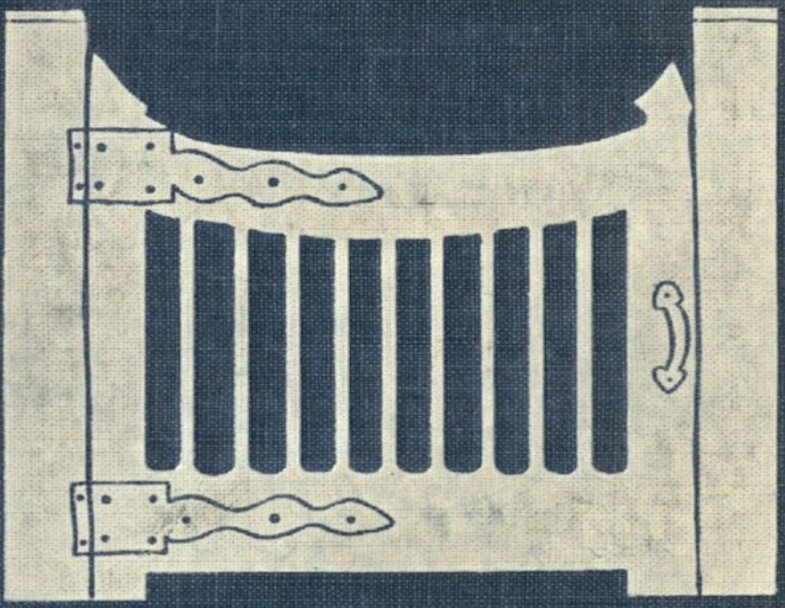
THE WHITE GATE



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WARWICK DEEPING

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"'You are coming back with me, and I am going to teach you to live'" (*see page* 179).

THE WHITE GATE
BY WARWICK DEEPING
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TO

MY WIFE

Foregleams

John Cuthbertson made his way down the harbour pier at Dover, looking like a big brown bear in his rough ulster. There was expectancy in the kind blue eyes set wide apart in the fresh-coloured face. Like many big men, John Cuthbertson had a shy and silent dignity. He moved slowly, spoke slowly, and smiled with his eyes when smaller people would have laughed.

A March sky hurried overhead, and the sea kept up a monotonous splashing on the other side of the great grey breakwater. Landwards, Dover Castle stood out dimly on a dim hill, the grass and the chalk looking sad and soiled under the grey sky. The Calais boat was in. John Cuthbertson could see her masts above the roofs of the shelters on the quay.

"I'm late, I suppose."

The boat train came steaming towards him, and he stood to watch it pass. People were settling themselves there, reading books and papers, or looking with tired and apathetic faces at nothing in particular. Cuthbertson had a glimpse of a child holding a Teddy bear against a window, as though determined that the good beast should lose no chances.

The red train swept by. He smiled and passed on.

Most of the people had left by the boat train, and the long platform on the quay was left to the jerseyed figures of the harbour porters. Just beyond the small buffet Cuthbertson saw two people walking towards him—a tall man with a lean, alert face and a coal-black beard cut to a point and a little old woman in black. The man was carrying a brown basket. He had given an arm to the little old lady, and was looking down at her with an air of understanding and of sympathy.

A glimmer of surprise, humour, and affection shone in John Cuthbertson's eyes. The two were coming along very slowly, the little figure in black rather tottery and forlorn. The yellow face under the black bonnet had sunken eyes and lines of pain.

"It's so kind of you. I thought I was going to die. And I'm giving you such a lot of trouble. I'm afraid I can't go any faster."

The man with the short black beard looked down at her consolingly.

"There's no hurry. Just take your time. Now, what do you say to a plate of soup?"

"I couldn't touch it—I really couldn't."

"No? Well, just take your time. The fresh air will make you feel better."

He glanced up suddenly, and his eyes met the eyes of the big man in the brown ulster. A flash of recognition leapt into them. The hearts of the two men seemed to come together in that look.

"Old man, this is good of you."

"You knew I should come."

"You see, I have a friend here who wants to get to the harbour station. You won't mind going slowly?"

Cuthbertson took off his hat, swung into line, and offered to carry the basket.

"Let me take it, old man."

"It's all right; I can manage. My hand luggage has gone on by porter. They tell me I shall have to wait an hour to get my baggage through the Customs."

So these two tall fellows went at a snail's pace towards the town, sheltering the little black figure that shuffled between them. It was a patient and a kindly escort, and the exhausted face looked grateful.

"How do you feel now?"

They had reached the space before the "Lord Warden," and the sea wind blew in strongly and lifted the old lady's black bonnet.

"Better, thank you. It doesn't go up and down so much. I can't say how kind you've been. I don't know what I should have done——"

"It was a very rough crossing, you know. Would you like to go to the waiting-room?"

"Yes, please."

They took her there, still walking very slowly. The yellow face had lost some of its deathliness. Tears came into her eyes as she looked up at the man with the black beard.

"I'm so very grateful."

He carried her basket into the waiting-room, and put it down on one of the

seats.

"Good-bye. I hope you will soon feel all right. I shall be hanging about the station for an hour or so, so if you want anything send a porter to hunt me out—a man with a black beard."

"I don't know why people should be so kind."

"Why? Oh, because we all need it. Good-bye."

Cuthbertson was waiting for him on the platform. They smiled at each other, and by some common impulse shook hands.

"Old man, how are you?"

"Better—pounds better."

"Are you going to leave your friend there?"

"Yes, poor old soul. I only picked her up on the quay; she could hardly stand, or ask anybody for anything. Whence—and whither? Let's go in here and get something to eat."

They turned into the refreshment room, and sat down at the table that was farthest from the bar. But talking rather than eating seemed to be the importunate need of the moment. They gave casual orders to the casual young woman behind the counter, and then forgot everything in being with each other. For these two men had loved with the rare, rich love of comrades in arms.

"Yes, you look more like your old self."

Cuthbertson leant back in his chair and examined Skelton with shrewd and affectionate eyes. He had spoken of the old self, and the Richard Skelton of two years ago stood out like some magnificent portrait hung in a great room where the evening sunlight entered. The lean, alert, sensitive face, with the deep blue eyes that looked black in certain lights. The straightness of the mobile mouth. The proud holding of the head. He had loved this man, loved him for his forcefulness, his fine flashes of anger, his moments of tenderness, his sparkles of half-devilish humour. That rarest of rare things—a personality, an aliveness so brilliant that it had made weaker men seem but half awake.

Then that tragedy of overwork, when he, John Cuthbertson, had spent half his days with a dying wife, and his comrade in arms had done the fighting. That breakup of a man whose creed had been to spend all of himself—or nothing! Skelton's face still showed the lines of strain, and his eyes had not wholly lost their restlessness. Cuthbertson noticed these things. He knew how the man had suffered.

"I had your last letter. You did not say anything about the beard."

Their eyes met across the table.

"Old man, I was afraid of my razors."

"Nonsense! You?"

"It's the truth. No one understands this sort of thing until they have been through it."

A fierce light came into his eyes and his nostrils quivered.

"It sounds preposterous, hysterical, to those who haven't been down into the depths. Three years ago I should have had something like a sneer for people whose nerve gave out. Now—I know. Everything wrong, inside and out, and your soul like an empty wine-skin. And the nights! Good God! Old man, I used to lie awake in my cabin and say over and over again, 'You are not going to do it—you are not going to play the coward.' Well, that's passed."

Cuthbertson drummed on the table with his fingers. His eyes were very soft for a man's.

"What are you going to do? I have kept everything open. Things are going well."

"That's like you. But I am not coming back yet; it wouldn't be fair to you if I did. I don't think I could stand London. It would put me in a fever. You know, I can't lounge and watch other people doing things. I must be fighting if I am in the thick of it."

"Have you made any plans?"

"I am going to have a year in the country—perhaps more. Cockney or peasant, I couldn't stand a provincial town. I shall work. There was that thing I was rummaging at before I crocked. And I want to think; to make sure of one or two lessons I've been learning."

He was silent a moment. Then his eyes flashed up suddenly, and his whole face seemed to radiate inward light.

"Old man, I was a hard beggar. I thought I was strong enough for anything, equal to anything. I despised the people I used to call weaklings, and the poor devils who got stuck on stools. I hadn't any patience, and not much pity, and I thought myself so confoundedly clever. Then the crash came. Fate had been smiling and waiting. Well, I've been through hell."

Cuthbertson stared hard at the opposite wall.

"You always would work too hard. And it was my fault—in a way."

"Not a bit of it. But, do you know, I have relearnt something I had managed to forget? I have had the egotism burnt out of me; I have rediscovered the other side of life. When you are a hard, clever devil you want breaking, just to be made to understand. I do understand now. At least, I hope so."

Cuthbertson's eyes glimmered in his big, round face.

"I have been hurt in my time."

"That's it. The sequence of things that we call Fate, or God, or the Great Cause, had to hurt me most damnably in order to teach me to feel. I had a bit of steel for a brain then. I have had my purgatory; I have come out softened."

He smiled reflectively.

"Sympathy—a sensitive surface. What one misses by being in such a heartless hurry! I tell you what I swore to do, Jack, to tear the skin off my old self and to go about feeling—life. Men, women and children. We have all got to help each other to live."

The big man nodded.

"There's a monstrous lot of good in the world," he said. "Why, you have only to keep a dog to learn that."

Constance Brent came out of her mother's room with dull and bewildered eyes.

As she closed the door behind her a woman appeared at the end of the short passage leading from the hall. She had been waiting for the opening of the door, and the brown eyes in the broad face were full of pity and of anger.

"Miss Connie——"

But the girl fled towards the stairs, her face quivering as her self-control gave way. She wanted to keep back tears until she was alone in her own room.

"I can't, Mary."

The woman watched her run up the stairs and disappear. She stood twisting her hands into her apron and staring at a patch of sunlight on the red carpet. Anger and compassion were big in her. She nodded her head emphatically, and gazed at the door of the room from which Constance Brent had come.

"She's told her."

The woman had a broad face, with steadiness and strength in the mouth and forehead. Her brown eyes could be very kind. She was not one who acted quickly, but when once set upon a purpose she was not easily rebuffed.

Crossing the hall, she opened the door of the room and went in.

Dora Brent lay on a Chesterfield sofa by the open French window, with a bowl of red and white roses on a little Sheraton table beside her. She might have been about fifty, though her hair was the colour of saffron. Her face had a curious waxy pallor; the only live things in it were the eyes, large, of a lightish hazel, and very hard and restless. Deep furrows ran from the nose to the angles of the mouth. It was a face that betrayed nothing so much as discontented apathy, though the selfishness that lived in the eyes seemed to have sucked all the blood and substance from the surrounding flesh and left it sapped and shrunken.

She was dressed—or overdressed—in some pink gauzy stuff that would have suited a girl of twenty. The left hand had three rings on the third finger, a large emerald, a hoop of opals, and a circle of plain gold. In repose she kept her fingers pressed together, the tips curved inwards so that the hands appeared to run to a point and to take the shape of hooks.

The servant closed the door and stood with her back to it. Dora Brent had turned her head. Her eyes looked at the other woman with cynical steadiness.

"You've told her——"

"I beg your pardon."

The servant's broad face flushed hotly.

"You think I've no cause——"

"If you must choose to regard yourself as one of the family—I have told her. She had to be told some day, or other people would have remedied the omission. I made up my mind to tell her when she was eighteen."

The woman by the door drew in a deep breath and held it. Her face looked astonished, angry and compassionate.

"And on her birthday——"

"Well, on her birthday——"

"Yes; and how did you tell her? You don't care how you hurt people. She's not like you or me. She feels things different; she's all heart and nerves. Oh, you don't care or understand."

Dora Brent's eyes were ironically imperturbable.

"If I tell you to mind your own business, Mary——"

The servant threw up her head.

"I wonder why I stay here!"

"I wonder——"

"It's not because of you."

"You can go the moment you please."

"I would. I wouldn't have stayed with you all these years but for her. Poor little soul."

Dora Brent's eyes grew harder, more cynical. It was easy to read some of the past from this woman's face. She had been something of a vampire, ever ready to suck the vitality of those who were weaker than herself. Mary, the big woman with the broad bosom and the square forehead, had had strength enough to stand against her. With the child it was different. The mother's selfishness was ready to devour the soul of the daughter.

"I don't think there is any more to be said. You can bring in tea at four."

She reached out for a rose, chose a white one, smelt it, and put it in her dress.

The servant's lips opened, faltered, and then closed again. She opened the door slowly and went out.

For some seconds she stood hesitating in the hall before she climbed the stairs to listen at the door of Constance's bedroom. Mary's hand went to her cheek and stroked it, as though she were unconsciously projecting a stream of sympathy into the girl's room. She could hear the sound of bitter weeping.

"Miss Connie——"

The weeping ceased abruptly.

"Miss Connie, shall I bring you up some tea?"

"I am lying down, Mary. I would rather be quiet."

The woman nodded her head, sighed, and went slowly down the stairs.

Chapter One

The girl in the pink linen dress came through the open French window on to the terrace. Pallant, the "Vernors'" butler, had preceded her with an air of stolid and sallow detachment. She had looked at Pallant with frightened eyes when he had asked her her name.

"Miss Brent."

She had to walk the whole length of the terrace before reaching the place where Mrs. Hesketh Power sat chatting in the thick of a group of well-dressed people. A man, sitting on a cushion on the top step of the stairway leading down from the terrace to the garden, glanced around and saw the girl following Pallant's shadow.

The glance had been a careless one, but it was arrested and held. The pink linen dress would have seemed satisfyingly simple to a man, and cheap to a woman. Otherwise it was a shaft of moving colour sustaining something that was sensitive, and fragile, and afraid. The face, with its full red lips and delicately curved nose and chin, swam in a setting of crisp jet hair. The eyes had a frightened, defensive look, a clouded velvety blackness that made the white skin appear even whiter. The whole figure suggested the image of a pale flame carried forward against an unsympathetic wind.

As the girl passed behind him, the man on the steps turned his head, and was able to watch the group upon his left. Mrs. Hesketh Power was rising from her chair, a tall, fair woman in a biscuit-coloured gown and a huge black hat. She had the happy, gracious poise of the thoroughbred, and though her eyes were often amused, they never mingled their amusement with malice.

She went forward to meet the girl, smiling down at her kindly.

"I am so glad you could come."

The girl blushed.

"Mother asked me to explain. She has one of her headaches."

"I'm sorry. Have you brought your racket and shoes?"

"I'm afraid I can't play tennis."

"No? Come along; I want to introduce you to some people."

Mrs. Hesketh Power was the most understanding of women, but, having launched Constance Brent on the little social sea on the terrace of "Vernors," she had to leave her to greet other guests. And the girl with the frightened eyes, who was suffering from an agony of self-consciousness, found herself placed between two people who did not encourage her to talk. On her left sat Mrs. Gascoyne, a melancholy neurasthenic, whose lined and sallow face suggested a mask of tallow that had melted and run downwards into one long gloom of mouth and chin. On her right a mothy young man in spectacles and a low collar, bent forward, elbows on knees and fingers together, trying to assume that he was absorbed in watching the tennis on the courts below the terrace.

Constance Brent felt herself seated in a little circle of silence. Inwardly she was still in turmoil, too sensitively alive to everything about her, and struggling against a sense of nudity as though she were being stripped and searched.

The man on the terrace steps was still watching her. She met his eyes more than once, and felt angry with him for being so inconsiderate as to stare when she was passing through an ordeal. How could he know that she had faltered and turned back at the front door, and had only been driven back into the porch by a motor arriving and hemming her in with a group of fresh arrivals.

She tried to lose herself in the excitement down yonder, and to fix her eyes upon the moving figures. A stout little man, strenuous, elastic, and eager, flashed a racket on the near side of the net. Her attention concentrated itself upon him, strove to lose itself in his superabundant vitality. His cuts and smashes at the net had glitter and dexterity. The happiness of his round face after a crisp and victorious rally held her interested.

Richard Skelton, seated on the terrace steps, was hidden by the massive corner pillar of the balustraded parapet from two women who had drawn two chairs aside in order to be undisturbed. Skelton was waiting for a set at tennis, his long legs drawn up and his arms wrapped round them, the sleeves of his brown Norfolk showing sinewy wrists. A grey slouch hat shaded his face. He no longer wore a black beard and moustache. His thin, determined chin and the humorous mobility of his mouth were all to his credit.

But he had forgotten the tennis players, first in watching the girl in the pink dress, and then in listening to the conversation of the two women behind the pillar. He knew who they were—old Mrs. Cottle, with her pink face and her air of bland patronage, and Betty Strickson, laced up in her alert reserve, with hard brown eyes that watched and criticised and a mouth that was eternally clever.

"I think tolerance can go too far. That is the one fault I have to find with Philippa. She told me she was going to call on the woman."

"Philippa Power is no fool."

"That is what I said to her, my dear. I said, 'As a woman of the world, you ought to know that some people are impossible, and that one is not justified——'"

"In being kind to the child in spite of the mother."

"That was her view. The Brent woman is impossible. I think Philippa is the only person who has called. I shall not. I regard tainted people as dangerous. One has to retain some social daintiness."

"I quite agree with you. A yellow head and a chalked face are apt to arouse prejudice. Besides——"

"My dear, it is not the mere appearances. Everybody knows——"

"What every woman knows by instinct. I think Madame la mère showed some sense in having a headache. And the girl——Philippa is such a good sort."

"Kindness may be unjustifiable in certain cases. If one lets sentimentality loose ——"

"At all events, the daughter is pretty, and looks too frightened to be dangerous."

"Of course, my dear, I am sorry for the girl, but——"

"She should have been more careful in choosing her parents!"

"I told Philippa Power that, though she might choose to take the lead, no one else in the neighbourhood could follow her. I refuse to know such people. Why should one?"

Skelton glanced at Constance Brent. She was still sitting silently in her chair, her hands clasped in her lap, her dark eyes watching the players on the court below. A flash of understanding and of pity struck across the man's consciousness. It seemed strangely hard that a circle of circumstances over which the girl had no control should condemn her from the first to this humiliating isolation.

Tea was brought on to the terrace. The tennis players climbed the steps, and the various groups split up and rearranged themselves. Philippa Power, observant and serenely kind, beckoned her husband to her and spoke in an undertone.

"Kethie, go and be kind to the child over there."

"Which one?"

"The little pink thing—you know."

Skelton, carrying round plates of bread and butter and cucumber sandwiches, saw this piece of by-play, and looked admiringly at Philippa Power. What a quiet and gracious understanding of life this woman had; how very patient she was even with the bitterest bores; what fine courtesy she showed in her unselfish self-restraint. An aristocrat! In the spirit Skelton bowed down and gave her homage, for such women helped other people to live.

Hesketh Power was a good fellow, but years spent in disciplining and stiffening an extreme self-consciousness had ended in giving him a poise that was altogether too perfect. He was so intelligently dressed that no one noticed what he wore. His clothes effaced themselves, as did his feelings. His slow, drawling voice always seemed to be holding itself in, lest it should run away with itself and say something that was clever.

Skelton, standing with his back to a French window and chatting with Garside, the Roymer doctor, watched these two and saw that they were in distress. Hesketh Power's poise had frightened the girl into mute awkwardness. He stood at her elbow and dropped a sentence from time to time as though whipping a trout stream and getting nothing in the way of a bite. The girl had had no experience of men, and to her an interesting conversation meant the interchange of enthusiasms, yet instinct warned her that to Hesketh Power enthusiasms were but the gambols of a lamb.

Skelton turned suddenly to Garside.

"Do you know the girl over there—in pink—talking to Power?"

"Miss Brent?"

"Yes."

"Ah, yes, I know her—and her mother."

"I wish you would introduce me presently."

The doctor gave him an interested look.

"Of course I will."

"Thanks."

With the moving on of the Chevalier of the Perfect Poise, Constance Brent was left once more in crowded isolation. Garside put his tea cup on a table and glanced at Skelton. The two men made their way to where Constance Brent was sitting.

She had no idea that these two tall men were singling her out till Garside's figure threw a shadow on the flagstones at her feet. He was built like a blacksmith, with a head covered with crisp, curled, black hair, puzzling dark eyes, an immense throat, and very massive shoulders. A man of big passions and big tendernesses, he could be extraordinarily gentle and playful towards women.

"How do you do, Miss Brent?"

He looked down at her very kindly, and held out a big hand.

"I don't think you have met Mr. Skelton. I have brought him along to be presented."

Constance Brent coloured self-consciously. Her eyes met the eyes of the man on the terrace steps—the man of the brown Norfolk jacket and the grey flannel trousers. He was smiling, and there was something about his smile that gave her a sudden sense of protecting friendliness.

"Garside and I always try to out-talk each other, Miss Brent, unless some third party keeps us in order."

The doctor laughed.

"I'm not argumentative to-day. Besides, I have to make up a four in three minutes. Skelton likes someone who will listen to him. If you let him talk about Japan or California, or heavy oil engines——"

Constance Brent's eyes cleared, and her face looked happier.

"I don't know anything about Japan."

"There's Skelton's opportunity!"

"No, my privilege."

"Or mine?"

A voice hailed the doctor:

"Garside, are you coming?"

"Coming, coming—out of Japan on to the grass!"

They watched him make his way along the terrace. Skelton turned again to the girl.

"Do you know what I call our friend?"

"No."

Her eyes looked up at him almost gratefully.

"The Oxygen Cylinder."

"Oh——?"

"Because he is packed so full of vitality."

"Yes, I have felt that. He can be so very kind."

"Oh, Garside's splendid—a sport. What do you say to watching the tennis?"

"I should like to."

They chose two chairs at the very edge of the terrace, whose red brick retaining wall dropped ten feet to form the backing for a broad herbaceous border. Constance Brent's face lost some of its reserve. There was something in the man's personality that made her react to his presence. He was so easy, so flexible, so much

the master of his smiling and kindly cleverness, that the shy, proud girl felt the whole atmosphere about her cleared and lightened.

"Aren't you playing tennis?"

"Sometimes I prefer to talk; especially when I find a stimulating subject."

"What do you call stimulating?"

"Anything with life in it, that's not dead or petrified. And I am always ready to listen."

"In spite of what Dr. Garside said?"

"Some of us can bear being teased."

No doubt they were very ready to listen to each other, but a knot of very young men, who had seized the deck chairs below the terrace, began to talk as very old men might talk, but don't. The voices carried a delightful self-assurance, and a suggestion of finality. To sit there and listen was to hear matters intimately discussed by men of the world.

"Monte? Monte's a rotten place; it bored me stiff. Had an indication? Oh, rather; lots of 'em—but never raked in anything."

"The bank's bound to win. I'll show it you all worked out in probabilities, Bertie. I'd rather have three weeks at St. Moritz."

"I dare say; but I hate the beastly French."

"Rotter! St. Moritz isn't——"

"Don't put little pins all over the map. Besides, those places are all full of beastly schoolmasters. You try a ride through the South of Spain. That's a country! You can get some quite decent shooting from Gib."

"Shootin'! What about Austria? Best sport in Europe; sort of antelope potting, they give you. Have to take 'em on the jump like fleas."

"Oh, I should go straight to British East Africa if I wanted big gunning. Bertie here was gassing about it, but he won't think of anything but gear-box grease and sparking plugs."

"What's wrong with a chap's being keen? Think of taking my 'Hawk' across and entering her for that French thing. Only I hate the beastly French—and their language."

"Hire a schoolmaster for the trip."

"I'd rather take the Penningtons' French governess."

Constance Brent was inexperienced enough to be impressed by the slangy self-assurance of these young barbarians, young men who would have had opinions ready upon Athens or Honolulu. People who talked "travel" always humiliated her, perhaps because there is so much conscious egoism in the babblings of idle fools.

She wondered how the thing affected the man beside her, and in trying to answer the question she came face to face with the glitter of tolerant humour in his eyes. He was smiling over the young men below, and enjoying them, as they deserved to be enjoyed.

"You can learn a great deal by listening! One has to remember one's own youth in order to appreciate the innocent priggishness of life. Our friends down below are being such men of the world."

"Who are they?"

"Three or four boys. You go up like a rocket when you leave school, you know. I remember my self-importance growing up like a gourd. The pumpkin heads one gets! All men over forty are decrepit duffers. You know everything. I only wish I could re-experience that delightful sensation. At twenty I was quite sure I could run the Empire. Now that I am getting towards forty I find a great deal of trouble in running myself."

Her eyes lit up to his.

"You are not forty yet!"

"Not so very far away."

"But you look so young."

"Mademoiselle, from henceforth I shall be devoted to you! But, really, the rookery down below is rather disturbing. What are they at now—Japan? Bless my soul, what a thing it is to be young and a ubiquitous liar! Have you seen the 'Vernors' gardens?"

"No."

"They are splendid. Let's go on a pilgrimage."

"Yes, please take me."

When Hesketh Power's father had bought "Vernors," he had taken to himself the dream of another man's soul. Moreover, the other man's dream had matured and mellowed. The Jacobean house was there, proudly placed upon its platform, with brick-faced terraces and flowing stairs. The old, high-walled garden remained, with its box-edged paths running between herbs, fruit trees, and old-fashioned flowers. Some topiarist had left a yew walk, with square-cut walls and great green battlements; and in the Dutch garden were box trees clipped into the shape of peacocks.

But all this was a mere ancient corner, a fine fragment almost lost in the miraculous beauty of the acres of parkland that had been turned into a perfect pleasaunce. Green walks plunged under the stately gloom of cedars of Lebanon, opening out into pools of sunlight, and rushing together again into sudden mystery.

There was a great rock-garden, where queer, elvish trees made the miniature landscape look like a land of the dwarfs, and where one thought of secret caves filled with caskets of beaten gold, enchanted swords, and hoards of emeralds and sapphires. Beyond the *jardin des roches* rose a wood of blue cedars, firs, and black American spruces, and in the midst of it a grassy glade that had a miraculous stillness and the listening awe of some ancient story of enchantment. Brown fir cones lay scattered on the grass for satyrs and dryads to play with. The place was so beautiful that it gave to the heart of the lover of beauty a moment of breathlessness and of pain.

The girl's face had an awed whiteness.

"It is almost too beautiful!"

Skelton's eyes shone.

"Beauty hurts—sometimes. But one can bless the man who created it."

"Yes. The joy and the pain."

They passed on, and found themselves standing on the edge of the rhododendron valley, filled with the choicest rhododendrons and azaleas, a valley that was an intoxication in the season of its flowering, with the strange perfume of the azaleas giving a pagan scent to the gorgeous flesh tints of a pagan world. The rose garden followed, and here all the rambling and polyantha roses were curtains of colour hung upon the great pergolas and the stumps of old trees. The walks were paved with irregular stones, and rock plants grew in the crevices.

But in wandering through the "Vernors" gardens Skelton had discovered a sensitive plant, a fragile flower that opened its leaves to the sunlight and forgot to be self-conscious and upon its guard. Enthusiasms, that Hesketh Power had terrified, fluttered out and displayed their iridescent wings. An intuitive pity stirred in Skelton. He could visualise the girl's life in that lonely little white house on the edge of Roymer Heath, with that yellow-headed mother for a companion. Constance Brent looked like a child who had lived through long silences, and who had had to create imaginary people to talk to and to play with. Yet the eyes were not the eyes of a child. They had knowledge, a something that lurked in the conscious background, a something that had to be hidden.

Their pilgrimage ended with a glimpse of the "Vernors" cedars, black against a primrose sky. Dew was falling, and the little gay figures were drifting from the terrace, to be carried away by motors, carriages, and pony carts. Constance Brent would be walking back alone to Roymer Heath, and to Skelton there was a touch of pathos in the thought of that slim, pink-dressed figure, with its flower-like face, passing through the lonely dusk of the Roymer fir woods.

They found themselves in the drive together. Skelton was still thanking Philippa Power in his heart for the smile she had given the girl, and for the calm warmth of her voice. He was wheeling a bicycle with a tennis racket strapped to the handle bars.

"I am going to walk with you as far as the church."

"But you would be riding——"

She caught the same gleam of protecting kindness in his eyes. He had a quiet insistent way with him, and it suited his lean strength.

"I don't know that I like cycling. It is one of those things that makes one feel in quite an unnecessary hurry. I can take the path through the woods from the church."

And when he left her Constance Brent wondered why he had taken so much trouble. Perhaps brothers were like that. She had never had any menfolk to brother her.

Chapter Two

Those who had known Dora Brent twenty years ago would never have recognised her in the woman who lived in the white house on the edge of Roymer Heath.

It was an inordinate selfishness that had created an unsavoury tragedy, and lost her her husband and her friends. She had been a devourer, one who had demanded to be fed on other people's emotions, and who had grasped fiercely at sympathy and compassion, only to discover that people had refused to be devoured. She had asked for everything and offered nothing. Bitter experiences, that had taught other women to accept the sacrament of suffering, had left her hard, incensed, and resentful.

With the crisis of her womanhood passed, a curious degeneration had set in. She had been an unusually handsome woman, and as the external beauty faded so the inner fire of her egoism seemed to flicker and to fail. The apathy of disillusionment settled upon her, dulling all the finer appetites of the cultured woman of the world, and compelling her to seek cruder sensations in order to be stimulated. As in some mental diseases, so the brain appeared to have lost its finer texture, its delicacy, the more subtle ramifications of intellect. She developed a liking for coarse perfumes, coarse books, coarse colours, and even coarse foods. Vulgarity overtook her on the downward slope of life. This woman, who once had boasted a very perfect taste in dress, now wore loud colours, overscented herself, and dyed her hair. The hardness that comes with selfishness seemed to have softened suddenly, and to have become flabby, garish, and smeared.

That she had chosen to come and live in such a place as Roymer betrayed the

curious change in a vain woman who had clung desperately to the skirts of the gay world. A day of routine seemed to satisfy her. She breakfasted in bed, "Gussie," her pet Pekinese, lying beside the tray and sharing the meal. She allowed the dog a license that showed a certain slovenly foolishness, in that she was absurdly soft to this little beast of a dog and hard towards her own child. She rose at ten, and spent two hours at her dressing-table with messes of grease and powder, and the like. From twelve till one Constance was expected to read to her mother, and the sentimental and erotic stuff swept a smear over the morning. They lunched at one o'clock. At half-past two the little governess cart was brought round by the boy who did duty as groom and gardener, and Dora Brent went for her daily drive, with her little consequential cur of a dog on the seat beside her. She drove the pony herself, and never let Constance take the reins. People had grown accustomed to seeing this saffron-haired woman with the dead white face driving the brown pony up and down hill, Gussie jumping up to yap at everything, and the girl, her daughter, sitting mute and dark-eyed on the opposite seat. It would be difficult to say how Roymer had discovered Dora Brent's history, but she was conspicuous in such a neighbourhood, nor had she been able to bury the past.

At four o'clock the governess cart reappeared at the white gate in the laurel hedge, and Constance would climb out and open the gate, with its "Furze Cottage" painted in black letters on the face of the top bar. In warm weather tea was brought out on the green-roofed veranda, Gussie having his particular cushion, or a place in his mistress's lap. From tea-time to dinner Dora Brent read the paper or played patience. They dined at seven, by candlelight, even at midsummer, and the courses were limited by the fact that they kept only one servant. Dora Brent drank stout, and took a glass of Kümmel with her dessert. After dinner Constance had to read to her mother for two clear hours, cheap tales from cheap magazines, novels that dealt mainly with sexual problems, or the more sentimental sorts of romance. On some nights she was suffered to sing or play, but as often as not Gussie objected, and the dog's whims were always considered. At ten Dora Brent went to bed. She slept badly, and had drifted into the habit of taking chloral. The dog slept on a light blue satin cushion at Dora Brent's side.

Three days after the party at "Vernors" Skelton came out of the village shop where he had been buying tobacco and a daily paper. Roymer Green, with its brick and half-timbered houses, lay in the full golden glare of a perfect summer day. Skelton had his grey slouch hat pulled well down over his eyes, and the ends of the belt of his Norfolk jacket were tucked into the side pockets. Shading the road and the little forecourt of Mr. Dutton's shop stood a huge chestnut, throwing a circle of

shadow. A pony cart had just drawn up under the tree, and the rich green half-light under the chestnut seemed to accentuate the colour notes beneath it. The brown pony looked a fine bronze. A yellow head, shining like a mass of copper wire, and a sapphire blue blouse, were reminiscent of Rossetti. Still deeper in the shadow, and seen against the trunk of the chestnut, a mute face floated upon a slender white throat that rose from the low-cut collar of a plain white blouse.

Gussie, the Pekinese, had his forepaws on the edge of the cart, his insufferable little nose in the air, his eyes bleary and overfed. The dog began to yap at Skelton as he came out of the shop.

"You wicked—icked—ittle thing, you! Does it like to hear its own voice?"

Her tone changed when she spoke to the girl, who sat staring listlessly down the white road skirting the Green.

"Go and tell Dutton to come out."

Constance was leaning over to turn the door handle when she caught sight of Skelton. He raised his hat, his eyes smiling out suddenly in his brown face.

"Don't bother to get out. I'll tell Dutton for you."

Dora Brent turned her head at the sound of a man's voice. She missed seeing the momentary flush of colour in Constance's cheeks—a tinting of sensitive shame.

"Mother—Mr. Skelton."

"I met your daughter at the Powers', Mrs. Brent."

"Oh?"

She stared at Skelton, and forced a smile that was like the cracking of a plaster cast. The dog continued to yap and fuss up and down the seat.

"Be quiet, Gussie."

Skelton noticed the sensitive loathing in the girl's eyes. The dog irritated her almost beyond endurance.

"Be quiet, you little idiot!"

"A talkative scoundrel! You have found one of the few cool places here—under this tree. Shall I send Mr. Dutton out to you?"

"Oh, thanks; I shall be much obliged if you will."

Dora Brent's haggard white face betrayed no friendliness. She had ceased to be interested in people, nor was Skelton the kind of man who would have appealed to her in her prime. In fact, her intelligent selfishness would have warned him to keep his distance, and dared him to come too near with his devilish sense of humour. Her apathy offered the man no opening, nor did the girl appear at her ease. Her eyes looked at him watchfully, half furtively, as though the vulgar glare of that golden head scorched her self-consciousness.

Skelton walked back into the shop, emerged again, lifted his hat, and went upon his way. Mr. Dutton appeared under the shade of the chestnut tree, to stand with brisk affability beside the trap, wiping his hands on his white apron and managing not to notice the Pekinese, who stood yapping within two feet of his face.

The homeward drive up the hill to Roymer Heath had no thrilling incidents, though life appeared to move Gussie to one eternal protest. Dora Brent hardly opened her mouth, and when she spoke it was usually to the dog.

"Ittle silly thing, you! How you do like talking, dear!"

The dog's perpetual barking, and her mother's metallic voice, uttering endearments, brought lines of tired scorn to the girl's face.

"I wonder you can bear the noise."

"Noise! Poor ittle sing! Why shouldn't Gussie-wussie have his talky-talky? It is absurd that Dutton doesn't keep that brand of sardines. Mary didn't spice the curry enough for lunch."

"I didn't notice it."

The square, grey tower of Roymer Church rose up among the pines and yews. The gold wind-vane glittered in the sunlight, and Constance Brent's eyes fixed themselves upon it with the look of a soul seeking escape.

"There! we forgot Gussie's Brazil nuts! Poor ittle sing, you! You can go down after tea, Connie, and bring them up."

"Yes."

She was still wondering what Richard Skelton had thought of her mother.

When we are ashamed of the people who belong to us, they seem to swell in public, and to take on a more glaring prominence, till we come to believe that the whole world must inevitably see our shame. That is how Constance Brent had felt, and Skelton had guessed that she had felt it. The thing touched her sore inexperience too closely for her to reason out the fact that she could not be held responsible. In her proud way she guessed that she herself must appear smirched by her mother's idiosyncrasies. She could not be so sharply ashamed for her mother's sake as she was for her own. That was Dora Brent's fault, not the daughter's.

Skelton took the woodland way down to Roymer Thorn, and the path through the fir woods was a "monks' walk," a magnificent cloister where a man's thoughts went undisturbed. His face had its "creative expression," as Cuthbertson had called it, strenuous absorption sacred to an inventive struggle with cogwheels, or power transmission, or some cussed piece of mechanism that worked in theory but would not work in practice. Sometimes the "creative expression" had denoted the accumulation of wrath in the course of a meditation upon fools.

Skelton was struggling towards tolerance, but there are times when tolerance is treachery, a surrender to the selfishness of egoists. He had the whole picture before his eyes—the yellow-headed woman, with her hard and haggard face, the yapping, self-important Pekinese, the girl whose sensitive eyes dreaded to see her own disgust reflected in the eyes of strangers. She was not one of those who contrive to get used to ugliness, and learn to protect themselves by creating a shell. The stab of the thorn went deep down to the quick.

"Good heavens! what a lot of us need rescuing! I think I know that sort of woman; her foot comes down on the child's toes a good many times a day. And that damned dog! I shouldn't mind wringing its neck."

Skelton came out of the fir woods into the sloping meadow at the back of his cottage—a meadow that had been made beautiful by previous bad farming. A great hawthorn hedge ran down one side of it, its boughs arching over the ditch and turning it into a tunnel. Masses of ragwort, fleabane, and thistles grew along the hedge and stretched out into the field, the gold and purple of the flowers glowing against the darker background of the thorns. Nearer the fir woods, where the hedge gave place to some posts and rails, and the ditch ended in a patch of boggy ground, willow-herb flowered like pink flame against the gloom of the woods. An idler could sit under a fir tree and gaze across blue ridges and valleys to the grey of the distant chalk hills.

In the lower part of the meadow were half a dozen neat wire chicken-runs, each with its brown weather-board house. The thatched roof and central red brick chimney-stack of the cottage showed above a thorn hedge. This cottage of Skelton's, long and low, with its soft-tinted old red brick walls, was watched over by a couple of gigantic yews. The lattice windows looked out on the garden, with its brick paths, fruit trees, rough, rich-coloured borders, patches of scythed grass, and plots of vegetable ground. A holly hedge shut the garden off from the lane, and on the other side of the lane ran the palings of Thorn Park. Standing in his thatched porch, Skelton could see the hollow shells of the primeval oaks, the wastes of bracken, the great thorn trees, the rush-grown, boggy bottoms, and sometimes a browsing herd of deer. At one end of the garden, under a lilac, and half-hidden by sheaves of sweet peas, were three bee-hives. Behind the cottage was a little brick-paved yard, a black and moss-grown well-winch, and several rough sheds.

Skelton entered the garden from the meadow, looked up and down between the fruit trees, and began to smile.

"I wonder what the young devil is up to this time?"

Skelton employed a boy to help in the garden and with the chickens, and Josh

was the boy's name. He arrived most mornings bellowing like a bull-frog, and the effort appeared to exhaust him for the rest of the day. An extraordinary languor descended upon him directly he got inside the garden gate. Lanky, loose-limbed, with a face that suggested the face of a sly, sleepy, yellow Buddha, he always gave Skelton the impression that he was about to fall to pieces, and that he only decided to hang together because it would be such a bother to collect the fragments.

Josh had no garment that could be called "manners." In this respect he was offensively naked. Skelton had discovered that the lad had a genius for falling into trances, and he had once seen him spend a quarter of an hour in watching a feather being blown to and fro on the water in one of the hens' drinking troughs.

Curiosity piqued Skelton. He went silently to the tool shed, looked in through the doorway, and saw Josh sitting on a sugar-box with his back half turned. He was staring at himself in a broken bit of looking-glass held in one palm. The fingers of the other hand were feeling his chin.

"Hallo!"

Josh remained utterly unabashed.

"What are you supposed to be doing, my friend?"

A confidential eye fixed itself on Skelton.

"They be sayin' as I ought t' shave."

"Are they, now!"

"I was just countin' 'em."

"What, the shavers?"

"These 'ere 'airs on m' chin."

"By George!"

"And I can't find no more than seven as I can tweak between m' fingers."

"The Seven Sacred Hairs! The Seven Sacred Hairs of Roymer! Don't sacrifice them on any account. And, by the way—excuse me mentioning such a vulgar matter—but I should be rather grateful if you would go on cutting the grass under the hedge."

"I just came in for a fresh rubber; t'other's broke."

"That explains everything."

Skelton's irony was purely playful. He burst out laughing as soon as he could save his dignity by getting the cottage between him and young Josh.

"Exquisite infant! Such works of art must have their price."

An old lady from up the lane came in and did Skelton's cooking and cleaning. She was fat, bland, and not too talkative, and was known as Mrs. Gingham. The name had a sheltering sound, and also suggested that she could be opened out and

shut up at will. Skelton had studied and elaborated the process, and he could control Mrs. Gingham to a nicety.

Her admiration for him was quite voluble when she forgathered with her neighbours. "I never see such a gentleman! Reg'lar conjuring, I call it—in that there workroom of 'is, 'im just a-twiddling 'is long fingers, and turning you out a toasting-fork or a mousetrap, just pat. 'E's a wonder! 'Mr. Skelton,' says I, ''Ere's the spout come off of the kettle.' 'Bring the old blackguard 'ere,' says 'e in 'is comical way, and, bless me, 'e'll 'ave the ol' spout on again in no time, better than a tinker."

The interior of Skelton's cottage was a cool, comfortable shadowy affair. Pipes, books, cushions, boots lay about contentedly, as though all wild life were at peace, and the place preserved against feminine fussing. The fat brown tobacco jar had an air of swaggering contentment. "I'm boss here," it said, "and old Gingham knows it!" Wistful slippers were allowed to come out and browse upon the carpet. No one came and hustled them away into cupboards. Nor were the cushions seized, shaken and punched, and made to sit up with their little figures in order.

An additional window had been put into the room at the east end of the cottage. In Skelton's workroom order reigned, severe fanatical efficiency. Plans, diagrams, and papers of calculations were pinned up on the walls. The tool racks were like the rifle stands in an armoury. A big bench stood under one window, a lathe under the other. The furnace was in a detached shed at the back. A number of models were ranged on shelves behind the door. In the centre of the room stood a stout deal table, and upon it the creature of steel that Skelton was bringing into life.

The whole cottage told of a busy world—a man's world, full of ideas and of endeavour. The books on the shelves in the living-room evidenced a breadth of culture. William James, Shaw, Swinburne, Wells. There were volumes upon art, the painters of Florence, the Renaissance, old French clocks, Limoges enamels, the Pre-Raphaelites, Leonardo da Vinci. You found none of the half-baked books beloved of the British matron, little chocolate *éclairs* of history and biography, compounded by some dilettante gentleman, and sent forth in pretty little dishes for people who believe that, in consuming such stuff, they are accumulating culture.

As Mrs. Gingham said, "'E do read something furious. I dursn't speak to 'im when 'e's got 'is nose inside a book. A body might think as 'e meant to know everything as ever was. And yet 'e ain't one of those there book-ticks. What, 'worms,' is it? Oh, well, I ain't a-going to quarrel about a word."

Chapter Three

Constance Brent found the life at Furze Cottage intolerably lonely. She and her mother had been living there for two years, and Mrs. Power and the rector's wife were the only people who had called. For Constance each day was much like every other day, save that sometimes it rained, and rain meant an added dullness and more reading aloud of trashy books. Or she could sit at her bedroom window, watching the fir trees on the heath being blown by the wind, till she knew the outline and the characteristic gestures of each restless tree. The landscape had become so tristfully familiar that much of the beauty had been washed out of it, and even the purples, the amethysts and golds seemed infinitely sad.

For many years Dora Brent and her daughter had lived at a succession of South Coast watering-places, and, though they had known very few people, there had been shops, libraries, concerts, a sense of movement and of hope. For every healthy girl is born to look into shop windows, to laugh a little, to flirt a little, and to gloat over new clothes. Up at Furze Cottage in winter, when the lamps were lit, Constance had a feeling of being lost for ever in a black, moaning wilderness. The finest trickles of life seemed to die away into the far distance, and there was not a twitter of hope anywhere. Sometimes a kind of despair came upon her—the despair of one buried alive, a thrusting off of stifling, terrifying silence. She would even go out and stand at the gate, on the chance of hearing a motor go whirling down the road, a hundred yards away. Things were like that. They came out of the unknown, swept by, and rushed into the unknown again. She was always left alone, and listening. And she wanted to live.

Moreover, the girl had an exquisite sensitiveness, a love of beauty so keen that it

meant pain and tears in the throat. The ecstatic "Ah!" of the wind-swept pine woods at sunset would make her shiver and thrill like an echo. The coarsening of her mother's nature had even driven her towards a more delicate fastidiousness. Her inner world became more and more a secret world, wherein she shut away odd corners of romance, old gardens under moonlight, strange castles upon sunset peaks, visions of human, summer lands.

Existence at Furze Cottage had compensations; she could number them on three fingers—her music, Mary, and Jim Crow.

Music was part of her way of feeling things. She fled to it also for utterance, and, knowing nothing of the ultra-modern school, she found her expression in Schubert, Chopin, Liszt, and Grieg. She had one of those soft, moaning voices, of not great power, but boasting some of the arrestive strangeness of the voice of an oracle. She read Maeterlinck with passion, and his spirit was in her and her singing.

Mary, the servant, was an immense cushion. She had the gift of sympathy, and of letting people lean against her and get rested. Moreover, she was very fond of Constance, and love counts in a wilderness.

As for Jim Crow, that fledgeling who had been sold to Constance by a farmer's boy, he lived in a box fastened to a laburnum tree at the end of the garden, and was the one comic character in the girl's life. With one wing clipped, he came flopping and cawing towards her whenever she appeared in the garden, stood at her feet, cocking a blue eye, or pulled her shoe-laces undone with facetious solemnity. Jim was the one person who had no respect for the dog Gussie, and perhaps part of Constance's love for the bird went to the mischievous and sly ferocity with which he tormented the Pekinese. Jim seemed to have sufficient sense to make these attacks when the yellow head was within doors. If Gussie tried to sleep anywhere in the garden Jim came stalking up and pulled his tail or tweaked his ears. The Pekinese would start up, yap, and snarl, but he was a coward, and whole-heartedly afraid of the big black bird. It was one of Connie's joys to see an indignant mop of fluff being chased up the garden by the crow. Jim would come and sit on her wrist after the performance and be stroked. His blue eyes appeared to say: "All right, you leave it to me. I'll take it out of the little beast sometimes."

The experiences of the last few years had taught Constance Brent to think, and she had come to realise the significance of her isolation. She could remember the time when she had said to herself: "Oh, things will be better next year. We may get to know people. It can't go on like this." But that was just what the present life persisted in doing, in going on and on indefinitely in the same dull, muffled way. Constance had faced the panic thought that it might go on and on like this for ever

and ever, and that she would get up and go to her window each morning, and see the same view till the day of her death.

There had been periods of bitter rebellion, a beating of wings that had broken helplessly against her mother's cynical apathy.

"Of course, if you like to go out and scramble with the fools who live on tea and buns, well and good. But I shan't offer to help in the scramble. Don't be an idiot, Connie. You are not made for that sort of life. You don't know what it means."

"But I'm no good to you here. Gussie is a much better companion than I am. And——"

"You want a new frock. Or perhaps you would like to go out as a governess, though I don't know what on earth you could teach. You haven't anything that the world wants, anything that it will give money for, except——"

She broke off suddenly with a queer laugh, and looked at the girl with a moment's critical interest.

"You are just a bit French, you know—all eyes and white skin. I suppose you haven't learnt the pussy-cat wisdom of finding someone who can give you a pleasant, sheltered corner?"

"Don't, mother. I shall never marry. How could I?"

"There is no need to throw the blame on me. If your father had not had the head of a sheep——"

The realisation of her own helplessness made Constance's moods more bitter. The sensitive and idealistic youth in her rebelled against the world's callous and unjust ordering of everything. She was very feminine, and discontent made the lives that she imagined other women to lead seem ten times more mysterious and desirable. She knew that she would like to be exquisitely dressed, even to the very last delicate detail, to be able to wear French lingerie, the smartest of shoes, beautiful lace, tailor-made costumes, well-fitting gloves. Oh, she was sick of cotton and flannel, cheap blouses, and the old black stockings that Mary darned so beautifully. Dora Brent did not appear to care what her daughter wore. Constance had no fixed allowance, and her mother always protested poverty when she looked at the shop windows in Reading, and thought of what she herself desired and what would do for the daughter.

This longing for material things was but a small part of Constance's discontent. She wanted to live, to do what other people did, to go to Henley and Ascot, and spend a month in London, to see Paris, France, Italy. She was hungry and starved, full of a yearning for the human touches of life, for the interplay, the laughter, the exultation of youth. She was ready to be passionately interested in everything, but

Fate had ordered her into a corner and told her to turn her eyes to the wall.

Constance Brent made no more appeals to her mother, and her impulse towards rebellion took a more secret and inward course. She felt driven to break out, to assert herself, to seize life by the sleeve and insist upon its noticing her. Had she been ten years older she would have known how near she was to despair, and to the terrible desire that overtakes the best of us—the desire to cease from existing.

Trivial incidents were needed to join up the wires and to cause a flash of revolt.

Jim Crow was largely responsible for something that happened about that time. The Pekinese lay asleep in the veranda one morning, when Jim came across the lawn with an observant blue eye turned upon the house. The opportunity tempted him. There was a yelp, a scuffle, and a sudden uprising of wrath within an open French window. A book—thrown viciously—caught the crow sideways, elicited a loud squawk, and sent him retreating in flopping confusion down the path.

Partisans were up in arms.

"You've hurt Jim! Oh, you've hurt him!"

"Go and call Harry. I'll have the bird's neck wrung. He's always tormenting the dog."

"If you tell Harry to touch Jim, I'll take the dog and drown him. I mean it."

Her white face blazed as she followed the bird, who was settling his dignity and uttering self-encouraging squawks. He brisked up when Constance approached, blinking an eye, and hopped on to the wrist she held towards him.

"Poor old Jim!"

She had never before felt such bitter wrath against her mother. Certainly the bird had been the aggressor, but he typified in his way the spirit of rebellion against the rule of lap-dogs and apathy.

The afternoon found her starting off on one of her lonely walks, feeling that she could not bear to sit opposite her mother in the pony-cart, and look into the sulky, hard, white face under the yellow hair. Yet there are times when the most perfect country is detestable, a certain temperament being needed by those who are to succeed in being eternally interested in Nature. The heartache of youth cannot be lost in studying the ways of the dodder plant or the sundew, in watching ants at work, or in collecting specimens for systematic botany. Nor can the exotic modern spirit bear too much Arcadian loneliness, or the tantrums of a perverse climate. It seeks to build itself cities of refuge into which it can retreat when that mob-woman, Nature, beats her drum and brandishes her red flag, or seeks to make long and boring orations.

The shadeless road over the heath revelled in glare that afternoon, and the

heather had lost its richness and had taken on duller, rustier tones. Now and again a motor passed. Constance Brent felt that she detested motors, and the people who owned them. They exaggerated the sense of life's limitations, so far as she was concerned. The people appeared to stare so hard as they whirled by, and for one moment she had an absurd and primitive desire to put out her tongue. At all events it was humiliating—as the mood held her—to be left behind feeling a creature of the meaner sort.

A long grey car overtook her and swept past, driven by a fresh-coloured young man in a brown coat. He was alone, and he glanced round at Constance as he passed her with an interested glare of his blue eyes.

When the car had travelled about two hundred yards beyond her, Constance saw it draw to the side of the road and stop. A brown figure climbed out, and disappeared behind the grey body of the car. She knew the man quite well by sight, young Bertie Gascoyne, of Winwood Place. He always stared rather hard when he passed her on the road.

As she drew level with the car Constance saw him bending forward over a front mudguard. Something about the waiting expectancy of a half-turned profile, the furtive side glint of an eye, flashed home the thought that he was about to speak to her. Intuition triumphed. Bertie Gascoyne lifted his tweed cap and smiled rather foolishly.

It was a challenge, and she knew it. The next instant she had smiled back at him.

"Jolly warm, isn't it?"

"Very."

She felt a sudden heat go over her. The impulse towards revolt blazed up and seized its fuel. She faltered, and then stopped, conscious of the red blood in her cheeks.

"Is it a breakdown?"

"Nothin' much. Had a new carburettor fitted, and just givin' it a trial."

He stood half turned towards her, one hand fiddling with something under the bonnet. He was a big young man, with a youthful largeness of manner, long-sighted eyes the colour of speedwell but without depth, throat and face burnt a rich red brown. A kind of sheepish self-assurance went with his flat, round face and large body. The mouth was rather too soft and loose, the teeth within very white when he smiled.

"You been walkin'?"

"Yes."

"Too jolly hot. I say, let me take you for a spin; it's the coolest thing goin'."

So was he—in a sense. His large manner seemed to grow larger, as though an additional impression of size were needed to carry off the informality of the whole affair. Constance felt his blue eyes tentatively searching her face. She was conscious of an exquisite suggestion of mischief, of a moment's flitting behind the footlights. Young Gascoyne was trying not to look afraid of a possible snub. She felt the power of her silence, and it delighted her, for life had hardly ever given her the chance of refusing anything.

"Go for a drive?"

"Why not?"

"I have been abusing motors for the last half-hour."

"Beastly things when you are walkin'. My 'Hawk's' a ripper. Just you let me show you what she can do."

She nodded and smiled. The conspiracy was complete.

Bertie Gascoyne gave a queer laugh, and his blue eyes took on a glaring hardness. He turned to the car, and then glanced round at her with an air of heavy slyness. Constance noticed what a thick red neck and big hands he had. A momentary fastidiousness attacked her, a sensitive shrinking from this big creature, a feeling almost akin to fear. Then young Gascoyne's face came up and smiled at her. Surely it was a mere piece of rebellious fun, unconventional no doubt, yet the most natural thing in the world.

She found herself leaning back in the well-cushioned seat beside this stranger, a rug over her knees, the glass screen keeping off the draught and the flies. The car was gathering speed, and for a minute or more she fixed her eyes on the white ribbon of the road that seemed to slide towards them and disappear down the throat of the great car. Beside her sat the young man with the brown face and the staring blue eyes that puzzled her.

