

I
PRONOUNCE
THEM

▼
G.A. STUDDERT KENNEDY

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I PRONOUNCE THEM

A Story of Man and Wife

BY
G. A. STUDDERT KENNEDY



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I PRONOUNCE THEM
—A—
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I would there were no sorrow in the world,
But it were all like this,
Love's banner on the hills of dawn unfurled.
His kiss
Still wet upon the roses in the lane.
I would there were no pain,
No cry of souls lost in the starless night,
But one way white
And shining, wherein the feet of fools might walk
Unwounded, and unshod,
Until, in peace of eventide, they came,
With pilgrim songs,
Unto the gates of flame,
And saw behind the sunset,
 God.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

I have written this story because I had to. It would not leave me alone until it was written. It worked and worried inside me as a poem does. I had a tale to tell. But I am really a preacher and a priest, and the tale I had to tell arose out of, and was bound up with, a sermon I could not preach. I wanted to preach on the meaning of Christian Marriage, but always I felt that the problems to be faced could not be treated in a sermon. However hard I tried sermons were too general and too abstract. No one has really faced the problem of the “innocent party”—what a name to give a tortured man or woman!—until he has been faced with a man or woman whom he knows and loves, and been asked to decide what God’s Will is in their particular case. To sit in a room with Maisie on one side of you and Charlie on the other, and tell them that they are living in sin, that is the test. I have had to stand it many times, and have been sick with doubt. The characters in the story are purely fictitious, but the essential moral situations are not. There are such people and there is such suffering. Is it God’s Will? That is the question.

It is the same with the other moral problem, the problem of the unwanted child. It must be asked and answered in the concrete, if its poignancy is to be realized. It is always Mrs. Chapman, or Mary whom you prepared for Confirmation that asks, and it is Mary, married to a man you know, that you must answer. Until you have done that you have not faced the question at all. That is how the story arose. It was born in the agony, that is the only adequate word, of such decisions. Once born it became, as stories do, an end in itself. The people became living people for me. I hope they will live for you, my readers, so much depends on that. I have often been on the point of burning this manuscript because I felt it was not good enough. But I have read it to, and it has been read by, many friends, and they have decided that it should see the light. Some of them are priests, some are laymen, all are Christians, and no one of them condemned it to death. They are, of course, in no way responsible for the story. I alone am responsible. For a man of the world there is no problem, but we are not all men and women of the world yet. I doubt if there will be much world to be a man of when we are. Christian love in Christian homes is the soul of civilization, and if it dies, the body will disintegrate and rot. Of that I have no doubt. It is this faith that makes the problem of lives like these so deadly difficult to face. It is a sad story. I wish it were otherwise. I wish I could have written of a Peter the Splendid who was always splendid, and of a Robin who lived in a cloudless June.

But that would have been neither the tale I had to tell, nor the sermon I could not preach, for both were born of an effort to help and comfort sinners like myself. It is a tale told by a fool striving to help his fellow fools, and guide their sorely wounded feet into the Way of Peace.

G. A. STUDDERT KENNEDY

WORCESTER, *Jan. 27, 1927.*

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I Pronounce Them

CHAPTER I

WE THREE

“It’s a rum world!”

The Reverend Robert Peterson got up from his study chair, and, walking over to the mantelpiece, selected one out of the many foul and well-used briar pipes, and proceeded very deliberately to fill and light it. A tall, fresh-complexioned, blue-eyed man, his black, curly hair going grey and thin a little at the temples, he looked what he was, a healthy-minded, clean-living English gentleman who had taken Holy Orders some twenty-five years before, not because of any tremendous and overwhelmingly religious experience, but because his father had been a parson before him, and he desired to serve his generation, and to stand for what was decent. It would not be fair to say of him that convention counted for more than conviction in his life. He had convictions, but they were the result of heredity and habit, rather than of conscious thought or strong feeling. People who had positive and personal religious experience made him feel uncomfortable and shy. He did not doubt their sincerity. He even admired them in the pulpit, but outside of it—well, he just wished they wouldn’t, that was all. He had always been a conscientious, hard-working parish priest, and was considered “good” with men and boys. Being average at all ball games, and more than average at golf, he commanded their respect. For fourteen years he had worked in and about Liverpool, first in the slums, and later in the suburbs, and had then come as rector to a wretchedly poor parish in the cathedral town of Ranchester. During the war he had joined up as a Padre, and done good work in the line as an amateur stretcher-bearer, receiving the Military Cross for gallantry on the field. Although the parish was poor the income was adequate, and he possessed sufficient private means to enable him to live without anxiety, to spite the Inspector of Taxes, in the pleasant old barn of a rectory which stood ivy-covered under the shadow of the

Cathedral. His study window looked out upon the Cathedral close, which was now bathed in the sunshine of the end of May. The echoes of the great tower bell which had just chimed eleven o'clock died away into silence, and there was no other sound but the distant shouting of some boys at play. It was a lovely morning and a pleasant scene, a typical piece of that sweet mellow older England over which an American tourist is prepared to burst into an ecstasy at any moment. But there were no signs of ecstasy about the Rector of S. Philip's. He stared out of the window with unseeing eyes, and, as his pipe got going, muttered to himself again:

"It is a rum world."

Like many men in post-war England whose lines were cast in pleasant places, and who had no personal worries to speak of, he was, notwithstanding his creature comforts, neither happy nor altogether comfortable. The whole world seemed to be in a state of turmoil and somehow in these days one was forced to think about the world, forced to think about everything. That was the misery of it. Things that one had simply taken for granted before the war, and regarded, like the weather, as part of the natural, if incomprehensible order of things, rose up now and challenged a decent man to think. The poverty of his parish which he had pitied, and faithfully ministered to, in the old days, now made him uncomfortable in a new way. He had a wretched feeling when he compared his lot with that of his people that this glaring contrast ought not to be, there was something shameful about it. He had always detested Socialism and dismissed its enthusiastic advocates as cranks, but there were times now when he could not withhold his sympathy from them, even though he thought that they were wrong. It was disgusting that some of the decent working men who had served with him in France should be compelled to live as they did. He was heartily sick of politicians and politics. And there were other things. He had just been reading a sermon on the Sanctity of Christian Marriage which the Suffragan Bishop of the Diocese, an ardent and powerful Anglo-Catholic, had sent round to all the clergy. It was a disturbing thing to read. The sternness, almost ferocity, of its orthodoxy was upsetting to him. He had never thought of orthodoxy, in this or any other matter, as a thing which a man was called upon to get stern or ferocious about. It had always been the solid background of an ordered life which one took for granted and never thought about at all. But here was one whom he respected and admired, talking as though Christian Marriage were on its trial and needing of ardent, earnest, and reasoned defence. He thought of occasional sermons he had himself preached on the subject before the war. Remembering quite distinctly the line he had taken, he realized with an uncomfortable feeling that they would not do now. Even he could not deliver them now, they took everything for granted.

“Well, why the devil shouldn’t I take it for granted?” he said to himself. “If one can’t take that for granted, what is there that one can?” Even golf moved him but seldom to strong language, but he brought in the devil on this occasion as a kind of guarantee to himself of his own sincerity. He meant in effect: “Even supposing I jump out of my clerical skin and become a layman, I’m blessed if I see how I can, as a decent man, do anything but take strict Christian Marriage as a fixed and settled fact, about which there can be no real argument.” And yet . . . there was this wretched business of Charlie Roberts and Maisie Smith—and there was Jim. There was Jim, that was a problem. What on earth . . .? As though in answer to his thoughts there was a click of the garden gate, and a man walked quickly up the path. He was of middle height, broad and powerfully made, with a very large head, enormous dark eyes, and an ugly but striking face. Even before he spoke one might have guessed that he was Irish. The large, mobile, humorous mouth, and high cheek-bones prepared one to expect the brogue before one heard it. There had been days when the football fields had rung with his name, Counihan the Irish three-quarter back. He wore a cassock and no hat, and looked ill and worried. Presently he burst into the room unannounced.

“I say, Bob, are ye busy? or could ye spare me half an hour now?”

There was no greeting smile, no joke. It was all so unlike Jim Counihan’s ordinary self that his friend took his cue at once and answered.

“Of course I can, Jim. Sit down and smoke.”

“Thank ye. No, I never smoke anything but fags,” he said, waving the proffered tobacco-jar aside and sitting down. “I’ve got some yellow perils on me somewhere.” He foraged round in the breast of his cassock and produced a battered packet of Gold Flake, lighted one, and then for awhile sat staring into the empty grate. They were old friends, these two. They had worked together in slums and campaigned together in France, and Peterson was not surprised at the silence. He knew, all his friends knew, that there was enough in this man’s life just then to make anyone silent. Presently Counihan felt again in the breast of his cassock, and out of his waistcoat pocket produced a letter, a letter which had been all crumpled up, and then straightened out again.

“Read that,” he said.

Peterson took it. It was written in a large loose feminine hand, sloping backwards, and smelt strongly of a certain scent which, even for him, brought back in a flood memories of the writer, the queer mixture of charm and repulsiveness which she had always had for him, a woman at once too hard and too soft to be friends with, one of those for whom it must be all or had

better be nothing. Instinctively he was on his guard. She was the only woman who had ever disturbed him since his marriage twenty years ago. Once when she and Jim were engaged and had come down to spend part of a holiday by the sea with him and Robin, about two years after his own wife died, he had caught himself thinking about her far too often, and in a way that had shocked and surprised him. He had been glad, and yet strangely restless and lonely, he remembered, when she was gone. He could see her now with a yellow bathrobe thrown over her shoulders, shaking the water from her thick mop of bobbed brown hair with gold strands dancing in it, and laughing down at Jim and Robin who were sitting at her feet. She was asking for admiration and receiving it. She could not help it. She was always asking for admiration, and when she did not receive it, she was just puzzled and did not know what on earth to do next with the person, man or woman, who did not respond. He had never been able to make up his mind whether she was deliberately provocative, or whether it was simply natural, but the challenge was always there.

“What a woman! Why, even this scent . . .”

All this flashed across his mind before he began to take in what the letter meant. It was brief. She was too lazy to write long letters about anything, even this. He remembered how Jim used to fret over the brief sweetness of her love-letters to him before they married.

“Dear Jim Crow,” it began. “Good Lord, what cruelty! She’s as hard as nails. No mercy—absolutely none, never had. It must have hurt like blazes, that name.”

“Dear JIM CROW,—

“Do hurry up and get your divorce. It’s no good, we could never live together. I was never meant to be a parson’s wife. Besides, I’m going to have a child now, and that ends it. Don’t waste time writing any more long letters and arguments, but get a divorce for my sake. You will not be so cruel as to let your religious scruples stand in the way. Hurry up and try not to think too hardly of it.

“Yours,
“PHYLLIS.”

The Rector read the letter through twice, and then looked at the tortured face of the man opposite to him. He felt utterly helpless and miserable.

“Well,” he said at last, “there’s nothing else to do, I suppose.”

“But I don’t believe in Divorce. I hate it. It is against the law of God. It is

sin. This child of hers was conceived and will be born in sin, nothing can alter that. Why should I divorce her, and throw away the only chance I have of bringing her to repentance? This Philip Dunstone is a loose-living waster. God knows whether he will marry her even if I do divorce her. But if he does, what difference could it make? Is the sin going to be any less sinful because it has been whitewashed by Society? I'm sick of all this sham and hypocrisy. No one has any convictions about anything nowadays. I cannot and will not do it. It is contrary to the Law of the Church, and the Church is the only Society left in the world with a grain of moral sense in it."

This was exactly the kind of talk that made Peterson feel all at sea inside. After all, what Phyllis asked for was only common sense, cruel if you like, but common sense. In theory, of course, there was no such thing as Divorce, but in practical matters, one had to compromise.

"Well, you know, Jim," he said slowly, "I hate Divorce as much as you do, and believe in it as little. But for the life of me I cannot see how you can refuse to divorce her now. It would be cruel, as she says. I know she has been cruel to you. This letter is about the most heartless thing I've ever struck. But you are a Christian, Jim, old chap, and the law of love runs before all others, doesn't it? You can't be cruel."

"Cruelty!" broke in the other. "That's all this miserable sentiment over again. Isn't that just what tempted me all the time? I never could bear to see her unhappy, and so I let her do as she liked. I allowed her to drift into this because I was afraid to be cruel. I betrayed her soul because I was not strong enough to give her pain. All her life she has done just what she liked, and got whatever she wanted. No mother—and that old fool of a father. Now you are the same. You never could deny her anything either. You want me to let her go on drifting because it is cruel to refuse. That's what's the matter with us all. We are soft and self-indulgent ourselves, and we daren't be hard on anyone else, not even on our children. We let them go to the devil and pride ourselves on being kind. We daren't act upon principle because principles are hard. Of course they're hard, that's what they're for, to give backbone to jelly-fish like us."

The Rector's thoughts went back to the Bishop's sermon. Here was another of them waxing stern and ferocious about orthodoxy. There was so much truth in it, too. He could remember Rose, his wife, saying the same sort of thing about him when he was pleading with her for Robin when she wanted to do some little thing against her mother's wish. He could hear her saying, "My dear, it is not good for the child, and it is not kind to let her do what is not good for her. You are only being kind to yourself, that is all." Kind to himself,

he had always been kind to himself, that was really why he hated cruelty. He hated to see anyone unhappy or in pain. Perhaps that was why he was a parson. Was that all? Was even his vocation just being kind to himself? A jelly-fish, that's what he was. He wobbled about things, and never could be firm unless he were goaded into it, and wanted a way out of a painful situation. But hang it all! There must be limits to this firmness business. You could not let the woman have an illegitimate child and compel her to live as that fellow's mistress. It wasn't decent. He got up from his chair uneasily, relighted his pipe, and walking over to the table stood there fingering the Bishop's sermon. There was silence in the room, and he could hear the Dean of Ranchester calling to his grandson on the other side of the garden wall. "Harry, what are you doing? Come here at once." There was no jelly about the Dean anyhow. He was another generation. They knew their own minds in those days. He was bringing the boy up in the way he should go all right.

Suddenly, without turning round, he said:

"Do you still love Phyllis, Jim?"

There was no answer. He turned about and saw his friend all crumpled up in the chair, his head buried in his hands, and his shoulders heaving. This was terrible. Once before he had seen Jim weep, and then there were tears in his own eyes. It was while they stood together to watch the remnant of the 137th Brigade march down the road from Fonquevilliers to Souastre after the show on July 1st, 1916. All the deep and loyal love he felt for his friend rose up and rent him to pieces inside. He walked over to him, and putting his hand hesitatingly on his shoulder, said:

"Don't, Jim, old man, don't."

"Even now," he thought, "I'm only being kind to myself. I hate to see him broken, it hurts like the devil. That beastly woman deserves all she can get."

"I shouldn't have asked that," he said.

Jim sprang to his feet, walked to the table, and then turned leaning against it.

"Yes, you should," he choked out, "it's the one thing you should have asked. You weren't just being kind when you asked that, you were getting down to it. That's where my sin lies. There are times when I would give my soul's salvation, aye and the salvation of all the souls in the world, to take her in my arms again and know that she was mine. Is that Love? Sometimes I think that it is, and that it is the only thing worth living for. When I'm sane I know that it isn't, that it is sin. That it is sin now, and always has been sin; that

it was sin the day I married her. God knows no one ever meant their marriage vows as I meant mine, and yet it was a mockery, and deep down somewhere I knew it was a mockery. I knew she could not help me in my work. I knew she hadn't a spark of religion, real religion in her. I told myself that I did not want a curate but a wife, and that she had quite enough religion in her for that. I pretended that she was just a child, gay and innocent, but, in my heart of hearts, I knew she was a woman, a fascinating and enthralling woman, and that it was the woman in her that I wanted. I did not really care a hang about the work, the world, or the Church, or Christ or anything; I wanted her. I told myself that it was all right, only natural, and all that. I used to go down on my knees to thank God for her, and rise up knowing that I had not been thanking God at all, but just dreaming of her, of the way she spoke, and the little pucker under her nose when she laughed, and all the rest of it. You know what she was—and is, and always will be. No God, no Church, nothing could ever change her. I know it now. I knew it then, and yet I married her. That is my sin."

"I don't think it was sin, or is now," Peterson said gently. "I was like that myself once. It's only human nature after all."

"No, of course you wouldn't think it sin. Sin is a cruel word, isn't it? It's hard, and you can't be hard, except when you have no time to think, and the inheritance of a decent Christian tradition comes out. Of course it's only human nature, and what is human nature but sin? Weren't we born in sin? This shallow, muddle-headed generation doesn't like the Catechism 'We being by nature born in sin and children of wrath.' It shocks our fine susceptibilities, but we'll have to learn to like it or go to the devil."

"But you don't finish," interrupted the Rector. "You have not finished that. What about 'are hereby made the children of grace'?"

"That's all right if you stick to the Church, man, and live in grace. But haven't I just said that I didn't care a hang about the Church? I wanted her and I got her. That is human nature, and it is sin."

"Well, I don't agree. If Phyllis had played the game it would have turned out all right."

"Played the game! What game? She did play the game, the only game she knows anything about. She's playing it now, this letter is part of it. She is asking me to play up, and so are you. But what you don't see, and she could never see, is that it is a different game. This is not the fine hard game of Christian Marriage with its strict rules and grand, relentless loyalties; it is the soft old game of human love in which everything is fair as it is in war. That's

just what the world won't see, that there are two games, and that you must play one or the other. This sporting talk turns me sick when it pretends to be Christian. Of all the forms of modern cant it is about the meanest. We're always talking about playing the game, but we daren't play Christ's game to save our blessed lives. We put a velvet cushion on the cross for fear the nails might hurt. And who am I to rail at the world? I talk like a priest, but I'm just a man, a common, dirty, sinful man, caught in the trap I laid for myself, and blaming it on the woman as usual."

He walked over to the book-shelves opposite, and stood with his back to Peterson, drumming with his fingers on the bindings of the books, silent for a while because he could not trust himself to say another word.

"Don't you see," he stammered out brokenly at last, "I don't know where I am now. I don't know what game I'm playing. I don't know whether it is that I hate to close the door for good, and give up the hope, the last hope I have, that she will come back to me, or whether what I said just now is really true, and I cannot cease to be responsible to God for her soul, and want to save her from her sin. If she came back to-morrow I would not dare to play the Christian, I would be so terrified of driving her away. I would tell myself that I must be tender for her soul's sake, and all the time I would want her, want her, want her as a man wants his mate."

The stark-naked sincerity of all this was somehow repulsive to Peterson. He heard confessions now and then, but only now and then, and under protest so to speak. This was worse than any confession he had ever heard. It was, moreover, complicated by the fact that he really loved his friend. The very pain of the situation drove him to the point of decision. He simply could not stand much more of this. He did not acknowledge it to himself, but in reality he was determined to put an end to the interview as quickly as he could.

It was bad enough having to teach the theory of Christian Marriage, but this brutal decision in practice was more than he could bear.

"Well," he said, "if that is how you feel, Jim, old chap, don't you think it is clear that you must divorce her? You feel that the marriage never was a Christian marriage, and that you are, partly at any rate, to blame. You do not know that your desire to hold her is not selfish, the indulgence of a crazy hope. A man of the world would say that to refuse your wife divorce under the circumstances was the act of a cad, and I can't help feeling that there is something in it. It can't be Christian to be caddish, can it?"

A certain hardness, born of inward irritation rather than conviction, crept into the words somehow, although he tried to soften it by a term of affection.

The hardness had the effect of calming Jim.

“That’s better,” he said after a silence, “that’s straight talk. But”—and he looked up at his friend with a whimsical smile that had in it more agony than many tears—“but you’re still the same old woolly-headed fraud, you know. It’s my feelings, and her feelings, and your feelings that you are thinking about. But Christian Marriage does not rest upon feelings, it rests upon facts. What I felt and she felt, what you and I or the man of the world feels cannot alter the facts. Phyllis and I were made man and wife by God. No man-made law, no State nor Court can change that fact, any more than it can make you into a woman, or your daughter into a son. Once you ignore or defy that crucial point the whole basis of Christian Marriage crumbles into dust, and you fall back into the wash of feelings, expediciencies, shifts and subterfuges that make up the world’s marriage laws. Of course I’m a priest, but my Priesthood does not really make up a scrap of difference in this connection. There aren’t two Christian Marriage laws, one for the Priesthood and the other for the laity. It is not my Priesthood that is at stake, but the whole conception of Christian Marriage. According to that if I divorce my wife, I openly condone her sin, and give her permission to go on living in it. How can I do that and continue to be a Christian? Am I not bound to try and save her soul, and get her back again?”

“You cannot save her soul,” Peterson interrupted with a flash of insight. “She must save her own by repentance and the grace of God, as we all must in the end. You may help her to that, but you certainly will not do it by insisting on your rights. You are much more likely to drive her to bitter hatred and resentment of your attitude. You do not believe in Divorce, and you will not be divorced, but you cannot compel her to share your belief by exposing her and her child to social pains and penalties. In the face of that answer to all your pleading do you think yourself that you are likely to bring her to real repentance by holding her to the law? Put yourself in her place. What could I feel about you suppose it were my Robin?”

“It couldn’t be Robin,” replied Jim with despair in his voice; “it couldn’t be Robin any more than it could help being Phyllis. They are two different types. It would be as impossible for the one as it was inevitable for the other. Robin is your daughter and had your wife for a mother. Phyllis had no mother, and that stupid, sensual, old Captain Forsyth, with his splutter and his spats, for a father—she never had a chance.”

“In that case, what is the good of Christianity at all?” Peterson said in gruff desperation. “If Phyllis could not help sinning and cannot be changed as you say. If she is just one type and our little Robin another—two fixed types from birth—where does the Church come in?”

“It’s not the birth that counts, though I suppose it does count, it’s the bringing up. The Church comes in with the children, if she comes in at all. But O God, I’m in such a muddle. Everything seems to be going from under me—faith and everything else. She won’t come back. I know her and I know she won’t. I cannot save her. What’s the good of my taking a strong line, when I’m not strong, when I’m weak as water? I may deceive myself into believing that I hold her on principle, when really I’m just being vindictive and futile. I suppose I shall divorce her, but I am all muddled up, and I can’t see right and wrong in it anyhow. God knows . . .”

He broke off, lighted a cigarette, picked up the Bishop’s sermon, and after reading the title tossed it hopelessly aside. Then, as he turned, he saw the garden gate open and Robin ran up the path.

“I’m sorry to have inflicted this upon you, Bob,” he said, “but there was no one else I could go to. You can’t talk of this sort of thing to anybody. Here’s the little Robin.”

She ran to Jim Counihan and kissed him.

“Hullo, Uncle Jim,” she said, and then, turning to her father, “I’m late, Daddy, and I’m so sorry. Miss Grayson kept me talking about the dance for ages after my lesson. I would have been later if I had not met Peter, and came back in his car.”

While she was speaking she had turned back to Jim and stood now with her arm through his. He had known her since she was a baby, and had played bears with her round this very arm-chair by which they stood. He looked at her now with a wealth of affection shining in his troubled eyes. She was good to look upon, good as a wild rose just opening out in June. Half child, half woman, small but exquisitely formed, with the perfect complexion of a healthy schoolgirl, large frank blue eyes, a strong chin and a small mouth with character and fine breeding in every line of it, she looked up at Jim with sympathy and anxiety in her expressive face. She knew he was in trouble. For years these three had been friends and constant companions, and, next to her father, Jim Counihan was to Robin the dearest person in the world.

Feeling that if he stayed he would only make the child sad, he excused himself from coming to lunch. She saw him to the gate and as they were going down the path she took his arm and gave it a friendly squeeze.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Jim,” she said.

He kissed her gently and turned away.

CHAPTER II

AND PETER

The morning of her father's interview with Jim Counihan had been a memorable one for Robin Peterson, too. Born artist as she was, her natural means of artistic expression was dancing. Everything, as she said, went to her feet. Emotion of any kind, joyous or sad, she wanted to dance it out. The one ambition of her life was to be a great dancer. Already she realized that Art is a hard mistress, and that she must work if she was to be anything but a decent amateur, and she worked hard. She was fortunate in having a real artist to help her. Miss Grayson had run a dancing class in Ranchester for many years, and was no mere hack teacher, but one to whom her Art was life. Robin Peterson was her glory, far and away the most talented and promising pupil she had ever taught, and the two were fast friends. Every morning now that she had left school Robin went to her dancing. Punctually as the Cathedral clock struck the quarter after nine she would come out of the Rectory gate. Her punctuality lately had been remarkable, and was not, it must be confessed, altogether due to virtuous resolve or artistic zeal. Peter Craddock, old Canon Craddock's son, had observed that she came out then, and he nearly always managed to be starting out at that time in his little two-seater sporting car, and would offer Robin a lift. Neither of them acknowledged that there was any arrangement between them. Sometimes Peter had to get down to the works early, and then he could not wait. When this happened he would swear softly to himself as he drove off without her, and Robin would be conscious that the morning was rather a dull morning, even though the sun were shining.

Peter Craddock had been an airman in the war, and was now with the Bristol Aeroplane Company, who had sent him down to Ranchester to supervise the production of some parts which an engineering firm in the town were making for them. He was twenty-nine years of age, tall, dark, good looking, and to outsiders perfectly charming when he liked. At home he had always been a source of some anxiety. He was an only child and his parents idolized and spoiled him. He assumed that the world was made to provide him with what he wanted, and up to now it had served him pretty well. He had both brains and courage, and had found life an easy nut to crack. Although tradition and upbringing had provided him with a standard of honour rather higher than that of some of his friends, there had been incidents in his life which he would not have cared to discuss with his father. But then the old man was out of date, and was a parson, and for that double reason did not really count for much. He

was a great New Testament scholar, but that, of course, has no possible bearing upon real life. Peter was not really vicious. Many men would have been proud to have reached his age with as clean a record. He had not kept altogether straight in France, but that was wartime madness. There had been an affair with a married woman at Bristol, but it went no further than a few mad expeditions into the country, some hectic kisses, and sad farewells. Anyhow, she had gone off with another fellow over a year ago, and he did not wonder, her husband was a brute. The world would have been quite satisfied with Peter even had it known his secrets, and Peter was more than satisfied with himself. He did not think of himself as being in love with Robin. She was only a child, but rather a wonderful child. There were finer possibilities in his nature and to them she appealed. She stood to him for all that was cleanest and best in life. Since he had become conscious of her, which was about three weeks after he had come back home on this job, he had taken to going to his Communion again in the Cathedral at eight o'clock on Sunday morning. Nor was this altogether because he knew that Robin would be there, and not in the least because he wanted to impress her with his Church-going. It was, as far as it went, a real revival in him of what was best. Somehow it was easier to keep straight at home. The atmosphere caught him, and he followed, as he always did, the line of least resistance.

He was happier than he had been for a long time, and was not finding Ranchester the dull hole he had feared that it would be. His parents were delighted. They assumed that the restlessness of war was working off and that he was settling down. Old Canon Craddock gave special thanks to God in his private prayers when Peter appeared at Communion for the third time running, and he now looked forward on a Saturday night to hearing him say, after bidding him good night in the study, "Well, I'll trickle off to bed, Dad, you might give me a knock in the morning. I think I'll go to Church."

On this particular morning all had gone well. Robin came out of the gate and there, opposite the Craddocks', was the Riley two-seater with its red splash-boards and silver body shining in the sun, and Peter, tinkering at the engine with a skill and earnestness partly real, for he loved an engine as a saint loves his soul, and partly designed to kill time. He heard the gate, and turned round, wiping the oil off his fingers with a cloth.

"Hullo! little girl," he said, "want a lift?"

"Yes, Peter, I'd love it," said Robin. "I want to be in time this morning. There's this dance at the Fête next Wednesday. I'm practising like mad, and Miss Grayson's tearing her hair over it."

"We'll have you there in a jiff," he said; "hop in while I crank up. The

starter's on strike this morning."

Robin liked the air of mastery with which he steered the car through the old gate of the Cathedral close. She liked the feel and the smell of his brown tweeds beside her, the watchful look in his eyes as he drove, and the ease with which he threaded his way through the traffic in the narrow High Street. She wondered how he looked when he was flying. It must be grand to fly, she thought, almost as good as a really good dance. I would be a flying man if I were a man. All this was fleeting through her mind, rather as a series of sensations making up a happy feeling which fitted in with the sunshine, than as a connected train of thought. She did not know she was thinking about Peter, she was just conscious of him; he was part of the sunshine and of life, and she was happy. She had been very happy lately, happier than she had ever been since her mother died.

As they slowed down for a lorry passing a big Drapery store at the Cross, a pretty girl who was polishing the brass outside the window, smiled at Robin and nodded her head.

"Who's that?" said Peter, struck by the beauty of a really lovely face.

"Oh, I am so sorry for her, poor girl. Her name is Maisie, Maisie Smith," Robin said. "She used to be Maisie Thomas, but she married a soldier just at the end of the war, and he turned out a perfect brute, used to drink and beat her, and was so cruel to their little girl. He's gone away now and she lives by herself and works at that shop."

"Hard luck that," Peter said.

"Yes, and the worst of it is that the boy she really loved and who loves her is dying to help her, and of course he can't. He's a server at daddy's church, and such a dear. Maisie used to be much the prettiest girl in our parish, and Charlie Roberts just worshipped her."

"What made her marry the other fellow?" asked Peter.

"I never could think," said Robin, "nor can daddy. He was wounded in the war and Maisie met him up at the Old Hall Hospital. She was a maid there, and she seemed to go mad on him all at once. When she came to ask daddy to marry them all in a hurry, he asked her about Charlie, but she said she never could marry anyone now but this Will Smith. Of course he married them, but it turned out all wrong."

"Pity she can't get rid of him and marry the other fellow," said Peter, half to himself and half to Robin. "Divorce laws in this country are all wrong."

Robin heard him, but this was strange ground to her, and she said nothing more. She did not really want to talk about poor Maisie and her troubles, the morning was too lovely, and the sun too bright.

She had never thought about the Divorce laws.

She had read things in the papers, and seen pictures of women who had been divorced with expansive smiles, or trying to hide their faces from the camera. But of course people who got into the papers were not like ordinary people that one met every day. There was some awful trouble between Phyllis and Uncle Jim. That was beastly, and poor Uncle Jim looked so ill and miserable. She did not associate that with Divorce as yet. It was just a quarrel or something wretched. She half wished now that she had said nothing about Maisie. She had only done it because she was still a little shy of Peter, and had to talk about something. They were coming near to the Studio where Miss Grayson held her classes, and it had been a lovely drive after all, and she was happy.

"Here we are, little girl," said Peter, putting out his hand with a splendid sweep and swinging round a corner. "Not been long about it, have we?"

"No, it's not half-past yet," answered Robin, jumping out and looking at a little gold wristlet watch that had belonged to her mother. "You have been quick, Peter, and I have enjoyed it. Thank you ever so much."

But somehow Peter did not seem to be in a hurry that morning. He did not touch his hat, and start to turn the car round in the firm, beautiful curves that were one of Robin's half-conscious morning joys. All fine graceful motions were a joy to her dancing soul. He just sat there smiling at her, as much as to say "Isn't it jolly—aren't you jolly, and I jolly, and isn't it good to be alive!" She agreed with him; every fibre of her body and soul, in their mysterious and indivisible unity, agreed with him. She put her two hands on the door of the car which she had just closed, and did a kind of little dance. Peter and the sunshine had got into her feet.

"I have enjoyed it," she said again, smiling. "She is a beauty," and she patted the car as if it were alive.

"Not bad, is she?" said Peter, and then looked away. He looked back again in a moment. "I'll be coming back this way about half-past twelve. I suppose I couldn't take you home, could I?"

Robin coloured with pleasure. That was one of the jolly things about her, Peter thought. It was not a blush exactly. It was something alloverish. She just shone.

“I should love you to, Peter,” she said. “I generally come out about twelve, though, and I don’t want to keep dad waiting. Still, we have an awful lot to do this morning really, and I may be a bit late. You might just call round and see, if it’s no trouble. If I’m not here at half-past, don’t wait, will you?”

She half knew that she would be late out and he wholly knew that he would come early, but they had never made any arrangement before, and both instinctively wanted to preserve the fiction of their casual meetings. There was a kind of deliciously certain uncertainty about them which was too good to lose.

“It’s not a bit of trouble. I love having you, little girl. You make the car go better. I’ll come a bit early if I can. Good-bye, till then.”

The car swung round with an extra thrill, he waved his hand, and disappeared round the corner.

The morning went like lightning. The “Dance of the Golden Moth” was Miss Grayson’s own conception. It had come to birth in her mind after reading some lines of poetry in a magazine.

Thought is the final mockery,
A chance by-product of the brain,
As blank, as purposeless and vain,
As all the rest of this mad scheme of things.
Its shining wings
Bear mortals to their death,
As, after witless wandering flight,
The moth is burned up in the light
That, through the darkness,
Lured him to his doom.

The poem itself had been on the Resurrection and had ended on a triumphant note:

If Jesus died,
Nought but the winter and the gloom
Remain.
But Jesus lives! Then full and fair
Shout and sing ye golden flowers,
Drifting clouds and dancing showers,
Silver moons that wax and wane,
Resurrexit! Resurrexit!
God’s green spring is true again.

Miss Grayson had never been able to make up her mind how to end the dance. Should she dance the whole poem or only part of it? Ought it to end in the tragedy of Death or with the triumph of the Resurrection? For some time it had been a tragedy, and she had never even hinted to Robin of any other possibility. Round a table, with a flower-pot on it to represent the dazzling light of life, the little golden moth, with her soul in her feet, had danced to her death morning after morning. Nearer and nearer she came, as though caught up into an ecstasy by the sheer glory of light, until she sank down, with her wings of golden drapery wrapped close about her, and lay still.

Then she would jump to her feet with a shining face and say, "Will that do, Miss Grayson?"

It never would do, of course, for Miss Grayson was an artist, but it grew better and better. Then one day, struck by the joy in Robin's face when she jumped up from her death, she let out the fact that the poem really ended with the Resurrection, and quoted the lines. She was, in her own mind, convinced that it was better to keep the note of sombre tragedy, and end with that little huddled figure lying still in the burning light, but, from the first, Robin was for the Resurrection. She was wild with enthusiasm for it.

"O may I Resurrect, Miss Grayson? Please let me Resurrect. It would just make it perfect. Let me do it all over again now and Resurrect at the end."

Miss Grayson hesitated for awhile, but at last gave in with a smile at her enthusiasm.

"Well, you can try it, my dear," she said.

Robin stood for a moment considering, one hand to her lips and one foot pointed to the ground.

"How do you Resurrect, Miss Grayson?"

A shadow came over to the older woman's face.

"I'll leave that to you, dear," she said. "I'm not sure how I should do it, and perhaps I'm too old to learn."

Robin threw herself into it. In some subtle way the consciousness of the coming Resurrection changed the dance of death, the approach to the light was purer ecstasy, the unconsciousness of the cruelty of life more complete. For a little longer than usual she lay still, then slowly raised her head, and with an unfolding of her lithe little body that spoke in every line of a delicious awakening stood up, and with arms outstretched, as her golden wings came back to her, held up her laughing face to the light, like a child waiting for a

kiss. It was beautifully done for a first attempt. Miss Grayson saw the possibilities of it, and was really pleased.

“Then can I Resurrect at the Fête?” Robin said. “I love it, it makes it perfect. Of course I loved it before, it was so deliciously sad, but really inside me I always wanted to Resurrect, though I never thought of dancing it.”

“Well, we’ll see,” Miss Grayson said.

On this morning, what with Peter and the sunshine, Robin was all Resurrection and no death. The dance had been much elaborated, and they went through it together again and again, and, when the time came to go, Robin kept the willing Miss Grayson discussing suitable music, methods of Resurrection, and other important matters until she heard the Cathedral clock strike the quarter. Then she hurriedly took up her hat and little leather case with her shoes and wings in it, and ran downstairs. Peter and the car had been there for a good ten minutes.

“I do hope you haven’t been waiting long,” Robin said breathlessly. “I had no idea it was so late.”

This was almost true because she had tried to forget the time, and it is wonderful what a happy girl can forget when she is reluctant to remember.

“No, only a minute or two,” said Peter, which was also true, for even a long watch seems short when it is past and the light has come. The wonder of little Robin had been dawning on Peter’s mind that morning more brightly than before. He was very near to being in love.

“We must hurry,” said Robin, “daddy will be waiting, and he does so hate waiting for lunch, poor dear.”

The engine was already humming and, as they started off together, she began to tell him about the dance.

“I think it’s much better to Resurrect, don’t you, Peter?” she said.

“Well, I don’t want you to die just yet anyway, little Robin,” he replied.

“Nor do I——” She laughed and made a little movement with her hands as though she were taking the whole world into her arms, and then said radiantly, “I do love life.”

“I don’t think you ought ever to grow up either,” Peter remarked with a glance at her after a happy silence, during which he made a series of perfectly barbaric and abominable noises to clear a lorry out of the road.

“Oh! I’d like to grow a bit bigger,” she said, “my legs aren’t long enough.”

She looked down, more in sorrow than in anger, at the beautifully shaped but offending members in their silk stockings stretched out luxuriously before her. It was a real trouble to her this matter of her legs, which were too short for perfect dancing. She had often talked about it to her father, and she made the sorrowful observation now with an evident sincerity that made Peter chuckle. He glanced sideways at the legs, and felt, rather than thought, how jolly they were.

“Well, I think you are just all right as you are. You ought to be put into a glass case and preserved like that for ever and ever.”

“Like a mummy—that would be dull,” she said with a comic little grimace.

They drew nearer together in spirit as they laughed over the nonsense of a mummified Robin. Presently they passed through the gate of the close and drew up with a flourish at the Rectory. For a moment they sat still, then Robin gave a little sigh that said what all the poets in the world have tried to say, and known that they have failed.

Peter took her hand in his and gave it a squeeze.

“You really are a darling little girl, aren’t you?” he said.

She did not return the squeeze, but jumped out, a shining, happy Robin, with a joy song in her face. She banged the door and turned to him, and, looking like an April morning trying to be serious, said:

“I’m not really. I’m horrid inside sometimes. You don’t know me yet. Good-bye, Peter. I must fly.”

It was from that heaven of cloudless youth that she had burst in upon the two men with the wreck of a world between them.

