the top shelf”—with a wavering little laugh—“and leave it there. I’ve told you I’m willing to be your wife. Let’s start afresh from that. I’ll marry you as soon as you like.”

Page 219

After a long pause:

“I believe you really would!” said Roger with a note of sheer wonderment in his voice.

“I’ve just said so.”

“Well, my dear”—he smiled briefly—“thank you very much for the offer, but I’m not going to accept it.”

“Not going to accept it!” she repeated, utterly bewildered. “But you can’t—you won’t refuse!”

“I can and I do—entirely refuse to marry you.”

Nan began to think his mind was wandering.

“No,” he said, detecting her thought. “I’m as sane as you are. Come here—a little closer—and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Rather nervously, Nan drew nearer to him.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said with a strange kindness and gentleness in his voice. “I had a visitor this morning who told me some unpalatable truths about myself. He asked me to release you from your engagement, and I flatly refused. He also enlightened my ignorance concerning Peter Mallory and informed me he was now free to marry you. That settled matters as far as I was concerned! I made up my mind I would never give you up to another man.” He paused. “Since then I’ve had time for reflection. . . . Reflection’s a useful kind of thing. . . . Then, when you came in just now, looking like a broken flower with your white face and sorrowful eyes, I made a snatch at whatever’s left of a decent man in this battered old frame of mine.”

He paused and took Nan’s hand in his. Very gently he drew the ring he had given her from her finger.

“You are quite free, now,” he said quietly.

“No, no!” Impulsively she tried to recover the ring. “Let me be your wife! I’m willing—-quite, quite willing!” she urged, her heart overflowing with tenderness and pity for this man who was now voluntarily renouncing the one thing left him.

“But Mallory wouldn’t be ‘quite willing,’” replied Roger, with a twisted smile. “Nor am I. And an unwilling bridegroom isn’t likely to make a good husband!”

Nan’s mouth quivered.

“Roger—” she began, but the sob in her throat choked into silence the rest of what she had meant to say. Her hands went out to him, and he took them in his and held them.

“Will you kiss me—just once, Nan?” he said. “I don’t think Mallory would grudge it me.”

She bent over him, and for the first time unshrinkingly and with infinite tenderness, laid her lips on his. Then very quietly she left the room.

She was conscious of a sense of awe. First Maryon, and now, to an even greater degree, Roger, had revealed some secret quality of fineness with which no one would have credited them.

“I shall never judge anyone again,” she told Kitty later. “You can’t judge people! I shall always believe that everyone has got a little patch of goodness somewhere. It’s the bit of God in them. Even Judas Iscariot was sorry afterwards, and went out and hanged himself.”

Page 220

She was thankful when she came downstairs from Roger's bedroom to find that there was no one about. A meeting with Lady Gertrude at the moment would have been of all things the most repugnant to her. With a feeling of intense thankfulness that the thin, steel-eyed woman was nowhere to be seen, she stepped into the car and was borne swiftly down the drive. At the lodge, however, where the chauffeur had perforce to pull up while the lodge-keeper opened the gates, Isobel Carson came into sight, and common courtesy demanded that Nan should get out of the car and speak to her. She had been gathering flowers—for Roger's room, was Nan's involuntary thought—and carried a basket, full of lovely blossoms, over her arm.

In a few words Nan told her of her interview with Roger.

Isobel listened intently.

"I'm glad you were willing to marry him," she said abruptly, as Nan ceased speaking. "It was—decent of you. Because, of course, you were never in love with him."

"No," Nan acknowledged simply.

"While I've loved him ever since I knew him!" burst out Isobel. "But he's never looked at me, thought of me like that! Perhaps, now you're out of the way—" She broke off, leaving her sentence unfinished.

Into Nan's mind flashed the possibility of all that this might mean—this wealth of wasted love which was waiting for Roger if he cared to take it.

"Would you marry him—now?" she asked.

"Marry him?" Isobel's eyes glowed. "I'd marry him if he couldn't move a finger! I love him! And there's nothing in the world I wouldn't do for him."

She looked almost beautiful in that moment, with her face irradiated by a look of absolute, selfless devotion.

"And I wouldn't rest till he was cured!" The words came pouring from her lips. "I'd try every surgeon, in the world before I'd give up hope, and if they failed, I'd try what love—just patient, helpful love—could do! One thinks of a thousand ways which might cure when one loves," she added.

"Love is a great Healer," said Nan gently. "I'm not sure that *anything's* impossible if you have both love and faith." She paused, her foot on the step of the car. "I think—I think, some day, Roger will open the door of his heart to you, Isobel," she ended softly.

She was glad to lean back in the car and to feel the cool rush of the air against her face. She was tired—immensely tired—by the strain of the afternoon. And now the

remembrance came flooding back into her mind that, even though Roger had released her, she and Peter were still set apart—no longer by the laws of God and man, but by the fact that she herself had destroyed his faith and belief in her.

She stepped wearily out of the car when it reached Mallow. She was late in returning, and neither Kitty nor Penelope were visible as she entered the big panelled hall. Probably they had already gone upstairs to dress for dinner.

Page 221

As she made her way slowly towards the staircase, absorbed in rather bitter thoughts, a slight sound caught her ear—a sudden stir of movement. Then, out of the dim shadows of the hall, someone came towards her—someone who limped a little as he came.

“Nan!”

For an instant her heart seemed to stop beating. The quiet, drawling voice was Peter’s, no longer harsh with anger, nor stern with the enforced repression of a love that was forbidden, but tender and enfolding as it had been that moonlit night amid the ruins of King Arthur’s Castle.

“Peter! . . . Peter! . . .”

She ran blindly towards him, whispering his name.

How it had happened she neither knew nor cared—all that mattered was that Peter was here, waiting for her! And as his arms closed round her, and his voice uttered the one word: “Beloved!” she knew that every barrier was down between them and that the past, with all its blunders and effort and temptations, had been wiped out.

Presently she leaned away from him.

“Peter, I used to wonder *why* God kept us apart. I almost lost my faith—once.”

Peter’s steady, blue-grey eyes met hers.

“Beloved,” he said, “I think we can see why, even now. Isn’t our love . . . which we’ve fought to keep pure and clean . . . been crucified for . . . a thousand times better and finer thing than the love we might have snatched at and taken when it wasn’t ours to take?”

She smiled up at him, a tender gravity in her face. Her thoughts slipped back to the little song which seemed to hold so strange a symbolism of her own life. The third verse had come true at last. She repeated it aloud, very softly:

“But sometimes God on His great white Throne
Looks down from the Heaven above,
And lays in the hands that are empty
The tremulous Star of Love.”

Peter stooped and kissed her lips. There was a still, quiet passion in his kiss, but there was something more—something deep and intransmutable—the same unchanging troth which, he had given her at Tintagel of love that would last “through this world into the next.”

THE END