"How fast we are going!"

She looked up at him with a sudden shyness that would have made a more sensitive man than Herbert Gascoyne wholly her servant, but this god in the car was a young barbarian out for his own pleasure. He belonged to a type that is excessively healthy, and whose appetites are very much alive. Constance did not guess the insult his inward attitude towards her was levelling at her pride.

"She can go! You wait till we get to Hanger Hill, then I'll let her rip! You don't mind going the pace?"

"No, it's splendid."

He laughed, enjoying the little innuendo by himself, but imagining that the girl had understood it perfectly. She was sitting relaxed, her eyes half closed, her mood for

the moment one of exquisite exhilaration. She was wondering whether they would meet anyone who knew them by sight. If the man did not care, certainly she did not. Nothing mattered at Roymer.

Brown heathlands, dull green woods, blue sky, silvery distances swam and melted, raced and changed. A delightful physical languor stole over her. It was like being carried on the wings of the wind.

"Here's Hanger Hill. Hold tight!"

They seemed to drop down the hill like a spent shell returning to earth. Trees and telegraph poles went by in rhythmic flashes. The girl felt life rising to her throat as she sat with her two feet pressing hard against the slope of the footboard. She had a wild desire to laugh, even to cry out.

They were down in the trough of a valley. The farther slope rose against them, white and steep and menacing. Up and up swept the car. There was the quickened, racing roar of the powerful engine.

Young Gascoyne turned and glanced at her. His eyes were alight, his lips parted over white teeth.

"Not quite all the way on top."

The rush through the air and along the steep windings of the road made her feel a vague respect for the man who sat there and drove. There seemed something solid yet alert about him, a male effectiveness that counted.

"How many miles an hour was that?"

"Oh, about sixty. Hanger Hill's a bit tricky."

"Is it very difficult to drive?"

"Like to learn?"

"I should never have the nerve."

"Timid thing!"

"I should lose my head."

She was puzzled by the way he looked at her, and by the casual bravado in his voice. It did not occur to Constance Brent that this young man measured his respect for her by the yellowness of her mother's head, and that he allowed himself the right of easy familiarity. He was out for pleasure, and he considered that this girl who had that woman for a mother might be quite ready to please him.

"Often wanted to speak to you, you know."

"Have you?"

"Rather."

She knew practically nothing of men, and it was this very innocence that made her think Herbert Gascoyne a blunt and ingenuous boy. They were on the homeward

road now, and she dallied with a strange new sense of power, the power of the feminine creature to provoke and please the male. Bertie Gascoyne laughed and flirted, and became rather fatuously personal. It was only when the Hesketh Powers' car flashed round a corner, with Philippa Power's grey eyes looking straight at both of them, that the young man uttered a suppressed "Damn," and grew less talkative.

Constance noticed the changed atmosphere. Perhaps he was thinking that he ought not to have tempted her into this exuberant piece of mischief, though Constance need not have worried her head about young Gascoyne's hypothetical chivalry. He was not thinking of the girl at all, but of himself.

"Shall I put you down past the 'Three Firs'?"

"Please."

They grew silent, self-conscious, and ill at ease. Herbert Gascoyne had opened the throttle, and let the car travel at full speed. The little white-faced inn came into view, and the three fir trees on the grass knoll in the dip beyond. Young Gascoyne let the car thunder on till it had passed the trees, and then pulled up with a suddenness that made the brakes scream. He leant across and opened the door.

"Awfully good of you to have come."

"I have enjoyed it."

His brown face was very close, his blue eyes staring into hers.

"I say, you go for walks sometimes?"

"Yes."

"Wonder if you'd let me come?"

"I don't know."

She escaped and climbed out, feeling her face burning.

"Well, may I?"

The spirit of revolt was still strong in her.

"Perhaps."

He waved his cap and drove on, his blue eyes watching the road.

"Sly little bit of goods! Now, I wonder——"

Chapter Four

Sauntering out early with a pipe between his teeth, Skelton crossed the footbridge into the meadow, strolled along past the wire-netted chicken-runs, and watched the sun climbing above the black tops of the firs. White clouds swam in a dense blue sky. The masses of ragwort and willow-herb were all purple and gold along the hawthorn hedge. It was to be a day for colour, for cloud shadows upon distant woods and pastures, and miraculous silvery lights upon sleepy hills.

But Skelton was in an irritable mood that morning. He could always gauge his own temper by the way the hens in the wire runs affected him when he came out to give them their early meal.

"Oh, you confounded fools!"

They would crowd up in the corners nearest to the cottage, waiting for him to appear, and then run along the wire with fatuous, scuffling eagerness towards the door where he would enter. They repeated the same manœuvre every morning, and showed the same ridiculous haste in racing to and fro, only to end up at the place where any sane creature would have waited. They never learnt by experience, and were never an oat grain the wiser.

"You confounded fools!"

That was the judgment he passed upon them when he was not in the best of tempers. As a rule he was more playful, and treated them to badinage.

"Hallo, you modern democrats! Scuffling up and down to get the first peck at State pickings! There is always the man with the tin!"

Or——

"Now, my dear ladies, this is breakfast—not a panful of votes! Don't mob me

off the earth!"

But this morning he was irritable, and their diligent greed and the tapping of their beaks on the tins annoyed him.

It was Huxley who said in his caustic, smiling way, when discussing the question of the elimination of "the unfit," that there are times when the best of us would doubt our right to be included among the "fit." On the one side the heights, on the other gulfs of gloom. Only the healthily stupid people know nothing of the deeps of depression, of self-discontent, and the days of dust and ashes. Perhaps the devil of depression is the devil of the modern world. The balance swings more widely. The scheme of chiaroscuro is more subtle and more sensitive. Periods of creation and of sorrowful sterility alternate, and it is an age of wonderful creation and therefore of sorrow. No man is more miserable than the creator on those days when his brain is a mere skinful of lard.

Skelton had still to fight this devil of depression. It had triumphed over him after his nerve had given way after the long strain of overwork, and now that he was growing strong again this devil of a sick self still struggled to regain its power. But it had become a more insidious spirit, an old man of the sea, taking on some disquieting shape, and changing when grappled with. Sometimes it was like an importunate woman, whispering, ogling, plucking him by the sleeve.

This morning in the meadow below the fir woods it came as a restless voice, questioning him like the voice of a friend.

"Is this the right life for you?"

He answered the voice as though it came from someone who was walking beside him.

"It's about the best sort of life a man can ask for when he can count only on one hundred and fifty pounds a year. I'm a free man. I can concentrate on the particular work that fascinates me."

The voice proceeded to argue.

"I consider that you are buried here. Why, you are bored now—this very moment!"

"Confound you, I'm not!"

"Oh, very well, then! But just think of the men who are doing big things—building new bridges, making reputations and a lot of money. And you go on pottering along here, working at this precious engine of yours, and trying to pretend ——"

Skelton had a way of throwing back his head and turning on this devil of depression, cowardice and discontent.

"Look here, Satan, get out!"

He uttered the words aloud and with such fierceness that Josh's round face appeared over the garden hedge.

"Did you call?"

"Call you? No, I think not."

Skelton shoved his hands into his trousers pockets and marched up and down the edge of the wood. He made himself a curt, characteristic and inward speech.

"Now, listen. It is a grand day. Just look at the blue shadows on the woods over yonder. See them? Well, be grateful.

"At nine o'clock you will enter your workshop and you will work there till twelve. From twelve to one you will do some hoeing. You will be allowed an hour for dinner and the daily paper. At two o'clock you will return to the workshop. At four you will have tea. After tea you will walk up to see Bobby Dent at the 'Three Firs,' and take him the parts of that model engine. You will be back by seven. You will have supper, and then sit down and hammer out some of those calculations. At ten you will go to bed. Understand? Well, don't let me have to mention it again."

This was the way he fought these moods, disciplining himself, compelling himself to use the scourge of a strong purpose. He had learnt to dread and to avoid those pits of gloom into which weaker men fall periodically. Work, a passionate interest in everything about him, the building up of sympathy and understanding! Bitter experience had taught him that a man must "live out" if he desires to live at all, and that humanity heals itself by being human.

Skelton left the cottage about half-past four, locking Josh out of it, lest he should get to the larder or go to sleep on the couch, and started through the fir woods for Roymer Heath. The little white-faced inn of the "Three Firs" blinked at him from the northern sky line when he left the tall shadows of the woods. Set upon the blue ridge where the high road crossed the heath, it was rarely free from wind, and its signboard was nearly always swinging and creaking on its hinges.

Skelton walked up the dusty road, smiling at the three fir trees, whose attitudes always amused him. Two of them grew rather close together, their outlines suggestive of two people kissing. The third stood a little apart, a tree with a lopsided top and one great benedictory bough stretched out towards the two that kissed. "Bless you, my children." The conceit had struck Skelton the very first time he had seen the trees, and to-day the benedictory hand of the "heavy father" was woggling up and down, while the lovers swayed and thrilled.

"If I were the 'heavy father,' I think I should have got tired of it by now! Besides, they must be rather bored with him!"

Turning into the bar of the inn, he found a short, squarish woman reading *Chatty Bits* behind the bar.

"Well, Mrs. Dent——"

The woman whisked the paper aside and stood up. She was so short and square that her shoulders only just managed to overtop the bar. She wore her black hair plastered down so smoothly that it looked like the painted hair on the head of a china doll.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Skelton, sir."

She spoke with a brisk chirrup, and her snub nose, blue eyes, and brick-red cheeks gave her a cheeky air. That she had a tongue went without saying. It was almost impossible to walk round her loquacity, for it was as square and as full-hipped as her person.

"By Jove, you have got some dust blowing up here."

"What may I 'ave the pleasure, sir, of——"

"Oh, ginger beer."

"Mr. Skelton, you make me feel mean, you do, reely. Just because it's a pleasure for me and my man——"

"Not a bit of it. I drink to please myself, you know!"

A cork popped, and Skelton's drink bubbled into a glass.

"Just a drop of gin, sir?"

"Well, just a drop. Where's my friend Bobby?"

"In the garden, sir."

"May I go through?"

"You're welcome to, sir. The boy's been wondering whether you would be coming up this week."

There was a patch of grass behind the inn shut in by a thorn hedge and shaded by three starved apple trees. Here, lying on a folding bed, Skelton found Bobby Dent with a book under his chin. The boy had a remarkable resemblance to his mother, save that he was white where she was red. A tuberculous hip joint had kept him on his back for months.

"Hallo! What is it to-day?"

He sat down on an upturned wooden bucket that sometimes served Bobby Dent as a table, and tweaked the book away from under his chin.

"Algebra again! And quadratics, too! You are getting on."

The boy coloured with pleasure.

"It goes down easy."

"You're a marvel! When you get that leg of yours well you'll be putting on

seven-league boots."

Skelton did not speak in jest. The lad had one of those delicate and acute intelligences shining in a frail body. Garside, the doctor, had first told Skelton about him, and Skelton had walked up to the "Three Firs" and made friends. And from the friend he had developed into the fellow enthusiast and the coach. He had brought young Dent books on algebra, trigonometry, physics, and applied mechanics, coached him, worked out problems with him, and been astonished by the boy's genius. For Bobby Dent of the chair-bed, lying under the apple trees at the back of the "Three Firs" inn, had very definite ambitions.

"I'm going to be an engineer, and build motors and steam engines," he had told Skelton.

And Skelton had said: "By Jove! you shall."

He laid the text-book back on the bed.

"Comes easy to you, Bobkin?"

"I seem to see them all working out, sir, just like sheep going through a gap in a hedge."

"Mathematical imagination! I believe you've got it."

The boy looked up at him eagerly. And for once genius appeared willing to clothe itself intelligently in the flesh, and not to hide behind muddy eyes, or a weak chin with thin, silly, unvirile hair, or the face of a learned boor.

"But I do want to get up off this bed. You know you said, sir, you'd let me come down to your workshop."

"So you will before long. I don't think there is much in the way of toolcraft I can't teach you."

He felt in the bulgy side-pockets of his Norfolk and brought out two brown paper parcels.

"A friend of mine sent these down from London. Have a look at them, Bobkin. It will make you a fine puzzle."

He passed them over, and the boy's quick fingers picked at the knots.

"Wait a moment; we ought to have a table or something."

"There's the mangle-board in the scullery. Ask mother."

Mrs. Dent was serving a carter, the beer frothing up superbly in the mug.

"Mangle-board? I'll get it, sir. Bless me! Talking of mangles, that puts me in mind of how he took the mangle to pieces afore he was ill. Always was taking things to pieces. Took the kitchen clock to pieces, and spent three blessed weeks getting it right again. 'I'll send it over to Smith at Reading,' says I. 'Mother,' says he, flushing up like, 'do you think I'm a fool? Smith be blowed!'"

When Skelton returned with the mangle-board he found Bobby Dent in a fever of delight. The brown parcels had contained the parts of a model motor-car all complete and to scale, even to the tiny cogged wheels of the differential. The little brass pieces glinted in the sunlight, and the boy's fingers touched them as though they were far more precious than gold.

"I say, Mr. Skelton——"

"I thought that would fetch you. When you have fitted all those parts together you will know just a little about motor-cars."

"You're going to leave 'em here?"

"Of course."

Skelton knew now where life kept some of its purest pleasures.

They played together for the best part of an hour, children and wise old men, talking of crank shafts and timing gears and universal joints, all of them represented in the exquisite model. John Cuthbertson had sent it down from his works in town. "I must have a look at that youngster of yours," he wrote, "next time I run down. As for you, old man, you seem to be finding what you wanted."

Skelton started home by Briar Lane, an old Roman grass road that cut the heath like a green dyke. The lane ran within a hundred yards of Furze Cottage, and the white house with its green shutters and green veranda roof lured him aside. He had a good view of it over the furze bushes and between the scattered firs, and he could see over the laurel hedge into the garden, with its small lawns and geometrical flower-beds filled with geranium and lobelia, its gravel paths and galvanised-wire arches covered with clematis and roses. The stable was on the east of the house, and a few fantail pigeons sat on the ridge tiles of the roof. The place looked stupidly neat, not with the sleekness of art, but with a kind of suburban front-garden neatness. Skelton imagined that no one was particularly interested in the garden. It was scrubbed and ironed, and starched, just like linen sent to the wash.

As he came nearer he heard a piano being played, and then a voice began to sing. A path led off from Briar Lane to Furze Cottage, and joined the by-road there. Skelton turned into the path, and, reaching the shelter of the laurel hedge, stopped to listen.

Skelton knew little about music. He remembered that in his most strenuous days he had had a barbaric love of street organs, rampant marches, and songs from musical comedy, liking the cheerful clang and rhythm that seemed to speak of the clatter of hammers or the whirl of dancers' feet. It was only when his first strength had failed him that he had found himself in the humour to listen to the more subtle utterances, recognising in them something essentially modern, a wounded self-

consciousness, a sentimental and tired decadence. So that music had come to be too intimately expressive, moaning with him, and making him long for those strong, barbaric days when ordered sound was as the clangour of swords.

As he listened to Constance Brent singing, he had a strange feeling that Fate was at work, weaving some tragic maze about him—

"Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar.
Where are you now—where are you now?"

Skelton felt stricken. It was like the cry of the soul of the age, awed yet rebellious, conscious of faintness under the stars that shine in the blackness of an immense mystery.

"Drink deep, drink deep of the water, Melisande."

Why should he feel as though the blood of his soul was flowing out upon the grass? He walked on slowly, letting the singing voice sink deep into his consciousness. It seemed to him that he had listened to one who was unhappy, and on the edge of revolting for the sake of self-expression. The scene on the terrace at "Vernors" rose up before him, the pale face and the frightened eyes.

He wanted to see more of this girl. She interested him, interested him very greatly.

Ah, yes, he was a fatherly person. But interest? He caught up the word and held it before him, as a man might hold something he wished to examine. Interest! Was it just that—and no more?

Chapter Five

It was after buying tobacco at the village shop that Skelton usually ran up against adventures. An imaginative person might have expected that the "King's Head" over the way would have provided more sumptuous and regal happenings than Mr. Dutton's general shop, but Skelton had found the "King's Head" dull witted and rather dirty.

This morning there was no splintering of spears on Roymer Green, no succouring of some full-blooded young woman with coal-black hair, red lips, and eyes like sloes, but merely a meeting with Mr. James Woodnut, who was standing outside his cycle shop with his right hand in a sling.

The projecting boards above, fastened by iron brackets, said "Garage," "James Woodnut, Motor and Cycle Agent," "Repairs." The gable end of the garage and the red-tiled walls above the shop window were plastered with coloured plates advertising petrol, bicycles, and motor tires. The garage was an old coach-house that had been glorified and fitted with a pit, a bench, and a window looking out on a backyard. The doors were half open, and Skelton could see the grey nose of a big car poking out like a pig's snout between palings.

"Good-morning, Mr. Woodnut."

"'Morning."

The cycle and motor agent had a round, white, greasy face, with pale blue eyes that never brightened. His lower jaw, which was rather prominent, showed a black crop of unshaven hair through most of the week. The hunch of the man's shoulders and the way he held his head were very characteristic. He was one of those slow, stocky, obstinate mortals who had made up his mind to get on in the world, and had

put his head down and butted. He had butted doggedly, consistently, and with success. Starting life as a boy in a bicycle shop, he had trained himself as a mechanic, saved money, and came up spluttering and aggressively successful. He owned cars now, letting them for hire.

"Something wrong with the hand?"

"Split a finger, and it's festered."

"That's bad luck."

"It is."

Woodnut had no manners, but Skelton liked the man, respecting his doggedness and his pluck. He could imagine how that slow-moving brain had had to worry at the technical knowledge of his trade, for Woodnut had taught himself, and was no mean mechanician.

He had had to puzzle it all through, sitting with his chin on his fists, trying to see things with those unintelligent eyes of his. "I reckon I knocked it in with a hammer," he had said once to Skelton, "and it took some knocking, I can tell you."

Woodnut's independence was apt to be offensive. He did not converse, he blurted, standing with his feet wide apart, and looking as though he were for ever waiting for someone to patronise or contradict him.

"Hung up over a job?"

"What job?"

"No business of mine, you know."

Woodnut turned and scowled at the grey car that seemed to be poking out its grey snout and demanding attention.

"Got this. Darned if I don't wish I hadn't. Young Gascoyne's 'Hawk.' Seems to think that by giving me the job he'd make me swell with pride."

His air of savage melancholy made Skelton want to laugh.

"My chap's on his holiday, and I can't touch no tools. Car to be running by three o'clock. Sent to Thursleys to tell 'em to send a chap out. Wired back couldn't spare one. Just to put me in a corner, 'cos I've cut in on them about 'ere. Young Gascoyne will come gassing down 'ere, and I don't know as I shall be able to keep civil."

"What's wrong with the car?"

Woodnut swung the doors open, and began pumping out jets of technical jargon that only an expert would have understood. Skelton was the only man in the neighbourhood to whom he would have condescended to talk in such a strain, but, to Jim Woodnut, Skelton was something between a genius and a joss.

"A beauty, ain't she? And that bloomin' fool of an amater does knock 'er about shameful!"

Skelton's eyes warmed as he looked at the great car painted battleship grey, with its gleaming brasswork and lamps. It said so much to him, this creation of man's intricate and ingenious mind, this almost live thing begotten in the furnace of brain and workshop. To young Herbert Gascoyne it was just a luxurious contrivance for rushing hither and thither, a sort of purring triumphal car to carry his youthful swank. He liked to talk about "top-gear runs" and spasmodic rushes through imaginary police traps, but he had quite a vague idea as to what a cam was, and the exquisite subtleties of engineering craft were wholly beyond him.

Jim Woodnut's contempt for young Gascoyne was unspeakable. It was the instinctive contempt of the man who had suffered and laboured to learn for the smoking-room amateur who had never worked and who knew nothing thoroughly.

"'E does bang 'er about."

They examined the car together.

"I say, Woodnut, there are only two or three hours' work wanted to finish this job."

"That's so."

"What's the time? Eleven? Look here, jump me into a suit of your overalls and I'll finish the job."

"You do it?"

"Do you think I can't?"

"Wasn't thinking nothin' of the kind. But 'tain't your business to be working 'ere—and on that young chap's car."

"Think I'm proud?"

"It ain't for you to do work for that young squirt. It's my livin', and I'd throw 'is money back at 'im for tuppence."

Skelton laughed.

"It's for the car's sake. She's sick, poor dear. I say, Woodnut, if you let out like this—Half of us may be fools, but——"

"Do you think I let my tongue run with everybody? Not me!"

"Come along, then. Fetch me a pair of your overalls, and I'll get to work."

Woodnut still bristled.

"It's business. I pay you for this job—top price."

"Oh, all right. It will keep me in tobacco for a month."

"That's square."

Skelton smiled to himself as he took off his coat and hung it on a nail. "Oh, you difficult, touchy, cross-grained, efficient, independent beggar!" he thought. "Don't I know the type? Hadn't I something of it in me myself? One has to try and be a bit of

everybody in order to understand everybody. And that's life."

Jim Woodnut brought him a suit of clean blue overalls, and Skelton got into them after taking off his collar and tie.

"I can lend you one 'and."

"Let's have the doors wide open."

"You don't mind fools garping?"

"Not a bit."

About half-past two Bertie Gascoyne strolled into Woodnut's garage, his coat unbuttoned, and a tennis racket under his arm. He was in flannels and white boots, the trousers well creased, the boots spotless. Woodnut had gone up the village on some piece of business, and Bertie Gascoyne found Skelton doubled over one of the front mudguards with his head under the bonnet. The blue coat and trousers were misleading, and if the mechanic was not Woodnut, he was—well, a mechanic.

"Got her ready?"

"Not quite."

"She's got to be ready by three. Where's Woodnut?"

"Gone up the village."

"Who're you? Chap he's got over from Thursleys?"

"No, I'm a casual."

Skelton came out from cover, straightened up, and looked at Bertie Gascoyne with a disconcerting twinkle in his eyes. The younger man stared.

"I say, I didn't know——"

"That's all right. Woodnut has a poisoned hand, and I have been amusing myself."

Young Gascoyne eyed him dubiously, and Skelton, immensely amused, guessed what was passing through the other's mind. It was a piece of cheek, this fiddling with another chap's car. Besides, he—Bertie Gascoyne—didn't want some blessed amateur messin' about and makin' a muck of things.

"I say, though, what was wrong with her?"

Skelton got back to work, and gave Bertie Gascoyne several mouthfuls of highly technical material to munch.

"Oh! That's it, is it?"

He looked down glumly at Skelton, vaguely disliking the elder man for a certain something that chafed the smooth surface of his own conceit.

"Thought it was that. She's been a bit tricky lately. Think you've got her all right?"

"Yes."

"You know somethin' about cars?"

"Just a little; always like a chance at a bit of tinkering."

Bertie Gascoyne relapsed into sulky, distrustful silence.

Skelton, intent upon screwing up a nut, glanced round presently to find that the young man had disappeared. The grey-coloured double doors of the garage thrown wide open framed a view of Roymer Green, with the red brick pumphouse in the centre and a row of half-timbered houses in the background. The big chestnut tree outside Mr. Dutton's shop thrust one half of its green dome into the picture.

Bertie Gascoyne was crossing the Green as though he were going in the direction of Mr. Dutton's shop, and from under the shade of the chestnut tree came a figure in a pink linen dress. A pink sunshade went up where the white glare of the road began.

Skelton saw young Gascoyne raise his hat and cross the road. The girl faltered and stopped. They stood talking together, Bertie Gascoyne swinging his racket to and fro, Constance Brent looking up at him from under the shade of her parasol.

Skelton stood up, a spanner in one hand, a cleaning rag in the other. He was in the shadow, and it made his watching face appear darker and more intent. Bertie Gascoyne was talking with a free and easy graciousness, swinging his racket, and staring hard into the girl's face. She appeared uneasy, as though conscious of an undesired publicity, her dark eyes throwing flitting glances from side to side.

They talked for little more than a minute, and then Skelton saw Constance Brent turn away rather abruptly and walk on down the village. Bertie Gascoyne went on towards Mr. Dutton's shop. In five minutes he was back in the garage, smoking a cigarette, and looking peculiarly pleased with himself.

"Nearly ready?"

"In another five minutes."

"Just went across to Dutton's. He gets me the stuff I smoke."

The line of Skelton's jaw was not particularly amiable. He knew men pretty thoroughly, and the full-blooded young animal standing in the doorway was neither a very complex study nor a very pleasing one. The hard blue eyes were gloating over something in the distance, the selfish eyes of the male hunting down something feminine.

Skelton had a moment of chivalrous anger.

"Damn the cub," he said to himself. "How dared the young beast look at that girl like that!"

Chapter Six

To some people Roymer seemed in sympathy with that school of fiction that scorns anything dramatic and prefers to regard life as one long flux of dreary detail. Blessed is the man who is supremely interested in details, and who knows how to treat them as tesseræ in the fascinating mosaic of life. Brain makes for the difference between blessedness and boredom.

"Hallo! That you, Skelton? Coming my way?"

"As far as the lane."

"Good. I say, I have got a beautiful little bit of Mendelism with those birds of mine."

Skelton had come up with a wiry, energetic figure in a rough pepper-and-salt tweed suit, with an Irish terrier trotting at his heels. Captain Strange, R.N., was sixty-five and had the active figure of a boy. You could tell him a hundred yards away by the brisk activity of his legs, the keen and interested cock of the head, and the swing of the broad shoulders. This sturdy little old gentleman had all that delightful courtesy that a sea life seems to give. He was shrewd, capable, sharp as a needle, and clean with the cleanliness of fifty years of self-discipline. His iron-brown profile cut through all pomposity and affectation like the merciless ram of a ship.

"Just been up to O'Connor's. The man's bored to death."

"Too much money—and too much food."

"That's it. I have been prescribing. I shall have Garside falling foul of me for poaching."

"Oh, Garside's a sportsman. I know what I should give O'Connor—three years on a desert island where he would have to knock his daily dinner down with a stick."

"By George, it's pathetic! I found him going over his lawn with a pot of acid and a stick. He was in a towering rage because there were so many dandelions."

"Now, if they had been sovereigns——"

"Yes! I said, 'All right, my dear man, they don't bite; be thankful for that.' I have persuaded him to get an electric lighting plant and to run it himself. The man's so pathetically ignorant. He knew how to make money, that's all; and now he has retired he hasn't the intelligence to amuse himself."

"It seems to me, sir, you are one of us."

"One of what?"

"Garside and I have started a new sort of Freemasonry. We call ourselves 'The Healers.'"

"Healers! That's good—quite good. Though I think I'm a bit of a blister. Look here, come in and have tea, and I'll show you these birds of mine."

"I should like nothing better."

They talked Mendelism and such matters as "pure dominants" and the "segregation of gametes" till they hauled up outside a red-brick, red-tiled house, with white window frames that looked at them over the top of a square clipped yew hedge set on a green bank. The place was compact, neat, admirably kept, and yet boasted a breadth of colour and of atmosphere that saved it from primness. It suggested cosmopolitanism both outside and in. The rain gauge on the lawn, the maximum and the minimum thermometers, the glass sphere up above on the balcony for registering the day's sunlight by a burnt pattern upon a scale, the barometers in the hall, the telescope, microscope, and theodolite in the library—all these seemed to belong by right to the keen and alert figure in pepper-and-salt. Travel had left its broad finger-prints everywhere—on the Japanese carvings, the Spanish paintings on glass, the Indian ivories, the Syrian pottery, the antique furniture, the fragments of French tapestry.

A tall woman wearing gardening gloves came from behind one of the herbaceous borders. She looked hot and toil-stained, and quite happy.

"Kate, I have brought Skelton back to tea."

"I was just waiting to see who was with you. I never mind being caught in a pickle by people who know what work is."

Her husband looked at her affectionately.

"Thorough—that's the word. It's a prejudice of ours, Skelton, but we can't stand the dilettante people who talk about 'my roses,' and who never did anything but pay for the bushes and boast about the flowers."

Mrs. Strange drew off one of her old gloves and held out a hand to Skelton. Her

tall, stiff figure, narrow at the hips and shoulders, and an air of kindly austerity would have made many people take her for an old maid. She wore her hair drawn back neatly from her forehead, and her brown eyes had a shy reserve behind their glasses. Her voice was quiet, level, and unhurried. She did not rush to meet the world, but stood a little aloof, watching.

Tea was brought out under the shade of a Himalayan cedar. It was an informal affair, with basket chairs drawn up round a wicker table, and the Irish terrier lying at Captain Strange's feet.

"I found O'Connor trying to kill dandelions, and almost weeping with rage because the birth-rate among them happens to be so high."

"It is a pity to let one's life be spoilt by dandelions!"

"My dear, I have known you so worried by weeds——"

"There are not many to worry me now."

"That's it! Believe me, Skelton, my wife's a born administrator. If only they would make her a sort of female dictator. Here you are, now, the very woman to listen to your new philosophy."

The brown eyes behind the glasses were turned interestedly towards Skelton. He remembered his surprise when he had first discovered that this shyly austere woman was extraordinarily human, that she had touched the many sides of life, and that her experience was as delicately shaded as a landscape on a warm April day. Her insight and her understanding were remarkable. The brown eyes would light up, the kindly quiet voice become animated, and the surface impression of primness be swept away.

"There are so many new philosophies."

"Mine is simple enough. The art of helping other people to live."

"By being a sort of modern Mark Tapley?"

"Don't tease, Peter."

"Skelton suggested I should become one of the brotherhood. Garside does the electric battery part of it. I might do for a bottle of iodine. And Skelton himself——"

"He's too subtle for you, Peter. You know we all have such raw surfaces at times, and——"

She looked smilingly at Skelton.

"Some soothing cataplasm——"

"Or a vital tonic when we feel empty of life. It is really amazing how many of us make life unbearable for each other."

"I don't know, Kate; I have managed to stand you, somehow."

"Thank you. I'm a believer in the kindness of self-restraint. It is a sort of quiet

courage that helps us and others over the rough places."

Skelton sat watching her, thinking what an admirable woman she was with her shyness and her subtle sympathy.

"Self-restraint—yes, that's one-half of the picture. But I believe, too, in active healing."

"It suits you."

"Me?"

"I did not say you, Peter. You are stimulating enough——"

"Thanks. I'm not part of the picture! Look here, Skelton, who do you practise on in these realms. On us?"

"I have come here for a little spiritual morphia sometimes. We all practise on each other. I have a case I might recommend to Mrs. Strange."

"Oh, come, this is interesting! Let me get at my pipe. It sounds like being a real good gossip. Won't you smoke?"

"May I? I was thinking of that little Brent girl up on the heath. I imagine she has a pretty time of it. And it's just the rebellious age."

He tapped the bowl of his pipe against his palm, and glanced across the lawn at the phloxes in one of Mrs. Strange's herbaceous borders.

"I say, what colour! We all of us seem to hunger for colour of some kind in life."

"Most of us get more of the blues than we want."

Catharine Strange gave her husband a look of appeal, a look that said, "Now, you incorrigible old tease, we want to be serious."

He smiled at her affectionately and understandingly.

"Don't mind my patter. As for colour of a kind, by Jove, the child must see enough of it!"

He caught Skelton's eye, and nodded reassuringly.

"It's a horrid habit of mine, I know, this facetiosity. Why haven't we called, Kate?"

"I don't know. I really don't think it occurred to me. Do you think the girl——"

She seemed to be waiting for Skelton to speak.

"I think she must be very lonely and pretty miserable, and when we are miserable——"

"We take to drink!"

"Peter, what a bore you are sometimes."

"Thank you, my dear. No more squibs."

Skelton was biting his pipe rather hard, and staring at the dog who lay asleep at Strange's feet.

"I'll tell you something. When I was a youngster in town I was lonely at first, most accursedly lonely. I used to rage along the streets at night. No one spoke, except—yes, just that. Poor beggars! But it used to put me in a fever, just to have them looking me in the face. I wanted something human, something that seemed to care ever so little. Just before it became too bad I got to know the man who has been the very best friend I have ever had."

A quiet light came into Catharine Strange's eyes.

"I will go and call in a day or two. We could ask the girl here."

"And all your dear friends?"

"You know very well, Peter, that none of my friends are prigs or prudes."

"Of course not. Say acquaintances, then."

"Acquaintances do not count."

Skelton's eyes flashed her his homage.

"You will do her good," he said.

When he rose to go, Catharine Strange went with him towards the gate and lured him aside to look at some of her treasures. She loved her garden, and slaved for it with a tenderness that was made happy by some exclamation drawn from an acquaintance or a friend. As for the captain, he remained stuck to his chair, perfectly conscious of the fact that he had intended to show Skelton an example of Mendelism that he had worked out with his fowls.

"Confound the chickens! Kate does love to get hold of someone and show off her garden. And she deserves it, by George!"

Catharine Strange was walking slowly along the borders, happy in the knowledge that the man beside her saw everything and saw it well.

"That's Iris. Isn't she beautiful?"

"Perfect."

"And don't you like that little bit there—the big yellow achillea and the steel-blue echinops?"

"That's a touch of genius."

"As we were saying, some of us simply thirst for colour. It is a passion when we are young. Is Constance Brent a sensitive?"

"That's the tragic part of it. I had a talk with her one day at 'Vernors.'"

"Yes, I remember seeing you. I am interested in sensitives. I don't think I care for cows and calves."

"I think just a touch from an understanding hand. You see, it's a woman's affair."

"Is it—always?"

The question was a frank one, and he answered it frankly.

“One does not want to see a girl like that left alone to talk to some young cad. I’m interested. I don’t like to see such a child suffer.”

“No, not when one has suffered,” she said very gently.

Chapter Seven

A full moon had risen over Roymer Heath, changing from copper to silver as it rose higher in the sky. The August night was warm and oppressively still, so warm and oppressive that Constance Brent had both the door and the French windows of the drawing-room wide open. Her mother had gone to bed half an hour ago.

She stood at one of the windows, leaning against the frame, and the simple white blouse and skirt that she was wearing were like the white petals of a flower that waits for the coming of some big moth. The lad who looked after the garden had, by some blessed lapse from stupid uniformity, sown night stock in the bed below the veranda, and the scent of it filled the air. The night had a strange sensuousness, and this subtle scent was like the perfume of some scented body wrapped in rich fabrics and stretched in sleep behind hangings of eastern silk. Stars flickered in the soft sky. The very shadows had a feminine suggestiveness, and stretched out desirous and alluring arms. Southwards the heathland rolled, a sea of tarnished silver stippled with the black masts of solitary pines. Queer wisps of white mist lay in the hollows, spirits rising from earth with a floating whirl of diaphanous tissues.

Utter stillness prevailed, the stillness that surrounds an isolated house in the country on a windless summer night, yet Constance Brent felt restless, yearning for something she knew not what. She had a vision of life hurrying on and leaving her alone in the wilderness. Had she but heard the moaning of violins and the soft, sibilant swish of swinging skirts, she would have held out her hands for a partner, though believing that no one would ask her to dance. It was a night for ghosts, the ghosts of many hopes that laugh, whisper, and vanish into the darkness. Never had she felt more alone, more smothered behind the curtains of a house in which nothing

happened.

The hunger for life cried out in her, and the silence of the moonlit landscape flung the cry back. Oh, for some sound, even the barking of a dog! She turned, opened the piano, sat down, and let her hands wander. Then her white throat lengthened. Song rose in it like wine into the throat of a Grecian vase. It passed her lips and flowed out into the moonlight:

"Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns."

She sang on in the darkness, her eyes half closed, her white throat a throbbing curve.

Upstairs a bell began to jangle, making an ill-tempered, outraged clangour. And to amplify the discords a dog began to yap.

Constance swept an impatient hand over the notes, crashed out a dissonance, and stood up. Her mother's handbell still jangled. In the hall she met Mary pinning on a cap hurriedly, and looking sleepy and solicitous.

"I had dropped off in my chair. Shall I go, Miss Connie?"

"No, I will, Mary."

A light was burning in Dora Brent's room, and Gussie, offensively awake, capered about the bed, yapping. The haggard face under a grotesque and frowsy arrangement of pins and wisps of hair was the face of fury, the half-moon mouth drawn down at the angles and open as though to screech.

"Didn't you know I had a headache? Waking Gussie up just as I was getting to sleep!"

The girl stood stone still.

"I thought——"

"You didn't think! That's just it; and you've spoilt my night. Pour me out a dose of my sleeping stuff."

Constance went to the little medicine-chest and took out a bottle and a measuring glass. A horrible frost seemed to have stiffened her into utter callousness towards this woman. She was astonished, and yet not astonished, at the thoughts that went sleeting through her mind. She found herself thinking as she measured out the draught that she would not care if her mother never woke again.

Her hand trembled, and something caught in her throat.

"I'm sorry. Here it is."

"Don't touch the piano again till I tell you."

"Yes."

"And tell Mary to take off those beastly squeaky shoes of hers when she comes

up to bed."

Constance left her, shutting the door gently, and as she descended the stairs she had a feeling of going down, like one condemned to some cell, under the surface of life. A voice cried out in her: "It is going on like this for ever, it is going on like this for ever! I can't bear it, I can't!"

She eluded Mary who had waited tentatively for the chance of a few comforting words, and going out on to the veranda she sat down in a basket-chair. The night was so perfect that it was a mockery of her limitations, and the scent of the night stock touched the edge of pain. This vastness, this mystery, what did they offer her but contrasts? Where were the happy, adventurous days she yearned for? Somewhere afar off people would be dancing, making love, listening to music, watching life from the chairs outside Continental cafés, laughing, talking, being human. Those Paris boulevards she had read of! To-night in her hatred of the immediate present she felt she could rush into that boulevard life, do wild things, dance and sing in some cabaret, drink absinthe till she forgot. She had a hunger for sensation, even for some stab of exquisite pain that should break the numbness of this solitary existence.

She lay back in the chair, her breath coming and going in great heaves. Was she going to weep, or be whirled away into some hysterical outburst? Every organ in her body seemed to be throbbing in revolt, calling for life, and threatening violence if life were not given.

She sat up suddenly, stark, listening.

There were footsteps going along the laurel hedge. Someone whistled softly, casually, as though the whistler had no particular purpose in passing the white house.

"I have a song to sing o'."

The footsteps went up along the hedge, stopped, and came back again.

"I have a song to sing o'."

Constance Brent's hands were gripping the arms of the chair. She started up, stood a moment irresolute, and then walked out of the veranda and across the lawn towards the wicket gate opening upon the heath. She raised the latch noiselessly, and went out from the shadow of the hedge into the moonlight.

The whistle came again:

"I have a song to sing o'."

She answered, puckering up her mouth:

"Sing me your song o'."

A figure appeared round the angle of the hedge, and came along slowly, keeping under cover.

"Hallo!"

It was a large and very confidential whisper.

"Hallo! I say, you do look well in white."

She let him come close to her and stare down into her face with those round, shallow eyes of his. His largeness cast a shadow that nearly enveloped her slim whiteness. A sheepish excitement possessed him—the excitement of a young man who feels himself a devil of a fellow and who means to put the feeling into prose.

"Jolly out here to-night. I say—" He glanced towards the house.

She knew that by recognising that glance she would be conspiring with him.

"Isn't it beautiful out there on the heath?"

His male mind, vulgarly agog for anything suggestive, sprang at the supposed invitation.

"Let's go and look at the view? What about a coat or something?"

"It's so warm."

His smile would have been a leer on the face of an older man.

They started off along the path between the furze bushes, and so came into Briar Lane. The whole southern landscape, glimmering white under the moon, seemed more vivid and miraculous when seen from between the high black banks of the lane.

Constance Brent paused, with a drawing in of the breath.

"Isn't that wonderful?"

Bertie Gascoyne looked at her as a butcher might look at a gazelle. He was an obtuse youngster, with all the selfish complacency of youthful obtuseness, the ordinary coarse-grained young cad found everywhere, at the Universities, and in the workshop, whose thoughts run perpetually to peer under the hem of a woman's skirt. He had a sort of vague notions of honour, but these notions applied only to the young women, the sisters of his compeers, whom he knew that it was dangerous to meddle with. The average young man's honour is only a class affair. It does not extend to the people whom he considers to be his inferiors.

"Look at the moonlight on the hills!"

"Fine, isn't it?"

She did not understand the thing at her elbow, and certainly young Gascoyne did not understand her. "Tosh"—that was the word he applied to states of feeling that he could not comprehend. And the soul of a sensitive girl was as unexistent for him as the artists' world is unexistent for the stevedore or the butcher. He did not see the spirit of beauty, and mystery, and pathos beside him, and was ready to walk blindly through it like a gamekeeper through a ghost.

The night was marvellous, and something had come to Constance Brent and

offered her human comradeship. It must please him to be with her. She guessed that much, and a kind of innocent exultation stirred in her, a delight in the thought that she could create a necessity in the life of another. Some of her discontent floated away into the moonlight. She felt gay, happily reckless, eager to accept the spirit of comradeship, and to give it. Oh—he was alive; he must have felt some of the things that she had felt; he was at Oxford; he was young, and he would understand.

"I say, don't you find it a bit lonely up here?"

He was plotting to come closer.

"Lonely? It is lonely."

The crude male instinct took the inference to itself. They were talking at cross-purposes, the girl's eyes turned towards spiritual things, the man's fixed on mere matter. She began to talk to him, offering tentative, shy confidences, while the rough youth grabbed them complacently, always suspecting a double meaning, and accusing her to himself of "coming on."

"Like bein' out here?"

"It is new to have someone to talk to."

"Me? Oh, thanks. Did you find it much of a bother to get out?"

"Get out?"

"Yes, out of the coop."

Her white face, a little puzzled and appealing, with its dark eyes and hair, might have touched an older man. It looked so innocently for life, desiring to understand and to be understood.

"What do you mean by the coop?"

He thought, "You do play up to me, don't you?"

"Why, the house," he said aloud.

"Oh!"

"Took me a deuce of a lot of thinkin' about. I'm supposed to be out after moths with Emma Cottle."

"Emma Cottle! Is she——"

Bertie Gascoyne blurted a laugh.

"Emma Cottle! My hat! Old Emmery—don't you see? He's fly, too; knows the game."

"Oh!"

"The old 'uns are always so deuced inquisitive."

She had a sudden bright idea that Bertie Gascoyne might be tyrannised over by his mother and that he had come to her for sympathy. "They never seem to realise that we are young, do they?"

"Who?"

"The older people."

"Suppose not. Is your old lady pretty stiff on you?"

His vulgar directness disconcerted her.

"I don't know. Do you mean——"

"Keeps you on a chain. And I've come to let you off, eh?"

He swayed nearer, brushed up against her, and his hand touched hers. A queer, fastidious thrill went through her. She did not like him to come so close, but perhaps he meant it kindly.

She paused and turned about.

"I think we have come far enough."

Constance did not guess how near she was to being caught, and bespoiled by the barbarian's rough hands. But Bertie Gascoyne had a moment's cowardice, a raw dread of the crisis that he would provoke.

"All right."

He became awkwardly and half sulkily reticent. They reached the laurel hedge again; young Gascoyne half ready to clutch at the white figure, yet half afraid to play the devil.

"I think I must go in now."

"Must you?"

"Yes."

He loomed above her, sulkily and sensually inept.

"All right. Suppose I may come up again?"

She looked up at him quite frankly.

"Do you want to?"

"'Course I do. I'll just whistle."

She moved towards the gate where a blurred and unseen figure was standing under the shade of the laurels. The figure hurried away across the grass, and disappeared under the veranda.

Five minutes later Constance Brent and Mary met in the hall.

"You can shut the windows, Mary, and we'll go to bed. I've been out on the heath. It's beautiful by moonlight."

"Yes, Miss Connie."

The woman kept her own counsel, but she was troubled within herself.

"It's only natural," she thought; "but then—I don't know. She's so lonely, poor dear! And men—some of them young men are mean beasts. Anyhow, I didn't mean to be spying."

Chapter Eight

Skelton felt in a marching mood, and since he had done good work during the day, he allowed the soft summer night and his own inclination to carry him off into the fir woods. He remembered that there would be a moon, and being out for idleness, he lay down for a while on the dry needles, and stared at the black canopy where the straight trunks disappeared into the upper gloom, and star dust glimmered through. It was very still here in the thick of the woods. The warm air had a resinous fragrance, the perfume of the invisible incense burnt in this most solemn of temples.

Lonely? Well—he supposed he was lonely at times, and not the master of a grinning and inhuman cheerfulness that accepted all things and everything with officious resignation. He was very much a man despite his philosophy of healing, and Stephen Phillips's "Paolo and Francesca" had stood propped against the sugar basin on his tea table.

The kindness of self-restraint. What a supremely wise and lovable person was Mrs. Catharine Strange! Just that—self-restraint, for one's own sake, and for the sake of others. To be sure, he felt like a man, was tempted like a man who had got far into the thirties and remained unmarried. For instance, there was Nance Willard, the gamekeeper's daughter, that plump, well-developed, dark-eyed young woman with the big red mouth. She always seemed to be standing at the white gate when Skelton went by, her eyes challenging him, her feminine completeness cheerfully provocative.

"Good evening, Nance."

"Good evening, Mr. Skelton. It's a nice day, isn't it?"

That was all that passed. But the girl's eyes had marked out the lean, tall man

with the keen, virile face. The feminine instinct in her had whispered that here was a woman's mate, a man who had but to lift a finger—and she would follow.

But what a fool's move such a match would be. The girl's healthy, good-humoured ripeness had come within Skelton's horizon, but he was not the man for such a hazard, even when honourably tackled. Moreover, he had his own contempt for young Gascoyne and that sort of adventurer, the cads who allowed raw Nature to play all the wild tricks she pleased.

Yet to have a mate, a comrade, a serene and tender presence near him, good God! he did yearn for that. Someone to give sting and passion and sympathy to his ambition; someone whom he could see and touch and tease very dearly; someone for whom he could spend himself; someone for whose innocent and delightful vanities he could deny himself a big thing here and there.

"Confound it, a man's not complete so long as he's unmated."

He stared at the black feltwork of boughs above, and the stars glimmering through seemed to be pricked out in astral figures.

"One hundred and fifty pounds a year. Look here, Dick Skelton, can you marry on that?"

"Idiot," came the retort; "as if I couldn't make my thousand a year—for the sake of the one particular person! My wife——Well, I should want to see her better dressed than most other women. A woman of taste can be an artist. I should want to see her—Her! Who?"

He sat up suddenly, his arms wrapped round his knees.

"Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar"

There was a voice in the fir woods, an elfin voice that made the first slanting streaks of moonlight shiver. He found a queer, reminiscent tenderness assailing him. What a haunting voice that girl had! It yearned, asked questions, stirred strange deeps of feeling.

"Where are you now—where are you now?"

He rose and walked on through the woods in time to see the light of the rising moon filling the valley where Roymer lay in a lake of silver mist. Up yonder swelled the heath, with a light glimmering here and there, its dark outlines cutting the sky.

"I wonder if she is singing to-night?"

His footsteps tended that way till the white house stood out above him like a great white headstone. He took a by-path that led to the main road, and bore round westwards towards Furze Cottage. When quite near it he heard someone whistle,

and he was human enough to stop and listen.

He walked on.

"I'll go round by the back and cut into Briar Lane."

He did so, and cut into a large figure in a grey Norfolk and white trousers that was lounging up and down with a certain air of expectation.

The figure gaped, and nodded with disconcerted abruptness.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!"

Both would have added, "What the devil are you doing here?"

Skelton went past young Gascoyne with a brightening of the eyes, and a queer and unforetold gust of anger rushing through his brain.

Briar Lane ran straight as an arrow, and Skelton walked on. Turn his head to look? No, he was damned if he would! But he did look, and so appositely that he just caught a glimpse of a white figure gliding into the dark trough of the lane. So Constance Brent came out by moonlight to meet that cub!

Skelton marched on, trying to sort out the situation.

"I am glad I didn't meet her—just there—or the two of them together."

He was carried away suddenly by the sincerity of his own anger, and he was not pleasant to behold when he was angry. It had been said of him once by a youth who had had to flatten himself into surrender: "I tell you, Skelton can be a devil."

"Glad! Am I glad? I have a good mind to go back, kick that young beast, and send the girl to bed. But, is it your business, my friend? Don't be mean-minded."

He walked on, telling himself quite calmly that he was not prejudiced against young Gascoyne. He happened to know what sort of a cad the youngster was. And he was ready to swear that Constance Brent knew nothing about men, and that this particular man had not been caught up by any ideal passion.

The magic was out of the night so far as Skelton was concerned. Any attempt to reach magnanimous tolerance was spoilt by his own intimate knowledge of life and by his opinion of Herbert Gascoyne. A man who has developed no vein of cynicism is not to be trusted, nor is there much doubt that the cynical common sense of the community keeps the faddists and the idealists from doing any great harm. This cynical common sense may be called the steel framing of a man's mind. All manner of fine things may be stored there, but this framing of steel serves to keep them from getting bundled into confused sentimentalism.

"Youth goes towards youth."

He remembered that Stephen Phillips had said that.

"But what a youth, and what a child!"

He wondered whether Catharine Strange had called there yet. Mrs. Strange could be compassionately and suggestively cynical, a great gift. She was human, not one of those soulful persons whom Skelton mistrusted and abhorred.

"If a man talks the ideal purity stuff to me," he had once said, "I tell my friends not to trust that man near their womenfolk."

He could guess how badly one of the soulful women would blunder in dealing with such a girl as Constance Brent. They were neurotic egoists, most of them, and Skelton wondered what one of these soulful women would make of Bertie Gascoyne. Since they were always looking upward, talking a sort of strenuous star-dust jargon, they forgot that the world was full of young animals. They were quite inhumanly superhuman, or wanted to be. Thunder!—give him a woman who was something of a cynic, in the sense that she realised that there was mud everywhere, and that one cannot escape it by talking mystical nonsense and flapping one's arms at the stars.

He was astonished at the intense feeling the incident had roused in him. It was no impersonal affair, then. In fact, he might charge himself with jealousy.

"Jealous of what? Herbert Gascoyne!" He laughed, but his laughter had a passionate edge.

That sensitive, fragile figure drifting through the twilight of its loneliness, and reaching out pathetically to touch any shape that seemed human! How well he could picture what had been happening up yonder. And this cub who had nothing but his youth to recommend him!

Skelton felt savagely troubled. How could one cut in on such a problem and solve it? Had he any right to meddle, and, after all, was there any serious cause for meddling?

As to his right, the full consciousness of it came to him as he was working at his lathe an hour later, making his hands help his thoughts.

"By George! I have a man's right. What did Catharine Strange say? 'Is it always —a woman's affair?' Let me think—let me think."

Chapter Nine

Constance had carried a deck-chair out under the shade of the lime tree that grew at the far end of the lawn, and Jim Crow was pecking at her shoe-laces, putting his head on one side, and looking up at her with a blue eye that challenged conversation. But Constance was not in a mood to talk to the bird, having drifted into a sleepy backwater of meditation.

The lime tree could be seen from the kitchen window, and Mary's white-capped head moving to and fro there often turned its eyes towards the girl sitting in the shade. The woman's face had a troubled, puzzled look. An anxious motherliness seemed to be watching a child on the edge of experiences that may be disastrous and tragical. That is why youth is so intensely and pathetically interesting to people of understanding. The hazards, the disillusionments, the exaltations, the little tristful tragedies repeat themselves. Youth comes toward the fire with shining eyes and hands out-stretched, and we elders hold our breath, and watch, wondering whether those eager, innocent hands will be scorched and made to suffer pain.

Mary's reflections were full of unrest.

"She's been out three evenings, and she hasn't said a word to me. And, somehow, I can't—It isn't fair on the child, this walking out into the dark."

Mary was polishing silver, and she rubbed hard and viciously.

"What has she ever done for the child? She doesn't care for anything but that little brute Gussie. One couldn't speak to her about it. Tantrums. Oh, we are selfish beasts!"

Her eyes reverted to the figure under the lime tree, and compassion shone in them.

"Miss Connie, my little girl, if you could just put your head on my shoulder—and talk. Oh, I'm no fool, and I should like to tell you just what—But there! she thinks no more harm than a flower might with a bee buzzing round."

Constance lay with eyes half closed, looking up into the green heart of the tree. It was dappled with gold, and touched here and there with burrs of silver. She was in one of those moods when the imaginative "I" seems to leave the body and stand aloof, looking down at its material self. In spite of the sentimentalists and the poets, it is doubtful whether any young girl is ever "fancy free," and Constance Brent had had her dreams. But then they had been tender, ethereal, mysterious dreams, turning all the dross to beauty, recreating the whole world.

And the reality appeared to be so different. Even in herself she had discovered a strange creature, a thing of unexpected whims and impulses. Why had this strange self promised to meet Herbert Gascoyne again when she had returned from the last adventure with a feeling of bewilderment and vague distrust? And why had she let him kiss her at the gate? Had it been for the sake of the sensation, or because she was grateful to him for coming, or because there was something compelling about this youth? She had not thrilled to that kiss. It had been a blundering and rather clumsy incident, and she was inclined to shudder when she remembered the hot breath and the eyes glaring close to hers with a suggestion of greed. Why had he done it, and why had she suffered him to do it?

She had expected everything to be so different, but they had been at cross-purposes from the very first. Was it that she was too sensitive, or that she knew nothing of men? She had wanted to talk to this new comrade, to pour out her heart, to be understood, but this big fellow had stared at her almost stupidly, and answered with grunts of crude flattery. He seemed to have had no echo for her. Why? Perhaps shyness, perhaps because he was one of those dumb souls who feel deeply, and lack the power of expression.

She was going to meet him again that evening after her mother had gone to bed, for Dora Brent's apathy had overlooked any such affair, since it never even occurred to her to wonder how Constance amused herself when she—Dora Brent—went to bed at the bored hour of nine o'clock. The mother started out for her afternoon drive, taking the lad and Gussie for company, Constance pleading a headache and a dislike of the glare. She was at the piano soon after Dora Brent had started, and Mary, sewing in the kitchen, opened the kitchen door to listen. Constance's voice sounded strained that afternoon. The feeling seemed forced, suggesting wings beating wilfully upwards against the wind.