CHAPTER III

IN THE DEANERY GARDEN

The morning of the Fête was cloudless, and burnished bright with heavy dew, as a morning in English June can be when the weather is on its good behaviour. Robin jumped out of bed very early, and dressed in a tearing hurry. She almost forgot her prayers, but didn't. She added a special thanksgiving for the morning and a prayer that she might dance very well, and to the Glory of God, as Uncle Jim said. Uncle Jim had prepared her for Confirmation, and had often talked to her about the redemption of Art. He explained how the Incarnation of Jesus Christ had lifted up the whole of human life on to a higher level. He took her to the great Cathedral, and she caught something of his enthusiasm, as he showed her the beauty and delicacy of the smallest and least important piece of carving in wood or stone, and impressed upon her that all this wonder of arch and aisle, and the riot of blazing colour in the windows, was just a perfect song of praise offered up about the altar which was the centre of it all. The Cathedral, he insisted, had not been built as a place to preach in; she could see how the pulpit stood aside, with a splendid gesture of humility, and pointed to the altar. The bread that was broken there represented in itself all our daily bread, and the means by which men earned it. All arts and crafts, all the humming busy world of work was laid upon the altar, and offered there to God, that He might take it, and make it what it was meant to be, His own Body, the means of expressing His Infinite Love for men. All good art, and all fine work, he declared, should be done to the Glory of God. That was what made this old work great, and much of our modern work so mean. The slow-witted, and probably illiterate, monks who had hammered out this perfection in patience were really poets writing in stone a silent song of deathless praise to the Saviour of the World. All this and much more he had poured out to her on one or two glorious mornings in July, when his own heart had been bursting with gratitude to God for life and love that promised to be perfect. It had made a deep impression upon Robin. She did not always understand, but she sympathized. She rather caught, than was taught, the inner meaning of it all. The Cathedral itself became a new place for her, she loved it as she had never done before, and went always to her Communion there. She asked Uncle Jim about dancing—was that an art? There was a difficulty in her mind because she could not see where dancing came into the universal worship of art and work. He replied enthusiastically that of course dancing was an art, the most primitive of all the arts, the real mother of them all. He told her that

Mozart had always held that dancing was the Virgin Mother of music, and that religion itself had been born in the dance. He took her back to the childhood of the world and showed her how all the first feelings of awe and wonder at Nature, shuddering horror in the face of death, fierce excitement in time of war, and ecstasy at the approach of Love had first been expressed in the tribal dance. One thing above all remained fixed in her mind, and that was the legend, which he said was not altogether dead in Europe yet, that the Sun danced before God on Easter morning. When she objected that there was no dancing in religion now, he answered with a smile, "No, worse luck, nor much religion in dancing. Both have suffered from the divorce. Modern dancing is degenerate. It is still a sensuous pleasure, but has ceased to be a social art. In English cathedrals they used to dance until the fourteenth century, and many have danced here. At Paris, Limoges, and elsewhere in France the priests danced in the choir until the seventeenth century." At that she laughed and said:

"I can't imagine the Dean and Daddy and old Canon Craddock dancing, can you?"

"No," he answered, smiling; "but seriously, if we really believed in the Resurrection I think you might dance the Dance of the Sun on Easter Day, Robin, and God would love it better than an anthem with twiddley bits in it."

Robin remembered that now as she went downstairs. She had thought a good deal about it since she had begun to "Resurrect," as she still called it, and the Golden Moth had become linked up in her mind with the Dance of the Sun on Easter Day. She went out on to the lawn, and, finding it still wet with dew, sat down upon a seat and took off her shoes and stockings. As a child she had loved the feel of the grass upon her bare feet, and she loved it still. Then round the sundial she danced out again the sorrow of Death and the joy of Resurrection. There were parts of it that she repeated again and again, partly for art's sake and its perfection, and partly for the joy of doing it. She was absorbed in her work when she heard her father's voice calling to her through the French window.

"Robin, breakfast's ready, and I'm starving!"

She stopped at once, and snatching up her shoes and stockings, ran across the lawn, picking her way gingerly across the gravel path, and stood in the window laughing.

"Oo—the gravel hurts," she said as she dropped her shoes and stockings, and leaning against the window sash, put one foot up to wipe the tiny pebbles from the sole.

"Of course it does, you little goose," her father said as he went over, and, taking her in his arms, plumped her down in the big arm-chair.

"Put on your stockings."

She sat there leaning back with a whole world of happy love shining in her eyes, and stuck out her feet in front of her.

"I don't know that I want to, Daddy," she said. "The carpet is quite comfy—and I do love my proper feet."

There was between these two the peculiarly rich and perfect love that can grow up between a father and a daughter. He had hoped for a son, and had been secretly disappointed when baby Robin had been born. Her name, Roberta, was the result of that disappointment. But she had changed even that by calling herself Robin as soon as she could speak. He would not have changed her for ten sons now. She was the light of his eyes, and since the death of his wife, had grown dearer than ever. There had been a very deep and loyal love between husband and wife, but it had been of the prosaic humdrum kind. She was a conscientious, capable woman, and had mothered both father and daughter for their good. Robin would have been hopelessly spoiled had it not been for her, and the man would have spoiled himself. They both mourned her loss sincerely and long, but, although neither of them would have acknowledged it, a certain sense of fear and repression had gone from the home with her, and had never returned. Perhaps, had she been different, they would have been different, and their happiness would not now have been so fine or so complete. She had sowed that they might reap. There are many such lives, and she would have asked no better reward than to see them now, although she would have said, "Robin, my dear, put on your shoes at once, and come to breakfast, we shall be late with prayers, and it puts cook all out for the day."

Robin jumped up and ran over to the sideboard.

"Are you going to have porridge or 'geggs,' Daddy?" she said.

"Porridge," said her father, who had taken his seat and was looking at the *Daily Mirror* which was taken in for Robin but always read first by him.

She banged out the porridge on to a plate with a delicious whack, and going behind her father, put it down before him, and then stood with her arms about his neck, resting her chin on the top of his head, and looked over at the paper.

What caught her eye was "Sensational Divorce Case—Peer as Co-respondent." Suddenly she thought of Uncle Jim, and remembered the pain in

his face as he walked down the garden path with her, the pain which had made her say, "I'm sorry, Uncle Jim."

"Will Uncle Jim have to be divorced from Phyllis, Daddy?" she asked.

"He won't have to, darling," said her father, after a pause, "but I think Jim will divorce his wife. She wants it."

Robin suddenly felt as though a cloud had come over the sun, and it were raining. She turned away and went slowly over to get her own porridge. There was no joy in the whack now, it was just porridge again, not fun. She went back to her place and standing there said:

"I don't understand how anyone could be so cruel—to Uncle Jim, he is such a darling."

Her father said nothing. In his heart he hated the whole thing. He was distressed for his friend, and bitter against Phyllis, but what he hated most was that it should come near Robin. He knew he could not keep it from her. Jim Counihan was too close to them both. He was Uncle Jim in a sense more real than proper uncles often are.

He began to eat his porridge in silence, flinging the paper aside.

"Daddy," said Robin after awhile, "do you think the Divorce laws are all wrong in this country?"

This was a facer—and he hesitated.

"Well," he said, "this has nothing to do with Divorce laws really. No law could make Phyllis different from what she is. She never loved Jim. She never loved anyone but herself. She does not know how."

"No—but Uncle Jim loved her. He just worshipped her," said Robin.

"I know—and no law could alter that either. It is just cruel, anyhow, no matter what the laws are. Selfishness always is cruel, darling, and laws can't make much difference."

Robin considered this for awhile. Then, after she had taken away his porridge plate, and given him a sausage, she stopped by his chair, and asked:

"If Uncle Jim divorces Phyllis, can he marry anyone else?"

"He doesn't want to," evaded her father.

"No, but suppose he did. Suppose some day he met someone and loved her very much and she loved him—could he marry her?"

"No, he is a priest."

"But is it different for priests, Daddy? Suppose he wasn't a priest, could he?"

"Well, he could according to law, my dear, but he couldn't because he is a Christian. Christ has forbidden divorce."

"You mean that no Christian ought ever to be divorced and marry again?" said Robin. "Then I suppose Charlie Roberts could never marry Maisie, could he?"

"Not unless Will Smith dies."

"Poor Maisie, and poor Uncle Jim."

She sensed somehow that her father did not want to talk about this any longer, and changed the subject abruptly.

"You have a funeral this afternoon, haven't you, Daddy?"

"Yes, old Mrs. Morris at half-past two," said her father—"and that reminds me, how are you going to get out to the Fête? I shall not be able to come until late, and I must have the car, if I am to come at all."

"Oh, that's all right," said Robin. "Peter Craddock said he would drive me out."

When she had met Peter outside the Cathedral on the Sunday before, he had asked if he could do anything for her on the day of the Fête, and Robin, knowing that her father had a funeral that day, had said he might perhaps drive her out in the "Bolshie," as she had christened the car. Peter had been delighted and had promised to be waiting by half-past two.

Robin had made no secret about her friendship with Peter, and had often told her father that, as it was on the way to the works, he had taken her down with him to the studio. He knew that her mother would have told her to be careful, and it had often been on the tip of his tongue to say something to her, but he shrank from it. After all, it would only put ideas into her head and she was young. Young people nowadays went about with one another quite freely—and it was absurd to worry about it. Canon Craddock had told him only the other day what a splendid lad Peter was, and had confided to him his joy about his Communions.

"The war shook him up a bit," the old man had said; "it did that with a lot of young fellows. But he's getting over it nicely now and settling down again. He's got a head on his shoulders, too," he had added. "He is working on some new invention of his own, and if he gets it out, from what he tells me, it should be worth a good bit to him."

Mr. Peterson had been glad to hear this and remembered it now.

“Well, my dear,” he remarked, “that will be splendid. I can come out about tea-time and drive you back after the dance. It comes last of all, doesn’t it—because of the light?”

“Yes,” said Robin, “it cannot be until about half-past eight.”

“I’m at the Deanery for lunch to-day—and I will be busy all morning. What are you on for? Are you going to dancing this morning?”

“No—Miss Grayson said I was to rest. I’ve got something to do with my moth wings and costume, and shall just sit still and do it up in my den.”

The morning seemed a long one to Robin. She found it very hard to rest. It clouded over a little about eleven, and that made her dreadfully anxious about the weather. She could not get Uncle Jim out of her head, and he was all mixed up with Maisie. Then Peter came in, and Friendship and Love, and the Dance, and Death, and the Resurrection, and then Love again. How could people fall in love and then be cruel to one another? Why, did Phyllis marry Uncle Jim if she didn’t love him? He was not rich. Then the sun peeped out, and she jumped up in joy. It was going to be fine after all. As is the way with the young, when the clouds cleared off the sky the shadow was lifted from her heart, and she was gay again. She ran down to the kitchen to get a snack before she got ready to go.

The sky was cloudless and the sun blazing down when, at half-past two, she ran out of the gate to find Peter, and the resplendent “Bolshie” waiting. She had on a simple white frock and a large straw hat, and looked more like a happy child than ever, Peter thought.

The Fête was at Farnley Court, about ten miles out of Ranchester along the main London road.

“Are you in a hurry to get there?” Peter asked, when he had settled her into her seat and was adjusting the engine. “If you aren’t, I thought we might go the long way by the hills. It would be fine over there this afternoon.”

“No,” Robin said, “I’d love to go the long way. I need not be there until tea-time anyhow, so we have lots of time.”

Peter wanted very much to have a long time with her to himself. He had received a letter that morning which meant that he must leave Ranchester the next day and return to Bristol. It seemed likely, moreover, from the letter, that he would have to fly a machine over to France near the end of the week, and might be required to stay for some time at Hardelot Plage, near Boulogne.

Some very important experiments in aeroplane construction were being tried out there on the great expanse of hard sand. These experiments included tests of his own invention and he was required to be present. Now that his time at home had been brought to this unexpected close, he realized how good it had been, and how much little Robin had come to mean to him, and he wanted her to himself.

As they passed down the High Street a man came suddenly out of a shop and bolted across the road almost under the wheels of the "Bolshie." Peter pulled up with a fierce indignant shriek of the horn.

"Oh! it's Uncle Jim," said Robin. "I'm so glad you didn't run him down. I wonder if he is going to the Fête. He was not sure when I asked him on Monday."

She was waving and calling him as she spoke. He heard the horn, and turned round when he landed safe on the other side of the narrow street.

Peter was not pleased with him, and it was mutual, he was not pleased with Peter. Just after the war was over Canon Craddock had come to see Jim about his son, and confessed to some anxiety about him. He had nothing definite to go on, but he had heard stories and was worried. Jim had comforted him by saying that many of the boys were unbalanced just then, but that they would come out all right in the end. Nevertheless he did not really like the man, and somehow the sight of Robin alone with him made him uneasy and worried. He did his best to disguise his feelings as he stood beside the car.

"That was a near one," he said, "I'm so sorry I was not looking where I was going."

"Glad I was able to pull up in time," Peter said politely, but without enthusiasm.

"You'll get killed one of these days, Uncle Jim, if you bolt about like that. Are you coming to the Fête to see me dance? I do want you to," Robin said with all her love and pity for him shining in her eyes.

"I want to badly," he replied, "but I have a lot of visits to pay, and I do not know how to get out."

"Daddy will be driving out about tea-time. Call in and ask him to wait for you. He's got a funeral and couldn't come now. That's why Peter is taking me," she said, smiling at Peter.

He felt more kindly disposed now that he was certain they were not going to pick the parson up.

“Making myself useful, sir,” he said.

Jim smiled back. “Right! I will call and ask Bob to give me a lift. I must get off now, or I won’t be finished in time. Good-bye!”

He waved his hand and was gone, walking rapidly down the street.

“Isn’t there some trouble between him and his wife?” Peter asked presently when he had got through some traffic into the open again.

“Yes,” Robin answered sadly, “she ran away and left him. I cannot understand how she could do it. He worshipped her and he is far the nicest person I know.”

“Poor devil, what a mess,” said Peter grudgingly. He did not want to talk about the wretched parson and his wife, and began to tell Robin about the letter, and why he had to go back to Bristol next day.

“I am sorry,” she said.

“So am I, little girl; I shall miss you dreadfully, and the ‘Bolshie’ will not behave himself half so well without you.”

“I’ll miss you, too, Peter.”

He looked at her, and she looked shyly away, but there was a real cloud on her face, and he was well content.

“You do like me a little then, Robin?”

He dropped one hand off the wheel and took hers and squeezed it. She did not return the pressure, but neither did she take her hand away. She just left it there like a child does.

“I like you very much indeed, Peter,” she said, looking in front of her and smiling happily.

“Better than the parson?”

“Oh, Uncle Jim’s different—quite different. I have always loved him—he’s daddy’s greatest friend, and I have known him since I was a baby.”

This satisfied Peter. The cloud of ill humour passed away and he became the utterly charming boy again. Somehow he did not want to press her further. The relation in which they stood of friendship with a hint of love, which he knew she did not altogether understand, was so perfect that for the time there was no temptation to disturb it. “She’s only a child still,” he thought, “but she will be a wonderful woman some day,” and the thought of the future thrilled him.

They had a gloriously happy drive, and when they got to the top of the White House hill, they stopped the “Bolshie,” and ran, hand-in-hand, through the heather to get a view from the top of the bank at the side of the road. The panorama of pastoral England that lay spread out beneath them repaid them for their race up the bank as they stood panting on the top. “Look, there is Farnley Court,” said Robin, pointing with her left hand because the other was in his —“and how plain you can see the Cathedral.” The two great towers of Ranchester stood crystal clear but strangely small with the river like a silver ribbon shining through the trees.

“I wish we could stop here and have tea, don’t you?” said Peter.

“It would be lovely, but I might miss my dance.”

“You could dance with me instead.”

He put his arm about her and they did a fox-trot together on the soft green turf.

“We must go,” said Robin laughing.

As they started to run down, she stumbled, and he put his arm about her to save her. Just for a moment she lay in his arms with her little laughing face turned up to his. He stooped and kissed her gently on the lips. “You’re a darling,” he said huskily.

They were silent but very happy as they sped down the hill towards Farnley Village, a cluster of black and white houses, and thatched cottages that could be seen at the bottom.

When they got to Farnley Court Robin was immediately claimed by Lady Compton and carried off to see the place where the “Golden Moth” was to dance.

Sir Edward Compton, a big, heavy-faced man with a drooping white moustache, who had made a fortune and honestly paid for a title by his own business ability, talked aeroplanes to Peter and took him in to tea. He was financially concerned in commercial flying and had heard something about Peter’s patent. Peter was interested in spite of himself, and explained the advantages of his invention clearly and well, though all the time he was thinking of Robin. He was conscious that she had come into the tent for tea, and had met her father and Jim Counihan. She was standing now, with her arm through her father’s, talking eagerly to Jim. He heard her say:

“Oh, but you must stay for the dance, Uncle Jim.”

He could not hear the parson’s reply.

Then just as he was explaining a difficult technical detail he heard her say:

“But why not? Of course Daddy can take you back as soon as ever it is over, and I can come home with Peter.”

At this point his attention wandered so far from what he was saying to Sir Edward that he had to explain all over again.

Presently Robin ran over to where they were sitting.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, Sir Edward,” she said smiling.

“A very pleasant interruption, my dear,” he replied, thinking what a lovely child she was.

“I just wanted to ask Mr. Craddock if he could take me home to-night after it is over. I do want Mr. Counihan to stay for the dance, and he is afraid I will be kept and will not get away at once, and he must go back to someone who is ill.”

“Could you, Peter?” she added, turning to him.

Peter assured her with a twinkle in his eyes that he would be delighted, and, after apologizing again for her interruption, she ran off back to the other two. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that she had persuaded Counihan to stay, and that it was all settled.

For some time he saw no more of her. The tableaux and dances had been arranged by Miss Grayson and Robin was busy helping her to get things ready. Sir Edward introduced him to one or two other men and they to their wives, and Peter found himself the centre of quite a circle of people who were interested in the young inventor and aviator. It was flattering to his vanity, and he enjoyed himself. He was at his best and was charming as he could be when he was satisfied, and he was well pleased with himself now because he was the centre of attention, and also because he was going to drive Robin home.

The tableaux began at eight o’clock, and, just before then, she ran up to him, and asked if he would get some people to help him and arrange the chairs round the green mound in one corner of the garden.

“Of course I will—we’ll have ’em round in no time,” he said.

“You’re a brick, Peter,” she said, and then she laid her hand gently on his arm and added, “I’m so glad you’re going to take me home, as it’s our last night.”

She ran off behind the screens of trelliswork and shrubbery which had been put up as a green room, and he went off well content to beat up helpers and

arrange the chairs.

The Dance of the Golden Moth was the success of the evening. “The child is a real artist,” Peter thought as he watched the golden figure weaving poetry out of motion in the blinding light.

In one corner of the garden, overshadowed by three huge old elm trees, there was a natural mound on the top of which there was a sundial with ivy climbing round it. On the top of this a limelight had been fixed which cast an amber glare upon the gap in the shrub-covered trellis through which the Moth came. A hush fell on the spectators as, after fluttering nearer and nearer to the light, the struggle of fear and fascination expressed in every motion, she stood with outspread wings and half-closed eyes, and then, with a shudder half terror, half ecstasy, sank down on the moss-covered stones and lay still. And when, after lying a moment or two motionless and crumpled up, she began slowly and with perfect grace to awaken and arise, until she stood at last radiant and quivering with life to await the kiss of God—the hush remained for awhile, and then they rose and recalled her again and again.

It was a very bright-eyed, shy, but joyous Robin that stood in the big marquee afterwards to receive congratulations from everybody. Uncle Jim had whispered, “That was really beautiful, my dear, God would love it,” as he hurried off with her father to the car, and that made her happy. Sir Edward Compton was enthusiastic and pressed her to drink champagne, but she refused and drank iced lemonade like a schoolboy with joy in every gulp.

“A charming unspoiled child,” Lady Compton remarked to her husband, “and a real artist.”

Presently Robin caught sight of Peter making his way towards her through the crowd. He had been stirred to the very depths of him by the dance, and admiration was shining in his eyes. She met them shyly but with a thrill that made her heart dance for joy. She looked forward to their drive home.

“We must hurry, Peter,” she said. “Dad has gone with Mr. Counihan.”

It was a lovely moonlight night, but turning cold, and when Peter had wrapped her up in her fur coat and tucked her into the car, Robin realized that she was tired and a little sleepy, but utterly, perfectly happy.

“You needn’t hurry really, Peter,” she said as they turned through the gate. “I wanted to get away.”

“I’m not going to,” he replied. “I wish we could go back over the hills again, but I suppose we mustn’t.”

Robin laughed. “No, I don’t think we can, but you can drive nice and slowly.”

They talked very little. Robin was too happy to talk, and in Peter’s mind there was a conflict. He had been thrilled by the dance and passion was awakening in him. He had dreams of stopping the car in some quiet place and making this glorious child kiss him as though she meant it. But there was a finer element in his passion, it was full of tenderness, and the nearest approach to humility of which he was capable. She had touched all that was best in him, and he never carried out his half-formed plan.

Only when the road was clear he slowed down and taking her hand in his held it gently.

“Happy, little girl?” he said.

“Very happy, Peter dear,” she answered with a little pause before the last word that made him squeeze her hand tight.

The drive was like a dream for both, and it seemed as though only a moment or two had passed when they found themselves turning the corner into the close.

“Come in for a little while,” Robin said.

Peter was only too glad, and followed her into the hall.

“Daddy,” she called, “here’s Peter come in to say good-bye.”

There was no answer.

“He must have waited to bring Uncle Jim back. He often comes in late for a talk with daddy. Let’s go out into the Deanery garden.”

There was a gate into the big garden of the Deanery from the Rectory and Robin often sat there. Her favourite spot was an old fountain that stood in the middle of the Rose garden. There a very fat, oddly disproportioned, but deliciously pagan and impertinent, cupid blew water like a blast of defiance out of a trumpet which he held tip-tilted to his lips. His roguish face, with one weather-eaten eye, was turned up as if in play to the ancient towers of the Cathedral, that glittered white in the moonlight, and seemed to bestow upon the little fellow the good-natured tolerance of dignity to impudence.

“Isn’t he a darling?” Robin said.

“Yes,” said Peter, but he was not looking at the cupid.

They stood there hand-in-hand and silent for a time. Peter could not speak. The temptation to awaken her was strong upon him, he wanted the woman that

was to be to kiss him before he said good-bye. But his better nature was still uppermost, and stood between him and his desires.

Presently he put his arm about her and bending down laid his cheek against hers for a moment.

“You’ll write to me sometimes, Robin dear?”

“Of course I will, Peter, and I shall miss you dreadfully.”

He rested his hand upon her shoulder, and touched the tip of one small ear.

“I’m not fit to be your friend, Robin,” he said, “but you don’t know how much it will help, if you will try to like me a little.”

“I like you very much now, Peter,” she said, looking up at him bravely, “better than anyone else I know.”

Just then she heard her father calling, “Robin—where are you?”

“I must go,” she said, facing Peter, and looking up into his eyes. “You—you may kiss me, if you like.”

For a moment passion was almost master of him and he swept her into his arms and kissed her hungrily. She did not kiss him back, but yielded to him without resistance.

Very gently she broke away. “Good-bye, dear,” she said, and ran through the gate.

Peter stood by the fountain very still for a while and prayed that he might be a better man. God knows why our best prayers so often remain unanswered, perhaps it is because we do not pray them for long enough. God’s story of unanswered prayers will be the strangest and most tragic tale that ever has been told. This prayer will be recorded there. It was not answered. Peter never was in all his life as good as that again.

CHAPTER IV

MAISIE AND CHARLES

“Daddy—are you there?”

The Rector was sitting in the garden in the twilight of a sultry airless evening in September. The summer, except for some brilliant weeks in May and June, had been unkind and cold as charity, but was now making a belated and dying effort at amends. The last few days had been burning hot. It was obviously useless, a hopeless struggle against the inevitable, and everything in the garden conveyed the same message, “it is too late.” It fitted in with the mood of the man who lay stretched out in a deckchair smoking. He was as near to melancholy as anyone of his even equable temperament ever comes. The last three months had been an almost perpetual trial. The holiday which he had spent with Robin and Jim in Devonshire had not been a success. In spite of gallant efforts to disguise his misery, Jim had not been his old self, and Robin’s obvious happiness, although neither of them had the heart to damp it, had been a source of secret anxiety to them both. After sending her sleepy, but sumptuously happy, to bed on the night of the Fête, the two men had sat until late in the garden talking. Jim had confided to him his doubts about Peter, and they had come near to an open disagreement on the question. The Rector had tried to put the matter aside lightly, saying he was afraid that his friend was allowing his own bitter experience to distort his view of things, and telling him of the excellent report Canon Craddock had given about his son. Jim was not satisfied, and because he himself was doubtful in his heart as to whether his sorrow was not making him see evil everywhere he had been perhaps a little overemphatic. Some slight irritation had crept into the Rector’s replies. He was, as usual, being goaded into positive decision by his desire to escape unpleasantness. In the end they had agreed not to mention the subject again, and to this agreement Jim had been scrupulously loyal. But the Rector was not nearly as easy in his own mind as he had pretended to be, and, although he had been partly reassured by further conversation with Canon Craddock, and by the tone of Peter’s letters about which Robin had made no secret, the matter had worried him considerably. This and Jim’s wretchedness had marred the perfect happiness of the relationship between these three who meant so much to one another. It was about Jim that he was thinking when Robin called him. The poor old fellow was leaving Ranchester. The divorce proceedings were over. The case had been undefended, and there had been very little publicity, but it had led to such an underground storm of scandal and gossip, that Jim’s

life had become unbearable, and he had decided to take up work in a big slum district in East London. The Rector hated his going and stormed against the cruel prurient tongues that wounded in the dark. He knew that members of his own congregation, and people who were pillars of other churches had been foremost in this persecution, and the knowledge sickened him. What was their hollow conventional profession of Christianity worth if, after saying prayers and singing hymns, these wretched pharisees went out to tear a suffering soul to pieces? It made him feel ashamed and degraded. Dirt—dirt—the world seemed full of dirt.

Robin's voice broke in at this point in his unhappy ruminations.

"Daddy darling, where are you?"

He stood up and called, "Here I am, little girl."

She had been walking away towards the Deanery gate, but turned at the sound of his voice and came towards him across the lawn.

She walked slowly as though in thought, and held a railway time-table in her hand. Dressed all in white, her beautifully shaped arms slightly tanned with the sun and bare up to the shoulder, she sank down in a chair beside him.

"Phew—isn't it hot!" she said.

Then after a pause.

"Daddy, I've wired for Charlie Roberts to come to Maisie—I had to."

This was disquieting news. He thought that the problem of Charlie Roberts and Maisie Smith had settled itself, but this would open it all up again, and there would be more gossip. He groaned in spirit.

"It's cruelty, Daddy," Robin went on, "Maisie is no better, and she will die if she goes on fretting like this. Doctor Grant told me so, and said we ought to send for Charlie. You promised you would if Maisie really wanted him, didn't you?"

"Yes, my dear, but I did not want to if I could help it. It only makes it worse for them afterwards."

Late one night, some weeks after the day of the Fête, the Rector had been called out to baptize a child that was dying in a cottage next door to the one in which Maisie Smith lived with her little girl. It was in a narrow street of filthy old ramshackle houses built on a steep hill leading down to the river. Jim Counihan had been extremely outspoken in the local Press about the crying scandal of these houses, and had made enemies. Some of these were the main

centres of the gossip that was driving him from Ranchester. The Rector's mind was running round this circle of low intrigue as he hurried along by the river which was the shortest way to Bank Street.

When he got close to the end of the street he saw a girl leaning with her back against the wall, and looking up, with tears in her eyes, at a man who was standing opposite her. It was Maisie Smith and the man was Charlie Roberts.

"How could they be so foolish!" he thought angrily, "it is just asking for scandal—and the whole place is buzzing with it already." He was just going to stop and speak to them when the girl looked at him with such a passionate appeal in her big grey eyes, that he hesitated and then passed on.

The baptism over he set off back. He was full of doubt and anxiety about those two. He was very fond of them both. Charlie was one of his very best boys. A big quiet lad, tall, with a finely featured serious face, black curly hair, and keen deeply set grey eyes he had led an absolutely blameless life so far as the Rector knew, and he knew him well. Before the war his only fear about him had been that he was almost too good. But, on the outbreak of war, Charlie had surprised him by being one of the very first to join up. He had risen to the rank of sergeant and won the D.C.M. for an act of peculiarly reckless gallantry at the Battle of Loos. There was the finest kind of stuff in the man. He was the sort that saints are made of. The Rector was convinced of it. And Maisie was his proper mate: they had always gone together. She was a beautiful girl. In the Bethlehem Tableaux she had for years played the part of the Madonna, and had been perfect in it. Her face had in it a peculiar spirituality. Pale, with the healthy pallor that is perhaps more beautiful than colour, she was tall and slender, yet fully and finely formed woman. In her happy girlhood everyone, man, woman, or child, had been fond of Maisie, but that did not prevent them from tearing her with their tongues now. Acid old maids and untempered mothers at sale of work sewing parties smacked their lips and assured one another that still waters run deep. Good Lord, how sick he was of it all!

He walked on in a brown study, and passed unnoticed the turn that led up, through a gate in the wall, to the Cathedral close and his own house. But he woke up with a start and stood stock still when, after turning a corner, he saw about fifty yards ahead of him just by the lock gates the two who occupied his thoughts. They were standing opposite one another as before. He was going to turn round, walk a little way and wait for them, but, before he did so, he saw the man throw out his arms and the girl went into them as though she were going home—and lay there with her head upon his shoulder. There was an utter tortured misery in the embrace which twisted his soul in pain, as he

turned away with the picture in his mind.

He stood for awhile miserable and hesitating. What ought he to do? Presently he heard steps coming rapidly behind him. He turned round, and there was Roberts. The boy's face was ghastly white, and there were little drops of sweat about his mouth.

"I was just coming to see you, sir," he said, "I'm going away to-morrow. I have said good-bye to Maisie." He choked as he uttered her name. "It's the only thing to do. I can't stand it—and she can't stand it any longer. It's hell for us both."

The Rector took his arm. "I think you are right, Charlie," he said gently. "But what on earth made you come out here? Anyone might have seen you, and there is enough gossip around as it is."

"Well, what could we do?" the boy broke out. "I dare not go into 'er 'ouse, and she cannot come far away because of little Maisie. Oh! damn their tongues—they would cast dirt at an angel."

The older man sympathized intensely, and the two walked on in silence until they came to the turn into the close.

"You'd better come in, Charlie," said the Rector.

"No, sir, I know what I'll do. I'll catch the 11.30 train to London to-night. I can't stay 'ere any longer or I shall break. I want you to promise me something and to do something for me."

He felt in his pocket, and pulled out ten pounds in Treasury notes. "I want you to take this," he said, "and use it for Maisie if she is ill, or in want. She won't take anything from me—but she would perhaps from you. And, oh, sir, if she is in danger—or wants me very badly, you'll let me know, won't you? Promise me you will. We are not to write to one another—but I will keep in touch with you."

There were tears smarting behind the Rector's eyes as he parted with the lad, after promising that he would look after Maisie and would let him know from time to time how she was.

Next morning he told the story to Robin at breakfast. She was full of pity. Her own happiness made her compassion for the unfortunate lovers deep and generous. She went to see Maisie the next night, and found her in the depths of misery. All the splendid mother that there was in this little dancing child's heart rose up, and as she petted and comforted poor Maisie, the woman in her came more fully to its birth.

"I know it's wrong, Miss Robin," the girl sobbed out, "but I love 'im, I love 'im, so, and 'e's that good."

"Love is never wrong," Robin said, with the unconscious wisdom of innocence, "it can't be wrong. God is love."

"But I'm a married woman, and I mustn't love 'im. I mustn't love nobody but Will, and I can't love 'im. I never did, that was my sin. I shouldn't never 'ave married 'im. I don't know whyever I done it. I was crazy, I think."

Robin said nothing, but just stroked her head as she knelt at her feet.

"I didn't know nothing about men," Maisie went on brokenly. "I never went with no one but Charlie, and 'im that careful of me and always treating me like a lady. Then when 'e came it were all different, all different. I was mad, I'm sure I was mad. Then 'e said I'd 'ave to 'ave 'im, or I'd be disgraced, and I married 'im, and I don't know where 'e is now, and don't want to know neither."

This tragic story came out in jerks with broken sobs between.

"I can't 'elp loving Charlie, 'e's that good."

"Of course you can't," said Robin. "I shouldn't try."

"But I must—I must—it's all wrong."

"Love can't be wrong," Robin replied; "it is the most beautiful thing in the world."

"But there is something what's wrong," Maisie said, sitting up with a frightened look in her eyes. "There's something what drives girls mad, Miss Robin, so they don't rightly know what they're doing. I ain't the only one. That's what 'appened to Bessie Potter, too—'er as died when she 'ad 'er baby last week. It was a married man with 'er. She told me when she was dying. O God, why should men be so cruel!"

Robin had heard about Bessie, but had not thought much about it, and did not want to think about it now. She tried to turn Maisie's thoughts to other things, asked about little Maisie, and went up to the bedroom to see her asleep. After an hour or so she left the mother calmer and more resigned, promising to come again soon. The two became great friends. Robin had a dancing class for children in the parish, and she got Maisie, who was a beautiful dancer, to help her on Tuesday evenings. Sometimes, too, she would slip up to the Rectory in the evening and do sewing work for Robin, helping to make the children's costumes.

But, in spite of all her efforts, the girl fretted silently but continually, and seemed to grow thinner and frailer. At last one Tuesday night, just after they had come back from Devonshire, a small boy brought round a message that Mrs. Smith could not come to class as she was ill in bed. Robin dismissed the children and hurried round to the cottage. She found Maisie lying in bed with a high temperature and delirious. She had thrown all the clothes off her and was panting for breath, and Robin was shocked to see how thin, almost emaciated, she had become. In her delirium she kept on calling out to Charlie and begging him to keep her husband away. First she crooned over Charlie, comforting him as a mother comforts a child, then she suddenly shrieked out, "O God, I can't bear it! 'E's like a beast. Don't let 'im 'it me! Don't let 'im 'it me." She struggled to sit up, holding up one arm as though to shield her face, and then fell back upon the pillow with a moan. Robin sent at once for the doctor, who declared it was double pneumonia. For days she lay between life and death, but she survived the crisis and came back. After that, however, she seemed to stand still. It was as though she did not wish to get better. She never mentioned Charlie when she was awake and conscious. She had promised and was too plucky to give in, but, in her sleep and her delirium, his name was often on her lips. Robin asked her father to send for him several times, but he kept putting it off until at last in real alarm she took the law into her own hands and wired. Now the fat was in the fire, the bewildered Rector thought to himself. He dreaded a revival of the scandal, and the pain that must result from these two coming together again.

"It's a shame," Robin said with indignation in her shining eyes. "Why can't Maisie get rid of that brute and marry Charlie? She'll never be well or happy till she does. The man has gone off and left her, and he must be a perfect beast, anyway."

"Divorce is very expensive. I believe there are ways of getting it more cheaply, but it is a long, tedious business. The working people very rarely use it, anyway; they do not go farther than legal separation as a rule. But in any case, my dear, both Maisie and Charlie are convinced Christians and Divorce is impossible for them."

"But Daddy, it's all wrong," Robin broke out. "She loves him so dearly that she just frets herself to fiddle strings. She can't live without him, and love can't be wrong, it can't be wrong, not true love like theirs."

"But she is a married woman, my dear."

"That's just it. It was a beastly marriage. That was the real wrong. Maisie was crazy when she married him. She told me she was—and he—oh, he must be a fiend——" She grew hot all over as she remembered some things poor

Maisie had said in her delirium. She did not know, but guessed at the horror of degradation that lay behind them. “Anyway, I’ve sent for him, Daddy—I wired this afternoon. I’ve looked up the trains and he ought to be here by the last train at half-past nine to-night. I promised I would go down to Maisie last thing to see if he had come.”

“I’ll go down with you, dear,” her father said. They stood up and he put his arm round her. “I’m glad you wired. After all I did promise.”

“Yes, and I am really anxious about her.”

The Rector turned her face up to his, and looking down at her said, “You must not take it so much to heart, darling. I hate to see you looking unhappy.”

Tears came into her eyes—but she laughed them away.

“I’m all right, darling Daddy,” she said—“but,” she sighed, “I do wish people would not be so cruel to each other. Everything seems to have gone wrong lately, doesn’t it?”

They walked towards the house together.

“I’ve got one or two letters to write, but I’ll be ready about ten and we’ll go down together.”

Robin went to her den and sat down to write a letter to Peter in reply to one she had received that day. He appeared to be very happy. He was confident that his invention would be a success, and full of plans for perfecting it still further. She could not keep the trouble that was on her mind out of her letters to him. She wanted to tell him, and was soon writing rapidly.

It was after ten when she heard her father calling. The Cathedral clock was striking the quarter as they passed out of the back gate, and went down towards the river. Great clouds had rolled up, and there was thunder in the air.

She slipped her arm through her father’s and they walked in silence. Neither of them wanted to talk. As they drew near to Bank Street end, Robin said:

“We’ll just go straight in—there will be no one to open the door.”

They stepped into the front room which was bare but beautifully clean.

“You’d better go upstairs first, dear,” said the Rector.

As she got to the door she heard Maisie’s voice saying: “You won’t never go away from me again, Charlie, I can’t bear it, I’ll die if you do. You won’t, will you?”

A man's voice answered, "Never again, Maisie, dear, never again."

Robin knocked and then opened the door. Charlie was sitting on the side of the bed with Maisie in his arms. Her head was resting on his shoulder, and there was a look on her face that Robin had not seen for months, she was young again.

He made a motion to get up as Robin came in, but the girl clung to him and he sat down again.

"Oh, Miss Robin, thank you a thousand times for sending for 'im," she said with trembling lips. "I don't mind what 'appens now—I feels different already."

"That's right," Robin answered brightly, "you look ever so much better, dear. Daddy's downstairs," she said, smiling at Charlie; "perhaps you would like to go down and see him, while I make Maisie comfortable for the night."

The man had felt ill-at-ease, but the natural way in which this shining-faced child assumed that it was all quite as it ought to be reassured him.

"Yes, I'd like to see him very much," he said.

"But you'll come back, won't you, boy?" Maisie cried, holding up her face for a kiss. "You'll come back to say good night?"

"Of course I will—and I'll come round first thing in the morning."

Charlie went downstairs. He found the Rector sitting on the table in the middle of the room, and staring at a photograph of a Christmas party taken some years before in which Maisie and Charlie stood side by side. The boy did not know how his parson friend would take this new situation and was shy and awkward.

"How is she now?" the Rector asked as they shook hands.

"Better, sir, but oh God, she's that thin," his voice trembled.

"Well, she's had a high temperature for a good while. It pulls you down, you know. Where are you stopping for the night, Charles? You'd better come along to the Rectory."

Charley stiffened. He was not going to have his friend under any false impressions. It had to come out, and it had better come now.

"I'm never going to leave Maisie no more," he said defiantly. "She's my girl, and I'm going to keep 'er."

The Rector expected this. He said nothing, but took out his pipe and began

to fill it. There was silence, and they could hear Robin's voice upstairs talking to Maisie.

At last he said:

"Well, old chap, it's no good discussing that now. Anyhow, you had better come up home. I don't suppose Mrs. Cruickshanks can have you, she's got another lodger now."

"There ain't any good discussing it any time," Charlie answered doggedly. "I've been turning it over and over these last three months, and my mind's made up. If you don't want me knowing that, I can't come, and must get in where I can."

The Rector held out his hand. "I'm not that sort, Charlie," he said, "you know I'm not."

"Yes, but I 'ad to tell you."

Robin had come downstairs and was standing framed in the doorway as the men shook hands.

"Maisie wants you—she's all quite comfy now," she said.

Charlie looked from her to her father, and from her father back to her again.

"I reckon you two is about the best friends any man ever 'ad," he said huskily.