When she went to her room to change for dinner she put on her white blouse

and skirt. She remembered that he had said that she looked well in white, yet the memory brought no mysterious thrill. Why was she going out to meet him? Was it because of a desperate desire to escape from the old loneliness, because the fact of his stealing up over the heath at night was like a cup of wine to the dry lips of her feminine vanity? Comradeship, sympathy, even something deeper still, how she yearned for them. It was a sort of forlorn hope. She clung to it, trying to hang some of her ideals about young Gascoyne's neck.

It was a pathetic affair—this dressing. She let her hair down, and, sitting before her mirror, took great trouble to do it prettily. Her store of finery was soon considered. She could count her ribbons and fal-lals on the fingers of her hands; the blue ribbon, which was new; the black velvet band she wore sometimes round her throat; the green leather belt with the silver filigree buckle; the two bangles her mother had given her; the green and blue enamel brooch Mary had bought for her last birthday. She chose her newest pair of shoes, they were not chafed and worn about the toes. It was a sensitive, feminine detail, for who would see whether her shoes were scratched and worn or not? She put on her one pet pair of light stockings, and fastened the black velvet band round her throat. She had picked a red rose in the garden, and after putting it in her belt she stood looking at herself questioningly in her mirror.

What did the man see in her—what did he desire? What did she see in herself? A slim, fragile figure with a pale face, large dark eyes, and a mass of still darker hair. A strange thought struck across her mind; how easily she could be crushed, what a little thing she seemed. But then, a man liked something he could be very gentle with, something he could protect. She did not desire to be a fine, independent young woman very well able to assert her own physical fitness. It was very pleasant to think of inspiring chivalry and tenderness in a man. Perhaps he felt that, but had not been able to make her feel all that he had felt.

At dinner Dora Brent noticed nothing of all this. She just ate, and fed Gussie who sat on a chair beside her, and talked of whether she should go into Reading next week, why Dutton's boy had not left the daily paper till after three o'clock. Constance felt that she was listening to a distant muffled voice that did not belong to her own world. Then came that hour after dinner when she had to sit under the standard lamp in the drawing-room and read the account of the trial of a particularly sordid little person in a particularly sordid murder. Dora Brent had the mind of a servant in these matters, and since the trial had been going on for days, Constance had had to wade through and through the vulgar slime of cheap journalism. Nothing else seemed to interest her mother. She would break out suddenly with some

reasonless remark, such as "It was funny about that night-dress." "I wonder whether he killed her before or after the milkman called?" The whole thing smelt of the gutter, of a greasy, scandalous, and utterly ugly life in a London suburb.

And to-night, there was a "thrilling cross-examination" to be read. Constance's impatient disgust rose in her throat. She tried to rattle through the details, wondering whether her mother would lose her interest in the unsavoury mess before the clock struck nine. The "popular murder case" sprawled over a whole page, and the greasy little brute who had committed the murder might have been "a man of destiny."

"I wonder how you can listen to all this!"

"Don't be squeamish. It's a bit of life!"

"Can life be like this? Oh, I feel—I feel that I want to wash my mouth with clean water."

"Twaddle! About that bloodstain on the stair rail? Just read that again."

It was over at last, and Dora Brent had gone, carrying Gussie under her arm. Constance went and stood by the open window, drawing in the clean night air with the scent of the night stock. How incredible it seemed that people should be interested in such dull and abominable nastiness. Why was it not buried quietly, and contemptuously, and put away out of sight?

Looking out between the pillars of the veranda she realised suddenly that there would be no moon to-night, and that it was very dark, in spite of a clear sky, and the stars. Perhaps the case in the paper had made her morbid, but the darkness out yonder was what the country folk called "unked." To go out there alone and meet him seemed such an intimate committal of her pride. But he, too, would realise that. The consecrating of her trust in him would make him more chivalrous.

All movement had ceased in the room above, and Constance went out into the veranda and across the lawn towards the wicket gate in the laurel hedge. It had been agreed between them that Bertie Gascoyne should not whistle. He would come and wait at the gate till she could escape and join him there.

Constance had a quiver of excitement over the heart and a sense of adventure as she opened the gate and went out. There was a movement along the laurels, a brushing of feet over the grass.

"Hallo, Connie!"

His large shape came and loomed over her. A hand touched hers, and seized it. He spoke in a sort of gloating whisper.

"You've come all right. I knew you would."

"Yes."

He did not realise how soft a girl's hand can be. Moreover, she was wearing a

little old silver ring that she had saved up for and bought when she was sixteen.

"Oh, not so hard. It hurts."

"Hurts?"

"Yes; let go."

"You sly little flapper."

"Let me go."

His face came near to hers.

"All right, darling. I didn't mean to hurt, if it did. Let's go where we can talk."

She stood hesitating, vaguely afraid. He was different again to-night. There was a rough boldness that troubled her. When he had gripped her hand so hard, she had felt him trembling, trembling like one in a fever.

"Perhaps I'll come a little way. It's so dark to-night."

He gave a queer, half-smothered laugh.

"You don't mind that, do you?"

"No. Only I want you——"

"That's it. You're up to snuff—all right."

Five minutes later Mary came down to the gate in the laurel hedge. She had a shawl wrapped round her, and she had come to wait. The heath seemed one great silence, a black smudge below the lighter gloom of the summer sky. Now and again she fancied that she could hear the murmur of voices, but her straining ears picked up all manner of imaginary sounds and she anxiously wondered over them.

Mary had waited there half an hour before that queer cry came out of the darkness. It was neither loud nor shrill, yet it was like the cry of someone surprised and sprung upon in the darkness. Mary had the gate open, and was out upon the rough grass and heather, her eyes shining with a hard, fierce light. She stood listening, straining eyes and ears, half afraid to call lest Dora Brent should hear.

It was then that she saw something white coming through the furze bushes. It was a figure that ran, and panted for breath.

"Miss Connie!"

The girl ran straight at her, as a bird frightened by a hawk dashes for a bush.

"Mary!"

She clung to the woman with passionate violence, her breath coming in quick gasps.

"Mary!"

"There—there, it's all right, Miss Connie."

She had a horrible dread in her, for the girl clung to her like one in despair. Some of her hair had slipped down and hung about her throat and shoulders.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, what's happened?"

"I didn't know—I didn't know——"

Her voice had a shocked, moaning note.

"Don't take on so. Tell me."

"I didn't know—I didn't know——"

"Dear soul!"

"I didn't know men were like that."

She grew limp of a sudden, and hung in the servant's arms. She had fainted.

Mary carried her into the house and laid her upon the sofa. Through the thick of her blaze of pity blew gusts of anger and scorn.

"The young brute! I could kill him."

She did what her woman's wit devised, and was infinitely comforted. A towel soaked in cold water soon brought Constance back to consciousness. She held up her hands and whimpered.

"Mary!"

It was like the cry of a hurt child.

"Miss Connie—oh, dear heart!"

"Don't leave me. I'm frightened still—so frightened."

She shook as with a fever.

"There, there; just tell me everything, soft like so as to wake nobody. Don't mind old Mary; she just loves you; think that."

The tale was soon told, and Mary realised that the soul had been more sinned against than the body.

"Now, I'll just put you to bed."

"I can't stay alone. I can't——"

"Well, just come to my bed with me. I'll be mother to-night."

And the shivering, shocked body fell asleep in the woman's arms.

Chapter Ten

Catharine Strange drove up in her pony cart to Furze Cottage to call on Dora Brent. She had planned—so to speak—for a crossing of pony carts, knowing that Dora Brent made a habit of going out between half-past two and four, and that there might be some chance of her catching Constance alone.

As she stood waiting at the front door her eyes took in as much of the garden as could be seen, and drew their own conclusions. Catharine Strange liked to try and place people by their gardens. There were the fussily correct, the pretentious, the flagrantly untidy, the retired from trade, and the cabbage mania gardens. Only here and there did she come across the pure artist, the man who could bend lovingly and understandingly over some rare flower. The ordinary person wanted impressive splashes of colour, something in the way of a good "poster," and Catharine Strange, with her exquisite independence, was always amused by the latest gardening fad. At the moment it happened to be "rock gardens," and she was always being conducted to see the usual accumulations of stone set out with studied irregularity, and traversed by absurd little winding paths. She guessed that there would not be any rock garden at Furze Cottage. She knew, too, that the real flower lover is a Bohemian spirit, and that he is not cursed by a fussy tidiness. Here, at Furze Cottage, the lawn-mower, the roller, and the weed-killer can were the gods that ruled, and the red-headed pelargonium possessed the earth.

Mary answered the bell.

"Is Mrs. Brent at home?"

"No, ma'am; she's out driving."

"And Miss Brent?"

Catharine Strange saw the doubt in the woman's eyes.

"Miss Constance is in, ma'am, but she's been lying down with a bit of a headache."

"I'm so sorry. I thought I might find her at home."

Mary felt the touch of sincerity.

"I'll just go and see. What name, please?"

"Mrs. Strange. Tell her not to come down unless she feels well enough. I can wait and see."

"Won't you come in, ma'am? I'll not be a minute."

Catharine Strange sat down on an "occasional" chair in the drawing-room, and looked about her. She was both very observant and very sensitive, and the room seemed over-crowded and yet lonely. How characteristic it all was, just like the gardens of those amateur gardeners who must have a certain plant because their neighbours possess it, the brass standard lamp with its pink lace shade, the wall-paper patterned with rose-buds in a floating lattice of light blue ribbons, the carpet an art green square. The chairs were grotesque things, self-conscious complexities that realised that they were some sort of "new art." There was even a cosy corner in wood enamelled white, and seated with rose-coloured cushions. A pseudo-antique glass-fronted mahogany corner cupboard held a few lustre cups, and a lustre teapot, and two Toby jugs. The two reposeful and unaffected pieces of furniture were the Chesterfield sofa covered with chintz and the piano against the opposite wall. There were three or four pictures representing soncy and sentimental young mothers in the thick of groups of well-fed children, while a sentimental and dark husband in late Georgian dress looked on with an air of romantic gentility.

Catharine Strange had risen to look at the books on the white enamelled shelves when Mary returned.

"Miss Connie says she will be down in ten minutes, ma'am."

"Thank you. Tell her not to hurry."

She resumed her examination of the books, picking out one here and there like an expert. What stuff! Mock romance and mock realism, sentimental rubbish and cheap nastiness. She smiled to herself with intelligent compassion.

Then Constance Brent came into the room, and Catharine Strange thought no more about books.

"Mrs. Strange?"

"Yes. I hope your head is better. It is really good of you to come down."

"Oh, yes, it's better, thank you. This room is cool, too. Isn't it a lovely day?"

Mrs. Strange's brown eyes gave one gleam, and then seemed to retreat behind

their glasses, becoming soft, and shrouded, and unembarrassing. The girl looked all nerves, white and strained, and ready to talk any nonsense for the sake of avoiding silence. Her hands fidgeted together in her lap, and she stared at her visitor with the large and painfully attentive eyes of one in a fever of shyness.

Catharine Strange felt a protecting pity, touched with surprise.

"My dear," she thought, "what has happened to you, or is it all mere shyness and a sick headache? You look as though something had frightened you half to death, and you had not got over the shock yet."

She began to talk, quietly, easily, as a woman of the world knows how to talk when it is necessary to save some self-conscious soul from torture. The sensitive face opposite her reminded her of the face of a flower that opens only to the sunlight, and closes when it is cold. The line of the mouth seemed ready to break into quivers of emotion. The dark eyes looked scared and miserable.

"How do you like Roymer Heath? Isn't it rather lonely sometimes?"

"Lonely? Yes, it is lonely. But then, of course, it is very beautiful. I——"

She paused vacantly and looked for a rescue. Catharine Strange glided in and began a monologue, wondering whether the girl was in pain.

"You must come down soon and see my garden. I don't think you play tennis, but—croquet? You would soon learn. My husband is an enthusiast; he is always scouring the neighbourhood for someone who will come and watch him make twenty-minute breaks. When he once gets started I go and do a little weeding, or pick up a book and lose myself till he misses a shot or has done all that is possible for an ingenious man to do. You must come down and play. I suppose you do a good deal of reading?"

"I read a good deal to mother."

She glanced at the bookshelves, and Catharine Strange saw in her eyes something that was very like hatred of those books.

"One can so rarely get the books one wants to read."

"Look through my shelves when you come and take anything you fancy."

"It's very kind of you."

"We have to be kind to each other in the country. Besides, books are no use when they are hoarded away on shelves."

Constance Brent made the discovery that the austere woman who had turned to meet her when she had entered the room had changed, and mellowed to a figure of grace and of charm. The brown eyes were very friendly. They were peculiarly persuasive, eyes into which you could look while you talked of intimate things, without fear of cynicism or of prejudice.

"Won't you have some tea?"

"It is rather early, isn't it?"

"Oh, but——"

She rose and moved towards the bell.

"Do stay. Mother won't be back yet."

She flushed up, realising the suggestiveness of the admission.

"I mean—she will be so sorry to have missed you. I'm afraid she never goes out—much."

"As a matter of fact, I should like some tea. Also, I should like to see your garden."

"We can go round while Mary is getting tea. I'm afraid it is rather a dull garden, but I must introduce you to my tame crow."

"A tame crow? That's quite original. And, by the way, I shan't expect a formal call from you, but you must come down and spend the afternoon."

They were standing in the veranda together, Constance ready to pass out between two of the pillars. She hesitated, and turned a troubled face to Catharine Strange.

"Please don't think me rude, but I am so foolishly shy. It's pain to me—sometimes—to meet people. If I may just come and see you when you are alone."

Catharine Strange felt a pang of pity and of understanding. So the child knew everything, realised everything. Her sensitive pride went armed.

"Of course. But you ought to meet people sometimes."

Constance Brent's lips quivered.

"I know. But—perhaps you will let me talk to you sometimes."

"My dear, it will do me good. What is to-day—Wednesday? It's the flower show on Friday. Suppose you come and spend Sunday afternoon with me?"

Constance was looking at her with eyes that seemed to question her kindness. "Why are you bothering about me? How is it that you make things so easy?"

She said aloud: "I should love to come."

"No one pays calls on Sundays, and we shall not be bothered. We are going to get to know each other better."

When Catharine Strange drove home she turned her own lad out by the church with orders to buy two bundles of raffia at Dutton's shop, and took the lane that led round by Roymer Thorn. She was not in any way a romantic woman, but she had fine feeling for the spiritual colour of life. Whenever she came in contact with a new personality she put forward a clean, sensitive, and unprejudiced surface, and she trusted very greatly to the pattern of the impressions that were made upon it. She

never forced herself either to like or dislike people, nor was she ever aggressively observant.

"That girl has been suffering; it was not all headache. Sensitive—but not hysterical. I like her; yes, I like her. There are the makings of a real woman there."

And so she pulled up at Skelton's gate.

Josh was working in the garden, and Mrs. Strange hailed him.

"Is Mr. Skelton in?"

"Dunno. 'Ee was."

"Well, go and see."

Skelton came out of the cottage and down the path that was all dappled gold with the sunlight through the apple trees. He had a peculiarly radiant face, and eyes that shone. Moreover, he had forgotten to turn down his shirt sleeves or to put on his coat.

"I am afraid I look rather a tramp."

A teasing look came into her brown eyes.

"You do, but rather too intelligent."

"I have just had seven hours—some of the hours of my life. Do you remember the tale of the painter, Paolo Uccello?"

"The man who would not come to dinner when his wife called him, because he had such a passion for perspective?"

"I have just had a fine bit of perspective. And the number of pipes I have smoked——"

"I know. Inventive visions?"

"I have just got something that has been beating me for months. Something that seems big and so absurdly simple when you've got it."

"I'm so glad. You did not have to shout in your bath 'Eureka!' And I have just been paying calls."

His face grew keener, and his eyes lost their visionary look, and came to point.

"What! Up there?"

"Yes."

"That's really good of you. I've been worried, and working like a pig. What's your impression?"

He watched her brown eyes intently.

"Youth—in fetters."

"You felt that?"

"Yes. And they chafe. The girl knows what it is to suffer."

Skelton's mouth hardened.

"Now, I wonder—Well, never mind; you have used your white witchcraft."

"She is coming to spend Sunday afternoon with me. I did not see the mother."

"No loss, perhaps."

"I drove round to see if you would care to come in on Sunday."

Their eyes met. Skelton stood to her woman's challenge.

"Thank you, I'll come."

She smiled at him slyly, affectionately, for he was a man after her own heart. Her eyes said:

"You can come. I am not afraid of taking the responsibility of asking you, even if you come as a healer."

Chapter Eleven

The rebel in Constance Brent was dead.

Disillusionment in one of its phases had come upon her with such crude abruptness that she felt stunned into a kind of miserable humility. The sheer animal selfishness of the thing had shocked her horribly, and left life a jangle of doubts and of discords.

What a consenting fool he must have thought her, for she understood it all now, his frank familiarity, and his casual slang. He had held her to be a cheap and likely victim, a girl who was not in the position to be the possessor of a sensitive pride. And she had danced to him, innocently, unconsciously, while he had piped.

The shock of this new knowledge had hurt her so much that it had numbed all anger and bitterness, and reduced her to a shrinking misery that accepted the facts, and did not question them. So men were like that! This one incident had swept away a great illusion, and shattered all her dream castles of romance. That was what she believed, and she was constrained to shudder and to hide herself away and to try and cover up her own disgust.

She felt very miserable, and as lost and lonely as a believer in the first hours of triumphant doubt. The shock had gone to her soul, and she looked out upon a tainted world, a world of raw and horrible appetites and emotions. So fierce was her repulsion from all things physical that she had to make herself eat, and she hated her own body. Colours had lost their purity. Even white had been smirched by a memory. Her senses were so overstrung that the scent of the night stock nauseated her. She dreamed dreams at night, and woke up shivering, and feeling that life was horrible.

A desire to hide, to shut herself away, possessed her during those days. She felt that she could not bear to be looked at, or to meet people's eyes, as though all the humiliation of the thing were stamped upon her face. There was a red wound in the white breast of her pride. It bled, and she hid herself away, dreading lest the eyes of men should discover her humiliation.

Then came the day when Catharine Strange had called. She had caught Constance in a mood of wild craving for sympathy, for those warm, delicate touches that the woman Mary could not give. At first the girl's intuition had been at fault, trusting too much to the mere externals. The elder woman's quiet charm had won its way. Constance had come out of her nun's mood and consented to be lured out a little by this woman of the world.

Then came one of those little tragedies, a fit of tyrannical obtuseness on the part of Dora Brent. She had these tyrannical moods when the old, greedy, restless self rose up and triumphed for a while over the later apathy, insisting upon gaining self-expression by domineering over something. Constance was the readiest victim, and was seized upon and tortured.

Catharine Strange's call seemed to rouse the old self to life. Dora Brent did not take the stimulus to herself, but transferred it to her daughter. People were more inclined to be friendly, and Constance must make responses. There was a possible marriage to be remembered, a claim on some man's banking account. She would have nothing to leave the girl except her furniture, for her income came from an annuity that died with her.

"It's the flower show to-morrow, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Dress yourself up, Connie, and go."

Constance looked scared.

"I don't want to go. I shan't know anybody there."

"Fudge! All the more reason for your going. There are the Powers and Mrs. Strange; they have given the rest the lead. Get introduced to people. Of course you must go."

And since the evil-tempered people generally get their own way in life, Constance surrendered rather than provoke one of her mother's sulky moods.

The flower show was held in the grounds of Roymer Hall, and Constance Brent put on her pink linen dress and the cleanest pair of gloves she had, and was driven down to the main lodge, where an under-gardener sat at the receipt of custom. She paid her shilling over the wooden table, and went in through the iron gates hung from the red brick pillars, finding herself in a great avenue of elms with stretches of

parkland rolling away on either side. Her self-consciousness took on an objective phase, and she could see herself as a little lonely figure in pink walking up that depressingly majestic avenue. Life was at the other end thereof, the life she had desired, but which to-day she dreaded.

Other people were walking up the avenue, villagers in their Sunday clothes, and wearing their Sunday manners, manners that were far cruder than their clothes. Constance Brent had the instinctive hatred of the sensitive soul for the common people with their coarse, prying interest in everything, and that stupid shyness that makes them *gauche* and surly. She walked fast, and they stared at her as she went by, raw girls in raw finery, hard-faced women, slow-eyed men, youths who sniggered and butted each other with their elbows.

"Oo's that?"

"The young woman from Furze Cottage."

Constance fancied that she could catch remarks about her dress. She was in an abominably sensitive mood, and it angered her that she should be discussed, in loudly suppressed whispers, by these people. The fine and scornful fastidiousness of "breed" surged up in her. She would like to be the great lady with these hinds crowding at her castle gate. She would have them whipped out of her sight, out of her very knowledge.

She caught herself in this attitude, and laughed a quick and hard little laugh, but her cheeks flamed. "The young woman from Furze Cottage!" They had not even given her a name. Was it their way or only another—She drew aside to let a carriage pass, and met the eyes of a stout, white-faced woman in black who was lying back against the cushions. The woman in black stared, and to Constance the hard, expressionless eyes in the puffy face seemed contemptuous and hateful. No, she would not go any farther, she would turn back. Yes, and meet all those gawking villagers, those little sluts and hobbledehoys! No, she would go on, walk through the tents, escape as soon as possible, and make her way home.

She was in no mood to enjoy the English opulence of the parkland scenery with its grass slopes burnished by the afternoon sunlight; its great trees—oaks, beeches, cedars, chestnuts, standing in splendid full-grown isolation; its green hollows and sunk fences; its dark-mouthed glades; its lagoons of bracken turning yellow. She felt the beauty of the place, but it was a strange, inimical beauty, making her feel little, lonely, and obscure. The long, grey house waited on the side of the hill, a house with a classic portico, stucco walls, and windows that looked cold and dead. She could see the people on the terrace, a crowd of bright little figures that belonged there, and to the life there. In the meadow below the gardens were the marquees and tents, the

steam roundabout, the coco-nut alleys, the shooting galleries, the sweet-stuff stalls that were allowed in the park for that one day. The steam roundabout had not lifted up its voice as yet, for it was not permitted to play the demagogue until the string band on the terrace had gone through its garden party programme.

Constance was conscious that her own outlook was a narrow slit in a spacious country where big white clouds moved and a strange and half-scornful life passed to and fro above her head. She was as one of the common people, for she could not go up there among the figures on the terrace. And it seemed strange and sad, and huge and mocking, this broad green landscape in the broad green valley. She looked at the black-mouthed oak woods on the hills, and wished herself there, hidden away under some greenwood tree.

Presently she found herself in the first marquee. It was full of flowers, and people, and warm moist heat, and a kind of yellowish light that made the grassways between the exhibiting stands look a dense, richer green. The massed colours of the flowers were blurred for her, as were the faces of the people. Only one face came fully focused upon her consciousness, a serene and podgy face that drifted on her suddenly from behind a mass of purple Michaelmas daisies and white phloxes, and looked at and through her with calmly blind blue eyes. Constance had given the flicker of a smile, but Mrs. Cottle might not have known her from Eve, though Mrs. Power had introduced the girl to her that day at "Vernors." Or, perhaps, Constance may have personified Eve trespassing among the flowers proper to an English garden.

Constance felt the instant humiliation. She did not glance at blood-red gladioli or purple phloxes, or at the posies of cottage flowers, but passed out from the colour and the warm scents and the babble of tongues. A lane of brown and trampled grass between canvas screens brought her to the second marquee where fruit and vegetables were on show.

She was doomed to run against something far worse than Mrs. Cottle's wilful blindness, for wedged between three argumentative old men and a tray of peaches she was brought face to face with Bertie Gascoyne. He was lounging through the marquee with his mother, looking profoundly bored and stolidly contemptuous.

They were almost in contact before he noticed Constance Brent. His eyes flew away instantly from hers, and his brown face grew red and hot. Mrs. Gascoyne, with her huge death mask of melancholy, walked on as though the tent were empty, and somehow these two shuffled past each other, shamefully, furtively, without a flicker of recognition in their eyes.

Constance felt ready to stifle in the close, warm atmosphere. She made her way

out of the tent and stood for a moment holding to one of the guy ropes. A feeling of nausea and faintness seized her, and black specks jigged and danced before her eyes. Conscious that the people were staring at her she rallied herself and walked away in the direction of the coco-nut alleys and the shooting gallery. Trade was busy here, and since people seemed intent upon breaking bottles and hitting the coloured balls that danced upon jets of water, she paused, feeling that there was less likelihood of her being stared at. The two Cottle boys and Terence Snape were at the shooting gallery, betting against each other and being provoked and encouraged by the cheeky, hard-faced young woman who loaded the guns.

"Two up on you, Emma!"

"I'm on that blue one. There she goes!"

"Lord! you gents won't leave us a sound bottle!"

The elder Cottle turned, and saw Constance Brent watching the villagers throwing for coco-nuts. He was a young man who looked all profile, like one of those old-fashioned tin soldiers with a Roman nose and a hard little ginger-coloured moustache. His red-brown eyes twinkled, and he nudged his brother's elbow.

"Shut up! You've made me boss."

"There's Bertie's pink 'un."

The three of them turned their heads simultaneously, and the concentrated interest of the three pairs of eyes willed Constance to look their way. She flushed and walked on, bearing towards the back of one of the big marquees, meaning to pass under its sheltering lee and escape towards the road.

"Hallo! there goes Bertie."

"Hurry up, you bounder!"

"Stoke up, and get up steam!"

Five minutes ago Richard Skelton had come to the door of one of the tents, and stood there in the shadow, watching Constance Brent. She did not guess that this man's eyes had been on her from the moment when she had entered the marquee, and that he had followed her and seen her cut by Mrs. Cottle and the Gascoynes. He had been absorbing impressions, watching a play, moving towards anger, pity, and passion. His soul had shadowed hers, and she had gone in ignorance of his chivalrous nearness to her all the time.

Now, what Skelton saw outside the marquee was both dramatic and suggestive. Bertie Gascoyne lounged out of one of the doorways, glanced right and left with affected carelessness, and sighted the figure in pink disappearing round the back of the farther marquee. He took another survey of his surroundings, shoved his hands into his coat pockets, and started after Constance Brent.

Skelton waited till he saw the full square of Herbert Gascoyne's back before he strolled after him. Gascoyne overtook the girl as she was passing along the blind side of the refreshment tent. No one else was about, and Skelton saw him raise his hat. That gesture betrayed everything. He could recognise her on the "back stairs," but not under the eyes of his mother.

"I say, Connie."

The girl flashed round on him with a face that was as white as pear blossom.

"How dare you speak to me!"

"Tut-tut!"

"How dare you!"

Her scorn dominated her, stiffening her slight throat and body, and giving her a dignity that was fierce and convincing. She had spoken very quietly, but with a voice that went level and straight as the thrust of a spear. Bertie Gascoyne had blundered against the steel of her scorn, and it pierced even his thick-skinned conceit, and left him deflated.

"I say!"

She did not speak again, but looked at him for one moment with the uttermost loathing and contempt before turning to walk on. Herbert Gascoyne did not follow her, but stuffed his hands into his pockets, glanced nervously round, and, sighting Skelton, marched off diagonally towards the shooting gallery.

"Damn the little cat—damn her! And damn you, too! Who the devil are you staring at?"

He said these things very softly, for the clown in him was cowed.

Skelton strolled on a little farther. The pink figure had reached the road and was entering the avenue of elms. Sometimes it was in the shadow thrown by the great trunks, sometimes in the sunlight that poured through between them. He wanted to follow her, to spread the cloak of chivalry over the puddle of young Gascoyne's caddishness, but a sensitive visioning of her mood held him back.

Near the lodge Constance Brent met Catharine Strange driving alone in her pony cart. She pulled up and leant forward, smiling, and observing while she smiled:

"Going away so early? I thought I might come across you here."

Constance's composure was a thin and frozen surface that hid anger and tears.

"It was so stuffy in the tents."

"I know. Don't forget Sunday, will you?"

"No; I shall not forget."

Catharine Strange drove on, and half an hour later she met Skelton before her own exhibit of herbaceous plants that had taken the first prize.

"Congratulations."

She was delighted, just as delighted as if the flowers had been clever children that had brought her honour.

"Thank you. I have looked at nearly everything. How hot it is in here. Shall we go up to the house and get some tea?"

When they were outside she said, "I met our 'sensitive' in the avenue. I suspected that some raw surface had been touched."

He smiled rather fiercely.

"Oh, yes, I saw some of it. What callous beasts some of you women are."

"I plead guilty."

"For the others, yes. You know, I can't stand most women, and I can find something to like in most men."

"But you must remember——"

"I wouldn't mind if some of them would not insist on talking so much, and on being such absurd little Brummagen Juggernauts on tin-wheeled stands. What is most women's talk? What somebody else said or wrote—second-hand stuff. You get a man's personal grip."

"You are in a bad temper to-day!"

"I, too, have a raw surface."

Chapter Twelve

As Skelton came along the road under the yew hedge of "Green Banks" he heard Mrs. Strange and Constance Brent talking in the garden beyond the hedge. The voices made an intimate and reposeful murmur, and hinted at a mingling of two sympathetic natures. In walking up the drive he had a glimpse between a purple-spiked buddleia magnifica and the crowded pink cups of a hibiscus of these two women sitting under the shade of the cedar. Constance Brent was in white, Catharine Strange in one of her quiet black gowns, so that the black and the white were in subtle contrast.

Constance Brent's voice had been the more animated of the two, but the sound of Skelton's footsteps on the gravel put a diminuendo to its flow. Her voice seemed to break off like a bird's singing when some intruder comes pushing through a wood.

Constance had her back towards the house, and her half-turned profile was restless and expectant. Nor was it a pleased expectancy, but the waiting look of one who resents being disturbed.

Skelton met Catharine Strange's eyes as she rose.

"I hope I am not too much of a third?"

"I am so glad you've come. Peter is having his Sunday prowl in the woods; he will be back for tea. You know Miss Brent?"

"Yes. We once explored the 'Vernors' garden together."

He stood bareheaded, looking down at her and holding out a hand, but for a moment she did not seem to notice the hand. Her eyes had taken a curiously clouded expression, as though the life had sunk back and left them cold and empty.

"You remember 'Vernors'?"

"Yes, I remember."

She did not respond to his smile, and Skelton drew up a chair and sat down, conscious that the figure in white had stiffened into shyness. His coming had spoilt her self-forgetfulness, made the sensitive petals close, and he wondered why.

He glanced at Catharine Strange.

"Well, how did Hobbs take your triumph? Has he been parading the village with a chaplet of bays?"

"He paraded rather more seriously than that."

"Oh!"

"Hobbs is my gardener, Miss Brent, and he has a most horrible hatred of the Powers' head man. I believe it all arose about a prize onion. I must say the Powers' man is a most offensive person—considers himself a textbook. They are particularly proud of their herbaceous flowers, and we beat them this year."

"What did Hobbs do—exult in public?"

"Very much in public."

"The 'King's Head'!"

"And a black eye. If I had known that my phloxes were going to make Hobbs get intoxicated——"

"Oh, perhaps it was the colour. One hears of people being drunk with colour."

They laughed, and Skelton glanced at Constance Brent. Her eyes met his for a moment, and then fell away, but he had caught the distant, critical look in them, the watchful spirit that gazed down from a little ledge of shadowy distrust. She regarded him as a stranger, and was not glad of the intrusion.

"What should we do if we did not have our dissipated moments? Hobbs has a swelled head and a black eye, and is happy. I have a sort of liking for an incorrigible blackguard."

"Hobbs is a most respectable man. That is what makes it so tragic."

"Respectable! Have you ever realised how English that word is? We are the 'respectable' nation. Hurrah!"

He was in a Skeltonian mood, and inclined to be a little outrageous, perhaps because he wanted to dissipate the girl's reserve.

"Just be carried off one's pedestal by some intoxicating impulse! I have my dissipated fits over books. I believe you have dissipated moments when you look through gardening catalogues. And I believe there are shops in most towns where ——"

His eyes challenged Constance, but she held aloof, watching and listening.

"If you mean giving away to whims——"

"Of course I do, or life might just as well be turned into a hardware business. I assure you there are times when I should like to make a whole community—Roymer, for instance—just a little drunk, to see the stiffness taken out of all the social joints."

"People would be ten times more horrid."

"But think of the possible humour. Think how one would talk to one's butcher: 'Blodge, my dear old fellow, your meat is a dream; you never send big enough joints, and you don't weigh in enough bone?' Or women might become deliciously frank, and exclaim: 'Darling, how beautifully that old dress of yours has dyed.'"

"Would you be cynical even when——"

"Oh, come now—cynical."

He glanced at Constance Brent as though for help, and found that the white figure seemed a little stiffer and the dark eyes more obscure and clouded.

"I think all men must be cynical, or very stupid."

It struck him suddenly how very young she was, and how unused to subtle and preposterous fooling. Probably she was ready to be shocked by it, life having been deadly and earnestly dull.

He looked at her frankly, with a brotherly boldness.

"Don't be so very hard on me, Miss Brent. If I talk a lot of nonsense Mrs. Strange will tell you that I am not even an Irishman."

She opened her eyes at him, and Mrs. Strange cut in:

"He is really quite English."

"I was wondering——"

"Don't say you thought me an Hibernian! I can stand a good deal——"

Constance looked at him obliquely.

"You see, I have been trying to grow young again."

"Isn't youth rather serious?"

"Our first youth. Second youth arrives later, and is altogether more playful."

"I see."

"Now, take Captain Strange. He is in the sporting sixties——"

"You will be getting epigrammatical."

The austere note in Mrs. Strange's voice brought him to attention. He met her brown eyes, and appeared to interrogate them.

"Am I getting too clever?"

"Haven't you so often abused people who will talk cleverly? It is like sitting in a draught."

"That's brilliant! But why?"

The glimmer in her brown eyes made him think of a mother posing a child with some cunning question. She was longing to give him the answer, and willing him to find it for himself. "Why has she withered up? Don't you see she is afraid of you? Think how much older we are, though I grant you the girl is difficult."

Captain Strange and tea arrived simultaneously, but even that cheery man of irregular quips and regular habits could not save the afternoon from failure. The girl's constrained reserve was too apparent to be forgotten, and though they talked to make her open her petals, the white bud remained closed. She was in a hopelessly self-conscious and defensive mood, angry with herself, and half angry with Skelton because he had made her feel a fool.

At five o'clock Constance began pulling on her gloves.

"I am afraid I must be going. Mother will be wanting me to read to her." She felt in an absurd fever to escape. "Yes, I must really be going."

Skelton rose, too, glancing at Catharine Strange.

"You must come down again soon and play croquet."

"Thank you so much."

She stood to shake hands with Skelton.

"I am coming your way. May I see you home?"

"Please don't bother."

Her eyes filled with obstinate alarm.

"It's no bother."

"Really, I would rather——"

"I have to go up to the 'Three Firs' to see a friend."

She could not blurt out the truth before them all, that she hated the idea of his coming with her and that she wanted to be alone. She accepted the thing as inevitable, but she offered no thanks, and they walked off down the drive together, leaving the Stranges staring whimsically at each other across the tea table.

"My dear Kate, what an awkward young woman!"

"Be grateful that you have never known what it is to be as delicately strung as a violin."

"A healthy young woman ought not to be like that."

"Perhaps not. But if men insist on having exquisite music——"

Skelton was glancing tentatively at a clear white profile that drifted along as though intent upon dissociating itself from his comradeship. A pathetic haughtiness had come suddenly upon her. The man ought to have had the sense to see that she had not desired his presence.

"Which do you vote for, the lane or the woods?"

"Oh, the lane."

"It is the longer way."

"I really don't care."

It was like attempting to open a door and having it slammed petulantly at each attempt. Once her eyes met his, and he was surprised by the active antagonism in them and by something that was akin to fear. Her eyes almost said, "Men are beasts, and you are a man. I wonder why you had not the sense to let me walk home alone."

He caught a hint of this, and it set him thinking while a mere surface self talked conventional stuff to her. What did the mood mean? Might it be that her too sensitive pride had been outraged, and that she had been bitterly shocked by some caddish contretemps? He had a vivid memory of the way she had turned on Herbert Gascoyne. Something had happened between them, and he was tempted to believe that the distrust and distance in her eyes symbolised the outlook that some harsh incident had forced upon her.

Strange as it might have seemed to a younger man, this curt and defensive mood of hers roused in him a deeper and more generous compassion. He saw beneath the cold, white surface, and behind the clouded unfriendliness of the eyes. He believed that he could understand this fragile, lonely, sensitive spirit, blown like a white flower by the night wind, complaining vaguely like a harp set in a window. She was afraid of him, afraid of the male in him. He felt it, was sure of it, and was angry with life for her sake.

It seemed impossible to lure her into talking, so he set out to tell her about Bobbie Dent up at the "Three Firs," and how that bedridden youngster swallowed mathematics as an ordinary boy swallows sweets. His breezy, vivid human touches were impulsively excellent, and presently he discovered that he was interesting her, and that the sense of prejudiced restraint had lessened.

"Do you go up there often?"

"Once a week at least. It does me an immense amount of good."

"Teaching him?"

"Seeing the youngster's keenness and pluck. People talk of offering up prayers. Well, you know, anything that is bravely borne or bravely done is a bit of prayer."

She was silent a moment, and he saw that her eyes had softened.

"And yet you are a busy man."

"Am I?"

"Mrs. Strange——"

"Mrs. Strange is one of those encouraging women who always believe that we

work harder than we do. I have orgies of hard work. That's how a man's mood so often takes him."

Her eyes let a gleam of interest escape.

"You are an inventor, aren't you?"

"Something of the kind. It is fascinating work."

She sighed. "Something to think about—always."

"There is a lot in that! No empty cellars with trapdoors that let you fall in—flop. As you say, there is always something to think about."

"You are lucky," she said sadly.

And that air of softened sadness remained with her; she seemed to be thinking, visualising some grey future that took all the youth from her body and the hope from her eyes. Skelton felt touched by her silence and by the tristful mood that had come over her.

They turned into Briar Lane, and it struck him that her face grew thinner and bleaker.

"What about music?" He broke a silence that was becoming irksome. "I have heard you singing once or twice when I have happened to come this way."

Her face came sharply out of its musings, as though she had forgotten his presence and had been roused to it by his hand touching hers. Her eyes looked startled, mistrustful, half defiant. The old defensive, doubting look came back. Possibly it was all a matter of association, for there are some memories that are so poignantly vivid that they can reproduce physical nausea.

"I am rather fond of music. Yes, I can turn off here; there is a path to our garden gate."

She drew away from him quickly, almost with the air of a prude drawing her clothes more closely about her. He caught one glimpse of her scared, elvish eyes.

"Good-bye."

"Good night, and thank you."

"I wonder if you would care to go up and see Bobbie Dent sometimes?"

"Oh, I don't know; I might. I have so little time to myself. I must go in now. Good afternoon."

It was an escape, a flying from something, and Skelton stood looking after her, pained, touched, and silenced. A light that was unforgettable came into his eyes. The very deeps of them gleamed out after her.

"My dear, if you would let me try my hand at healing you!"

He did not go to the "Three Firs" that evening, but spent it wandering on Roymer Heath, watching the sunset and feeling himself taking fire.

Chapter Thirteen

For many people the passing of summer is a season of sadness and regret. With the browning of the leaves and the sinking of the sap the lustiness seems out of life; spiders spin webs in corners, and the dew hangs there; the eye sees the red in the leaf glowing and throbbing with pain. A symbolical scent hangs everywhere, calling up thoughts of dead queens lying in faded scarlets, and the dust of desire blown hither and thither by autumn winds.

Constance Brent was one of those who felt the change of the seasons. Spring was her good cheer but autumn brought a feeling of physical slackness, a melancholy that hung like fog about dripping trees, an instinctive dread of the shorter days. She loved the beauty of bluebells under golden oaks, the rank green promise of the flower-filled grass, the mystery and the greenness, and the singing of birds. But the beauty of autumn had no impulse towards joy, with blood in the hedgerows and death among the flowers. The wind cried "Winter comes," and a little shudder would go through her as she thought of an infinitude of dreary days. Rain, mud, raw cold, hours of yawning in a yawning house, the long, boring evenings, that terrible feeling that life was slipping—slipping into some bottomless abyss! No dances, no house parties, no laughter before a roaring fire, no jaunts up to London, no change, no surprises.

Mid-September brought two weeks of wind and rain—wild blustery days that rushed hither and thither and beat the pomp and pageantry of summer to pieces. The firs in the woods moaned and swayed and lashed each other like fanatical flagellants. Birch leaves came scattering down in amber showers, the asters and chrysanthemums in the garden were dashed and overborne. The clouds pressed low

upon the hills, preparing to unfurl the wet canopy of winter over the land.

Constance felt stagnation settling upon her, a pessimism that resigned itself without a struggle. She no longer hoped for anything, asking herself what there was to hope for, since even her dreams had been spoilt. Humiliation was upon her, the humiliation of the past, so that she felt like one of those superfluous women who have ceased to wonder at life, and whose thoughts begin to secrete a bitter juice. The dreariness of it all smothered her spirit, so that she told herself that she did not care what happened. She hid herself away with wounded recklessness, refusing Catharine Strange's invitations to "Green Banks," and insisting on the belief that no one really cared whether she went or whether she stayed away. She let her morbid moods blow as they pleased, and drifted through the wet woods and the dripping lanes, feeling like a ghost of her old self, uncared-for and uncaring. The life about her was so much grey mist. She saw nothing, touched nothing, but rose in the morning, dressed herself, ate, read, walked, and went to bed. She had not opened the piano for a month. Song would not rise to the surface. It reached her throat, hovered there, and then dropped back with a fluttering helplessness.

Coming back through the wet dusk of a September evening, after one of her long walks over the heath, she found that the lamps had not been lit and that Mary was not in the kitchen. After hanging up her coat to dry and lighting the hall lamp, she made her way to the drawing-room, where she expected to find her mother. There was a figure on the sofa by the window—a figure that snored.

Constance crossed the room, and in coming nearer to Dora Brent she could not help noticing an unfamiliar odour. Gussie, who was lying on a cushion, woke up, and barked at her in the dusk. The sound roused the sleeping woman. She sat up, staring about her with heavy, vacant eyes.

"Silly iddle sing! Silly sing!"

Her voice was thick, and fumbled over the words.

"Where's Mary, mother?"

"Mary? Ma-ry had l'ttle lamb. Silly zing! G'ussie, l'ttle lamb——"

She broke into foolish, giggling laughter, trying to reach out and caress the dog, who lay on a chair beside her. Even he seemed to see in her something unfamiliar and strange, for he drew back, growling.

"Oh, naughty sing! Growl at muvver!"

Constance wondered whether she was still half asleep.

"Has Mary gone down the village?"

"Has Mary g-gone down th' village? Don't know—don't care! Don't fuss——"

An empty, high-pitched giggle took her, and her whole body shook. Her hands

kept wandering about aimlessly. Constance felt frightened.

"Aren't you well?"

"Don't fuss. Let me go to sleep again—sleepy."

Constance heard someone moving in the kitchen, and she hurried there, to find that Mary had lit the lamp and was taking off her hat and cloak.

"I've just been down to Dutton's, Miss Connie. He forgot to send the soup tablets. But you do look tired! You've been walking too far."

"I don't think mother's very well, Mary."

The woman's face stiffened, and an intent look came into her eyes.

"Not well?"

"I found her asleep, and she's so funny."

"I'll go and see."

"Perhaps we ought to send for Dr. Garside."

Mary remained reassuringly imperturbable.

"One of her whims, more like. I'll go and see. And you go and lie down till dinner, Miss Connie; you look tired out."

She waited till Constance was on the stairs before she lit a candle and entered the drawing-room. The light showed what the dusk had hidden, and what Mary had seen maturing for many a long day. She frowned, closed the door, and went and stood over Dora Brent.

"Do you know you've let her see you like this?"

Dora Brent giggled.

"As I was s-saying t' Gussie, poor dear Dora—poor dear Dora's so sad——"

Mary caught her by the shoulder and shook her.

"Why can't you do it decent? Let me get you to bed."

The suffused and stupid face flushed with anger.

"Dare you! Leave th' room."

"I have got to get you to bed. As if you couldn't—It's cruel!"

"Go to bed, Mary, go t' bed, yes; don't forget to t-turn out th' lights."

Partly by scolding and partly by the steady persuasion of a pair of strong hands, Mary got Dora Brent to her bedroom and put her to bed. She was thinking all the while of Constance and what she should say to her.

"Don't you worry, Miss Connie. There isn't any need to send for the doctor. When you get a bit older you'll understand."

They were whispering in the passage, the candlelight shining in Constance Brent's eyes.

"But what is it, Mary?"

She was twenty-two, but in some ways her knowledge was the knowledge of a child of ten.

"Something women have to put up with. Don't you fret. I've helped her to bed, and she'll soon be asleep. Now I'll go and get you some dinner."

For months Mary had been watching this last phase that shows itself in many such a life as Dora Brent's. The square bottles that came up from Dutton's shop to be hidden away in the bedroom cupboard were only too indicative of a further stage of degeneration. There had been words between mistress and servant over the incipient habit, but Mary had no threats with which to terrorise Dora Brent, and nothing that she could appeal to. As for the inevitable betrayal, she dreaded it for Constance's sake, and often asked herself how long it would be before this last degradation forced itself upon the girl's inexperience of such things. She watched the powdered face being powdered more heavily, and noticed the lavish use of scent. Dora Brent still cared a little, but Mary knew that the time would come when she would cease to care at all.

"She'd be better dead," said the woman to herself before blowing out her candle that night; "dead, yes, and what will happen to Miss Connie? She won't have anything but the furniture; I know that much. And what can she do? Good Lord! But life's a rare mess of a thing at times, all upside down and in a tangle! You're like a rabbit in a burrow; if you bolt from the ferret the man with the gun gives you what for! I give it up. It's too beastly cruel. Bless me if it does to think."

She became more watchful and more alert, shadowing Dora Brent's habits as a keeper shadows a dangerous lunatic. She knew how the thing must end, but for the time being she tried to thrust the ugliness of it away from Constance's life.

"As if the child hadn't enough to put up with without that!"

Nor did even Mary guess how dark was the valley of shadows which Constance had entered.

A watchful woman cannot do everything, much less prevent the inevitable corroding of a character. For the last two or three years an apathetic selfishness had characterised Dora Brent's existence, but now a new devil stirred in her as the new habit increased. About this time she began to develop blind, senseless rages, splurges of fury that rose like dust-storms in a desert. Even the dog Gussie was cuffed occasionally, and as for Constance, she fled away more than once and hid herself in her room.

The everyday details of life began to betray the change that was taking place. Dora Brent lay abed longer in the morning, took less trouble with her dress and with the dyeing of her hair, which began to show all manner of queer shades. A frowsy

slovenliness grew more noticeable, a looseness in the way she talked and in her habits at table. She grew fatter, coarser, a swollen caricature of her old self. And Constance, sitting opposite her at table, watched it all and wondered, and said never a word.

But she would slip away on her lonely walks or to her bedroom, and brood and think, and question the vague new disgust that seemed to be oozing up over the surface of life. New humiliations were stealing upon her, and she began to wonder why she lived.

Then came an outburst that opened her eyes to everything. Returning, tired, from a ramble towards Windover, and entering the garden by the white gate in the laurel hedge, she heard two voices that brought her to a standstill. One was a sort of shrill, tearing scream; the other hard, tense, and level. They seemed to battle together like two birds in the air, the calmer, harder voice trying to overcome the other.

Constance stood stricken. Was that her mother's voice screaming out strange, coarse words—words that she guessed were horrible, though she did not understand what half of them meant? Fear of that voice sent her back through the gate, and she stood listening behind the hedge, all her sensitive nature jarred into discords.

In a little while the screaming voice weakened and dropped to a complaining monotone. Constance could still hear Mary speaking as though reasoning with a fractious child, and she realised suddenly what it meant to her having this good friend in the house.

She waited some while longer before she ventured again through the white gate in the hedge, and as she was crossing the lawn she saw Mary come out into the veranda, looking white and stern.

She caught sight of Constance, and her eyes flashed and softened. Neither of them spoke for the moment, but Constance went and stood very close to the woman, feeling that it was good to be near so human a figure when the dusk was falling about the house.

"Mary, what was it?"

Her eyes were all dark entreaty.

"She's had a kind of a fit, dear. I've got her to bed, and I'll go down for the doctor."

"But, Mary——"

"Ssh, she'll be falling asleep. She flew into one of her rages because Jim got at Gussie in the garden, and she took a stick and rushed out."

"She hasn't hurt Jim?"

"There! But I haven't had time to look. Besides——"

Constance broke away and went gliding round the garden in the gathering dusk. "All this emotion over a crow!" She seemed to hear people asking her this with amused pity, but then no one knew how very few things she had had to love.

"Jim! Jim!"

Her voice quivered.

"Jim!"

From somewhere behind a laurel came a feeble answering croak. Constance pushed back the boughs and, peering into the darkness, found a black shape lying there in a sort of ruffled disorder, panting with widely open beak.

"Jim!"

A filmy eye looked up at her. She gathered him up very gently and laid him in the hollow of her skirt. Tears were falling on the bird's black plumage, and she went back blindly to the house.

"Look, Mary!"

"Poor old chap!"

She saw that the bird was dying.

Garside came up about nine o'clock that night, spent half an hour in Mrs. Brent's bedroom, and came down with a cynical and thoughtful face. He paused in the hall, pulling on his gloves.

"Is Miss Brent at home?"

Mary had taken part in the scene in Dora Brent's room, and she and Garside had come to a speedy understanding.

"She's not up to seeing anyone, sir."

"Just so. I'm sorry. By the way, does she understand?"

"Not at all, sir, I think; but what's to keep it from her?"

Garside nodded, and looked sarcastic and grim and kind.

"All right. We'll do what we can. Do you think you could stop her getting the stuff?"

"I've tried."

He nodded again, as though recognising the inevitableness of the habit.

"I'll send up some medicine to-night."

"Thank you, sir."

"And I shall be up to-morrow."

He went away angered and saddened, knowing by experience that no human wisdom would be of any use in such a case.

And in the kitchen Constance sat with her head resting on the deal table beside

the dead body of the bird.

Chapter Fourteen

At half-past six on an autumn morning Skelton came out from the thatched porch into the garden and stood under the apple trees, where the misty sunlight powdered through upon the grass.

He expanded his chest, drawing in deep, exultant breaths, filling himself with the clean fragrance of the morning.

The day promised well—one of those coy, veiled days that come gliding in and making a mystery of their beauty. Sunlight and white mist bathed together, and yonder in the lowlands of the park the old oaks and thorns seemed to be pouring out grey smoke, while the dew on the hedges twinkled and trembled. Here and there in the autumn borders some flower caught a sun ray and gleamed out like a jewel, glowing with red or purple light. Wet perfumes rose out of the soil, and the freshness was the breath of the dawn.

Skelton lit his pipe, that first pipe that is like no other. He strolled down the path under the apples, leant his arms on the gate, and smoked like a rustic god who exults in the joy of the morning.

"It is something to be alive. And once I thought of ending it! That's one thing a man has to learn—to hang on through the bad times; they don't last for ever."

He smiled, and there was infinite understanding in his smile.

"It does not do to be in a heartless hurry. That is what is wrong with so many of us. We trample on life, instead of walking through it like sane creatures who realise that they can only go through it once."

The hazy, golden light, and the thoughts that came to him, softened the outlines of his face. His eyes had the inward glow of eyes that see things truly and see them

well.

Presently he left the gate and walked back up the path, looking first at the reddening apples and then at the thin blue sky above the deep green of the fir woods. A faint shadow seemed to drift out of the blue of that northern sky. Skelton's face grew keener again, and the light in his eyes increased.

"It's all nonsense, my dear fellow; you are not getting any forrader. Yes, but didn't you decide not to rush things? And you wanted to finish 'Jerry.'"

He re-entered the cottage, and, passing into his workshop, stood smoking and regarding the engine that was bolted to a strong wooden stand. The sunlight slanted in and struck upon the bright metal, and appeared to glance off into Skelton's eyes. He had christened the engine "Jerry"—why, he could not say; the name had come into his head.

"Well, Jerry, old man, how are you feeling? I shall expect you to pull me along pretty soon."

He touched this creature of his creative will, passing his hands over it fondly, for there were two years of brain-sweat, and joy and cursing, impatience and dogged scheming in that thing of steel. The molten vision had consolidated and taken shape. For the first time, three days ago Skelton had seen the creation working and complete.

"Somehow, Jerry, my friend, I think you are just what the good commercial people have been asking for. You've got your rivals, but you ought to eat them up. Do you realise, you beggar, that I have been in labour over you for two years?"

He sat on the bench, smoking, and talking to the thing as though it could understand.

"Power, that's what you stand for—power. What most of us lust for, and what precious few of us get. And, by the way, Jerry, you are getting a nice little patent all to yourself—the Skelton Heavy Oil Engine, S.H.O.E. Shoe! Well, it never struck me that way before. And who knows but that there may be a Cinderella?"

He slipped off the bench and walked out again into the garden, challenged by a sudden restlessness. His brain felt almost too alive, too keenly conscious of the multitudinous possibilities of life, and of the sardonic eyes of the goddess Success.

"Power!"

He walked up and down under the apple trees.

"Oh, damn, why have you let this month go by? Haven't you been a little too kindly restrained? And Mrs. Strange hasn't seen her for a month. Nor have I heard her singing. Well, I wonder——"

He went and leant his arms on the gate, and bit hard at his pipe.

"One must risk something. I have got Jerry going, and I have given her a month to get over that Gascoyne affair, whatever it may have been."

His eyes flashed out suddenly.

"I can't hang back any longer. No, by George, and I won't."