"Yes, aren't we a nice pair?" she said, going over to her father and taking his arm. "Daddy is the nicest person in the whole world, isn't he, Charlie? And I can't help catching some of it—can I? Run up to Maisie—and don't hurry down. Daddy and I can wait a bit."

He thanked them with his eyes and went upstairs.

Robin turned to face her father, and putting her two hands on his shoulders, said:

"Oh dear, what are they to do—they are all bound up in one another?"

He was silent. He was a poor parson, he told himself. These two ought not to be together, and Robin ought not to be here—and it was all a muddle. "Good Lord, I wonder what Christ would do under these circumstances," he thought.

"Charlie's coming home with us, anyhow," he remarked. "You can shake a bed up for him in the spare room and we can talk it out to-morrow."

She nodded and they said no more. Presently Charlie came downstairs. He was all cut up, but keeping hold on himself.

“Come along, Charlie,” said the Rector, “you’ll want a bite of supper.”

“Are you sure you wants me to come after what I told you?” asked Charlie, looking him straight in the face.

“Of course I do, man, come on.”

They called up a last good night to Maisie, closed the door behind them, and went down the street together. A stout evil-looking woman standing with her bare arms folded across her enormous breasts, looked after them and muttered to herself.

CHAPTER V

AND WILL SMITH

Jim Counihan sat in his study tearing up old letters and papers. It was Saturday afternoon, and on the following Sunday he was to preach his farewell sermon at St. Andrew's, of which he had been Rector since before the war. The room in which he sat was all upside down, and the man looked as desolate and forsaken as he felt. When he had brought home his bride four years before he had bought a lot of furniture, and most of this was to be sold on the Monday. He would need but little where he was going. Although he was a tremendous worker he was careless about details, and accumulated great quantities of old papers, and it was these he was endeavouring to sort and get rid of now. Clad in his cassock, he sat on a box in which some of his books were packed, and on his knee there was a drawer taken from his writing-desk, with the contents of which he was dealing. There were all sorts of things in it—old bills receipted, letters, notes for sermons, newspaper cuttings—all the usual contents of an untidy man's glory-hole. He took up one paper and opened it out. It was an old account for a hat of Phyllis's from "Estelle," the milliner's shop in High Street. He remembered the hat, and could see her coming downstairs in it putting on her gloves. It was on a Sunday morning when they had been married a year. He saw again the dazzling whiteness of her teeth, and the beautiful red lips parted in a mocking smile, which changed to a kind of pout, for she was coming to church under protest, having planned to drive over to friends at Ludlow with Mr. Dunstone. "It was beginning even then," he thought bitterly. He sat there with the bill in his hand, staring in front of him, as these ghosts of the past went by. He remembered kissing Phyllis at the bottom of the stairs to make it up, and there swept over him again the terrible tearing longing that blotted out the face of God. It was thus that Robin found him. She had rung the bell and called to him from the hall—but he had not heard. She stood now in the doorway, looking with pitiful eyes at the confusion, and the lonely man on the box.

"Uncle Jim," she said softly.

He turned, and for a moment his lips quivered, and then parted into a welcoming smile. He was not going to visit his misery on the child.

"Hullo! darling, what brings you here?" he cried, putting the drawer down, and coming to meet her with both hands held out.

“Daddy sent me to ask you if you could come over this evening. He wants to talk to you about something important,” Robin said, slipping her hands in his, and holding up her face for his kiss.

“Yes, I have nothing on once I get this mess cleared up,” he said, looking round hopelessly at the room.

“What are you doing?” Robin asked. “Can’t I help you? You did look so lonely when I came in.”

He turned away and picked up the drawer again.

“No,” he said, “I must do this myself—I am sorting out these papers.”

“Well, may I stop and talk to you, and keep you company, and then drive you back in the car? And have you had any tea?”

His smile answered all the questions but the last.

“No. Mrs. Spalding has gone out, and I was too lazy to get it myself.”

“Well, I’ll run down and make some—I know where the things are, unless the kitchen is all upside down, too.”

“No—I don’t think it is as bad as this,” he said, going on with his letters.

Robin had often made tea there before. She was the only member of the female sex that Mrs. Spalding, Jim’s housekeeper, could tolerate at all. Mrs. Spalding was a perfectly circular widow, of uncertain age, and still more uncertain temper, with but one passion in her life, which was devotion to the Reverend, as she called him. She had been his landlady in his first lodgings as a curate and had followed him ever since looking after him and scolding him like a mother. She detested designing females, as she called them, and when Phyllis had run away she had muttered to herself, “I told you so, I knowed she were no good as soon as ever I clapped my eye on ’er, with ’er silk stockings and ’er skirts up to ’er knees—not decent for a Reverend’s wife;” and had broken up the home she had made with her sister and come back to Jim at a moment’s notice. She was going with him to London and had gone out to say good-bye to the forsaken sister at Shillingford.

Robin found the tea-things and Jim could hear her singing as she waited for the kettle to boil, and the comfortable clatter of the cups as she laid the tray. Somehow the house seemed different, and the horror of loneliness was lifted from his heart. Then it came upon him how much he would miss her and her father when he went away, but he put that from him.

“God bless them both!” he said to himself; “no man ever had better

friends.”

Presently Robin appeared with a tray upon which tea was laid on a spotless cloth. Mrs. Spalding prided herself upon her linen.

“What’s Bob after now?” Jim asked when Robin had made him put down the glory-hole drawer and take his tea.

She had turned one box of books into a table and was sitting on another one, while Jim sat on the edge of an arm-chair covered with sacking. Her coming made the whole place different and the desolation had departed from the room.

Robin had not wanted her father to drag Uncle Jim into the business of Maisie and Charlie. She thought it cruel under the circumstances, and moreover was a little afraid of the line he would take. But her father, despairing of being able to convince Charlie of the sinfulness of what he proposed to do, and being frightened of the responsibility laid upon him, had insisted that Jim should be consulted. Charlie had to go back to his work by the last train on Sunday, and he hoped that, if they could get a good talk with Jim on the Saturday evening, he would be persuaded to leave Maisie alone. He had therefore sent Robin round. She hated telling him, but plunged in head first—and gave him the whole story.

He listened attentively, interjecting a question every now and then.

“You don’t think I did wrong to wire for Charlie, do you?” she asked when she had finished her tale.

Jim did not answer for awhile. He was thinking rapidly and making plans. He foresaw a struggle ahead.

“No, darling,” he said slowly. “I don’t see what else you could do. After all Bob promised the lad. But it can’t go on,” he added after a pause, “he must go out of her life.”

All his priestly instincts were uppermost for the moment. These two were in moral danger and must be saved at all costs. For the time being he had almost forgotten his own trouble and was the pastor defending his flock. A girl who had gone wrong must marry the man, if possible, that was the rule, even if she loved someone else. Maisie was a married woman and must be preserved from sin. Hundreds of such cases had passed through his hands, and like most parish priests, he had acquired a kind of technique and a technical point of view with regard to them.

“You’re never going to try and part them again for good!” Robin broke in.

He did not hear her at first, so occupied was he in devising schemes for saving the pair, and she had to repeat her question before he answered.

“Of course I am. What else can I do? Maisie is married—and she cannot have anything to do with Charlie.”

“But it’s cruel, Uncle Jim, they adore one another, and she’ll die if he goes away and leaves her again—I know she will. She tried ever so hard this time, but it was all no good.”

Jim became conscious of himself again. The priest slipped off him. Maisie ceased to be a case—and became a woman; and Charlie stood before him with his steadfast questioning eyes. The result was to leave him bewildered.

“I think it is cruelty,” Robin repeated; “it makes me all sore inside to think of it.”

Jim had lighted a cigarette and was hurriedly clearing out the last papers in the drawer.

“Look here, little girl,” he said, “I can’t talk of this with you. Put your hat on, and I’ll go round with you to see Bob right away now.”

She was tempted to plead with him, but, looking at his face, thought it better not to try, and turned to put on her hat.

Still deep in thought he took his place beside her in the car and they drove to the Rectory almost in silence. They drew up at the gate at the same time that the Rector and Charlie, walking arm-in-arm, came up to it, having evidently been to Bank Street.

“How’s Maisie?” Robin asked as she turned the engine off.

“Oh, she’s a different girl,” her father answered. “Isn’t she, Charles?” turning to him.

“She looks much better, Miss Robin,” Charlie said. “The nurse is with ’er now, but she ’opes you’ll go down soon.”

“I’ll go now,” she said, getting out of the car.

She waved her hand and went off towards the river as the three men passed through the gate.

The Rector led the way to three deck-chairs which stood by the sundial; two were open and one lay closed on the ground. The two parsons sat down and Charlie began to open out the third chair.

“Look here, Roberts,” Jim began at once, “you can’t go on with this thing,

you must leave Maisie alone.”

“I ain’t never going to leave Maisie no more, Mr. Counihan,” Charlie said doggedly, looking in front of him.

“But you’re a Catholic—and a Communicant—and it is sin,” Jim replied. “You don’t want to drag Maisie down?”

“I ain’t going to drag ’er down,” the boy said, flushing. “I’m going to look after ’er all my life, and see as no one drags her down again.”

“But you can’t get married, and you know what it means for her, if she isn’t married and lives with you.”

Charlie looked at him with a question in his eyes.

“Well, it means that decent women won’t talk to her, and that there will be scandal and gossip about her. It means that to start with.”

“I know that,” Charlie said, his face darkening. “They’ll talk and sling mud all right—she’s ’ad enough of that already.”

“Well, you don’t want to drag her into more?”

“Better that than leave ’er alone—I’m going to take ’er away. I’ve got a good job in London, and some decent rooms—till I get a ’ouse.”

“But it’s sin,” broke in Jim, “you know it is. What about your religion?”

“You mean that my love for Maisie is sin?” said Charlie. “I can’t believe that, Mr. Counihan, I just can’t.” He spoke earnestly and rapidly now. “It isn’t sin. It is the best thing in my life. I’ve loved Maisie as long as I can remember. I’ve kept myself clean for ’er sake. It was ’er as kept me to my religion. When she had ’er trouble and fell to that brute I nearly went mad. I wanted to chuck myself in the river and ’ave done with it. I didn’t care about God, nor the Church, nor nothin’ for a while. I do now,” he went on after a pause, “I have fought through that. I know it was God as kept me straight and saved me from myself like. I’m not saying anything against God, nor the Church, nor anything of that sort. I’m not going to give up my religion, and nor is Maisie, we’ve said our prayers together to-day.”

“But it’s making a mockery of prayer,” Jim interrupted.

“Our prayers weren’t no mockery, we meant them. She told God she was sorry for ’aving sinned with Will Smith, and we prayed that our love might be pure—and it will be,” he said earnestly, “it’s the best part of me.”

“You know that you cannot go to Communion?”

A cloud came over Charlie's face. "I know," he said, "we was talking about that this afternoon. We shall 'ave to go without."

"And that means you are not members of the Church at all," Jim insisted.

Charlie looked at him as though he were asking for mercy. His face was flushed, his lips trembled, and he kept on turning his cap round in his hands. He was a well-instructed Christian—and he knew what the priest meant, and it was terrible to him.

"It means a lot to 'er that does," he said hoarsely, "and to me. We was confirmed together—and went to our first Communion together—didn't we, sir?" turning to the Rector.

He nodded—because he could not trust himself to speak.

"And I knelt by 'er side every Sunday at eight o'clock. It 'as been a great thing for both of us—Communion 'as—and I'm afraid she'll miss it."

Memories of summer Sundays and Maisie with her prayer book in her hand coming down the road to meet him with the lovelight in her eyes swept over him. He ended abruptly, and taking out his handkerchief blew his nose as if he had a cold.

"We'll miss it, but we'll 'ave to go without. We wouldn't go under no pretences."

"But can't you see it's all wrong?" Jim Counihan said, getting up from his chair and standing before him. "You talk about taking care of Maisie, but it is a queer way of caring for her. She is a good girl, and how can she be happy living in sin?"

"You keeps on saying our love is sin," Charlie answered, anger rising in his heart, "and that's right down wicked talk, that is. It isn't sin. It never could be sin. It's the one thing as 'as kep' me from sin all my life. And it would 'ave kep' 'er, if she 'adn't been a blessed innocent. She were caught out by that brute. She didn't know nothin' about men nor 'erself nor nothin'. That's 'er sin, poor kid, an' she knows it."

"Well, but she put that right by her marriage."

"No she didn't. She knows she didn't. 'Er marriage was sin if you like, and 'asn't she paid for it, knocked about by that drunken swine? There's a mark on 'er body now where 'e kicked 'er. The nurse told me there was. God, I could twist 'is blasted neck round when I think of it." Charlie stood up and faced Counihan, clenching his hands. "Do you want to punish 'er all 'er life? Is that Christianity? 'Ave I got to say my love is sin, which is a cursed lie? An' 'as

she got to say 'er sin is 'oly marriage, which is another? 'Ave I got to leave 'er to the world alone so I can call myself Christian and go to Communion. God love me, sir, it's a pack of damned nonsense and you know it is."

He was desperate and another Charlie was coming out. Here was the man who had led his comrades to battle with steel in his eyes, and bitter rage over the madness of the world in his heart.

Jim was silent. He was staring facts in the face, and was baffled. How could one meet this naked sincerity of feeling?

"I suggested to Charlie," the Rector said, breaking into the silence, "that it would be best for Maisie to get a divorce, and for him to go away until she got it and then marry."

"A divorce! Good Lord, man——" began Jim.

But Charlie interrupted sullenly. "Divorce is for society folks, and not for the likes of us. Working people don't 'ave divorces, they can't afford 'em. I was askin' a lawyer chap about it in the train the other day. It costs a 'eap of money, or it takes donkeys years to get. I might save up if Maisie wanted it, but no I can't leave her alone while I save up."

"That's the real point," interjected Jim, "you won't leave her alone."

"No, I can't and I won't, and what good would a divorce do anyway? It makes no odds to folks like me and Maisie. If it's wrong, it's wrong, and it's no good 'aving it whitewashed as you say society folks do by divorce. We couldn't go to Communion, if we was divorced, nor be members of the Church, nor nothing. We'd be living in sin, just the same, if what 'e says is right. Mr. Counihan's told me many's the time as the Church don't allow no divorces, only separation, and I can't live separate."

"Why can't you?" Jim pleaded earnestly, laying his hand on the boy's arm. "Why can't you help her out of your wages, but live separate, and not drag her down into sin."

"There you go again, drag 'er into sin. If I leave 'er to live all alone, and fret 'erself to nothin' same as she 'as done these last three months, and pay money to keep 'er alive and miserable, that is Christian and right. If I love 'er and comfort 'er all 'er life and look after little Maisie as though she were my own, that is sin—because of this 'ere 'oly marriage with Will Smith. What sense is there in that?"

Charlie turned to go, putting on his cap, but just then the gate opened, and Robin came running across the lawn. She was out of breath and looked

terrified.

“Daddy! Charlie!” she gasped out. “You must go to Maisie at once. Here’s the key. Will Smith’s come back, and he’s drunk and swearing, and he tried to get into Maisie’s house, and——”

Charlie grabbed the key and was off like a shot as soon as he heard the name.

When Robin left the three to their talk she made her way slowly towards Bank Street. At the corner of the next street before it there stood a low-class public-house, “The Red Bear.” It was a sordid, dreary hovel of a place, which did a roaring trade. Through its doors the dirty draggled women of the slum passed and repassed carrying jugs, and on a Saturday it was always full of men and women drinking their weekly pittance away. Robin usually hurried past it, but as she came towards it that afternoon, she saw a little group of people, and when she drew nearer recognized Will Smith in the middle of them. He was a tall, dark youth with a pallid unwholesome face, a loose mouth, and a shock of greasy black hair which was hanging down into his bloodshot eyes. His hat was on the ground, his waistcoat unbuttoned, and he was slobbering drunk. Hanging on to his arm, while he tried to throw her off, was a young woman whom Robin recognized as Jennie Brooks, who had gone off with him when he had deserted Maisie. A big, coarse-featured girl, her handsome animal face powdered into a white blotch with a scarlet cut across it, she had been drinking too, and was shouting at the top of her voice.

“I don’t want ’er—I tell yer,” the man was bawling, “too—religious—for me—lemme go—I don’t want ’er—nor you neither—you great—— But I’m goin’ to see my child—my little—— she can go to—— But I’m goin’ to see ——” He poured out this stream of filth as Robin passed. Looking back she saw with the corner of her eye that he had thrown the woman off and was staggering after her. She took to her heels and ran. As soon as she got inside she locked both the front and the back doors, and then stood panting with fright in the little front room. She sat down for a minute or two to recover herself and then went up to Maisie, trying to hide her terror, and appear as though nothing had happened. Maisie was asleep with little Maisie by her side. Robin stood silent at the end of the bed, afraid to move lest she should wake them, and listening with both ears.

Presently she heard steps staggering up the passage and then the sound of others following. She could distinguish Smith’s voice outside the back door, but could not hear what he said. There were sounds of a scuffle—and then a loud hammering at the door and his voice again.

“Lemme in—lemme in—I don’t— want you—you—I don’t want no— woman—I want——”

There was more struggling and hammering.

Maisie stirred uneasily in her sleep when the noise began, and then, just as Robin heard the sound of someone being dragged down the passage, and the voices grew fainter, she sat up with a look of abject terror in her eyes.

“O God,” she panted, “I ’ad a awful dream. I thought ’e was back again drunk—and was coming up them stairs. Not that! O Jesus Christ not that! I’d sooner die. ’E ain’t ’ere, is ’e, Miss Robin?”

“No, dear, it’s all right,” Robin said, smiling bravely, “it was only a dream. Have one of these pills the doctor left you and try to sleep again.”

Maisie’s eyes were heavy with sleep. She took the pill and then lay back and soon was off again. Robin sat listening in dread, but there was no sound, except voices talking down below, the gossip of the slum. After about ten minutes, she made up her mind, slipped downstairs, and out of the back door, locking it behind her. She ran almost all the way home with a sob in her throat, and now, when she realized that Charlie was gone, she just sat and cried a little first, and then told her story sitting on the ground at her father’s feet while Jim stood by and listened.

“I’d better go down after him,” the Rector said, “I wouldn’t like those two to meet. Charlie would kill him. You stop with Robin, old chap, I won’t be long, and she will be glad of a talk with you, as we are losing you so soon.”

When Charlie got to Maisie’s he found all quiet. She was awake, and began at once to tell him of her dream. He saw how it was and said nothing to undeceive or alarm her. He took little Maisie downstairs to undress her and get her ready for bed. It was thus the Rector found him, with the little one on his knee clad in her nightdress and prattling away twenty to the dozen.

When he had carried her up to bed, he came down, and said at once, “I’m stopping ’ere to-night, sir, I ain’t going to leave ’er with that brute about.”

The two looked at one another, and each understood without words what was in the other’s mind.

“I know they’ll talk,” Charlie went on, “but let ’em talk. We’re in for that anyway. It is no use arguing, we only goes round and round. I don’t want to deceive you—nor nobody else, sir; when Maisie is ready and says she is, she will be my wife. She’ll be a long time getting round, poor lass, but love and kindness is good tonics, and she’s better already.”

The Rector made no attempt to argue the question, it seemed useless. They talked a little while about Charlie's plans, and then he bade Maisie good night, and went back home.

All that night Charlie sat in a chair before the fire dozing at times, then starting wide awake when steps or voices outside made him think the trouble was coming. Three times he went upstairs to see if his precious charge was safe. Once she stirred in her sleep and called his name. He knelt down beside her, and she put her arms about his neck, opened her eyes for a moment, then, with a sigh of deep content, lay back and was dreaming again. The glory of his love for her burned about him like a splendid dawn, and, as the first faint light of day came wanly through the window blind, he bent, and with passionately tender reverence kissed her just where her poor rough nightgown left her white throat exposed.

He went back to his chair, and for some hours he must have slept soundly, for he was wakened by the bell of St. Philip's ringing for the seven-o'clock Celebration. He sat for a while dreaming of other Sundays, seeing pictures in the fireless grate, then, as the bell ceased, he knelt down by the table, buried his head in his arms, and prayed.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO PETER

“It is Christmas morning, and it ought to be a happy morning, but it isn’t, there’s something wrong with it somewhere.” That was what Robin thought when she was wakened by the bells ringing for the seven-o’clock Service. She was not going until half-past eight when they had Choral Communion at the Cathedral, and there was plenty of time to think. She wasn’t happy; there was a kind of ache somewhere inside, and, in the vague way of waking thought, she set about locating it. She would miss her mother, but that wasn’t it. Mother was a dear, but—and there would be no Uncle Jim. That was something. He had always dined with them on Christmas Day, and he was such fun. Poor Uncle Jim! He would be lonely, too, his letter had sounded so desolate though he had only said how much he would miss them both. “I am sorry for him, but it isn’t that either.”

For a long time she refused to acknowledge to herself the real cause of the ache, but finally she faced it; it was Peter. She could not understand Peter’s letters lately. At first they had been such long friendly letters with something more, something that recalled the kiss in the garden, between the lines. But lately he had missed writing and when the letters came, they were short, and contained nothing but explanations as to why he had not written. In his last letter a fortnight before he had said that he might come home for Christmas, but would let her know. No letter had come, so he was not coming. That was the ache. She jumped out of bed, and going over to a writing-desk in the corner of her room, took out a bundle of letters, and then hopping back between the sheets, sat up reading them. They did not cure the ache or clear the clouds away.

She tied them together again and got up slowly. For a little while she sat on the edge of the bed, a slim boyish figure, holding the letters in her hands and thinking, then she knelt down, and prayed God to take the ache away and bring her news about Peter.

She was soon dressed and ready for going out. No one who met her and saw the little flower-like face pressed against the upturned collar of her fur coat and flushed by the frosty air, would have thought there was any ache in her heart. Cecil Weyman, the Doctor’s son, who almost knocked her over as she came out of the gate, thought she was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened, and was almost tongue-tied as they walked together to the great

North Door of the Cathedral. He was a tall awkward youth, with a clever but plain face, and very short-sighted blue eyes, behind big gold spectacles. His two dearest dreams unfortunately did not go well together: one was to marry Robin, and the other to go out as a Medical Missionary to China. As they came to the door he asked timidly, and with the stammer that was the curse of his life when he was nervous:

“W-would you m-mind very much if I s-sat with you, Robin?”

“Of course not, Cecil, I’d love you to.”

He was in the seventh heaven, and as he followed her up the aisle, the romance of kneeling beside her, and vowing secretly to love her, and her only all his life glowed within him like a flame. They knelt and prayed together, he with a hammering heart and mind confused praying for her, and she asking God again to take away the ache and send her news of Peter. Almost touching one another as they knelt, yet with minds and souls ten thousand leagues asunder, they must have been a strange pathetic pair in the eyes of the God who loved them both.

The Dean, resplendent in his cope, which he wore awkwardly and on one side, as though protesting inwardly against it, as indeed he did, led the Canons up to the altar. The shambling figure of Canon Craddock made Robin’s heart go out to him, and she wondered if he had heard from Peter.

The offertory had just been brought, and the Dean was holding it up, when Robin noticed Mr. Wiggins, the Head-Verger, a tall grey-haired old man with a beard like Michael Angelo’s Moses, going up to the altar. He held something in his hand, and as he passed her she saw that it was a telegram. She watched him go up behind Canon Craddock and hand it to him. The old man tore it open, and for a moment or two stood still, then he turned and followed Wiggins tottering down the choir. Her heart sank within her. Was it bad news about Peter? Presently, as she knelt, she saw another Verger come and whisper to Mrs. Craddock, who knelt opposite to her, and she got up and hurried out. Cold fear came over Robin’s heart, and rising from her knees she whispered to Cecil, and slipped out through the Crusaders’ chapel. She would excuse herself on the ground that she came to help—but she must know.

She ran down the cloisters to the Chapter House, where she found Mrs. Craddock sobbing in a chair and the old Canon standing white as a sheet with the telegram in his hand.

“Can I help at all?” Robin asked, running up to him.

He passed her the wire.

“Serious accident to Mr. Peter Craddock. Come at once to Nursing Home, Mandeville Place, London. STREETER, M.D.”

Robin read it with a little cry of pain and went very white. But she pulled herself together, and looked at the clock. There was a train from Stourton Junction, ten miles away, at a quarter-past nine, and it was just a quarter to.

“You could catch the train at Stourton if I drove you in our car,” she said to the poor old father who looked dazed like a man in a dream.

“Could you do it, my dear?” he said waking up.

“Yes. I’ll meet you at your door in five minutes.”

She turned and ran, and within a few minutes was at the Craddocks’ door. The old couple came tumbling out, Mrs. Craddock cramming things into a bag as she bundled down the steps. Just then Cecil ran up.

“C-can I help?” he said eagerly.

Suddenly Robin realized how awful that drive back would be all alone.

“Yes, Cecil,” she said, “come with us to Stourton now.” He got in in front, and the two old people behind, and they were soon travelling down the Stourton Road at a good pace. Robin was fully occupied, and Cecil was in a complete fog as to what it all meant, but it was enough for him to know that in some way he was helping her. They ran up to Stourton Station just as the train arrived, and in a few moments, after hurried farewells, the two were safe in a first-class carriage, and the train was steaming out. Then Robin turned to Cecil and burst out crying. He put his arm about her as they walked to the car.

“What is it, darling?” he said. “What is it?”

“It’s Peter,” she said. “Oh, what has happened to Peter?”

There was no sound nor sign, but a whole castle of dreams went crashing to the ground, and Cecil Weyman knew the first real bitterness in life.

It was years before Robin knew what had happened to Peter. Had she done so then, the course of this tale might have been very different, and perhaps that castle of dreams might be standing yet. Had she known in time the whole course of events that led him to lie now raving in a nursing-home, with a fractured skull and a broken arm, she might indeed have known a greater bitterness as she drove home with Cecil, but it would have saved her Gethsemane later.

For some months after Peter had taken up his job at the Aeroplane Works at Hadelot he had thrown himself into the task of perfecting his invention. The

trials had disclosed some defects in it, and the remedying of these presented a peculiarly subtle and intricate mechanical problem. It was a really important matter which would do much to obviate danger in bad weather, and he tried experiment after experiment, with a skill and daring that earned for him the admiration of his colleagues. He journeyed to Cologne to consult certain German experts, and spent day after day in the little workshop put at his disposal by the firm. During this time he wrote regularly to Robin, the long friendly letters she had loved. He was busy and happy. By the middle of November the problem was practically solved, and Sir Edward Compton came over from England to inspect experiments and made him a really handsome offer. The night on which he drove into Boulogne to discuss this with Sir Edward was the night on which things began to happen to Peter.

It was raining hard, and the streets were filthy. As he turned round the corner of the Rue de Victor Hugo, about ten o'clock that night, after leaving his friend in the Hôtel de L'Europe, a woman stepped from behind a motor standing by the pavement, and appeared to be almost under his front wheels. She saw the danger in time, and jumped forward clear of the car, but fell all her length in the street. Peter ran to help her up, but she was on her feet before he reached her, and, as she turned to him, he saw that she was a lady in full evening dress, a kind of silver shining grey. The dress was ruined—covered with the mire of a vilely kept French street.

"It's lucky I am not to be dead," she said as Peter helped her to a place of safety on the sidewalk.

"I am most awfully sorry," he replied, looking anxiously and admiringly at her. "Are you hurt?"

"Not at all, and 'twasn't your fault anyway. 'Twas me running across the road did it."

She spoke with an Irish accent, and in a soft and musical voice which completed the fascination of the dazzling mischievous face that laughed merrily up into his.

"Can I do anything? Take you anywhere?" Peter asked eagerly.

"Well now, ye might," she said, "me car's gone. That's what made me in such a hurry. I forgot to tell him when to come back, and I thought I might catch him round the corner. I can't go to a dance like this, anyway, can I?" She drew aside her cloak as she looked up at him to show her ruined frock and stockings.

"Hardly," said Peter. "Where can I take you?"

"I think ye'd better drive me home, if ye don't mind. Our villa's on the road between Paris Plage and Etaples. Ye may know it, that big wooden bungalow just before ye come to the railway crossing."

"I don't know it," said Peter, "but you can show me. Won't you get in?"

They had been standing on the pavement, Peter holding open the door of the big saloon Citroën he was driving. She got in with a glance at him and comic little grimace at the condition of her dress. Peter got a rug and tucked it round her.

She was a bewildering vision as she sat there with the roof light of the car upon her face. A dark shingled head of what must have been glorious hair before it was ruthlessly murdered to appease the God of fashion; a perfectly featured face with all the Irish beauty of cream and rose complexion lighted by two big grey blue eyes, in one of which there was the faintest suspicion of a cast, which gave to it a subtle fascination, a kind of frank devil-may-care recklessness which Peter felt even then would drive some fellows mad. He had been working hard for months, with very little recreation of any sort. The strain was over, and he had the chance of a good bargain with Sir Edward. The champagne at dinner had been good and there was plenty of it. This adventure fitted Peter's mood exactly. Apart from his work, in which he displayed a power of concentration amounting almost to genius, he was a creature of moods, and responded to an atmosphere as inevitably as an open lake to change of sun and shade. Sitting beside this girl, Ranchester, if he had thought of it, would have seemed like a half-remembered dream, in which little Robin moved, as a dream figure moves, unmeaningly. He was in another world.

Like many men of his sort he was peculiarly susceptible to the sense of smell, and, as he took his place beside the girl, there was a fragrance about her which went to his head like wine. For a while the traffic and the greasy streets kept him occupied with his driving, and she sat silent stealing a glance at him now and then. When they got clear she said as he turned to her with a smile:

"You're a nice boy, Mr. Man, and I'm not sure that I don't forgive ye for nearly killing this child entirely. But it's time we introduced ourselves. My name's Juliette, Juliette de Mauray. What's yours?"

Peter laughed. "I'm sorry, I should have mentioned it before," he said; "Peter Craddock is my name."

"Och sure," she cried, clapping her hands, "aren't you the flying man that's made some wonderful contrivance to keep the things steady in a storm?"

"That's me," said Peter, turning for a moment to look into the two bright

eyes beside him which glowed almost black in the half light of the lamps.

“Wonders never cease,” she cried, “little Juliette’s in distinguished company. It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. I’m not sure that I’m so sorry about the dance. This is much jollier anyhow.”

She snuggled down into the soft cushions and closer to Peter, as the car gathered speed and swept out upon the open road.

“You’ll be making pots of money out of your contraption, won’t you?” she asked.

“Pretty fair,” he replied. He was immensely pleased that she should know his name, and have heard of his invention, and was enjoying himself thoroughly.

“How did you hear of me?” he asked.

“Och, I met a man the other day—Sir Edward somebody or other—with a face like a fat pig—and a moustache like a walrus—ugh! what a man,” she said with a mock shiver that made Peter chuckle. “He was saying what a clever fellow you were. He looks like money—smells of it—so I guessed you’d——”

“Sir Edward Compton—yes,” said Peter. “I’ve just been dining with him at the L’Europe—that is where I was coming from when——”

“When you busted into little me. Then I forgive the pig-faced magnate of Mammon. It’s great fun you being you and me being me.”

“It is,” said Peter, laughing.

“You’re in an awful hurry,” she said glancing up at him, “you needn’t be—I’m quite comfy, thank ye.”

Peter slowed down a little.

“I’m sorry—I’m so used to driving fast.”

“Oh, don’t apologize, Mr. Peter—I like it—but it is comfortable in here.”

“Do you live in France?” Peter asked.

“We do. Me mother was French. Father’s Irish—but we came to live in France when mother died. He’s got some business here—I don’t know what. He gives me plenty of money, and that’s all I care about——”

“Is he at home now?” Peter asked.

They were drawing near to Etaples, and he had a wild hope that she might ask him into the house.

“He is not. He hardly ever is,” Juliette replied. “He travels a lot. I think he’s in Germany now. We don’t trouble each other much, father and I. He goes his way and I go mine.”

“Lonely for you, isn’t it?” Peter said.

A shadow came over her face, and there was a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“Lonely? Och no—I’m not lonely. I’ve too many friends—and things,” she said. “Here’s the house anyway. Take that turn to your left, and you’ll come to the gate on the right-hand side.”

The car turned round the corner and in through an open gate, and they pulled up before a kind of pillared portico over which a light was burning.

“Come in,” said Juliette, “the night’s young yet—and ye deserve a drink—Mr. Peter boy.”

The door was opened by a smartly dressed French maid, and Peter followed Juliette across a large entrance hall, on the polished floor of which there were some fine Persian rugs.

They turned into a very spacious room, elaborately and expensively furnished with what Peter perceived was mostly either genuine French antique or an excellent imitation. A log fire burned on an open hearth of red brick, and opposite it an enormous deeply cushioned couch upholstered in black and gold tapestry invited the guest to perfect comfort.

“Get Mr. Craddock a drink, Marie,” Juliette said to the maid as she helped her off with her cloak.

“Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Peter, while I run up and change this thing.”

She patted the cushions of the settee as she spoke, and, as she passed a table on which French and English periodicals were piled, she tossed one of them across to him.

“I don’t know whether that’s in your line,” she said gaily; “bad for your morals, but I dare say you’re a hardened sinner. Rotten rag, I call it.”

She was gone and Peter sat looking into the fire. His head was in a whirl. It did not seem real, all this. He seemed to have jumped out of his own skin into someone else’s. That morning he had been the hard-working slave of a machine, with no thought beyond wind pressures and balances. Now he was another person altogether. All the past seemed like a dream—and there was no

future—except that presently she would come back again. “Gad, what a girl!” She was wonderful.

The maid appeared presently, bearing a tray upon which was all the apparatus for mixing cocktails, as well as a bottle of whisky and a siphon of soda. She set it down on a table at his elbow and just then Juliette came in. She was clad in a daring flame-coloured creation chiefly remarkable for the brilliant effect produced with a minimum of material.

“I can’t find me proper stocking but these’ll have to do,” she remarked, standing in the doorway. “You can go to bed now, Marie,” turning to the maid, “I shan’t want ye any more to-night.”

The girl, after pulling the curtains to, bade them good night, and retired.

Peter had risen when Juliette came in, and was gazing at her fascinated. She threw herself down on the couch, and, looking up at him with mocking laughter in every line of her expressive face, said:

“Well, and do you like me? This is me maddest. I always wear this colour when I’m feeling crazy. I put it on for you as a reward for your great goodness in saving me life by not killing me. Aren’t I good to ye now? Mix me one, will you,” she added, nodding at the table.

When she had lighted a cigarette and taken a cocktail they chatted for some time about Peter’s invention. She made him draw plans, making room for him beside her, and asked endless droll questions. Their hands touched as they bent over the plans, and Peter was thrilled and stung by the glamour of her nearness.

“Tell me about yourself, you wonderful person,” he said presently, taking no trouble to hide the ardour of his admiration.

“Well,” she said, “I’d better begin with the most important thing for little boys to know. I’m married.”

She looked at him provocatively as she watched to see the effect of this announcement.

Peter disguised his feelings pretty well.

“You don’t look it,” he said laughing.

“Well, ye see, it had no time to take,” she said. “I married Gascon in 1917, but we never lived together after the war.”

“Where is he now?” Peter asked.

“Lord, I don’t know. I don’t know who he’s with either. I’ve lost count.”

“Jolly hard luck on you.”

“Och well, I’ve myself to blame. I ought to have known that Gascon de Mauray wasn’t one to stick. His sort don’t.”

She spoke bitterly, and there was a hard look in her strange eyes which for a moment made her look older, and robbed her face of its beauty, but it was gone in a flash and she was laughing again.

“I’m no saint meself,” she said, “I’m not built that way.”

“Are you going to divorce him?” Peter asked.

“Might do, one day,” she answered, “I’m a Catholic of sorts, and we’re not much on divorce, but one never knows. I don’t know that I’m so keen on matrimony, holy or otherwise, are you?”

“Well, that depends,” said Peter.

“Depends on what?” she challenged with a laugh. “Are you married?”

“No—not guilty.”

“Engaged?”

A momentary vision of Robin hovered at the back of Peter’s mind, but she was far away, poor child, and helpless against the nearness and sensuous spell of this daughter of Eve eternal and unchanged.

“No—I’m not engaged either,” he said after a scarcely perceptible pause, which, however, did not escape Juliette’s intuition.

“You’ve got someone though—I can see it in your eye,” she said, forcing him to look at her.

But Peter did not want to think of, still less to talk about Robin. She cried for a second down the distances of memory. The kiss and the prayer in the garden strove for an entry into his consciousness, but the door was slammed in her face.

“No, I’ve got no one,” he lied.

Why, two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, God made that one cock crow, and sent the first Peter out into the twilight of the dawn to find his soul through bitter tears, and why so often when our denials come the cock spreads his wings and opens his mouth but no sound comes, God only knows.

“Sure?” said Juliette, twinkling with mischief.

“Quite sure.”

“Honest injun?” she said, getting up and standing in front of him.

“Honest injun,” he answered.

“Goody,” she cried, “goody, then we can be friends. I’m no saint, but I’m not going to spoil anybody’s game. Will you be friends?” she said, holding out both hands to lift him from among the cushions.

“Friends?” said Peter, with laughter in his eyes and catch in his voice.

“Well, and what more could ye want, greedy man?” she said with a mischievous grimace. “You mustn’t drive too fast, as I told you coming up. I like it—but—safety first, Mr. Peter.”

“Safety be blowed. Can friends kiss?” asked Peter, still holding her hands.

She held his eyes with hers, and the pipes of Pan made music round them while all desires danced.

“Well now, they might,” she said, and kissed him full on the lips.

“You must go now,” she said.

Peter tried to hold her but she broke away and led him to the door. She helped him on with his heavy coat, and saw him off, standing framed in the light while he cranked up the car. Then as he got in she threw him a kiss and was gone.

To trace the stages by which Peter fell completely under the fascination of this utterly amoral, joyously, bitterly pagan, eternally sexual woman would not help us much. There have been millions of such stories told, and they are all the same, with a sameness that is sickening to the soul.

He put up some sort of a struggle, but it was not much. He had never really learned to control himself or put any curb on his desires. Modern education with formal religion and nebulous moral teaching does not help the upper classes of the Western world to resist the lure of pleasure which a highly artificial civilization makes so poignant and so fierce. Peter was very intelligent, but morally he was only a selfish baby. He took Juliette flying, motoring, and dancing, into all of which she entered with a zest and abandon which made her companionship intoxicating. Frequently if he did not go to her she would ring him up, and it was the telephone bell which, as a rule, brought to defeat any struggle that he made. At last one night at the beginning of December she rang him up to say that she was all alone, and would he come over.

He went, and on that night did not return; and there were other nights.

About a week before Christmas she went away to Germany to make a long-promised visit to friends. Peter was left alone and grew restless and miserable. He began to wake up as from a dream, and he detested waking up. He wanted to go home and yet he didn't. He was always getting piteous letters from his mother begging him to come home for Christmas, if only for a day. But there was Robin—how could he face Robin? With Juliette away, and the power of her continual proximity withdrawn, little Robin came nearer again. She forced the locks on the doors of memory and came in, pure and jolly, like English spring and English lanes. There swept over him at times a nausea of this whole intrigue, but his senses were absorbed in it, and he swung from despair to exaltation, and exaltation to despair. He had been gradually falling into the habit of drinking much more than he had been accustomed to, and now he gave way altogether, and, during these days, went drunk to bed each night. It so happened that one of the machines was going over to Croydon at dawn on Christmas Day. He asked if he might take it, and leave was readily accorded.

The journey was quite uneventful, except for some slight engine trouble crossing the Channel, until he came to land. What exactly happened then Peter never knew. He could remember afterwards the dim figures of the mechanics waiting for his landing. He could remember turning the nose of the machine down, then there was a roar in his ears, a sudden vision of the earth coming up to meet him, a crash, and he remembered no more.

CHAPTER VII

THE MARRIAGE OF THE OUTCASTS

If we could see the world as God sees it, if we could see it from a point of view outside of time and space, we might be able to discern the invisible bonds by which all our lives are linked together, the subtle, complex unity of the spirit in which we live, and move, and have our being. Events which, to our limited vision, seem entirely disconnected might be revealed as having a vital and necessary connection in the immense dramatic unity of life of which only God Himself can have either the joy or the agony of being conscious. Those who seem to be absent from us, and to have passed out of our lives, at any given moment, might prove to have been very present with us then, and to have influenced us for good or ill in ways beyond our power to perceive.

The Christmas morning upon which Robin woke with an ache in her heart, and on which she asked the unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable question "What has happened to Peter?" was a memorable, and fateful day for Maisie, as it was for Charlie, for Peter himself, for Robin, and for poor stammering Cecil Weyman whose dreams went down into the dust.

Maisie was awakened in London by church bells at much the same time that Robin sat up reading Peter's letters in Ranchester. She was in a small bedroom almost the whole available space of which was occupied by the double bed which she shared with Rose Elgood, who still slept by her side. Mr. and Mrs. Elgood rented a large house in Tavistock Terrace, and took in lodgers who occupied bed-sitting-rooms and were given bed and breakfast only. When Charlie had come to London first, after a long and weary search, he had found with them a bed-sitting-room at the top of the house. Rose Elgood, a pretty, very much up-to-date, and independent little typist, had taken a fancy to the quiet grey-eyed lad in No. 28. She met him often on the stairs, and at last manœuvred him into their sitting-room in the basement by carrying up a cup of cocoa to him one evening and remarking that it must be lonely by himself. It was partly the desire to be quite straight with Rose that led Charlie to tell them the whole story of Maisie and her sorrow. Rose was disappointed, but she appreciated his honesty, and as she was a loyal little soul, she at once became an advocate for the rights of true Love. The Elgoods were not Churchgoers. Mrs. Elgood had been a Baptist Sunday School teacher and had met her husband in the Sunday School, but religion meant very little to her now. She and her husband had struggled hard, and had succeeded, mainly owing to her

persevering self-sacrifice, in giving their three children a much better chance in life than they had ever had themselves. Tom, the eldest son, had been killed in the war, and his death had really killed his mother, too. She continued to live and work by force of habit, but the whole meaning of life had been destroyed by the telegram announcing his death. His photograph, with the King's letter underneath it, hung over the mantelpiece, and, to an understanding mind, explained a good deal about these living people who were themselves only conscious of it now and then. Bob, the second son, was married and lived in Walthamstow. He held a good position as traveller for the large drapery stores in which Rose worked as cashier. Mr. Elgood was a small, sharp-featured, nervous little man whose whole religious fervour found its outlet in Socialism. He was an ardent and enthusiastic Socialist full of explanations of, and remedies for, all the ills the flesh is heir to. He had no use for the Church which he regarded as entirely out of date, a dying and already outworn survival of the Feudal Period. He spent hours explaining to Charlie how inevitable it was that Christianity, with its teaching of resignation to evil, and submission to the powers that be, should pass away, as the workers became conscious of their strength, and united all the world over to build the Socialist Commonwealth. Charlie himself was interested in these things and not unwilling to enter into arguments, which they both enjoyed.

Mr. Elgood was full of contempt for the teaching of the Church on the matter of Divorce, and was at times intensely irritated by Charlie's attitude on the question which he said was utterly inconsistent. For, although he was quite convinced that he and Maisie were doing right, Charlie defended the Church in the strictness of her teaching about the sanctity of marriage, merely pleading that she ought to be able to provide for certain exceptions. He realized, and often explained to a fuming and impatient Mr. Elgood, the difficulty of this.

When Charlie had gone back to Ranchester determined to bring Maisie back with him, the Elgoods had offered to let them share their sitting-room, if Maisie would not mind sleeping with Rose. This arrangement he had gratefully accepted until such times as he could find a home of his own, and Maisie was ready to begin their life together.

They had agreed to wait until Christmas before taking this final step, and, after a long and apparently hopeless quest, had at last succeeded in securing a little flat out at Higham's Park. It was a tiny place, two box bedrooms, a kitchen like a cupboard, and a small living-room, which they furnished on the hire-purchase system.

With much diffidence they had explained to the Elgoods that they would like to begin their life there on Christmas night. Mrs. Elgood had been quietly

sympathetic, Mr. Elgood defiantly and loudly approving, and Rose romantically excited. Mrs. Elgood took Maisie aside and asked if she might keep little Maisie that night. So it had all been arranged.

As Maisie lay awake listening to the church bells her heart was full to overflowing with humble joy and gratitude. There was a little suit-case on a chair at the bottom of the bed, and in it all her things were already neatly packed, including a white dress which she had secretly made for herself, and planned to put on that evening as a surprise for Charlie. Rose and she shared the secret together, and when they disappeared arm-in-arm, and Charlie asked where they were going to Rose would shake her finger at him and tell him not to ask questions. The thought of that dress brought colour to Maisie's pale cheeks and a glow of happiness to her heart. You would not have recognized her now as the same girl that had lain raving on her bed dreaming awful dreams three months before. Peace and loving kindness had restored her beauty, and she was a picture as she sat up in bed with the joylight in her eyes. She slipped quietly out and knelt down to pray. There was a passion of sincerity in her thanksgiving and prayer that she might be worthy of this great patient love which had always been the lodestar of her life. It was some little time before she looked up and became conscious of Rose, who had awakened and was looking at her with wonder and whimsical loving admiration in her eyes.

"A merry Christmas and many happy returns of the day," she said, nodding at her gaily.

Maisie blushed rosy red, and tears came into her eyes. Rose jumped out of bed and hugged her.

"Now then, no tears," she said; "there ain't no luck in tears on your wedding day."

"Oh—I wish I were going to be 'is proper wife," Maisie sobbed with her head on the other's shoulder.

"I reckon you're the properest wife any man ever 'ad," Rose answered, kissing her. "You're just lovely, and as good as a lump of gold. Come and let me help you to dress."

Charlie had planned the whole day out. They were going to the Communion Service at a little church in the city. They could not communicate, and they did not go to the service as a rule, because, as Charlie said, there were to be no pretences. But, on this morning, they had agreed that they should go together and kneel at the back. After that they were to come back to breakfast, rejoice with little Maisie over the contents of her stocking, have their

Christmas dinner with the Elgoods, and then go to evensong at Westminster Abbey, and from there go out to their little home.

Maisie was soon dressed.

“You look just scrumptious,” Rose said as she pinned a bunch of violets, Charlie’s gift, to her coat. “Off you go and if ’e doesn’t jump when ’e sees you, I’ll eat my best silk stockings.”

There were but six or seven people at the Service in the dimly-lighted, but exquisitely beautiful, little Christopher Wren church to which they went, and the white-haired gentle old priest who knew them all, and wondered who the two young strangers were, was a little sad that they did not make their communion. When the others rose to answer the invitation of the whispered words, “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world,” Charlie reached for and found Maisie’s hand, and, as they looked into one another’s faces, the eyes of both were full of tears.

“For ever and ever,” whispered Charlie. “For ever and ever,” she replied.

When old Canon Warburton came out of the vestry to invite the two young people to breakfast, they were gone. They walked back to Tavistock Terrace in silence, their hearts too full for words, and were met at the door by little Maisie with a large Teddy bear in her arms. Maisie caught her up and hugged her; then turned and, with eyes that shone with unshed tears, put her into Charlie’s arms. She went to him happily, and on his shoulder rode laughing down to the basement where breakfast was ready.

Breakfast over, in spite of protestations from Mrs. Elgood and Rose, Maisie insisted on helping to cook the Christmas dinner. Charlie built castles and churches for little Maisie with her new bricks, and argued with Mr. Elgood, who, having secured out of the library a copy of Karl Kautski’s *Labour Revolution*, was sitting in his shirt sleeves and a highly enjoyable state of indignation over what he called “that doddering old idiot’s betrayal of true Socialism.” “Just listen to this,” he would say, and then read out a passage, snorting the while like the war-horse in the Book of Job.

“For this reason it is impossible to give effect to the demand, put forward by Marx and adopted by Lenin, that nobody employed in the State Service should receive a salary in excess of workers’ wages. This principle may be in harmony with our Labour sensibilities and our Socialist conceptions, but it is incompatible with economic requirements which always enforce themselves.”

“Pshaw!” said Mr. Elgood, taking off his pince-nez and waving them in the air. “The old fool is out of date, as out of date as Queen Anne or John Stuart Mill with his economic man. Wouldn’t the servants of the State be proud to work for the State once they knew that they were serving the community, and not feeding bloated profiteers? Of course they would.”

Charlie was saying that he doubted very much whether they would, human nature being what human nature was, when Maisie, with her sleeves rolled up above her elbows and a white apron on, came in with some cake and ginger wine for Mr. Elgood. He was enjoying his anger over Charlie’s doubt so much that he did not appreciate the interruption, though he was very fond of ginger wine. Maisie stood by smiling and listening to the argument. She was proud of Charlie’s cleverness, and liked the quiet cool way in which he reasoned with the little fanatic. He went on building for little Maisie, but, by dint of continuing calmly through snorts of contempt, explained that it was not so much economic requirements, as psychological necessities, that made the payment of highly skilled brain workers on the same scale as manual labourers impossible.

It was like watching a man fight and win with one hand tied behind his back, and Maisie loved it because he was her man. Mr. Elgood was in his element, he felt that in Charlie he had a foeman worthy of his steel, and he at any rate was quite unconscious of defeat. In the excitement of explaining that all the baser passions of pride, greed, and desire for social superiority and display, were the result of the capitalist system, and would automatically disappear once men learned to produce for use and not for profit, he poured the wine over the cake instead of into the glass. At this they all burst out laughing, which brought Rose and Mrs. Elgood in to share the joke.

Mr. Elgood did not want to stop, and he endeavoured to revive the argument, in spite of Rose’s chaff and little Maisie’s clamour to be taken on his knee. As it does in many men compelled to live all their lives in subordinate positions, and to do routine mechanical work, the suppressed desire for self-assertion and domination found its expression in argument, and the joy of battle went to his head like wine. Whatever subject he talked about he was really always talking about himself, and in that, perhaps, he did not differ from the majority of the human race.

However, domestic pressure was too strong and the contest had to be abandoned. Mr. Elgood was ignominiously despatched to see if he could buy some Christmas crackers which had been forgotten, and Charlie was sent upstairs to pack his things.

Dinner went off uproariously, Mr. Elgood proposing the health of our two

young friends with so much fun and real affection that Maisie laughed and cried at the same time.

The organ was playing the Pastoral Symphony as the two lovers, having left their suit-cases in charge of a kindly ticket-collector at Westminster District Railway Station, came into the Abbey. The sun had come out and the glorious amber light of the December afternoon was pouring in through the great west window, broken into a thousand colours in one place, striking naked through clear glass in another, making soft shadows and pools of light upon the floor. They both loved the Abbey and often came there on a Sunday afternoon. They were afraid of being questioned in other churches, but here they knew that they were safe, even outcasts could worship and find a welcome here. They did not pity themselves or picture themselves as outcasts. There was no resentment in their hearts. Charlie was too clear headed and honest for that, and Maisie too naturally humble in heart.

A pleasant-faced verger who knew them showed them to a seat near the altar and underneath the pulpit. The service was pure heaven to them both. Together with clasped hands and bowed heads they confessed their sins. In Maisie's heart there was always that one sin, the memory of the night that led to her marriage—and Charlie thought of the times when temptation had all but mastered him, and he had been plunged into despair. But neither of them could have confessed their love as sin; to them both it was the very gift of God. Before the sermon the choir sang Christina Rossetti's "In the bleak mid winter," with a descant of boys' voices that lifted them both into Paradise as they stood together sharing a hymn book.

Angels and archangels
May have gathered there,
Cherubim and Seraphim
Thronged the air.
But only his mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshipped the beloved
With a kiss.

What can I give him
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a wise man
I would do my part;

Yet what can I give him?

Give him my heart.

An old man whom neither of them knew preached the sermon. His clear quavering voice rang out like a silver bell. The text was taken from S. Matthew, chap. 1, vv. 18, 19: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When, as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things the angel of the Lord appeared unto him."

He drew a picture of this village maiden telling her story to Joseph, watching his face with anxious eyes, and asking in her heart "Will he believe me and take me to him or will he cast me off?" They went with her through the nights of agony, agony of suspense she must have endured while he wrestled with himself half minded to put her away privily. They saw her, conscious of her purity and of God's hand upon her, yet doubted by the man she loved, and compelled to endure the gossip and slander of whispering tongues. They followed her wounded and desperate as she fled for refuge to her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country, and so on through her reconciliation with Joseph, to the night when, with her precious burden growing heavy within her, she staggered to the door of the village Inn, pleading for a place to lay her head.

Here, the preacher insisted, was the very meaning of the Incarnation. By drawing God nearer to man and man nearer to God it made possible a morality higher than mere herd morality, a goodness with firmer foundations than custom and convention, a goodness standing solid on the real knowledge of God. God led Mary to Bethlehem as He led Christ to Calvary, both by the same power, for the joy that was set before them endured the Cross despising the shame, and that power was Love. If our hearts were right with God, we could ignore the pain of slander and the cruelty of men, only our hearts must be right with God.

Yet what can I give Him?

Give him my heart.

As the story reached its climax Charlie took Maisie's hand in his and held it tight. Gratitude for his love swept over her like a glory. He was, like Joseph, a just man. She had known, and would know again the bitterness of slander, the stabbing pain of cruel tongues. But how could she ever know the power and joy of purity? She was unclean, defiled. Dreadful memories came back to her, memories of unsteady steps coming up the passage, of a drunken leering face pressed down to hers. Oh God, what had he saved her from? She clung to

his hand desperately, her lips quivering, and tears stealing down her cheeks. She could never be like the Virgin, she was all dirty, and defiled, but she would love and serve her Joseph as no man had ever been loved and served before.

Charlie in his thoughts reversed the whole story. He thought indeed of the days and nights of misery he had endured when he heard of her marriage, and his heart went out to Joseph in the torment of his doubt, but that in the end was all swallowed up in the thought of her pain. He remembered the gossip of Ranchester and his heart grew hot within him. Memories of Maisie in the Bethlehem Tableaux when he had been her Joseph crowded in upon him. She was the Virgin to him pure, spotless, and without reproach. The story of the Maiden Mother roused him to passionate resolve to guard and cherish her. The thought of their little home thrilled him. There, at any rate, she would be safe.

The sermon over, they stood as in a dream still hand-in-hand to sing “Come, all ye faithful,” and then knelt to receive the blessing. “The Peace of God that passeth all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and the love of God and of His Son Jesus Christ, Our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost be amongst you and remain with you always.”

“For ever and for ever,” whispered Charlie. “For ever and for ever,” she replied.

They passed out with the throng of worshippers unnoticed and unknown. I wonder what God thought of them, and I wish I knew. When they passed out of His house did they pass out of His presence? An adulterer and an adulteress on their way to a life of sin, is that what Jesus of Nazareth would have thought of them, had He seen them standing arm-in-arm in the fading light to watch the pigeons in Parliament Square?

“You open the door, Boy,” Maisie said as she leant against the wall, flushed and panting after climbing the thirty odd steps that led to No. 11A, which was the top storey of a large house turned into flats. She fumbled in her bag and gave him the key.

His hand trembled a little as he fitted it into the lock, and then it was stiff and would not turn at once. He turned to look at Maisie and her answering smile shone back through tears.

He stood aside to let her pass in, then closed the door and stood with his back to it. There was no light in the room, but a faint glow through the window from a street sign outside fell on Maisie’s face. He could see the tears shining in her eyes, and she seemed to him the fairest and most pitiful thing on earth.

They stood thus for a moment and then she went to him with a little cry:

“Oh Charlie, Boy, thank you. Thank you.”

He took her in his arms, sought and found her lips, and kissed her as he had never done before. She answered eagerly for a moment in full surrender of body and soul, and then suddenly lay still with her head on his shoulder.

“What have ye to thank me for, Maisie mine?” he said huskily.

She raised her head and looking bravely at him answered:

“More—more than I can ever say——” And she broke away abruptly, wringing his hand.

They turned on the light and looked around their little home. The table was all laid for tea. Maisie and Rose had arranged it the afternoon before. There was an iced cake in the middle and a card on it said, with “Love from Rose,” two blue cups and saucers, and two blue plates side by side, a teapot to match, and all sorts of good things covered with paper. Maisie threw off her hat, and while Charlie made toast and watched her with wonder and worship in his heart, she busied herself making the tea. Happily, and almost in silence, they drank it. Most of the good things went untasted, they did not want to eat. When, in spite of her protests, he had helped her to wash up, she drew a little couch before the small gas stove, and pushing him gently into it, she felt in his inner pocket, took out his cigarette-case, put a cigarette between his lips and lighted for him, and all of this with a tenderness beaming from her grey eyes that brought a lump into Charlie’s throat. Then standing before him she said, “I want you to wait a little while for me. I’ve something to do and I won’t be long.” She kissed him and with a little sound, half a laugh, half a sob, was gone.

Charlie sat before the fire and smoked deep in thought. He was full of wonder and doubt about this girl wife of his. During the three months at the Elgoods’ they had gone back to their courting days. He had treated her always with the tenderness and reverence of a strong deep love. They had endeavoured to forget the past, and she had said very little to him about the horror of her life with her husband. Beyond fixing Christmas as the time for their coming together, to which she had given a silent consent by kissing him tenderly when he proposed it, they had not talked of that side of their marriage at all. There had been times of temptation, but he had always held back, and if there had ever been more than usual passion in his embrace, she would surrender and then abruptly break away as she had done just now when they first entered their home. Was it because she felt that their union was wrong? She had always denied that when he had asked, and assured him with much

nodding of her pretty head that she was quite sure about it. But in her heart of hearts was she sure? If she wasn't, what ought he to do? Ought he even now to leave her? Ought he to offer to put off their coming together? He must be very careful of her. His mind trailed off, bringing back from the stores of memory picture after picture of her from which he might guess what she really felt. The cheap alarm clock on the mantelpiece fussed noisily on its way through a quarter of an hour. He could hear her moving in the next room, then the door opened and she came in. She was dressed in white, in the frock which Rose and she had conspired to make. It made her look like a beautiful child again and brought back to him a vision of her as she was on the night they were Confirmed together. He started forward to take her in his arms, but she laid her hands upon his shoulders, and said:

"Boy, dear, I don't want you to kiss me just yet. I want to talk a little first. I've got something to tell you before—before you takes me for your wife."

She uttered the last words bravely but with a quivering lip. They sat down, she on a little stool at his feet leaning against his knees with both his hands in hers.

"Is it—is it that you aren't sure?" he said presently, with pain and passion in his voice.

She shook her head and pressed his hands against her cheeks. "No, dear, I'm quite, quite sure, but you aren't, that's——"

"But, darling," interrupted Charlie eagerly.

"No. Listen, Boy, you must. You aren't sure of me. You're afraid of 'urting me, and you don't know whether to put it off and wait. Well, that's what I want to talk about. It isn't easy, so you must be patient with me."

She leaned back and looked up at him with an appeal in her eyes that made him feel the passion of pity that a father feels for his child in pain. In the very finest kind of wedded love all others are combined, and men and women find in one another the father and mother they forsake that they may cleave together.

"You see, dearest," Maisie went on after a moment's silence, "it's because I feel all unworthy of you. I'm all dirty and stained, that's my trouble."

Her voice trembled, and Charlie made as though to lift her up, but she restrained him, and went on bravely.

"No, dear. I know, but I can't never tell you properly 'ow awful them days was. I didn't know nothing about it when I met 'im. Honest to God, I didn't.

Then when 'e came 'ome from the war 'e was drunk, and"—she struggled with her voice, but it trailed off into tears—"and 'e was always drunk afterwards. When 'e wasn't in drink 'e never did nothing but curse me and knock me about. 'E never——"

Charlie was trembling with anger, passion, and pity, and an overmastering love, and they clung together in silence, then she went on brokenly:

"I've felt like that, 'umbled and shamed like, ever since. I felt it in the Abbey this afternoon. I feel as I can never be clean and good again. I'm not fit to be your wife. And oh, I wish I could be your wife, your proper wife. I love you so. I love you so."

"Maisie, Maisie," Charlie cried, tears streaming down his cheeks, "you mustn't talk like that. It ain't——"

"But I must tell you," she interrupted passionately. "It isn't that I'm afraid our love is wrong. It's them awful days as keeps on coming back to me. I keeps on seeing 'is face, and smelling his breath—and I could kill myself. I want to forget. I want to forget. I've got to thank you, my Charlie, for saving me from that, and——"

She was kneeling before him now holding both his hands to her cheeks.

"And I do thank you. I do thank you. But if you can make me forget, if you can make me believe that love can be real, beautiful like I thought it was once, the most beautiful thing in the world, as little Miss Robin said, why then I'll worship you—just worship you for ever, Charlie boy, for ever and for ever."

He took her in his arms and crushed her to him, and then, looking down into her tear-stained face, he said tenderly and solemnly, as though he were taking an oath:

"I will try and make you forget. I will try to teach you that love, our love, is the most beautiful thing in the world. It shall be. It shall be. For ever and for ever, Maisie mine."

Half an hour afterwards a policeman stopped at the corner of Wood Street. There had been a batch of weddings, perfectly proper weddings, at the neighbouring church that morning, and one of the bridal parties had broken into a noisy quarrel, and was forcibly expelling one of its members, who was fighting drunk. The man picked himself up and staggered cursing down the street. The constable stood and watched him out of sight, and then when all was still again, he looked up and saw the lights go out in No. 11A. He shivered, for the wind blew cold, and turned upon his beat.

CHAPTER VIII

LONELINESS

Peter did not die. For about three weeks he hung on betwixt life and death, and then, very slowly, began to mend. Almost as soon as he became conscious again he asked after Robin. Whether it was the prayers which she offered up for him day by day, or merely the natural result of his accident, it was she who came to him as soon as he came to himself. Juliette seemed to belong to another life. His mother and father, England and Robin all hung together in his mind somehow. Those hectic mad weeks seemed more of a dream to him now than Ranchester had been when he sat beside Juliette in the car.

One day, about six weeks after his accident, he asked his mother if Robin could possibly come to see him. Mrs. Craddock was pleased. She was very fond of the child and thought she would make an excellent wife for her beloved son.

"Perhaps Mr. Peterson would let her come," she said, smiling. "Anyway, I will write and see."

So it came about that when she came in from dancing one morning Robin found her father standing opposite the fire with a letter in his hand.

"Peter's better and asking for you, little girl," he said, and handed her the letter.

Her eyes shone and she gave a little jump of joy.

"Oh Daddy, I am glad, can I go?"

"If you want to very much, my dear," he said, looking at her anxiously, and with all his love for her in his eyes.

"I'd like to very much," she said, looking up at him shyly.

He came and put his hands upon her shoulders and turned her face up to his. "Are you very fond of Peter, then, Robin?" he said.

She hung her head and traced a little pattern on the carpet with one foot.

"Yes, Daddy," she whispered, "I was before he went away, a little, but his accident—and all this has made it more and more—and," she looked up at him with tears in her eyes, "oh, it has been awful—I thought he was going to die—and he's so big and brave—and——"

The Rector hugged her to him and kissed the tears away.

“All right,” he said. “We’ll go this very afternoon. There’s a train at half-past three. We can stop with old Jim. He said he could always put us up. I’ll send him a wire now. You get our things together, and I’ll ’phone the wire straightaway.”

The journey up to Paddington passed like a dream for Robin. The last six months had changed her. The child was becoming a woman. The tragedy of Maisie and Charlie had begun the transformation. There had been things she did not understand and only dimly guessed the meaning of, but the passionate love of the two unfortunates had taught her much. She felt within her the possibility of love like that, and understood more fully the meaning of Peter’s last kiss. Again and again her mind had travelled in a dream over the day of the Fête, and as she thought of it now, her face grew hot, and her heart happy with a happiness she had never known before. She was going to see him. Would he be much changed? What would he say to her? Her mind ran round in a circle of such sweet thoughts as she sat by her father’s side, silent for the most part, while he read, but now and then slipping her arm through his and asking the names of the places they passed.

They arrived at Paddington at half-past five and immediately rang up the Nursing Home. A nurse replied saying that Mr. Craddock was asleep, and that it would be better if they would come in the morning, as it was not good for anything to excite him at night.

Robin was disappointed, yet relieved in a curious way she did not understand. When the actual time came to see Peter she felt afraid, and as she stood waiting outside the telephone box on the station, it was hard to tell whether the tumult in her mind was pleasure or pain, and she did not know now whether the news was disappointment or reprieve.

“We had better take a taxi, and get down to old Jim right away,” her father said.

The thought of seeing Uncle Jim cheered Robin, but it was still Peter who was uppermost in her mind as they drove through the wet and shining streets. She had never been to London before, and her impression of it, through a taxi window, was just a blur of blazing lights, millions of red ’buses, and multitudes of people. They passed S. Paul’s and she looked out of the window to see the suggestion of its enormous bulk looming through the dim light overhead. The City was emptying itself, and when the cab was blocked by traffic she looked out to see endless streams of girls of her own age with their silk stockings, and little leather cases, rushing for their trains. Some of them

were very pretty, and one she saw smile brightly up into the eyes of a young man who was standing waiting for her in an office door. It set her wondering. Did she love him and did he love her? Did someone love each of these, and were they happy and frightened, and all mixed up inside like she was?

Presently they began to thread their way through a maze of mean streets; the lights grew dimmer and the faces that she passed were like the people in Bank Street, only there were so many of them, and such swarming multitudes of children. They stopped to ask their way, and a crowd of them left their play and shouted directions round the door. They all seemed to know S. Jude's and the Mission.

At last they drew up before a big gloomy-looking house next to a church which was lighted inside. The knock at the door, for the bell would not ring, brought Mrs. Spalding, who showed them into a bare flagged entrance-hall. There were no carpets anywhere, and the floor was all marked with the tread of dirty little feet. The air was full of the smell of poverty and damp clothes. Robin knew the smell of poverty; everyone does who has worked among the poor, and no one who has not could be made to understand it by description. In the rooms off the hall and upstairs there was the hum of children's voices.

Mrs. Spalding's rather grim face lighted into a smile, all the more wonderful because it was so rare, at the sight of Robin.

"Oh, Miss Robin," she said, and did what she had never done before, took her into her arms and gave her a kiss. "It's right nice to see ye both," she said, shaking hands with the Rector. "The Reverend is in church, but 'e won't be long."

She led the way as she spoke through a green cloth-covered door at the end of the hall. On the other side of this the atmosphere changed. Here Mrs. Spalding reigned supreme, and it was spotlessly clean. Uncle Jim had a study, three bedrooms, and a kitchen for his quarters, but had turned the rest of the rambling house into a kind of children's refuge. All over it as soon as school was over children swarmed and played, but into these sacred rooms they never came, save one by one having wiped their feet before the eyes of the Cerberus who kept the door. The old Yorkshire woman loved children, really, but without sentiment. Had it been possible, her love for these "little varminths" would have expressed itself in washing them one by one with a set, determined face, pursed-up lips, and continual comments on their disgraceful dirt.

"You'll be wanting a cup of tea, and I'll show you your rooms," she said, when they stood in the study.

It was a fairly large room, and in it Robin felt at home at once. All that was

saved from the wreck of the man's former life was there. The familiar roll-top desk littered with papers, the high stool in the corner, the prayer desk underneath a large and beautiful crucifix, the big arm-chair with worn-out springs, and the small chesterfield underneath the window; the few Medici Society prints on the walls, and books everywhere, she knew them all—and so did Bob.

"Couldn't we go and see the church and Uncle Jim now?" she asked.

"Of course ye can, and 'e'll be right glad to see you, I know."

Mrs. Spalding showed them out of a back door by which the church could be reached without passing through the house. As they came into the porch a woman came out and passed them by. She was quite young, and her face had been pretty once, but was worn and haggard now, with great rings under the eyes. She carried a child in her arms, and another, barely able to walk, toddled at her side, clinging to her skirt. All her life long Robin remembered her, the look in her face, and the gleaming whiteness of her bosom where the wailing baby pulled at her blouse seeking for the breast.

It was a picture that came to mean more and more as she grew to understand the inner tragedy of great slum life.

They passed into the church which was now completely dark except for a single light that burned on one side where a little altar stood. When their eyes got accustomed to the gloom, they discerned Jim Counihan kneeling before a crucifix upon which the light shone. He knelt at a prayer desk with his head buried in his arms, quite still, and did not hear them come in.

They slipped into a pew and knelt down to pray, but prayer did not come to Robin. She was half frightened. There was something terrible about all this. That woman's face, the tortured figure on the cross, and the man beneath it, all seemed to speak to her of despair, or a dreadful battle against despair. Was this what Christianity really meant? For the first time in all her life she felt afraid of Christ. Did He really demand this of those who followed Him? She thought of Peter and tried to pray for him, but he felt somehow far away, and her own happiness seemed to die within her. She could not take her eyes off the crucifix and the man beneath it.

Presently he stirred, looked up at the Christ, crossed himself and rose to his feet.

He came down the aisle towards them, but his back was to the light, and she could not see his face.

When he came near and made out who they were he hurried, and, as Robin

came out of the pew, he took her in his arms.

“Little Robin,” he said, kissing her, “and dear old Bob.”

There was a wonderful welcome in his voice and the cloud lifted from Robin’s heart.

As they made their way back to the house—Jim with one arm round her and the other on his friend’s shoulder—there came over her a sense of peaceful happiness, in which there were none of the thrills and fears of her journey down, but just hominess and the calm certainty of being loved. The woman was falling back into the child again, the world was Daddy, Robin and Uncle Jim, and it was a good world.

“You are in my room, Robin dear, and Bob has the spare room. I’ll show you the way,” Jim said, going up the narrow back-stairs. “It’s only a small bed, Bob, old chap, but you won’t mind that, will you?”

“Where are you going to sleep, Uncle Jim?” asked Robin.

“Oh, I’m going to shake down on the couch downstairs.”

“But that’s too bad—I’d much better be downstairs,” she cried. “I could sleep on the couch quite well, I’m so small.”

“Of course you won’t,” said Jim, “it’s all ready for you.”

He showed her into a small room, barely furnished, but with a brand-new, suspiciously new, carpet on the floor. There was a bowl full of violets on the dressing-table, and a vase with daffodils in it on the chimney-piece.

Jim turned on the light and looked anxiously round it. “It’s not much, my dear,” he said, “but it is a comfortable bed.”

Robin was smelling the violets.

“Did you get these for me, Uncle Jim?” she said.

“Yes, I knew you liked flowers,” he answered, smiling.

Tears came into Robin’s eyes. He was such a dear, and she was so sorry for him.

“You’re a dear old Uncle Jim,” she said, and kissed him.

When she was left alone she began to unpack her case. Mrs. Spalding had told them that high tea would be ready in a quarter of an hour, and the smell of fish frying came up the stairs. She wondered if she had time to change. She had brought with her a new frock that her father had just bought her, a little light blue thing that matched the colour of her eyes. She had put it in for Peter,

to look nice in if ever she went to him in the evening, and one of her pictures had been of Peter lying in bed and saying she looked lovely—and perhaps wanting a kiss. Should she wear it to-night? She held it out at arm's-length considering. She wanted to, it would be festive, and would cheer the study up. In a moment or two her mind was made up, and she was hurrying to get dressed.

When she came down to find her father and Uncle Jim waiting and stood in the study doorway, a little self-conscious, and flushed, Jim cried out:

“My goodness, Robin! What finery! I’m glad. This is a great occasion, and I must be on by best behaviour.”

With elaborate politeness he pulled out a chair.

“Will her ladyship sit here?” he said.

They had a merry meal. Somehow the presence of this radiant little person with her bare white arms, and dancing eyes, changed the whole room and lighted it with lamps of youth and love. The dim lit church and the great slum seemed far away.

“I’ve planned it out so that we can have this evening to ourselves,” Jim said; “it’s the first evening I’ve had off since I came.”

He drew up the chesterfield when they had finished and Mrs. Spalding had cleared away, put the Rector into the big chair, with a tobacco-jar beside him, and sat down with Robin on a stool at his feet leaning against his knees. Hundreds of times these three had sat thus before the fire to talk.

“You will be seeing Peter in the morning, then?” said he, stroking her shining head.

Robin blushed, and nodded at the fire.

“Poor lad, I hope he’ll soon be better.”

Jim was determined to put all his suspicions behind him and not poison the child’s life with his own bitterness.

“I think he’s round the corner now, and Robin will do him good,” the Rector said, smiling.

They talked for some time about Peter and his invention. Canon Craddock had told the Rector of Sir Edward Compton’s offer and how Peter’s fortune was made. He had attributed the accident to the fact that the poor boy had been sticking too closely to his work, and must have fainted or turned dizzy when he was landing. The Rector was much more comfortable in his mind about Peter,

and spoke very kindly of him. Robin listened happily and occasionally reminded her father of details that were creditable to Peter.

After a while the conversation turned to Jim and his work in the slum district.

“You’ve got a job on, Jim old chap,” the Rector said; “beats Bank Street, doesn’t it, Robin?”

Jim talked rapidly and eagerly about his work.

“It’s the extent of it that is so appalling,” he explained. “There are houses and streets in Ranchester quite as bad as anything we have here. But there you can get out of it in a few minutes into the country and the fields; here there is nothing but this for miles and miles. At first it feels like being locked up in a vast prison; but one gets used to it after a bit, as prisoners do, I suppose. The overcrowding is ghastly. There’s hardly a house in this parish of fifteen thousand that has not two families living in it, and some of the bigger ones have three and four. I went to visit a woman yesterday who lives with a man and five children in one room. She is just going to have another child.”

“There seems to be such a lot of children,” Robin remarked.

“Swarms of them. The poorer and more wretched they are, the more children they seem to have. Of course, there is a lot done for them nowadays—free meals, children’s clinics, Baby Welcome centres, and the rest of it. But thousands of them, I’m afraid, are not welcome when they come for all that, and many are what the doctors call insufficiently nourished, which is a polite way of putting half starved. If all the men and women were angels and spent their money wisely and well it would still be a tight squeeze for many of them, but as they are as careless and selfish as most other people, it is often impossible. It would take a very clever woman to manage on what they get, and most women aren’t clever. Ordinary stupidity and selfishness which mean discomfort in a better-class family spell disaster in the slums. Many a woman in our class of life who gets through all right would, even with her better education, be absolutely beaten by the task that faces these women.”

“Yet I suppose you do find some who manage to keep themselves decent like little Mrs. Andrews at home,” the Rector remarked.

“Yes, that’s the sort, the clever ones, clever and a little hard. It is often rather a question of brains than of any particular goodness, though there are some good ones too.”

“By the by,” said the Rector, “how far from here is Highams Park?”

"About ten minutes from Liverpool Street," answered Jim. "Why?"

"That is where Charlie Roberts and Maisie are," the Rector replied uncomfortably and avoiding Jim's eyes.

"Oh, is it?" His face hardened and he said nothing further.

"I couldn't do anything with Charlie," the Rector went on; "as soon as Maisie got better she went off quietly and joined him. I heard from them at Christmas, and they seem to be very happy."

He was feeling in his pocket as he spoke and presently produced a letter. "11A, Wood Street, Highams Park, that's the address."

"It's all wrong, that business," Jim said after a pause; "he ought to have left her alone. Are you going to see them?"

"I'd love to," interrupted Robin. "Don't be hard on them, Uncle Jim." She turned and, laying her hand upon his knee, looked up into his face. "They love one another so dearly, and that Will Smith is a beast. She couldn't go back to him, could she?"

"You have a fellow-feeling for them no doubt, my dear," he said, looking down at her but without a smile on his face, "but Maisie is a married woman, and it's all wrong."

A silence fell upon them, an uneasy silence. There was raw misery uncovered before their eyes. United as they were in many things, they were divided upon this. Somehow it seemed to Robin as though the joy of the evening were over. The hardness in Counihan's face and the sternness of his words brought her back to that dim tortured figure on the Cross, and to the man who knelt before it. She felt again the shadow of despair. Over Jim, too, depression came. It was nearly eleven o'clock, the evening was over, and there would not be another for goodness knows how long. Up to this night he had plunged into his work, and in it drowned the power to think; now, for a few moments, he saw it from a distance as it were. A sense of its utter hopelessness swept over him. Here he was making a fuss about Maisie and Charlie, but there were so many like them. He came across them in his visits week by week. They were not worrying about the Church or about their sin. They came to church in batches of four and six to be married on Bank Holiday mornings and never came near again. If it turned out tolerable they stuck, if it didn't they hitched up with somebody else. There were thousands living in sin. His own wife was living in sin, and he could not save her.

As thoughts like these raced through his mind the stern look on his face melted into the torment of despair, and Robin, who had been watching him,

took his hand in hers and laid it against her face. He left it there for a moment and then suddenly jumped up.

“I must pay a sick visit before I go to bed,” he said. “I’m sure you must both be tired and would like to rest, specially this child,” putting his arm round Robin. “I’ll show you your rooms.”

The natural thing would have been for the two friends to stay up talking after Robin had gone to bed, but it was clear that for some reason or other Jim did not want it. The truth was that he could not have borne it. He was to go through Gethsemane that night. He had no special vocation for celibacy, and had never professed to one. He had not been one of those ardently Catholic young men who explain with infinite wisdom the necessity of a celibate priesthood, and then suddenly get married. The coming of his two friends had roused in him a hungry longing for home, and all that home means. His soul loathed afresh the mean grey squalor of the slum, and the grim brutality of its teeming life. An agony of loneliness came down upon him, and the black melancholy which is a sensitive Irishman’s special hell threatened to engulf him. The sick visit was an excuse for action. There was, indeed, the dying woman, but he had been twice, and need not have gone again that day. The necessity for work was on him. He needed other people’s sorrow as an antidote to the poison of his own.

He showed them to their rooms, and as Robin, his kiss still fresh upon her cheek, sat on her bedside looking at the violets he had bought, she heard him open the door and pass out. She could not sleep but lay awake, her thoughts in a whirl, half happy, half sad, half Peter, but that the more distant half, and half poor Uncle Jim. She could not get out of her mind the sadness of his face as he sat by the fire. After about three-quarters of an hour she heard the door open, and he came back locking and bolting it after him. She must have dozed off then for two hours or more, for when she woke the church clock was striking two. She sat up suddenly wide awake and became conscious of someone moving downstairs. Backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards the footsteps went pacing the room below.