Down the lane came the sound of Josh singing as he marched to his day's work. The boy had developed a taste for hymns, and he bawled them with infinite gusto and with queer emphasis upon certain syllables:

"Ar-bide with me, fast falls the e-ven-tide."

This most unheavenly voice brought Skelton back to earth. He watched the boy come slouching down the lane, feeling half irritated, and yet conscious of the humour of the thing.

"The dark-ness dee-pens——"

"All right, Josh, let it. You seem to have got hold of the wrong end of the day."

"Sir?"

"I dare say you'd like it to begin at six in the evening."

That hymn, bawled forth in the fair face of the autumn morning, haunted Skelton most of the day, getting caught up in his thoughts, and entangling itself in the rhythm of his emotions.

It was not till he got deep into the Roymer fir woods that afternoon that the hymn ceased running through his head. The song of the trees, primitive and mysterious and full of a wild, heathen beauty, brooked no such rivalry. They murmured the old forest epics of heroic things that had happened ages before the ape-man hammered flints and dwelt in caves.

Skelton met the sunset as he climbed Roymer Heath. The whole west was aflame as with the tossing of a thousand torches, and the smoke of their burning seemed to darken the zenith. In the "romances" things happen as they never appear to happen in sober life, and colours, scents, and sounds are richer and more vital. Skelton, following one of the heathland paths, met Constance Brent like a figure of desire rising out of the red heart of the sunset. She seemed to float upon him suddenly from behind a black mound of furze bushes, a problematical figure that hovered on the elemental edge of life.

"I was thinking of you, and you appear."

She stopped, and stood looking at him with a kind of wonder, as though he had flashed a naked light into her eyes when she was expecting nothing but veiled and impersonal vagueness.

"How do you do? I have just been down into the Rusper Woods."

He noticed that she had changed in the month, that she looked thinner, and sadder about the eyes.

"Do you know the pool in Rusper Woods?"

Her eyes still wondered at him and at the glow upon his face.

"You mean the Whispering Pool?"

"Yes, black as ink, with the trees all round, like a woodcut illustrating an Arthurian tale."

"Yes, I go there sometimes, but not often."

He was blocking the path, and she made a little tentative movement to go on. He stood aside instantly.

"May I walk back this way?"

"If you like."

The petals had opened in surprise; now they were closing again. Skelton found in her the same suggestion of fear and of veiled distrust. She gave him quick defensive glances, as though desirous of keeping some dreaded thing at a distance.

"I don't think I have seen a finer sunset this year."

"No?"

"You know how we little people take all the phenomena of Nature to ourselves, making a sort of stage effect of this sky while we strut about below."

"Do we?"

A little laughter came into his eyes.

"Of course we do. I have been having a triumphant time, and the sun is just hanging out his flags and lighting his bonfires for my benefit. What have you been doing all this month?"

"I?"

"Yes. I had hoped I should meet you again at the Stranges'."

He was attacking, as the male spirit must attack when the feminine spirit does not behave according to some of the theories of Bernard Shaw. The white petals were a little tremulous, but they remained closed like the ivory gates of a walled city. She would not open herself to him. Her dread of the male spirit remained.

"It has been so wet. And I have been busy at home."

Again the lover's laughter showed in his eyes, laughter that sought to lighten the blows of his compassion upon the gate of her pride.

"There always seems such a lot to do in a house—and on Roymer Heath, too—where there should be no such things as smuts!"

She remained awkwardly silent, feeling his laughter and misunderstanding it.

"I suppose men always think women have nothing to do but to go round with dusters."

"That is the old superstition. Even if we men had not realised it already, we should have been made to realise it by the aggressive moderns. Men used to marry housekeepers; now, the best of them want to marry comrades."

"Perhaps."

She tried to gaze into the distance, and to persuade herself she did not feel something strangely compelling about this man's eyes.

"You haven't been up yet to see my mathematician?"

"Who?"

"Bobby Dent at the 'Three Firs'."

"No."

"Why don't you let me take you some day?"

She began to feel herself in a corner, and became possessed of a wild desire to push her way out. That other affair had begun like this, and she distrusted the male spirit, and shrank from its imagined coarseness.

"I have my mother to look after. And I am afraid that I prefer being alone."

"I have always found the Rusper Woods and that black pool rather morbid."

She flashed a look at him, and there was something like fear in her eyes, a fear that he had read her inmost thoughts.

"I don't go there often. Besides, I prefer solitary places."

"So do I—sometimes. But a crowd can be more fascinating, a crowd made up of one human being. Hallo, here's your house!"

She breathed with relief.

"It is my time for reading to my mother. I have to do a great deal of reading. Good night, Mr. Skelton."

He hesitated on the edge of an idea, but held himself back.

"Good night. Why not come and see Mrs. Strange some time? She has felt quite hurt."

"Has she? Perhaps I will try. Good night."

Skelton walked on for a quarter of a mile, and then turned and came back past Furze Cottage. He had reached the end of the laurel hedge, when he heard a few tentative chords struck upon a piano, and then her voice singing the song that haunted more than any other:

"Drink deep, drink deep of the water, Melisande."

But to-night there was no passion in her voice. She sang as though she stood at

the dark end of the world, waiting resignedly for death to come. There was a hopelessness about it that went to Skelton's heart.

And somehow that song and her singing of it sent Skelton's thoughts down to the black Rusper Woods and the Whispering Pool lying there so strange and still. He knew it with its surface of agate, its masses of willow-herb that seemed to bleed upon the bank, and the bracken making a green gloom under the straight trunks of the encircling trees. One might dream of finding Merlin there sitting bowed beside the water and staring through the long silence into the magic mirror of the pool; but it was not a place that should lure a young woman who was very lonely, one who sang with a voice that despaired.

Chapter Fifteen

Skelton faced about and walked on in the direction of Roymer village. Constance had ended her singing, and he had heard two voices talking, and one of them had seemed quarrelsome, with a jagged edge likely to cut through any sensitive surface.

"It must be bad enough to have to live with a voice like that," he thought, "especially when it starts sawing wood just after you have been singing."

Dusk was deepening, and the light in the west had shrunk to one long red streak above the black outline of the heath. Skelton struck into the main road and held on for Roymer village. He passed the church standing among its yews, and turned up one of the side roads off the Green towards a red-brick house that stood among firs and larches. As he pushed open the swing-gate the cheerful *chug chug* of a motor echoed from the stables, and Skelton, walking through the glare of a headlight, found Garside in the act of getting into his little runabout.

"Hallo! That you, Skelton?"

"One always finds a doctor out or going out. I wanted to talk with you."

"Professional?"

"No, not altogether."

"I have to run over to Stradfield. Get in and come with me. I can lend you a coat."

"Thanks. That will be just the thing."

Garside's lad was sent to fetch a coat, while the little car *jug-jugged* contentedly.

"How's 'Jerry'?"

"Alive and christened. He is going up to town next week to Cuthbertson's works. The fact is I am getting back to a temper when I want more of the particular stuff that everybody is scrambling for."

"Cash?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean——"

"Hard up? No, not that. But I see chances of expansion."

"That might mean feminine influence—anything!"

The boy came back with the coat, and Skelton got into it and climbed into the car.

"All right?"

"Right away."

They swung out into the road and across Roymer Green, where the triangle of cottages and old houses made a pattern of lights in the brown October dusk. There was raw white mist hanging in the dip at the bottom of the village, and Garside had to slow up, for the glare of the headlight played upon the mist and it was impossible to see a yard beyond the nose of the car.

"Sort of thing to make you swear when you are in a hurry."

They climbed out of the dip and above the mist.

"I have an immense respect for the man who designed this engine. Efficiency, that's what I ask for in life. I am much too irritable now to stand the fussy moods of some fool of a horse."

"Why do you get irritable?"

"Try doctoring for twenty years, and you'll know. Well, what's the talk to be about?"

"The Brents up at Furze Cottage."

Garside turned an alert profile.

"What's that got to do with you?"

"You happened to tell me you were attending the mother."

"Well?"

"And since I happen to be interested——"

Garside swept the car round a sharp corner, and they began to glide down a stiff hill.

"What do you want to know, old man?"

"Just what you can tell me."

"If any other man had asked me that question I might have punched him on the jaw. It's awful how one develops a desire to hit people."

"I know. But we're in partnership."

"All right. The mother's a drunkard and takes chloral, if that's any comfort to you."

The rapid hum of the engine was the only sound for the moment. Both men were sitting squarely, staring straight along the road, lit up by the glare of the headlight.

"What a damned cynic the ordinary fool might think you, Garside."

"Well, I don't splurge."

"You are pretty nearly as sorry for that girl as I am."

"Are you sorry?"

"Sorry to the point of taking all risks."

Garside glanced round at him with affectionate grimness.

"Go easy, old man. It so happens that I know all about these people. Do you know who the mother was?"

"No; and I don't know that I care."

"Twenty or more years ago she had her hunters and her shoot in Scotland. Wakeman, that was her married name—Wakeman. I happen to know about Wakeman. He was one of those quiet, decent fellows who so often seem to be got hold of by the wrong woman, though she came of good stock, mind you. He stood it for some time, and then blew up and went into court. I believe he is still alive. He was a generous sort of beggar, and he bought the woman an annuity after he had divorced her."

The car took a steep hill, and the quickened whir of the engine smothered conversation for the moment. The pause was dramatic and forcible, as though Garside were letting the hard facts sink in.

"Anything more?"

"I should think that would be enough for most men. I'm most confoundedly sorry for the girl; she's much too good for such a backstairs life. But look at the heritage——"

"Damn your theories on heredity."

"Take them or leave them."

"I don't believe in the bugbear. Human nature is fine in the main. It only wants handling properly, given a decent chance."

"Do you mean to say——?"

"I do."

"Hallo, here we are! I shan't be more than a quarter of an hour. Just you sit here and think it over."

They pulled up outside a farm-house, and Garside switched off the engine.

Skelton was left in a shadowy place, half road, half yard, surrounded by the vague outlines of barns, out-buildings, and stacks. The broad ray of the headlight clove the darkness, and showed him nothing more interesting than a white five-barred gate. Overhead the stars were shining, and the silence was unbroken save by a faint and muffled murmur of voices from the house.

Skelton sat staring at the white gate. It seemed to symbolise the formal and conventional barrier that closes in the thoughts and actions of the ordinary human being. There is a good deal to be said for fences and closed gates, but it is as well to remember that gates are made to open.

A great compassion had spread through Skelton's being, a tenderness that was as soft as the darkness about him. He felt moved to curse the careful, selfish spirit that succeeds because it has never dared to take generous risks. The glare from the headlight shone steadily upon the white gate.

"All right," he thought, "I see you, and I'll jump over you."

Garside came out, and loitered a moment to talk to someone at the door. Skelton started the engine.

They were settling themselves when Skelton said:

"See that gate, Garside?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to jump over it."

"That's the verdict, is it? But there are some gates that one can't jump over—at least, not without——"

"I'm not that sort of man. I don't see why one shouldn't set out grimly to design a successful life, just as one designs an engine. It is all a matter of imagination, sympathy, understanding—and something more."

"And something more!"

"Which I, for one, happen to have. The problem is——"

"Yes, just that."

Chapter Sixteen

In the great gallery of life, when a man comes to stand before the picture of the one woman in the world for him, he is lost in a kind of wonder at her and at himself, and at all that mystery of tenderness that no sensual being can understand. So Skelton, standing before his mind-picture of Constance Brent, asked himself why she stirred in him a passion that no other woman had been able to arouse.

Beauty! Yes, she had it, the beauty of the elf, with the red, pained lips and the questioning woodland eyes. There was something French about her, an essential daintiness, a fastidiousness that would never become bourgeois and blousy. When, with a man's delight, he came to consider it, everything about her was most exquisitely fashioned—the small white ears half hidden under the dark hair, the regular teeth, the hands, with their refined, impulsive fingers, the feet and ankles that needed no hiding under a skirt. As for the woman in her, it had all that luring elusiveness that reacts so powerfully upon a man bored by young women who are too interestingly active and loquacious. She could sit still and say nothing, and make him wonder what was passing behind her eyes. The protective instinct leapt out towards her and held up shield and sword, warning the world back. He knew that she was no fool, that the charm was no mere virginal bloom, for once or twice he had seen her soul flash out understandingly in a way that no man of the world can forget.

Well, how should he begin? He was so conscious of her sensitiveness, so alive to her fragility, that, big man that he was, he felt that he must keep his strong hands behind his back, lest some too heavy touch should spoil everything. There were so many ways of showing a woman the truth—the boy's way, impetuous, idealistic,

egotistical; the way of the man of five-and-thirty, more restrained, more unselfish, more understanding, with just a twinkle of tender fun in the eyes. Yet he was too much in earnest to feel that he would muddle things by being self-conscious.

Two wet days followed the night of Skelton's drive with Garside. He spent them in dismantling "Jerry" and packing the parts for their journey to John Cuthbertson's works. He did a great deal of quiet thinking, and lost himself so completely in this new mystery that old Mrs. Gingham came near stumbling upon the truth, and Josh had hours of glorious inactivity in the tool-shed.

Said Mrs. Gingham to her neighbours:

"Dunno whether he be in love with that there engine of 'is, or whether it be some young woman. My! if Mr. Skelton went a-courtin', I reckon the girl would know it! Masterful? Bless me! I should 'ave 'ad no more strength than a bit of thistledown with a man like that."

"Do 'e 'ave any letters?"

"Nothin' that looks like 'avin' crosses inside of it, so fur as I can tell."

"Maybe it's the engine. I 'eard of a young chap as was so soft on 'is motor bike that 'is girl got jealous and chucked 'im."

The third day opened clear and yellow, with a backrush of the warmth and the scents of summer. The very beauty of it made Skelton feel restless. In the morning he saw the heavy crate that held "Jerry" go off to the station in one of Mr. Jackman's coal carts, and when "Jerry" had gone the workshop seemed very empty and the wooden stand like an empty cradle. In three days' time he would be following "Jerry" to town, to assemble all the parts and show John Cuthbertson what the gentleman was like.

For the moment the soul in him longed to rush out and to accomplish self-expression. He made a pretended lunch, and told himself that he would go out for a long ramble and do a lot more thinking. There were the Rusper Woods. He would walk down there and sit by the Whispering Pool, feel her presence there, and try to see pictures in the water. He might get some intuitive glimpse of how things ought to happen.

A wind had risen—an adventurous wind that whipped the clouds across the deep blue sky and let floods of sunlight loose upon the brown splendour of the deciduous woods. Skelton went over Roymer Heath, with the white house up yonder showing amid the firs and gorse. Below, and to the south-west, stretched the Rusper Woods, black, thousand-spired, mysterious, smitten by the sunlight or darkened by cloud shadows.

The line of straight trunks rose and rose as he descended the heath, till their tall

grandeur, and the solemn gloom behind them, stood for the very gateway of romance. A path curled in and lost itself amid the multitude of tree-trunks, and the white clouds galloped overhead. But, though the wind moved in the tree-tops, the wood below was strangely still, and the low, constant murmur of the wind above made the silence below seem more profound.

Skelton stopped now and again and looked along some mysterious alley-way where the sunlight slanted in, touching the brown carpet of pine needles and making a golden haze about the trunks. What a corner of the world for adventurous happenings, for a clashing together of two charging, mail-clad figures, while a white-faced girl stood in the shadows and shivered! Of course it was the bounden and romantic duty of the right man to win, to catch up the girl on to his great horse and ride off into a lover's twilight.

Presently the trees thinned before him, and beyond the yellowing bracken Skelton saw the sheen of the Whispering Pool. It lay still and calm, without a ripple, blue sky and white clouds and green tree-tops reflected in it. The purple of the willow-herb was gone, and nothing but the silky seed threads remained.

On one side of the pool a fir tree had fallen, and lay hidden by the bracken that grew in places some five feet high, and Skelton, trampling through the bracken, sat down on the fallen trunk. This woodland seat was not his alone, for he could tell by the track through the bracken that someone else had been to and fro. The inevitable pipe came out, to add something to the scent of the fern, the fern whose many tints gave the impression of a number of different yellow lights falling upon the tall fronds. It was a forest within a forest, and down the trampled track Skelton had a view of the pool.

Perhaps he had been there half an hour, when Constance Brent came along the path and out into the one patch of sunlight that lay beside the pool. It was a coincidence that Skelton had not counted on; moreover, he did not see her at first, nor she him, for the bracken was too tall. She just came out of the gloom of the woods like a bird from nowhere, and stood there in that piece of sunlight, staring at the pool. She was very pale, with a queer, far-away look in her eyes as though she were trying to see below the surface of things, to catch a glimpse of the whence and whither.

She moved forward and went straight to the water's edge, and it was then that Skelton saw her. She was bending forward and looking down as at her own reflection in the water, her hands stretched out a little, with the palms upward. Skelton sat as still as a hunter who has been lying in ambush waiting for a panther to come down to the water to drink.

She remained poised there a moment, and the poise suggested neither curiosity nor thought, but rather an attitude of hesitation—a tragic faltering between two alternatives. In a little while she began to walk slowly round the pool, looking at it slantwise as she walked, with a kind of brooding wonder.

"Drink deep, drink deep of the water, Melisande."

When she came opposite to him Skelton saw her lips move as though she were whispering the words of the song. He could see her eyes, and the look in them made him draw his knees up ready to spring up and forward. She was still staring at the pool, and did not see the figure half hidden by the bracken.

Her hands came up and made quaint, downward soothing passes over her bosom. She smiled suddenly at the water, the unforgettable smile of one whose thoughts reach out towards oblivion. Skelton held his breath. The self in him that had suffered even to the point of a passionate desire for self-destruction saw and understood.

"Good God, is it as bad as that!"

Chapter Seventeen

Skelton saw Constance Brent kneel down and dip her hands into the water and move them slowly to and fro, as though playing with the substance of this thing that was able to give her forgetfulness. Sometimes she withdrew her hands and watched the drops fall back into the water, making minute, silvery ripples.

Skelton's pipe had gone out, and he put it in his pocket, his eyes remaining fixed upon the girl kneeling by the pool. He could imagine her angry when she discovered that she was being watched, but some deep instinct was urging him to tempt her anger, to outface it, to carry her forcibly away from the refuge of her shy distrust. He saw all these things clearly for the moment in the strong and generous light of his own compassion.

Leaving the dead tree, he walked slowly through the bracken down to the pool, and he was still wading through the fern when Constance Brent looked up and saw him. She was on her feet almost instantly, and gazing across the water at him with startled eyes. There are times when the garment of the flesh wears very thin, letting the outlines of the soul show through, and Constance Brent felt herself standing before this man like some spiritual Eve in all the tragic nakedness of her despair.

He was smiling and raising his old slouch hat to her, and for some seconds they looked at each other across the pool. She seemed to read the truth in his eyes, that the water of the pool had been symbolical of death, and that she had been dabbling her hands in it, so passionately unhappy that she had been seized by a sudden hunger for oblivion.

She felt discomfited, unable to think or to act, yet conscious of a feeling of defiance and resentment. Skelton was walking round the pool, and she stood there

helplessly while this new force swung round to her, and all the laws of attraction and repulsion contended chaotically within her body.

She wanted to turn and run, to break free, to escape from the sense of inevitableness, from the instinct that told her that he had seen her soul in its nakedness.

"I suppose Melisande's pool was much like this."

He was within five paces of her, and her eyes felt compelled to look at his. They were still smiling, but behind the smile she imagined something intense and stern, something that watched her and read her very thoughts.

"I don't know."

"As for drinking deep, I think the water would be rather brackish!"

His voice was very quiet and kind.

"I happened to be sitting over there on that dead tree."

Somehow she knew that she had betrayed herself, and that he was determined to make her realise that he had witnessed the betrayal. The blood rushed to her face and brain. She felt in a whirl, giddy, unable to think.

"I came out. It was so beautiful after the rain."

"And I startled you a little? We can't help having chosen the same refuge. I am going to have the courage to talk to you, and to make you talk to me."

"I don't know that I understand."

"Let's try talking, anyway."

She realised that there was no barrier between them, and that they were standing there face to face in the thick of the fir woods, and that Skelton was determined that it should be so. A big and compassionate masterfulness overshadowed her. He was so much cleverer than she was, so much bolder, so much quicker in his fencing. Besides, all the humiliation was on her side, all the dread of the truth that he had guessed, all the resentment against him for guessing it.

"One starves, you know, if one never talks."

"Oh!"

"And I suppose this pool has a peculiar fascination for us both."

"I don't know. It may have."

"For me it calls up a song; for you it is a mirror—a dark glass in which you see your own troubles floating."

She could not guard the level look he gave her, and her eyes filled with fear and anger.

"My own troubles! I don't know why—you——"

"Don't grudge it me."

"What should I grudge you?"

"If I called it comradeship I should not be telling all the truth."

She winced, and her face looked pained, as though he had touched upon some sore memory. Her hands hung limply. Her one instinct was to keep him away, to hold him at a distance, for she was possessed by the idea that the rough male spirit had many methods of attack.

"Mr. Skelton, I don't think I understand."

"Let me remedy it."

"But I don't know you. I don't——"

He put his hands into the side pockets of his coat, and this most trivial act had a significant meaning for them both.

"In the first place, you are afraid of me."

Her eyes flashed to his, and her colour rose.

"You mean——"

"Come, let's get it over, and all the absurd discomfort of the thing. It's because I don't want to worry you that I am talking rather boldly. It's best in the end. You are afraid of me. Why?"

"I don't see that it matters whether——"

"It matters more than anything else in the world."

She half turned away from him, and her lips quivered.

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't——"

"Pester you?"

"I didn't say that. But you don't know——"

"My dear, my dear, don't take life so bitterly. You say you don't know me, and you think that a man may be any sort of cad. If you believe that I am just a light-hearted fool, who does not care twopence whether he gives you pain or not, look at me squarely and say so. I can only tell you that you are wrong."

His voice thrilled her, and arrested every movement. There was a new note in it, something that she had never heard in life before, and yet a something that she had heard in dreams.

"I don't think you ought to say that."

"We are just talking to know each other, you and I."

"But it seems so strange!"

"What seems strange?"

"That we should be talking here, and——"

"That you hated me for being here. I had to risk that; one has to begin somewhere. Now, to-day you are to think of me as a sort of brother, just a fellow

you can trust. And I am going to walk back with you, and you are going to let me be a regular chatterbox."

She looked up and caught the teasing tenderness in his eyes, and for the first time hers answered them.

"I don't think I could stop you talking."

"That's what Garside says. But I want an echo—and something more than an echo."

"Yes?"

They walked round the pool and through the bracken to where the path led back towards Roymer Heath. Skelton kept a little apart from her, his hands still in his pockets, his whole figure touched with a comforting nonchalance that suggested tranquillity and self-restraint. Constance's eyes glanced at him tentatively. Was she afraid of him? Perhaps in a different way, for she felt the strong pressure of his manhood behind that quiet self-confidence.

"I am going to talk about myself."

"You mean to make it a kind of bargain!"

"Are we a couple of savages? You know how they trade. I'll put my beads and gold dust and leopard skins on the ground."

"Yes?"

"And you must see what you can make of it."

As he talked to her, giving her half grim and half whimsical pictures of his own life, she let her glances wander along the black alleys of the wood, feeling the strangeness and the mystery of the place to be part of the strangeness of this new experience. Yet she could not escape from the memories young Herbert Gascoyne had left her, and, however different this other man might be, she felt ready to shrink back from the intimacy he seemed determined to offer her. Moreover, so far as she was a judge of life, the past made everything so impossible; yet how was she to make him understand?

They had left the fir woods, and were half-way across the heath before Skelton developed the most significant part of his confession. He had purposely kept his eyes from her face, as though realising that the veil that covered her pride was very thin. But as he touched upon that great overthrow of his manhood, when he had come so near to taking his own life, he glanced occasionally at her face, to watch how the words stirred the sensitive waters of her consciousness.

"We all have our rough times. You may be pretty sure that we understand life better when we have suffered."

Yet the significance of the thing he had confessed to her challenged so forcibly

her experience of an hour ago that she felt dazed by it as by an intense white light. Something cried out in her, "Why have you told me this? It is not fair, this trying to bargain."

She pressed her lips firmly together, and resisted the appeal. He was trying to make her uncover her soul to him, tempting her to a kind of spiritual wantonness, and her sensitive pride revolted. She looked eagerly for the chimneys of Furze Cottage, and saw them at no great distance above the gorse.

"You must have suffered a great deal."

She uttered the words almost primly, and Skelton's eyes, searching her face, found it hard and white and unresponsive. Meeting his eyes for the moment, the seeing look in them confused her.

"My leopard skins and gold dust are not sufficient?"

"But I never asked you——"

"What can I add to the pile?"

She felt bewildered and hardly able to think.

"It isn't fair——"

"Do you look on it as nothing but a bargain?"

She kept her eyes on the white house that was separated from them by some hundred yards of red-brown heather. And, though there was silence everywhere, she felt in the midst of clamour, importuned by passionate voices, pursued by a mob of thoughts. She could have put her hands over her ears and run.

"I can't talk to you like that."

She wondered what he would say, what he was thinking.

"Try."

"I can't."

"Is it so hard for you to realise what it means to me?"

"But why should it mean anything?"

"Because it does."

She stopped as though fascinated, and stood looking into his eyes. Her lips quivered, and then began to speak:

"I can't talk to you as you have talked to me. I can't—and you don't understand."

"Try me. I may understand more than you imagine."

"Oh, I can't. It's too—too sordid."

She looked at him with a kind of hopelessness, and suddenly he saw the tears swimming into her eyes. All his compassionate reasonableness lost itself in a rush of feeling. He tried to take her hands.

But she flung away, humiliated and dismayed.

"Don't—don't! Please let me go on alone."

"My dear, you are too much alone. It is just because——"

"Don't—oh, don't!"

She turned and ran towards the white gate in the laurel hedge, leaving him to wonder whether he had blundered.

Chapter Eighteen

Mary was roused from sleep by the sound of someone opening her bedroom door. She left the curtains undrawn at night so that she might wake easily in the morning, for Dora Brent, who lay abed till ten, was in the worst of tempers if her early morning tea arrived ten minutes late.

A full moon was shining, and Mary saw a figure standing between her bed and the window. It was the figure of a girl in a white nightdress, her hair loose upon her shoulders, her face turned towards the moonlight.

Mary sat up in bed. "Miss Connie, what is it?"

She did not turn, nor did she seem to hear, but stood there motionless where the moonlight slanted in.

"I can't get away—I can't get away!"

She uttered the words in a queer, whispering monotone, and, facing round suddenly, walked back towards the door.

Not till then did Mary realise that Constance was walking in her sleep. She slipped out of bed, thrust her feet into a pair of slippers, and, putting on a dressing-gown, followed the white figure out into the passage. Constance was standing at the head of the stairs, as though about to descend them.

"Oh, my dear, come back!"

Mary spoke the words more to herself than to the girl. Her head was full of the tales she had heard of sleep-walkers dying of fright from the shock of being awakened suddenly. She held back and watched to see what Constance would do.

"Dear Lord, send her back to bed!"

But the dream-self decided otherwise. Constance began to descend the stairs,

one hand gliding down the rail, her figure growing dim as it sank away into the darkness of the hall. Mary followed her, shuddering as the stairs creaked. She saw the dim figure glide across the hall and enter the drawing-room, and for a moment or two she waited in the hall, thinking that Constance might return.

Then she heard the click of the catch that fastened the French window.

"Good gracious! If she isn't going out in her night-dress!"

Mary found her standing at the top of the short flight of steps that led from the veranda into the garden. It was a raw and rather misty night, but with no wind moving. Beyond the black line of the laurel hedge Roymer Heath showed vague and dim and ghostly.

Mary paused just within the window and shivered.

"She'll catch her death of cold. I'd wake her, only I'm afraid."

She saw Constance stretch out her hands and feel the air like one who is blind.

"I can't get away. It's the Whispering Pool, and the water's so black."

She went down the steps, murmuring something to herself. Mary stood spellbound.

"She'll tread on the gravel, and it will wake her."

But it did not wake her, and she walked barefooted across the grass, the moonlight shining upon her white night-gear and making a mist about her hair. Mary followed her, absolutely puzzled as to what to do. This dream pilgrimage might carry her half across Roymer Heath.

"I'll have to wake her if——"

Constance turned abruptly and walked straight back towards the house. Her eyes looked at Mary, but they were unseeing eyes, large and round and empty. To be looked at like that and yet not to be seen made Mary wince. It was so eerie, so unhuman, so much like being stared at by a ghost.

Constance paused quite close to her, and Mary saw her lips move.

"It's horrible. I can't get away from the black water. No one ever says, 'Dear, I love you.'"

The same dream trick that had brought her out of bed and sent her wandering barefooted over the wet grass drew her back towards the house. She re-entered it by the window, passed through the drawing-room and hall, and up the stairs to her own room. Mary, still following, saw her close the door.

"My dear, you've given me a scaring!"

She stood for a while, listening.

"I'll get the key another night and lock you in. But you mustn't know, if I can help it. Poor soul, you're not happy."

This night adventure and certain other incidents that followed it at Furze Cottage sent Mary down to Roymer to the doctor's house among the larches. She caught Garside making up the physic for the day, and the surgery was empty.

"I've got ten minutes, doctor. The dinner's cold, all but the soup. And I said as how Dutton had forgotten to send the coffee, and I'd fetch it."

Garside held his hands under the tap, and dried them on the roller-towel behind the door.

"Another breakdown?"

"It's about Miss Constance."

His face lost its look of cynical tolerance.

"Oh! Come inside and sit down. Now let's hear all about it."

Mary told her tale, her sympathetic common sense giving it a vividness that kept Garside silent. As a rule he did not allow a woman to rush into a characteristic monologue; he was too busy to listen to useless and egotistical verbosity, and putting the patient in the witness-box, held a cross-examination, relentlessly smothering all attempts at oratory.

"Well, go on. What's your view?"

"It's the life, sir, that's just breaking her heart. I've noticed it for months now. I've told you she walks in her sleep, and I've caught her crying, crying just like one who's dead weak after a long illness. You know how they cry, doctor, for no reason at all, but just because they're so miserably weak."

Garside stood with his elbow on the mantelpiece, looking down into Mary's steadfast, upturned face. She was one of the exceptions so far as he was concerned, one of the few women a man can talk to as though she were a man.

"The mother is responsible."

"To be sure, doctor. And everything's been against her. I don't know whether you know, doctor, about——"

"Mrs. Brent's history?"

"Yes."

They exchanged significant glances.

"I happen to know about that. Does she know?"

"Everything. It's enough to cloud any girl, to be outside of life, so to speak. And then this summer—I don't know whether I ought to tell you, doctor."

"You are a woman of sense."

"Of course I must tell you. It was that there young Mr. Gascoyne. He came hanging about after her."

Anger came into her voice as she told Garside of the affair, and the man's

swarthy face seemed to grow swarthier. One large fist clenched itself in a trouser pocket. His nostrils dilated.

"The young cad! The thing shocked her badly?"

"I had to put her to sleep with me, doctor; she was no more than a child that way. I could have gone and—well, what can a woman do? But it's all along with the other things. What's she got to live for up there? That's how I look at it."

Garside's eyes had a glitter in them.

"I think you have summed up the case pretty well. Even a plant must have something to live on. And Mrs. Brent?"

"She's getting worse, doctor."

"Just so."

He was silent a moment, staring out of the window at a row of birch trees whose yellow leaves were fluttering and falling in a rush of wind. Some things seemed as inevitable as the fall of the leaf, and in this inevitableness lay their sadness.

"I'll come up to-morrow. There are cases where people bleed to death without having an artery touched."

"It's the spirit that's bleeding away, sir."

"Yes, the blood of life, the will to live."

When Mary had gone Garside went back into the surgery and resumed the making up of the day's medicine. There were two parts of him in action at the same moment—the mind that measured and the mind that thought. Of immense vitality, the very strength of his passions sometimes broke through his self-restraint. The waste-paper basket got in his way as he stood to take a bottle down from one of the corner shelves, and he put his foot through the thing as though violence was a means of self-expression.

"What a damned lot of wickerwork there is in the world! If one could only put one's foot through some of these problems. There ought to be a quiet corner in every town where you can take a cad and thrash him without anybody asking questions. If it weren't for the old women——"

He set the bottle down very gently, and there was more violence in that self-restraint than if he had banged it upon the table.

"What the devil is one to do in such a case? The chances are that the girl will simply wilt away into a hopeless neurotic."

He slammed a label on the medicine bottle.

"What about Skelton? He'll be back from town in three days. It might be a solution. He'd have to risk it."

Garside's thoughts had "gone to town," and in that vague and completely ugly

district north of King's Cross Station, and somewhere in the neighbourhood of Brewery Road, stood the red-brick buildings of John Cuthbertson's engineering works. They straggled along a cobbled side street, where the lorries and vans made a most abominable clattering, and the smuts came down on nothing but brick and slate and stone. Up above two or three little black pipes puffed steam all day, and there was the constant glugging of gas-engines and the snarling of machinery in action.

Away from the workshops and the great rooms where the mechanics laboured stood an iron-roofed building, set apart in a quiet corner at a little distance from all the mere mechanical unrest. Here there was a sense of calm, purposeful cerebration. It was the brain that worked tranquilly, undisturbed by the hands that wielded hammers and the machines that bored and ripped and ground, creatures that howled and snored with delight as they vented their strength upon tissues of steel.

In this particular building "Jerry" was running a test, with two blue-trousered mechanics at his service and three experts on the watch. John Cuthbertson was one of them, Skelton himself another, the third a tallish, silky, round-shouldered man, the colour of tallow and charcoal, with waxed moustache and sleepy eyelids. He was dressed in frock coat, well-pressed trousers, and patent-leather boots, and he watched "Jerry" with a bored air, one sleepy eye half closed.

"You can shut off, Simpson."

"Yes, that will do."

The engine came to a stop, and the three experts stood staring at it for a moment in absorbed silence. The man in the frock coat produced an eyeglass, and went walking round the bench like a quiet-footed and observant cat. It was not the engine alone that interested him, but Skelton's new transmission gear.

He prodded it here and there with his white, restless fingers.

"Very nice—very nice, indeed! Suppose we go and have a chat?"

Skelton was watching the frock-coated figure with an amused curiosity. He had been allowed to see behind the man's pose and under his sleepy eyelid. The patent-leather boots and the neatly creased trousers were for the edification of fools, and his soft, conciliatory, well-shaved manner were to help people to forget that he was too devilish clever.

They passed into Cuthbertson's private room, and sat down in the comfortable arm-chairs. A cigar-box was handed round. The sleepy man's profile seemed to harden, with its straight nose and massive chin. A kind of baffling look came into his eyes. He smoked, and twitched one patent-leather boot.

"Bench tests are all very well, but what do you think of doing?"

He was politely aggressive, and Cuthbertson put the bulk of his massive common sense in the man's path.

"Go on testing—practically. That's obvious."

The eyeglass turned on Skelton.

"Have you got plans out?"

"Yes. For heavy motor traction, motor boats, and self-propelling railway carriages."

"Working models, full size? Are you ready to back them?"

Skelton smiled.

"My banking account lies in my head. Cuthbertson and I are going in together."

The Yorkshireman lay back comfortably in his chair, as though he were thoroughly satisfied with life.

"Of course, Doyle, I am ready to do the backing. I believe in the thing, but we are giving you the chance of coming in."

Doyle bowed with cynical urbanity.

"Thank you. Supposing we were to sketch out a hypothetical agreement?"

They did so, but with a good deal of sword and buckler play between Cuthbertson and the man in the frock coat. Skelton smoked and listened, holding himself in reserve, leaving Cuthbertson to deal with the financial aspect of the venture. The big Yorkshireman had a quiet and immovable way with him. It was character against cleverness, and Doyle, who had made his hundreds of thousands, and could lay a finger on most men's soft places, seemed to know when he had run up against oak.

"Well, you are a bit of rock, Cuthbertson; I'll think it over."

He rose to go, putting on his suave and conciliatory manner with his top hat. The eye under the drooping eyelid twinkled slyly.

"I'll write you in a day or two."

And he left them alone together.

Skelton and Cuthbertson sat and eyed each other in silence for some moments. The ultimate smiles arrived simultaneously.

"Clever devil! It was the transmission gear that fetched him. That's what we have all been worrying after, and you've got it."

"Do you think he will join in?"

Cuthbertson stroked his beard.

"Sure of it. He is an extraordinary beggar is Doyle. He has a kind of second sight, devilish intuition. That's what has made him. He has hardly ever missed a good thing. But he is a bit of a conundrum."

"A conundrum—to a good many people!"

"Did you notice those eyes of his? You never quite know what he is looking at; they seem to go round the corner and get behind you. And all his confounded suavity and that patent-leather boot business! I've got to know him a little now."

"The affable way in which he was going about to bag five-eighths of the possible profits and to get his grip on the patent rights!"

"Putting it as a sort of favor! I know how to sit down and play the mountain with old Doyle. He will come in, and he is a genius at pushing a thing along."

Skelton sat and stared at Cuthbertson's boots.

"You are treating me almost too generously, Jack."

"Bosh, old man! I knew you would come along with something; I was only waiting for it. I was pounding along here, while you were doing the brain-work down in the country. And, by George! it seems to answer."

"Anyway, you have escaped getting commercialised. I tell you, I believe that chap Doyle would poison us, if it were possible, walk off with the ideas, and spend the evening entertaining a few bishops at dinner."

Cuthbertson smiled shrewdly.

"Some of these people are so devilish clever that Society would have no chance if it did not retain the handcuffs. One takes no chances with Doyle. Tie him up to the last eyelash, for some of these chaps can get out of an agreement like those conjuring fellows who are tied up in chairs, and then get out behind a curtain. Well, you'll stay another night?"

Skelton threw his cigar-stump into the grate.

"Thanks, old man, but I'll get back to-night. There are some things I want to look after."

"Cabbage plants?"

"You know; I gave you a hint."

Cuthbertson nodded his big head.

"Good luck to you, old man. By God! yes, good luck."

Chapter Nineteen

Skelton never forgot that wet walk from Fallowfield Station, with the darkness full of a persistent drizzle and the mud squelching under his feet. Over the clay lands by Fallowfield the road ran through ash and hazel coppices, and under rows of towering elms, and everywhere there was a feeling of rain and of leaves falling in the darkness. His own mood had a warmth of exultation that kept out the melancholy of the November night, and his almost boyish aliveness made him remember every detail. It became a prelude to stranger and more problematical happenings—so vivid a prelude that the notes of darkness and rain had only to be struck for the whole November night to be repeated, with its falling leaves and rustling elm trees.

As he entered his own gate the wet smell of autumn leaves and soaked soil seemed to become intensified. He opened his chest and drew in deep breaths, feeling that life was excellent and the earth itself miraculous. Those few days in London had whipped a new excitement into his blood and flicked up his ambition, yet he came back gladly to this cottage under the fir woods, for there was a mystery here that no great city could surpass. He had been telling himself all the way from Fallowfield that it could be counted to him for wisdom that he had chosen to get back nearer to Nature. Mechanical science and life in a great city were too thinning for the human soul. For sometimes a man must run naked in the woods, and see Pan and listen to the music of his pipes. The city "woman" with the painted face becomes a too odorous and frowsy thing when great oaks dream in the moonlight and elf women glide by in gossamer, and the Holy Grail can be seen like a moving heart of flame by eyes that can see other things besides steel and brick and newspapers.

Mrs. Gingham had hidden the key in the hole under the thatch, and Skelton

unlocked the door, and dropped his bag on the couch by the window. A struck match showed him that the good soul had left the table laid for a cold supper. He lit the lamp, and glanced at the mantelpiece to see if there were any letters.

He found one that had been left by hand. The writing was familiar.

"Garside? Wants to try and persuade me to shoot, probably."

He felt hungry after his four-mile walk, and sat down to supper. Garside's letter remained unopened until he had put away a good helping of cold meat. Presently, between the courses, he slit the envelope with the butter knife, and helped himself to raspberry tart.

His first glance at the letter was quite casual, for Garside was outside the magic circle of his mental horizon.

> DEAR SKELTON,—Can you give me a call when you come back from town? I have some news for you. I ought not to disclose it, but it seems to me that I might be helped by passing it on to you. Stuff in a bottle is useless on some occasions. Come up in the evening and have a smoke.—Yours ever,
>
> GARSIDE.

Skelton glanced at his watch. The hands stood at half-past eight.

"Too late to trudge up there to-night. What does he mean by being so cryptic?"

Yet he was conscious of a clouding of his mood, of a reaching out of his conjectures towards the white house up yonder. Was Garside pointing at Furze Cottage? Was she ill, or had she made a second betrayal of that desire for oblivion? He felt curiously uneasy, yet ready to quarrel with his own restlessness.

"Garside would have spoken out if it were anything serious. Besides, why should I immediately imagine he is referring to Constance? It seems to me all roads lead that way!"

He pushed his chair back, crossed the room, and looked along the mantelpiece for his favourite pipe, an old "bulldog" with an amber mouthpiece, that he had mislaid and forgotten to take to town with him. He remembered now just where he had left it, on the windowsill of the tool-shed behind the cottage.

He went into the kitchen and lit a candle.

"I'll go up to-morrow evening," he said to himself as he opened the back door.

The draught blew the candle out, and he did not trouble to relight it, knowing his way perfectly in the dark, and feeling sure that he could put his hand at once upon the pipe. He found the key in the shed door, turned it, and thrust the door inwards

with his foot.

One of Josh's peculiarities was an absolute passion for disorder, and if there happened to be a wrong place for a tool the lad was pretty sure to leave it there. He had a haphazard way of hanging things up, generally with an eye on something else, and as often as not they fell down again, and he left the picking up till the morrow. Skelton, entering in the dark, had no notion that a roll of wire netting had toppled over and lay across the entry. He caught his toe in it and pitched forward on his hands.

Something sharp caught him across the left wrist, and being human, he swore.

"Devil take the young fool!"

The fingers of his left hand felt warm and wet, and scrambling up he groped about to find the thing on which he had fallen. It was a hoe lying on the floor, blade-edge upwards, and if Josh had improvised an ingenious trap he could not have been more successful.

Skelton knew that he was bleeding, but he did not realise how badly till he got back into the cottage and into the light.

"Damn!"

The sharp edge of the hoe had gashed one of the arteries at the wrist, and blood was spurting out in no uncertain fashion. Skelton knew something of "first aid," and gripping his left arm below the arm-pit and pressing hard with his thumb, he saw the flow at the wrist cease.

"This settles it about seeing Garside."

In five minutes he was out in the lane, after locking the door. It was so dark that he decided not to try the path through the woods, but to keep to the main road.

Garside had finished a hard day, and was largely spread before the fire, reading a novel and smoking an old pipe, when Skelton rang the surgery bell. Garside threw the book aside, heaved himself out of the chair, and went himself to see what was wanted.

"Hallo, is it you? Come along in."

"Sheer necessity, my dear chap."

"What?"

"I never imagined that one could get so tired hanging on to an artery for half an hour."

"What the dickens have you been doing?"

"Trying to find something in a dark shed, and falling over things that confounded boy of mine had left lying about. I landed with one wrist on the edge of a hoe."

"Compressing your own brachial! Come along in."

He lit the gas and glanced at Skelton's wrist.

"Artery cut?"

"I'll let go for a moment."

"Phew! You will have to be tied up. And I can see that that hoe was not particularly clean."

"My lad does not worry about such details."

"Funny sort of coincidence. Sit down here."

He made Skelton sit down and bathe his wrist in a basin of warm water while he got ready his instruments, disinfectants and dressings.

"Feeling all right?"

"Yes. I had been back only about half an hour after a most successful jaunt to town. I got London fever, and wanted to walk down Goswell Road and through Clerkenwell and Aldersgate, and smell all the old smells. I tell you Bloomsbury gave me thrills, and I wanted to rush in and ask the porter at the Foundling to come out and dine in Oxford Street."

"By Jove, old man, don't! It makes me think of those roaring days when I had eighteen-penny table d'hôte lunches at little Italian restaurants when I was in cash and felt ducal. And the hospital 'rugger' matches, and the rags, and the smell of the hot streets in summer, and the fireflies and fly-by-nights, and the strawberry barrows and the flower girls, and Piccadilly Circus! By Heaven! don't I wish I was back in it all, sometimes. Now, let's have a look."

He examined the cut.

"I shall have to get hold of that artery."

"All right; go ahead."

It was by no means a pleasant business, but Garside was deft with his fingers, and both men talked hard all the time as though nothing were happening.

"That's got him. Now for a good clean up. I shall have to put you in a couple of stitches. By the way, did you get that letter of mine?"

"Yes. It was rather cryptic."

"But probably you had some idea——"

"I was thinking of Furze Cottage."

"So was I."

Garside went on talking to cover the process of putting in the stitches, and so keenly concerned was Skelton with what the big man was saying that he hardly noticed the pricking of the needle.

"The life up there is enough to send any girl into melancholia. The servant came down and saw me, and told me a lot of things. What's one to do with a mother like

that? It's perdition for a sensitive girl to be near her."

"You mean she's likely to break down mentally?"

"The life has been bleeding her to death, and who can wonder at it? Sordid monotony with that Brent woman——"

He began to bandage Skelton's wrist.

"I thought, old man, I'd tell you."

"And I shall be eternally grateful; I happen to know how serious it is."

"You do, do you?"

He looked keenly at Skelton.

"I can't tell you the incident that opened my eyes. It wouldn't be quite fair to her."

"All right. We'll turn in now and have a smoke. How are you feeling? You look a bit——"

"Rather green! I feel rather like——"

"Hold on. Put your head down, right down between your knees."

He dashed away, and returned in a couple of minutes with a stiff glass of whisky and water.

"Drink it down. I have just told one of my maids to have a bed made up. You'll stay the night."

"It's good of you, old man."

"Nonsense. It's past ten o'clock, and we can have a yarn before we turn in."

Garside's den was a cosmopolitan kind of room. He was a great sportsman, and had contrived in his early days to get himself attached to one or two African exploration parties. The hearthrug was a lion's skin, and over the door a little stuffed monkey sat on a bracket and grinned. His gun cases lay under a table in a recess beside the fireplace, and one shelf of his instrument cabinet was given up to fly-books, reels, and lines. Behind the door were several cases of birds that he had shot, stuffed, and set up himself. It was the room of a practical man—a man with a keen eye, a big heart, and a steady hand.

When the hall clock struck eleven Skelton and Garside were still sitting over the fire, with the lamp turned low. Garside was lying back, with his feet on the arch of the grate, Skelton bending forward, elbows on knees. He had been hearing the whole truth, and his face was a little grim.

"Garside, I'm glad you've told me this."

"I thought you would be."

"It explains a good deal. By George! yes, it has given me light. That damnable young cad!"

His eyes caught the firelight.

"What a vile thing sex is at times. It is like a rooting hog."

Garside crushed a piece of coal with his heel.

"It is a case for a healer, and under the present conditions——"

"That's it. She wants taking away and giving the elixir of life. That mother of hers would be better dead."

"She will be before so very long."

"But in the meanwhile——"

He stared hard at the fire.

"It has got to be a rescue, knight-errantry and the high horse. You don't think it will hurt her, old man, if I——"

"No, you're to be trusted. And, by the way, I think it's time you got to bed."

Chapter Twenty

There had been three days of continuous rain, and the wet desolation of Roymer Heath had almost merged into the grey of the autumn sky. Constance, utterly weary of the house, had fled out upon one of her long walks, for she was beginning to find that she could not sleep at night unless she tired out her body. She was ill—mentally ill—and she knew it, and would have known it without the enlightenment of the excuse Garside had made to see her when he had come up to visit her mother. She had a feeling that her "self" had been divided into two distinct entities, one remaining subjectively within the body, the other hovering apart and watching the earthly twin. She knew that she was drifting into a state of hopeless melancholy, and she could see herself being carried towards the sluices by the steady glide of the black water of her unhappiness. An effort was needed for her to save herself; Garside had said as much; but she felt utterly unable to make that effort. In fact, she did not care greatly what happened. She was even ceasing to feel things, and a fatal numbness was stealing over her, the numbness that steals over those who lie down to sleep in the snow.

Yellow leaves were being piled up in the ditches, and as she wandered along the wet lanes the scent of decay was everywhere. It all seemed part of this pathetic decadence, the death and passing of the desires of life. She watched leaves falling, and they seemed like drops of blood, or the hairs from the head of some tragically unhappy woman. For Constance Brent the whole landscape was painted in sad and morbid colours, and the mouth of winter was ready to moan a requiem.

She passed the gate of Skelton's cottage, and a moment's flickering curiosity made her turn back and look over the gate. It was during the time that Skelton was

in town launching "Jerry" upon a problematical commercial career. The cottage was shut up and the curtains drawn, but in the garden Constance saw a boy planting out spring cabbages with a dibble. The wet black earth, the green of the young plants, and the brown of the boy's corduroy trousers were in vivid contrast. A great blue rain cloud hung in the northern sky above the gaunt tops of the firs.

Constance walked on, wondering whether this man with the brown face and the intent eyes would leave her unmolested. Her attitude towards him was one of hesitating incredulity. She felt so infinitely superfluous that Skelton's aggressive interest in her failed somehow to be convincing. Even if he were not a superior sort of Herbert Gascoyne, it was all so useless, so impossible. She told herself that she had not the heart to care for any man, and that she was nobody in the most significant and shameful sense, and that a man could not mate with nobody. The very thought of marriage frightened her. It was a strange, horribly intimate, hazardous state, and the very idea of physical surrender made her shudder. At that time, in the thick of the fog of her morbid loneliness, she saw the creature, man, distorted and exaggerated.

Constance was tired out when she returned to Furze Cottage, and her mother was in one of her peevish moods, and insisted on being read to. The book that Dora Brent chose was a volume of crudely realistic short stories, things that left the tongue rough, and a sense of uncleanness somewhere. Constance read as though she did not realise what she was reading. She strung the words off mechanically, without expression, and sometimes without sense.

Dora Brent showed temper.

"If you can't read better than that you had better shut the book up. I wish you weren't so abominably selfish."

Constance's face and hands were flaccid.

"I can't help it. I am tired."

"You are always tired when I want you to do anything. I shall go to bed."

She was as good as her word, and had her dinner taken up to her by Mary, while Gussie lay beside the tray, and was fed with tit-bits from madam's plate.

Constance spent the evening on the drawing-room sofa, with the lamp turned low, and the fire half out. She lay there brooding, in a state half between wakefulness and sleep, conscious of a dull pain somewhere, a pain that felt as though it would never pass. It was one long, spiritual ache, with a sense of compression above the eyes, and emptiness at the heart. Time had no significance. Her senses were half numbed. Even the idea of going upstairs and undressing herself seemed to demand too great an effort.

She was roused suddenly by the ringing of her mother's little hand-bell in the room above. The sound was insistent, querulous, and compelled her to give heed to it. She rose listlessly, and went upstairs to her mother's room.

A night-light was burning beside the bed. The face on the pillow looked flushed and stupid.

"Can't sleep—can't sleep at all."

Her utterance was thick, as though her lips were swollen.

"Pour m'out a dose. Glass by the bed."

Constance went to the medicine cupboard and found the sleeping mixture and the tablespoon that was used for measuring. The light in the room was very dim, but she managed to pour out a dose into the spoon and emptied it into the glass that stood on the table beside the bed. A pile of books lay between the night-light and the glass and threw it into shadow.

"Here it is."

Dora Brent sat up in bed, took the glass from Constance, and drank the stuff down. Her hand was very tremulous.

"Sleep now. Tell Mary not t' make a noise."

Constance took the glass from her and put it back on the table.

"Good night."

"Goo—night."

She slipped out of the room with a feeling of relief, for she had grown to hate it because of its associated ugliness.

Constance slept well that night, for she had tired out her body, and when she woke next morning the sun was shining. She lay still for a while, listening to Gussie yapping intermittently in her mother's room. The dog seemed more restless than usual, and she wondered how her mother could stand the noise.

The sunshine persuaded her to get up early, and she opened the window wide and looked out over the heath. The sunlight was still struggling with masses of white mist that streamed upwards like smoke and dissolved into the upper air. Here and there a Scots fir loomed through the vapour, vague and gigantic. In the garden below the leaves of the laurel hedge were dull and lustreless, covered with a fine film of moisture, and the last roses hung their heads, over-weighted by the dew. Between two rolling masses of mist Constance could see the black Rusper Woods thrusting their peaks up into the sunlight.

She began to dress, becoming more and more conscious of Gussie's restless yapping. How Dora Brent could suffer the discord she could not imagine. And then it struck her that there was an unusual note in the dog's barking.

Constance had turned towards the door when she heard Mary come out of her room, walk along the passage, and enter Dora Brent's room. For the moment the dog's yapping grew to a crescendo, and then whimpered out into silence. Constance stood listening. The silence struck her as so very strange, for there was no sound of voices.

Opening the door, she went out into the passage, to find Mary coming towards her. There was a north window here, and the cold light poured in and lit up the woman's face. It was shocked and very pale.

"Miss Connie——!"

"Something has happened?"

They stared at each other, Mary holding herself very stiffly and gripping hard at her self-control.

"Miss Connie, just go back to your room for a while."

"Something has happened. I heard Gussie barking."

"Did you?"

"Mary, tell me; I must know."

"Miss Connie, dear, she's—she's dead."

They stood, both of them, as though stupefied, looking at each other in the cold northern light of the passage. Constance's face was a white mask. She was trying to grasp things, trying to think.

Then Mary spoke.

"She had had her sleeping draught, for I poured it out for her when I fetched away the plates, and the glass is empty."

"Mary!"

Constance's eyes dilated.

"But I poured it out too—when she rang the bell. She never told me——"

Mary's face was working.

"Oh, Miss Connie, my dear!"

The girl went to her and put her hands upon the woman's shoulders.

"Mary, look at me! She must have had a double dose. And I never noticed it in the glass, for the light was so bad. I've killed her!"

Mary's eyes tried to meet hers, to answer them reassuringly, to thrust the horror of the thing aside.

"It may be——"

"But she had it—the double dose. I've killed her!"

Mary put her arms round her and began to speak in an awed and appealing whisper.

“Don’t look like that, Miss Connie, for God’s sake don’t! It was as much my fault as yours. Now, put your head down here and cry it out. Do, now, dear heart.”

But Constance freed herself, turned, and walked back slowly and steadily to her room, her face like the face of death.

Chapter Twenty-one

It was about eight o'clock when the lad who looked after the pony and the garden at Furze Cottage came coasting down Roymer Hill on his bicycle, swerved round into the side road and dismounted outside Garside's gate. He left his bicycle against the gate-post, ran up the path leading to the surgery, extracting a crumpled letter from a side pocket as he ran.

Garside and Skelton were at breakfast, with an open French window letting in the fresh November air and a robin who hopped in daily for a meal of crumbs. The rank green lawn was dappled with sunlight and fallen leaves, and in the border beyond it chrysanthemums white, purple, bronze and gold, were still in bloom.

A maid brought in a note on a brass tray.

"From Furze Cottage, sir."

Garside's eyes met Skelton's as he took the note from the tray and opened it. The writing was in pencil, large, round and childish, the writing of a servant.

DEAR DOCTOR,

Mrs. Brent died in the night. Please come quick. She had too much of her sleeping draught. I'm afraid for Miss Connie.

Yours obediently,

MARY HALL.

Garside passed the letter across to Skelton.

"What does that say to you?"

"Good God! Is the woman dead?"

"I had better go up at once. The surgery people can wait."

"Shall you drive?"

"Yes."

"I'll come with you."

"All right. I have a feeling that there is something behind this."

Skelton was re-reading Mary's scrawl in pencil.

"Did she take a narcotic as a rule?"

"Yes, chloral. It was no use trying to break the habit."

"I wonder how she got an overdose?"

"That's it. I hope the girl has not to go through some sordid inquiry."

"I hope to God not."

In ten minutes Garside had his car out, and they were climbing Roymer Hill through the thin November sunshine. Skelton had his left arm in a sling, and his eyes had a touch of fever in them, the fever of a long night passed with but little sleep. When they had left the church with its black yews behind them, Roymer Heath began to spread to the west, blue and hazy in the sunlight. Here and there a gorse bush showed a sprinkling of yellow bloom.

Garside turned the car into the lane leading to Furze Cottage, and they saw the white walls and brown roof showing between two groups of Scots firs.

"Rum thing death. I never can get used to it. Such a brutal breaking away of everything."

"If it could be relied on to take the right people——"

Garside was thinking of his own wife, dead these seven years, yet living on in memories that were miraculous and tender. He could never think of her without a savage feeling against Fate and a welling up of infinite compassion. That one woman lying dead in the earth! It had never ceased to be incredible.

"Ah, if it could!"

He pulled the car up in front of the white gate where wheel tracks showed in the gravel. Dora Brent would never pass to and fro again in her pony-cart with the Pekinese yapping on the seat.

Skelton climbed out to let Garside pass.

"I'll stay here."

"All right."

"Don't forget, I am waiting to take my chance."

"I shall not forget."

Mary had been on the watch, for she met Garside at the door. Her face looked haggard and shrunken, the mouth firm, the eyes very anxious.

"Doctor, it's good to see you. I've had two shocks in a morning."

"How did it happen?"

Mary glanced over her shoulder as though the house held something that was to be feared.

"Come upstairs, sir, and I'll tell you."

They went into that upper room where Dora Brent lay sleeping the long sleep, with the blinds drawn down and the bed-clothes folded neatly. The dog had been taken away and shut up in the stable. Mary closed the door, drew up one of the blinds, and stood looking at the dead woman with a hard and resentful wonder. Yet there was some pity in her eyes, pity for the woman whose life brought pain and sadness to others.

"It's funny to think of the harm she's done, and the fine-looking woman she was —and she lying dead."

"Let it pass."

"I'll have to tell you, sir. She had a double dose of that chloral, though I don't know whether she died of that. She asked me to pour out one ready, and she must have forgotten—or been stupid, you know—for she rang, and Miss Connie went up and poured her out a second dose. The light was bad, and she didn't see the other stuff in the glass; and she knows, and she says she killed her."

Garside stood at gaze.

"You found her like this?"

"Yes, quite peaceful; but the dog, he took on, poor thing. And there's worse to tell."

"What?"

"Miss Connie shut herself in her room, and I had a kind of dread on me because of the look I had seen in her eyes. I was writing that letter to you, sir, when I heard her come out of the room, and something sent me upstairs after her. She came in here and over to the cupboard yonder, and was for taking——"

Garside nodded.

"Poor child! Poor little woman!"

"I took the bottle away, sir, and broke it—there—in the grate. And I got my arms round her, though she seemed sort of strange and dead. She's in her room now, with the key turned."

They stood looking at the dead woman, and the same thought was in either mind.

"Do you think it can be kept quiet, sir?"

"What, Mrs. Brent's death?"

"Yes."

"No. I shall have to tell someone else. But I don't suppose that overdose would have killed a healthy woman."

"If you could only make Miss Connie believe that!"

"I'll try to."

For the moment there was nothing more to be done in the room where Dora Brent lay. Mary pulled down the blind, and turned again to Garside.

"Will you see Miss Constance, sir?"

"Yes, if she will see me."

He went downstairs into the dining-room, while Mary knocked at Constance's locked door.

"Miss Connie, dear, Dr. Garside would like to see you."

A lifeless voice answered her:

"I can't, Mary—I can't see anybody."

"But he's so kind, and he'll tell you——"

"I can't. Ask him to go away."

"But, Miss Connie, dear, do just try."

"It's no use, Mary, I couldn't bear it."

The voice was unpersuadable—the voice of obstinate misery that refused to come forth and uncover its face. Mary retreated, and told Garside of her failure.

"She won't see you yet, doctor."

"No? Well, it's understandable. Perhaps she is better left alone for a few hours."

"Poor dear! It means a break-up of everything. You know, doctor, she'll have nothing but what the furniture fetches. It was all in an annuity, and Mrs. Brent wasn't a woman to stint herself. And——"

"All that can be looked into presently. The first thing is to get through all this miserable business and to spare her all we can. You leave it to me."

He found Skelton walking restlessly up and down outside the laurel hedge. Garside was not a man who wasted words, and he told Skelton the blunt facts. They brought a kind of hunger of compassion into the younger man's eyes.

"Can't you manage to save her all this?"

"Old man, it's not possible. It's fairer to her that everything should be clear. I'll drive over this morning and see Crumwell; he's a decent fellow, and will make things as easy as he can."

They looked each other straight in the eyes.

"Do you think she ought to be left alone?"

"I should say that was just a wild impulse when the pain was at its worst. I think it is best for the present."

Skelton was grinding one heel into the sandy path, his forehead heavily lined.

"I am going to stay about here for a while. I tell you, Garside, I have a queer feeling about things, and that I must be near her just now, even though she does not know. I dare say you understand."

Garside's eyes looked very sad.

"Oh, yes, I understand," he said.

Chapter Twenty-two

Skelton wandered about among the furze bushes and the groups of firs that covered the heath in front of the white house, whose darkened windows blinked in the November sunlight. He could hear the incessant whining of a dog coming from the stable, where the Pekinese had been shut up with the fat brown pony, and the sound jarred on Skelton, perhaps because he felt that it must be a sound of torture to Constance herself.

"They must get rid of that dog," he said to himself. "I'll get Garside to have it shot; it isn't necessary to waste sentiment on a little beast like that."

Compassion and love grow on the same stem, and to Skelton the pathos of this maid's tragedy meant an almost miraculous quickening of his inward vision, and an exquisite refining of all his intuitions. He could see beyond the drawn blinds and glimpse what was passing in that silent house. The aching regret, the self-accusing shame, the vague and prospectless future, the shrinking of a sensitive spirit from the insolent questions the world asks—all these were very real to him. For that hour on Roymer Heath he had the soul of a seer, and his restlessness was the greater because of his supernormal vision.

He stood leaning against a tree-trunk, under the shade of a group of firs, and watched the white house with eyes that waited. He had heard, in imagination, the plaintive crying of a voice a great way off, and he was but waiting for what should follow.

It was with a feeling of acquiescence that he saw a blind lifted at one of the upper windows, remain raised for a moment, and then fall back again like a lid closing over an eye. The shadows thrown by the firs and the grouping of the trunks

made it unlikely that anyone coming from the house would see him standing there. He kept his eyes on the white gate in the laurel hedge, feeling convinced that she would come out by that gate. He was as sure of it as he was of the fact that his senses served him.

Everything happened just as he had forecast it. The white gate opened, and a figure came out through the opening in the hedge with something of the air of a bird escaping from the doorway of a cage. She did not see Skelton, but fled straightway along the heathland path that led down to the Rusper Woods, pinning her hat on as she went.

Skelton was able to keep her in sight without much trouble, the more so because Constance fled away blindly without looking back to see if she were followed. She had put on a plain white blouse and skirt, and the white figure went in and out among the furze like an ivory shuttle through the strands on a loom. She walked very fast, and even broke into a run at times where the slope of the ground was with her, and the very way she crossed the heath was but a rendering into life of Skelton's premonitions. Impulse had seized her, and was hurrying her away. She was obsessed by a wild desire to escape from everything, to attain oblivion, to sink into forgetfulness.

Skelton let her enter the woods before he quickened his pace to overtake her. He was half afraid of losing her among the trees, but Constance kept to the path as though she were following the thread of her fate. She reached the edge of the clearing where the Whispering Pool lay half in sunlight and half in shadow before Skelton closed in on her, running the last fifty yards over the carpet of pine needles. So obsessed was she by her own mad purpose that she did not hear him, did not so much as dream that anyone was near her.

He called her by name.

"Constance."

She turned without a sound, and stood facing him, mute and confounded. Skelton was within three yards of her, and she was conscious of the shine in his eyes, and of a something that transfigured his whole face. Under the shade of the fir woods and by the sunlit edge of the pool death and life challenged each other.

Skelton acted on impulse, the impulse that carries a man above and beyond self-consciousness. His love came forth naked and unashamed.

He went and took one of her hanging hands, and stood looking into her face.

"You are coming back with me."

She shivered as though cold, but said nothing.

"Look up at me, dear; look and see if there is anything to make you afraid."

Her eyes rose to his, mesmerised, answering to his suggestion.

"I—I don't know——"

He lifted the hand and kissed it.

"Connie, I am going to make a stand for you against all this. It's no theatrical business. I want you more than I ever wanted anything in life before. You are coming back with me, and I am going to teach you to live."

She seemed dazed, unable to understand.

"But——"

Skelton put his right arm over her shoulders, and drew her round and back towards the path that led to the heath.

"Yes, I know; I know everything. There is nothing you need tell me. Try and realise that I understand, and that you can talk to me as though you were talking to yourself."

She suffered him to shepherd her back under the firs whose topmost boughs breathed with a vague, yearning wind from the west. Her white face and her wondering eyes were part of the mystery of this place of lights and shadows. The strong arm round her seemed to be lifting her up out of the waters of darkness into which she had fallen. Inarticulate astonishment seized her. It was so impossible that anyone should trouble to understand.

"How did you know I was coming here?"

"When we care very greatly, there are some things that we take care to know. Now, you are not going to be afraid of me. I am not like that young cad of a Gascoyne."

He felt her shrink within his arm.

"Oh!"

"It is best to speak out."

"I didn't care——"

"I know that. It was just because you were most abominably lonely and you wanted—life. That is not the only sort of man in the world."

He watched her white, meditative and suffering face.

"You know that I——"

"I know that you have had nothing that can be called life. I have known that a long time. I want to change all that."

"You?"

Her eyes lifted to his.

"Yes."

"But why?"

"It's very simple. Just because I love you."

Her eyes were a little awed, even incredulous.

"But it's so strange. You hardly know me, and I'm——"

"You are you. What more does a man need to say? My dear, I think I fell in love with you that very first day I saw you at 'Vernors.'"

The awed light in her eyes increased.

"It's very wonderful. I don't know what to think, what to say to you. And everything has been so horrible just now."

"That is why I want to carry you right away from it."

She walked on in silence, her eyes looking into the deeps of the woodland.

"But I don't know whether——"

"Of course you don't, just yet."

"I mean—it isn't fair to you."

His arm tightened.

"Connie, don't go making new problems. I am going to be here, near you, like something a little better than a big brother. Don't worry that too sensitive soul of yours; nothing is so bad as we imagine. But you are going to make me a promise before we get out of this wood."

He stopped and held her back, looking down at her very dearly.

"Now, don't be scared."

"But what am I to promise?"

"To live. Never come down to this damned pool again. It's a wizard's looking-glass, an infernal lure!"

He felt her breath come and go.

"What have you done to your hand?"

"Never mind my hand. Promise. I'll help you to keep it."

Her lips moved, and her voice was almost a whisper.

"Yes, I will promise," she said.

Chapter Twenty-three

Constance had to suffer all the sordid impertinences that follow such a death as that of Dora Brent. The next day—a Sunday—brought specimens of the common herd up from the village, those indefatigable and barbarous fools who stare over gates and peer through hedges with insatiable curiosity. As for the inquest which Mr. Crumwell, the coroner, found necessary to hold at the "Kings Head" inn at Roymer, it would have passed off considerately enough but for the self-importance of a little grocer from a neighbouring village who was inclined to play the blow-fly. This person, blessed with a nagging beard, yellow teeth, and a notion that he was exceptionally acute, chose to assume that "the business was very fishy." He did not like the girl's attitude, taking the cold calm and the reserve of a sensitive spirit to be indicative of callousness, perhaps something else. Wet woe, blubberings, a general emotional disorder, appeal to the gross sentimentality of the bourgeois mind, a mind which cannot understand silence in marble, or the frozen reservations of a sensitive pride. The grocer, like many men of his class, had a most absurd idea of his public responsibilities, wearing them with the unction of some petty mayor wearing his robes. He began to ask the witnesses questions, questions that insinuated that things were not as they should be.

Crumwell, a large man with much experience in dealing with self-important jurymen, put out a big hand and wiped the blow-fly off the window pane. Snubbed for the moment, the grocer waited till Garside was called, and then flew in again with officious buzzings. Garside, who had been sitting next Skelton, and swearing under his breath, used a foot where Crumwell had used a hand, and some of the jurymen sniggered.

The grocer, bumptious as ever, tackled Garside afterwards in the brick-paved forecourt of the inn.

"One moment, doctor, please. I should like to state that I am not at all satisfied."

Now Garside had a temper that blazed on occasions.

"Oh, you go to hell," he said; "you go to hell with a pound of your own candles."

Dora Brent was buried in Roymer churchyard, with an Irish yew standing like a black sentinel at the head of her grave. Garside and Skelton so contrived things that gaping curiosity was reduced to a minimum, and Constance, who insisted on going through the ordeal, was spared being treated like an interesting freak. She drove back with Mary to Furze Cottage—Mary, who had been studying Skelton all through the service with critical and curious eyes.

"Who was the tall man with the doctor?"

Constance stared out of the window.

"Oh, that was Mr. Skelton, an engineer."

And Mary had to be contented with this bare outline.

Mental suffering often has an accumulative effect, no change being noticeable until the beam of the balance swings over suddenly, and the poise of years is reversed. It fell to Mary Hall to notice the change in Constance Brent, a deepening of that apathetic calm that had carried her through all the detestable formalities of those last few days. Constance gave the impression of having been emptied of all vitality, and both soul and body were growing bloodless and cold.

All through the day following the funeral she sat in a chair by the fire, staring at nothing in particular, motionless and inert. A dressmaker came up from Roymer to fit some of the mourning that had been ordered, nor had the woman ever dealt with so plastic and yet so lifeless a figure. Constance went through the process of being fitted without speaking, without betraying a flicker of feminine interest, without even troubling to look at herself in the glass.

The woman remarked upon it when Mary let her out of the house.

"She's going to be ill."

Mary, none too pleased at having her own fears amplified, was somewhat abrupt.

"She's just tired out, and so would you be if you were her."

But there was more than weariness, more than mere physical lassitude in Constance's case. Our ideas of life become more complex the more deeply we look into life, Nature life in the sea, in the slime, in the supernormal phenomena of consciousness. We no longer dogmatise so readily, or pat ourselves with pride over long words and explanations that explain nothing. What Mary beheld in Constance

Brent was a suggestion of the soul withdrawing from the body, or of the vital fire dying down until its red core dwindled to a solitary spark.

She was perfectly rational, perfectly calm, not in the least emotional. In fact, an utter lack of emotion was the most striking point about her. There were no weeping fits, no nerve storms, but rather a frozen, level surface, without shadow effects, without expression.

Mary began to be worried. It was with the greatest difficulty that she could persuade Constance to take anything to eat.

She tried the stimulus of a little coaxing.

"Won't you go out, Miss Connie, and get some fresh air? I'll put on my hat and come with you."

"You can open the window, Mary; that will give me all the air I want."

Even her voice betrayed a damping of the vibrations and a loss of tone.

"Miss Connie, dear, you mustn't take it to heart too much and mope."

"I am not moping."

Which was true, most ominously true. If there is such a thing as spiritual anæsthesia, Constance Brent was sinking into such a state. Her senses, too, were chilled, and had lost their delicate responsiveness.

A piece of clumsiness on her own part forced this fact very vividly on Mary's mind. When carrying in a big bowl of chrysanthemums she tripped over the edge of the carpet, and the bowl crashed to the ground. Constance, who was lying on the sofa, never flinched or turned her head.

"Miss Connie, I'm so sorry."

"Has it broken?"

Mary stared. Broken indeed! The crash would have jarred most people's nerves.

She began to piece up these impressions, and to look for Garside's evening visit. He had promised to come up and look into Dora Brent's affairs, and go through the papers that she had kept in the Sheraton bureau in the dining-room.

Garside drove up in his motor about half-past eight, and left the car standing just inside the white gate. Constance had gone to bed early, and Mary, who had been waiting and listening, had the front door open before Garside reached it.

"Well, how are things?"

"I've got everything ready for you, sir. Miss Constance has given me the keys. She's gone to bed, and asked you to excuse her."

Mary had made elaborate preparations. A good fire burnt in the dining-room grate, and she had arranged a reading lamp on a table so that the light fell full upon

the bureau. Under the lamp were what Mary considered to be appropriate accessories—a siphon, a whisky decanter and a glass, pen and ink, a box of matches, an ash tray, and a stick of sealing-wax. A big wastepaper basket stood ready to accept anything in the way of a donation.

"You mean me to be comfortable! You might bring your work and sit in here; there may be some things I shall want to ask you about."

Mary went for a petticoat she was hemming, and when she returned Garside had unlocked the flap of the bureau and was beginning to look through the various papers. And a strange conglomeration of things he found there—dress patterns, old letters, several photographs tied up together with a piece of green ribbon, a number of pages torn out of a diary, a cavalry officer's gilt spur, receipted bills, and a roll of newspaper cuttings. It was in a recess under a dummy partition that he found the papers and documents that were of importance.

"How has Miss Brent been?"

He threw the question over his shoulder.

"That's just what I want to talk about, sir."

She began to describe all that she had noticed about Constance, and to describe it so arrestingly that Garside forgot the dead woman's papers and sat listening.

"It might be what people used to call dying of a broken heart."

"Do you know, that is a very fine description of a case?"

"I wish it wasn't so fine, sir."

The ash-tray on the table caught Garside's eyes, and his hand went into a side-pocket for his pipe.

"I have seen cases like this before. I may as well tell you that physic is no good. She wants taking right out of the old life into a new world."

Mary watched him pathetically.

"And who's to do it, sir? We've got rid of the dog, and I've packed all her things away—the books and clothes and all that. But I don't suppose you'll find that Miss Constance has been left much money, and who is there to do anything for her?"

Garside smiled as he lit his pipe.

"Do you know that there is someone who wants—well, to marry her?"

"Bless me, no, doctor!"

"There is."

"Who?"

"Mr. Skelton."

"What, that tall, brown-faced gentleman with the glittery eyes?"

"That's the man. But not a word of all this to anyone. Understand?"

He was so brusque and fierce for the moment that Mary's hands stopped sewing.

"Yes, sir. But what kind of man——"

"If I had a sister, Mr. Skelton's the man I should like her to marry."

"If it could only happen, sir. She's just like one who's drowning, and wants dragging out of the water."

Garside turned back to the bureau, and for an hour or more there was no sound in the room but the rustling of papers, the scratching of a pen, and the asking and answering of an occasional question. Garside was quite the man of affairs in his knowledge of the ways and means of life, being far more than the mere surgeon and physician, probably because many of his patients had persisted in regarding him as an encyclopædia of treatment even when the ills were other than ills of the flesh. He had helped to pack young prodigals off to the Colonies, had advised on wills, arranged marriages, and prevented one or two divorces. Moreover, he had acquired a certain knowledge of the working of all those formalities which the legal gentlemen so carefully conceal from the eyes of the public, desiring to keep men blind in order that there may be no loss of fees. And as a matter of fact, Dora Brent's estate was not very complex, even pathetically simple so far as her daughter was concerned.

Garside had it all before him after working for a little more than an hour. Dora Brent had left a will, properly signed and witnessed, and all that she had to leave she had left to Constance. The tragic part of it was that the estate amounted to next to nothing.

He told Mary the truth.

"It seems to me that there is nothing but the furniture and about fifty pounds at the bank. Her pass-book was made up only two weeks ago. This annuity of hers, of course, dies with her. Do you know if she ever saved?"

"She was not the woman to save, sir."

"There is no record of any saving. I don't suppose a sale would fetch more than three hundred pounds. Twelve pounds a year, or so. You see?"

Mary nodded. He looked at his watch. It was half-past ten.

"I'll come up to-morrow and see what I can make of the child. I must have a talk with her. And if Mr. Skelton should come up here, you will understand?"

"I may say as I'm no fool, sir, and I'd do anything to see her happy."

Garside drove up again next morning, and saw with his observant and kindly cynical eyes far more than even Mary had seen. The compassionate manhood in him was shocked. When he left he drove straight to Skelton's cottage at Roymer Thorn.

Skelton had paid an after-breakfast visit to the Stranges. A long talk with

Catharine Strange had heartened him, for what woman of wisdom cannot help the cleverest man when he happens to be in love with a woman?

"Teach her to laugh," she had said, "for laughter is not far from tears. And don't think me a materialist if I tell you that one can do much for a woman by letting her look into shop windows. The shop window of life! Oh, yes, we are not superwomen. A new dress or a new pair of shoes do count. Do you take me?"

Skelton had laughed, in love with the admirable humanism that underlay her words.

"I think I realise something of that."

Garside found him in his workshop, shaping a piece of rough brass on his lathe. He took his pipe from between his teeth, laid it down on the bench, and looked at Garside with humorous earnestness.

"Hallo!"

"It is hallo! What do you mean by using that wrist of yours?"

"There's nothing much wrong now, and I felt like a cat when a storm's coming. You have been up there?"

Garside sat down on a stool and told Skelton all that he had to tell.

"She has been left practically with nothing."

"I'm not looking for any such assets. I prefer my woman naked, so far as property is concerned. But she herself?"

"I have told you. I have seen something of the kind once or twice before. I might say she is dying very, very slowly for the lack of the will to live."

Skelton picked up his pipe and relit it.

"Then, it is to the rescue. You think——"

"I believe it is the one hope. If you could give her a new vitality."

"I can do it, old man. By God, I believe I can do it!"

Chapter Twenty-four

Skelton went out into the fir woods at the end of the meadow and walked up and down one of the woodland ways, feeling that he must be utterly alone for a while before going up to Roymer Heath. As Garside had said, it was a case for a rescue, nor was Skelton young enough to overlook the fact that there may be danger to the rescuer as well as to the rescued. Put crudely it would have appeared to most men of the world as a piece of absurd quixotry. "What, marry a girl with no money, no position—or, rather, a very anomalous position—and such a heritage! My dear chap, it's preposterous."

Perhaps the most vital quality in life is the quality of courage—the fine texture of the timber without which nothing is durable, nothing certain. Most men are cowards because of their selfishness or their materialism, fearing loss of prestige, loss of profit, loss of comfort, loss of a cheerful and indolent acquiescence in some sort of creed. The higher courage is very rare, that imaginative valour that believes that most things are possible if we persist in believing in their possibility.

Moreover, no man can be more tender, more compassionate, more blessed with a fine understanding of the various values of life, than the man who has to work and to struggle and to suffer. Pain is a spiritual food, especially when a rich vitality has triumphed over pain. As for Skelton, he had this higher courage that flashes into audacious tenderness and looks beyond into the gold of truth. He was neither little, careful, nor conventional, and he was in love.

About three in the afternoon Skelton started to walk to Furze Cottage, when the thin and slanting November sunlight threw all the autumn shades into rich relief. In the fir woods the bracken was a mass of gold, the black trunks rising out of it to ascend

into an atmosphere of finer and more ethereal gold. There was a sense both of pallor and of wistfulness everywhere, with the blood of the summer sprinkled upon hedgerows and on the bosoms of the wind-blown thorns. The grass had an almost blue tint under the softly yellowing sky, and the dark heather was a sea of bronze.

Skelton turned in at the white gate, noticing the wheel marks in the gravel and the forlorn look that November brings to the most conventional of gardens. The rank lawns were stippled over with worm-casts and littered with blown leaves, and the borders, emptied of dahlias and geraniums, looked sour and neglected.

Skelton was surprised by Mary's smile when she opened the front door to him. It was neither sly nor significant, and yet suggested an intimate and welcoming approval.

"Is Miss Brent in?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will she see me?"

"Won't you come in, sir?"

She was shrewd enough to guard against the intervention of any possible whim by showing Skelton straight into the drawing-room, where Constance was lying on the sofa with two cushions under her head and shoulders.

She was dressed plainly in black, and the red cushion under her head had the effect of making her look more white and ethereal. Her eyes seemed to have grown larger, lethargic, and more shadowy, and her lips had lost the red of the brier berry. She turned her head, and looked at Skelton as though she were neither surprised at seeing him nor moved in the very least by his presence. Her eyes did not brighten, nor was there any kindling of the blood in her.

To see her lying there so white and still in her black dress made Skelton's heart go out to her with a great yearning. The sunlight that slanted in fell very gently upon her. He was shocked by her lifelessness, by the ominous change in her, by the very pose of her hands, lying palms upwards as though in surrender.

"Don't get up."

He drew a chair round and sat down so near to her that he could stretch out a hand and touch her if he wished. His coming had brought no ruffling of the surface. She lay there, inert and relaxed, watching him as though nothing he could either say or do would matter very greatly.

She managed to speak.

"I hope your wrist is better?"

"I have forgotten all about it. My health's a negligible quantity just at present. How have you been sleeping?"

In the spirit he bent over her with intimate tenderness. Voice and eyes were the voice and eyes of love.

"I can't sleep much."

"We must change all that."

"I am wondering whether it matters. I don't know whether I want to go on living."

"It matters to me, and to you. I want you to marry me."

Her eyes met his with no flash of desire or flicker of confusion. They were empty —eyes that might have had no soul behind them. She appeared to accept his words as a mathematical brain might accept a formula, understanding it with unemotional lucidity, and recognising its suggestiveness.

"I can't marry you."

She spoke slowly, dully.

"You must see that I can't marry you. It would not be fair."

Skelton sat with his elbows on his knees, and his lips smiled.

"You think it would not be fair?"

"To you."

"To me? And why?"

She lay absolutely still, her eyes half closed.

"Because you must know that—my mother—that I——"

He broke in with a rush of fierce chivalry.

"Whatever may have happened in the past is dead. You and I are alive. What is dead does not concern me. I refuse to recognise it."

She was silent a moment, feeling the vibrations of his voice in the air about her.

"But that's not all. I shall be very poor—I'm not strong—and people—It wouldn't help you if you married me. Besides——"

"Well?"

"I think it's only out of pity."

Skelton's right hand swept out and covered one of hers.

"Connie, look at me."

Her head turned on the red cushion.

"I love you. Do you hear that? I love you."

She sighed unconsentingly, and closed her eyes.

"It's so strange. But I can't listen."

He bent over her.

"Dear heart, you are ill and very weary. I understand; I understand it all so well because you are so very dear to me. You feel that you don't care, that you can't

bother to care, that life is all grey and cold. Yes, but I am going to change all that. I can give you back life, teach you to laugh again. Oh, I know, you have been cooped up here, but you will come right away with me into a new world, a world where things happen and the people are alive."

She opened her eyes, looked at him, and seemed to be waiting.

"Yes, that's not all. Dear, I love you, not selfishly, not roughly, not for a week or a month. I love the you in you—not the mere woman. I tell you I can make you happy. Don't doubt it. I have known what it is to suffer, and therefore I know what happiness should be."

The shine of his eyes seemed to kindle her for the moment, but a tired wistfulness stole over her face. She moved one hand, and let it lie palm upwards.

"I know you are good. It's so sad. I can't feel—feel anything. It's as though I were dead. And——"

He bent nearer as though catching the whispered words of one who lay dying.

"Yes."

"I don't think I could care. No, no; don't think me horrible; I am trying to tell you the truth. I don't feel alive enough to care. It would be like your marrying someone who was only half alive."

He looked steadily at her a moment, and then gave a deep and inarticulate cry. His arms went round her, lifting her up with all the strength of his love. One hand was under her head. He held her very close to him, and spoke with his lips near to hers.

"Oh, my dear, I can give you life—breathe life into you. Look at me; open your eyes."

She gazed at him, dazed, wondering.

"I—I can't. It's so horrible—so horrible not to be able to feel."

"I will teach you to feel."

"But it might not come."

"It shall come."

He kissed her upon the mouth. "There's life in that. Oh, my beloved, you shall live and not die."

Chapter Twenty-five

The windows of Roymer were blinking their eyes in a storm of wind and rain; and Garside, buttoned up in his mackintosh, came out of one of the cottages above the bridge, and glanced with disgust at the grey and scolding sky.

"You hag, and I was going to shoot to-day."

He paused with an observing eye on a tall figure that was marching over the bridge with an energy that outfaced the weather. Skelton was walking as though he had put a hand on the wind's chest, and was pushing it backwards out of his way. His brown mackintosh was nearly black with the soaking it had had, and he had pulled the peak of his cap well down to keep the rain out of his eyes.

Garside smiled.

"Nothing matters at such a time. One even forgets the weather."

He moved across to intercept the striding figure, and the eyes that looked at him from under the peak of the cap were like the eyes of a sea-king steering his warship towards some land of adventure.

"Hallo!"

"I was coming your way. I have just had tea with Mrs. Strange."

"Come along, then. Any news?"

"Only that I hope to cease to be a bachelor."

A gust of wind, sweeping down between two houses, lifted Garside's hat, and he had to chase it across the green. He came back looking grieved and thoughtful.

"Did the weather ever consider a man's dignity? So you have made up your mind?"

"I have asked her to marry me."

"Yes."

"She refused."

"Refused you! And, then——"

"I am going to marry her."

"By refusing to be refused?"

"Just so."

Garside's eyes glittered.

"That's the song to sing; use the force of suggestion. If I might put in a word!"

"Well?"

"Get her out of this infernal climate. Go south—anywhere. A winter in England would be all against her in her present state."

"That's just what I mean to do."

They turned in at Garside's gate where the larch poles were rocking in the wind.

"That's why I went to see Catharine Strange. Oh, she's fine; there's a touch of genius about her. But I can tell you, Garside, it means a plunge for me."

"You mean——"

"Financially. My future is balanced on a knife-edge, and I have got to leave it at that. You know I have a little capital, and I am going to sell five hundred pounds of stock."

"And plunge with it?"

"Yes; bring back her joy in life, and, by God! I don't grudge it. She has never known what life is, and I am going to fill up the blanks for her. The Rue de la Paix, Monte Carlo, olives and orange groves—those white towns by the blue sea. The dull and so-called conscientious people may talk about extravagant selfishness, cities of sin, and all that. What rot! A good, riotous, spendthrift holiday does us all the good in the world. There are some fools who seem to think it immoral and cowardly to get out of this island for the sake of a little sunshine. It's like much of their religion, grubbing along like wood-lice. Well, I'm out for a gamble, if you like to call it that, and the stake is—her health."

They were in Garside's den by now, and lighting up their pipes.

"You are a brave man."

"No, I'm in love. And do you know, old man, it makes my heart turn to hot blood to see her so white and empty of the life that ought to be hers. I tell you it makes me want to be an extravagant fool, to give her every blessed thing money can buy. I suppose the common-sense people would say that I'm on the high road to spoiling her."

"Leave the common-sense people out of the question. They are no use out of

their own rut. I have known champagne do more good than all the gentian and soda in London."

"Champagne! The thing's symbolical of all that I mean. She wants laughter, glitter and beauty. Oh, I know. And she shall have it. What is money beside the desire to live?"

Garside nodded his big head emphatically.

"You have come by a bit of inspiration."

Skelton had kept away from Furze Cottage that day, and had contented himself with writing Constance a lover's letter, such a letter as a man can write only when he has outgrown the arrogances and crudities of youth. There were moments of laughter here and there, delicate and subtle touches like the glimmer in the eyes of a love that cannot be hid. He tried to sweep her along with him in a rush of tender optimism, flattered her a little, spoke of his delight in her music, confessed that he had listened surreptitiously, and that "Melisande" had haunted him and sung herself into his heart. For Skelton was in the happy position of a man who could write all that he felt, knowing at the same time that he was no fool for feeling as he did. It was no case of sex-blindness on his part, no infatuation for some crude, raw girl, for Constance Brent was a "sensitive" in the subtlest sense, with a fine taste in music, colour, and books. Folded up in that slight figure, and looking out from those listening eyes, was the virginal soul of a very adorable woman—one of those rare creatures who seem to understand life intuitively, who seize an impression with the swiftness of light, and who are far too finely strung for the dull and complacently domestic notes of the average woman. She had reticence, insight, and no gush of adjectives that served to play upon any subject, from the Alps to hairpins. Skelton, like most men of some originality, had no use at all for women in the bulk. They bored him, especially when they tried to talk man's talk and did it abominably. Men of originality are concerned only with one particular woman, or with two or three of the exceptions. The sex, especially when it ceases to be sexual, is a temptation towards blasphemy.

But towards Constance Brent his instinct had flown unerringly. She was above the ruck, a spirit with pinions, untouched by the taint of the parlour. He believed most passionately in his power to heal her. The soul was there; it only needed sunlight, atmosphere, space.

He wrote to John Cuthbertson also, telling him frankly how matters stood.

"As the sporting journalist would put it, 'Jonathan, be thrustful,' and shoot hard at goal. I can leave Doyle to you; but after this extravagance in quest of the child's health, I shall be raging round for an income. I put great faith in 'Jerry'; and one or two of those other little creations of mine ought to bring in money. My present

income from patent royalties and interest on capital is about a hundred and fifty pounds a year, and as I told you, I am selling out five hundred pounds of stock. So, you see, I shall be in a temper to use my horns.

"As for your offer with regard to my coming back to you at the works, I have an idea that I shall accept it, unless 'Jerry' develops so much power that I shall be persuaded to set up a little experimental place of my own. The results will come to you first whatever happens.

"I will write again in a day or so."

Roymer Heath looked dreary enough when Skelton emerged from the fir woods on his way to Furze Cottage the following afternoon. The landscape was a wet, bleary grey, with rain driving before a vicious, westerly wind, and the gorse and the fir trees rocking and crying as though in pain. The white, rough-cast walls of the cottage were discoloured with damp, and the laurel hedge along the southern side of the garden shook as the gusts struck it in a succession of waves.

"I must get her out of this at all costs," that was the chief thought the landscape inspired in him.

He was wondering what her mood would be, but preferring to gauge it for himself he asked Mary no questions when she opened the door.

"Wretched weather!"

"It is that, sir. Miss Constance is in the drawing-room. Perhaps you will stay to tea?"

"Perhaps I shall."

Constance Brent was lying on the sofa in front of the fire, and to Skelton it seemed that she had faded perceptibly even in the passing of two days. He had one moment of intolerable dread, a dread lest he should be counting too much upon the persuasive power of his own vitality; but his love threw out the conviction that it was not possible for him to fail.

She held out a hand to him, and he noticed how cold it was.

"Why, you ought to be warmer than this."

"I don't feel cold."

He drew up a chair and sat down, conscious that her eyes were watching him with a glimmer of troubled appeal. They were eyes that were schooling themselves to refuse some very precious thing. She shivered when he kissed her hand.

"It was a terrible business, keeping away yesterday, but I wanted you to have that letter and to think over it. I have been making all sorts of magnificent plans."

She stiffened resistingly as she lay.

"I can't. I have been thinking it all over. It would not be fair."

"You have still got that prejudice in your dear head? Tell me what is troubling you."

"It's difficult—so difficult to explain. I feel that I could care, only that something is dragging me down and down into deep water, into a sort of stagnation. And how could I think of letting you——"

He bent over her.

"Connie, you need saving. I am here, in the water with you, and I shall not let you sink."

Her eyes widened, and out of the darkness came an upwelling of light. Her lips quivered, and the white throat grew tremulous.

"Don't let me drown! Oh, my dear, save me from myself."

She flung out her arms and was caught up into his, and held with her head against his shoulder. Her whole body shook convulsively, and she clung to him with her hands.

"Save me! I can't promise anything. I feel that the waters are closing over my head."

He put a hand under one cheek, and turned her face to his.

"Little woman, I am strong enough."

She burst into tears.

"I don't know—oh, I don't know. I feel so weak and dead, just as if I had been ill for years and years. Why is it? Why?"

"Because you have been starved of life. Lie here in my arms, and I will tell you what our life shall be."

"Dear—dear——"

She caressed him with sudden, pathetic tenderness.

"Dear, must you marry me—must you risk all this?"

"Do I look very scared?"

"It's so wonderful. Oh, my dear, make me live, make me live!"

Chapter Twenty-six

Richard Skelton was the very man for such a lover's enterprise, for his vitality was still the vitality of youth, capable of adventurous enthusiasm, while all that he did was tempered with the tenderness and insight of a manhood that has mellowed and matured. Just as he could concentrate on the creation of a machine, so he concentrated all the powers of his personality upon recreating the mental health of the woman he loved, planning each delicate and chivalrous detail, and thinking for her with a sensitiveness that was feminine as well as male.

All the poignant richness of such a June was in his blood, and his heart was enlarged within him. The earth was full of her voice, and his compassion was a perfume from the gardens of the dawn. Yet he was immensely and actively practical, crowding into a few days matters that would have kept most men meditating for weeks. He wrote letters, rushed up to town, saw friends, lawyers, business men, carried a Continental time-table and a French dictionary in his pocket, bought rings at a jeweller's in Oxford Street, made inquiries about tickets, trains and hotels. The furniture at Furze Cottage was to be sold, and the money invested in Constance's name, as soon as Dora Brent's will could be proved. Skelton had the gift of being able to press other people into his service, and of inspiring them with a kind of vicarious enthusiasm. He had Mary mending his socks, John Cuthbertson forcing the financing of "Jerry," Mrs. Strange canvassing acquaintances in the South of France. His vitality was contagious, and seemed to infect the common circumstances of life, so that they appeared to get themselves done in a way that was miraculous.

Mrs. Strange was a most sympathetic and active partisan. She had friends everywhere, and could give sound advice upon most places under the sun, her

personal experiences having stretched from Malta to Japan, and she knew a good deal about climates and their psychological effect upon different people.

She had been writing letters on Skelton's behalf, and one morning he had a note from her.

Come and see me. I think I have found the very thing to suit you.

And so she had.

In discussing travel with him her choice had tended towards the South of France, and she had justified it by her common sense and her descriptive charm.

"It may sound too much like 'good form,' but because a number of people congregate on a certain strip of sea coast, it does not follow that everybody is 'just so.' You will never get away from vulgar fools, unless you go to Greenland; and, after all, they are amusing. You want variety. I remember the first time I went to San Remo. Oh, yes, I thrilled perceptibly. People sneer at the big hotels, but if you want a little world in miniature to laugh over, why, there you are; and I can still chuckle over my little comedies. Besides, the journey is so easy. As for scenery—well, as I loathe people who gush over scenery, I will leave it for you to look at."

Skelton found her printing zinc flower labels, using a pointed piece of wood as a pen, and acid for ink. Her husband had gone shooting, and his copy of the morning paper remained crumpled up in an arm-chair beside the fire.

"That is Peter's one bit of dissipation, his one lapse into disorder. He says it crumples up the sheets ready for the maids to light the fire with, and so is justified by its utility. I have threatened to order two papers. Now, about my discovery."

Skelton sat down in Captain Strange's chair, after removing the paper and smoothing it into shape.

"I am most tremendously grateful to you."

"And I to you; I have just heard from some people who have a little furnished villa at Mentone; they want to let it for two months, as they have to be at home during December and January. It is quite *mignon*, well above the sea on the east bay, with a garden and a fine view. There is a factotum in residence who can speak English and French, cook, and shop. I remember you said something about a villa."

"I think it will be better for her at first. We can move into an hotel later if the mood takes us. This sounds excellent, but what about terms?"

"I think they are very reasonable."

In ten minutes Skelton had heard all that he wanted to hear, and was sitting at a desk by the window writing a letter that was an offer to take the Villa Proserpine.

Visions of orange and lemon trees, of mimosa in bloom, of palms and olives passed across the paper as he wrote. He heard the wind in the cypresses, and the Aleppo pines, and the soft foaming of the blue sea against the sunlit rocks.

A week later he and Constance Brent were to be married by special license at the little chapel of ease in Tidworth Valley. Skelton had chosen the place because of the charm of its isolation, and because it was served by a man for whom he had a very great liking. The marriage was to be as quiet and as simple as possible; no one knew anything about it save Garside and the Stranges.

The evening before his marriage Skelton walked up to Furze Cottage with Constance's wedding present in his pocket. Mary's smile was a benedictory embrace, for Skelton had drawn her into the conspiracy in a way that had flattered her heart. He and Constance were to spend a day or two at his cottage before going up to town on their way to France, and Mary was to spend those last few days looking after Constance and helping Skelton to pack.

"You take a temporary situation for six months," Skelton had said to her; "we shall want you with us when we come back."

"I shall be ready, sir. It's good of you to let me stay with Miss Connie."

On this evening before her marriage Constance Brent had come by a faint colour, and there was a restless brightness in her eyes. The shaded lamp had been turned low and left in a far corner of the room, so that the firelight possessed her as she sat in a low chair before the fire. Her eyes were shy of Skelton as he drew up a chair beside her, for to-morrow they were to be brought so near to each other, and perhaps she was a little afraid.

He had come to her with the feeling that marriage might appear in the light of a sacrifice to a sensitive girl, and that a sense of sacrilege might be the dominant emotion if the male spirit were rough and tactless. And all his manhood was very gentle towards her, and wholly triumphant over the more primitive self.

"I wonder how you will like this."

He took the case out of his pocket, opened it, and showed her a hoop of sapphires and diamonds.

"I got Mary to steal a little ring of yours for the size. Now, let's try it on."

He smiled as he took her hand.

"Put that most important of fingers out straight. That seems just as it should be."

She looked at the ring, and at her own hand, and then tentatively at him.

"How good you are!"

"Don't start with such a misconception; I'm human. As for those stones, I put a language of my own to them. The diamonds are—well, guess."

"I don't know."

"Constancy and understanding."

"Yes."

"And the sapphires: sympathy and no secrets."

He kissed her fingers, and then with sudden tenderness took her face between his hands and turned it to his.

"Look at me. Now, the truth. Are you afraid?"

She hesitated.

"A very little? Dear heart, don't you know me yet? Now, listen!"

He spoke words to her that only the most intimate of moments can inspire—words whose simple and elemental tenderness touched the very core of her womanhood. She flushed up and closed her eyes, and remained thus for an instant, breathing very deeply.

"I thought——"

"Are you afraid now?"

Her eyes flashed open to his, and her arms went round his neck, clinging with a kind of fierce and desperate gratitude.

"Oh, my dear, I never thought it possible. Oh, my dear, my dear!"

Frost was in the air, and the sun shone in a clear sky when Constance entered the car that had drawn up outside Furze Cottage. She was dressed in a simple tailor-made dress of black, with a big black hat shading her pale face. Mary followed, sitting well apart in her own corner as though there was something sacred and untouchable about a bride, and the car started over Roymer Heath.

Constance sat in silence, looking out over the late November landscape, with the Rusper Woods lying black and sinister under the southern sky, and holding "Melisande's Pool" hidden in their depths. A white calm possessed her. Mary, on the watch for any flicker of dubious emotion, any sign of reluctance or panic, kept smoothing down her gloves and looking at herself and Constance in the mirror made by the front glass panels of the car.

Presently she spoke.

"He's a good man, a real man, Miss Connie."

Constance did not turn her head.

"I am wondering whether I can make him happy. The giving seems all on his side."

"Oh, my dear, don't think that. It would be his way; he's one of those as has the wisdom of love in him."

"Is he different from other men?"

"There be two men in every man, my dear, and it just depends on which of 'em is master. In most cases it's the beast as rules, but with him the beast doesn't dare show his nose for fear of being trodden on. Don't you worry; just cling tight to him, and let him carry you through."

Tidworth Valley was a valley of oaks, a great pool of bronze under an azure sky. The road wound down under the overhanging boughs of these glowing trees, for the leaves were hanging late this autumn, to end in a little garden of life and of death set thick with yews and cypresses, and planted with rose bushes that made it a place of perfumes in June. The ancient, red-roofed chapel with its buttresses and tiled roof stood full in the sunlight, with the flaming oaks covering the shallow sides of the valley, so that the day was a day of gold.

Constance had a sudden feeling that it was all unreal as the car drew up outside the porch. Skelton was there, reaching out a brown hand to open the door, and smiling at her rallyingly. Garside stood waiting in the porch, and she remembered noticing that he was wearing his ordinary clothes. Behind him she could see Catharine Strange and her husband.

The stillness of it all struck her—the stillness of the woods, of the building, of the people. She had her arm in Skelton's, and they moved like figures in a dream, without substance and without sound. She wondered why she felt so calm over it, she who was pledging so much, risking a man's happiness and her own.

Someone's boots squeaked, and she smiled over the breaking of her dream image as a broad and very solid little man came out by the vestry door and stood at the chancel steps with a face like a rising summer sun. She felt an instant's pressure of Skelton's arm on hers. Then they were standing a little apart, with Garside and Mary Hall beside them.

Somehow the little clergyman insisted on making the ceremony seem real to her. She lost her feeling of vagueness and of wonder, for the man's personality was sincere and his voice made the words carry. She felt Skelton at her side, felt a stream of life flowing from him and enveloping her.

It was over, and they were in the car together, driving back under the banners of the oaks. They held hands and were silent, feeling that they were one spirit and one flesh.

It was part of Skelton's passion for delicate details that he should have hired a piano for three days.

"Rest a little, and then sing to me."

"I'm not tired, Dick."

"Then sing."

She sang for nearly an hour, while he sat on the couch by the window watching her with eyes that shone.

"I'm so out of practice."

"Nonsense! I never heard you sing better. It's the soul in the voice that counts."

She came across and knelt down at his knees.

"Perhaps I could not help it, dear."

And he kissed her.

Mary had never before served such a dinner as she served that night in the cottage sitting-room, Mrs. Gingham assisting with unjealous awe. There were candles with red shades on the table, bowls of hothouse flowers, choice fruit, and little dishes of olives and sweets. The dinner itself ran to eight courses, and they drank champagne out of goblets of Venetian glass.

Mrs. Gingham had to describe it all to her neighbours.

"I just peeked in, and, my gracious, weren't it pretty! The little lady with her eyes all bright and her cheeks pinky like, and Mr. Skelton looking that proud. Yes, and he's 'ad a wreath of flowers made and 'ad it put on 'er 'ead; all white they was, and they made 'er black hair look fine. Must say I shouldn't 'ave minded kissing of 'er, and 'im too. 'E's the most masterful gen'leman as ever I see."

There was a little bedroom reached by a passage leading from the sitting-room, and at ten o'clock Skelton held out his hand to his wife. His eyes said "Come."

The white quilt of the single bed had been strewn with flowers, and a posy of white roses lay on the pillow. Skelton looked round the room with a touch of awe.

"Sleep well, dear heart."

She stood in the middle of the room, hesitating.

"Dick, I—I——"

He caught her to him suddenly.

"No, I'll come to you gradually. My love is so very big a thing to me."

She hid her face on his shoulder for a moment.

"How is it you understand?"

"Perhaps because I care so much."

He went out softly, closing the door after him, and there was a thickness in his throat. He found Mary hovering round the table in the sitting-room pretending to clear away.

"I have sent her to bed; I think she has everything."

Mary appeared to be struggling to say some one particular thing.

"Yes, sir, I saw to it."

She faced round on him with impulsive frankness.

"God bless you, Mr. Skelton, sir. God bless you."

Words choked her, and a rush of tears came as she blundered out into the kitchen.

Skelton stood awhile on the hearthrug, smoking, and looking at some of the new and feminine things that had come into his life. There was a cloak hanging on the door, and a vanity-bag lay on the sofa. Under the chair she had used he saw a lace handkerchief lying. He went and picked it up, looking at it with eyes that smiled. "God keep you, dear."

He passed to his own room utterly happy.

Chapter Twenty-seven

They left Dover in the drizzle of a December day, with a raw south-west wind blowing, and England looking like a grey pile of desolation heaped against the northern sky. Skelton had taken a private cabin for his wife, but before the boat started they walked about on deck together, watching the people coming on board and settling themselves and their hand luggage in the red deck-chairs and along the seats. The sense of stir and of movement were utterly new to Constance, as were the types of people who crowded the boat—people many of whom could lead spacious lives and yet had dull and unimaginative faces. There was a breath of adventure in the way the wind ruffled her hair, and her eyes were bright and intensely interested in all this breezy wayfaring life.

The half-humorous dignity of her husband's poise struck her, and in the midst of these multifarious people she seemed to see him in a new light, and his figure grew taller and his keen eyes more searching. It was as though she had other men against whom she could measure him, and he profited by the contrast, looking bigger, more quietly sure of himself, more suggestive of strength. She felt proud and a little afraid.

"I can hardly believe that I am going to be in France in an hour."

"That's a certainty, unless the boat goes down. I can remember the thrill I had when I first steamed into Dieppe and saw the great crucifix at the harbour mouth."

"Have you noticed, Dick, what a lot of old women there are?"

"There always are, dear; they are chronic."

"So many of them look the odd women."

"In more ways than one. It's a dreary life."

"Very."

She thrilled, and there was still a quiver of fear. Was it possible that she could hold and keep this happiness? Was she big enough?

"Need I go into the cabin?"

"If you stay outside you will see only a lot of rather yellow people sitting about and looking aged and ugly. And there are beasts who smoke! I want you to rest."

The hawsers had been cast off, and the boat was gliding towards the harbour mouth, where a stretch of dirty grey water ridged with foam tumbled beyond the breakwaters. It looked like being a rough crossing, with the sky as grey as the sea.

"I should go and lie down, dear. I'll come and tuck you up."

She acquiesced. The boat had begun to pitch and roll by the time Skelton had the rug round her and a pillow under her head.

"What sort of sailor are you?"

"I don't know; I have never been tried."

"Delightful innocence. I'm going to have a last look at the dirty Dover cliffs. To-morrow we shall be looking at a different sort of sea."

Constance's innocence did not survive that first passage. She was ill, most dolefully ill, and hated herself—if she had the power to hate anything. Skelton, after one look, had kept away, wise in his generation, and knowing that in her heart of hearts she would be grateful to him for being blind. He marched up and down, interested in people who were not in the least interested in themselves for that particular hour. He was vaguely annoyed by the way some of the men persisted in smoking, for Skelton was none too good a sailor himself, and knew that when one is on the edge of nausea there is no more insufferable reek than the smell of tobacco.

"What selfish beasts we are! I believe some of these beggars would smoke beside their mother's death-bed, especially if she were long in dying. I'd make smoking on a Channel boat a blackguard's offence."

He did not go back to the deck cabin till the boat was entering Calais harbour, for he was one of those rare men who can travel imperturbably, and who did not push for the gangway.

"Hallo! It's all over."

She was just sufficiently recovered to feel ashamed.

"Oh, Dick——"

"There, we've had a beastly crossing; you've been one among many. There's no hurry; we'll let the sheep shove through the gap, and then go through the Customs with dignity. After that, hot soup."

"Shan't we miss our train?"

"Not a bit of it. And if we did, the sky wouldn't fall in. Now, I'll be lady's maid."

His imperturbability and his good temper were most admirable travelling companions, and the orgy of absurd excitement was over in the *douane* by the time that Skelton and his wife reached it, with a French porter carrying their hand luggage. Skelton had the knack of getting things done quickly, calmly, and without any appearance of effort. People scuttled to and fro, while this most reposeful Englishman refused to be hurried, and refused to let his wife be hurried, because the hands of a clock were made to move.

Constance's youth and colour came back to her. They had taken possession of their sleeping compartment, and when they returned to it from the buffet it seemed like home.

"We don't have to turn out again?"

"No, except for a drive across Paris. We pick up the train again at the Gare de Lyon."

"A drive across Paris! I shall love that. Dick, my hair!"

She was looking at herself in one of the little mirrors, and putting up the black strands with white fingers.

"What a fright!"

"Nonsense! I'll look round while you get yourself into what you consider to be order."

In two minutes she joined him in the corridor, smiling and alive.

"Can't we walk up and down the platform for a few minutes? I do love seeing the people; it's just life."

"We have got another ten minutes. It won't tire you?"

"No."

He helped her out at the end of the coach, and they enjoyed the life of the station together.

"You are getting on splendidly," he said to her. "Just wait till we get into the sunshine down by the blue seas."

Darkness blotted out the bare grey country as the train held on for Amiens, and at Amiens the one possible event appeared to be the wasting of a franc on a most unutterable cup of tea. Skelton brought out his French money, and arranging the coins like counters on the travelling table, gave Constance a mock solemn lecture upon the relative values of the different coins. He made a collection and asked her to pass him her vanity-bag in which she kept her purse.