“It’s Uncle Jim, and he has not gone to bed yet,” she thought. He had not dared to go to bed. For once the antidote had not worked. He had ministered to the sorrow of others but it had not dulled the aching of his own. He had been a real comfort to the poor cancerous woman and had seen her piteous eyes light up as he came to her bedside. He had brought Peace and left it behind him, but there was no peace for him. After months of stern and successful repression the natural impulses were taking their revenge. The flesh was in open rebellion against the spirit and he was torn in two. He strove to pray, but his thoughts

wandered. He began to read, but it was the same. He lay down to sleep, but started up in terror of the temptations that assailed him as soon as he ventured to relax. He was neither morbid nor in any way abnormal, but the task of sublimating the energy of natural affection is no easy one for a man of his temperament. He was walking a way which had been trodden by millions before him, and will be trodden by millions more. There is no respect in which individual men and women differ so widely from one another as in the strength of their natural affections. At this point body and mind, flesh and spirit, are so closely and inextricably intertwined that it is impossible and dangerous to separate them even in thought. To say that this struggle was a struggle with physical desire would be untrue. If that had been the whole meaning of it, it would not have been so bitter or so fierce. It was part of a life-struggle to organize and redirect the whole energy of his affections into a channel other than the natural, into a supernatural channel if you will. This battle for self-mastery and the higher life must in some form and measure be fought by all men and women, and is the key to character; but there are many for whom temperament, circumstances, and the sin of others makes the conflict a literally desperate one, and Counihan was one of these. Those for whom the struggle is comparatively easy are all too prone to lay down the law for those, among them some of the best, for whom it is almost impossibly hard. The last thing any competent physician of the soul would have advised this splendidly vital man to attempt was celibacy, and it was that very lot which had been forced upon him, under the most distressing of all circumstances.

His vocation as a priest and the crowd of children round him did provide him with an outlet denied to many others, and by means of prayer and self-discipline he lived for the most part victoriously, but there were days and nights when it was life and death, and he had come to one of these.

For an hour or more Robin lay awake listening to that restless pacing up and down, then she made up her mind to go to him. She jumped up, and, slipping on a blue silk dressing-gown and some slippers, crept downstairs with a candle in her hand. She found him leaning on the chimney-piece, his head sunk in his arms.

“Uncle Jim,” she said.

He turned, and for a moment she thought he was going to be angry with her, and her heart stood still, he looked so wild and wretched.

But he said gently: “What is it, little Robin? Can’t you sleep? Have I kept you awake? What a selfish beast I am.”

“Oh, it isn’t me, Uncle Jim,” she said, tears coming into her eyes; “it’s you

that matters.” She was so relieved that he was not angry, and so sorry for him that the tears splashed over and rolled down her cheeks as she stood before him with the lighted candle in her hand.

“Let me make you a cup of tea, dear, and I’d like one too.”

“Would you?” he said, smiling. “Well, you shall have one. We can boil the water on this gas ring. I’ll get the things from the kitchen.” He hurried out, and in a moment or two came back with the tray on which Mrs. Spalding had set out the cups for the morning. Robin put the kettle on and sat down on the floor at his side, tucking her little bare feet underneath her dressing-gown. She made him tea, lighted a cigarette for him, and talked about Ranchester, just the ordinary kindly gossip of home. A sense of peace came over him, and the awful loneliness and dread of temptation were banished. Silence fell upon them, and after a while Robin realized that he had fallen into an exhausted sleep. She tucked a rug about him, put out the light and left him. The moonlight through the window fell upon his face, and as she turned to look back at him before she closed the door, a spasm of pain passed over it. She crept up to bed, cried a little, and soon was sound asleep.

CHAPTER IX

BLIND LOVE

Peter Craddock looked up from *The Times*, which he was turning over in a desultory fashion, to see his mother coming towards him over the Deanery lawn. He lay with his feet up in a very comfortably cushioned arm-chair under the shadow of a beautiful old beech tree. It was the middle of June, and, after heavy rain in the night, the morning was cloudless and warm. The delicious smell of an English garden rejoicing and refreshed was in the air, the smooth, perfectly kept lawn glistened like a diamond-spangled carpet in the sun, and there were roses, roses everywhere. Old Dr. Slopes loved them as a fond man loves his wife. He was standing now, talking to his head gardener, at the door of the Deanery, a tall, dignified figure with the sunshine on his head of snow-white hair, and he nodded smiling at Mrs. Craddock as she passed. He had specially asked that Peter might use the garden as his own during his convalescence, and his hospitable, kindly soul was satisfied to see his invitation appreciated.

Mrs. Craddock had a letter in her hand. She was a small, faded little woman with the story of two great sorrows written on her face. Her two eldest children, a boy and a girl, had died of typhoid fever within a few weeks of one another, and for some years she had been desolate, until Peter was born. Her love for him was idolatry pure and simple; he was the soul and centre of her life. Even her religion, which was sincere enough, consisted mainly of gratitude for him. Gentle and refined as she was, she would have fought for him like a tigress, and died without a murmur to save him an hour's pain. For the past two months, once she knew for certain that Peter was going to get better, she had enjoyed a positive and ecstatic happiness, which she had never dreamed could be hers to feel again. Peter's weakness had made him utterly dependent upon her, and she recovered the joy of his childhood. He was once more a baby crying out his need. While he was really ill Peter was well content to accept her devotion, and, it must be confessed, to put it to the test. He was not a good patient. Like many men of undoubted physical courage, he was fretful under pain, and his irritability vented itself mainly on his mother. He had always been subject to fits of bad temper, and these had grown worse during his convalescence. Only the day before he had been furious with the poor little woman over a letter which, owing to the forgetfulness of a maid-servant, had not been posted. She had cried quietly to herself going to bed because he had not kissed her good night, and had refused help going upstairs

to his room. She was all anxiety to please him now, and was hurrying with the letter which had just arrived by the second post.

“A letter for you, darling,” she called out as she came near, waving it in her hand.

Peter took it and looked at the address. He took no notice of the kiss his mother bent to give him, and it lighted on his hair instead of on his cheek as she had intended. A shadow of disappointment passed over her face.

“I hope it’s a nice cheery letter, dearie,” she said. “I see it is from France.”

“No. It’s only business,” Peter grunted with a frown. He was both excited and afraid. The letter was from Juliette. Nothing had passed between them since his accident. He had expected to hear from her, and for some time had watched the post with very mixed feelings. In some moods he wanted a letter, and in others he dreaded one. There were times when he craved for the thrill and excitement of those December days, and others when his one desire was to bury them in oblivion. He knew that if he renewed the relationship with Juliette he must surrender the heroic rôle he enjoyed playing at home, and throw away the worship in little Robin’s eyes. Ever since the morning following Jim Counihan’s restless night when she had come shyly towards his bed in the London nursing-home, Robin had waged increasingly successful war with Juliette in his thoughts. It was not really a battle between flesh and spirit, or a conflict of higher with lower love. In any true sense of the word there was little or nothing of love, or capacity for it in his heart. It was just that each ministered to his desires in different moods. At all times it was only what he wanted that counted for anything with him. He was always the complete egotist. Consideration for the happiness of anyone else never entered his mind at all. The sight of Juliette’s writing revived in him now the desire of her presence. He was dying to open the letter, but he must get rid of his mother first. To his dismay she seated herself on a chair near by. She, poor thing, wanted to make up the difference of the night before, and be happy again.

“Is Robin coming for you this morning, dear?” she asked, trying to make an opening tactfully.

A bright idea came to Peter.

“Yes,” he said with a smile, and in his most charming manner, “she ought to be here almost immediately,” and he looked at his wrist-watch, “and I say, Mumsie, would you mind making us up some sandwiches and things? We planned if it was fine to picnic on Bellarmine Hill, and I forgot to ask you.”

His mother was delighted. What a dear boy he was, and everything seemed

to be going well between him and Robin. If he married her he might live near Ranchester because of Mr. Peterson, and that would be lovely for her. She jumped up at once.

“Of course, dearest,” she said. “I’ll go and tell cook now.”

She leaned over him, and this time he lifted his face and returned her kiss affectionately, and she went off with joy singing in her heart.

Peter ripped the envelope open eagerly and something wrapped in cotton-wool fell out upon his knee. It was a little jewelled charm, the only present Juliette had ever received from him. The letter that accompanied it was written in a curiously illegible but firm and decided hand, innocent of punctuation of any kind, and running in a reckless slope from left to right.

“I thought I’d leave you to write first but never a line and now I know why. I met the pig-faced Sir Edward the other day and he let it out about the little schoolgirl. You’re a liar, like all the rest. I suppose you’ve been in a funk for fear I’d butt in and spoil the lover’s dream. But not this child. I wish her joy of you. I only hope for her sake you’ll either become a really artistic liar or learn to speak the truth, and for God’s sake don’t mix your drinks. Cheerio and happy days.

“JULIETTE.”

Peter sat staring at the letter, and seeing not the writing but the writer. Even through this careless scrawl she had succeeded in coming back to him. It was just her, every line of it. It was as though she were standing there before him. The letter set his senses tingling and whipped old longings into life, but it wounded and piqued his self-conceit. It stung and stirred him, kissed and kicked him at the same time. It was so damnably honest, clear-sighted, and true, and smashed all sham to bits. For the last five months he had lived in sham, lived in it until he had almost come to believe in its reality. The picture of himself which was held up before him by those whose love surrounded him he had almost come to believe in as the truth. He was the heroic aviator, the inventive genius, whose dauntless courage, and passion for his work, had almost cost him his life. He was the bright star of Ranchester, a made man with the world at his feet. He had enough money to live on, and live well, even though he never did another stroke of work in his life. There was so much truth in all this that it easily became reality to him, and if ever an uncomfortable doubt invaded his mind about the real reason of his crash, a doubt as to whether too much whisky had not more to do with it, than too much work, the

doubt was easily dismissed. Was not the whisky due to overwork? Was not the whole Juliette affair, in fact, due to his being overstrained, and having had no proper recreation? Any man might have fallen into it. Ought he to tell Robin? What would be the good of that? She could not understand, and would make a mountain out of a mole-hill. She was only a child after all, and he was a man of the world. It would only distress her, and perhaps she might cease to worship him. He shrank from that, for Robin's adoration had become a necessity to him. That was what made him dread anything leaking out, and had caused him once or twice to take up his pen to write to Juliette definitely breaking off. But that was unnecessary now. She had done it for him. It was all over. All over; she chucked him up as carelessly as she had taken him on. That hurt. Memories began to crowd in upon him. Memories of delirious hours when he had held her in his arms, and she had seemed the only thing worth living for. His wounded pride strove to avenge itself. Anyway, she had surrendered to him absolutely. Whatever she might say now, she had adored him then. This letter was bluff, of course it was, a jealous woman's bluff. She was smarting inside all right, you bet your life. Serve her right too, damn her. What was she, after all?—Soiled goods, not good enough for him. The thought of a stinging reply which would put the laugh on his side gripped him for a moment. "Soiled goods," he would put that in at the end. But, after all, better not. He was well rid of her. Little Robin knocked her into a cocked hat. She was going to be a glorious woman, and she was his. He knew she was; he had seen it in her eyes.

The letter brought out the very worst there was in Peter, the ugly vein of grossness and the overweening self-conceit which effectively prevented him from having any real sense of humour. He could laugh, but was utterly incapable of laughing at himself. As he sat there staring out across the garden, with a look on his face half a smile and half a sneer, it was as though the mask of youth were down for a moment, and he was revealed for what he was, a repulsive person. Presently he sprang up from his chair, threw down the little charm, grinding it beneath his foot, and, taking the letter and envelope, tore them into little pieces which he stuffed into the pocket of his coat

"Well, that's that," he muttered, "and good riddance of bad rubbish. I've had my fun and enjoyed it. Now for the little Robin."

He took his case out of his pocket, selected a cigar, cut off the end with a gold cigar-cutter, and was just lighting it when he looked up and saw Robin coming towards him across the lawn. She had on a white silk jumper, wide open at the throat, white skirt, shoes and stockings, and carried a yellow knitted jacket over one arm, a shady straw hat in one hand. Peter noticed with a

thrill the promise of the woman in the lovely smiling child, the fuller curve of her bosom, the shy dawn of deeper feeling in her eyes.

He was still a graceless animal within, but as by magic his face was changed, and he was the charming boy.

“Ready, Peterkins?” she said, standing before him with her hands behind her back, her face lifted up to his.

He put his hands on her shoulders and stood looking down at her for a moment. The adoration which she could not hide was balm to his wounded self-esteem. He had never seemed so splendid and so handsome to her, and she had never been so desirable to him. In appearance they made a pretty picture standing on the sun-kissed lawn. The reality was about as pretty as a bird being mauled by a bear. Men say God does not suffer. If He can look at the reality of pictures such as this and remain unmoved, He must be the Devil himself.

He caught her to him and kissed her on the lips.

“Been waiting ages, you darling,” he said.

“So sorry, but I was as quick as ever I could be. I simply tore back from dancing, nearly knocked the policeman over at the Cross.”

They were walking across the lawn arm in arm. Peter had not asked her to marry him yet. He had put it off, partly because he dreaded lest something might crop up about Juliette, and partly because things were so delicious as they were. The coming of love into this child’s life had been wonderful to watch, and he had enjoyed awakening her. She on her part was so utterly and completely happy that she had been content to let things drift.

The course of true love had seemed so exquisitely smooth. She felt somehow that this was to be a great day, and that perhaps she might come back from their picnic engaged. For one thing, Peter had been insistent that they should go to Bellarmine Hill, and, two or three days before, he had mentioned casually, but with a smile in his eyes, that he thought of buying a house out there which belonged to Sir Edward Compton, who had offered it to him cheap. She knew the house, and had often admired it. It stood on the very top of the hill and commanded a glorious view. She had been dreaming of it since, and thinking of summer evenings there with Peter.

“We’ll take the Bolshie, and I’ll drive,” Peter said.

“Oh, are you sure you are fit, dear?” Robin asked, looking at him anxiously.

Since his accident Robin had been driving him out, and when he had

suggested the week before that he should drive she had persuaded him to wait, partly because she was genuinely anxious lest he suffer from the strain, and partly because she liked mothering him, and doing things for him. But Peter was masterful to-day. His pride had been piqued and he wanted to assert himself.

“Oh, I’m all right now, little girl,” he said, “don’t you worry. I’ll have you out at the hill in two shakes. The Bolshie’s all ready and Mum has put us up some sandwiches and things.”

She gave in happily enough. She liked his being masterful too. He was such a baby and such a man, and both had their hold on her heart. They passed in at the Craddocks’ back door and through the hall to the front where the Bolshie stood gleaming red and silver, resplendent in the sun.

Mrs. Craddock appeared bearing a picnic basket.

“So here you are, dear,” she said to Robin, kissing her.

“Peter darling, don’t you think you’d better take your overcoat? It might rain and——”

“I don’t want a coat,” said Peter, “it’s grilling hot.”

“Yes, but it gets colder, and it might cloud over.”

“Oh, don’t be so fussy, Mum,” Peter said, taking the basket from her, “I’m all right.”

It was not a kind speech, and Robin felt it wasn’t and shrank from it a little, but she excused it to herself on the ground of his illness. “Poor boy, he isn’t quite himself yet,” she thought. She gave Mrs. Craddock an extra hug and kiss to make up for it, and got into the car.

Peter took the wheel with a conscious air of mastery and swung the car round with a careless ease and certainty that expressed his unacknowledged desire to reassure himself of his own dignity and impress Robin with his skill.

She took it as a sign of returning health and was glad.

All that day these two were destined to play a game of cross purposes with every appearance of mutual understanding. Juliette was never really absent. She had a finger in every move, and, though Peter would have denied fiercely and with contempt that she could influence him at all, it was she accounted for the dangerous skill with which he shot through the traffic and for the extra ten miles an hour on the open road.

“Peterkins, you’ll be the death of us,” Robin said, laughing. She was not

really afraid, and rather enjoyed the rush through the warm, scented air. Her cry, as the car bounded over a piece of bumpy road, was rather a tribute of admiration than an expression of fear.

“Frightened, little girl?” he said, slowing down. He was immensely pleased with himself and enjoyed the homage in her eyes. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking, and I always drive fast.” Juliette tapped him on the shoulder as he spoke, and he heard her gurgling laugh. He shook her off angrily.

“No, I wasn’t really frightened,” Robin said. “I wouldn’t ever be with you. Still, we’re in no hurry, and it is so lovely.”

They had just turned a corner and were running down a steep hill from which the first view of the Minverns opened out before them.

“Yes, by Jove, isn’t it?” Peter answered. “It’s good to be alive.”

In a few minutes they came to the “Vernon Arms.” Here there was a sharp turn to the right, and then immediately the steep incline of Bellarmine Hill. Peter made a wild, blood-curdling shriek on the Klaxon, shot round the corner and up the hill at a tremendous speed. If Robin could have heard it, what the horn was shrieking was “Soiled goods. Not good enough for me. I’ll show them who’s who.” But no one understood it, not even Peter himself.

They drew up outside the gate of Eagles Crag, and he looked down at Robin with a triumphant smile. He had determined to do the hill on top and he had done it, and was satisfied.

“You are much better, aren’t you, Peter?” she said, looking up at him shyly. “And I’m so glad, it’s lovely having you well and strong again.”

“Fit as a fiddle,” Peter said, putting his arm about her shoulders. “Come and see the house. I want to know if you like it, because——” He broke off to open the gate in the wall with a key for which he searched in the big side pocket of his light sports jacket. As he pulled it out some little pieces of paper fluttered unnoticed to the ground.

A moment later they stood hand-in-hand looking out upon one of the fairest views in England. Bellarmine Hill shoots suddenly up a thousand feet above sea-level. As they stood looking west they could see stretched out beneath them ten miles of beautifully wooded, softly undulating country. On their right the horseshoe of the Minvern Hills, soft blue in the summer haze, limited and yet perfected the scene. Robin knew and loved them in all their changing moods. Far away in the distance the towers of Ranchester, white as marble, shone through the thin smoke-veil that marked the town, and to the right of them a glimpse of the river flashed silver in the sun. They stood by a

garden seat near which a great laburnum tree sent down a shower of gold to touch the purple of the rhododendrons underneath.

Peter's arm was tight round Robin, and the consciousness of his power over her was sweet to him as he looked down into her face. She had taken off her hat, and was gazing straight in front of her with shyly happy eyes.

"Isn't it just heavenly?" she said softly.

"Like to live here always?" he said, putting his hand under her chin and turning her face up to his.

"Yes." Only one word but with all any man could wish for, and only a decent man could deserve, shining in her eyes.

"With me?"

She turned in his arms, and taking one of his hands, pressed it against her cheek and, bravely innocent and surrendered, said almost in a whisper: "I'd like to live anywhere with you, Peter dear, anywhere on earth, but I'd like to live here best of all."

Triumph shouted in Peter's heart, triumph of conquest, and self-respect restored, thrilled through and through, with passionate desire, but not transformed or redeemed from utter selfishness by any sense of gratitude for her glad self-giving.

He kissed her long and fiercely, abandoning restraint. Far away at the back of little Robin's mind, dimly sounding down the distances of memory, someone called a warning: "But there is something what's wrong, something as drives girls mad, Miss Robin, so they don't know rightly what they're doing!" Miles and miles away—in the depths of the unconscious—Maisie, a frantic Maisie with frightened eyes, cried a warning to her friend. Robin did not know she heard, but some faint echo reached her and she broke suddenly away. A momentary pain stabbed her, just for a second, and then was gone.

It was Juliette who had cursed that kiss, unwillingly, unwittingly, and unknown to Peter himself. It was but the faintest, vaguest shadow of a curse, and yet it was there.

A moment after little Robin was perfectly happy resting in his arms. Peter was not satisfied, but something warned him to be careful. She was a little Puritan, he thought, but he would soon cure her of that. He would get it fixed up now, and marry her as soon as he could. They turned and sat on the seat, she leaning back with her head on his shoulder.

"You won't make me wait long, Robin," he whispered. "I don't want to

wait. I want you now.”

A shadow passed over her face.

“I want you too, dear,” she said, “but I’m thinking of Daddy; he’s only got me, you know, and——”

“But that’s why I thought of this,” Peter interrupted; “it’s only a quarter of an hour out in the car. We could have a room for him, and he could come as often as he liked.”

She lifted her face up to his with a lovely smile of gratitude.

“You are a darling, Peter, to think of it, and it would be lovely. I dare say Aunt Mary would come and look after Daddy. She’s a dear, and we could all be happy together.”

He kissed her and for some time they sat in silence. Peter felt it was wiser not to press her further then. He would get his way before the afternoon was out, and the present was very satisfying.

“Let’s go and look over the house,” he suggested presently, “or are you hungry for lunch and shall we have that first?”

“I don’t want to move from here, ever. I’d like to sit like this for years and years,” Robin said in a dreamy voice of perfect bliss, “but I’d love to see the house too.”

“Come on, then,” said Peter.

Together they wandered from room to room, Robin wild with delight. It was a modern black-and-white house beautifully decorated inside. The three reception rooms on the ground floor each commanded, from a different angle and through large windows, the exquisite view of the Minvern Valley, and there was a lovely white-tiled kitchen which delighted Robin’s heart. They went upstairs into a spacious room with two windows looking out west and south and taking in the whole stretch of the hills.

“This would be ours,” Peter said, squeezing her tightly to him.

“Won’t it be scrumptious waking up and looking out on that?” she answered shyly.

It was half-past one o’clock by the time they had completed their explorations, and they both began to feel hungry. They went and fetched the hamper from the car. There was a white cloth packed in it, and all they needed for a picnic lunch, and they sat side by side on the lawn and munched their sandwiches. Robin was perfectly happy. It was enough for her, this glorious

scene and the presence of her beloved. Peter's happiness was not so complete. In reality they had not much in common; their mutual passion was almost the only link that bound them, terrific in its power now, blinding them to all else, but, unless constantly strengthened by physical contact, liable to wear thin, and leave them as they were poles asunder in mind and spirit. Neither of them was conscious of that now, but in Peter the desire to capture and possess her utterly, and establish himself master of her life, was working all the time. Pictures—half-formed, pictures of taking her to London and showing her off, and of Juliette reading about her in the fashion papers, and being hurt, flitted through his mind and mingled with strong feelings of desire.

He took her in his arms again.

"When is it going to be, little lady?" he said, putting his hand on the softness of her throat, tanned where the sun had caught it. "July?"

"Oh, Peter, that's too soon."

"Well, August?"

"Oh, I'd like to have one last holiday with Daddy and Uncle Jim, and we always go in August," she said, teasingly.

"Bother Uncle Jim," Peter said with a frown.

"Don't be a jealous old goose," Robin said fondly, putting up her hand and pulling his nose. "Couldn't it be September?"

Peter gave in. After all, it was not long to wait, and he doubted if he could square up everything much sooner. He had got his way and was satisfied, and besides, he wanted to make love to her now.

The intensity of his passion made Robin deliriously happy, but, somewhere deep within her, a little afraid. She suggested a walk in the woods, and they wandered down the hill into the gloriously cool shade. They talked of their new home and made plans. Peter was very masterful and efficient, and Robin submissive and easy to please. There was no conscious cloud in their sky.

"Shall I tell your father to-night?" Peter asked, as they sat in the car ready to start home.

"Oh, no, let's keep it our secret for to-night," Robin said. "Tell them to-morrow. I'll meet you in the rose garden after dinner to say good night."

When she got to her room, with Peter's kisses still hot upon her cheeks, she felt that she could not sleep. She decided to write to Uncle Jim to tell him, and sat down at the open window.

“MY DEAR OLD UNCLE JIM,—

“I am the happiest girl in all the world. Peter and I are engaged, and Peter has bought a lovely house out at Bellarmine so we can be near Daddy. It is perfectly gorgeous out there, and you can come and stay as often as you like, and look at the hills and forget all about London and the poor people. That is one thing I dream of specially. We are to be married in September. I will tell you the day later on and you must keep it free, because of course, you and Daddy must marry us. Oh, dear Uncle Jim, do pray God to bless us and make me a good little wife for him. He is such a dear. Your prayers are better than mine. Peter is quite strong again now, and he is—but I mustn’t try to tell you what he is or I would go on all night, and it is late now. All my love to you and kind thoughts to dear old Cecil.

“Ever your
“LITTLE ROBIN.”

She sat for some time dreaming with the letter in her hand, then undressed slowly and knelt down to say her prayers. She tried hard to pray earnestly, but it was all thanksgiving. Peter got mixed up with God and God with Peter.

It was not long before she fell happily to sleep.

Peter reached his room and sank down in an arm-chair, stretching out his legs before him. He was triumphant, but smarting still from the memory of Juliette’s letter. During his convalescence he had been drinking nothing beyond the glass or two of wine the doctor prescribed, but lately the craving for drink had come over him again. His room was arranged as a sitting-room with a screen hiding the bed. Locked in a cupboard behind it he had a bottle of whisky and some soda.

“I must have a drink,” he said to himself.

He went over to the cupboard, took out the whisky and soda, and mixing himself a stiff drink, stood with the glass in his hand looking out of the window.

“For God’s sake, don’t mix your drinks.” “Pshaw!” he said. “That’s done with. Here’s to the little Robin and a damned good time.” He drained the glass and set it down upon the table.

CHAPTER X

SOULS IN THE DARK

“I will have nothing whatever to do with it. The attitude of the Church on this matter is quite clear, and I have no right to differ from it even if I desired to, which I don’t.”

Jim Counihan sat in his study chair, and his remarks were addressed to an informal meeting of his Mission staff. Opposite to him in the arm-chair was Joyce Wetherby, dark-haired, grey-eyed, with a round face like a beautifully intelligent and humorous dutch doll. She sat now with utter bewilderment in her face, looking at a paper she held in her hands. She was simply but tastefully dressed in brown, and, wearing her clothes with an air, looked what she was, the very best type of modern girl. Born with her bread buttered on both sides, and a good thick layer of jam on top of that, she might have sailed away into the world of wasters, and never done a hand’s turn for anyone in her life. But the war, and the death of a much-loved brother, had touched and roused her, child as she was then, to a sense of service and of shame for the condition of the English slums. After leaving the fabulously expensive school to which she had been sent, she took a course at the London School of Economics, and came down to the Mission as a whole-time voluntary worker to help with women and girls. She was frank, fearless, honest, with a good brain, a kind heart, and an unfailing sense of humour.

Next to her, on a chair imported from the kitchen, sat Captain Dayborn, D.S.O., M.C., a tall one-armed man with a face scarred and lined with suffering, but lighted by a pair of blue undaunted eyes which proclaimed him still an unconquerable soul. The eldest son of old Sir Charles Dayborn, a wealthy shipowner, he had come in as patron and helper to the Mission partly through love of his own ex-servicemen, and partly in opposition to his father, a die-hard leader of die-hards, who had withdrawn his support, amounting to some two hundred a year, on the ground that Jim’s attitude in some recent trouble on the docks had revealed him as a secret Socialist. His interest in and enthusiasm for the work, it must be confessed, had grown warmer because of Joyce. The two were always sparring with one another, Joyce posing as a female Bolshevik, and Dayborn supporting the public-spirited Christian capitalist point of view. Now and then, however, especially when the Captain, affectionately termed the Honourable and Gallant, or Gallant for short, was hitching his overcoat on over his empty sleeve, there would come a look into

Joyce's eyes which showed that a reconciliation between Labour and Capital was not so impossible as it appeared to be.

On the couch under the window sat Dick Raymond, Jim's curate, a silent, solid young man, who was born to be a carpenter, but whom Christ had made a priest. His power was all in his hands. He never did a foolish thing, and never said a wise one; indeed, he very seldom said anything at all. His preaching made kind angels weep, and drove human beings to despair or sleep. He was in charge of Scouts, managed the Mission theatre, taught carpentry, and played classical music from memory by the hour on Sunday night after church.

The party was completed by Cecil Weyman, who was at Guy's, and helped Jim in his spare time. One of his dreams still stood, and he was preparing for the mission-field; the other he was trying to count as dead, though his devotion to Robin burned bright and clean as ever. He stood now with his back against the chimney-piece smoking a cigarette with a puzzled look on his face.

A mother's clinic, the prospectus of which Joyce held in her hand, had lately been established in the district by a committee composed of two very distinguished physicians, a well-known publicist, and several ladies of title. Here information about the best modern methods of contraception was being given in such cases as the doctor in charge thought were in need of it. The question had been raised by Joyce as to what attitude the Mission staff were to take up with regard to it.

"I hate the whole business," concluded Jim, a little irritably, "and I certainly do not want to discuss it in present company."

"Is it because of me, Padre?" Joyce intervened, "because that is nonsense, you know. It's one of the most important questions of the day, and I've discussed it with all sorts of people. Besides, it's me that's up against it all the time. These poor women keep coming to me for advice, and what am I to say?"

"Tell 'em not to touch it with a barge-pole, if they're coming to the Mission," Jim said firmly. "I can't have anything to do with it."

"But, Padre, I don't——" Joyce began.

Here Cecil Weyman's eager stammer cut her short.

"I—I d-don't understand your attitude a b-bit, Padre," he said. "What are these women to do? There's that Mrs. Allen d-down in Fish Street, she ought never to have had children at all. They're just rotten with consumption the whole lot of 'em. She's had four and she's terrified of the fifth. W-what's she to d-do?"

“Well, that miserable husband of hers must control himself, that’s all.”

“B-but how do you mean c-c-control himself? Do you mean that they’re not to live as man and wife at all? B-because that’s all there is for it, if they’re to have no more children. W-what earthly chance is there of that? You know the man.”

“Well, how have people managed in the past? We’ve done without these things, and trusted God for thousands of years. What’s the sudden necessity for them now?”

“They didn’t manage in the past,” Joyce answered. “They just went on having children to die of disease. ‘They ’ad seven and buried five and knew what trouble was.’ That’s what Mrs. Allen will do now, if she doesn’t go to the clinic or die herself.”

“Well, better that than get mixed up with this vile business, and lose her soul. That’s what I’m concerned with.”

Counihan was as near to being angry as he ever was, and there was tension in the atmosphere. His whole being revolted from the subject, and he loathed discussing it.

Cecil Weyman went scarlet, and for a moment he could say nothing. The others, seeing his distress, waited for him. He was the doctor among them, and had some right to speak. He was a coming man too, and they all respected his brains, besides loving him for the goodness of his heart.

“I—I think that’s ab-abominable, P-Padre,” he got out at last, speaking with an accentuated stammer in his nervous eagerness. “It’s nothing b-but wickedness to talk about saving her soul by b-b-bringing those wretched little kids into the world. There are two of them in and out of the sanatorium now, and the last one turns me sick to look at. They live in those two stinking rooms all huddled together. It’s d-disgusting to—to think of their having more children. I d-don’t understand you at all.”

“That’s just it,” Jim returned, frowning. “People want the poor to stop having children to save themselves the trouble and sacrifice of providing them with decent conditions to live in. It’s a cheap way out. Cheap and beastly.”

“I’m with you there,” Joyce said emphatically. “That’s absolutely true. I was at a conference the other day when this business came up, and there was a man there who gave me the creeps. Said religion was all sentimental nonsense, and talked about the poor as if they were rabbits. He wanted birth control because he despised them. Said it was no good building houses, it only encouraged them to have more children. He had nasty thick lips and piggy

eyes—ugh! I hated him. He made me see bright crimson red. I told 'im off something 'orrid.”

The last words which were spoken in perfect Cockney made Captain Dayborn grin.

“I know the sort,” he said, nodding, “think they’ve nothing to do but set up their wretched clinics all over the shop, and everything in the garden’ll be lovely. They’re fools, and nasty beasts into the bargain, some of ’em. But you know, Padre,” he continued, opening his cigarette-case and taking out a cigarette with one hand and his knee, in the easy, swift, and dexterous way that always thrilled Joyce to watch, “I’m sure you’re wrong about this. Fact is, my sister’s in this. She showed me some letters she got from working women. There are cases where something’s got to be done. God! it’s awful what some of these women have to put up with.”

“Women have always had to put up with it. It’s no new thing,” said Jim, looking down to avoid the eyes of the others.

“But it’s all wrong,” Cecil broke out again. “It’s always b-been wrong. Women haven’t just p-put up with it. They’ve struggled against it always and resorted to—to dreadful means of escape. You know they have. And it’s worse now. In the past the children d-died, died like flies. Dirt, d-disease, and epidemics carried the weak ones off. But now we keep ’em alive, p-patch ’em up in hospitals, and send ’em out to p-pass their diseases on. Mentally defective girls go on having children year after year, and we know that’s hereditary. The p-prisons are crammed with the children of these d-disgusting marriages, and we send chaplains to look after their souls. That eldest Fisher girl d-down in Castle Street is going to be married to Dick Willis. She’s a case. She’s not fit to have children. She’s got one illegitimate, half-witted thing, and I suppose you’ll marry her to save her soul, and encourage her to have more. It’s sinful—right down sinful, P-Padre; it sickens me of the Church.”

Jim remembered with a miserable feeling that this was true. He had called the banns for the second time the Sunday before. He turned to the desk to get the banns book, and avoid the accusation in Cecil’s eyes. His mind was all torn and divided about the question.

“God knows it’s bad enough as it is,” he muttered presently, “but if these things are to be allowed, it will be impossible to keep boys and girls straight at all. Once you take away the fear of consequences, natural consequences, they won’t have any sense of responsibility whatever.”

“But, Padre, surely that is a hideous idea. Putting up little children as a kind of barrier to keep people straight. If they’re going wrong, isn’t it better for

them not to bring children into the world that way? If they only keep straight for fear of consequences, what on earth is religion for? Oughtn't we to give them a better and higher reason than that?"

Joyce Wetherby spoke pleadingly. She had an enormous admiration and respect for Counihan. She was all in a fog as to her own religion, but the passion of self-sacrifice in this man's life had almost compelled her to believe that his feet were set on solid rock. It was this conviction that had brought her down to the Mission, and Jim's attitude on this matter troubled her greatly. Just then the door opened, and Mrs. Spalding appeared, bearing a tray upon which were cups and saucers and an enormous brown teapot. She was greeted by a chorus of approval.

"Oh, Mrs. Spalding, you are an angel, with all your wings, completely grown," Joyce said, getting up from her chair and coming forward to pour out.

Mrs. Spalding grunted. She was not sure that she approved of Joyce. She could not help being partly won by the frankness and commonsense of the girl, but her stockings were the wrong color, they were silk, and there was too much of them. Moreover, she was much too pretty to be trusted without a long apprenticeship.

"T' angels wouldn't be no use i' this place, Miss Wetherby, unless they could scrub. I never followed such an a mucky lot i' my life as them childer," and then turning to Jim, "That there girl from t' Allens' wants to see you. She's on t' mat in t' 'all."

Jim jumped up and hurried out.

"Two letters for the Padre," Joyce said, taking them off the tray and handing them to Cecil to put on his desk. Cecil could not help seeing that the letter on the top was addressed in Robin's writing, and was from Ranchester. A letter from her always set his heart hammering, and it did so now. He wished it had been for him, but no such luck. There would be a message. She hardly ever forgot him—bless her.

"I wish to goodness the Padre could see sense about this," Joyce said, as she handed a cup to Gallant; "it drives me frantic. I don't want to be disloyal to him, but I can't agree with him. What is one to do?"

"Well, you know, he's in a devilish awkward fix," Dayborn replied, passing the sugar to Cecil. "The Bishops have gone all out against this, and he can't very well go back on his Colonel, can he? What?"

"But we can't go on like this," said Joyce. "The Church marries people anyhow, whether they're fit to marry or not, and then encourages them to

‘increase and multiply and replenish the earth.’ An old Johnny with a long white beard bobbed up like a Jack-in-the-box the other day and pitched that text at us in a conference. I believe God said it to Noah just after the flood, and very appropriate too. There was need of an increased birth-rate just then. It was all right for Noah, but he didn’t live in the East End, did he?”

There was a general laugh, light-hearted enough, but with a hint behind it of the miserable perplexity they all felt. Modern flippancy is often a disguise for pain, and there is sometimes more real religion in it than there was in the pompous solemnity of our Fathers.

“There’s another beastly text,” Joyce went on. “It’s in that psalm you read over these women when they come to be churched—being ‘done’ they call it. I often come with them to hold the baby, and it gives me the shudders. ‘Blessed is the man that hath his quiver full of them. They shall not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate.’ As if the poor little mite was born to be killed in wars, and women bore children for cannon fodder. Of course, they never think about it, but——”

“I’m afraid it’s pretty true as the world is now,” the Gallant interrupted. “It’s what they are. God knows how many went west altogether in this last business, and the next’ll be worse. As long as the populations go on increasing at their present pace, and in the present way, there will always be plenty of enemies in every one’s gates to keep them speaking. It’s a vicious circle fodder for cannon, and cannon for fodder. Poor devils! It’s all wrong. We breed from the worst, and kill from the best. One would think we were lunatics. War destroys the best we have, and such birth control as there is, is working in a perverted way. The people who ought to have children aren’t having them, and the people who oughtn’t to have them are. Women like this Mrs. Allen have children year after year, and lots of strong, healthy men and women in the comfortable classes would rather have a Baby Austin than a baby daughter any day.”

“I don’t care so much about that,” Joyce said, taking up the cudgels for the poor. “I don’t believe the so-called better classes are necessarily better stock. The children of the poor would be all right if we could house them properly, and give them a decent wage. But it’s these weakly mothers worn out with child-bearing, and this business of disease that makes me mad.”

“B-but the Gallant’s right,” interrupted Cecil. His mind was full of Robin’s letter, but he felt deeply about this, and for the moment even Robin took a second place.

“The fact is that b-birth control as it is, is a curse and not a blessing. It

encourages selfishness and luxury in the well-to-do, and loose-living in all classes. There's no m-moral basis for it at all, b-because there's no moral teaching. The Church is all in a fog and afraid. She doesn't teach anything constructive. It's mainly a matter of teaching and p-public opinion. We can't do much by legislation except prevent quacks and charlatans from selling and advertising poisonous things b-broadcast. We can do nothing as long as the Churches set their faces against facts and go on b-blessing immoral marriages, and encouraging the p-propagation of disease. They're always talking about self-control, but self-control's no good in half the cases. It's total abstinence or segregation we want, and what chance is there of that?"

The door opened and Jim Counihan came in looking more anxious and worried than ever.

"I've got to go round to the Allens'," he said. "Jessie says her mother is dying. From what she tells me, I'm afraid it's that wretched woman's work again. This is the third case in the last six months I've had my suspicions about. I wish I could find out who she was."

A silence fell upon them all. Cecil Weyman drew in his breath with a hissing sound like a man in pain, and, turning his back to the others, muttered: "Good God! That's it. Some c-cursed quackery failed, and she took to this. It's damnable. I hope she dies. She'd b-be better dead."

Joyce felt suddenly sick and hot with shame.

"Can't you drink your tea before you go?" she said to Jim, striving to hide the sense of outrage in her heart. "And there are two letters for you."

He took the letters, and, without looking at the addresses, crammed them into the breast of his cassock, and, waving aside the tea, was gone.