"You ought to have a little French money by you. I'll fit you out with more when we get down South."

It was a sweet bitterness to her to take his money.

"I'll be very careful with it, Dick."

"Careful! You goose! Do you think I am going to present you with just twopence halfpenny a week!"

Then came Paris, a galaxy of lights and of towering black houses, with windows like yellow ladders going up into the sky. At the terminus they climbed into a taxi and were whirled across to the Gare de Lyon by a driver who drove like a dead chauffeur let out of hell for one night. Constance was very much on the edge of the seat, holding her breath and Skelton's hand, as the car whisked in and out and missed other vehicles by inches. She was not sorry when they reached the Gare de Lyon, left their hand luggage in the cloak-room, and made their way to that restaurant where the walls are more decorative than the dinner. Constance had moments of shy self-consciousness, but there were such novel exclamation marks everywhere that her eyes had to wander. A little private of Zouaves sat at the next table, and she was interested in his uniform till the soldier became so aggressively interested in return that Constance felt embarrassed.

They found the train waiting for them, and Skelton was for sending his wife to bed. She had suddenly grown tired, after the fashion of highly strung people, for her senses had been so played upon by a hundred new impressions that her vitality gave out at last, like a candle having a coil of wire brought down sharply about the flame.

It may be said that no personality has any possibilities unless it is sensitised by a fine humility. The lower the scale of social intelligence, the more cocksureness and egotistical garrulity are to be found. A fool is full of instructions and of advice, and the dullest women are those who are most respectably self-satisfied. Humility, an inward and sensitive humility, gives the shadow effects in the scheme of a personality. Without it the result is all flat, stupid, unsympathetic glare.

Constance had this fine humility almost morbidly developed, and it showed itself that night as she lay listening to the roar of the wheels and the tapping of the little metal bob of the lamp-shade against the glass of the lamp. She had tried to get to sleep and failed, and all the strange new possibilities of life crowded in on her, challenging her with an oppressive complexity.

Her husband was asleep so near to her, and yet she felt that he was far away—so much beyond her and above her in power and cleverness. He loved her, and her new pride in him brought forth incredulity and fear. Could she keep his love, deserve it—she, a raw and inexperienced girl, none too strong in body and almost too sensitive of soul? The cord of the day's happiness seemed to break as she lay there in the semi-darkness, letting her down into a pit of self-conscious doubt and dread.

A great loneliness stirred in her. She got up and sat leaning forward, looking at

Skelton yearningly. He was sleeping, and not for one moment did she think of waking him; but she bent over the man who was her husband and spoke to him with a strange, whispering tenderness, letting her hands hover close to his face.

"Oh, my dearest, love me, love me always. I will try—I will try."

She put her hands to her throat.

"Ought I to have let you marry me? You are so much bigger and cleverer than I am. Oh, my dear, if you should regret it afterwards!"

She lay down again, still tortured by the suggestions of her own humility. And presently she fell asleep, so that when the train stopped at Dijon, and Skelton started up and looked at her, she neither stirred nor woke.

He bent over her and just touched her hair with the tips of his fingers.

"That's good. Sleep right through into the sunshine."

It was an orange dawn, with frost on the ground and the cypresses black against a glowing sky, and opalescent greys and blues in the western horizon. Constance woke when they were near Avignon, and her first consciousness was shot through with a dread of some vague and unrealisable loss. She glanced across at Skelton, and saw his profile clear against the dawn as he sat at one of the windows and looked out at the flat-roofed southern houses and the haze of golden light over the fields.

He turned sharply and, coming across, kissed her.

"Here we are in the sunshine."

Her heart rushed out to him, but that morning greeting could not dispel the dread of her own insufficiency.

The day's journey along the southern coast brought a new world before her, a world such as she might have imagined in her dreams. The great hills and the blue of the sea, the red pinnacles of the Esterelles, the dense green of the clustered pines, the vineyards and reed fences, the queer box-like houses with the red, pink, or white walls, the grey shimmer of olives—she saw all these, yet with a premonition of pain. The more exotic beauty of the farther coast roused in her a sad yearning, and her eyes grew tired. Aloes and agaves, oranges, lemons, carob and eucalyptus, palms and mimosa, the white-walled, red-roofed villas, the grey cliffs hung with colour, the blue stretches of sea, surf girdling black headlands, islands lying out in a haze of mystery—she saw them all with eyes that wondered and grew weary. The splendour of it all crushed her somewhat, made her feel smaller, cruder, and more unessential. It was a strange world, and she was in the midst of strangeness, with a sense of oppression at her heart.

She made an effort to be animated when Skelton's enthusiasm flashed out at a

glimpse of Monaco.

"Look at that."

"Isn't it wonderful?"

She felt so tired and ineffectual, and her voice sounded flat in her own ears. Skelton looked at her understandingly.

"Scenery, you know, is just a matter of how one feels. Hallo, here's Monte Carlo! The station looks rather clean and small for so much notoriety. We won't moralise."

"No. It's so hopeless to moralise, isn't it?"

He turned to her suddenly.

"You are tired to death, I know. Shut your eyes and refuse to look at another thing. You will see things differently to-morrow."

She let herself sink back upon his sympathy.

"I shall get so strong and well down here, Dick. I must in the sunshine."

"Of course you will. We are going to have the time of our lives."

She wondered.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Skelton strolled across the terrace of the Villa Proserpine and stood by the balustrade, looking out towards the sea. It was a still and sunny morning late in January, and the clock in the bell tower of the old town church had just smitten the hour of eight. The Villa Proserpine was high enough upon the hill-side for its terrace and windows to gain a full view of the sea and harbour and the old town, with its battered colours and tall, flat-roofed houses. One had to go higher to see into the western bay with Cap Martin a dark ridge of pines, agate bounding a half circle of lapis lazuli. Behind towered the hills, grey cragged, splashed with red stains, silent and very still.

Wallflowers were in bloom, and roses out on the arbour at the end of the terrace. The autumn-sown grass covered the little green plots with vivid green needles, and there were tufts of freesias growing between the rough stones of the edging. On the balustrading were pots of yellow crassula, glaucous leaved aloes, and geranium. A palm threw a thin shade over the centre of the terrace, and bees were at work making January seem like June.

Below the terrace a mimosa was coming into bloom, and Skelton had spread beneath him groves of oranges and lemons, with a grey-leaved olive here and there, a fountain of silver spray in the sunlight. Rank green grass and herbage caught the light that sifted through the trees, and was splashed by it into many depths of gold. Bougainvillea, roses, and huge climbing geraniums covered the face of the retaining wall of the terrace. Below were other gardens, other white-walled, red-roofed villas, with palms and cypresses, and fruit trees falling away towards the blue pavement of the sea. Wallflowers and narcissi scented these gardens. On the right, above the old

town outjutting on its spur, stood the cemetery, with its white tombs and black cypresses, a little acropolis of the dead, hung between sea and sky.

Skelton lit a pipe and stood at gaze, his eyes steady and thoughtful under the down-turned brim of his felt hat. He had had his coffee and rolls in the rose arbour, for the morning was very warm. Though his eyes looked towards the sea, his inward vision was turned for the moment to the green shutters that were still closed over the window of Constance's bedroom. He was going down to the town for a stroll, and would be back again by nine to take her up her breakfast.

Skelton's stroll ended at a tobacco shop near the post office. He bought flowers, anemones and violets at a shop in the Avenue Félix Faure, and made his way back through the long and narrow street of the old town where the broad steps go up to the platform of the church. The street was a great crevasse, with stained walls and faded green shutters and linen hung out to dry, and roofed with the blue of the heavens. The grey cobble paving led the eyes upwards till they caught a glimpse of the white tombs and black cypresses on the height above.

Skelton threw a copper into a beggar's hat, and stopped to refill his pipe.

"To think that she has been here six weeks and has seen nothing of all this!"

He walked on slowly, glancing right and left into the dark entries where the bottom steps of worn stairways showed. They looked like lurking places for lovers, and jealous, primitive passion armed with a knife.

"Bad luck, rank bad luck, little woman."

There was no impatience in his eyes, no suggestion of a grieved restlessness in his meditations. His thoughts, threading this queer old street, worked back to the villa up yonder with a message of compassion and of hope.

In the subdued light of the bedroom Constance lay awake, listening and thinking. Bad luck indeed! She called it more than that, seeing that she had developed a temperature the very first day after the journey, and had been in the doctor's hands before the evening. Influenza of a rather virulent type had kept her in bed for two whole weeks, and then had taken an ironical departure, leaving her in possession of a weak and nervous heart.

Bad luck! Six weeks had gone by, and Constance alone knew how she had suffered, consumed by an impatience to be well and a morbid dread of giving trouble. It had seemed to her so wretched an omen for the future, and her dominant thought had been that she had let Skelton marry an invalid wife, and that no effort on his part could overcome the inherent frailty of her heritage. His very patience had spelt suspense, since she had treasured it, watching it anxiously from day to day, and fearing to discover some signs of its diminishing. The more she came to love her

husband, the more she hated her unfortunate self.

"I shall spoil his life," she kept saying to herself. "He will grow tired, he must grow tired. I had little enough before to give him, but now——"

Then a desperate resolve to overcome her unfitness, to revivify herself, to make a fight for happiness, would rush over her.

"I will get strong; I must get strong. It all depends on myself."

At nine Skelton came in, carrying her tray with the brown coffee pot, and the crisp horse-shoe rolls, the butter and honey. He set it down, crossed over, and opened one of the shutters.

"How's that, dear; not too much light?"

"No; I love the sunlight."

"That's good. Now for breakfast."

She sat up, and he brought her her dressing-jacket, helped her into it, and put the tray on the bed. Her eyes threw anxious and almost furtive glances at him.

"Thank you so much, Dick."

"Feeling better?"

"Oh, yes, much better. I shall soon be well; I shall—really."

"Of course you will."

She choked something in her throat, set her lips firmly, and refused to break down. Skelton went out for a moment, and returned with the flowers.

"Here's some colour. You shall see them growing before long."

"Dick!"

She coloured up and stretched out her hands.

"Let me have them. What a dear you are to me! And I feel such a ghastly humbug."

He sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair.

"Nonsense. No problems, mind. I call all this the clearing shower; bad times always come in groups, like wet seasons. There is nothing for you to worry about. The Lascelles are not coming for another month, and they will be glad for us to stay on here. You'll be getting fit by then."

She nearly choked over her coffee.

"Dick, do go for a walk to-day."

"No."

"Do. I should like you to. Promise. Anna can make you up some lunch."

He felt the pulse of her desire and humoured it.

"All right, *enfant*, I'll tramp up to Gorbio and round by Roquebrunne. And presently we will have you out on a noble mule."

"Yes, presently."

So Skelton set out for Gorbio, that grey little town set like a casket on its hill, and Constance lay some while longer in bed, thinking. She rose about ten o'clock, and, opening the shutters, stood looking down upon the gardens, the red roofs and the sea. A sailing boat was making its way out of the harbour; a ringing of bells came from the old town, and in one of the gardens an Italian gardener was singing in a flowing basso. Down below a French locomotive gave out its distinctive and rather querulous whistle as it steamed slowly along the hidden line.

It was mellow with life this scene, a mature, Mediterranean sunlit life, even though the cemetery stood out so significantly on the height above, and Constance, looking down upon it all, caught at a ray of sunlight and turned it into her own heart.

"I will get strong. I'll make myself a mate for him."

She did not ring for swiss Anna, but dressed herself, put on a hat and shoes, chose a gay sunshade that Skelton had bought for her, and passed down the stone stairs. In the hall, with its polished pine floor, she came upon Anna busy with broom and polisher.

"Ah, madame!"

Anna was fat, and short, and round, with black eyes and a huge mouth, but her plumpness was a clean and saucy plumpness. She had an operatic way of talking and of striking attitudes that had captured Skelton's sense of humour. Her English was electrical.

"Ah, madame, you go walking!"

"I feel much stronger, Anna, and I am only going a little way."

She was seized by a desire to take this fat, good-tempered thing into her confidence.

"I don't want monsieur to know, Anna. I want to be able to walk a little farther each day, and then make it a surprise for him."

Anna held up her hands.

"A surprise for monsieur. *Bien, bien!* I keep my tongue tied, as you say. No rot; I tell you I am jolly saucy!"

"Anna, where did you learn some of your English?"

"I learn English in English family. The young gentlemen teach me the id—idioms, they called it."

"And you are teaching me French idioms."

"I teach you very good French—most infernal good French."

"Anna!"

Constance went out into the sunshine, down the steps under the rose arches, and

out by the green iron gate where climbing groundsel scrambled in masses over the gate pillars. She felt a little dizzy at first, but launching out downhill on the shady side of the lane, she adventured between high walls and the gardens of the various villas. The first two hundred yards were wholly encouraging, and then she had a sudden feeling of having been dropped into a hot and airless pit. Her skin flamed and then went cold, and she had to rest against a wall.

"I have gone far enough for the first time."

She spoke to herself rallyingly, and started to walk back, not faring so badly till the hill rose against her. She stopped to rest, went on, stopped again to rest, feeling her heart drumming, and the arteries throbbing in her arm-pits.

"It has got to be done," she told herself, and so she held on—slowly, breathlessly—her whole body throbbing with the beating of her heart. Once, at a sunny corner, she felt that she must sink down and faint, but desperate courage carried her home.

The steps were a ladder of torment. She tottered on to the terrace, to be rescued by fat Anna who had come out to shake a rug.

"Ah, madame!"

"I'll lie down, Anna, in the shade over there under the lemon tree. I got on splendidly."

"Awfully splendidly! Too much cheek, madame. I get you some wine."

"Just a little, Anna."

She unpinned her hat and lay flat on the long cane lounge chair, wondering how long her heart was going on hammering at the rate of a hundred and twenty strokes a minute. A sense of horrible physical distress possessed her, but morally she set her teeth and held to her ideal.

"I have done it once. I don't care. Make or mar, and I would rather be dead than a clog on him—for ever. I'll go out again to-morrow."

Chapter Twenty-nine

Anna brought out Constance's *déjeuner* into the rose arbour, where a screen of reeds kept off the mistral, and where she could lie and look out over the sea. As a cook, Anna had the most delicate of fingers, and her serving of fish, eggs, and salads might have satisfied the most selfish of bachelors who demand that everything shall be exquisitely done, and who confer a favour upon people by deigning to eat their food. Nor is a glass of good wine despicable when sipped on a southern terrace, nor the cup of coffee that was to follow it, and Constance drifted into a state of pleasant languor that faltered on the borderland of sleep. She had made her effort for the day, and sufficient unto the day was the effort thereof.

About three o'clock she was roused from the long calm of her drowsy mood by the clang of the iron gate at the bottom of the steps. There were light footsteps and the scuffling sound made by an elaboration in silk petticoats. Constance saw a cerise-coloured sunshade rise into view, to be followed by a white figure with a cerise-coloured gauze scarf over its shoulders. She started up with an inward whimper of annoyance, for she was not inclined towards this particular visitor on this particular day.

"My dear, don't get up, don't get up. This is splendid!"

The lady with the cerise sunshade took the terrace and Constance at one gush.

"My dear, I'm so glad to see you down. Jim has gone to Monte, and I thought I'd stroll up and see how you were getting along."

She was a big woman, with a fine head of naturally yellow hair, and a round and peculiarly handsome face; moreover, she possessed one of those thick white skins that never burn or freckle, and retain a sleek creaminess on all occasions. A certain

breadth of nostril and a slight tip-tilting of the nose gave her an expression of audacious good humour, and the delicately pencilled lids and brows made her very effective when a man was present.

"Well, how are you, really? This looks more like the right thing."

"I am much better."

"And hubby has gone off for the day?"

"Richard has gone to Gorbio and Roquebrunne."

The elder woman's eyes glimmered with amusement. She drew up a cane chair, and looked Constance over with an air of large and patronising good humour. "Richard has gone to Gorbio." To a woman who was elementally quick and shrewd this touch of rigidity was suggestive and rather comic. Mrs. Madge Parsons had very clear-cut views of life, and life for her meant an horizon that was ultimately male. It was a staging for the interplay of sex, elemental and yet curiously self-conscious, a kind of Empire ballet in which things feminine pivoted with all the seductive details of shoes, stockings and petticoats about the centre-point of male appreciation.

"That's good news for you. Mr. Skelton is one of the climbers. Men have to be studied."

"Oh?"

Constance's frigidity retained its reserve.

"They are selfish creatures. I always know when Jim is feeling at his best by the way he scuds off on his own somewhere. You may be sure a man is in perfect health and pretty well satisfied when he flirts. You have to give a man a little rope to keep him."

She began to draw off her gloves, and Constance lay and looked at the sea, feeling antipathetic towards her visitor, and ready to shrink from an attitude that she distrusted and did not understand. The woman's superabundant health oppressed her, and there was a coarse suggestiveness about her conversation that was distasteful and baffling to Constance's more delicate nature. Madge Parsons had no reserve. She saw things nakedly and talked about them rather nakedly, and with a cynical and good-humoured gusto that offended a more sensitive taste.

"It's high time you got well, you know. Men don't like invalids. It's only natural."

She laughed, and there was a gleam of invitation in her blue eyes.

"I reckon yours is a very good hubby. I know something about men, and I always say to a girl, 'Never marry a bachelor over forty, and always find out whether a man is mean about money.' You'd be surprised how mean men can be, especially the charmers. Give you a pound one day, and expect it to last six months. But when a man doesn't marry and gets set, my word! he's a terror! Selfish! I've

had bachelors staying in my house who used to empty our cigarette boxes into their cases before they went away, and who always forgot to tip the servants. A bachelor of forty gives more trouble than three married men. They're the most blind and selfish beasts under the sun. I am always against a girl marrying one of them. You see, a mean man's the worst. You can't get along without money, and if a man's mean, his meanness sits down with you to every blessed meal. If a man's generous, I can put up with a lot. That's why Jim and I get along so well together. Of course, I know he has his little affairs sometimes; most of them do. But the wife stands safe enough, if she's got any sense."

Constance felt herself in the thick of a whirl of words. She was unfamiliar with the way in which such women as Madge Parsons talked to each other, throwing out innuendoes at all angles, and always reverting to the one eternal question. Nor did she desire to discuss any of her own intimate affairs with Madge Parsons, though the woman's husband happened to be one of Skelton's friends.

"I don't think men are mean."

"I don't suppose you've known very many. And even the best of them are after one thing."

She laughed.

"You're a little chicken; you ought to be told a thing or two. It's good for a girl to know things about men, instead of having to find them all out for herself and be shocked."

Constance felt a sudden dread of the woman's coarse frankness.

"I don't care to discuss such subjects."

"Anyhow, my dear, you are one of the lucky ones, though, of course, a man's always a man. You've got to remember that. Now, I'll tell you a tale or two."

She did, and with a cynical good humour that made Constance feel that all the sacred things of life were being pawed by unclean fingers. A vague disgust seized her. This world in which Madge Parsons lived seemed a sordid and horrible travesty of life from which her soul revolted. She felt sick and shocked.

"I think we ought to have tea."

She gathered a frigid dignity about her, and, reaching for the hand bell on the table, rang for Anna. Mrs. Parsons looked amused.

"Now I've shocked you."

"Thanks. I don't care to talk about such things."

"My dear child, it's no use sweeping the dust away under the hearth-rug. You don't know what men are. You take a hint from a married woman."

Anna brought tea, with thin bread and butter, and chocolate *éclairs* and fancy

cakes from the Swiss confectioner's. Madge Parsons suggested that she should pour out tea, but in spite of her visitor's air of large good humour Constance felt armed and on the defensive, her intuition telling her that Madge Parsons was officiously interested in her and her marriage. She was a woman who thirsted to know everybody's history, and she may have had her suspicions, and such a nature is piqued by some new sexual problem.

Constance attempted less personal topics.

"How do you like your hotel?"

"One can't do better here, though it is so full of old women. They are queer kinds of odds and ends—rag-bag people. There's one spinster of fifty with a swollen face and a voice like a cough, who will get me into a corner and groan over the diminishing birth-rate and the increase of insanity. It makes me want to laugh. You know, a woman's a fool unless she has a man to go about with, and a man's as bad. One can't get along with the women who have always lived by themselves; they're absurd."

"I suppose it is so."

"Too many old women in the world, my dear. It's a pity they can't all be allowed to have babies; it might keep them from going dotty over good works, and all that sort of bosh. I like men; they are better sports in their way than we are. But when all's said and done, the man wants the woman in us."

Constance shrank away from this reversion to the old topic, for, though she hated it, this sexual gossip quickened some of the secret fears that had haunted her of late.

"Won't you have some more tea?"

"Thanks! Don't you bother; I'll help myself. There's one thing I can't understand: a woman not wanting children. Men want them when they've got them, not much before. What about you, now?"

Constance's eyes fled to the horizon.

"I haven't thought about it yet."

She did not see the flicker of interested curiosity in Madge Parsons' eyes.

"About time to begin, isn't it?"

Constance turned her head away to listen to footsteps that were coming up the lane. A flare of impatience and of anger had risen in her against this woman, and her aggressive storming of all barriers. What did she mean by persisting in trying to talk about all the most intimate relations of life, as though she were the oldest of friends! Besides, surely such things were sacred, hidden even from friends!

Constance felt that she must rescue herself from this free and easy tongue.

"I don't think I care."

The iron gate clanged, and a man's footsteps came up the stairway. Constance breathed with deep relief.

"Here's my husband."

Skelton came up the steps and across the terrace, throwing a mere momentary glance at the woman in white. His eyes were wholly for his wife, and she flushed from throat to forehead, smitten through by a joyous belief in the wholesome cleanliness of his manhood.

"Hallo! I have had a great day. How are you, madam, and how's Jim? Monte as usual? What a fellow! Those rooms give me a cracking headache in about an hour. Tea, by Jove, tea!"

Constance let herself sink into the strong arms of his vitality. He could carry off most things, and even bear with bores who wanted to repeat all that they had read in the newspapers.

Madge Parsons was eager, smiling.

"You've been to Roquebrunne? Isn't it one of the quaintest, dodgiest things on earth?"

She seemed to turn her personality inside out in a moment, to show a new surface, and to create a kind of atmosphere of charming appreciativeness. Constance lay and stared at her, astonished by the transfiguration. Mrs. Parsons could even patter a little archæology, talk about the trees and flowers, and criticise the Alpine troops whom Skelton had met upon the hills. She talked man's talk, and talked it well.

Constance lay and listened, wondering whether her husband suspected how differently Mrs. Madge Parsons could talk to a woman. She was tired of the sound of the woman's voice; the more so that she knew that her visitor was talking artificially and for effect; nor was she sorry when Madge Parsons rose to go.

Skelton accompanied her to the gate, and Constance heard her laughing at some jest of his. She felt mortified, a little jealous of the other woman's superabundant health.

Skelton came back, sat down close to his wife, and took one of her hands.

"Tired?"

"A little. But I'm so much better."

"I think you look it. Had our friend been here long?"

His eyes observed her with subtle intentness.

"More than an hour."

She broke out into confidences.

"I don't like that woman. I can't bear her!"

"What—Madge?"

"Yes."

"She's not a bad sort. Rather overpowering, of course, and primitive."

"She's so cheap and cynical and coarse. She wants to find out everything. And I can't bear it!"

Skelton's face hardened.

"Has she been upsetting you? Confound the woman! I thought she had more sense. Look here, dear, in the future, tell Anna you are out."

"But she walked up the steps."

"I'll have a chain and padlock put on the gate."

She pressed his hand.

"You do understand, dear? I——"

"I understand all right. You are sacred to me, and I to you."

"Oh, that's just it! And it's horrible to have people trying to tear open all the secret doors."

"She's that sort, is she? I half suspected it. She's clever enough at playing up to men."

"You don't think me a sensitive fool?"

"Good heavens, no! Some people have no sense of privacy; they want to see into everybody's bedroom. I know the type. And yet, she's a good sort in her way."

"I can't bear to have her near me. She makes me feel horrible. Dick, aren't there some people who seem to drag you down to a lower level?"

"Of course there are. The thing is to keep them on the other side of the road."

He pulled out his pipe, filled it, and began to smoke, gazing meditatively over the sea. And Constance watched him—anxiously, jealously—telling herself with fierceness that he was not as other men—the men whom Madge Parsons knew.

And yet the woman's innuendoes haunted her. In order to keep a man's love ——!

Chapter Thirty

From that afternoon Constance began to watch her husband's face as one on a holiday watches the sky from day to day, fearing to find the fine weather breaking. And since no decent creature is as venomously cheerful as Mark Tapley, Constance detected what she believed to be an incipient sadness in the eyes of the man she loved—a sadness that might mean regret. Many a newly married woman passes through this stage of over-watchfulness and doubt, being strange perhaps to the ways of men, the passion to create that possesses the best of them, the silences, the preoccupation that comes from thought. A something glides between; it may be a business scheme, a book, a round of golf. And a young wife is apt to seize upon this preoccupation, and to magnify it into the broodings of disillusionment. In the most intimate marriage husband and wife need their dim retreats, their little secret oratories, a solitude that is inviolate. We are not always out in the sun, or asking people to guess our thoughts.

The fact was that Skelton was worried. The creative spirit that dwelt in him had grown restless and importunate at the end of two months' idleness, and it was thrusting ideas upon him and imperiously demanding that they should be put into action. Moreover, he had been worried by Constance's illness, not selfishly, but because it had hinted at the pathetic fragility of the body of the woman whom he loved. Also, there were financial worries hovering on the horizon. One or two of his inventions that had promised well were refusing to fly, and the great Doyle was finessing with regard to the exploitation of "Jerry."

So Skelton had a silent mood pieced in here and there, more especially when the creative spirit gripped him, and his brain grew incandescent with inward vision. He

would sit on the terrace, smoking hard, and staring into space, while Constance's eyes crept up from the pages of a book to glance at him. Silence, such silence, is rather frightening to a sensitive spirit that is on the watch for a clouding sky, and it is a strange but certain fact that some men have the knack of looking supremely miserable when they are in the thick of hard thinking. The almost morose and preoccupied face of the thinker may have scared many a young wife into imagining that the man she has married has discovered her to be a fool and a bore.

"He is unhappy about something," she would say to herself, but she could not summon up courage to challenge his silence.

"Of course, it's my wretched health. And I'm not big enough or clever enough."

When Skelton came out of the unconscious gloom of his thinking, and flashed out on her a playful tenderness, she would suspect effort in it and a determination on his part to make the best of things and to be kind.

The more she brooded over these possibilities, the stronger grew the kind of desperate will in her to overcome her physical weakness, and to train herself to be a mate for her husband. The time seemed so critical. Her love, rendered restless by suspense, dreaded lest happiness should slip away before she could make her effort. She was for ever persuading Skelton to go on long tramps to the hill towns and villages round about, to play golf at Sospell, or listen to the music at Monte Carlo.

"You can find out all the finest bits," she said to him, "and then you will know what to show me when I am well."

His absence was her opportunity, and fat Anna was a fellow conspirator. Skelton believed that his wife could not walk a hundred yards, and she temporized with his suggestion as to the hiring of a car; yet each day when he was away she was making a pilgrimage along the Boulevard de Garavan, lengthening it at each outing, and feeling her heart growing steadier at each attempt.

About this time, too, she came by one of those queer notions that thrust themselves with seeming illogicalness into the patterning of our emotions. Each morning she saw the white tombs and the dark cypresses of the cemetery standing out against the blue of the sky, and the belief grew in her that when she was able to reach that height above the old town she would find herself strong and well. It suggested to her a pilgrimage to some sacred city where there were wondrous waters of healing, a city that rose azure-turreted against an orange dawn. Each day she drew a little nearer, strangely persuaded that all the blemishes would fall away from her when she reached that garden of the dead where the cypress tops curved like sickles when the mistral blew.

As for Skelton, he was wise enough to understand the inward purpose of her

unselfishness. An exacting woman may kill the love she cherishes, and men—whose lives are full of give and take—value nothing more highly in a woman than unselfish reasonableness. Skelton knew that it pleased his wife that he should leave her at times, and the gain was hers in the matter of his homage. She was sensitively afraid of being selfish, of exacting too much, a rare spirit in a very young wife.

Sometimes he climbed the hills to Castellar, St. Agnes, or Grimaldi, wandering along the olive terraces and looking back through the spun lace at the blue of the sea. Grey, rock-set, earthquake-shaken Eze was a favourite haunt of his, and he loved the long scramble down the mule-path among the pines to the white road at the edge of the sea. Always, Constance was with him in thought. "She will like this, and this," he said to himself, and even the shops at Monte Carlo had a suggestive fascination. "She shall have a day's shopping over here, and it shall be a day."

Sometimes he sat in the gardens at Mentone by the band-stand, watching the people and listening to the music. The white casino, the green grass, the violas, cyclamen, and cinerarias in the beds were gay in the sunshine. Northwards rose the Annonciata Hill, with the grey bastion-like wall of its monastery terrace and its mighty cypresses, and the peak of St. Agnes, and the little white-towered hotel thrusting into the sky. On most mornings he would find Jim Parsons and his wife settled in a shady corner, Jim reading the English paper, his wife criticising the world at large. She had a healthy interest in life, and a rather boisterous sense of humour.

On the morning before the coming of King Carnival, Skelton discovered them in their usual corner, sitting on two garden chairs with an air of utter detachment. Skelton had known James Parsons years ago. He was short and stubby, with a vulgar face and a most excellent heart. He wore a grey bowler hat, spats, and a carnation in his buttonhole, and carried wash-leather gloves and a yellow cane.

"Hallo! Sit down."

"No Monte to-day?"

"Monte! My dear chap, I had a Deutscher breathing on the top of my head for a whole hour yesterday."

Madge Parsons welcomed Skelton with that indefinable rustling of skirts, like a tree wooed by the wind. She was interested in Skelton, and interested in his marriage, the more so because of a male elusiveness that refused to be caught in the net of her sympathy. Skelton puzzled her, and therefore piqued her femininity. She wondered whether he was extraordinarily cold, or the victim of a devilish reserve.

"How's madame?"

"Much better, thanks."

She observed him critically.

"It must be worrying for you, and on your honeymoon, too."

"One needn't look for worry, you know."

He was debonair and perfectly friendly, but his courtesy was a polished surface that turned the points of all her projectiles. Reserve can be radiant, and even genial, and is then more baffling than a studied reticence.

Jim Parsons's queer, fish-like eyes roved over them both, and betrayed a faint glitter of amusement. He and his wife were excellent friends, but he knew her tricks of temper as well as he knew the temper of a favourite horse. He made silent comments, pretending to read his paper. "Look at her trying the confidence game on old Skelton. Go it, my dear, try your hardest. You won't pump much out of him."

And she didn't; and so far confessed her failure as to revert to less personal topics.

Parsons smiled tolerantly.

"Which way are you going, Skelton? Home?"

"Yes."

"We'll walk along the parade with you, and round by the harbour."

When Skelton left them under the shade of the old town houses, and started the ascent to the Villa Proserpine, they returned towards the gardens by the Avenue Félix Faure, walking a little apart with an air of not belonging to each other. Madge Parsons stopped to look in all the hat shops, while her husband dawdled on, stopping in his turn to look at photographs or picture postcards, his wife overtaking him, and dawdling on in turn. Yet they managed to keep up a conversation even under these conditions, each being ready with a remark or a counter-remark when they happened to be together for a matter of twenty steps.

"I can't quite make that man out."

"Skelton?"

"Yes."

"That's queer."

Here there was an interlude devoted to a windowful of lace.

"I never quite know whether he is laughing at me or not."

"You never will, Madge."

"What do you mean?"

He diverged towards a stationer's where they sold English novels, but he had bought nothing when he overtook his wife.

"Skelton's not in your book, old girl. He's too devilish clever, even for you."

"Thanks!"

"What's more, he's most confoundedly in love with his wife."

Rumpelmayer's window was the next distraction.

"Men are queer creatures. One knows more or less that the girl was—well, a little worse than a nobody."

"Which may be much better than being a little somebody."

"I can't see the attraction."

"You are too robust. It's all in the air, high up, out of sight."

"I think you are talking rubbish."

"All right, leave it at that. One can't see what one was not made to see."

Chapter Thirty-one

On the day when King Carnival arrived at Mentone in the guise of a boxer riding the ass of Gorbio, Constance for the first time opened the piano that stood in the little salon. She sat for a while with her hands resting tentatively on the keyboard, waiting for an inspiration, her face upturned, her eyes half-closed. Skelton had gone out, taking a batch of letters with him, and this February morning she felt a welling up of song within her and a sense of strange, expectant joy. Never before had she risen here with such a feeling of freshness, and the beckoning cypresses up yonder seemed very near.

The scent of wallflowers and stocks floated into the room, making her imagine blue night and a perfumed sea. She was in a drifting, dreamy mood, in the green gloom of a lover's twilight, and the fruit upon the trees were so many lamps of pale gold.

Her fingers moved at last, and glided into one of Chopin's waltzes. Presently she began to sing some French song, and she sang with a smile in her heart and a foretaste of desire upon her lips.

Skelton had gone out with his batch of letters, and among them was a depressing one from John Cuthbertson.

> Dear Old Man,—Sorry to say I can't bring Doyle to the signing point. The beggar is in his most slippery mood. He sent me the draft of an agreement that he had drawn up, and no sooner had our legal man studied it than he looked at me and grinned. I know what Hardy's grin means: that he has scented some sly and round-the-corner trickery. I sent the

agreement back to Doyle with a fairly grim letter, and so things are hung up. I have given him a week to make up his mind and accept our terms, and if he hangs back we must start fresh and try to rope somebody else in. We haven't quite enough financial force to thrust the thing through ourselves; it's a big thing, and wants a big opportunity.

Some of these financial men make me want to go out into the wilds away from the smell of them. My dear chap, they are unclean, you know, sordid, greedy, well-dressed beasts packed full of Tory prejudice. I have to let out sometimes.

Skelton smiled rather bitterly over this letter. He knew that John Cuthbertson's big shoulders and stubborn good temper had had to bear many business burdens that were made detestable by the methods of the people with whom he had to deal. Skelton had never been able to adjust himself to the commercial side of a manufacturer's life. His creative brain could not bear patiently with financial pimps and promoters. The abominable selfishness, the cynical "slimness" of much of it had made him lash out, and make use of the devilish irony of a clever tongue. The very ferocity of his scorn had made him impossible as a business man, and he had left all diplomatic details to John Cuthbertson.

The big Yorkshireman knew how to defend himself without making the smaller men hate him.

"You have got to stand up quietly to the beasts," he said, "and smile. Stand tight and smile. They find out that they can't budge you, and that you are not asleep. You have to take it for granted that most of these people have dirty hands."

Skelton wandered up to the cemetery with these letters, and sat down on the lower parapet below the figure of the "Marble Girl." This white, virginal figure moved him very strangely that morning. It was the spirit of youth pensively accepting sorrow, wondering perhaps why sorrow came, yet far too stricken to rebel. In looking up at her he was made to think of the fragile body of his own wife and of the strong purpose that possessed him to save her from all unhappiness.

Some of the sadness of the "Marble Girl" descended upon him, and he found himself wondering whether Constance would ever be strong. He had dreamed dreams of a wonderful comradeship, of life taken together on the wing. It would be hard for both of them, this careful and circumscribed existence, this economy of her vitality. A mate for him in the spirit she might be, but neither man nor woman can ignore their bodies, in spite of the nonsense talked by the Theosophists. An invalid is but half alive, however vital the spirit may be; there are a hundred limitations and

barriers everywhere, and the fragile vase has to be delicately handled, nor can it hold the essential richness of life. Nor could the possible cramping and souring of her character be ignored, the gradual growth of a pathetic peevishness that attacks a spirit that is not strong enough to enjoy. It was for her sake that Skelton felt the pity of it all.

He looked about him, and felt sad that she could not see all that was spread above and below. Close on his right rose the cupola of the Russian tomb dusted over with golden stars. In the battered, pink cathedral tower the great bell smote solemnly. He looked down on the flat expanse of red and black tiled roofs, on the placid harbour, and on the blue bay with its white fringe of foam. Over yonder were the Red Rocks; beyond them La Mortola point, and on the horizon Bordighera, a white town shining in the sunlight on the purple edge of the sea. Birds were twittering in the cypresses, and he could hear the steady breaking of the waves upon the shingle.

One thing he did not see: a slim figure in white coming slowly up the Boulevard de Garavan under the shade of a dark blue sunshade. He had left the parapet overlooking the Garavan bay, and climbed to the upper platform where the cypresses stood close together like mourners among the tombs. Constance, pausing from time to time, reached the stairway leading to the lower cemetery, where a child stood selling little bunches of wild violets. The flowers were a part of her triumph, and the symbolism delighted her. She had climbed to this citadel of healing in this sunny land washed by a southern sea. The cypresses that had beckoned from afar were very beautiful and very near.

She climbed the steps, holding her bunch of wild violets, and wandering along, sat down on the parapet looking towards Garavan, almost upon the very spot that her husband had just left. From under her blue sunshade her eyes glanced up at the "Marble Girl," and the first impression that the figure stirred in her was one of quick repulsion. The meek, wondering sadness offended her; she, who felt the flush of her triumph, and to whom life seemed rich and desirable. She had not suffered and laboured day by day to be brought to the feet of this white child of sorrow.

Constance turned her head away and lost herself in the world beneath. She wanted to see everything, to enjoy everything this sunny morning, when the birds twittered in the cypresses and the sea's song bubbled out in foam. Presently she rose and wandered on, feeling high up, on the top of the world, floating in a new air. Death did not thrust itself into her thoughts, for here the living senses could satisfy themselves with flowers. She could not name them all—purple irises, rose and white cyclamen, climbing geranium, the hedges of Banksia roses round the graves not yet

in bloom, white jasmine, mimosa, heliotrope, violets, wallflowers, primulas, yellow-flowered sedum, aloes and agaves on the rocks below. Higher still the cypresses stabbed the blue, and the grey mountains shut out the very thought of the north. Sometimes she glanced at a headstone, and read the name and date with a feeling of dreamy detachment. These people were dead; they had lived their lives, while she had her life to live, held it within her arms, a mass of fragrance, of colour and desire.

She would tell him the truth to-day, confess where she had been, and in the very contemplation of this triumph she walked almost into her husband's arms. He was coming down a flight of steps, his hands in his trouser pockets, his head bowed as though he were thinking.

"Connie!"

The astonishment upon his face thrilled her as very few things had thrilled her in life.

"Connie!"

"Yes, I am here."

"But, good heavens! how did you get here?"

"I walked."

"You walked? But, my dear!"

She gave a queer little exultant laugh.

"No, I am not exhausted. Hold my wrist and feel. It was to be a surprise, Dick."

"By Heaven, it is that!" he said.

Chapter Thirty-two

They found themselves sitting on a low wall under the shade of a cypress, with the town spread out below them, and the rocks at the foot of the terrace streaked with the red torches of aloes in bloom. The cypress breathed softly in the wind with a gentle, shivering motion, and its long shadow fell like the shadow of a gnomon on a dial. This corner of the garden of the dead was wholly theirs for the moment. Blue sky above, the town and the sea below, and the calmness of sunlight upon the mountains.

"Am I to guess the answer to the riddle?"

She looked into his eyes and smiled, the mysterious smile of a woman who is loved.

"Shall I tell it you?"

"No secrets, mind!"

"I think I shall always be able to tell you everything."

She had laid the bunch of violets on the wall between herself and Skelton, and was tracing patterns on the sandy path with the point of her sunshade.

"I was horribly afraid, Dick. I couldn't help it. When you remember——"

She glanced up at him momentarily with a flush of colour, and then kept her eyes fixed upon the pattern she was drawing.

"I felt you had given me everything, and that I had brought you nothing but worry and bad luck. I can't tell you how I hated my own body. It was horrible to have to lie there and feel that you had made such a miserable bargain."

He was watching her and keeping quiet.

"It frightened me. I felt that I might spoil your life, that you had married a poor

thing, and that I could never be all that I wanted to be. I used to—no, I'll not be egotistical. But I think I got desperate. I thought that I would get strong, or kill myself in the trying."

She traced a Tudor rose with the point of her sunshade.

"So I began to make my effort, going out when you were away, and walking a little farther each time I tried. And I had a queer, prophetic feeling that when I could climb up here I should find my bad fate falling off my shoulders. Strange, wasn't it, but a child was waiting with violets when I came up the steps: and violets with me have always stood for good luck."

She picked up the flowers, smelt them, and, looking at him, found his eyes fixed on her with a grave and penetrating gentleness.

"So that's why I used to find you so white and tired?"

"Perhaps."

"Did the doctor know?"

"Yes, but he could keep a secret, and he cheered me up."

"Do you know, little wife, that you are making me ask myself whether I have ever hurt you?"

Her hand came out impulsively, and rested upon his.

"No, no; don't think that. It was because you were so very good to me that I ——"

"Well?"

"It made me feel worse about everything. I wondered—I thought no man could go on caring. And——"

His hand turned and closed on hers. "What is a fine-weather love worth? I'm no raw boy. Do you think I don't know what suffering is—that I haven't been hurt in my time—that I'm so brutally selfish?"

Her face lifted protestingly.

"I never thought mean thoughts about you, dear. It was all about myself." A wonderful and misty radiance seemed to shine in her eyes. "Dick, I want to be a mate for you, a comrade you needn't be ashamed of."

"Connie!"

She was caught and held, her mouth very near to his. There was not a soul to see, nor would it have concerned them, seeing that they were far away in the solitude of their own two selves.

"I mean to be. I'm so much stronger!"

"Of course."

"I'll not bring you any more unhappiness—at least, I'll try not to—so hard."

His eyes held hers. "Listen. I'm proud, proud of your pluck. I knew you had it in you. Why, aren't you the one woman in the world?"

She glimmered her love at him. "Not yet, Dick, not quite that—yet. Oh, don't think too much of me. You're so much bigger than I am; sometimes I'm frightened. But, dear, I think I can keep your love."

His smile was very near to tears.

"Is it not for me to wonder whether I can keep yours?"

"Need you ask that?"

For a short while they sat in silence, conscious of a sympathy that was too sensitive to need words.

"Dick?"

"Yes."

"I want to go right into the country, on the hills, with you to-morrow. I want it to be our first day together."

"You had better ride."

"No, I want to walk. Yes, I can manage it. And you will——"

"Carry you if needs be."

"Will you, dear! But just imagine meeting some of the good English!"

"Confound them! I shouldn't care. By George, we are going to live! Life will be splendid."

She sighed and drew closer.

"Isn't it? I feel so happy; just like—like——"

"Like what?"

"I can't think of words."

"So much the better."

She looked at the cypresses and away to the grey mountains, and then at the sea, that miraculous southern sea with its varying shades of amethyst, lapis lazuli and pearl.

"I am going to climb all those hills before we go home."

Two Frenchwomen in black came round the curve of the path, and appeared interested in one particular grave. Constance stood up, still holding the bunch of violets.

"Come, I want to look."

He drifted with her whim.

"I want to leave—what shall I call it?—the scent of my happiness with someone."

She found the grave of a child-wife who had come from a far country to sleep

by the Middle Sea, and she laid the violets upon the stone, gently, tenderly, with a sigh of understanding.

"Poor child." She spoke caressingly. "I wonder whether it was hard to go? It must have been. And yet that depends——"

Her eyes flashed up to his, and he understood the look in them.

"May I never prove unworthy," he said in his own heart.

Chapter Thirty-three

To wake early on a February morning, throw open the shutters, and let in a rush of southern sunshine, should lift the most pusillanimous of souls into a divine good humour. It should be enough to be able to utter the cry, "Ah, to be out of England now the wet winter's there." Sometimes it is difficult to believe that the grey land beyond the grey sea really exists, and Constance, standing with bare feet upon the polished boards and watching a dawn that was all orange and azure and rose, thought of England as a dreary, sordid memory lost in the grey murk of the northern skies. She looked out on a sea that lost itself on the horizon in a mystery of sunlit, opalescent vapour. Below all was placid and radiant and very still, the cypresses moving never a finger, the olives motionless screens of grey-green filigree. The colours were intense and miraculous, the air full of the scent of mimosa and the fragrance of growth.

She knew that it rained sometimes most dismally, that the mistral blew; but then there was the atmosphere of hope, of the inevitable buoyant sunshine. She had never loved light so much before, or felt such a desire to bathe in it, to run out naked into the sunshine. Leaning on the iron rail, she wondered whether she could see Corsica as a faint blue outline against the pearly greyness of the horizon. Yet what did it matter whether the island rose for her like a magician's island spun round with gold and floating upon a purple sea? Life lay nearer home, life and the delight thereof. She felt full of an intense inquisitiveness and of a firefly energy that panted to dart hither and thither, sunning its iridescent wings.

It was to be a great day, and it had dawned most perfectly. She had thrills of expectation when she glanced at her watch and thought of deciding upon what she

should wear. It was a serious and most charming problem on such a morning; moreover, one of the surest indications of the state of a woman's health is the degree of interest that she takes in dress.

She lay down again for a while, her face towards the window so that she could see the sea and watch the blueness thereof change under the changing lights of the dawn. But her quietism was not for long, seeing that the morning had all the thrills of a birthday morning for a child of seven, and there was a wardrobe full of clothes waiting to be chosen and a mirror to be looked in. She was astonished at her own vitality. Something seemed to have lifted. She felt as though translated to some smaller planet where the force of gravity was less than upon the earth, and where the body had gained a sense of miraculous lightness and strength.

The morning's toilet was sacramental. She put on the most delicate and belaced lingerie she possessed, and spent much time over the doing of her hair. For her dress she chose a plain white linen, deciding to wear over it a cerise-coloured French woollen jacket that Richard had bought her. Nor can the colour of stockings be treated with careless levity, save by the women to whom all the nicer details of dress are pathetically superfluous. The sloven and the intellectualist are often on the same low level, yet the clever woman who forgets her body is more contemptible than the slut. It is more than probable that the outside of the head is more important than the interior, granted, of course, that well-dressed hair and the utterly suitable hat do not cover the brain of an arrant fool.

Constance's mirror was kind to her that morning, for a mirror has its moods, and may sympathetically reflect or mischievously flout the moods of its mistress. Black hair, pale face and throat, white dress, cerise jacket—the scheme was very pleasant, and suited the psyche of the wearer. Her expectancy shook hands with her sense of the beauty of life. She felt half a stranger to herself, and very grateful to her mirror.

On her way downstairs she met fat Anna, who was most dramatically and eloquently moved at the sight of her.

"Ah, madame, *vous êtes très gentille*! It ees splendeed that you are looking; what the English call 'slap up'!"

"Thank you, Anna. Is monsieur down?"

"He is very forward, is monsieur; he tell me to cut sandweeches, and put fruit and a bottle of Asti in a basket. An expedition *à deux*! But madame is a new woman! *La belle couleur!*"

Skelton was standing at the open window of the *salle à manger*, watching a big blue-black carpenter bee booming to and fro over the beds of wallflowers on the terrace. He turned sharply as Constance entered the room and paused where the

morning sunlight made the polished boards shine like glass.

"Hallo!"

She had no need to consider her triumph.

"Just stop there one moment, with your face in the shadow and the light on your dress."

"You'll make me shy."

"I say, do you know that you are a confoundedly good-looking young woman? And you know how to dress."

"You chose this for me."

"I congratulate myself. Thank God you have got the feminine instincts. I can't stand the muscular and bronzed young woman."

She laughed and coloured.

"May I move now, Dick, please?"

"Perhaps. I'll consider it."

"If you stare at me like this——"

"My dear, do you know you have made me forget all about breakfast! That's a triumph for any woman at nine o'clock in the morning! Come hither. What a sweet, fresh thing it is, with a skin like milk."

They heard Anna clearing her throat suggestively as she crossed the hall with the coffee. Her black eyes were full of mischievous satisfaction.

"Will monsieur have honey or marmalade?"

"Oh, both, Anna. And, I say, don't forget to put some dates into the luncheon basket—*le panier de déjeuner*, you know."

"Yes, monsieur; and a *tire-bouchon* for the wine."

"*Tire-bouchon?* What on earth's that?"

"A corkscrew, monsieur."

"Admirable Anna!"

Constance's mirror had pleased her, but the eyes on the other side of the table outflattered any mirror. Skelton began to tease her from the day's beginning, and all his tenderness had a glitter of mischief.

"I am going to make you ride half-way up the mule-path to Castellar."

"But you promised——"

"You don't know these mule-paths, picturesque but bumpy. Wait and see. I have ordered a most debonair donkey, and when we get among the olives I'll play the angel of the Lord, and the ass shall be turned back."

"Mind he does not speak!"

"He would only give us a blessing. 'Thanks be to God for the English lady who

rides like a rose leaf and defends us from Deutschers who ride like pumpkins.'"

The ascent towards Castellar was in every way triumphant. A donkey named "Giroflée" carried Constance up the winding grey-cobbled path over the rocks and through the fir thickets, between vineyards and wild banks where rosemary was in bloom. Giroflée and her flat-hatted owner were dismissed as soon as they reached the upper terraces where the olives grew, and Skelton loaded himself with the luncheon basket, mackintoshes, and a little hamper of fruit.

"I seem to be Giroflée the Second! A pity we haven't got a camera and a campstool and a few more accessories!"

"Let me carry something."

"Young woman, it is as much as your place is worth to suggest such a thing!"

They climbed the grey path at their leisure, turning often to look back through the grey lacework of the olive leaves at the vivid sea, or at Cap Martin thrusting a green wedge into the blue, or at the Convent of the Annunciata with its little grove of cypresses upon the opposite ridge. In the deeps of the valley below was a glimmering of oranges and lemons, and along the terraces under the olive trees the grass and herbage were a rare green.

Skelton watched Constance anxiously, yet without appearing to watch her.

"How farest thou, O Pearl of the Hills?"

"I feel I could go on for ever. The air is so wonderful."

"And the heart does not hurry?"

"No, no."

It was about noon when they gained the hill town with its weather-soiled church tower and its grey stone houses. The path of entry was none too clean, yet the quaint vista of narrow, stone-walled streets carried the eyes above the more obvious defects. A house near the church, a house with painted walls and a little outjutting green balcony, caught Skelton's eyes.

"Here's a place for a rope-ladder and a romance by moonlight.

"At Castellaro
Young Giuliano
Twanged a gitaro
Under the stars-o."

The flash of her laughter was very provocative.

"Isn't it delightful!"

"And dirty!"

"But just stand and look down this street."

"A good show of washing—of sorts—and chickens and sundries!"

They explored, glancing into the basements that appeared to serve as chicken-houses and stables, and up the worn winding stairways. The rough grey walls, with their windows glazed or stuffed with boards, were rather suggestive of possible mishaps. The vaulted passageways between the streets, the church, the public washing-place for clothes, the square—all had to be appreciated. The battered and squalid picturesqueness of the little town delighted them both.

Refusing to be cajoled into patronising the innkeeper's "Grande et Vaste Terrasse" and be charged double price for a bottle of wine because of the view, they made their way back through Castellar and drifted into the olive groves.

"What about lunch?"

"I haven't felt so hungry for years."

"Hurrah! Let's be Arcadians under the olives."

They chose a solitary spot on a terrace where there were violets growing in the grass, and Skelton spread the mackintoshes so that they could sit with their backs resting against the rough stone wall. A haze of grey-green foliage dropped away from them into the deeps of the valley. They heard the clock of Castellar striking, but otherwise there was no sound.

"Now for the *tire-bouchon*. It sounds like a term of affection! Dear *bouchon*, dear, dear *bouchon*!"

She laughed happily at his fooling, and watched the yellow Asti bubbling into the glasses.

"Drink deep."

"To you."

"And to you."

They ate like hungry children, carefully putting away all paper and debris so as not to desecrate the pleasant greenness of the place. When the meal was over, Constance repacked the basket, while Skelton lit his pipe.

"You can't enjoy this part of the performance."

"I can enjoy seeing you enjoy it."

"Vicariously. What an admirable woman! Not feeling cold?"

"No."

He looked at her with critical appreciation.

"Yes, very delightful. Just a touch of colour and sparkle. Wine suits you."

"Perhaps it is not the wine."

"Something else?"

"Happiness."

They fell into a silent and dreamy interlude, content to gaze down into the mist of olive leaves and the network of black, wriggling boughs. Skelton's pipe went out, and he did not relight it. They could see the grey flanks of the mountains towering into the bleak solitudes above. Here and there a white cloud drifted.

Constance made a sudden movement, reaching out and touching his arm.

"I want to talk. Come here."

She smoothed her dress with her hands.

"Put your head here. I want to talk."

He lay down even as she desired, his head in her lap, his eyes looking straight up at the blue sky above the olive boughs. She smoothed his hair, and ran her fingers across his forehead.

"Don't be afraid, dear. I shan't fuss you when you don't want to be fussed."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Oh, instinct—perhaps. But it is my day to-day."

"Yours to the last second."

"I want you to talk to me. There are lines here—sometimes."

"Where?"

"Here, on your forehead."

"That's nothing."

"But I am going to be the remover of wrinkles."

"You are, are you?"

"Now don't tease, Dick. Oh, my dear, I want you to talk to me. I want you to take me into your life, into all your ambitions and worries. You'll take me in, won't you? I'm—I'm your wife at last."

He caught her hands, drew them down, and kissed them.

"I'll show you every corner of myself."

She sighed caressingly.

"It will make me even happier. I want to be you, dear, and I want you to be me. I don't want you ever to keep things from me because you think I shall worry."

"I always thought I was no fool."

"Why?"

"Well, I married you. That was a stroke of genius."

Chapter Thirty-four

A warm, still evening followed the day of their climb to Castellar, and when they had dined Constance opened the French window that led on to the terrace.

"Dick, come and look."

A full moon had risen, a great disk of silver that poured light upon the mountains and the sea. A line of scattered silver edged the shore, and the far horizon seemed lit by phosphorescent light. Breaking the line of the terrace rose a group of cypresses black as ebony. The night was supremely still, and as warm as many a June night in England now that the sudden chill that comes with the sunset had passed.

"Let's come out here on the terrace."

"Wait, I'll get you a cloak."

They wandered out together to the edge of the terrace and looked down at the mysterious black tangle of gardens, the glimmering sea, and at the swarthy masses of the mountains piling up into the clear sky. The night was full of perfumes, the scent of the palm flower and mimosa. A faint and pleasant murmur came from the town below.

"What mystery!"

"The beginning and end of all our fussy knowledge."

She breathed in deep breaths, her face slightly upturned.

"Let us stay out here for a while."

"I'll get you your long chair."

He dragged it out into the moonlight.

"Now for a cushion. Shall you feel warm enough?"

"Quite. Light your pipe, Dick."

"It will spoil the fragrance!"

"I like it. I think I shall always keep some tobacco near me when you are away."

"Many people would quarrel with your taste!"

"It seems to me that one can spoil one's life by listening to the 'many people.'"

She lay in the moonlight with a cloak wrapped round her, and Skelton sat in a garden chair at her side, the smoke from his pipe floating away in grey wisps. It was tranquil and very still, and neither of them felt any urgent desire to talk, perhaps because they were so full of the knowledge of their spiritual nearness to each other. It had been a day of vision for them both, and the night had a new meaning.

"Dick!"

A hand came out to him.

"I want to say something."

"Say on."

"I don't want to be alone any more. I mean, I want you always."

"Well?"

"I'll whisper it."

He put his head down close to hers.

"I want to be your wife—every bit your wife."

"It is with you to choose."

"I do choose. I could never be afraid of you, dear. And it makes it more sacred."

He bent over her and kissed her.

"You'll never find me a rough beast, Connie. Yes, all that's enormously overrated. It's the you, not the other thing, that matters."

Chapter Thirty-five

Skelton found several letters waiting for him when he came downstairs next morning, and among them was one in John Cuthbertson's handwriting. He took them with him on to the terrace, and sitting on the parapet opened his friend's letter with an unflurried leisureliness that had itself well under control. In all probability this letter meant so much to them both, so far as material things were concerned, but in opening it Skelton prepared himself to expect bad news.

But it proved to be otherwise, and Cuthbertson wrote to say that Doyle had accepted their terms, and that it was agreed that Skelton, as the inventor and patentee, should receive five hundred pounds down and a handsome royalty on all profits. The first full-sized Skelton heavy-oil engine and railway motor coach were being built, and were to be tried experimentally on a special rail track laid down on the ground at Harpenden. Moreover, a carburettor of his invention that Cuthbertson had put on the market was beginning to sell. The agreements and contracts between them and Doyle were being sent out for his signature.

> So I am less of a wet blanket this time, old man. I hope your wife is better. We shall be wanting you over here before long, but we can knock along for the time being.
>
> I think this is going to be a big thing. There's money in it, and more than money so far as you are concerned. I have never seen Doyle so unctuous and affable. He has always been a rare picker of other men's brains. He wanted your address, and I gave it him, but you know your man.

The best of everything to you both.

Skelton ran upstairs like a boy and knocked at his wife's door.

"Hallo! Can I come in?"

"Yes."

He found her sitting in front of her mirror, wearing a light blue dressing-jacket and a white lace petticoat.

"Good news."

"From Mr. Cuthbertson?"

"Yes. Read that."

She flushed up sensitively, and her hands trembled a little as she held the letter.

"How splendid!"

"Good, isn't it?"

She jumped up and kissed him.

"I'm so glad, so glad, because I know how desperately generous you've been to me. Isn't it strange that it should have come just this very morning?"

"I suppose it is one of those rare occasions when Fate chooses to play the benignant uncle sort of business. By Heaven, we'll celebrate! You shall have your first day at Monte Carlo, lunch at Ré's, and do an hour's shopping."

"But, Dick, I don't want——"

"Don't want what?"

"You to spend a lot of money on me. You have had to work hard for it."

"Good heavens, what's money for? And what is a very charming wife for? You are not one of the selfish women who seem to expect everything and never think of giving anything in return."

"Well, we can take the tram."

"Tram!"

"Yes, by Cap Martin. Anna says——"

"Young woman, do you talk of trams on such an occasion! I never heard such bathos! We will have the smartest car we can hire in Mentone. And remember, you have got to live up to a most gorgeous day."

She looked at him with eyes that shone.

"What shall I wear, Dick?"

"Something simple. That white and cerise is very fetching. Yes, let's have white and cerise."

"Have you noticed that Mrs. Parsons is very fond of those particular colours?"

"Is she? I've never noticed it. I don't believe I could tell you whether Mrs.

Parsons was clothed or naked."

"Dick!"

"Well, it's only a way of expressing my lack of interest in ninety-nine women out of a hundred. Give me men, and none of the confounded social nonsense. Most women bore me horribly."

"That makes my responsibility very heavy."

"Do you think I should have married a bore! You're a firefly to me, a bit of radium."

"I hope it will always be like that."

"Now, no problems. Life's full of go, of *élan*, as Bergson says. The thing is to live out, do things, create, enjoy to the uttermost, let life flow fast through us, and not get in a metaphysical tangle. Come along, Melisande, breakfast in ten minutes. I'll get Anna to roll down and order our triumphal car."

The car arrived at ten, a smart affair with fawn-coloured cushions and red wheels. Anna saw them off from the terrace steps, a figure that should have thrown confetti and beamed congratulations.

"Now, then, how do you like the feeling of swagger?"

"Is it swagger?"

"That depends upon moods, past and present."

"I think I could swagger—on occasions."

"Ah! Now, then, confess."

"Over your triumphs."

"Now, what am I to say to that?"

The car rattled through the narrow streets, across the Place St. Roche, and on past the band-stand and the gardens, where the newsboys were shouting *Le Matin*, the *Daily Mail*, and *L'Echo de Paris*, and the pleasant fat person in the big straw hat went round collecting ten-centime pieces for chairs. The sea was in one of its bluest moods, and there was a wash of foam about Cap Martin.

"Dick, look!"

They had reached that part of the lower road where one has a view across the bay with the headland of Monaco and Monte Carlo lying far below the crouching mass of the Tête de Chien. The sunlight played upon the Casino and upon the white hotels and houses, with the grey landscape rising behind them to the blue of the sky. Below, along the coast, the black rocks showed in the shallow water, water that had the colour of turquoise and lapis lazuli. Villas and gardens seemed to float on the edge of the sea, with their palms and cypresses and firs, their orange and lemon trees and mimosa. Along the rocks below cliff-perched Roquebrunne the tree spurges

were ablaze with their cups of gold.

"Splendid, isn't it—if a little dusty?"

She was flushed and moved inwardly.

"I have never seen anything like it."

Betimes they came to that most strange place, Monte Carlo. Somehow this pleasure town by the southern sea strikes one as being outside criticism, the especial puppet-show of the gods. It is useless to bring to it the carping, moral spirit of the North, with its prurience and its ashen eyes that look askance at nature. A haunt of gamblers, courtesans, adventurers, decadents it may be, and its artificiality may stink in the nostrils of those simple folk who love all that is obvious, but that the place has its human fascination no one can question. It is a sort of gaudy side-show off the dull track of respectable habits—foolish perhaps, dangerous to some, not without pathos—but always infinitely interesting. You can be splendidly fed and bled there, hear some of the finest music in the world, be initiated into sexual matters by the most absolute experts, and see half the celebrities in Europe if you stay long enough. Cosmopolitan and chaotic, this little world will show you grand dukes and Russian dancers, tarnished women from other countries recovering a dubious social distinction, men who have become pimps and bullies, pickpockets, cranks, innocents, Cook's "respectables," statesmen, pugilists, courtesans. You can spend a day in Monte Carlo and spend ten centimes, or bankrupt yourself in half an hour. It is subtle, obliging, adaptable, ready to welcome any mood.

Constance was a little dazzled, a little oppressed by the complex newness of everything. With Skelton it was very different. He had come by that personal poise that is never hustled out of its individuality or made to feel self-conscious by any collection of humans whatsoever. The ego in him remained the ego, observant, tolerant, a little amused, vastly interested in some ways, non-moral. It may take a man years to learn that an archbishop and a duchess, a mobsman and a courtesan, are not very unlike when you remove their social decorations. One ought not to be dominated by any set of people or of circumstances, or by any arrogant arrangements of the stuff that we call matter.

He watched Constance, and was affectionately amused.

"These places are apt to make one feel a little—shy?"

"I don't know."

"Or diminutive?"

"Perhaps."

"I have had the feeling as a youngster; one feels suddenly that one does not belong."

The car reached the top of the gardens where the road turns down to the Casino. The stretch of grass under and between the trees, the gorgeous mosaic of flowers, primulas, cyclamen, violas, daisies, played upon by the sunshine, made a rich carpet of entry into the precincts of this pagan temple of life. Constance met the eyes of strange foreign men. They stared at her in a queer, appraising, critical way. Some of the women she saw made her think of pale, inhuman people with hungry nostrils and mouths red after sucking blood.

The car set them down outside the Café de Paris, and Skelton told the driver to wait for them there again about five o'clock in the afternoon.

"Supposing we walk on the terrace before lunch, and go into the rooms afterwards?"

"Yes, I would rather do that."

They passed round the Casino and down the steps to the lower terrace where the crowd idled to and fro in the sunshine, the white building above and the blue sea below striking a balance between artifice and nature. Pigeon shooting was going on from the pavilion below the terrace, and a line of people were watching the little traps opening one after another, the birds hurtling out to be knocked over and retrieved by a well-trained dog. Two white motor-boats had just come out of Monaco harbour, and were tearing to and fro with jets of foam at their bows.

Skelton and his wife strolled up and down, studying and being studied. To Constance the terrace of the Casino had an atmosphere of brilliant and extraordinary publicity, seeming to be a kind of stage where self-consciousness was stripped naked and made to run and dance. She was struck, too, by the dull colours of the crowd and by the bourgeois look of most of the figures. She had expected unimaginable smartness, but discovered that the majority of the people were badly dressed and badly bred, to judge by their exteriors.

"What do you think of Monte?"

"It's not half so smart as I expected."

"Just a crowd of rather third-rate people. I suppose the place has its spring and neap tides. But, after all, it is the demi-mondaine who sets the fashion, and all the good ladies run after her to get ideas!"

"How some of the men stare!"

"Beasts! Still, it's no worse than in London. That's what always strikes me in London, that most of the men have the eyes of animals. Any scrub of a clerk goes about ogling women who wouldn't let him lick their shoes. The foul conceit of fools. Hallo!"

They were sailed down upon and surprised by Mrs. Madge Parsons, gowned in

a fine Paris creation of opalescent grey, and wearing a huge black hat. She had a sallow-looking woman with her, a woman with a negroid face and a black colour scheme as to hair, dress and gloves. The two women did not look as though they harmonised; Madge Parsons had the eyes of one who was badly bored.

"My dear Mrs. Skelton, how well you look! Jim is having a day at the tables. Let me introduce my cousin—Mrs. Hogg Thomson. Isn't it a gorgeous day? My cousin is much too clever for me; she writes books; don't you, Hildegarde? My dear, I want to talk to you."

Her explosive amiability split up the party, leaving Skelton paired with the sallow woman in black.

"Are you staying in Monte Carlo, Mr. Skelton?"

"No. Over at Mentone."

"I must say I like the little soulful places away from the crowd."

"Yes."

"But, of course, one must see everything. I have to see everything because of my books, and my art as a writer. I assure you, that when I wrote my book on Algiers and Tunis, I saw everything—everything. One must have a cosmopolitan culture."

She was one of those women who dissolved at once into confidences. Her voluble mouth had the appearance of being made of pink rubber, and she shot out a pointed and periodic tongue to moisten her lips. Her blue eyes were protuberant and rather strained, as though pushing forward to see everything and to advertise their vision. Her hair was short, black, and curly; her throat fat, unctuous and sallow; her voice the kind of voice that is associated with enlarged tonsils. The woman was the worst type of egotist; the sentimental and selfishly emotional egotist. It did not take Skelton long to sum her up.

"Isn't it simply abominable, shooting these poor pigeons! Under the blue sky, too, with so many beautiful things to be seen. To me it is so typical of a decadent civilisation."

"It does seem rather superfluous."

Her throaty voice began to pulsate with feeling. She talked hungrily, as though desiring to masticate her subject thoroughly. Nor did she pause to hear what Skelton might have to say.

"The place makes me shudder. Those horrible gaming rooms, and the horrible faces, like Aubrey Beardsley's faces. Things impress me so vividly; one has to suffer for being an artist. I am writing a book about the Riviera; yes, and I shall expose this horrible butchery of birds. The public must be made to think. We have our responsibilities—we who study life."

"The public is——"

She was off again with a splutter.

"I went to the cemetery yesterday, and I am sure I cried most of the night. You ought to go there if you want to sound the depths of decadence, misery, extinction. Yes, it is an experience for one who can feel. I feel everything so acutely."

Skelton had a stiff upper lip and cynical eyes. He was watching Constance and Mrs. Parsons, who were a few paces ahead of them.

Here, too, the conversation was largely a monologue for the moment.

"My dear, you look wonderfully better. I hardly knew you. Something has happened. Now, don't protest."

She gave Constance a sly and understanding look.

"It brings a woman's bloom out. But, my dear girl, you ought to study your dress a little."

"Ah?"

"Men love smartness, but every resort has its proper note. You ought not to wear bright colours at Monte; at least, that's my view. You must think of the social atmosphere of a place. Something soft and inconspicuous, but absolutely *chic*. One does not want to look like—well, you know!"

Constance flushed.

"My husband——"

She felt the false step and recovered it quickly.

"Isn't it a matter of a woman's personality?"

"Personality?"

"Some women are born overdressed, so to speak. They have to tone themselves down."

Skelton was close behind them, listening to their conversation, and letting Mrs. Hildegarde Hogg Thomson work her India-rubber mouth into negroid volubility.

"All the same, my dear, it takes a woman a good many years to learn to dress understandingly. I don't think good taste is always born with one."

"But if one keeps to simplicity?"

"It depends on what you call simplicity. Besides, a woman can be underdressed, wearing a golf jersey when she ought to be in a smart gown."

"Better than being in a smart gown when it would be better to be in the jersey."

They were getting perilously near the edge of subtle personalities.

"My dear, if you had only asked me to go with you when you bought that jacket! It wants just a shade more delicacy in it."

"I think it pleases me very well."

"The colour is a little crude."

"A girl may be able to carry a colour that a woman of five-and-thirty cannot wear. Some of us soften colours; others make them more glaring."

Mrs. Parsons' eyes had a little glitter in them.

"We must all please ourselves," she said.

Skelton had been able to catch the whole of the argument, and there was a certain pleased and applauding amusement in his eyes.

"Well done. You have given her shot for shot, and raked her through and through. Damn the woman's impertinence! As if she wasn't always in danger of being taken for a superfine barmaid!"

Mrs. Hogg Thomson was in the thick of a diatribe.

"It's the shocking egotism of the place; a sort of miasma in the air. Can't you feel it round you?"

"I beg your pardon, I am afraid I was dreaming for a moment."

She gave him one look, and her mouth seemed to fall in.

"How delicate your wife looks, Mr. Skelton."

Her eyes said "sickly."

Skelton smiled.

"Some of us are built on fine lines. Delightful weather to-day, isn't it? Have you seen the blue frogs at the china shop in Mentone?"

The party reunited itself rather abruptly, and then split up again into its original parts.

Four different remarks were made by four different people.

Mrs. Hogg Thomson's: "An engineer? A mechanical mind, of course. That explains my feeling of repulsion."

Mrs. Parsons': "A cleverer little pussy cat than I thought."

Constance's: "There are some people who seem to drag one down to a lower level, and make one feel evil."

Skelton's: "I have been listening to a white negress jabbering bosh."

The married couple went off to lunch at Ré's. Mrs. Hogg Thomson had brought sandwiches. Mrs. Parsons could not face the ordeal of seeing her literary cousin eat sandwiches on the Casino terrace. She pleaded "shopping," and concealed herself in the Café de Paris.

Chapter Thirty-six

Having been inspected by one of the bored gentlemen in the bureau, and given their card of entry, Skelton and his wife made their way into the gaming rooms. The main room, with its air of tarnished opulence, had an empty look that afternoon, the roulette tables standing like so many isolated centres of attraction, each fringed with a circle of seated and standing figures. It was impossible not to be struck by the suggestion of feeding troughs, round which a number of intent and greedy animals crowded.

The habitués were there, the extraordinary old women with grotesque faces, the nondescript men, people who sat there day by day, and made gambling a business. The irresponsible and purely inquisitive element seemed largely absent. There was very little youth, very little gaiety, and absolutely no brilliance, perilous or otherwise. It was a professional crowd, stolidly and almost swinishly absorbed, rather squalid in appearance and not impressive, and not qualified to inspire any idea of hazardous and heroic vice.

Constance and her husband found a table where they could stand and watch the play. The master of the table was a lean man with a morose black face, and a metallic voice that seemed to come clicking rhythmically out of an iron box.

"*Faites vos jeux, messieurs. Rien ne va plus.*"

The croupiers, alert yet bored, amazingly efficient, sallow and dispassionate, juggled with rakes and coins. There was not much money moving on the table. It seemed to be a very bourgeois circle, largely made up of old women and men who might have sat behind a counter. They pushed out their stakes with a grudging, shopkeeping cautiousness; some of them scribbled figures in notebooks—stolid,

watchful, greedily intent. No one appeared either pleased or distressed. The ball spun round, the money went to and fro, the metallic voice sounded, the hands kept up a restless dabbling round the edge of the table.

"Not very thrilling?"

They drew back a little.

"What horrible people!"

"Isn't it a serious, sordid business? Just watch the hands and faces."

"I expected something quite different."

"Interesting villains and beautiful devils, desperate young men, and all that?"

"Perhaps."

"I don't call the place immoral. It's just unpleasant."

He caught someone's eye.

"Hallo, there's Jim Parsons over there at the end! Let's go and watch him."

They moved to the end of the table, and exchanged casual greetings over the back of Mr. James Parsons' chair. He was sitting between a huge, swarthy old frau in rusty black, and a sallow boy whose eyes were the colour of ice. James Parsons' face was about the only fresh-coloured one at the table, and the particular niceness of his person made most of his neighbours look frowsy and unclean.

"Winning?"

"Right out of luck to-day."

Constance was fascinated by the old frau in black. She had a pile of louis and two piles of five-franc pieces before her, also a notebook and a stubby pencil. Her fingers were like little bolsters, the nails bitten and very black. Time after time she staked her five-franc pieces with stolid deliberation, licked her pencil, and scribbled in her notebook. Her face was like a hideous tallow mask, all hairy about the upper lip and chin, with bulges under the eyes, and a black wart on one cheek. She never looked at her neighbours, never spoke, never appeared conscious of anything but the green table, the money, and the metallic voice that called out the numbers. She was winning slowly, and she seemed to sniff lovingly at the little piles of money.

"Like to put on five francs?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Try."

He gave her a five-franc piece, and she thought of a number. Twenty-three came into her head. She staked on a simple chance, James Parsons placing the piece for her. Twenty-three turned up.

The surprise and the excitement flushed her. She had to lean over the old German to take the notes and gold the croupier pushed towards her, and the smell of

the old woman was like the smell of a musty cupboard.

She had a sudden feeling of disgust, repulsion.

"Try again."

An impulsive and half-contemptuous whim made her place a louis on zero. Parsons gave a questioning jerk of the head and then followed her lead. Zero turned up. Constance and James Parsons had each won thirty-five louis, while the bank swept in the rest of the stakes.

"I say, Mrs. Skelton, take my chair, and play my game for me."

He was eager, excited, insistent.

"You have a flair. It's one of the lucky moments. Quick!"

She shook her head, her sensitive nostrils dilating as she looked at the German woman. Her husband was watching her.

"No; I would rather not."

"Nonsense."

She felt that people were staring, and that many of the greedy faces were turned her way.

"No, thank you, I don't care to. I shall not play any more."

"What a pity. Luck picks out innocence."

She felt Skelton's hand on her arm.

"Come and sit down."

She gave him her winnings, and he took her to one of the leather-covered couches against the wall.

"The air is pretty pestiferous in here. Do you care to go and look at *trente et quarante*?"

"No. You go."

"I've seen it before."

"I'm getting a headache, Dick, and I feel all flushed."

"How Parsons can stand it I can't think. Half an hour or so in this atmosphere is enough for most healthy people. The table doesn't lure you?"

"Not a bit. It repels me rather badly. I should like to leave the money behind."

"Tainted, eh? The hands and faces round the table don't look particularly fresh. Let's go out and look at the shops."

"Yes, fresh air and sunlight."

As they passed down the steps from the main entrance she turned to him quickly.

"I don't want to keep that money. It may sound superstitious, but I couldn't touch it."

"What shall we do? Throw it into the sea?"

"I'll give it away to something. If I bought anything with it, I should always be reminded of that old German frau's hands."

Take a tired woman shopping and she will revive in the most marvellous fashion, especially if she has a delicate taste and a healthy love of self-decoration. Skelton stopped outside a hat-shop window, where the "creations" were delectable enough to interest even a man. The window was as gay as a flower shop, all roses and pinks, soft blues and greens and greys.

"There's the very thing for you."

He pointed out a little silver-grey straw *chapeau* trimmed with a spray of minute pink roses, innocence, virginity, as expressed by the milliner's art. The face that lived under it should have a flower-like yet mischievous freshness.

"We'll have that. Come along in. I don't know how my French will work!"

He need not have worried. A great lady in black silk, very debonair and gracious, with white, smiling teeth, put herself at their service.

"*Bon jour, madame et monsieur.* What may I have the pleasure——"

"I want a hat for madame—a hat in the window; I will show you."

He pointed out the grey hat with the pink roses, and the great lady made a little gesture of enthusiastic and sympathetic approval.

"Monsieur has the good taste. Madame is so *gentille* and *ingénue*."

Constance changed hats and looked at herself in the mirror. One glance told her feminine instinct that the hat was perfect, part of her self. Skelton's eyes said the same.

"How much?"

"One hundred and twentee francs, monsieur."

Constance looked dashed.

"I don't think I quite like it."

"Well, I do! Madame will take the hat. We are driving—*en voiture, comprenez vous?* We will call for the hat presently, *plus tard*."

"Would not madame like to look at others?"

Madame was very firm, even chilling. They paid the bill and escaped.

She came near scolding him as they turned into the gardens.

"Dick, nearly five pounds! You are being too generous."

"I am out to enjoy myself."

"But, dear——"

"Do you care for lace?"

She became very serious, so serious that he made her sit down on a seat under a

tree and talk it over.

"I am not going to let you spend your money on me in this way."

He was equally emphatic.

"Connie, just listen a moment. I'm not a rich man, but when I give—I give. Understand, dear, that a man enjoys himself when he is giving to the one particular woman in the world. That's where wives who are greedy fools spoil the whole game. But I know this: you will never waste our money selfishly; it's not in you to do it; you are made that way. See?"

She looked at him very dearly.

"I think I understand. It's not that I don't like taking your money——"

"Our money. Listen. There is a certain sort of beast who tries to throttle his wife's personality by tying the purse strings round her throat. I can understand why many women are mad against marriage. The man who tries to rule by keeping hold of the cheque-book is a cad and a fool. It's a partnership—understand? You will have a certain sum yearly absolutely your own. You won't have to ask for it, or get pickings out of the housekeeping expenses! And when I save money, I shall invest a certain sum yearly in your name."

"You are very generous, Dick."

"Generous! Nothing of the kind! It's what every decent man ought to do, instead of dragging all the sordid money business across his hearthrug. Do you think I am going to let the dross get into our life and soil it?"

"I am so glad you think like that."

"Then come along and let me have a day's dissipation."

They bought lace, stockings, shoes, and spent half an hour in an establishment where Constance was measured for a tailor-made costume. She looked at him half pleadingly.

"All right, I know the limit. I have an account book somewhere in the back of my head."

Her eyes flashed out at him.

"How I like you; you are so straight and reasonable."

"By George, you have got rid of the Casino air. You are all sparkle."

"I am rather—happy."

"This sort of thing is the finest tonic going for a woman."

"You don't think it frivolous!"

"I think a woman who doesn't care what she wears is a perfect beast."

They drifted back through the gardens to the Café de Paris and sat down at one of the little outside tables. The band was playing, and life seemed in a mood to dance

to the music. The café was crowded. Waiters bustled about. The space in front of the Casino was full of movement and colour.

"*Thé pour deux, garçon.*"

The waiter, who had a cynical and hard-eyed way with him, cut in laconically:

"Tea for two. Buttered buns?"

"No, cakes—a plateful."

They laughed.

"So he thought we looked like bun people!"

"Is it because the English are bears?"

They drank their tea and watched the people, Constance drifting into a silent mood. A tranquil and pensive radiance seemed to light up her face, the radiance of inward vision that was penetrating to the core of things. Skelton lit a cigarette, watched her, and felt happy.

"Deep thoughts?"

She turned to him with a quick smile.

"Yes, a passing of pictures."

"May I see them?"

"Yes."

She glanced towards the Casino entrance, where people were streaming up and down.

"To have seen this once, or even twice——"

"Is enough?"

"Perhaps. It has made me look back at England a little longingly for the first time since we left it."

"What do you see?"

"A green country, fresh and cool, rather grey at times, but with pearl-grey mysterious distances. Dick, isn't it a land to live in, to work in? All this counts for so little."

"It's for people who want to run away from themselves. But work! Do you know what Bernard Shaw says about work? That nothing can make a man more selfish! And you are talking of work—already!"

"I have never read anything of Bernard Shaw's."

"Begin, but don't swallow everything. He's just a keen and clean north wind after a sappy south-wester. But what about work?"

"Do you think that I don't understand you a little."

He looked at her intently.

"Some of us are devils if we can't get rid of creative energy. It is food and drink;

we get savage without it."

"I can understand. And I am so glad. We shall have a home somewhere."

"My dear, are you so delightfully old-fashioned as all that! Victorian dullness!"

She turned eyes that glimmered.

"We are the home—you and I. It's not furniture or bricks. Dull people make a dull house. And we shall do everything together, shan't we?"

"Everything. You shall fair-copy some of my plans for me."

"May I?"

"Of course. You'll find me pushing my correspondence into your lap! And when I'm tied up in an infernal tangle over something you'll sing."

She gave a queer and almost noiseless laugh.

"Yes, I shall sing. And I think I shall know when not to get in your way, dear."

"Now, what nonsense!"

"It's not nonsense, Dick."

He sat silent a moment, as though deeply touched and a little astonished.

"How is it you are such a genius?"

"Well, you know, Dick, I am rather fond of you. You are just my life—all of it."

"Confound all these people! I wish they were under the sea! I want to——"

Chapter Thirty-seven

There was one blessing attached to the life at the Villa Proserpine: they were spared the enthusiastic and travelled egoists who persist in telling people where they can go and what they can see. These busybodies refuse to leave one any sense of adventurous mystery, but appropriate Rome itself, and shed the blight of their self-conceit upon all that is strange and alluring. Skelton and his wife had the delight of discovering things for themselves, of seeing them fresh with their own eyes. They discovered La Mortola, the cliff gardens at Monaco, the old town at Ventimiglia, rock-set Eze. No other people's adjectives spoilt the intimate, personal charm of their pilgrimages.

These two discovered the seat by the outjutting parapet at the end of the cliff gardens at Monaco, where they were poised between sea and sky, and could look down upon the cliff tinted with mauve stocks and glaucous-leaved aloes sending out tongues of fire, and upon the backs of wheeling gulls, and upon the sea that lapped at the rocks with lips of foam. A cypress grew beside the seat; trees, shrubs, and masses of geranium shut away Monaco as though it were not there. They could feel themselves on some Greek island, back in Homeric days, with the purple Ægean waiting for the pale sails of Agamemnon's ships.

La Mortola would have pleased them better if it had been less the proper popular thing to see, nor could they understand why hundreds of nonentities should be made to waste time, ink and paper by writing their names down in a book. The pergola with its masses of primulas below, the banks of anemones, the pool of violets on the lower ground by the sea—these were unforgettable. As for Eze, that earthquake-shattered town, poised like a tower in a mediæval picture wedged in

among spires of rock, reminiscent of dragons and sorcery, men in golden armour riding up steps, winding roads, and strange, elf-fair women, it lured them thrice along the Corniche Road after an anxious and stertorous engine had butted them up hill all the way from Monte Carlo to La Turbie. Constance sketched the grey walls and gateway of Eze, its narrow streets and baffling corners. Never was there a more captivating jumble of ruinous delight. The demure, sly young matron in black who waits, crocheting diligently, and smiles at visitors, luring them into a personally conducted tour of the castle rock and platform, only to accept a franc with an air of charming astonishment, became quite a friend of theirs. Cap Martin with its tangle of Aleppo pines and fringe of fretted and chaotic rocks was a favourite lunching ground, with Bordighera flashing white across a sapphire sea. They climbed on mules to St. Agnes, whence the terraced hills below look like a series of huge stairways. Sometimes they wandered up above Grimaldi, sat under the olives, and talked and dreamed. The whole land was theirs, to be discovered, enjoyed, and painted into vivid, personal memories.

But the Villa Proserpine expected its owners, and Skelton booked rooms on the second floor of the Hôtel Magnifique. To Constance, the parting from this little white-walled house brought mixed emotions of sadness, gratitude, and regret. It had held some of the richest moments of her life, many hours of suffering and dread. She would never forget the terrace and the green walk under the oranges and lemons, the corner where the white jasmine grew, the stone seat half covered with geranium and heliotrope. Nor was fat Anna to be parted from without emotions. She stood for that kindness somehow inherent in human nature, a kindness that transcends the civil expectation of "tips."

The Hôtel Magnifique was a typical Riviera hotel. It had its garden with palms and lawns of autumn-sown grass, its beds of cinerarias and wallflowers, its eucalyptus and mimosa trees. A punctilious smartness characterised all that pertained to it, from the gorgeous station 'bus to the boy in buttons who operated the lift. The Hôtel Magnifique was almost exclusively English. The terms were exorbitant. It was a constant complaint that the catering was on the meagre side in spite of the atmosphere of smartness, and a critical person might have been unable to discover what the Hôtel Magnifique gave people for the high prices that it charged. The hotel had become a habit. People went there because so many other people seemed to go there. The visitors' list published in the local paper could always show a lord or a baronet or two, and the names had, on the whole, an aristocratic resonance. As Thackeray would have put it, middle-class people must expect to pay extra for being put in the same list as Lord So-and-So, Sir Somebody Else and General Gadzooks.

But the Hôtel Magnifique was deplorably dull, with an expensive English dullness. The large majority of the visitors were old ladies, and a number of those neutral-tinted, unattached women who drift about the world, looking bored and lonely. Nobody appeared to desire to know anybody else. If you walked into the lounge when it was full, you might have imagined that there had been some universal, devastating row, and that the whole hotel was standing upon a morose and speechless dignity. Work-bags were very much in evidence. Nearly the whole hotel turned out to church on Sunday. At night bridge was played with gloomy seriousness, and many of the older women played patience. If any youthful spirit laughed during a meal, a cold ripple of surprise seemed to spread through the elaborately decorated room.

The Skeltons plunged straight from the intimate personal atmosphere of the Villa Proserpine into the dense and stupid reserve of the British caravanserie. It was like the old Exeter Hall after a Grieg concert. They were struck by the unimaginable dullness of the place, and by its air of overfed self-satisfaction.

The change was very oppressive, especially to Constance. She suddenly became conscious of a new sense of publicity and of isolation. People stared at her, but did not speak. She seemed to meet cold, critical and unsociable faces everywhere.

The impression was forced upon her that these people detected in her a taint of inferiority, some smirch, of which perhaps she was only too conscious. The Villa Proserpine had sent the past to sleep; the Hôtel Magnifique brought it to life again. She spoke of the impression to Skelton.

He was amused.

"Most hotels are like this, Connie. The people are only abominably dull and self-satisfied, and they eat too much."

"I feel that they look at me as though I ought not to be here."

"No one ought to be here! That's the particular attitude! I have reserved our room for only a week. We'll get out of this respectable refrigerator into something sunnier."

Yet this same sense of isolation brought them even closer to each other, and quickened that interplay of sympathy and understanding that alone makes marriage sacred. Their eyes saw the humour of things, and flashed with simultaneous vibrations of laughter. A word, a look, and their spirits were off in company, skimming the lake of life, or plunging momentarily beneath the surface. Constance's fine sensitiveness made her wonderfully swift in seizing upon all that was provocative and comical. No explanations were needed between them. The same flash lit both

brains.

The Hôtel Magnifique abounded in unconscious humour for those who had the eyes to see and the ears to hear. The place was delicious, Meredithian, worthy of a play by Shaw. Skelton and Constance had only to sit still and listen, watch and exchange glances, remain in a corner or behind a book, while the "Magnificents" performed. Skelton would repeat conversations he had heard. They invented nicknames for people, and grotesque, imaginary tides.

A very commonplace, middle-aged couple sat at the next table to them in the *salle à manger*. The man might have been anything; he was just red, and well-fleshed and rather voiceless, with a drooping yellow-brown moustache that needed a great deal of wiping. He did not seem interested in anything except the food, and his dress waistcoat was a bad fit. The wife reminded Skelton of a superior turkey. She gobbled at intervals in an opinionated voice, and described her personal adventures with impressive minuteness, as though taking it for granted that the whole room would be interested. Her taste in dress was shocking; and if she had dispensed with a little of her propriety, and had powdered her face instead, even the angels might have forgiven her.

"I feel quite sorry for those people, Dick. It must be dull to be so commonplace. I haven't seen them speak to anyone. The man looks at me sometimes as though he were shy but would like to be friendly. Don't you think we might be human."

"Try it."

She did so, and was badly snubbed, much to her own astonishment. A little later she happened to hear the wife making inquiries in the bureau, turning the English under-manageress into a sort of confidential *Who's Who*.

"Can you tell me who the Hendersons are who have just arrived? Ah, not the Hampshire Hendersons? Thank you. In a hotel one has to know who people are before one accepts advances. Yes, exactly. And the couple who sit at the table next to us—Skelton I believe the name is?"

The lady manageress knew nothing about the Skeltons. She was bland and non-committal, having learnt by experience to be astonished at nothing. People came and asked her the most extraordinary questions. She answered them discreetly, and thought her own thoughts.

Constance happened to know the number of "The Turkey's" room. She looked up the name on the board in the hall. It was Bunting.

She found Skelton in the garden under the shade of a palm, and reading "Tartarin of Tarascon."

"Do you know the Buntings?"

"Of rabbit-skin fame?"

"The people at the next table."

"Have you been making advances?"

"Yes; and I've been snubbed. And what do you think I heard afterwards?"

She described the bureau incident.

"They are exclusive, Dick, ex-clu-sive, and I thought them so dull and commonplace! Isn't it delicious?"

"Commonplace people are always exclusive. You see, there are so many of them that they try to disown each other."

"But what have they got to be exclusive about?"

"Ah, there you have me! Life is full of marvels. They probably have a lot of money."

"But isn't it absurd?"

"My pearl of great price, don't you see that these people might have bored us to death if they had consented to take to us, whereas we get infinitely more amusement out of their exclusiveness? Don't you see the humour of being excluded by people called Bunting? I think I must alarm the lady by acting the bounder, and then pretending to make advances!"

"I don't think you would enjoy it, dear."

"No, perhaps not. Here's the rhyme:

"Baby, baby Bunting,
Father's gone 'tuft-hunting,'
To buy a little snobber-skin
To wrap the exclusive Bunting in."

"Dick, you're dreadful. Let's go for a walk by the sea."

Not far from the Hôtel Bristol they met the very last person Skelton expected to meet, and yet when the coincidence was analysed it became apparent that Doyle was one of the most likely people to be found strolling about Cannes or Monte Carlo or Mentone at such a time of the year. He was idling briskly along, for Doyle always did things swiftly, even when he was supposed to be taking life at a crawl. A thin, round-shouldered man, alert and enigmatical, dressed in a grey morning-suit and green Homburg hat, with brown spats and wash-leather gloves, and carrying a light cane, he looked almost the elderly "Johnny."

He recognised Skelton instantly, though he had met him only once in his life.

"My dear Skelton! I knew you were down here, and I was going to call. Your wife?"

He bowed over her hand with his foreign air, holding his hat in his other hand, and smiling with his mouth and one eye. The eye behind the eye-glass always appeared blankly and blindly preoccupied, whereas it was acting as working partner, seeing to business while its fellow undertook the social side of things.

"May I join you for a quarter of an hour? I have to lunch with an old friend at Cap Martin. We might stroll that way. Good. Mrs. Skelton, I hear you came here for your health. There no longer seems any necessity!"

He was very debonair with Constance, talking as though he and her husband were comrades-in-arms, and managing to flatter her pride in Skelton without being obvious. Doyle could always count on his own imperturbability. He trod calmly on the facts that he had tried to drive a very problematical bargain with Cuthbertson and her husband, and had caused both of them a good deal of worry.

"Your husband is a very wonderful man, Mrs. Skelton. We shall have to beg you to bring him home before long. It is a fine thing to be indispensable! By the way, Skelton, I'll have this week's *Automobile* posted to you. You may find something of interest in it. We are getting along very passably."

"So Cuthbertson says."

"A gentleman with a very stiff back, my dear Skelton. No nonsense! We understand all that."

He puzzled Constance very effectually. She wanted to like him, but couldn't quite manage it, though she knew he was going to be a valuable partisan. The eye-glass and the steady expressionless eye behind it worried her, especially when the other eye seemed so much alive. She noticed that Doyle treated her husband with a directness that was almost brusque, as though he knew instinctively that the velvet-glove business was useless.

They parted company close to the old Roman arch, Doyle urbane and a little sly, Skelton with an expression of grim amusement.

"I can't quite make that man out, Dick. I don't think I would trust him."

"No one does, madam, except when he is tied up as tightly as our lawyers can manage it. Doyle is a genius in his way, and he wants to make use of me."

"How could you tell that? I thought——"

"That he was rather abrupt? All that was a challenge. It said, 'Let's have no nonsense between us.' He has had his tussle with Cuthbertson. There are some men you have to knock down before you can shake hands with them. Doyle is that sort. You know, you can mesmerise people into making them play fair."

In glancing up at him she had an intuitive glimpse of an almost ferocious sense of honour that could be implacable and devilish towards the meaner kinds of roguery.

"Yes, I believe you could."

Now Doyle had friends staying at the same hotel at Monte Carlo, the Rowland Trevors, who had a big place between Farnham and Reading. The Trevors were moving on to Mentone, and Doyle, who had been useful to Rowland Trevor, Esq., always made use of people upon whom he had laid any obligation.

He spoke to Trevor in the smoking-room that same evening.

"Are you going to put up at 'The Magnifique' at Mentone?"

"I believe my wife has selected that particular place."

"There is a man I know staying there, a fellow named Skelton—a devilish clever engineer. I am helping to run an invention of his; it's going to be a big thing. I believe he's got even bigger things in him, and I want to keep in touch with a brain like that. One must in these days. It's specialising in brains. You might be urbane to him."

Rowland Trevor, being a director of companies, understood.

"Of course, my dear Doyle, of course."

Chapter Thirty-eight

It was the day of the Battle of Flowers, and Skelton had been making secret preparations that had entailed serious interviews with a local car proprietor and a local florist. He had made it clear to a little, round, fat, and enthusiastic floral artiste that he had great ambitions, and that nothing but a triumph would please him. Pink and white were to be the colours, but he did not dogmatise as to the flowers.

At breakfast that morning he said casually, "We may as well go down and see the fun this afternoon. It looks like being a splendid day. And, by the way, Connie, wear that white dress and that pink jacket—will you? Also the white hat. It's a whim of mine."

"As my lord pleases!"

They were sitting in the hotel garden before lunch, when the Rowland Trevors arrived from Monte Carlo. They had the hotel 'bus to themselves, and their luggage was like the baggage of a regiment—travelling trunks, leather dressing-bags and hat-boxes, cameras, golf clubs, coats, bundles of sticks and umbrellas, tennis rackets. The Trevors were large people, nearly as large and impressive as their luggage.

Certain people impress themselves at once upon their surroundings, arriving with an easy assumption of a divine right to be considered superior to their neighbours. The Rowland Trevors were superior people. They did not talk loudly, but their voices were peculiarly penetrating, voices accustomed to the giving of orders and to conversing in large rooms and in the midst of publicity. Their complacency was so incomparable that it enabled them at times to be superfinely rude. They had travelled a good deal, and were thoroughly cultured in an eclectic and uncreative way, priding themselves upon their fastidious taste and upon their knowledge of books, pictures

and music. The father had published books upon the Elizabethan drama and upon violins.

Rowland Trevor stood six feet three in his shoes, held himself very straight, and walked with a slight swing of the shoulders, looking down on the world with an air of superior and amused benignity. His wife was nearly as tall as he was, thin, restless, authoritative, with glistening and protruding eyes, rather like the eyes of a King Charles spaniel. The daughters were well-developed and imperious young women, with full eyes and noses that were rather too broad and scornful about the nostrils. The son was in the Diplomatic Service, and was going bald on the crown. He looked infallible—perhaps because he felt it.

The Skeltons watched the disembarkation.

"I seem to have seen those people before."

"Where?"

He was frowning slightly.

"At home—I can't remember. They are large enough to be recollected."

"Rather overpowering. Do some voices rouse all your antagonism?"

"The very devil! Especially the voices that talk from the top of a mountain. Hallo! there goes the luncheon gong."

They had arrived at the "fruit" when the Rowland Trevors walked in in Indian file and took the table that had been reserved for them by one of the windows. The *maître d'hôtel* was very attentive, for the Trevors had never to beckon to subordinates. They sat down, looked about them, and began to talk as though they had been in the hotel three months.

"Did you see the creation that has just arrived outside?"

"A pink and white bird's nest on wheels. I suppose some tough old chicken is going out as a spring pullet."

The younger Trevor was unfolding his serviette and glancing round the room to see if there were any decent-looking women. His eyes reached Constance and paused momentarily with a stare of serene approval.

Skelton was looking at his watch.

"I think you might go and dress, Connie. Do yourself justice."

The diplomatist watched her rise and walk out of the room. He insisted upon a woman possessing poise and that gracefulness that hides all self-consciousness. He decided that the little girl with the dark eyes and the intent face was quite the most presentable female present.

Skelton went out to look at the pink and white bird's nest on wheels, and the prospect of "processing" in it rather frightened him for the moment. The artiste had

come up early to see if monsieur approved of the creation, and whether he desired any additions. It was really a very charming affair, made up of white wool, pink and white ribbons, pink and white carnations, almond blossom, white stocks and pink roses. A well-groomed little black mare was harnessed between the shafts, and the driver was a good-looking young Italian.

"Monsieur will observe——"

"Yes; but how the devil does one get into the thing?"

This necessitated some elucidation. The edge of the nest was made to open on one side.

"I see. Charming, *très charmant, très gentille*."

"Monsieur is agree-able?"

"Very agreeable—in the best of tempers."

"And the flowers for the battle? I have some."

"Put them in—*dans la voiture*. We must have ammunition—*munitions de guerre*, whatever you call it."

Constance came out and found her husband examining the accommodation inside the "nest."

"Hallo! Here's our conveyance."

"Ours, Dick?"

"I ordered a creation suitable to the lady who is going to take the first prize. If you don't mind a lean old goshawk occupying the nest with you, I'll go too and try not to look a fool."

She climbed in, flushed, and not a little touched by the trick he had played upon her.

"What a dear you were to think of this! It's a perfect picture!"

"You'll be pelted, you know, but I have laid in a store of ammunition. It's rather like going round with a circus!"

There were interested spectators in the vestibule and on the hotel steps. The whole Trevor family had filed out into the garden and taken chairs under the shade of a group of orange trees. They looked amused, but there was too much lift of the nostril about the daughters' amusement.

"Honeymooners, I judge! Care to go down and see the show?"

"No; they are awfully fusty things as a rule. Nice is the only place worth troubling about."

"Besides, the Cottle boys are coming up to tea."

"They are going through the flower business first, though, in a turn-out from 'The Paradise.' Young Emery told me."

"The honeymooners are off. Someone ought to have presented them with a nest-egg!"

"My dear Christopher!"

"Well, why not? The girl's rather pretty."

"In the—millinery—style."

"Now, how everybody does hate a pretty woman! You need not be so hard on the others, Gwen; you are not particularly hideous."

"I was only stating an impression."

The red-roofed, white-walled town, the grey mountains, and the southern sea were all in brilliant sunlight. The enclosures between the gardens and the sea were crowded, and nearly every seat in the tribunes was taken. The flags and streamers floated lazily overhead, betraying how light the wind was, and making the crowd turn frequent eyes towards pine-clad Cap Martin for a first glimpse of Legagneux's monoplane sailing like a great black bird out of the western sky. The band of the Alpine regiment marched in with a clangour of brass, and the sturdy little Chasseurs in the blue uniforms, caps and puttees took up their places along the roadway.

Mounted gendarmes and men carrying banners marched into the enclosure. The band played; people craned their heads. The procession of decorated cars, carriages and coaches filed in and the fun began, a little tentative at first, a little hypercritical, unwilling to waste ammunition upon anything that was not spontaneously provocative. A note of riot, of colour music, was needed to set the posies flying with the abandonment of impulse.

Constance's carriage came fifth in the line, and the "creation" in pink and white was fated to rouse the first murmur of enthusiasm and the first storm of flowers.

"I say, that's charming!"

"And a confoundedly pretty girl in it, too."

"She's French."

"Here's something worth throwing at."

Skelton had bought Constance one of the little round straw fans, and she needed it for self-defence. The bunches of flowers came pelting in—violets, stocks, wallflowers, mimosa, a flattering fusillade that poured from both sides of the roadway. Skelton, keen as a boy, gave back shot for shot, laughing when he scored a hit or was hit most palpably in return. If the men noticed Constance, Skelton was not unnoticed by the women.

"*Quel brave!*"

"That man with the brown face looks rather a dear."

"I like to see a man enjoying himself, and not looking like a self-conscious

codfish."

Self-conscious he was not, being in high fettle and full of fight.

"I say, hot work, this. Throw, old woman, throw like anything. I'm being buried in flowers. Talk about Roman triumphs! You see what it means, having a fascinating wife."

She was flushed, radiant, a little breathless.

"Isn't it? Oh, I say, that one stung!"

"Badly? Where did it come from? Let me get one back."

"No. Take that! Dick, look out! Oh, bother. All right, wait till we come round again."

He glanced at her with eyes that laughed.

"You look splendid; and you're getting an ovation. Watch this coach-load here; they are preparing a broadside. Lay on, Macduff!"

A coach-load of pierrots and pierrettes passed them, firing with every gun. It was laughing, pelting, bright-eyed fooling, with age growing young again and youth losing much of its self-consciousness. Skelton and Constance had no time to study the faces in the ship of flowers that pelted colour down upon them. It was a mere moving blur, a tossing of flowers, a shooting out of hands; they were overmatched and smothered for the moment by the superior weight of metal from above.

The coach carried a party from the Hôtel Paradis, and the two Cottle boys from Roymer belonged to the party.

"Emma! My hat! Don't you see who it is?"

"What?"

"That chap Skelton and Bertie's little flapper."

"Well, I'm jiggered! Who'd have thought of us pelting 'em with flowers down here? I say, what a wheeze!"

"Hallo! here comes the little bit of fluff in blue again. She's got eyes. Here, pass up a fresh basket."

To and fro rolled the pink and white carriage, pelted conspicuously all the way. Particular people, who were hard to please, held their fire and waited for Constance's return. One tall, coal-bearded Frenchman in the tribunes stood holding a bunch of violets, letting the duller folk go by, and reserving the homage of his attack for *petite madame* in pink and white. Each time she passed he tossed a bunch of violets at Constance, and a glance with it, exclaiming gallantly, "*La Reine, La Reine*."

An afternoon of sensations! It culminated in a triumph for the "creation" in pink and white. Constance and her car carried off the first prize.

The young Cottles stripped off their pierrot costumes and made for the Hôtel Magnifique, the Rowland Trevors, and tea. They felt themselves to be very "doggy," very much men of the world.

"I say, I'm going to follow up the 'Blue Bird.' Wonder if she'll be at the Casino ball?"

"You won't know her behind a mask."

"Don't you be too cocksure."

They found the Misses Rowland Trevor in the garden, and being favoured and familiar friends, they fell at once into intimate garrulity.

"I say, awful funny coincidence——"

"Yes; most rummy thing. Ever meet a chap named Skelton?"

"Engineer Johnny; lived in a cottage down our way."

"Ran off with a—what do you call it?—*enfant anonyme*; mother with a past, you know; made quite a stir in our mud-patch. You must have heard. The girl poisoned her mother—by mistake, so she said."

Neither of the Misses Trevor knew anything about such people. Their country place was within ten miles of Roymer, but they went only to the big houses.

"You seem rather excited about it."

"Well, blessed if they weren't in the battle of flowers, and we pelted 'em. And their ramshackle took first prize."

"What's the name—Skelton?"

"Yes. They were in a pink and white turn-out, a sort of nest."

The Trevor girls exchanged glances.

"Why, they are staying here."

"What, at the Magnifique?"

"Yes, and we have been asked to know them. A friend of the pater's."

The Cottles, as serious men of the world, looked scandalised.

"But you can't. The chap's an awful bounder. And, of course, the girl—One can't waste time on such people."

Chapter Thirty-nine

A copy of *The Automobile* arrived for Skelton that same evening, and Constance seized it from him, tore the wrapper off, and looked rapidly through the pages.

"They've got a photo of you, Dick, and there's a long article, all about your work."

"I wonder where they got the photo from? Old Cuthbertson, I suppose."

"It's quite a good one, too. It makes me thrill all over, seeing you there."

She took the paper in to dinner with her, and glanced at it from time to time, quite oblivious of the fact that the Trevor womenfolk were interested in her.

"What is a 'prime mover,' Dick?"

"Just a term for an engine—a thing that produces power."

"I see."

During dinner he became interested in the Trevor family, but merely in the part of a dispassionate observer. They were very animated, very much pleased with the family as a conversational machine. Charming people, so cultured, so interested in life, so sympathetic towards each other! The daughters seemed to find their father the most impressive and delightful of men; the father talked as though he could have no more intelligent listeners than his wife and daughters. Skelton watched them dispassionately and wondered. Was it art, a subtle and self-conscious intellectualising of the peacock's tail? He had a notion that publicity counted.

It was difficult to detach oneself from the aura of such a family, and Constance found herself lured into the part of listener. The Trevors depressed people who were at all sensitively modest and self-critical. They overpowered with a heavy perfume of

culture, and they had the knack of making other minds feel empty. They had travelled here, there, and everywhere, and talked about Italy and Spain as though they knew every picture, church, and village. They appeared to be in intimate touch with the art and music of the day. Constance struggled against a smothering sense of intellectual inferiority. How much these people had seen and experienced; how rich and full their lives had been; while she—Two years at a very middle-class school, a smattering here and there. She was sad, most absurdly sad, over a sudden conviction of her own ignorance, telling herself that she was a raw girl who could not write a letter in decent French, who knew hardly a word of Italian or German, who could sing and play and sketch a little. The Trevors had made her feel that she knew nothing—absolutely nothing.

Drifting into the reading-room after dinner, she sat down alone in a corner to look through a back number of a lady's paper. The bloom had gone from the day's triumph, and carried the skin of her self-content with it. She felt raw, self-conscious, ignorant, incomplete. The superior people had utterly crushed her sense of proportion.

Skelton had strolled into the smoking-room to light a pipe and glance through the article in *The Automobile*. It was a fine laudatory puff arranged as an advertisement, and carefully withholding any technical details that might be purloined by other people. The "Skelton heavy-oil engine" was going to revolutionise the transport service of the world. What was more, the Skelton transmission gear was a marvellous advance upon any previous system. The manufacturers were able to state that a model would soon be running a railway motor coach on their experimental track, and that more than one English railway company was intensely interested in the new system.

Skelton was thinking of possible future royalties, when a large figure loomed over him and uttered his name.

"Mr. Skelton, I believe?"

"Yes."

"We have a mutual friend in Howard Doyle. He told me you were staying here."

"Doyle? We have met once or twice."

"My name is Trevor—Rowland Trevor."

He spoke the words as though there was no necessity for him to explain the Trevors to anyone.

"Extraordinary man, Doyle; very old friend of mine."

He took an empty chair beside Skelton, thrust out his long legs, lit a cigar, and began to talk. The impression that Skelton had carried away from the dinner-table

was strengthened and enlarged. Trevor was always for striking the impressive note. His big head and a certain suggestion of reserves of profundity made one think of a Shakespearian scholar. Yet there was a jealous watchfulness about the eyes, a self-conscious studying of the effect produced upon the person who listened.

"Remarkable the complex development of power in the last twenty years. Take the gyroscope, for instance."

He began to dilate on the properties of the gyroscope. From the gyroscope he passed on to aeroplanes, talking as though he were the engineer and Skelton the rich amateur. Skelton was reminded of a tale told of Gladstone—how at a dinner he sat between a brewer and the owner of a tannery, and how he talked to the brewer about brewing and to the tanner about tanning. Said the brewer to the tanner afterwards: "He seemed to know all about your business." "Didn't know what he was talking about," said the tanner; "but he seemed to know all about brewing." "Brewing! Not a bit of it; he'd got all his knowledge of brewing upside down."

"Doyle tells me you have been doing a remarkable piece of work. New internal combustion engine?"

"Something of that sort."

"Now, when Herr Otto first evolved—" And Skelton had to listen to a popular history of gas and petrol engines; but as the brewer would have put it, much of the information was "upside down."