No one said anything for some time after he shut the door behind him. They were keenly conscious of one another, but were thinking their own private thoughts in the face of one of the bitterest tragedies life affords. It is common enough in slumdom, but they were not old hands, and to be brought face to face with it was terrible. Cecil's mind was in a turmoil. Experiences which had come to him lately in poor homes had touched and torn him deeply. He had heard much talk about the extent to which women in their desperation had recourse to this horrible way out, and had been sickened by the thought. Here was an actual case. It challenged his faith in the goodness of God. Why should such abominations be permitted? He thought of the cynical way he had heard the matter discussed, and raged over it. He loathed and detested the atmosphere of shameful secrecy that surrounded this subject, and longed for the open air. Science and religion reaped in this matter the most bitter

consequence of their unnatural divorce, and their separation sullied and degraded both. Mingled with, and running through, all this was wonder about Robin's letter, and disappointment that the Padre had gone off with it. A vision of Robin in pain or despair hovered vaguely at the back of his mind. Like the thoroughly decent man he was, he saw in every woman the sister of his love.

He was awakened from his reverie by Joyce Wetherby's voice. She was sitting on the arm of her chair, staring out of the window.

"I think men are beasts," she said fiercely. "There's any amount of this. I'm always hearing it."

Dayborn was standing behind her looking down at her with a light in his eyes that would have made things happen if she could have seen it. He hated her having anything to do with this squalid tragedy, and the pain in her voice made him stretch out his one arm, as though to draw her away from it, but he did not dare to touch her.

"Not all of them, my dear," he said miserably.

But Joyce was suffering keenly, and the pain made her hard. She did not answer to the appeal in his voice.

"Oh, I don't know," she said bitterly, "they're much of a muchness all over. Women pay every time."

She stood up as she spoke, and, turning round, met his eyes. The look in them made her colour up, and go hurriedly over to the table to collect the teacups.

"I must be off now," he said in some confusion. "I suppose I can't take you anywhere, can I, Miss Wetherby? I've got the beast of burden outside."

It was some little time before she answered.

"I have to see someone at S. Martin-in-the-Fields, if you are going that way, but don't go out of your way for me."

Looking round over her shoulder as she spoke, she saw that she had somehow wounded the man's shy sensitiveness. He had the look of a dog who does not know why you are angry with it. She was all repentance in a moment, and, putting down the tray, went over to him.

"Gallant," she stammered in a voice she hardly recognized as her own, "I did not mean what I said just now. I know there are some white men in the world, and—and I believe you're one."

Dayborn thanked her with his eyes, and said cheerily, to hide his emotion:

“I’ll go and get the beast ready and be waiting for you.”

Joyce took up the tray, and, calling “Cheerio” to the others, carried it out to Mrs. Spalding in the kitchen. She wanted a moment or two to collect her thoughts. She had just realized something, something about herself, and this drive might mean a decision.

Dick Raymond followed her saying that he had some reading to do. Cecil Weyman was left alone. He ought to have been reading too; but most of the morning was gone, and he did not feel that he could settle to it. The grim realities of life, as they had been revealed to him lately, had shaken his faith in God as it had never been shaken before. This problem of the cruel, haphazard, criminally careless way in which children were brought into the world was all new to him. He had never thought about it until now. Many things had conspired to force it upon his notice, and he had been studying the facts. From a Christian point of view he found them utterly bewildering. If every child born into the world was a newly created immortal soul of infinite value in the sight of God, the manner of their arrival into the world was simply staggering. Of course, if the soul was utterly independent of the body, and every new soul was pure gain even if it were born with a crippled body and a diseased brain, then disease and mental deficiency did not matter, and infantile mortality was a blessing in disguise. It hastened the journey to heaven. That, he supposed, was the Roman Catholic idea. They baptized and despatched them to paradise and encouraged the mother to have more. But he could not think of the soul like that. It seemed, in actual fact, to be all bound up with the body, and disease did matter. All sorts of sin was due to disease. This enormous infantile mortality in the world, millions of children born to die, what on earth was the meaning of that? Sheets of statistics about India and China danced before his eyes. He had an accurate memory for figures, and he read those terrible tables in the light of recent experience. Millions of mothers shrieking in pain to bring forth death upon death. Could that be God’s Will for women? He knew, of course, that Nature’s way of insuring quality was to produce an excessive quantity and then eliminate the unfit. Was Nature, then, more merciful than man, who would not suffer them to be eliminated but kept them alive and allowed them to multiply? Was the war against infantile mortality a piece of unconscious cruelty, an unwarrantable interference with Nature’s majestic mercy to the weak? The doctor soul within him rebelled against that thought. Once life was there he must fight for life. He never doubted that. But then there must be some way of preventing these wretched creatures from being born, and some way of keeping population within reasonable bounds, as science succeeded in conquering disease and early death. Was it due to sin? Ought people to be able to control themselves, and avoid it that way? Were men beasts as Joyce

Wetherby said? Doctors with whom he had discussed the question assured him that total abstinence for married people was impracticable as a means of reducing the birth-rate or preventing the propagation of disease. Was that true or was it God's Will? The Padre never faced up to it properly. He talked about self-control without attempting to define it. But quite good men, the best of men, had had enormous families. His own father had been one of fourteen. Could that go on forever? Could it go on much longer? If they attacked death by means of surgery and medicine, defeating Nature by their skill, and thus suspending the cruel, but racially healthy, action of natural selection, could they avoid attacking birth in the same way? It was a maddening question. Some men talked cynically and brutally about it, others seemed deadly afraid of it. One seemed to wander from the ostriches to the cynics, and from the cynics back to the ostriches again. Ought he to think about it at all, if it challenged his faith? But surely that was cowardice. He must face facts. There was China. He had always wanted to help in China, and Chinese population made him sick to think about. What did good women think about this? What would Robin say? She would make any subject clean. She was so—— His weary mind came back from the universal with its immensities and mysteries to the personal, and immediately real. He rested in Robin's presence, and found peace.

The door opened, and Jim came in carrying the two letters open in his hand. He went over to the chimney-piece and stood with his back to it looking down very kindly at Cecil. He knew of his love for Robin, and there was a tremendous pity for the boy in his heart.

"I'm sorry, old chap," he said. "I wish it had been you. I never liked that fellow," and he gave him Robin's letter.

Cecil took it, but saw only two sentences in it: "Peter and I are engaged"—"Kind thoughts to dear old Cecil." He sat there staring at it with a heart like lead. He must face it now. That dream must die.

Jim thought it kindest to say nothing, and went on reading the second letter, which was from the Rector.

"DEAR OLD JIM,—

"Robin tells me she has written you giving her news. I want just to add that I am perfectly satisfied in my mind now about Peter. Everyone I ask gives him an excellent character, and bears testimony to his ability, almost amounting to genius, in the inventive line. The young people are devoted to one another, and, as Peter has purchased a nice place out at Bellarmine, there seems to be no reason why they

should wait. I am delighted to have her so near. In haste and hoping to see you soon.

“Yours ever,
“BOB.”

Cecil got out of his chair, gave the letter back to Jim and went quietly out. Jim fumbled for and found a cigarette, lighted it, and muttered to himself: “I don’t know why, but I never liked that chap. I wish to God it could have been Cecil.”

Upstairs poor old Cecil gathered his books together in a maze of pain, and tried to pray for Robin and Peter.

CHAPTER XI

THE PASSING OF PETER THE SPLENDID

Robin woke with a start and a little cry. It had been such a horrible dream, and for some seconds it remained real, vivid and unfaded in her memory. She had been flying with Peter. At first it had been glorious. He had been so tender and so kind, and he managed the great machine with such perfect skill that she felt no fear. Then suddenly they seemed to be over the sea, and the plane was falling down and down towards it. She cried out and clutched at Peter, but, when he turned, it was not Peter but Will Smith, and he was drunk, and mocked at her for being afraid. She called out to Uncle Jim, and he came from nowhere, and quarrelled with Will Smith who was Peter. Uncle Jim tried to get hold of the wheel, and then they turned over and over—there was a crash, and she awoke.

She sat up frightened and weeping until she realized with a sense of joy and relief that it was only a dream, a silly dream, and that this was her wedding day. It was already dawning royal red through a floating veil of silver mist, and she watched it come behind the central tower of the Cathedral, which she could see from her window. The first faint twittering of the birds, and a cock crowing vigorously somewhere far away, came to her ears. She looked at the little travelling-clock that stood on a table by her bedside, and found that it was only six o'clock. At half-past eight she was going to Communion with Peter, and she could not sleep again. There was plenty of time to think, and she was glad. The last three months had been wonderful, but bewildering. There was a large photograph of Peter by the clock, and she took it and kissed it. It was Peter the Splendid in the uniform of the Air Force. He was such a darling, and had quite recovered now.

On the whole Peter had come through the engagement with flying colours. Little Robin had almost succeeded in conquering Juliette, and all that Juliette stood for in his plastic raw material of a character. She had brought him nearer and nearer to believing that her picture of him was the truth, and he had carried out his deception by the best of all methods, that of deceiving himself. There had been times just now and then when the grossness in him had peeped out, and just for a passing moment these troubled Robin's memory now. She was not entirely ignorant—no modern girl can well be that. She had received some carefully guarded sex instruction at the time of her Confirmation, and for the rest had picked up information in the haphazard fashion of a "well-brought-up"

child. Her friendship with Maisie had taught her something of the seamy side of life, but through it all her essential innocence remained untouched. Now and then she had worried a little over the manner of Peter's wooing, and about things that he had said. There was one night in particular when they had gone up to London to shop, and been to a theatre together. He tried very hard at supper to make her drink champagne, and she took some just to please him, but with a wry little face confided to him that she had a horror of drink, and hated the smell of it. He laughed at her and called her a little prude, and when she defended herself, and told him of the sorrow she had seen in the homes of the poor, he had been cross and sneered at goody-goody people. He drank a good deal of champagne himself, and was sulky when she instinctively shrank from his caresses in the taxi going home. They had been very near a quarrel, and for this she had blamed herself, and called herself a prig, and he had magnanimously made it up. It was when she was in this melting mood of repentance that he became excited and—but it was not much. It was more the look on his face and the tone of his voice that troubled her.

It was this drink business that had been Peter's greatest trial during his engagement. On the whole he had kept off it wonderfully. But there had been two occasions, when he had gone up to London on business by himself, and had stayed the night, that he had come back far from well, and Robin had been anxious about his health. She would have been more anxious had she known the cause of his indisposition. She attributed it to the strain of work following his illness, and this he eagerly accepted as an explanation, and almost believed himself, arguing that his getting too much to drink was the result of his weakness, and that it would not occur again. He had been particularly nice after these two outbursts. The strain of resistance to temptation was over, and he was anxious to make amends. No one but himself knew the reason of his sickness, and everyone accepted the fact that he had overstrained himself and must be careful. Robin's mind was but little troubled, and any doubts she might have had were swallowed up in delicious memories of his love.

The preparing and furnishing of the house at Bellarmine had been their great common bond. Peter was genuinely keen on all the details. He had an intelligent interest in, and some knowledge of, old furniture, and was now sufficiently well off to indulge it. He loved spending money and spent it well, with a full sense of its value, and yet generously, at any rate where himself and Robin were concerned. The two had motored round to sales, and had enjoyed the excitement of bargaining tremendously. This and their passion had effectively obscured the fact that their minds moved on utterly different levels.

The three months had passed quickly. Jim Counihan had found it

impossible after all to get off in August, so he and the Rector were going away together for three weeks immediately after the wedding.

If there was any serious pain in Robin's mind on this great morning of her life, it was due to the one fact that, although he did his best to disguise it, Uncle Jim did not like Peter, and the feeling was mutual. Peter inwardly resented her affection for Jim, and was afraid of his influence over her. Religion was all very well, but too much of it was a nuisance. It only tended to make Robin more of a Puritan—and he did not want that. He wanted the beauty of her, the lovely, laughing gaiety of the little dancing nymph, who sometimes on their picnics had jumped up and danced out the glory of her happy heart, explaining to him breathlessly what it meant. She had danced her love of him while he sat on a log and smoked, and then changed in a moment and danced the sorrow of parting from him. As a partner she was like a fairy, although she did not really care for modern dancing, and would explain to Peter why she thought it meaningless and dull. Peter at heart was a pagan, pure and simple. His hold on the Christian faith was of the vaguest, flimsiest kind, if he had any hold at all. He did not really believe in the necessity of any sort of inner discipline or restraint. He was the outcome of the modern pagan revival. A man was none the worse, he thought, for getting drunk now and then, and was only required to check any of his appetites by considerations of prudence. He could not, of course, altogether escape the Christian tradition—no one can—but he was not in any sense a Christian at heart.

Robin, on the other hand, was the product of Christianity through and through. She would have been utterly impossible without it. Before Christ came there were no women like her, and if He really died, there could be none like her again, unless and until He came again. Although they were to be married in the Cathedral, and both were nominally of the same faith, their union was essentially the same as those that must have taken place in early Christian days when the old world was in travail with the new. Therein lay the tragedy of it. Peter was an ordinary, very ordinary pagan. Robin was rather a high-class Christian. There are thousands of such tragedies to-day, for in our times there has come again upon the earth the ancient battle of the gods.

If God knows all, and every detail of our lives, past, present, and future, lies mapped out before Him, there must have been agony in His heart of love that morning as He looked down upon His child and heard her passionate thanksgiving, and her plea for help to make Peter happy.

It is thus in the sorrow and stress of individual lives that the tremendous struggle of the ages which history records is fought out, and in tears, like the tears of Robin, the price of moral progress has been, and must be, paid.

But the tears were not yet. Any artist would have been grateful for the picture of her as she threw off the clothes, and, sitting tailor-fashion on the bed, stretched out her arms in delicious awakening and cried:

“Peter—my Peter—you are a darling, and I do love life.”

The wedding went without a hitch of any kind, cloudless skies and cloudless hearts. Her father and Uncle Jim married them, and as the Dean, with the bright September sun shining round him like a many-coloured glory, gave them his blessing, many a man and woman thought they had never seen a prettier picture.

There followed for Robin three weeks of perfect bliss. Peter was devoted. For the time being he was satisfied. They went to Switzerland. Robin had a great love for the mountains which Peter partly shared. A friend of Mrs. Craddock's lent them a lovely little villa at Lauterbrünnen with a small but exquisite garden looking out upon the dazzling magnificence of the Jungfrau. It was a quiet time, the summer season was drawing to a close, and the winter not begun. The lovers had the glorious valley very much to themselves. Now and then they would meet a joyous party, a solitary wayfarer, or a couple as anxious to be alone as they, but for the most part they were undisturbed. The weather on the whole was beautifully fine and sunny, though there were one or two misty days, and then she and Peter sat by the fire together. These days did seem a little long, and their lack of real unity in mind began to make itself dimly felt. But they layed the ghost with kisses and were in Paradise again.

Inwardly, however, Peter was growing restive, and on the third Saturday it rained. Robin was feeling tired, an uncommon thing with her, and did not want to go out, so Peter went out for a walk by himself, and came back with the news that there was a dance that night at the Hôtel des Alpes at Mürren, to which visitors were invited.

“How would it be to have a hop to-night, little girl?” he said, bending over Robin as she sat in a great chair by the fire.

“I'd love it,” she replied. “Shall us? Lets. I've had a quiet snooze this morning and feel much better,” and she looked up at him with a happy smile.

And so that night the two went up by the funicular and then by the light railway to the great hotel which commands a view of the three giants, the Jungfrau, the Mönch, and the Eiger. As they took their seats in the dining-room Robin recognized at a table on the other side of the room, a girl she had known at school. She was sitting with quite a large party, which was in reality made up of two families. The Browns, consisting of Norah, who was Robin's friend, and her two brothers; and the MacAdams, two girls and a young man of

about twenty-five or six. Mrs. MacAdam, a tall, very stout lady with a pleasant motherly face and very bright blue eyes, presided at one end of the table, and there was a vacant chair at the other, waiting for Mr. MacAdam, who was late. They had just arrived and were very merry, apparently poking fun at the young man, Gerald MacAdam, who was immensely tall, and could not find room for his legs. Norah looked up and, seeing Robin, whispered to Mrs. MacAdam. She was just jumping up to go over to her when the older woman said something which made her sit down again. Robin guessed that she had been reminded that her friend had just been married and probably would not want to be disturbed.

She told Peter that she knew Norah, and asked him if he would mind her coming over, or should they just remain by themselves. Contrary to her expectations, Peter was quite anxious to know the party, saying that it would make the dance much jollier if they knew people, so, presently, Robin caught Norah's eye and made a little sign to her to come. She came and was introduced to Peter, and, after congratulating them both, suggested that they would be delighted if they would join their party. Robin looked at Peter, and again he was quite willing and eager. She did not quite know whether she was disappointed or not. However, they had a jolly dinner. Everyone was full of admiration for Robin, and she was too human not to enjoy that, and they were all excited about Peter's invention, and he enjoyed explaining its mysteries and answering innumerable questions put by the boys.

As they passed out of the dining-room into the lounge, for coffee, Peter was accosted by a dapper little Frenchman whom he had met in Paris while he was working at his invention. He had been a member of the French Air Force and had done wonders in the War. Peter was glad to meet him, and, asking Robin to excuse him, went into a corner to talk. M. Beaufois was an air expert, and they had much to talk about. The Frenchman ordered liqueurs, and after they had talked shop for some little time, he said with a smile to Peter:

"I 'ave come to know a friend of yours so well quite lately!" He talked English with a barely perceptible accent.

"Oh, who's that?" Peter asked.

"Juliette de Mauray," Beaufois answered with a sly smile in his eyes. His mouth, which was not covered by his clipped moustache, was thick-lipped and loose.

Peter gave a start, and looked round anxiously.

"Oh—indeed," he said, "and how is she?"

"It is all right," said the Frenchman, laughing. "Madame is not near."

"Little Juliette is all right—quite all right," he said with meaning, "and now that you are out of the way, the French airman may have a chance—eh?"

He launched out in praise of Juliette, repeating some of her gay speeches with gusto. He seemed to have gone some way with her, and hinted broadly that he had hopes of going further.

Peter was jealous, afraid, and yet fascinated. He had not talked this way for months, and it had its appeal for him. He ordered more liqueurs and he forgot Robin for about half an hour. She wondered what had become of him, but the party was such a happy one, that even for her the time slipped by.

When he sought and found her in the dancing-room he had consumed quite a number of liqueurs and several whiskies, and was excited. He flung himself into the fun and was the life and soul of the party. Sometimes while she danced with someone else Robin missed him, and wondered where he had gone, but he always had an excuse, and his gaiety carried her off her feet.

By the time twelve o'clock struck the mist and clouds had cleared away, and there stood out the three great mountains in awful and unearthly beauty against the starry sky. Gerald MacAdam proposed that they should walk to the funicular station with Robin and Peter. He was anxious really to walk back with Norah alone, and she was not unwilling. They set out, Gerald and Norah going first, and Peter, with his arm round Robin, following. Peter talked incessantly in a very loud voice, and a dreadful, nameless suspicion began to form itself in Robin's mind. At a bend in the road where there is nothing but a very ancient and rickety paling of wood to keep the unwary traveller from slipping down some fifteen to twenty feet on to the railway beneath, Peter said that he wanted to light a cigarette. He detached himself from Robin, who, answering a laughing question from Norah, took a few steps forward with her back to him. He stood fumbling for his cigarette-case, then suddenly swayed and, staggering, fell, and when Robin, hearing the noise, turned, there was the broken paling and he was gone. It was but a moment that she stood there, horror-stricken, looking at that hole in the fence, but in that moment something happened which changed the whole course of her life. Peter the Splendid died. When, a few minutes later, he scrambled up almost unhurt, though shaken and bruised, he was much more effectively dead to Robin than if his body had lain broken and bleeding at the bottom of a precipice. Had he been really killed, loyalty and love would have enabled her to keep intact the picture of Peter the Splendid. As it was, the sham was exploded. She knew that he was drunk, and had got drunk knowing that she hated it, and she guessed miserably that this was not the first time. It did not kill her love for him, she was too fine and

game a little soul for that, but it completely changed its nature. She knew now that, in one respect at any rate, he was a weakling. She did not want to know it, nor did she acknowledge it to herself, yet she did know it, and could not unknow it.

When Peter, sitting on a seat, with a great tear in his coat-sleeve through which the white shirt showed a stain of blood, and with a slight cut over his left eye, much shaken and somewhat sobered, explained thickly that he had turned suddenly dizzy, and thought it must be the result of his accident, she eagerly backed him up and explained to Norah and Gerald how bad he had been, poor boy. But, somewhere at the back of her mind, she knew that it was false, and was a little afraid that Gerald knew it too. She had seen him look in a puzzled way at Peter just before they set off. The others wanted to accompany them down to Lauterbrünnen, but Robin assured them that their villa was only a little way from the station and that they would be all right by themselves, once they got on to the funicular. So Gerald helped Peter along, while Norah walked with Robin, who told her about his crash, and how it was due to overstrain, because Peter was such a skilful, daring pilot that he never made mistakes. The other two could hear their talk, and Peter amplified it now and then by a remark to Gerald, who was sympathetic and anxious to believe that the accident was due to that and nothing else, though, as he remarked to Norah on the way back, he could have sworn that Peter was three sheets in the wind, when they were standing on the terrace.

Robin said nothing to Peter about her suspicions, instinct warned her not to. She bathed his wounds and made much of him, praising his bravery, and exhibiting an exquisitely tender concern lest she should hurt him. She forced herself not to flinch from his kisses, which reeked of alcohol, and was the utterly devoted woman to him. But after he had fallen into a heavy stertorous sleep, she lay awake staring at the moonlight through the window with dread of desolation in her heart. She felt utterly and absolutely alone. Twenty-four hours before, the idea of being lonely with Peter by her side would have appeared ridiculous, a contradiction in terms. But now it was all different. Hitherto she had depended on Peter. When he was there it was all right, no matter what happened. Now Peter depended on her, and yet something warned her never to let him know that she felt that. Intuitively she was certain he would rebel against it. That made it worse. It meant that she must for ever be acting a part, and she wondered if she could do it. Hitherto it had all been so perfectly natural, now it was to be artificial and a strain. She tried to persuade herself that it was only once, and that it would not happen again, and perhaps his head had something to do with it. But, in reality, she did not accept this as true; the doctors had declared him sound. To whom could she turn? Her

father? She could not bear to tell Daddy, poor old Daddy. Uncle Jim? He did not like Peter, and he would be angry with him, and would perhaps try to talk to him, and Peter would hate it. No—she was alone. The sense of desolation deepened in her. She slipped very quietly out of bed and went over to the window. There, in the moonlight, like a beautiful body in the calm of death, the Jungfrau turned her face up to the sky. Always before she had seemed to Robin like a lovely gentle woman with a child held in her arms; now it was as though the woman were dead, and peaceful in death, lonely, and glad to be alone beneath the still cold beauty of the stars. She shivered. “O God, won’t some one help me!” Suddenly she felt a longing to pray, and, kneeling softly down by Peter’s feet, prayed a wordless, eager prayer for him and for power to help him. She was better when she rose, tears came and gently crying, she fell into a troubled sleep.

On the whole in the weeks that followed she played her part successfully and well. She was more than ever gay and charming and kept Peter enthralled. But it was a losing game. She could not prevent her anxiety peeping through her worship of him and the lovely woman-like devices she employed to bind him to her. For one thing, she never really wanted him out of her sight, and although she invented a thousand sweet and loving reasons, in time Peter began to see through them and to fret.

They travelled down to Italy, visiting Venice, Milan, and Rome, and then returned to Paris, where Peter had to attend a business meeting five weeks after their wedding day. He had been as usual, more charming than ever for a week or so after his fall, and Robin’s task had been easy for a while. But towards the end of the time the craving for drink, and for a night of freedom, came over him again. He was at times silent and a little sulky, and once or twice flew into violent rages, not with Robin, but once with an official in Italy, whose manner in making some difficulty about their passports he resented, and once with the driver of a taxi in Rome who tried to over-charge him. These were but straws, but had she known how to read them, they would have shown Robin which way the wind was blowing.

They arrived in Paris late, and went straight to the hotel, where Peter has secured a suite of rooms, as they intended to stop there some little time. On the second night, after being engaged all day in business, he was invited to attend a dinner given by the directors of a large continental aeroplane combine. It was a semi-business affair, to which ladies were not invited, so Robin arranged to go with Miss Grayson, who was in Paris, to see the new Russian Ballet at the Comedie Française. Peter was to come to their box before the performance ended and take them both out to supper.

He was very contrite and apologetic about leaving them, and Robin went with her friend happy and reassured about him. The first part of the programme they both enjoyed, as I suppose, only artists can enjoy fine art, but, as the second part proceeded and no Peter appeared, Robin began to feel anxious. When it drew to a close and he was not there, she was consumed with fear and her heart was heavy as lead. She made excuses for him to Miss Grayson, who declared that she was not really sorry about supper, as she had had a tiring day, and would be glad to go early to bed. After driving her to her hotel, Robin returned to her own, hoping against hope that she would find Peter waiting, and explaining that he had been delayed. But inquiries at the office made it certain that he had not returned. She went upstairs into the bedroom, in which a lovely fire was burning, one of the great attractions for English visitors being the open fires. Robin stood for some time looking down into it, lost in troubled thoughts. She made a lovely picture standing there, with no one to glory in the beauty of it. The Golden Moth was all in gold—frock and shoes and stockings—and in her hair there glittered a golden band with tiny jewels in it that Peter had bought as a present for her when they passed through Paris before. Her blue cloak trimmed with white fur contrasted with and brought out the beauty of the dress.

Presently she threw the cloak off, and taking a cigarette from a little gold case, lighted it. Peter had conquered her puritanism, as he called it, to the extent of teaching her to smoke. She really liked it now, and it soothed her. She drew a chair up to the fire, and sat smoking and thinking.

Why did Phyllis marry Jim—and then treat him so cruelly? Somehow that question came back to her to-night. She had often asked it before, but never come near to answering it. She must have seemed to love him or he would not have married her. Could people pretend to love? And if they did, why did they? What was the relation of passion to true love? The old question which has tortured thousands tortured her. Once she remembered Uncle Jim talking about that, and saying that passion in itself was a cruel, selfish thing liable to burn itself out and leave nothing but ashes behind. She had not understood at the time, and was not sure that she understood now. Of course, she had read it in books, and seen it in plays, but real life was different. Supposing Peter did not love her, but only wanted her? Supposing he got drunk again and again. Oh, God could not be so cruel. She loved him so; except when he was drunk—she detested drunken men—even Peter—it turned her physically sick. Round and round in dreary circles her thoughts raced, as an hour slipped by, and Peter did not come. She was tired and very miserable, and at last fell asleep in the chair. Another hour or more went by and she lay there still, the soft light from the shaded lamp falling on her face. God is merciful to youth when He gives

His beloved sleep. She was awakened by a crash in the next room, the sound of breaking glasses and of a heavy fall. She sprang to the door and opened it. The room was ablaze with light. A table lay overturned upon the floor, some broken glasses and a silver tray, an un-stoppered whisky decanter with a pool of spirit beside it, and in the midst of it Peter, face downwards, lying still. He was dead drunk.

CHAPTER XII

LOVE AND HATE

“Well, I’m going to work in the morning.”

“If you does, what I says is as you’re black-leggin’, you’re betrayin’ the workers’ cause, Charlie, and I wouldn’t ’ave thought it of you. Your fellows have made a fine stand against the Capitalist class. The blighters are out to reduce the workers’ wages all round, and they’ll do it, unless someone stands up to ’em.”

Charlie Roberts and Mr. Elgood sat over the gas-stove in the little sitting-room of No. 11A and were discussing the situation in the great works of Messrs. Foster & Co., in which Charlie was employed. For some three weeks past the men had been out on strike for a rise in wages. Although there had been no lift in the general depression of trade, Fosters were busy and working overtime up to the strike, and the men, feeling that they had a right to some share in this prosperity, and, under the influence of some of the younger and more enthusiastic shop stewards, had declared a sectional strike for an immediate rise. This meant that they repudiated a National agreement come to twelve months before, and claimed the right to a local rate of wages. Charlie, who was a popular shop steward, had been against the strike from the first, but had been over-ruled by the others. The employers now threatened a national lock-out in defence of the agreement unless Fosters men returned to work immediately. Charlie had just come back from attending a delegate conference of the four big Unions concerned to which he had been sent to plead the cause of his mates. They trusted him although they knew that he had been against the strike and was against it still. He had done his very best at the meeting, showing clearly how natural it was that the men should feel they had a grievance, working as they did at a highly skilled trade in a very prosperous concern at wages less than those received by crossing sweepers, employed by the Local Authority. But the principle of keeping to agreements was at stake, and the Conference had ordered Fosters back to work. Charlie was to report to a meeting in the morning and expressed his intention of going back to work himself if he could get sufficient men to go with him to make it worth while for the management to give them a start. He was, in fact, going to break the strike, partly because he saw more clearly than ever that it was necessary to abide by the agreement, and partly because Trades Union discipline demanded that orders should be obeyed.

This very tame decision angered and disgusted the fiery Mr. Elgood who was declaiming against it with an indignation which he thoroughly enjoyed. He was in the delightful position of the irresponsible opposition limited only by his own imagination, and free to disregard both fact and practical necessity, and was therefore having a thoroughly good time and enjoying himself immensely.

"You're giving the game away, Charlie my lad, that's what you're doing, giving the game away."

"But I don't believe in this capitalist conspiracy business," Charlie replied thoughtfully. "I don't believe——"

"You mean to say you don't believe that the capitalists are out to force down wages if they can? You don't believe in the class war? Good Lord, man—you're dreaming. Of course you're religious, and that always makes men blind—doped. It is the best dope the bosses 'ave—that's why they tips up for the churches. Be good, pray to God, and do what the parson tells ye—and you'll go to 'eaven when you're dead, even if you 'aven't enough to keep your belly from your backbone while you're alive."

Charlie grinned good-naturedly. Mr. Elgood was off on his hobby-horse and he was used to it.

"Religion 'asn't got nothing much to do with this, Mr. Elgood," he said as the little man paused to take breath. "An agreement's an agreement, religion or no religion, and I guess what the Union says 'as to go whatever 'appens. If we breaks up among ourselves we're done in."

"That's right enough; but these big fellows at the top of the Unions 'as the wind up, afraid of losin' their fat salaries. It's the rank and file as counts. It's the fighting force of the proletariat what must bring in the revolution."

Charlie grinned more broadly. Mr. Elgood was as orthodox as a Presbyterian elder, only it was another religion. He was as particular about the proper shibboleths as the man who wants to know the exact date of your conversion, and looks with suspicion on any preacher who does not convict his hearers of sin on all possible occasions. He was a local preacher who had been soundly converted by Marx instead of Wesley. The class war was an article of faith with him, and took the place of the Atonement. Charlie enjoyed his outbursts enormously as a rule, and always did his best to draw them. He was trying to enjoy it now, but there was anxiety and fear in his heart.

There had been very little of this wild talk at the Conference; it had been, as such gatherings usually are, a business meeting which dealt with realities.

He knew quite well that the order for the men to go back to work was a tactical move preparatory to a great strike later on, and it was this prospect which troubled him. He could see no way out of it, and yet was doubtful whether it could do any good in the end. If it once began, it looked like being a long and bitter struggle, and might well ruin the Unions and make them practically powerless for years. Although he did not believe in the theory of the class war and the inevitable revolution, and was a very cautious Socialist, he knew that collective bargaining was always a precarious business liable at any moment to become a fight instead of a bargain, and this he always regarded as one thing to avoid. He was a good bargainer, cool, clever, and alert, always endeavouring to see both sides, but firm and even obstinate when he was driven back on his convictions. He did not believe in a deliberate conspiracy on the part of the masters to depress wages in order to reap profits, but knowing, as he did, that they were exposed to keen and merciless foreign competition, and groaning under heavy taxation, he feared that they might be tempted to adopt the obvious and easy method of reducing the costs of production by lowering wages. The Unions, he was certain, would not and could not accept a further reduction, and he dreaded an explosion. There was, moreover, always present with him, as there is with thousands of thoughtful workers, a miserable suspicion that there was something radically wrong with the whole Industrial system, and that some sort of upheaval was inevitable before it could be put right. This much truth he feared there might be in the revolutionary talk he heard so much of in the works, and at meetings outside. At times he was tempted to despair of any peaceful way out of the miseries of the post-war world, and always he cursed the war in his heart, as a bitter barren fraud upon the common people of all nations. He knew men drawing the same wages as himself, but with big families, who were genuinely driven to their wits' end to make both ends meet, and others who, owing to sickness or misfortune, had been compelled to borrow money, or get things on the strap, and so struggle on under a constant load of debt. Besides all this there was the great army of the unemployed. He was a skilled man himself in a good job and very unlikely to be out, but he often wondered what he would do if he were.

It was a desperate situation from the workers' point of view, and he did not blame those who talked about desperate remedies. But were they remedies? Was there any remedy? That question ached and ached in his mind, and often when Maisie coaxed him out of his silence, he would pour out his thoughts to her as she sat at his feet. She was a good listener, and talking it out to her always made him feel better, if it brought him no nearer a solution. Talking to Mr. Elgood, on the other hand, was generally amusing, often stimulating, and sometimes when there was serious business on hand, more than a little

irritating. He was endeavouring to suppress his irritation now.

“Fighting won’t do much good,” he said, getting up from his chair and picking up a Christopher Robin doll of little Maisie’s that lay on the floor at his feet. “If it comes to a fight, there’ll be a bloody mess, and nothing to show for it, same as there always is, and the women and kids will pay as they always do. I’m not blind, old son, I can see through a brick wall as far as the next chap. I know there is a class war all right; there’s no missing that, it sticks out a mile, but I don’t reckon as anyone is going to get much out of class war or any other war.”

“Oh, you’re a blessed pacifist, I know. But capitalist wars fought in the interest of Economic Imperialism is one thing, the people’s war for liberty is another. Take this last war——”

Mr. Elgood was going off again, but Charlie interrupted.

“War, when it gets to killing, is a blasted fraud, whatever sort it is. I’ve ’ad a bellyfull, I tell ye. You don’t catch me on that ’op again. If it came to revolution it would be the fellow with the slick tongue that would get all the swag, while the decent hard-working folk paid the bill. I tell ye, Elgood, it’s no good talking that way about this business of ours. If it comes to a big strike, properly authorized, I’m with the rest to the last ’ole in my belt, but I don’t see much good coming of it, and these sectional strikes are the very devil, and I wish to God I’d stood out against this one from the start. The Unions ’ave ordered Fosters back to work, but unless we can come to some understanding with the bosses, before three months is out, there’s going to be a National strike, and if that comes, and the miners business comes off too, there’s going to be hell to pay in this little island, and the poor folks will pay it as they usually do.”

“Well, there’s got to be hell to pay before there is any heaven for the workers,” said Mr. Elgood, who had been trying to interrupt all the time, but had not been able to get a word in. He was a little awed by the sternness in Charlie’s voice and the bitterness in his eyes. Charlie was, as a rule, the gentlest and most amiable person to argue with, but now and then this other man whom Elgood did not know, peeped out, and he was always a little afraid of him.

There was sorrow and anxiety in the younger man’s face now as he leant against the chimney-piece with the doll in his hands.

“Aye, but you can pay hell, and then be done out of ’eaven, same as we did in this last lot. I can see that trouble is likely enough to come, but what I can’t see is, what is going to come out of it. I don’t see no ’eaven in it.”

“Why, the Socialist Republic will come out of it,” said Mr. Elgood eagerly, “and that is as near to ’eaven as the workers are likely to get.”

“God ’elp ’em!” Charlie answered, looking straight in front of him with unseeing eyes, before which there rose a vision of multitudes of workers all the world over housed like pigs, struggling vainly to shake an intolerable burden off their backs, and driven out from time to time like flocks of sheep to be butchered in senseless wars. “God ’elp us all.”

“God! God’s no good to the workers,” sneered Mr. Elgood. “’E’s on the side of the big battalions always. God’s no damned good to no one, never was. The workers ’ave got to ’elp themselves, and quick too.”

There was silence between the two men for a second or two. Charlie put Christopher Robin gently on the table and lighted a cigarette. There was a sound of laughter coming up the stairs. Rose Elgood had gone out shopping with Maisie and they were panting and laughing up the steps. Charlie’s face softened as he heard her voice.

“I dunno,” he said, “sometimes I think as God is the only ’ope the workers ’ave. If we ’ad all stuck to God, we wouldn’t be as we are. We’ve got the hell of a lot of clever men, but durned few good ’uns, and its good ’uns we want, Elgood, men as we can trust.”

Mr. Elgood heard the girls’ laughter and saw the softening in Charlie’s eyes. He had a real liking and respect for this young couple, and in his heart of hearts, admired Charlie tremendously. He stood up now and put his hand upon his shoulder, and said half in earnest, half in banter:

“Well, Charles, old son, we’ve got one good ’un—when we’ve got you. Straight as a dye, you are, I know that.”

Charlie was touched. There were many at the shop who had not scrupled to charge him with double dealing, and this suspicion from his comrades hurt him more than he was willing to admit even to himself. The old fire-eating Socialist’s confidence, obviously genuine as it was, was grateful to him in his anxiety about to-morrow’s meeting.

“I’m not much cop,” he said, “but I’m out to play straight.”

They shook hands.

It was thus that Rose and Maisie found them when they tumbled in through the door panting and flushed.

“You two ’ave been quarrelling again,” Rose said, shaking her finger at Mr. Elgood. “You don’t want to take no notice of my old Dad, Charlie, ’e’s

balmy on the crumpet, 'e is, clean off 'is rocker. Socialism's gorn to 'is 'ead. 'Im and 'is bloody revolution. I'll bloody revolution 'im—look at 'is 'air."

She pushed her father back into his chair as she spoke, sat down on his knee and ruffled up what remained of his thin grey hair. Mr. Elgood adored Rose and she did exactly as she pleased with him, and the more she did it the better he was pleased, though he always protested.

Charlie with his arm around Maisie watched the pair with genuine affection in his eyes. They were loyal friends, and Rose had been a blessing to Maisie. She was still unconsciously or semi-consciously a little in love with Charlie, and the relationship between the four of them was full of happiness. Poor broken Mrs. Elgood did not count, though they loved her tenderly, and Maisie was her greatest friend.

"There's the joint for Sunday," said Maisie, unwrapping it upon the table. "Meat's gone up twopence again this week. I can't understand it, someone must make——"

"Of course they do," interrupted Mr. Elgood, "the capitalist system is all rob——"

"Shut up, you," said Rose, putting her hand over his mouth, "meat's got nothing to do with Socialism."

"We bought a paper," she continued, still sitting on his knee, "to see if there was anything in it about Charlie at the meeting. 'Ave you got it, Maisie? Let's see if there is anything about Bonnie Prince Charlie."

Maisie produced the paper from a net bag full of groceries and passed it over smiling up at Charlie. She was expecting a child, and he was always anxious about her, but she looked well, and her face was full of peaceful happiness.

"Um," said Rose, as she spread the paper out upon the table. "Um. Sir Austin at Geneva. Further fall in the franc. Sinking of the M.1. Saints and silk stockings—um—Attempted murder at Shoreditch. Police hunt. Portrait of the missing man. Lawks! what a dial 'e 'as to be sure. 'E'd take the booby prize at our beauty show 'e would. I bet 'is muvver 'ad a shrieking fit when 'e was born. Look at 'im."

Maisie came smiling round and putting her arm over Rose's shoulder looked at the paper, then suddenly she pushed her aside and snatched it up with a cry.

"O God—it's 'im—it's 'im. Charlie, look who it is."

Charlie looked at the paper she put into his hands and saw staring up at him Will Smith. The portrait had been found in the room where Jennie Brooks had been discovered lying with a wound in her throat, and bruises all over her body. It was one he remembered seeing at Ranchester.

Maisie was sitting trembling, deathly white, with little drops of sweat breaking out round her mouth.

Rose ran to her, and, looking with terrified eyes at Charlie, asked: "Who is it? What does she mean?"

"It's the brute she was married to," he said grimly, but with anguish for Maisie in his eyes.

"Oh, what will become of us," Maisie sobbed. "'E's Maisie's father—and 'e may be 'anged. Maisie's father a murderer."

"Little woman," Charlie said, "don't take on about it so. The woman is not dead yet. And whatever her father was, little Maisie is yours and mine, and as good as gold. Don't take it like that, darling, let me 'elp you to bed. You'll be ill, and you must think of our baby."

"I'm not fit to 'ave a baby—I'm not fit to be yours—O God, I wish——"

"Hush," said Charlie, putting his arms about her. "Hush, dear. You mustn't talk like that. You promised me you wouldn't. Let me help you into the room."

But Maisie sat up.

"No," she said, "I want to know all about it. I want to know the worst there is. I'm not going to be ill. It's not me as matters. It's Maisie and you. What 'as 'e done?"

"Well, they ain't perfectly certain as 'e done it at all yet," Rose said, reading the paper. "It seems 'e lived with this 'ere Jennie Brooks, and they 'ad both been drinking, and there was a row when they came 'ome last night. The girl what lives in the room above theirs knew them, and 'eard them rowin', and then she 'eard 'im go out, and after a little while she came downstairs to borrow something, and found 'er lying on the bed with a cut in her throat. She is in the London hospital in a serious condition, it says, and 'e's gone off. But this girl, Lizzie Rankin, as found 'er, doesn't know rightly that it was Will Smith as came back with 'er. It seems she was a wrong 'un, and 'ad other men up there when 'e was away, and it may 'ave been one of them. She can't say for certain. Maybe 'e didn't do it after all."

"O God, grant 'e didn't," Maisie said. "God grant 'e didn't." She gave a little moan and fell back in a faint. Charlie picked her up in his arms and

carried her like a child to the bedroom. When they had brought her round Rose helped to undress and put her comfortable in bed. Then she and Mr. Elgood, feeling that the two would be glad to be alone, said good-bye and left, promising to come round the following night to see how she was.

Charlie, after seeing them down the stairs, came back to find Maisie sitting up in bed with a terrified look in her eyes, twisting a handkerchief into endless knots.

"Boy," she said huskily, "do you think supposin' I'd stuck to 'im as I could 'ave saved 'im from this?"

"More likely you'd 'ave got what Jennie Brooks got in the end," Charlie answered; "'e never was no good."

"But supposin' I'd stuck to 'im?"

"'Ow could you stick to 'im, if 'e wouldn't stick to you? It was 'im went off, not you. Wasn't it?"

"Yes, and I begged and begged 'im to come back, and give up the beer, and I promised"—she hesitated with a look of appeal for understanding—"I promised—and I would 'ave kept it—but 'e always said 'e would go with anyone 'e liked."

"Don't think about 'im any more, little woman, you can't 'elp 'im, you never could 'ave 'elped 'im. You can't 'elp that sort."

Maisie was silent for a while, holding his hand tight in hers, but presently she asked another question that had been turning itself over in her mind for months, and came back to her now with increased force.

"Charlie, do you thing that's what them words means, 'For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health—till death us do part?' Is it meant that you 'ave to stick to a man even if 'e threatens to do you in and knocks you about, and goes with other women—do you think it means that?"

Charlie hesitated, then he said slowly:

"Maybe it does, lass, but 'ow can you do it, if 'e goes off and leaves you alone like 'e did?"

"I might 'ave followed 'im," Maisie replied. "If it 'ad been you, Boy, I think I'd 'ave followed you to the world's end—and loved you still no matter what you did. I think if you was cruel to me I'd die, but I could never leave you, and if you went to prison I'd be at the door to meet you when you came

out.”

Tears came into her eyes and Charlie took her in his arms, and for a while they clung together in silence.

Presently he said: “I’m going to give you two of these ’ere aspirin tablets, and you must try to sleep, Maisie mine. I’ve got some work to do for the meeting to-morrow, but I won’t be very long.”

He gave her the aspirin, tucked her up, and leaving the door ajar sat down to his work.

For half an hour or so there was silence as he worked away at his figures and the speech he was to make the next day, then he got up, stretched himself, and tiptoed into the bedroom. Maisie was asleep. He came back, and, lighting a cigarette, sat down to think.

Anxious as he was about the meeting, it was to Maisie and this new sorrow that his mind turned. He recalled an evening in Ranchester when, passing up the street to his own door, he had heard Will Smith cursing Maisie with drunken brutality, and had stood with murder in his heart, his fingers itching to get round the man’s throat. “Thou shalt do no murder.” For that moment at any rate he had been a murderer. If Smith had come out he knew that he would have killed him there and then as he had killed that German in the night raid near Villiers au Flos in ’18. Funny business this killing. That poor old Bosch was probably a decent old bloke and he had no quarrel with him, but he had strangled him. He could feel the softness of his throat giving and giving under his grip, and see again the bulging, bloodshot, terrified eyes staring into his. That was counted a good deed. If he had killed this Smith it would have been murder, and he would have swung for it.

Was it ever right to kill? Perhaps it wasn’t the killing but the hatred that was wrong. But how could anyone help hating a man like that? Wasn’t it right to hate him like hell? “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” But that was for people who were injuring Him, not people who were torturing women. Would Christ ever have killed? Were there any limits to forgiveness? Was Maisie right, and did the marriage oath mean that there were no limits, and that she ought to have continued striving to save and redeem Smith until either he or she died? He could see the beauty of the ideal, and he felt that there was such love as that, love that knew no conditions, and would suffer anything rather than give up. Supposing Maisie had stuck to him, and he had killed her in a drunken fit, would that have pleased God, and would she have been right? There had been little Maisie to think of, would it have been right for her? A vision swam before him of Maisie with a baby in her arms trailing

down a street after Smith as he had seen other women do. He shuddered. Was that what Christ meant? "For better or for worse." If it were love that made them do it, if they did it of their own free will, he could see the glory of it. But was it love? or were these women broken, helpless, desperate? Was there anything good or holy in submitting body and spirit to be broken like that when it was done under compulsion and fear. He could not see it. Women had had the hell of a time always. It was time things changed.

He got up, turned out the stove, and went into the bedroom. Maisie lay asleep with a little frown on her face. In one hand she held a photograph of him which she wore in a locket round her neck. He stood looking down at her with trouble and adoration in his eyes, and then stooping kissed her and knelt down to pray.

That night Smith was arrested in a common lodging-house in Whitechapel and Jennie Brooks died.

CHAPTER XIII

PARADISE, HEAVEN, AND HELL

The Mission Staff were having their monthly night off. This periodical burst was an institution inaugurated by Captain Dayborn, who insisted that it was good for the health of all concerned. By this he really meant that it was good for Joyce Wetherby, who was at once the joy and the worry of his life. He declared that, like his aged parent, he would withdraw his Subscription to the Mission unless he were allowed to bear the expense of a monthly binge, because otherwise he would soon be supporting a lunatic asylum which was not what he had undertaken to do. Things between him and Joyce were still officially in a state of suspense. She had acknowledged that she loved him, and about once a week he would ask her when they were to be married. She was torn between him and her work. The prospect of leaving it all, and being the wife of a wealthy man was, sometimes all too attractive, and at other times absolutely repulsive to her. The utter contrast between the two ends of London, and all that the contrast entailed, had been burned into her soul, and filled her at times with a bitterness and loathing of her own class which she knew was exaggerated and unbalanced, but which she could not help. In her worst moods she would taunt the unfortunate Gallant with having wealth to which he had no real right, and then, when he answered gently that he entirely agreed, but was, as he expressed it, "clean flummoxed about the whole business," she would repent and tell him that he was the best that ever was. This inward misery which was apparently a barrier between them was in reality a strong bond binding them together. The uneasiness in the mind of both was utterly sincere and a bitter reality in their lives, as it is in the lives of thousands like them to-day. Dayborn was deeply in love with Joyce, but it was this gallant, honest, fighting Joyce with the sorrow of the poor on her soul that he loved, and though at times he longed to take her away from it all, and resented the brute realities with which she was continually in contact, yet the grim fight with poverty, ignorance, and degradation appealed powerfully to him, and drew him back with a glamour all its own. In his own quiet way he did an immense amount of work, and his financial contribution to the Mission grew larger and larger. A few weeks before he had purchased a disused factory close by, and this he proposed to turn into a thoroughly equipped Social Club for young men and women.

At the back of his mind there was a scheme which he had tentatively disclosed to Joyce. He had dreamed as he lay awake one night with a gnawing

pain in the arm he had not got, of a house attached to the factory in which he and Joyce might live and do their work together. The rock they both saw ahead was the children. Joyce with characteristic honesty had spoken of that at once. "I want children," she had said with a smile at him that made his whole being go out to her. "I want your children badly, Gallant dear; I'm not sure that I don't want them even more than you." Then suddenly catching his empty sleeve and kissing it: "No—I don't—I want you. I think you are the nicest, whitest, dearest, most ridiculous old fool in the world, and if you don't give me a kiss immediately and at once if not sooner, I'll go and tell dirty Mrs. Anderson she must wash her neck or I'll drown her in a bath of boiling *boiling* water."

Mrs. Anderson's life had been saved, and they had talked of the house in a glory of hope that turned the slum into a paradise, and made its filthy streets seem pavements of pure gold. This solution of the problem was gradually emerging from a vague dream state into a practical possibility, and Dayborn had gone as far as to get plans made of the Club and house attached. They had delicious quarrels about it. Joyce wanted to make it a very modest establishment, and then, when he agreed, declared that she would not have him living like a pig and that there must be a nursery for the children, and that she did not know whether there would be any children because she had not promised to marry him yet, and she had not got a ring, and didn't want one, and yes she did, and he could get it when he liked, but not yet.

As a matter of fact, on this night of the binge he had the ring in his pocket, and had taken a stage box in the hope that he might utilize the occasion to put it on. They had elected to go to see Sybil Thorndyke in "S. Joan." There had been a doubt as to whether it ought to be "Mercenary Mary" or "S. Joan," but the Maid won the day. It was a law that the "burst binge breakdown and general orgie of swinish extravagance," as Joyce called it, should be done in style. Everyone had to put on their gladdest rags. Even Jim was taken out of his cassock, and put into immaculate lay evening dress, which, they declared, transferred him into a cynical worldly wise barrister-at-law who knew which side his bread was buttered on, and most other people's too. Joyce had purchased for him a monocle to complete the effect, and when he appeared in the study where they all foregathered there was loud and continued applause. Dayborn's sister, Patricia, and a medical student friend of Joyce's completed the party. Doris Wilson, the would-be lady doctor, a tall slender girl with dark hair and a pair of lovely violet blue eyes, was a creature of infectious vitality who often visited the Mission, and was quietly but doggedly adored by Dick Raymond, whom she chaffed unmercifully until he went to the piano. Then she would fall suddenly silent, and it looked as if the adoration were on the other

side, only Dick never saw it, for he was lost to the world once his fingers touched the keys. Patricia Joycelyn, the Gallant's eldest sister, was a tall stately woman, middle aged but good to look upon still, the widow of Sir Henry Joycelyn, and mother to two six-foot boys at Harrow and Marlborough. She was devoted to her brother and was a great friend of Jim's.

Jim himself appeared to be in extra good spirits and was the life and soul of them all. Inwardly, however, both he and Cecil were worried about Robin. On a previous occasion, some months before, she had been with them and they had been extra gay. She had appeared to be extravagantly happy, and made elaborate excuses for Peter who was at some wretched business dinner or something, but might appear later on. She had chatted away to Jim and Cecil, but once or twice, during the performance of "Mary Rose" which they attended, Jim caught a frightened look in her face, and towards the end when Peter did not come she looked over her shoulder repeatedly, and it seemed to him that she dreaded, rather than looked forward to, his coming. As they parted at the door of the theatre she suddenly gripped his arm and whispered: "Uncle Jim, pray for me, won't you? I need it."

She had confided in him that a child was coming, and it might have been that she meant, but Jim was afraid there was more behind it. Once or twice in the Rector's letters there had been hints that all was not well with Peter, and that he had not recovered completely from his accident. What the nature of the trouble was he could not guess, and neither from Robin nor her father did he receive any encouragement to inquire. On two occasions it had been settled that he should visit Ranchester, but both times Robin had written to put him off, pleading Peter's business engagements in London as an excuse, and saying that he wanted her with him. That one night at the theatre had been the only time they met in London. Jim was uneasy about her and had spoken about it to Cecil.

On this night she was very much in the minds of both these men who, in their different ways, loved her so dearly.

Lady Joycelyn's car, an enormous Armstrong-Siddleley saloon, awaited them at the door, and they packed themselves into it uproariously, Jim travelling outside, and Joyce, to his great satisfaction, sitting on the Gallant's knee. He sought and found her hand and held it, and she gave him a look that made him bless the gods, and love the little fishes.

After a sumptuous dinner at the Carlton they were transported into the Middle Ages by the genius of G.B.S. and the magic of Sybil Thorndyke's voice. The play, with its bitter steel-cold beauty, gripped them all in different ways. Jim saw deep into the inner tragedy of the dilemma, unsolved and

insoluble, between authority and freedom, and the subtle analysis of its exquisite pain. For Joyce it was the cruelty of the world and of life, the crushing of beauty and innocence by blind stupidity, and the recurrent question of God's power and God's love in such a world that absorbed her mind. They came out sobered and thoughtful, talking as thousands have done, about the Epilogue. Lady Joycelyn alone was against it; all the rest agreed that they would not have missed it for worlds.

They had meant to go home but the Gallant, who had not had his chance with Joyce yet, pleaded that they should have some supper at the New Criterion. Lady Joycelyn drove them there but had to leave them. She wanted them to have the car, but her brother declared that they would take taxis, determining in his own mind that he and Joyce would have one to themselves, and so crown the night with perfect bliss.

The room was crowded with people and loud with laughter and with talk. Dayborn had telephoned from the theatre and a table was reserved for them under a big palm tree in the far corner. During supper a discussion arose as to whether the British were in reality a cruel race or not. Joyce, in whom the eternal contrast was aching, and who was irritated by an enormously fat and generously bepowdered woman with two chins, who was gross, greedy, and overdressed, maintained that Shaw's Chaplain John de Stogumber was not a caricature but a portrait, England to the life, cruel because stupid and destitute of imagination. She contended that the Socialists were right, and that the British Empire was a gigantic fraud rotten to the core with hypocrisy. We grabbed land for what we could get and then pretended to govern people for their own good. She quoted with approval a remark made to her by a man at the American Embassy who said that British diplomats hunted always in couples: one read prayers while the other searched your pockets.

"Well, there is truth in that," said Dayborn, who, having soldiered in India and travelled all over the world, was stoutly defending his country without, he claimed, being blind to her faults. "There's truth in it, but it is not true as he meant it. He thinks that the reading of prayers is pure hypocrisy, because of the pocket-searching business, but that is not the way of it. The prayers are sincere and honest enough——"

"And the pocket-searching exhaustive and thorough," laughed Joyce.

"Exactly, both are characteristic. We are a nation of shopkeepers with our eyes on the main chance, but we also have a genius for government. We grab, it is true, but we do try to govern what we grab."

"Ten to one on the grab."

“No. I think it’s about equal odds on both. Good government makes for the prosperity of the shop, but it is also a game worth playing for its own sake, and we play it.”

“Well, anyway, I think Shaw’s Earl of Warwick is about right. If the British governing classes had feared either God or Devil they would not have made and could not keep the blessed Empire.”

“I think it is true that they could never have made the Empire if they had been in any way scrupulous,” Jim intervened, “but we are developing scruples now. We are not such good murderers and thieves as we were.”

“We’re n-not s-s-so d-dusty now,” stammered Cecil.

“Perhaps not, we are going strong as burglars in Kenya, I believe. But we aren’t what we were all the same. It remains to be seen whether we can hold the show together on the new plan or whether it will bust.”

“I think it will bust here at home first. How long do you think people are going to stand the contrast between this and Castle Street? It’s enough to turn you sick! Look at us all sitting up like over-fed pigs, tolerating that beastly mess down there because we are too stupid to imagine it, and too ghastly incompetent to set it right. If you whispered Bolshevism the *pâté de fois gras* would stick in that fat woman’s throat, but her sort manufacture it.”

“Steady, Joyce,” laughed Jim, “you have not got a bomb about you, have you? Search her, Gallant, she’s dangerous.”

Dayborn, who sensed the pain that lay behind all this, captured Joyce’s hand under the table and squeezed it tight. But Joyce drew it away.

“I think the most terrible sentence in that play is that one in the Epilogue: ‘Is it then necessary that a Christ should perish in torture in every generation in order to save those who have no imagination?’ That’s what we British are—we have no more imagination than—than——”

“Gosh, what a wonderful girl!” Dick Raymond interrupted.

There was a table near their own which had evidently been reserved, for it had been vacant all through supper. It was laid for two. Sailing up the room towards it now there came a girl in a flame-coloured frock. Dazzling, bewildering, undisguised sex attraction personified, conscious of the admiring glances directed upon her from all sides, and evidently enjoying them as her due, she waved a greeting to someone she recognized and sat down facing Jim and Dick.

“I bet she’s a madam, if ever there was one,” said Doris, who had never

known Dick notice another woman before.

The conversation became general and a little spasmodic, for they were all unconsciously waiting for the flame girl's partner. Presently he came, making straight for the table. As soon as he set eyes on him Jim exclaimed "Good God!" and half rose from his chair. It was Peter Craddock.

Cecil Weyman turned round at Jim's exclamation, and, recognizing Peter, went fiery red. The others did not notice and went on talking about the girl. Jim made a sign to Cecil to keep still. He realized that they were both in danger of making fools of themselves. After all, they did not know who this lady was or what had brought her and Peter there. Putting two and two together, he feared the worst, but had no proof of any kind.

Peter did not notice them, he was entirely occupied with his partner. He had evidently been drinking and spoke a little loud. Juliette, for she it was, was quite obviously managing him.

"I don't want to go home," they heard him say in a swaggering tone; "the night's young yet, I'm going to——"

The place and Juliette's reply were inaudible.

"The fellow's got quite enough on board I should say," Dick Raymond remarked.

"I think it's time we were off," said Jim.

He felt that he could sit there no longer, and inwardly thanked God that they had finished supper and could get away. They passed out without being recognized. Peter was speaking more quietly now and they heard nothing further. Dayborn had secured two taxis and Jim, guessing what he wanted, piloted the other three into the first, leaving him to follow with Joyce.

It was raining hard, and as they sped along the embankment, no passer-by turned his head to look at the two taxis or to follow the little red lights as they faded into the darkness. Taxis are ordinary things to look at from the outside, but how thrilling they would be if we could turn them inside out. All sorts of tragedies and comedies, visions of heaven and glimpses of naked hell are hidden within them, as night after night with gleaming eyes they wind their way through the labyrinth of London.

As long as they live Joyce and the Gallant will never forget that taxi ride, nor cease to have a kindly feeling for the enormously fat driver who beamed upon them when they emerged, Joyce with something very bright flashing on one hand. The taxi-man himself will not forget in a hurry, it is not often that a

one-armed man gives you half a quid for yourself on a run like that. The beam grew into a positive flood of sunshine when he saw the note, and he wished his fares good luck. They both felt they had all the good luck they needed for all time. Joyce had capitulated unconditionally just outside Cannon Street Station, the ring had been finally fixed as they passed Liverpool Street, and the rest they did not know much about except that it was heaven.

In the other taxi there was Paradise and Hell. Dick and Doris sat together facing the driver, and for the first time Doris put her hand where any sensible man would find it. Whether it was that she did not really like Dick's noticing Juliette, or that she thought more of him for it, or that there was something in the manner of the other two that made ordinary chaff impossible, and so she fell back on sentiment, it would take a woman to decide. It did not matter to Dick, he entered proudly into Paradise, and wished they could shift S. Paul's Cathedral a hundred miles farther east, and the Mission House a thousand miles beyond it.

Opposite to Paradise, with knees touching yet millions of miles away, was Hell. Neither Jim nor Cecil said a word, but there was stark misery in the souls of both. Both of them were quite certain that what they had seen meant tragedy for Robin. There was not much to go upon, but they knew it in their bones, and the knowledge was raw red torture. Robin was made for happiness, she was one of those whom sorrow should have touched but very gently, if at all. It was intolerable that this should have come to her. Both men were utterly unselfish in their devotion, but Jim was making discoveries about himself. He was realizing that Robin meant more to him now than any other human being in the world, that humanly speaking she was all he had. Phyllis had faded into the background, she belonged to another life. She was in South America, now married to Philip Dunstone, and the mother of two children. There was bitterness still in the thought of her, but it came less often now, and the blinding tearing longing for her came no more. She had never secured a hold on anything but his lower nature, and that hold, with a man like Jim, was treacherous and insecure. She was present with him now, an added bitterness, but his whole being was with Robin. Had you told him that he loved her you would have made him angry. What had he to do with Love of that sort now? And for Robin! "Uncle Jim," that's what he was, but how sweet it sounded on her lips. He remembered the night she had come down to comfort him, and how the very sight of her had charmed his evil dreams away. She would charm any evil always into good, the child—and that she should come to this! He blamed himself bitterly. Why hadn't he been more insistent about Peter? Why hadn't he made inquiries? He had always known the man was no good. Why had Bob been so blind and careless. But after all he had known nothing against

Peter, nor had Bob. He did not know anything very much now. It might all amount to nothing. O God, if that could be true. But he remembered her face as she looked over her shoulder when Peter did not come, and heard again her whisper, "Pray for me, Uncle Jim; I need it." He had prayed for her, never a day had passed without a prayer for her, but he had prayed for perfect happiness and for a blessing on her baby; he had never dreamed of this.

Cecil's thoughts were less complex, but not less bitter. He loved her, and she was unhappy and beyond his power to help, that was the plain truth that ached and ached within him. He was filled with a primitive murderous hatred for Peter. Had they met at that moment he would have killed him, and been glad to suffer for it.

Jim was a priest and an older man, and hatred for Peter was not the master feeling, but with Cecil it absorbed everything but his love for Robin. His hands clutched and unclutched spasmodically on his knees, and he muttered, "The swine—the dirty, low-living swine."

The taxi drew up at the Mission House door, followed almost immediately by the other. In Jim's study Paradise, Heaven and Hell faced each other, all with smiling faces. Paradise was silent and a little shy. Heaven was too full to hide its glory, and revealed itself laughingly, asking for congratulations. Hell was to all appearances as happy as either of them, and joined with Paradise in pouring chaff and love on the beloved pair.

But the ordeal was not prolonged, each couple had its own reasons for wishing to be alone, and in about a quarter of an hour, Jim and Cecil stood facing one another.

For some moments they said nothing. Jim sat down in his own chair and lighted a cigarette, and Cecil took a book up off the table, looked at the title without reading it, then abruptly threw it down, and broke out with stuttering vehemence:

"The s-swine—the r-rotten swine. I'd like to b-break his —— neck for him."

Strong language was utterly foreign to his habits, and his temper was, as a rule, entirely controlled, but he was beyond himself now and suffering.

"Yes," said Jim quietly, but with steel in his voice, "so would I, if what we suspect is true. But it may be we are a couple of fools, and that there is nothing to make a fuss about."

"Do you think that—honestly?" said Cecil, facing him, white and trembling. "Do you think there is a chance of that?"

“No, I don’t,” said Jim, after a pause. “I don’t. I suspect the worst—but
_____”

“O God—O God—what a hell of a world this is.”

The boy broke down utterly, and, turning to the chimney-piece, buried his head in his hands.

For some moments there was silence in the room, only broken by Cecil’s efforts to regain control of himself. Jim never stirred. At last he said:

“There’s nothing to be done, old chap; we must wait and pray for her. I’m going to bed. Good night.”

He went upstairs, leaving Cecil alone. Neither of them slept a wink that night, and for the next few days they both strove to drown their misery in a fierce outburst of work. On the following Monday night when Cecil came home from the hospital Jim was gone, and there was a telegram open on his desk.

“Come at once. Robin dangerously ill. BOB.”

CHAPTER XIV

ROBIN IN THE SHADOW

Jim received the telegram just after lunch and caught the 4.45 express from Paddington. Joyce came with him to the station. She had met Robin at the theatre on the night of "Mary Rose," and fallen in love with her. Both Cecil and Jim spoke often of her, and from Cecil she had heard the story of Maisie, and what Robin had done for her. This had touched her deeply, and made her certain, even before they met, that she would find a kindred spirit. They were early at the Station, but found the train already in, and, after Jim had secured a seat, they walked up and down the platform together. A flaring placard on the big bookstall near the War Memorial announced, "Engineering Crisis—National Strike Threat." Jim stopped and said to himself, "Good Lord, more trouble." Joyce, not noticing, was separated from him, and, recovering from his momentary abstraction, he turned sharply round to find her, and in doing so bumped into a young man who had also stopped to look at the placard. It was Charlie Roberts, with Maisie on his arm. The meeting was an awkward one for both parties. Jim had not seen Charlie since that evening when, after his passionate outburst, he had rushed off from the Rectory garden to rescue Maisie. The two, however, had been friends in the old days, and for the moment, instinctive kindness had its way, and Jim held out his hand. Charlie took it, and then there was a pause, but it was Maisie who unconsciously saved the situation.

"Oh, Mr. Counihan," she said, "'ave you 'eard anything about Miss Robin? Charlie's mother is coming to see us, and she wrote last night and said she'd 'eard as Miss Robin was ill."

Jim turned to her and the loving anxiety in the girl's face melted his heart. Whatever she was she loved Robin.

"I'm afraid she is," he answered. "I'm just going up to Ranchester to see her now."

"Is she that bad, sir?" Maisie asked, tears starting into her eyes.

"Yes, dangerously ill, I'm afraid," he replied. "At least, that is what Mr. Peterson's wire said."

"O God 'elp 'er, God 'elp her—she is the best friend I ever 'ad." The tears welled over and rolled down Maisie's face, and she took out her handkerchief

and turned her head away.

“Would you remember us both kindly to Mr. Peterson and to Miss Robin?” Charlie asked diffidently, as though afraid to make the request. “I—we both owe them more than we can ever repay.”

Jim had been thinking rapidly during this exchange. For a moment or two he had been tempted to be stiff and formal, but the obvious goodness of the pair, their evident devotion to one another, and their love for Robin had moved him, and he found it impossible to keep it up.

“I will, indeed,” he answered cordially, “and I’m sure Miss Robin will be glad to hear of you. She is very fond of you both, I know.”

Maisie gave a little sob and said, “Thank you very much, sir.”

Jim shook hands with her again and was turning away, when Charlie touched him on the sleeve.

“Would you mind if I came to see you when you come back, sir?” he asked. “I wanted to ask you about something.”

“Certainly. I’d love to see you, Charles,” Jim replied; “you know the address, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir, I’ll come next week if I may.”

“Do; I must catch the train now.” He turned away with a friendly smile and rejoined Joyce.

Hurriedly he told her of the encounter, said he would be back as soon as he could, and while she was giving him messages of love to Robin the train moved out. Jim was in a pitiable state of anxiety, but mercifully he was also dog-tired, and after a time his thoughts, which moved round and round in a tortured circle of questions and doubts, became vague and dim, and at last he fell asleep.

At Ranchester he found the Rector waiting on the platform. He looked ten years older, and his kindly face was drawn with pain.

“How is she?” Jim asked at once.

“Better,” he replied; “the child was born two hours ago—dead. They could not save them both.”

“O God!” Jim muttered.

They drove in silence to the Rectory, neither being able to trust himself to speak.

“I don’t think you will be able to see her to-night,” the Rector said as they stood in the dining-room, where a meal was laid. “She’s still unconscious. They have to keep her drugged for the present. I am glad you’ve come though, old man; I couldn’t have stood it much longer alone. Thank God, her life seems likely to be spared—but——”

He broke off, and, taking Jim’s bag, said: “Let me show you your room first, and then after you’ve had a bite of something we can talk.”

He led the way, walking on tiptoe up the stairs. The house was hushed and smelt strongly of ether, and, as they passed a door on the first floor, Jim heard a moaning cry like some animal in pain. A nurse in uniform hurried across the landing with a bowl of water in her hands. The room in which Jim was to sleep was Robin’s own room, which was always kept for her at the Rectory. There was a large photograph of Jim on the mantelpiece, with one of Peter beside it. All along the back, leaning against the wall, were a number of unframed snapshots, some of which had been taken on the holidays the three of them had shared in Devonshire. It was a room of many memories, and the spirit of Robin pervaded it, the fragrant, dainty, laughing child that she had always been. Peterson went out and left Jim alone in it. He took up one or two of the snapshots and stood looking at them with pictures crowding into his mind. There was one of Robin standing poised on a rock, ready to dive. He remembered well the morning it was taken and could hear again her voice, “Hurry up, Uncle Jim; it looks scrumptious—and I want to be in.” Then that joyous sunny scene faded abruptly away, and he saw again her face pale in the glare of the London street: “Pray for me, Uncle Jim, won’t you? I need it.”

He knelt down at her bed, and for some moments prayed, not for little Robin, but for the woman who had uttered that dreadful cry as he came up the stairs.

He partook of a hurried meal alone; Peterson, having a letter to write and post, left him, saying that they could talk in the study when he had finished. Shortly after he joined his friend there.

“Where’s Peter?” was his first question.

“I don’t know.” There was a whole world of sorrow in the three words. They meant so much that for a moment or two Jim said nothing. He had feared the worst and it was true.

“You don’t know?” he repeated dully.

“No. Nor does she, nor does anyone. He’s gone off somewhere and left no address.”

“Has he gone alone?”

“I don’t know that either. I don’t know anything about him. She may live now, but I’m afraid——”

The poor man struggled to command himself, but could not go on. He was sitting in his study chair, holding his unlighted pipe in his hands, and he turned the chair round on its swivel with his back to Jim. Jim waited, and suddenly a piece of flaming coal fell off the big fire that was burning and tumbled into the grate. Peterson jumped up, and taking the tongs put it back, and then, straightening himself up, said, “I’m afraid—her illness is not the worst of it. It’s all over between her and Peter.”

Jim drew in his breath sharply and opened his lips to speak, but Peterson continued in abrupt, broken sentences, lighting his pipe between the first words, and sitting down in his chair.

“I’d been uneasy about them for some time. Even when they came back from the honeymoon the child was not the same, though for the first few months things seemed all right between them, and they were apparently as much in love as ever. Peter went up to London a great deal, on business he said, and, at first, she used to go with him. I saw less and less of them. They never asked me to Bellarmine when he was at home. I thought they wanted to be alone together, naturally enough, and I did not press myself upon them, though God knows I wanted to. I was——”

He broke off and relighted his pipe.

“Then she came and told me one day that the baby was coming. I was tremendously glad, and she—she tried to be. She was always trying to be her old self. I can see that now. I felt it at the time in a vague kind of way. She seemed wildly happy sometimes, and then she would go suddenly quiet. It wasn’t like her, but when I asked, she always put me off. Old Craddock came in one night before Christmas, and said he was afraid Peter had not really recovered from his accident. He had been up to meet him at the Station the night before, and he—well, the old man was broken-hearted about it—he was drunk.

“I taxed her with that, and she broke down and told me that it was true. He was often drunk, and was very violent in it. I was furious, as furious as I know how to be, and was for going to Peter at once, but she begged and prayed me not to, and not to tell you. She said it could do no good, and it was better to leave him to her. I gave in, I always do give in. It’s easier.” There was angry self-contempt in his voice. “She ceased to go up to London with him. Said it was because of the child, but several times she hinted that she did not much

like Peter's friends up there, and that she detested night clubs. Things apparently got better for a bit at Christmas. I stayed with them then at Bellarmine, and they gave a treat to the poor kiddies here. He seemed all right. Then about a month back there was a story got round about his knocking his gardener down. Gossip had it that the man accused him of making suggestions to his daughter, who was Robin's maid. The tale only came to me a fortnight ago. Robin was away visiting Daphne Morrison in Winchester, and when she came back she looked wretchedly ill. When I questioned her she broke down utterly, and, for the first time, spoke out about Peter. Said he'd been a beast—and that she—that she was afraid of him."

He stopped abruptly and struggled with himself. He had told his story with difficulty lighting and relighting his pipe. He stood up now, putting it down on the mantelpiece, and went on brokenly: "Then—then last Wednesday night after dinner I was sitting here, and she came in, all to pieces, almost beside herself. She said Peter had gone away, and that he—had—knocked her. . . ."

Jim uttered a cry of bitter anger and sprang up from his chair.

"Yes. He knocked her down, and the child, a little boy, was born dead."

For some time neither of them said a word. The whole house seemed to be hushed into the silence. Peterson sat huddled up as though all the life had gone out of him, with the tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I blame myself," he said miserably. "I blame myself. I'm no good. I hate unpleasantness. Run away from it. Always have done. I wanted to keep her near me. That was it. My cursed selfishness. Why didn't I listen to you? Why . . .?"

"But I knew nothing against him really," interrupted Jim.

"No, no one did apparently. His own parents didn't. They swear it's his accident. It may be. It's all——"

"I saw him on Thursday," said Jim.

"You did? Where?"

Jim told him the story of the encounter in the New Criterion and, as he concluded, asked:

"Have you heard nothing from him at all?"

"Not a word. We have written and wired to his offices in London, but there has been no reply. Who can this woman be?"

"God knows, but the wrong sort. She has it written all over her. Has Robin

asked for him?” said Jim.

“No. She seems afraid of him. That’s the horrible thing. She’s frightened. She asked for you. God knows how she’ll be when she knows about the child. She might go——”

The door opened and a nurse came in.

“Mrs. Craddock has been asking for you, sir,” she said to Peterson, “and also for”—she hesitated—“for someone she calls ‘Uncle Jim.’ That’s you, sir, isn’t it?” smiling at Jim.

They hurried upstairs.

“Have you told her about the child?” Peterson whispered as they came near the door.

“Yes, sir, we had to tell her, but I don’t think she understands.”

Robin took no notice of them when they first came in. She lay quite still staring in front of her, and feeling every now and then in the bed at her side as though she had lost something. Jim always remembered that hand feeling, and fumbling blindly, and the tortured question in her eyes. Presently she looked up at him, and, for a moment, a smile quivered on her lips.

“Uncle Jim,” she said. He bent over her and she wound her arms about his neck, but the effort seemed too much for her, and she let them fall again. “Dear Uncle Jim. Peter’s dead, quite dead, and baby . . .” She stopped, the lost look came back into her eyes and she began to feel about again in the bed beside her. Then she closed her eyes, and appeared asleep.

“It’s the morphia,” said the nurse. “We had to give her more because of the pain. She was restless for you, but she will sleep now.”

For a little while they stood watching her, then her father bent and kissed her, and the two friends went softly from the room.

It was a fortnight before Robin was able to bear any sustained conversation. Jim ran backwards and forwards to London, bringing news of her to Cecil, who was in the depths of misery, and haunted still by a murderous hatred of Peter. He, it was discovered, was on his way to South Africa. The day of the encounter in the *New Criterion* he had drawn a large sum of money from the bank, picked up a returned berth on a ship sailing the next day, and disappeared. The cabin was a double one, and it was concluded that someone had gone with him.

It was a bitterly cold day at the end of February with snow upon the ground

that Jim, at his arrival at Ranchester, was told that during the last three days the invalid had taken a turn for the better, and was anxious to talk to him. He found her sitting up in bed, a ghost of her former self, but with the returning tide of life evident in her face. She held out her arms as he came in at the door, and for a while clung to him silently. Then she said:

“I want to talk, Uncle Jim.”

He sat on the bed, holding one of her hands in both of his, and she lay back and closed her eyes.

“You see I’m all dead inside,” she said presently, “I can’t feel anything. Peter—baby—all that—it seems as though it had happened to someone else. I can’t feel.”

“It’s God’s mercy that you can’t, darling,” he said.

“God’s mercy?” She opened her eyes and there was a dazed question in them. “Perhaps so, but I want to talk about—about Peter.”

There was a puzzled frown on her face which, Jim recalled with a pang, used to make him laugh. It always came when she was deadly in earnest about anything. A memory of her on the links in Devonshire preparing to drive brought a lump into his throat.

“Uncle Jim, ought I to try and get Peter to come back to me?”

“Do you want him back, Robin dear?”

“Well, I’m dead inside now”—she spoke slowly as if she were trying to realize something—“but even if I come alive, I don’t think I could ever love him again. You see the Peter I loved is dead, or perhaps he never was alive. I don’t know. He is terrible now”—she hesitated—“terrible. He’s—I think he’s—evil.” The last word was a long time coming out, and she looked at him to see if he would understand.

He nodded his head, stroking her hand.

“I blamed myself for a long time. Perhaps I do now. I don’t know. I used to wonder why it was I failed him. I did fail him. Almost from the first I knew he wanted something that I could not give. Now I know—or I think I know—that I never could have given him what he wanted. I ought not to give it to him. Do you understand. There’s something——”

“I think I do,” said Jim.

“They say love never dies. Perhaps I never loved him properly. And yet—I met a girl at a night club. Peter had been drinking—and he left me—and this

girl came and talked to me. She was bitter and hard, and she made me understand what men—men like Peter want. . . . And, Uncle Jim, I hate night clubs. I hate London, and all that. It's not that I'm good, really good, like you . . . but there were men there made me feel all beastly inside—towards the end Peter did that, too. . . . Ought I to try and get him back?"

"If he would repent," began Jim.

"Yes, that's what I mean. Must I try to make him repent? Is that what I vowed to do?"

She clung desperately to his hand, and looked at him with an anxious appeal in her eyes. He was silent, thinking hard. Was she bound to have him back? Ought a woman to be exposed to this kind of torture at the hands of a selfish brute like Peter? A momentary desire to thrash or throttle the beast swept over him.

"I'm frightened of him," she went on, "frightened that he'll hit me, and because he says horrible things when—when he's drunk. But I know that's wrong. I must not be afraid. That's not the worst. It's the other. Must I have him back and go on trying to make him good?"

"That's what Christian Marriage means," said Jim.

He made himself say it, though his whole soul was in revolt.

"That's what I wanted to know," she said quietly. "It means that I must go on trying to make him good, like God goes on trying with us. Is that it?"

Jim nodded. He could not speak, and there was silence between them for a while.

"I don't know what chance there is," she said presently. "You see he hates me trying to be good. It irritates him when I want to go to church or anything. I didn't preach to him, honestly I didn't. I never said a word to him, but—well, it just seems as though he hated God."

"You must pray for him, darling," Jim said, with pity tearing at his heart.