He became badly bored by Rowland Trevor's impressive ubiquity, and shook himself free by pretending he had a letter to write. He found Constance yawning over fashion-plates and looking tired.

"Come along; bed's the place for weary queens."

"Look; it's all I'm good for."

He gave her an understanding look.

"Fudge! Besides, I'd rather my wife knew how to dress than work out logarithms."

Skelton opened the bedroom shutters wide, and they leant over the iron rail for a while and looked at the lights and the stars.

"The tall man introduced himself in the smoking-room. His name's Rowland Trevor—a friend of Doyle's. He bored me badly."

"What, the new people?"

"Yes. I suppose they want to know us. Probably Doyle asked them to be polite."

She was silent a moment, motionless, leaning against him.

"You have got such a big future."

"Have I?"

"And I feel such an utter fool, Dick. I feel I shan't be able to keep up with you."

He held her close and said, "Bosh!"

"I'm awfully raw, and——"

"Fresh, and all alive, and young, thank God! I know what it is: the impressive people have got on your nerves."

"Did you hear them talking at dinner?"

"They meant us to. Look here, do you think those sort of people count in the world? Not a bit of it. Talkers don't count, except in the rotten political job. Go for such people, stand up to them, don't be smothered. They are much less impressive when you get them at close quarters."

"They would make me feel a fool."

"Nonsense! Be serenely sure of yourself in such company. There is much less real stuff in them than you imagine; and, don't forget, they always dine with the blinds up. If one were an urchin, one could just look in and grin."

Half life is suggestion, and the why and wherefore of her own humility became clearer to Constance after her husband's words. From what he had said it seemed to her certain that the Rowland Trevors would become acquaintances of theirs in the course of the next few days, and she made up her mind that they should not set her down as a mere raw girl.

The point of contact was nearer than she imagined, for on walking out next morning to the big thatched shelter in the hotel garden—a shelter that resembled the half of a huge beehive, set to keep off the north wind—she found the Rowland Trevor women in possession. Skelton had gone down to Cook's to book seats on the motor to Nice, and Constance had taken Richard Jefferies' "Wild Life in a Southern County" for an hour's read in the garden. The shelter had its back to the hotel, and it was impossible to see who was inside it until one had rounded the thatched wall.

She smothered an impulse that suggested a retreat, and sat down in one of the garden chairs. Mrs. Trevor was reading, the elder daughter was scribbling colour notes in her sketch-book, the younger girl writing letters. All three had stared up at her momentarily, but with nothing that could be construed into friendliness.

Constance opened her book and tried to read, only to discover that she was utterly unable to fix her attention. The atmosphere seemed unsympathetic. She found herself glancing at the profiles of the three women and thinking what absurd creatures humans were. Why should she feel so restless and ill at ease in the presence of these three mortals, or suffer their personalities to trouble hers?

Mrs. Trevor closed the magazine, keeping the page marked with her forefinger.

"Some of these cross-correspondences are working out very remarkably. There is an article here giving extracts from the scripts."

The daughters looked up. The younger one had finished her letter, and the other's sketch-book was not of superlative importance.

"I think I must make another attempt with Hilda Montgomery. I can't bring myself to think that telepathy explains everything."

"Do try again, mother; you got out some extraordinary information. Do you remember about the Thomson's Bible?"

"Yes; that was very remarkable."

The conversation ran for a while on psychic subjects, and then drifted into a discussion of the subtle variations of the human colour sense. Constance, listening while she pretended to read, was urging herself to cross the Rubicon and join in. "Make yourself speak to these people. Don't let your self-consciousness stifle you." The voice within her was dictatorial, even threatening.

The elder Trevor girl was speaking.

"I think one's sense of colour varies in different countries. Now, down here I seem to get more blue and grey."

"Adaptation, dear. Looking down through the olives, for instance, from—what's the place?"

"St. Agnes?"

"No, no."

"I can't remember."

Constance made her plunge.

"Are you thinking of Castellar? It's like looking down through grey lace, isn't it?"

The three faces were turned to her simultaneously. It was as though a lay figure had spoken.

"Thank you. Castellar. I believe that is the place."

Mrs. Trevor's glimmering and protruding eyes, with their expression of shocked soulfulness, stared at her for a moment. The conversation seemed to disappear like a puff of smoke blown from a gun. The elder girl resumed her note-making, the younger began another letter. The atmosphere settled into utter and exclusive silence.

Constance knew that she had been badly snubbed. Her whole pride quivered with the repulse. She turned her eyes to her book and made herself go on reading, tracking the sense down with passionate pertinacity. And yet how absurd it all was, how petty.

Presently the elder Trevor girl said something in an undertone, and her sister

gave a short laugh. They began to talk in Italian, rapidly and with animation.

Constance felt her face growing hot. She did not understand one word of what they were saying, but it was their assuming the fact that she would not understand them that made it sound like fluent and cultured mockery.

It cost her an effort to close her book, get up, and walk out of the shelter with an air of casual naturalness. Nor had she walked ten yards before she heard the Trevors revert to mere English.

She was angry, humiliated, and yet inspired.

"Dick, I want to have French and Italian lessons here. May I?"

She had found him reading a paper in a corner of the half-empty lounge.

"Anything you like, Melisande."

"Dick, I still feel a fool. I am going to work, and work furiously."

"It's good to see you keen."

"Yes, I am keen—bitterly keen. We have to go about armed in life, haven't we?"

She did not tell him what had suddenly made her so fierce and eager to learn.

Chapter Forty

Constance began to detest the Hôtel Magnifique. It was so dull and ornate and pompous, and inhabited by people who struck her as being only half alive, people who had dawdled comfortably through life, and who had never been desperately keen about anything. They represented the crystallisation of class prejudices, regular-featured good form taking shape in a solution saturated with selfishness. The lives of the unattached women appeared to be one perennial grumble. A coterie of old military men and their wives spent most of its time abusing the food. Only once had Constance dared to touch the piano in the great desert of a *salon*, and then the sound of her own voice had almost shocked her. Persisting in singing she had succeeded in ejecting two solitary women who had been doing fancy work in two separate corners. They had disappeared like shy and solitary creatures who could exist only in regions of undisturbed stagnation.

Constance happened to hear one of them remark next day that she did not approve of the modern style of song.

"I don't think they are nice. There is such a lack of self-restraint about them. A sign of the times."

Poor, lonely, shrivelled souls, shivering with vague unrest when the passionate wings of life stirred the air ever so little.

Constance had discovered a delightful old Frenchwoman, who lived high up in the tall house, and gave French and Italian lessons. Constance went to her daily, climbing long flights of stone stairs to the old lady's single room, to find her younger and more vital than most women of thirty. She sat in her plaid shawl and hat and wore mittens. "I feel the cold so, and wood and coal are so dear, and we have no

chauffage." Yet she laughed and twinkled and rubbed her hands, and enjoyed her pupil's tentative Italian. Constance took her flowers, chocolates and fruit. Madame Vicari always refused to believe that she was wholly English.

"Ah, my dear, you are French, believe me. You have the light touch, the sparkle, the style of a Frenchwoman. You do not play games—no. And it is a pleasure to see you walk."

It was when she was returning from one of these lessons that Constance met the elder Trevor girl and the two Cottles. A moment of illumination flashed upon her. At Roymer she had known the young Cottles by sight, and she recognised them instantly—the more easily, perhaps, because they drew attention to themselves by the impertinent, man-of-the-world amusement with which they stared at her as they approached. She felt the focusing of three pairs of eyes upon her, and knew she was under discussion. The three assumed an air of casual simplicity as they passed her on the pavement. And Constance was a little prouder, and even stronger, from that moment. Neck, insteps and figure were braced to a finer and more flexible temper. She seemed to see the futility of letting herself be troubled by such people—for snobs and fools need never exist for us if we refuse to recognise their existence.

Her dislike of the Hôtel Magnifique and its atmosphere was not lessened by something that occurred on her return. Three of the Trevors—mother, father, and daughter—were sitting under one of the big palms in front of the hotel, and her husband was standing talking to them. Keenly intuitive by reason of the sense of antagonism these people inspired in her, she could almost feel that the Trevors consented to tolerate Skelton, but that they would not tolerate his wife.

He turned, saw her, and signalled with his eyes.

"Connie."

She saw what he missed—a momentary exchange of glances between mother and daughter, a rapid yet impressive uprising, and an uncompromising retreat towards the hotel. The surprise was Skelton's when he turned to find Rowland Trevor, Esq., still in his place, but deserted by his womenfolk.

Skelton was posed for the moment by the question that suggested itself. Was it a coincidence, or was he to infer that there was a reason for this rapid retreat? He noticed a queer, half-amused light in Constance's eyes.

"Mr. Trevor, let me introduce you to my wife."

Rowland Trevor stood up, bowed stiffly, and promptly sat down again, as though the ceremony had begun and ended in one breath.

Constance was even more casual.

"I want to show you something, Dick. Can you spare me a moment?"

He glanced at her in surprise, and then at Trevor, who was turning over the pages of the *Spectator*.

"Yes. What is it?"

Her eyes drew him aside, and they strolled away along the terrace.

"Well?"

"Why did you want to try and introduce me to those people?"

"Try! Just because you are too good to know them."

"But I could have told you. You must have seen!"

He looked at her quickly with eyes that flashed out sudden understanding.

"You don't mean that?"

"Of course. Another case of exclusiveness. It seems that some people will allow themselves to speak to a man when they will not speak to a woman."

She saw his eyes and mouth harden.

"If that's so—By George! for the moment I did not take it in that light."

"They know about me, Dick."

"What?"

"You know the young Cottles, of Roymer? They are down here. I met them this morning with the other Trevor girl."

She had never seen him angry before—with the white anger of a man of generous instincts.

"Damnation take these infernal——"

"Oh, it's nothing, Dick; it doesn't hurt."

"Hurt! I'll go and——"

"No, no. I can see the humour of it. Oh, it was funny. I made wilful advances the other day, and was snubbed. I did not tell you. They excluded me most thoroughly by beginning to talk Italian."

"They did that! Wait a moment. How can one hurt such people?"

"Dick, I think it's impossible. And does it matter?"

He swung round full face to her.

"Good heavens, no—except that it has made me savage. You've got the real bigness in you, the bigness that is better than scorn. We'll get out of this superior atmosphere. Where would you like to go—on into Italy?"

"I don't know. Let's think about it. And let's go for a ramble after lunch into the hills. There's that mule-path to the Annonciata. I haven't been there yet."

"Yes, out on the hills, up above the sound of the superior voices."

The mule-path that climbs to the convent of the Annonciata is a grey, winding way, paved with grey cobbles, doubling to and fro, but ever ascending. At first it

passes between villas and a hotel garden, terraces and walls of rock covered with dark green trails of mesembryanthemum, yellow crassula, and climbing geraniums. Just below the brown chalet stands one of the forlorn little shrines, smothered with the yellow flowers and glossy green leaves of the climbing groundsel. At the steep places Skelton made Constance hold on to his stick and let herself be pulled up by his weight. They paused from time to time to look down and back as the town, the coast, the sea, and the gardens and terraces were unfolded. Sometimes the path ran between vineyard walls, or along the edge of a precipice of terraces. They could look down into the Carrei Valley and see the minute figures moving along the road hundreds of feet below. Olives, pines, and lemons clouded the grey-green hill-sides. Masses of Mediterranean heath were whitening into flower. Rosemary grew everywhere, and the queer, stiff, thick-stemmed broom promised a blaze of gold.

Up above, the grey, bastion-like entrance and the tall cypresses of the convent waited. They reached the steps at last, and were met at the top by the great wooden cross that stands facing the south and the sea. The convent terrace, surrounded by its low parapet, was silent and deserted. The monks had gone, and the walls of the chapel and the porch near it were scribbled over with dates and names. The weather vane up aloft was all awry, the bell had a look as though it never moved, and tiles were falling. As for the cypresses, drawn up like two rows of mutes upon the terrace, they bowed when the wind blew, murmured, and seemed to mutter prayers.

Constance and Skelton idled round the terrace and found various vantage points for looking at the country spread around, above, and below. Cap Martin, the sea, the hills above Roquebrunne, the town of Mentone, Gorbio, grey and dim in the shadows of its valley, the little white hotel and the ruined castle of St. Agnes, the Carrei and Borrigo Valleys, Castellar, a white line above the olive groves, the great grey mountains sharp-edged against a cloudless sky.

"One never forgets an hour like this."

"Not a murmur do I hear, Dick. I think one should try to live on a hill."

"Yes; but come down into the valley sometimes to a poor, irritable, blaspheming man."

"I shall often be in the valley, Dick, when——"

"There are no donkeys braying."

They descended a flight of half-ruined steps running along the side of the convent, regained the mule-path, and found themselves at the entrance of the Annonciata Hotel. A gate opened between two rock walls, over which mesembryanthemum poured in green waves; broad, easy steps went up under a wooden footbridge. This rocky entry opened upon the hotel garden, with its palms,

orange and lemon trees, its big *chaume*, or shelter, its quaint squares of grass, rose hedges, and its sunny view towards the sea. The atmosphere seemed of pure, ethereal gold. Pines and olives covered the hill-side that sloped sharply from the convent. The place had a fresh, peaceful, and calm aloofness, poised upon the terraced hill-side and looking towards the sea.

"Dick, isn't this delightful? The place looks so white and clean and wholesome. And I like all the green shutters."

"We'll have tea here in the sun."

"It's just the sort of place I should like to stay in. I wonder——"

"Whether we can get a room?"

"Yes."

"I'll go and see."

Skelton found an English manageress in the little bureau opening off the lounge.

"I wonder if you have any rooms vacant? My wife is so pleased with the situation of the hotel that she wants to come up here from below. We are at the Magnifique."

"Do you need the first floor?"

"Not a bit. I want a good room, looking south."

"We have every room taken; but there are some people leaving in three days, and the people who are to take their room have just written saying they can't come. Would you like to see the hotel? Monsieur Chierico, the proprietor, is out."

"Thank you; I should like to look round."

"There is the 'funicular,' you know, every fifteen minutes. So many people think we are isolated."

"That has its advantages."

Skelton walked out of the bureau and nearly collided with a tall man who was buying stamps from the Swiss concierge. They exchanged stares that were followed by flashes of astonished recognition.

"Cunningham!"

"My dear chap! What are you doing here?"

"Explain yourself. It must be five years since we met. I'm down here with my wife."

"And I with mine. Never knew you were married."

"One always does these things. We just came up here for a ramble, and now we want to stay."

"My dear chap, there is not another place to touch it. Of course you must stay. Miss Richer, I appeal to you, as the most considerate of women."

The manageress smiled.

"There will be a room vacant in three days, Mr. Cunningham."

"Splendid. What number? I'll go and put the name on the board at once. I say, Skelton, where's your wife?"

"Sitting in the garden. I'll introduce you and then go and look round."

Constance found herself shaking hands with a tall, lean, sandy-haired Scot. The man had a round, fresh-coloured face—a face that must have belonged to a most irrepressible young devil of a boy. His blue eyes still retained an immense amount of mischief.

"I won't say how small the world is, Mrs. Skelton, but this is really an excellent piece of luck."

She liked the man from the first glance, and trusted him. He was fine metal, very much in earnest, but full of fun in the midst of his earnestness. The blue eyes were very shrewd but kind—eyes that were uncannily quick in detecting humbug.

He began to talk to her in a dry, friendly way that was very charming.

"All the sensible people come up here from below. My wife and I did. Our hotel down yonder nearly reduced us to tears. I had to wear black, because I felt like a mute at a funeral when we were putting the dinner to rest. What! You are at the Magnifique! Get away from it immediately."

Skelton came back very well pleased.

"I've settled it. Most sensible woman that. Cunningham, have tea with us. Where's your wife?"

"Gone for an expedition. But I'm equal to doing duty for both."

"Come along. Waiter, tea for three—cakes and bread and butter. Now, who's going to open fire first? I have any amount of things to explain."

Cunningham looked at Constance with one of his shrewd, boyish smiles.

"I see—an event that does not need explaining."

They found that there was very little ice to break.

Chapter Forty-one

Some places are magnetic, and the Hôtel Annonciata was such a place. Not only did it stimulate the vitality of its guests, but it appeared to claim a selective power over the people whom it attracted. Almost wholly English in its residents, it managed to exclude the English spirit that characterised such a hotel as the Magnifique. It was higher and healthier, breathed a finer and less conventional atmosphere. You climbed to it, either by the funicular railway or on your own legs, and the people who are willing to climb are less likely to be dullards.

Cunningham described the place in his dry way as "The Hill of Refuge."

"Mrs. Skelton, there is one thing you will discover in life, that the really charming people segregate, get together instinctively. I have been here two months, and I have watched the wise and the noble few lured up here from the lower town. We are representative!"

What he declared, half in jest, was perfectly true; the Hôtel Annonciata was representative. Skelton had only to sit in the little smoking-room for one evening to discover men who had done things and men who knew. The circle contained an old Indian officer, who was also a keen naturalist; an English banker; a professor from the London University; a rising artist; a young naval commander with a reputation in the "service"; Cunningham himself, one of the most promising pleaders at the Scottish Bar; a German baron, who was no amateur when he handled a violin. They were workers, all of them, and, like the majority of men of marked ability, full of a wise playfulness and the fine good humour of a sensitive understanding. The hotel also claimed the English vice-consul, and a very charming old gentleman, who was said to be a millionaire and who knew more about the French Riviera than could

even be found in ten "Baedekers." As the men are, so are the women, and as the women are, so are the men. This double-headed apothegm was true in this particular case. Someone brought home the most exquisite sketches; someone else sang till she emptied the smoking-room and lured the men out into the corridor to listen; someone else was an authority on local government and education, without appearing to be an authority on anything. There was no snobbery or sheepish aloofness. A feeling of friendliness pervaded the hotel. It was more like a very pleasant and well-chosen house-party than a chance assortment of people who had gathered there haphazard.

As Cunningham put it, Cunningham who had been sent abroad for three months to recover from overwork, "We exercise ourselves up here, and don't stodge and overfeed. Chierico, the proprietor, is a gentleman, and a jolly nice fellow. That counts. We seem to get people here who are alive, and it's good to be among people who look at something beside their plates and their bridge hands. And then, you see, so many of us are Scots."

He spoke with understanding. The professor was a Scot; so was the delightful old gentleman who could remember Monte Carlo before it was; so was his valet; so was the Indian general; so was the lady who brought home sketches of olives and cypresses, anemones, green herbage, oranges, and blue sea. Half the hotel was Scotch—not the dour, trap-mouthed Scotch as pictured by the English, but a shrewd, lovable, playful breed, quick of wit and full of a bracing kindliness.

"Mrs. Skelton, you know we Scots have no sense of humour."

"So I have always heard—in England."

"We say the same thing in Scotland about the English! I suppose it is because we don't put inkpots on doors and scream when someone comes through and gets smudged. We're dry bodies, like good champagne."

Skelton laughed at him.

"Of all the cheeky young beggars I ever remember I think you were the cheekiest."

"Come, now, could I ever have looked cheeky? Mrs. Skelton, I appeal to you."

"I think my husband is always reasonable."

"Mrs. Skelton, let me warn you against perpetuating the ancient superstition. Be a new woman. Disagree with your husband."

"But, you see, I generally find that he is right!"

Cunningham looked at her with dour, covenanting solemnity.

"My dear lady, there is no hope for ye, no hope at all. My wife was in such a hurry to preserve her individuality that she disagreed with me daily, on every possible

topic, all through our honeymoon."

"It must have done you a great deal of good, Davie. Your wife must be a woman of penetration."

"Now, I ask you, are these the words of a long-lost friend?"

It was a vivid change from the blight of the Hôtel Magnifique to the stimulating atmosphere of this most friendly and unpretentious of places. It reminded Constance of the life at the Villa Prosperine, with the additional delight of new comradeships and a new interplay of individualities. The repose and the aloofness of the hill-side were magical. It was an experience to get up early, swing the shutters open, and let in the yellow sunlight, and perhaps see Corsica, far and faint over a purple sea. The empty convent had its own peculiar fascination. So had the mule-paths that climbed on past the hotel and along the ridge of the hill, gliding along by the walled vine terraces and under the shade of olives. It was very pleasant to lie out in the *chaume* and dream or talk to some new friend, with bees humming, and the scent of wallflowers drifting in, and the grandeur of the hill and valley making the outlook rich and generous. The slanting lights of the sunset were very wonderful, and when the sun had gone the mountains were black as jet against a steel grey sky. To see the full moon rise out of Italy was a study in ebony and silver never to be forgotten. Even the multitudinous croaking of multitudinous frogs at night was full of a weird exultation.

In a week Constance felt as much at home in the place as if she had been there three months. Everybody seemed interested in life and ready to enjoy it. She talked French with Monsieur Chierico, the proprietor, and was full of naive surprise when she discovered that though he kept an hotel he was a courtier and a gentleman, that he knew more about music and art than most of the critics, and that his delicacy and tactfulness would have made most Englishmen seem boors.

She confessed to Cunningham that she had had other views upon hotel proprietors, and he gave her one of his dry smiles.

"The English are a commercial nation. That explains a great deal. It is not a bad idea that a gentleman should run an hotel! It is eminently successful here. Chierico's a gentleman to his finger tips, and somehow you feel it about the place."

"Yes. Of course, when one comes to think of it——"

"One prefers staying with a gentleman, and when the house happens to be an hotel one appreciates the breeding of the man who keep it. If I wanted to send my sister to a masked ball at Nice, I'd send her with Chierico. He'd have more tact and understanding than any Englishman. But fancy telling some of your good people! It's best to leave them with their blinkers on."

She talked to the authority on local government, and was impressed and interested without feeling crushed. She was teased and flirted with by the Indian general, and taken for a drive to San Remo by the old Scots gentleman with the Scots valet. In fact, she found herself indefinably and unexpectedly popular, and a recipient of the devotion of one or two of the younger girls. They came and asked her, impulsively and confidentially, about dress, and she blushed at finding herself considered an expert.

"Oh, Mrs. Skelton, you seem to know just what to wear. Do come down and help me choose a hat."

Someone else was in distress about the arranging of her hair.

"I know I make myself look a worse fright than I am. It seems to grow all the wrong way. It would be so sweet of you if you would tell me what you think."

Constance spent an hour in the girl's bedroom, experimenting with a head of coarse black hair that persisted in running into hard wiry streaks. There was a big round forehead, too, to be softened. The girl was delighted with the result.

"I look quite different. What taste you have!"

The hotel discovered that Skelton's wife could play and sing, and every evening a little deputation waited on her, with David Cunningham contriving to act as spokesman.

"Mrs. Skelton, I am requested humbly to petition that you sing us the 'Kashmiri Love Songs.'"

People would gather in the recreation-room, sit round, and listen. It was no formal affair, but so much unaffected appreciation and enjoyment. The professor always retained an arm-chair near the piano, and he would ask her to sing songs that were popular thirty years ago, and she was always distressed when she had to confess that she did not know them. He struck her as a lonely soul, a man who had lost someone who had been very dear to him. He still seemed a little lost and bewildered, groping to get back somewhere into the past. She discovered at last that she had one song that said something to him: Tennyson's "Tears, idle tears," set to music. She sang it for him every evening, and he would give her a grave, shy look of gratitude.

It was at the Hôtel Annonciata that she came by what she had long desired, a woman friend, someone to whom she could talk as a woman. David Cunningham's wife was a black-haired little woman, with the face of a gipsy. She took to Constance from the very first day. Impulsive and yet utterly reliable, the only child of a rich man, and yet absolutely unspoilt, a keen worker with a very shrewd knowledge of life, she was a friend to be cherished, radiant, wholesome, full of

understanding. Her scorn of things which she deemed contemptible was apt to be over-fierce on occasions.

It was on an expedition to Gorbio that Constance and Jean Cunningham came very near to each other as friends. They were riding donkeys, the two husbands walking on ahead, the donkey-woman, with her blue apron and flat straw hat, trudging in the rear. The hot, winding road climbed slowly northwards, and behind them the V of the valley was filled with the intense blue of the sea. A gusty wind blew spasmodically, making the great reeds sway and rustle.

Skelton stopped to point out a house where the road was overhung by trees.

"Something ought to have happened there. It is like a bit out of Balzac."

A short avenue of pollarded limes led to rusty iron gates, and within stood a rusty iron rose arbour. The walls of the house were a faded red; pine needles and grass filled the gutters. The wild garden was surrounded by pines, cypresses, eucalyptus, oak and mimosa, and red roses, irises and bamboo grew on the bank above the road. The house and garden were mysterious and forlorn, secretive, enigmatical. Farther up the road there was a little postern gate with a winding path disappearing from it between grass banks and shrubs. Another path passed down along the vine terraces to where the river made a hoarse murmuring as it flowed over its rocky bed.

"Yes, something ought to have happened there."

The men went on ahead again, and Constance and Jean Cunningham resumed the telling of things that can only be spoken of between the surest of friends. David Cunningham's wife suggested to Constance a sympathetic and inviolate security. There was never any thought of improving the occasion, of dragging in the didactic and declamatory ego. Constance felt that she could say anything, and that she would be understood, and so Jean Cunningham had come to hear of the life at Roymer, and the life of the days before Roymer, and of all the dubious memories that had haunted and persecuted a sensitive child.

The road to Gorbio might have been a road of healing when the full suggestiveness of its beauty was considered. Life leapt out at the wayfarer, crying, "Live, enjoy, be healed." They passed an orange grove where peasants in blue trousers were heaping up yellow oranges on a patch of intensely green grass under the trees. Farther along the road the banks were starred with purple anemones and grape hyacinths, and there was one spot where violets growing in a garden perfumed the road for more than fifty paces. They struck the grey mule-path that climbed upwards under shimmering olives, the rough rock terraces looking like the walls of ancient citadels. The torrent hurried from side to side in the trough of the valley,

running between hazels, willows and great reeds. Here and there the wheel of an olive mill could be seen. Flycatchers flitted to and fro over the water. On a stone seat by the doorway of a ruined house they saw a locust sunning itself where tree-spurges spread their cups of gold, each set with a little Maltese cross. Above them were the forest slopes, and presently Gorbio stood out like a grey casket on its conical hill.

Constance had begun to talk of the Hôtel Magnifique and of the type of people to be met there, especially such people as the Rowland Trevors.

"It seems absurd to talk of such things out here. But, you know, I am not at all wise. I have pretty quick intuitions, but I began to wonder whether all English people are like that."

Jean Cunningham was amused.

"You need not worry your head about that sort of people. They don't count in life. You will be workers, you and your husband."

"Of course."

"I can always get into touch with people who work. It is the rich dilettante type that strikes me as so hopeless. They have no proper knowledge of values."

"You see, Dick will be a very famous man some day. I feel sure of it."

"Keep on feeling sure."

"Yes, but it has worried me: the thought that I might keep him back, that life might take us along with people like the Trevors, and that they would not want me."

"My dear, do you think your husband would ever make friends of fools with a lot of money, a little decorative information, and an infinite burden of conceit? I'm rich myself, so I'm not sneering at the mere money. Your friends won't lie in that direction."

"I want to know the real people, the best."

"What is there to worry about? With the real people you count for what you are. Besides, you'll be popular, you've a personality, and no affectation. It's so easy to get on with the best people, the people who do things and who count. It's the half-and-half people who are difficult. You will soon learn that."

"I suppose it is so."

"About the most understanding and unassuming man I know is our leading physician up in Edinburgh. Yes, there are dozens I could mention, the keen yet kindly men and women blessed with brains and a sense of humour. But these cultivated idlers, they are not good enough to come into a worker's life."

They were on the last slope of the grey mule-path to Gorbio, and urchins came stampeding down and demanding pennies. Cunningham stopped and addressed them with intense solemnity in broken French.

"Gentlemen of Gorbio, I do not believe in indiscriminate charity. We come here to see your town, not to subsidise infant beggars. Get out."

The boys flung epithets as soon as they saw that no pennies were forthcoming.

Jean Cunningham studied them with her steady eyes as they came clamouring round her donkey.

"Don't you know I'm Scotch!"

"Penny, madame, penny."

"No. You are little beasts with no manners. I don't like you at all."

They did not understand a word she said, but her way of saying it depressed them. Yet they threw a few offensive epithets after her by way of asserting their independence.

"Little idiots! Up here they haven't even learnt the art of humbugging. I'd have thrown them something if even one had shown a little human cleverness. But to be blackmailed by dirty, impudent children without even a twinkle in an eye——"

The donkey-woman came up and apologised.

"They are little pigs, madam; they have not the sense to have good manners."

Which was a very wise and subtle saying.

Chapter Forty-two

Towards the end of their second week at the Hôtel Annonciata Skelton received a letter from John Cuthbertson:

> Dear Old Man,—I don't want to hurry you and your wife home, but I find that you are wanted here pretty badly. Some of the big people have been asking questions that I am not wholly competent to answer, and there are one or two constructive details that are puzzling us a little. We are arranging for a state demonstration day down at Harpenden for May 1st. I believe we are likely to get some of the Government people, so you can understand that I'm anxious to have everything working perfectly.

Skelton was touched by the letter.

"Poor old John, what a strong, patient, unselfish beggar you are. You have been shouldering everything for six months. I'll be with you in ten days."

He did not immediately show Cuthbertson's letter to Constance, for they had a gay week ahead of them, and he wanted her to enjoy it to the full, with no background but the sunny southern scene. They were going to a masked ball at the Casino, and Constance's dress was being made at Monte Carlo for a figure that suggested work in the near future. The Cunninghams had arranged several expeditions—a long motor drive, a donkey expedition to Eze, and a steamer trip to San Remo.

On the last day of the carnival procession The Annonciata sent down a party to join the crowd in the Avenue Félix Faure. The charm of a southern carnival crowd is its absolute good temper, and its utter lack of any clogging self-consciousness. A

northerner's first experience of such a battle of confetti is an experience so novel that he finds himself wondering whether he shall laugh or look stiffly bored.

The carnival procession turned into the Place St. Roch, King Carnival—as a boxer—riding on the Ass of Gorbio, with the blaring band in the car behind him playing the provocative carnival tune. The wide space here was full of laughing, good-humoured, confetti-throwing humanity. The blare of the band splashed to and fro between the houses; the confetti sellers shouted; little skirls of laughter eddied up from combative, colour-smothered groups. The carnival figures themselves were infinitely clever; there was a touch of wit behind the pasteboard and paint. Some were satirical, others delightfully ridiculous, a few broadly suggestive. A crowd of huge babies went bobbing by, howling, weeping, laughing, gyrating, bumping. There was a gigantic lady with a ruddy, beaming countenance who marched boldly without petticoats in white lingerie, and a dude who followed studying through an eye-glass the points of the lady's lace. Groups of masked dominoes went dancing by, twittering, laughing, skipping, figures in pink and yellow, white and green, scarlet, blue, black and gold. A line of Chasseurs with linked arms danced and swayed and kicked in unison. The decorated cars rumbled by, pelting the crowd. The people in carriages were smothered, if the women had any pretensions to good looks. The military band by the tramway shelter kept the music moving, and the sellers of confetti shouted furiously.

Skelton, who had started the afternoon in an objective mood, had the English aloofness driven out of him by a couple of little dominoes in pink who singled him out, and showed no mercy. He dodged and laughed, only to find that it was imperative he should keep his mouth shut.

"*Mes charmants, je suis impuissant!*"

"*Monsieur l'Anglais, voilà la confetti!*"

He retreated with Constance to a confetti stall, bought a couple of linen bags, and had them crammed with ammunition.

They fought the two pink dominoes, and were taken in the rear by a party of German youths and girls who were absolutely hysterical. Cunningham and the Annonciata people joined in and created a diversion. The roadway was getting ankle-deep in pink, blue, and mauve snow, and everybody was laughing.

Skelton had to rescue Constance, who was being pelted by a couple of Frenchmen, one of whom was deftly stuffing confetti inside her veil.

Skelton joined in with such spirit, and threw with such strenuosity and at such close quarters, that he inadvertently smacked one of the Frenchmen in the face.

"*Mille pardons, monsieur*; I say, I'm awfully sorry, I hope I haven't hurt you."

The Frenchman laughed good-humouredly.

"*Non, non*; it was ac-cee-dent."

They bowed to each other, and took off their hats.

"You are a sportsman, sir."

"Monsieur, eet was nothings."

A party of English from some hotel swarmed up and attacked Cunningham's people who were replenishing stores at a stall in front of Cook's. All the sedate and respectable folk appeared to have gone playfully and furiously mad. Two quiet-looking elderly women in black singled out Skelton and gave him a warm time.

It was such a new experience throwing handfuls of coloured paper into the faces of gentlewomen who might have been the most sedate of aunts that the provocative quaintness of the thing made him laughingly helpless. He was smothered with pink and mauve confetti. It was in his mouth, his ears, his hair, down his collar, in his pockets, scattered on his shoulders, and lying in drifts upon the brim of his hat.

Constance came to succour him, but a drifting of the crowd carried the two festive elderly women away. Skelton, looking round for Cunningham, happened to see five very tall people standing in a row with their backs to Cook's window and watching this absurd crowd of grown-up children with an air of cold and superior amusement.

"Connie."

She too saw the Trevors, and her eyes sparkled.

"The gods have descended from Olympus to watch mortal fools at play!"

The Olympians stood stiffly, unblinkingly, without a glimmer of a smile. Rowland Trevor was the only one whose dignity suffered.

"There is a piece of the stuff in my eye, Helena."

"Rowland, dear, let me get it out for you. Lend me your handkerchief. These bourgeois idiots!"

"I think we might get out of the crowd."

"Take my arm, dear."

They left the barbarians at play, the father of the Olympians still dusting confetti from his waistcoat.

About nine o'clock everybody assembled in the lounge to see Constance come down in her *bal masqué* dress. Jean Cunningham was acting as lady's maid, and two or three of the girls had begged to be allowed to see the mysteries of a *bal masqué* toilet. The two chambermaids were waiting in the corridor, full of feminine curiosity, and Skelton, an outcast and an Ishmaelite, had taken refuge in

Cunningham's bedroom, to disguise himself at his leisure. He was going as a Red Cross knight in silver grey hauberk and red surcoat.

"I say, old man, anything to suggest? I shall be jolly hot in this get up."

"You needn't dance; in fact, you look too impressive to dance. All you have got to do is stand in a corner with a melancholy Byronic look, with your sword set so, and your hands resting on the pommel. I'll pose you."

"How the devil is one to carry any money or to get at it under these affairs?"

"Here's a little leather purse business on your sword belt. It was a considerate soul who sent this costume out."

They heard Jean Cunningham's voice outside the door.

"I want some hairpins, David."

"Can't this poor wretch be allowed one safe corner? You women seem to want a British Museum to dress in."

"Be quick. Connie is ready. Your wife is ready, Mr. Skelton."

"Mrs. Cunningham, I'm shy; I daren't emerge."

"Are you ready?"

"Let me practise swaggering in front of the glass for a minute."

"I think you'll forget all about yourself when you see your wife."

It was quite true; he did. An airy, gossamer-like creature dressed as a *première danseuse* came stepping down the corridor towards him. The two chambermaids were ecstatically inarticulate. The dress, with its short belled skirt, was made of some shimmering, ice-blue stuff, like the wing of a dragonfly, iridescent and diaphanous. Two frail fairy wings glimmered between her shoulders. The slim legs in white silk stockings ended in the most perfect of ankles and the most exquisite white satin shoes.

The maids were ravished by these details: "*Les petites jambes!*"—"*Ah, madame, les pieds exquis!*"

Her dark hair was dusted with some silvery powder and set with brilliants, and her face had a coy and excited colour, a shy and half mischievous bloom that was very alluring.

Skelton stood astonished. Never before had he realised so vividly the ethereal physical beauty of his wife. She looked like a delightful child in this filmy dress, with her finely turned ankles and little feet, her long slim hands and delicately moulded forearms. Not one woman in a thousand could have worn such a dress and carried it off so convincingly. And in a flash he saw her contrasted with what she had been six months ago—the pale, elusive girl brooding by the black water of that pool deep in Rusper fir-woods.

He made her a very stately bow.

"Madam, I am your first male victim."

She had looked at him with just a shade of anxiety.

"You don't think it is too bold, Dick?"

"Remember, you are just twelve to-night. It is incredible, but true! No one thinks of asking a firefly whether it is quite proper, eh?"

"Come down with me and help me to carry it off."

"My dear, someone will carry you off unless I am on the alert."

Constance floated down into the lounge, Skelton carrying her white cloak and black velvet mask. She was a little shy and a little flushed, rather amused at herself and at the stir she seemed to be creating. She looked so child-like, so spiritual, such an unworldly creature, despite the associations of her dress, that even women, who might have been jealous of something more fleshly, were genuinely enthusiastic.

The general surveyed her with his humorous, worldly, kind old eyes. "Bless my soul! I wish I were thirty years younger. I could dance then."

The professor had drifted up, and was looking at her with the air of a shy man examining some marvellous and delicate structure that was far too exquisite to be touched. "That's it. Music."

Constance heard him, glanced at him, and he blushed.

"It just struck me, Mrs. Skelton, that I—I should call you the Spirit of Music."

"Bravo! The professor has it!"

"I say, what becomes of your wings, Titania, when you put on your cloak?"

"Oh, they fold up."

"Modest, sly appendages. Skelton, my dear chap, you will want that sword of yours to overawe enthusiastic mortals!"

Monsieur Chierico appeared from the bureau, and the eyes of the French gentleman and man of discrimination flashed a vivacious homage. "Madame Skelton, you will cause a riot. A good riot. You will take a prize. Believe me, yes, we shall have a triumph!"

Monsieur Chierico was a pretty shrewd judge of what would pique the critical taste of the gay folk who gathered at the Casino. From the very first moment of her entry into the ball-room Constance dawned as the dominant figure of the evening—exquisite youth, ethereal, radiant and pure. The Red Cross knight who guarded her seemed part of the allegory. Love and life, desire and honour!

Many people took Skelton's wife to be a child of fifteen, yet, child that she looked, she lured as a light lures the moths. One Frenchman followed her all the evening, and ever and again threw a flower at her feet and called her "*La petite*

ange." Her pure charm had a selective, discriminating influence.

Skelton, grave, Byronic, imperturbable, always there, yet always a little aloof, watched the faces of the men who came to pay homage and to ask her to dance. The clean, manly element was attracted irresistibly. Only one sensual male face approached her the whole evening, and then the Red Knight came in between.

Time after time she was whirled away from him, to return, a little out of breath, perhaps, her eyes glimmering behind the black mask. Skelton did not dance, but he liked to watch other people dancing.

"Dick, it's great fun!"

"You are having rather a gay time, you know."

"And you—you look so impressive."

"I feel like the Lyceum."

"The pierrot boy over there has been trying so hard to find out who I am. Quite a nice boy, and his shyness and his curiosity keep getting in each other's way. And do you know the two Cottles are here?"

"Yes, I caught the Cottle grin an hour ago."

"One of them has been following me round."

"I don't know whether to call that a conversion to good taste or mere impertinence. If the young man becomes a nuisance, I'll overawe him."

Supper came, and with the champagne the fun became a little more heady and exultant. A big Englishman climbed on a supper table and solemnly conducted the band with a long baton of bread. A party of Spanish gipsies cake-walked to and fro, and waltzing couples swayed in and out among the tables. A little Italian, rather flushed, but wholly a gentleman in his fooling, dashed up to Skelton's table and made a pretence of baring his bosom.

"Lord of the Red Cross, strike with the sword, for I am in despair because of the Satin Shoes."

He spoke good English. Skelton solemnly touched him with the flat of his sword.

"Live, Sir Melancholy. Are there not Gipsy Headdresses and Pompadour Puffs and Zouave Jackets? If the Satin Shoes are not for you, live for a Shepherdess's Crook."

It was three o'clock in the morning when the Red Knight carried his wife and her prize banner away with him, her tired wings folded under her white cloak. A closed car took them up the Carrei Valley and the winding road to the foot of the funicular railway on the Annonciata Hill. The car was waiting for them at the bottom of the track, and Skelton had only to switch on the current and press a button. Constance stood on the front platform beside him, and they went gliding up past the dark

terraces and lemon groves towards the multitudinous silver of the stars. It was so still and cool and mysterious here, and a great hush seemed to cover the world. The convent walls glimmered wanly above the pines and olives.

Monsieur Chierico, sleepy but debonair, met them on the steps.

"I say, Chierico, it's very good of you to wait up."

"I sleep near the funicular room, and I wake. And madame has a banner!"

"The banner of the evening. I had to cut a way out with my sword."

"What did I tell you, Madame Skelton? Poor, unfortunate men will be haunting Mentone to try to refind the winged fairy! Monsieur Skelton will become proud."

In the lounge they found that he had hot milk ready for them.

"I think, Monsieur Chierico, you said that you had been to sleep!"

"I sleep—with the one eye on the spirit flame. Madame has given us a triumph. I stay awake to say—I told you so."

Skelton carried off Constance and her banner to their room.

"Dick, I feel so sleepy. I shall be asleep before I can undress."

"Let me be lady's maid. Those fellows down there would have danced you to death but for the solemn husband."

"I was proud of the solemn husband, and was glad to get back to him."

"I suppose I had better start with these wings. Sit down. It's rather like dismantling a Titania."

She let her head fall back upon his shoulder, and put one white arm over his neck.

"How very good you have been to me. I feel that I have been having a wonderful dream for weeks and weeks."

"And the waking?"

"Will be as good as the dream. But I want to wake, Dick, I do really, to our life—the real life."

Chapter Forty-three

"Let's go to Castellar, and take our lunch with us and picnic under the olives."

"Do you feel fit enough to walk there and back?"

"I feel splendid."

"Right o'! I'll go down and tell Gustave to put up lunch for two."

About ten o'clock they set out along the hot Sospell road, and crossing the Carrei torrent by a bridge where the main road begins to mount towards Monti, they followed a path that led up through the semi-wild garden and fruit groves of a rather dilapidated-looking villa. The path had the appearance of taking them into the villa's private backyard, and the illusion was heightened by a couple of curs who came tearing out, snarling and snapping at Constance's skirt. A woman who was washing clothes at a big water cistern called the dogs off, and the climbers towards Castellar began to ascend a cobbled path that led up under olives and lemons. It was lush ground, with water running in little stone aqueducts, and the grass and herbage rich and rank and painted with flowers. Violets grew everywhere, and rock plants and ferns filled the crevices of the rough stone walls.

The path dwindled to a mere mud track, slithered along the side of a hill, descended towards a water-hole where a leap was necessary, and began to climb again through fir woods. The air was hot and close under the trees, and Skelton took his coat off and made Constance give him her jacket.

"I don't know who set the fashion as to climbing in shirt sleeves down here?"

"I have generally noticed the Germans doing it on the Annonciata mule-path!"

"Well, it's good sense, anyhow. The Germans are a very sound nation."

The climb to Castellar was not a conversational ascent, the steepness of the

twisting, woodland path and the roughness of the surface making the breath a thing to be hoarded. For a while the path followed the line of a ravine where a stream splashed amid masses of green foliage and the great reeds swayed almost imperceptibly. Firs gave place to olives as they ascended, the path doubling to and fro, now slanting up steeply, now running almost level for a while. An old peasant passed them with a mule laden with olive wood. He took off his hat and wished them "*bon jour*."

Skelton made Constance pause from time to time.

"No need to hurry."

"I feel rather a different creature from what I felt like two months ago. My heart used to gallop when I tried to walk up the lane to the Villa Proserpine."

"But you had plenty of heart even then."

"I hated myself pretty heartily, if that is any test."

They heard the Castellar church clock striking, and Skelton caught a glimpse of the weather-stained tower.

"Not much farther. You have come up in style."

"The higher you climb, the better you feel."

"That sounds like an aphorism. What about a bottle of Asti? I'll stroll on to Castellar and buy a bottle. What about lunching?"

"Oh, under the olives—the same place."

Constance went with him as far as the little chapel and the iron cross whence Castiglione can be seen, flashing bare and white upon the far ridge of the divide. Skelton walked on into Castellar, leaving Constance resting beside the road. He returned in ten minutes, clutching an Asti bottle by the throat, and carrying it for any casual wayfarer to see.

"I've got the scoundrel. The gentleman lent me a *tire-bouchon*, and the wine was rather uppish. Also, the gentleman trusted me with a glass. Let's look for our own particular terrace."

They found it without much trouble, Skelton recognising an olive tree with a queerly twisted trunk.

"Just look at the violets!"

"It's like having one's lunch in an old Italian picture, a bit of Fra Angelico."

"I don't think we are angular and seraphic enough for Fra Angelico."

"Perhaps not."

"Shirt sleeves—and a wine bottle! Rather bourgeois! Here, put on your jacket."

They arranged themselves under the terrace wall, with the bottle of Asti, the glass, and the lunch packages between them. There was always an element of

excitement in opening these luncheon parcels, especially when two healthy people had had a stiff climb.

"I wonder if Gustave has put dates in?"

"Shall we bet?"

"Hallo, we have got the extra special *pâté* sandwiches. By Jove, I have a hunger!"

"Aren't we a horribly material pair!"

"Not a bit of it. Thank Heaven for a good, wholesome, greedy body."

Their delight in the atmosphere of this hill country was as keen as their hunger. The silver-grey heights, the glimmering fog of olive foliage, with here and there a distant cypress rising like an exclamation mark or a silencing finger of awe, the orange and lemon groves on the valley terraces, the immense and solemn silence of the peaks, and the little twitter of life below—all these were unforgettable. They could look away into sunlit distances, or see the light striking the violets in the grass around them, and making the flowers glow like scattered sapphires.

"A great deal has happened, Dick, since we were here last."

"Has it?"

"To me. I was just beginning to live then, and now life seems to open wider and wider."

He looked at her with half-closed eyes.

"Shall you be sorry to go north again?"

"I could go to-morrow."

"Without regret?"

"I shall be a little sad, but with such a delightful sadness that makes the memories sacred. But, then, I'm simply quivering with curiosity, with life hunger. Besides——"

"Well?"

"I think we ought to begin work."

He smiled as he felt in his breast pocket and brought out John Cuthbertson's letter.

"A most moral saying, Melisande. I had this a day or two ago, but I let the carnival spirit have full play. They want me rather badly in London."

He passed her the letter, and saw her flush as she read it.

"You ought to have told me, Dick. Why, it's such good news."

"To you?"

"Of course. They want you; they can't get on without you. It feels like an adventure, all this big thing—life. What a host of absolutely fascinating things there are for us to do."

He looked at her with wise eyes that glimmered.

"You are healed; the joy of life has come to you; all's well with the world."

They lingered under the olives and talked, and as they talked the green land set in the grey northern sea began to call them irresistibly. Spring would be flowing in there like the foam on the great west-coast billows. They could see the dawn light of the young year flashing upon the granite lands and flowing in ripples of gold up the sheltered valleys. Primroses were out in the woods, with the white anemones under the hazels. The yellow gorse and the blackthorn would come with the bluebells, and the great may trees would pile snowy pavilions in fields of sheeted gold. The song of the thrush, against the wet gold of an April evening! The green land lured them. They saw it as Arthur's Land, green glooms, and mysterious meres and rivers, shining through the silver mist of a summer dawn.

"I shall have to be in close touch with Cuthbertson's works, perhaps for a year or so. What do you say to a flat in town—for a year, at any rate?"

"Do you know, Dick, I have been to London only about ten times in my whole life? And a flat in town!"

"It will only be a little one."

"What more do we want? And we can have old Mary as our servant."

"Excellent idea. My notion is to go down Westminster way. That's Cuthbertson's haunt, and he has a circle. I want you to have a circle."

"A circle, Dick?"

"Of humans—the real people, the people who work. I used to know all Cuthbertson's circle; I was one of them; yes, Reynards, the artist, and his wife; old Trefusis—you'll love old Trefusis; Shenstone, the architect and landscape gardener; Professor Jerningham, and a dozen more. Think of it, no snobbery, no class prejudices, no social absurdities. I want you to have a circle."

She looked at him with amused seriousness.

"Am I to run a salon? And they sound so terribly clever!"

"So they are! So clever that they know how little they know, so clever that they can play and be big children. You need not be afraid of Cuthbertson's friends. Nor are we all brainy. We have Kershaw, the well-known golfer, a dear boy who can hardly add up his own score; and Corberry, the old rowing 'blue,' who is in the War Office. Heart comes first. We have no use for prigs and information-mongers."

"Are there any women, Dick?"

"Plenty. All Cuthbertson's circle seem to have been lucky over their women, except Dodge of the *Times*. He married a county person who was a wriggler and always hinting that she had fallen out of heaven. Dodge got mad, and made her look

a fool by going off with another woman. Wrong? Not a bit of it; she deserved it. It would do thousands of women a great deal of good if their husbands eloped with the housemaid. But you'll like our women. Some of them are keen on dress, some aren't. They're alive. They've helped men, and been helped by men. No silly suburban smartness and snob-given dinner parties. Wait and see."

She smiled trustfully.

"If they are like Jean Cunningham——"

"Yes, that's the type, that's the woman. Yes, and what about our week-ends? We'll go up the river, and out on the Surrey hills, try a Sussex farm-house now and again, and dream about in the New Forest. Town and country for a year. And then?"

She drew a little closer to him.

"And then? Can you read my thoughts?"

"Let's see. A little place in the country, yet close to town. A garden, a first-rate piano, a workshop for me, a motor—Then one must remember the people. There's the eternal problem! One has to think of one's future neighbours. House and estate agents ought to issue catalogues of the local residents, giving income, politics, religion, and personal details. Mr. So-and-So, respectable mug; Mrs. Etcetera, dull and dogmatic; Miss Ditto, antivivisectionist and local secretary for the Society for the Preservation of Fleas. The thing is never to anchor yourself till you have looked round your anchorage. And one has to remember that the conventional bumboat women of the little social harbours don't want to deal with any new, queer-looking ships, any more than we want to buy their provisions. If one can find six households within three miles where the people are not habitual fools, well, one can manage."

Her eyes were full of laughter.

"You sound so merciless, Dick; I wonder I'm not afraid of you!"

"Are you on the side of the bumboat women, the sort of women you met at the Magnifique—'The Jabberwock,' for instance, who went to early service regularly, who'd never done a day's work in her life, and who gnashed her teeth over having to pay some twopenny-halfpenny tax? It's the blind, sanctimonious insolence of such sorts of selfishness——"

"I want to live with people who look at life honestly."

"I tell you what. We must found a colony somewhere, and get a circle of the understanding, grown-up children together. A collection of cranks, eh? How the dull people do love that word 'crank' to throw at a free-mindedness that they do not understand. It must be a colony of workers. Work—work!"

She reached out for his hand.

"Have you been so badly starved these months, dear man? And for the sake

——”

“I’ve been storing energy.”

“Oh, I understand, Dick. I think I shall always understand. You are creative; life flows deep in you. And I think I can help you a little. A woman——”

“Well?”

“Can create an atmosphere, can’t she?”

“She can make all the difference between heaven and hell.”

“That’s what I mean. We can protect, save men so much, with the atmosphere we create.”

“And you think that is a sufficient purpose! What about feminine freedom, her individual right to develop, outside male interference, her independence?”

“I don’t want to be independent, Dick. And——”

“And?”

“I don’t want you to be independent.”

He turned her face up to his.

“That’s it. We shall always be together, do things together, think things together. We’re comrades in arms, and when one of us dies the other won’t want to live long. Yes, that’s the test. But now, thank God for life—our life.”

Chapter Forty-four

Jean Cunningham and her husband climbed up to the convent terrace on the night after the Skeltons had left for England. A full moon was shining, and the shadows of the cypresses stretched sharp and black upon the ground. Far below lay a land of a thousand lights, a multitude of sparkling points, like spangles upon black velvet. There were street lights, lights at sea, lights in villa windows, ladders of light that climbed the sides of some big hotel. They lay in half-moons along the edge of the sea, wound here and there in sinuous glistening lines, or were massed into star clusters and little whorls of brilliant haze. The peaks against the northern sky were silver grey in the moonlight, the valleys great glooms between the hills. The night was so clear that Bordighera stood like a town of ivory upon the edge of a sable sea.

It was very still save for the croaking of the frogs in the water cisterns. The cypresses might have been carved out of black marble, and the olives, splashed with silver, seemed asleep. David Cunningham and his wife, sitting on the parapet, looked down at the multitude of lights glittering like the stars of a universe tacked to the hem of the sea—which suggested infinite space. And for contrast, the croaking of the frogs filled the night with a kind of mocking, gloating hilarity.

The Cunninghams sat there and talked.

"They had a fine send-off to-day. I wonder if it will be a happy marriage?"

"Have you any doubts?"

"None at all, so far as my experience counts for anything."

"Most cautious of women! Yet you two fell into each other's arms, and as for Skelton, he is one of the few men one could trust implicitly."

"Yes. So often it is not a case of how to be happy though married, but how not

to be a fool. Why don't we humans write and tell the truth? We all know that there are a certain number of women who are made to be 'mistresses,' and a great number of men who can't help being polygamous. And yet we insist on the same harness for everybody, and act a fib when the traces break. Marriage needs a particular temperament. How can one expect fools to live the most difficult and complex and sensitive of lives?"

"Jean, old lady, we are discussing the Skeltons, not the mob."

"They'll be happy."

"Born comrades. Besides, Skelton's generous, and nothing counts like generosity."

"And she's a dear, the very mate for him—sensitive, quick as light, and full of understanding. She's a marvel, considering."

"Perhaps that accounts for it. She won't worry her man with silly little piques and prejudices, and spill all the domestic worries over him directly he comes home."

"It sounds as though you spoke out of the fullness of bitter experience."

Cunningham rapped his heels meditatively against the wall. "They always tell one not to expect too much. It seems to me the thing is to expect a very great deal of the right material, and, what's more, to say so. Now, I——"

"You stimulated me to re-act properly!"

"It's true. We stimulated each other. I shouldn't be the man I am——"

"Davie, the frogs are croaking at us. I'm so glad those two dear people are going to be happy."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The White Gate* by Warwick Deeping]