"I have. I do. I have done to-day. But I expect my prayers aren't much good. I'm not good myself. You'll help me, won't you, Uncle Jim? You see, I'm all alone. That's what I felt when Peter first got drunk in Switzerland. I was all alone. I'd never been like that before. I'd always had daddy and you. I felt I couldn't tell you and daddy then, but I have now, and I shan't be alone again, shall I? I couldn't bear it."

"Not if I can help it, darling," Jim answered, choking back the tears that

scalded the back of his eyes.

“Then I’ll try. I’ve written him a note to-day to say that it’s all right and I forgive him. I’ll send it. It’s not that I love him like I used to. I don’t understand about that. I did love him while he was Peter, and then he didn’t seem to be Peter any more. I do not love him like that. But I’m his wife and I’ve vowed to love him, and help him, and I’ll try. He was drunk when he knocked me down, and did not know what he was doing. I can forgive that—but sometimes when I think of baby I—I—but I must not think of that. Perhaps it is better for baby. Uncle Jim, would you pray with me now, please? I want to be prayed with and by you.”

He knelt down and prayed. He was amazed at the strength of this new Robin. The child was gone, but she had developed into a wonderful woman, and he thanked God for her.

“Of course I’d like to have died,” she said as he rose from his knees. “It would have been easier. But I know I’m not going to die now. I’m going to live and——”

Then suddenly her strength gave way and she threw herself into his arms in a passion of weeping.

“Oh, I wish Peter hadn’t died or that I’d never met him. I wish I could be happy again—that it was all a bad dream and I could wake up and be with you and daddy again, like we used to be—just we three.”

Jim felt that the tears were good for her. He petted and comforted her, and presently she grew calmer. She felt under her pillow and gave him a letter.

“Will you try and find his address and send it to him? I will try hard. You’re very good to me, Uncle Jim, and I love you very much.”

He settled her pillows and she lay back and in a little while fell asleep with her hand in his. Jim sat perfectly still, and as he watched her, there was born in him a passion of tenderness such as he had never known could exist, a blending of pain and perfect pity which made him from that moment a greater, finer man. After about half an hour he rose. Poor old Bob would be wanting him. He bent and kissed her softly on the forehead, and she stirred in her sleep. The puzzled little frown was still in her sleeping face as he gently drew down the window blind and left the room.

CHAPTER XV

NO WAY OUT

“Does Mrs. Chapman live here?”

“Yes, sir, but I’m afeared it’s too late. The little lamb’s gorn ’ome. ’E died arf an hour back in one of these ’ere convulsion fits.”

Jim Counihan stood at the door of No. 37 Blackwell Buildings. As he was finishing a hurried meal on his return from Ranchester for the first time, Mrs. Spalding brought in a message to say that he was wanted to baptize a sick child in the Buildings. She had not hurried to tell him, knowing that he would jump up as soon as he heard it. She cared more for his stomach than for his conscience, which she considered was overdeveloped. Jim knew the place well, a great block of tenement flats which ran along one side of a narrow street, faced by a factory which shut out all the sunlight, and made the wretched dwellings so dark that in winter the gas had to be kept burning all day long by those who could afford it.

In most of the flats there were two families living in the four rooms and No. 37 was one of these. Mr. and Mrs. Chapman occupied the two front rooms with their family of five children, paying twelve and sixpence per week for the privilege, and, partly to make both ends meet upon the dole, and partly because there was just as little room, and two big brothers, in the grandmother’s flat downstairs, Mrs. Chapman’s youngest sister Elsie lived with them. As Jim entered she slipped, half-dressed and holding a towel to her face, into the back room from which the sound of smothered giggles could be heard. She was getting ready to go out, and had been washing herself in a bowl of water which stood on the table surrounded by dirty plates and the remains of a meal, bread, margarine or doubtful butter, dregs of cold tea, and some antique-looking beef steak with dripping round it. In one corner of the room was a large bed, and on it lay the dead child, covered with a rather dirty sheet. A pale, sickly-looking boy with a squint sat on the end of the bed with a cheap comic paper on his knee. Two children, a boy and a girl of five and six years old, naked save for their little vests, sat on the floor together, and with large solemn eyes and very dirty faces stared at their mother who sat on a chair by the bedside crying.

“I am sorry I’m too late,” said Jim miserably.

He had seen hundreds of similar scenes, but he never grew accustomed to them. Always they made him feel inwardly wretched and ashamed. It seemed

such hopeless mockery to talk to people who lived like this about the Love of God. He was too honest, and too close to the facts, and was, moreover, far too good a Christian, to find any comfort in the thought with which most of us protect ourselves against the pain of such places, "it is their own fault." This wretched evasion meant nothing to him. If their condition were due to sin, if they had lost their characters, as well as everything else in life, so much the worse; so much the harder was it to help them, and so much the more imperative and urgent was their need of help. He knew, no one knows better than a working parish priest, that sin and human weakness play their part in making slums, but, as he told himself again and again, had he been born as they were born he would be as they were now, and worse. It was the essence of this man's perpetual crucifixion that he was honest, and could not harden himself with comfortable lies because Christ would not let him. Thousands of parsons, at whom the unthinking glibly jeer for their helplessness and inefficiency, are in the same case, and those who mock at them are too deficient in imagination to understand the burden that they bear. The people among whom he went loved him for his gentleness and respected him for his honesty, for no one could speak more bluntly or let a man have it straighter from the shoulder than the parson of S. Jude's, when he felt that straight talking was demanded, and would do good. But, for the most part, it was the misery, rather than the sin, of his people that lay like a badly packed and sharply pointed burden on his heart. As he stood now with his hat in his hand opposite the enormous grandmother who opened the door to him, there was in his manner the shyness and diffidence which endeared him to the poor, feeling as they did that he respected them, and hated to intrude.

"I came as quickly as I could," he added.

"'Ow it ain't your fault, sir," the grandmother replied volubly. "'E oughter 'ave been done afore."

She was taking charge of the situation and was conscious of the importance of the occasion. Death, even a baby's death, is always an event in slumdom.

"As I says to our Mary, I says, 'You did ought to 'ave 'ad 'im done afore. I allus 'ad mine done so soon as ever I got up—an' I've 'ad eleven and buried six—so I knows what trouble is.' She oughter 'ave 'ad 'im done, that's what I says to 'er."

"Yes," said Jim gently, "poor little lad, how old was he?"

"Nine months, sir," Mrs. Chapman answered, "and I would 'ave 'ad 'im done, but we've 'ad a lot of trouble, father being out of work—and—and that."

She choked back a sob.

"I know," answered Jim, shaking hands with her as he sat down on a chair which the grandmother had put for him after carefully dusting the seat with her apron. He took the little girl off the floor and set her upon his knee. She came to him gladly, as all children did, and after staring at him fixedly with one finger in her mouth, caught the light of a smile in his eyes and smiled shyly back.

"'E's allus been a lot o' trouble, and the doctor said as 'e wouldn't never do much good," Mrs. Chapman continued. "'E's better off where 'e is, I expect'."

"It's Gawd's Will," said the grandmother. "'E knows best, as I says to my 'usban' when our little Jack 'ad the fever. It took 'im off while you could clap your 'ands. But 'e oughter 'ave been done, that's what I says, and I allus will say they oughter be done at once. You never knows with children. It's Gawd's Will and——"

"Yes, God will take care of him now," interrupted Jim. This blasphemous piety always made him sick. God's Will in these damnable hovels where women littered child after child to die in the dark! God's Will in this stuffy stinking disease factory where the slaves of muddled and chaotic social order were bred! He would almost rather they had cursed God than connected His Will with this. The fatalism of the people was the crowning shame of all.

"Would you like me to say a prayer for him?" he asked, seeking to stem the tide of the old woman's eloquence.

"If ye like, sir." Mrs. Chapman looked round anxiously to find a spot where he could kneel.

Jim took the child off his knee, and putting his arm about her, knelt down on the floor. The grandmother went down with a rolling motion like an elephant, holding to the table. Mrs. Chapman whispered sharply to the boy, "Kneel down, Jack," and for a moment or so there was silence, broken only by the murmur of talk from the next room. The other child crept up within Jim's arm and he began to pray. It was a short and simple prayer, but it taxed his faith to the limit. There were times when he found it almost impossible to believe in God and this was one of them. "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief," he muttered to himself, and then prayed:

"Jesus, Lord of the Children's Kingdom, Who didst say 'Suffer little children to come unto Me and forbid them not,' receive the soul of this Thy son, and make him happy in Thy heavenly home. Forgive us our sins, and help us to live good lives that we may one day meet him where death and parting are no more, for Thine own Love's sake. Amen."

Only one who has prayed such a prayer in such a place can count the cost of it. The sweat was streaming down his face as he rose from his knees, sweat of shame and struggle. Just as he finished the door of the back room opened and Elsie Chapman came in. She was a pretty fair-haired girl, as her sister had been once, and was all “dolled up” to go out, as she would have said. Cheap but smart, she was. A blue costume with very short skirts, light grey silk stockings, a little blue hat with a white feather in it, worn at a rakish angle on her bobbed head. Her lips were painted and her face generously powdered. She passed quickly through the room with just a side-glance at Jim, and, leaving a sickly smell of scent behind her, opened the door and went out.

Mrs. Chapman looked at the grandmother and burst out crying again.

“I wish you could say a word to our Elsie,” the grandmother said. “She don’t go round to Miss Wetherby’s club no more now—says she don’t want no religion, and we can’t get ’er in of a night.”

“She ain’t comin’ in at all to-night—neither—she said she weren’t,” sobbed Mrs. Chapman; “she used a bad word and said she were sick of this ’ole and sleeping with the children—and we’ve allus been respectable.”

Jim started forward to the door. This was the climax and there was a fury of shame in his heart as he said hurriedly:

“I’ll try and catch her up, and I’ll get Miss Wetherby to see her to-night, if I can.”

He ran down the flight of iron steps to the street, but the girl had disappeared. She might have gone either way to catch a ’bus, but Commercial Road was the more likely, so he ran in that direction. On reaching the corner he could see nothing of her, until, as he hurried along the crowded street, he caught sight of the grey silk stockings mounting the steps of a ’bus already moving off. He ran but failed to catch it, and abandoning the attempt, stopped and hesitated and then turned to go home. It was hopeless trying to follow her now, he would have to wait and catch her to-morrow, and put Joyce upon her track. He walked back to the Mission with a sore heart. Robin was not yet out of danger, poor old Bob was a broken man, nothing had been heard of Peter, and the thought of Cecil Weyman made him ache with sympathy. The Chapman family in their brutal squalor with the dead child in the overcrowded room and little Elsie running off to sell her slim young body on the streets formed a fitting background to his inward misery. There was, of course, nothing uncommon about it. It was all in a day’s work, but he did not find it easier to bear for that.

As he let himself in with his latchkey, Mrs. Spalding met him to say that a

young man was waiting for him in the study, and he found Charlie Roberts standing before the fire with his hat in his hand. This meant more delay in getting to the letters which he could see piled up on his desk, but, remembering how Robin had pleaded with him for this pair as she held his hand and sat at his feet that night that seemed so long ago, he greeted Charlie warmly for her sake.

“I ’opes I’m not intrudin’ or keeping you,” Charlie said nervously.

“Not a bit. I asked you to come, and I’m very glad to see you, lad. Sit down, and have a cigarette. I know you smoke these yellow perils like me.”

He passed Charlie a box of Gold Flake, and taking one himself, lighted up for both.

“Two’s all right, but three wouldn’t do—would it?” he said smiling.

He was gaining time to calm and collect his own thoughts, and trying to put Roberts at his ease.

“No, sir. ’Ow’s Miss Robin, if I might ask?” replied Charlie.

“Better, but not out of danger yet, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry. Maisie said I was to be sure and ask.”

He asked no more questions. His mother had repeated the gossip of Ranchester, and he did not want to appear curious. A silence fell on both, and for a while they sat smoking.

“Well, Charles, what is it?” said Jim at last. “You said you wanted to ask me something.”

“Yes, sir——” He hesitated, and then said haltingly,

“I expect you know about Maisie’s husb—about that Will Smith she were married to?”

“No—what about him?”

“’E’s in gaol, sir.”

“I’m not surprised to hear that, but what for?”

“Well, ’e’s charged with murdering that there Jennie Brooks ’e went off with when he deserted Maisie, but they don’t know rightly that ’e done it.”

“Murder! Good Lord!” said Jim sharply. “Was that in the papers? I never saw it.”

“Yes—about a fortnight back. There was a portrait of ’im too.”

“He never was much good, nor the girl either, by all accounts. God have mercy on her soul,” Jim said, getting up from his chair and standing with his back to the chimney-piece.

Charlie made a motion as though to throw his cigarette away, but took another draw at it and then said nervously:

“No, sir, they was both wrong ’uns, but what I wants to ask is this: It seems a terrible thing to ask when ’e’s where ’e is—and God knows I ’ope ’e never done it. But supposin’ ’e did and pays for it. ’Ow would me and Maisie stand?”

Jim’s face hardened and he stared straight in front of him.

“I know,” Charlie went on, “that if ’e—well, if ’e dies, I can go and put the banns up at the church down our street, and be married, and no questions asked. It ’ud be legal all right. But that isn’t what me and Maisie wants.”

Jim looked down with a question in his eyes.

“We don’t want to be married, unless we can be married proper. Unless you and the Rector could marry us.”

“It makes no earthly difference who marries——” began Jim.

But Charlie went on. “Yes, it does, sir, if you’ll pardon me. You said as me and Maisie would be living in sin if we went together. You said that when we was in the garden there at Ranchester. Well, we ’ave lived together, and Maisie ’as a baby coming, and what I wants to know is, would we ’ave to say we was sorry we done it, and that we repented of our sin before you, who knows us both, could marry us, and give us Communion?”

“Yes, you would, Charles,” Jim said after a pause. “According to the Church you and Maisie are now living in sin, and you must repent of that before you can receive the Sacrament of marriage.”

“Then even if ’e dies, we are where we was. We can’t get married nor come to Communion. I were afraid that ’ud be it.”

There was disappointment and trouble but no bitterness in the man’s face as he stared into the fire.

“You see,” he continued quietly but doggedly, “we can’t neither of us say as we’re sorry. It ’ud be a lie if we did. We can’t get married proper nor come to Communion because we won’t tell a lie. It seems ’ard, that does.”

“Have you never regretted what you did?” asked Jim.

“Never, neither of us, never for a minute,” answered Charlie earnestly, “we

thanks God every day for our love. It's made another man of me. I never knowed what 'appiness was until this last twelve months. And Maisie . . ." He stopped abruptly. He couldn't tell anyone, not even Jim, what Maisie said. "She's one in a million, my Maisie is—you know that, sir," he added after a pause.

Jim lighted another cigarette, sat down, and for some time smoked in silence. Robin came back to him. He heard again that wailing cry and saw her feeling vainly after her dead child. In the tangled skein of life these two were strangely close to her, and he knew she loved them both.

"Charles," he said at last, "I know that the Church seems hard about this, and even cruel, but she is not really so. This sex passion is the most unruly part of our nature. It is blind and blinding, the best of men and women are liable to be deceived by it. It causes, and always has caused men and women to inflict unspeakable cruelties upon one another. The Church has to protect her children against themselves. I am neither a cynic nor a pessimist, lad, and I know that married love can be beautiful. I believe that there are millions of really happy marriages, and millions more that are just humdrum and commonplace, but beautiful, too, in their way. The happy and the humdrum marriages make no noise, and we do not hear about them. There are fine women, too, who stick to, and partially redeem vile men, and decent men who cling to worthless women for their honour's sake, and there is the multitude of ill-assorted incompatible couples who yet make something of marriage, because they are held together by an ancient tradition and a life-long vow. The Christian Marriage vow has done more to help the human race in its battle with this blind and lawless passion than anything else in the world. It has been our strongest weapon, and it is entrusted to the Church for man's good. We dare not throw it away. You are a man who has seen life and you know what men are. You were in France and saw what it meant there. All the casualties did not appear in the papers, you know that. Women went down by thousands, murdered body and soul by men, and men trapped by women and their own lusts died of shameful disease. The brothel and the battlefield each claimed their toll of broken hearts and broken homes, and among them some of the finest hearts and homes in England. It is fashionable nowadays to talk about sex as only natural and human, and to accuse the Church of inhumanity because she is hard upon it. But this is sentimental rubbish. It is not the Church which is hard but lust itself, which knows no mercy and no law. I hate to say it, but the cruelty in your case is the result of Maisie's sin. It is always the result of sin."

At the mention of Maisie's sin Charlie's face flushed and he had to struggle with the anger rising in his heart, but he felt the kindness behind the

stern words and mastered himself.

“And ’as she got to pay for that all ’er life?” he asked, his voice trembling.

“It sounds hard, but it is the kindest way in the end,” Jim said slowly as though he were thinking it out again. “There are many hard cases, cruel hard cases, but if you surrender the law of life-long union you open the way out for more cruelties. The Church is right. She knows what human nature is. We can rise by discipline and grace to be but little lower than the angels, but we can sink a long way lower than the beasts.”

“Can’t there be exceptions, no ’ow?” Charlie asked in despair. “If ’e’d stuck to Maisie she would ’ave stuck to ’im. God knows if ’e ’ad been a decent man, if ’e ’ad even kep’ ’er I’d never ’ave gone anigh. But ’e made ’er life a ’ell on earth for two years, and then went off with another woman. Didn’t she pay for ’er sin, poor lass? I didn’t go in and break up a ’ome, sir, and steal ’er from ’im. I—we’ve made a ’ome, and little Maisie is as dear to me as my own will be. Don’t that make no difference?”

Jim was some time before he answered. He was groping in the darkness. The vision of sex passion’s evil record which he had conjured up was much more vivid to himself than he had been able to make it in words. Thousands of pictures which the merciful power of forgetting the repulsive and unpleasant normally kept in the lumber room of his unconscious mind, enabling him to maintain his essential sanity and balance, came crowding round him now. They swarmed up from his mental cellars like devils out of hell. The little consumptive prostitute at Boulogne who spat blood on her handkerchief, and told him it was life, and then passed in to serve French soldiers till she died . . . and other pictures . . . many others. He had proved too much. These cursed facts were a two-edged weapon, they did more than justify the sternness of the Church, they blackened the Face of God Himself. Night came down upon his mind, a night in which there was neither moon nor stars. He was groping frantically after his faith. If that went he was lost, lost on a dirty stinking battlefield full of muttered curses and obscene smells. Memories of a hideous sin-blasted wilderness near Messines in which he had wandered for hours dodging death and waiting dawn came back to him. Life was like that without faith. Had he not forfeited the right to faith when he divorced his wife? But what could he have done? She would not come back to him. She preferred to live in sin. That she was living in sin, though legally married, he never doubted. Secular divorce was nothing. Her life with Dunstone was adultery whitewashed by a shallow-thinking Godless society. But was that true of Maisie and Charles? They were not married at all, and yet he felt that their whole outlook was different. They were Christians and wanted to live the

Christian life. Was there not in the passionate pity, protective tenderness, and high courage of this boy's love for his girl clear proof of a redemptive power at work transforming crude sex passion into the most beautiful thing in the world? This union of theirs was no mere sex adventure, it was a triumph of real love. He was certain of that in his bones. Yet they were without the law. Was it the rigid law of indissoluble Marriage or the power of the Christian Spirit that enabled men to resist and rise above crude sex? Was the Spirit inseparable from the law? Was the Church bolstering up her weakness in the Spirit by relying overmuch upon the letter of the law? Was it the sword of the Spirit that had been entrusted to the Church as the weapon wherewith to combat the ravages of lust, and had she not ceased to wield it, and taken instead the broken useless shield of legalism? Was it her weakness or her strength that made her merciless to her little children when they failed? The thought of Robin came back to him again. Supposing Peter never came. Supposing it was all over between her and Peter. Must she remain alone all her life and put love and children, for which she was so clearly created, behind her for ever? If Love came to her, the fine love of an honest man like Cecil, and she took it, was she to be classed with adulterers and sex adventurers, and all the miserable crowd bound with the chains of lust?

The clock ticked away on the mantelpiece. He passed the cigarettes to Charlie but did not speak. He sat forward and buried his head in his hands striving after light. Stick to clear-cut law and it was all plain sailing, surrender it and there was an end of reason and consistency. But was reason, was logical consistency the way to Truth in this matter?

"Exceptions would be very hard to make, and could only lead to more confusion. The Church would betray her trust, and her children if she made exceptions. She must be strict about this; it would be fatal to be slack."

He said this half to himself, not looking at Charlie but staring into the fire.

"She's pretty slack as it is," Charlie said, bringing out the thoughts that had been beating through his mind during the silence, and speaking for the first time with real bitterness. "'Alf the marriages, more than 'alf of 'em, ain't Christian. It's all a matter of form. Anyone can get married in Church. If this 'ere Smith dies, I could get married in Church next day and no one 'ud say a word. What right 'ad 'e to be married in Church? 'E weren't a Christian or communicant nor nothin'. It were a farce, their marriage. 'E never even tried to keep 'is vows, never meant to keep 'em. 'E betrayed Maisie and then deceived 'er, and that's 'Oly Matrimony! We've sworn to be faithful and meant it with all our 'earts. We swore on Christmas Day," his voice broke as he recalled the moment in the Abbey, "and yet we're living in sin."

He got up from his chair, and took up his hat as though he meant to go. Jim sat perfectly still. His mind refused to move, and he was conscious of nothing but pain. Deep down within him he felt that Charlie was right, Maisie's marriage had been a scandal and a fraud. Thousands of marriages were just that, blasphemies. He had taken them himself. He had married couples doped with drink, and destitute of any religion whatever. People were married in Church, and sent back to bring forth sickly children in pigsties like Blackwell buildings, and the man who owned them, and drew income from their rents, kept his wife in Holy Matrimony, and patronized the Church. He was not excommunicated for his covetousness and greed. The Church pretended to be strict, but was in reality as slack as she could be. The evil passions of men, pride, greed, sloth, and self-assertion, were running riot in the world and making it a dirty shambles, but the Church singled out this one passion of sex, and made up for her weakness in other respects by a tremendous show of sternness in this. Yet Christ Himself was ever merciful to those whose weakness was weakness of the flesh; it was for pride, hypocrisy, and covetousness He reserved His wrath, and the whip of His tongue.

"Charles," he said, getting up and laying both hands upon his shoulders, "I confess to you that we have been slack. My old friend the Rector was slack when he married Maisie, but no worse than I have been many a time. We have not earned the right to be strict and consistent. We have let the whole ideal down."

He paused and then went on rapidly, turning to the mantelpiece and looking into the fire: "But the ideal still remains, and we cannot, must not surrender it. It is more than an ideal, it is a fact. When two people marry they create a relationship between them which can never be changed by man. They are husband and wife as brother and sister are brother and sister, and as mother and son are mother and son. Many a sister suffers torture for a sinful brother, many a mother for a sinful son, but they cannot break the relationship, however great the pain may be. That's how it is—and I cannot alter it—no man can. It is cruel—often cruel—but the cruelty is in the sin and not in the law of God."

He was hanging on to his faith with his teeth set and there was a note of defiance in his voice. Charlie was silent, standing hat in hand with a world of misery in his face.

"I divorced my own wife," Jim went on fiercely, "you know I did. I let her go because—because I could not keep her back. But she is living in sin—living in mortal sin, and I know it, and suffer for it. No matter how much I wanted to I could not marry again. There is no way out of it."

He turned and faced Roberts with the sweat shining in little drops upon his forehead. He was at the end of things, with his back to the wall. For some time the two of them stood there, neither of them able to speak.

“What—what do you think my Maisie ought to do, then? Go to that black devil in prison? Go back to him with my child in her body? My God, sir!”

“He’s her husband,” Jim replied sternly.

“He’s not. He never was,” the other man almost spat back at him. “He’s her betrayer; he’s the plague and curse of her life. He’s a devil—and I’ll see you and the Church damned before I let her go near him.”

Jim pulled himself together. This would never do.

“Charlie, old man,” he said, “don’t talk like that. I don’t think Maisie can go back to him now. It is a hideous tangle. But I cannot betray the truth. You and Maisie should part. You should keep her because she has borne you a child, but you ought never to live together again as man and wife. It is sin against the law of God.”

“If I believed that, I would hate God,” Charlie said slowly and deliberately. “If I am to go to hell for Maisie, then to hell I’ll go and be glad.”

He turned to leave the room.

“Wait a bit,” Jim said quickly, “don’t go like that. Listen—I cannot alter the truth, and I cannot say your union is right. But—but God is greater than we are, Charles, and in the end it is to Him that you must render your account. I want to say this, lad, I believe that your Maisie is a good woman, and that you are a good man. It is all wrong somehow, but I believe that with all my heart. We must leave it to God. Won’t you shake hands?”

Charlie hesitated a moment, and then, responding to the sincerity and love behind the words, held out his hand.

“I wish I’d never come,” he said sadly. “It ’as done no good, only brought it all up again. Good night, sir.”

“Good night—and—and God bless you both—and the baby.”

Roberts stood for a moment, opened his mouth as though to say something further, then turned abruptly and went out.

Jim got down to his letters. With a tremendous effort of will he put his wretched perplexities behind him and concentrated his mind upon the work. His whole soul was in the Mission and its effort to save life from this shipwrecked mass of men and women amongst whom he laboured. If at times

the hopelessness of the task overwhelmed him, and storms of angry rebellion against the callous carelessness which had allowed this festering sore to remain so long untouched swept over him, he always came back again to the one hope with a courage born of faith that defied despair. He was a born fighter, and Christ had laid well hold on him, and would not let him go. There were times when he doubted everything, even the existence of God, but he never doubted the right of Christ to rule his life, and reign supreme in all the world. He went steadily through the pile, stopping every now and then to make rapid calculations as to his ability to meet the expenses and pay the bills as they came in.

He was sitting with a letter in his hand and a frown upon his face when the door opened, and Cecil Weyman came in. He looked ill and weary, and his eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep.

“H-how is she?” he stammered out at once.

“Not out of danger yet, but better. The child was born dead.”

Cecil gave a groan in which anger and pity met.

Jim got up and, pushing him into the arm-chair, told him all he knew. He had been expecting this final ordeal, and went through it with never a thought of himself, concentrating his whole power on helping his friend. He got through the story, but the latter part of it was a little incoherent. Then suddenly he stopped, staggered to his desk, and with a rushing, roaring sound in his ears, fell into a dead faint.

When he came round Cecil, full of concern and penitence for having taxed him further when he was at the end of his tether, insisted on his going to bed, and an hour later looked in to find him lying in the deep sleep of complete exhaustion.

CHAPTER XVI

LIGHT

“What a pretty child that is.”

“Yes, isn’t she? Dangerously pretty, and there’s stuff in her too, poor kid. We only just got her in time. She had started on the streets.”

Robin was sitting in an arm-chair at the window of Joyce Wetherby’s room. Elsie Chapman, looking like a picture of provocative innocence in her white cap and apron and quaker grey frock, had just set down on the table a great bunch of red roses which Captain Dayborn had brought as a present to Robin. Joyce had with some difficulty persuaded the girl to come to her as a maid, intending to keep her on when she and the Gallant were married. September 29th had been fixed for the great event, and the date was always alluded to as “Der Tag” amongst the band of friends who gathered round the Mission. It was now early June, Whit-Sunday night, and the rest had all gone to Evensong. The sound of the first hymn could be heard floating in through the open window. Robin could not catch the words, but the tune brought them back to her mind, and with them a flood of memories.

Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,
Taught by Thee, we covet most,
Of Thy gifts at Pentecost,
Holy, heavenly love.

Love is kind, and suffers long,
Love is meek, and thinks no wrong,
Love than death itself more strong;
Therefore give us love.

For weeks after she knew that she was not going to die, she had remained stupefied by sorrow, “all dead inside” as she called it, utterly unable to realize what had happened. It had been a month before she had heard from Peter. His reply to her letter, begging him to come home and begin again, was a long rambling incoherent effort to defend himself and lay the blame on her. Their life together, he said, had been impossible from the start. She had not helped him to keep off the drink, but had driven him to it with her damned spying and puritan nonsense. No fellow could stand being tied to a woman’s apron-strings like that. It was the letter of a bad-tempered, sulky schoolboy, who knows he is

wrong, and will not own up, and was merely a repetition, in the same words and phrases, of tirades he had poured out upon her at frequent intervals during their brief life together.

It filled Robin with despair, and at the same time with overwhelming pity. That was the basis of her feeling for him. She had never been able to resent his most outrageous speeches, even when they cut her to the quick. He was such a helpless child. From the very first, from the moment that Peter the Splendid died, she had been filled with a desire to mother him. But unfortunately that attitude was to Peter like a red rag to a bull. He had fought a fierce battle for years, as he grew up, to free himself from the clinging, possessive, anxiously protective love of his mother. This battle had begotten in him a repressed antagonism to all mothering which he did not understand himself. Once he sensed, or thought he sensed, the mother in Robin all his unconscious and involuntary loathing of it blazed out. There was nothing to hold them together then but passion, and for some time it did hold, and their life was a series of violent quarrels and equally violent reconciliations, the violence in both cases being almost entirely on his side. Robin gave him all she could in their times of truce, but always felt that she failed to give him what he sought. Had Peter been a poor man, and she entirely dependent upon him economically, the situation would probably have forced her to become the broken-spirited, helpless instrument of his desires, as thousands of women are and have been to such men from time immemorial. She could never have fought him and become a shrew, and the wealth of compassion in her nature would have kept her trying to mother him to the end. Had Peter stuck to it the marriage would have been a fairly commonplace hell in which a woman lived and proudly kept up appearances. But towards the end two factors came in which brought matters to a climax: one was his repeated threat of physical violence, which, to Robin's intense disgust, frightened her, and the other was his sensuality and grossness which came out when he was drunk, and filled her with involuntary repulsion. Try as she might, she could not prevent his knowing that she feared him, and, though she would not acknowledge this to herself, that she despised him for frightening her as she despised herself for being frightened. Nor could she, for all her efforts and prayers, hide the disgust with which his sensuality filled her. The affair with Mary Truscott, the gardener's daughter, was not the first, and it only hastened forward an inevitable conclusion. She had torn up a dozen letters written in reply to his, and felt that the one she had actually sent had been futile. As his had been a repetition of his habitual outburst, so hers had been a repetition of her patient replies. She had exhausted all the means of persuasion at her command, and could think of no new pleas which she could make. Indeed, one of her strongest pleas was gone since the child was dead.

She had not reproached him for that, nor had she mentioned the last awful interview when he had struck her. All that she had covered by saying that the past was dead and done with, and asking him to begin again. Two months had passed without any reply, and then there had been only a short note saying that he had no intention of coming back to England or of living with her again, and informing her that a generous allowance would be paid into the Bank, and she could do as she pleased with that, and with the house at Bellarmine. He never mentioned or asked for divorce, and she wrote again begging him to return, and taking all the blame upon herself. For some time she had doubted the honesty of this, but had determined to leave no stone unturned and sent the letter as it was. To this there had, up to now, been no reply.

It was her father's illness that roused her from the listless apathy which bound her at first. Peterson was tortured with self-reproach, and was a broken man. A bad bout of influenza had left his heart in a serious condition, and the object of their visit to London, which brought Robin to be sitting listening to the hymn of love with memories crowding round her, was to see one doctor about him, and another about herself. She wanted to be assured about his heart, and he wanted to be quite certain that she was recovering and would be none the worse. Joyce came over and sat on the arm of her chair and stroked her hair, and they were both silent until the last notes of the hymn died away:

From the overshadowing
Of Thy gold and silver wing,
Shed on us who to Thee sing,
Holy, heavenly Love.

"I love that, don't you?" Joyce said softly.

"Yes," said Robin, "when I hear it I seem to understand what love is, and I know that it is the most beautiful thing in the world. But—but then one comes back to real life—and——"

She stopped, biting her lips.

"I don't want to be pathetic. I won't be pathetic," she said, smiling up through unshed tears with a look that made Joyce take her into her arms with a sound, half a laugh and half a sob.

"You are a darling," Robin said indistinctly because her head was crushed against Joyce's breast, "but you are not to love me too much. I can't stand it just now. At least you are to love me because I love you, but you must be sensible, and you must keep me sensible. I refuse to be a pitiful object; it breaks daddy's heart, and his heart is not to be broken."

She sat up and took both of Joyce's hands in hers as she stood before her chair.

"You don't know what you have done for me already, you and that man of yours. I think he is the very nicest person I have ever met, and, if he were not head over ears and eyelashes in love with you, I'd fall in love with him myself—there. When I see you two I believe in love again, and in tenderness and loyalty, and—yes, in God. That's what you've done for me. But you're not to cry,"—for the tears were raining down Joyce's cheeks—"you're not to cry, you're to laugh, and talk to me about Bolshevism and Bloody Revolution and the Mission—and Uncle Jim—and all that."

Joyce kissed her and said:

"You're a dear to feel like that, and my Gallant can love you as much as he likes. He can bring you roses and not bring me any, and he—he can kiss you if he likes, and he does it very nicely, because I know. No girl could say more than that, could she?"

They were both laughing now through their tears.

"If you lend me your handkerchief I'll lend you mine, and then we'll be quits," Robin said, fishing out her own.

"What did the doctor man say about Mr. Peterson?" asked Joyce.

"Well, he said the poor old dear's heart was very groggy, and that he must not work for a long time, and must not worry or be worried. That is why I must not be pathetic. I want him to leave Ranchester and come down somewhere near here. You see, he loves Uncle Jim, and they are so good for one another. I don't know whether that isn't partly selfish—I am a selfish little beast really—because I love Uncle Jim, too, and it's—well, it's like it used to be when we're together—we three."

"And what did your doctor say about you, dear?" asked Joyce.

"Oh, he said I was all right. He even told me that I would be quite well again. But what's the good—that's being pathetic—but—I'll say it sensibly. I could have borne it better if—if my baby had not died."

Joyce sensed the agony that lay behind this.

"I know," she said. "It must be a million times worse for you—but I can understand a little bit, dear. Do you really think you will come down here? It would be lovely having you."

"Well, of course daddy does not want to stop working, and he'll be lost

without a parish. He has always worked hard, poor dear. But if he has to, he has to, and we both want to be near Uncle Jim. He's such a darling, isn't he?"

"I think he is the finest man I ever met," Joyce said thoughtfully. "I cannot understand all his ideas, but it was he that made me believe in God again after the war. He's splendid. I suppose you've known him a long time?"

"Ever since I was a tiny tot," said Robin. "He prepared me for my Confirmation and taught me all I know about—about big things."

"He'll kill himself the way he works, and we can't stop him. You do him good, you know, Robin. He looks happier since you've come than he has done for months. It would be ever so good for him having you nearby," Joyce said, looking up into her face.

Robin brightened.

"Oh, do you really think I help him? I think it's daddy more than me, or perhaps it is we three together. I believe that's it—we three, we've always been such pals. Of course, if Peter——"

She stopped.

"Do you think your Peter will come back? But I shouldn't have asked that," Joyce said, kissing her hard.

"Yes, you should. I want to talk to you about it. I don't think he's ever coming back to me. I have tried my best, and I will keep on trying."

"Do you want him very badly?" Joyce asked diffidently, but encouraged by the look in her eyes.

The frown that used to make Jim laugh and once had made him cry, came, and she was silent for a while.

"I suppose the proper answer would be that I do—but the comfortable part about you, you darling, is that one need not say proper things to you. The truth is that I do want my Peter, the Peter I married, back. I want him back so badly that I cry my eyes out sometimes for him at night. I'm not going to cry now—I'm sensible. But that Peter is dead—and the other Peter that is my husband—I only want back because I want to help him. Because I'm sorry, dreadfully sorry for him. But I don't love him, at least—that is what I can't understand about love. I suppose you can't imagine your Gallant suddenly changing into someone else—and not being himself any more. I can't—he's too good. Peter wasn't good, you know—he's—oh, I can't explain, dear—but I don't really want him back as he is."

“Then why do you keep on trying?”

“Because I think it is my duty. He is my husband and I want to help him.”

“But isn’t that just being proper—conventional?”

“No—it is more than that. You see, I believe that I must try to keep the vow and that says ‘for better or for worse.’ ”

“Surely that does not mean that if a man is unfaithful and cruel you are bound to have him back?”

“Yes, I think it does. It means that you must forgive him and try to make him better.”

“No matter what he does?”

“Yes, no matter what he does. It means bearing his sins like you would bear the sins of your father or your brother. That’s what Uncle Jim says, and I believe he’s right. If Peter were my child or my brother I would have to try and get him back and suffer for his sins, wouldn’t I?”

“Yes, but I never thought of marriage that way. Are you going to go on trying all your life?”

Robin did not answer at once. She suddenly realized the possibility of long years of loneliness and hesitated.

“I don’t know about that,” she said at last. “It depends on so many things, doesn’t it? But as long as there seems to be the slightest chance of getting him back or doing him any good I will keep on trying.”

“Supposing he won’t come back, and wants to marry this—to marry someone else. Would you let him? Do you think it is ever right to divorce?”

“Not absolutely right. It couldn’t ever be that, could it? But—well, I’ve thought a lot about that—and it seems to me that it’s impossible to help it sometimes, and that it is less wrong than trying to keep someone by force when he wants to go. If I were certain Peter wouldn’t ever come back to me, and he wanted to marry someone else, I would let him go, especially if I thought she could help him.”

She spoke calmly and quietly, but Joyce guessed the struggle that lay behind it all by the hand that unconsciously tightened its grip upon hers every now and then. There was silence between them and they could hear the singing again:

Our Blest Redeemed, ere He breathed
His tender last farewell,

A Guide, a Comforter, bequeath'd
With us to dwell.

They heard it through, Robin leaning back in her chair and looking out at the red geraniums that nodded at her through the window from the box outside.

"Could you ever marry again, Robin, if you divorced him?" Joyce asked, when the Amen had died away into silence.

"That's another thing altogether," she said. "I've never thought about that. It never occurred to me for myself."

"Do you think it is ever right for divorced people to marry?"

"It depends on the people and lots of things, it seems to me. I don't see how you can lay down hard laws about it. Did you ever hear Uncle Jim speak of a girl called Maisie—Maisie Smith?"

"Yes, and Cecil told me the story, and all about what you did for them, that made me like you before I saw you."

"Well, I'm sure she ought to have divorced her husband and married Charlie Roberts."

"The Padre doesn't think so."

"I know. It's the only thing I've ever known him hard about. I think it's his own trouble makes him hard, poor dear, and now he's got me, too."

The people were beginning to come out of Church, and Joyce stood up to watch.

"There's Gallant and Cecil," she said.

Robin stood up with the help of Joyce's arm about her. They waved a greeting to the two, and were still standing when Dayborn and Cecil burst into the room. Both men thought what a lovely picture they made. Robin was still frail, and in her white dress looked like a graceful flower beside the older girl's splendid beauty and abounding health. To Cecil she seemed the most wonderful thing on earth, and he was, as usual, utterly tongue-tied.

"Well, you two? Ben having a good gossip?" Dayborn said, as he drew Joyce within the circle of his one great arm and kissed her.

"I've just been telling Robin you can kiss her, if you like," Joyce said mischievously. "She has been saying such nice things about you that I'm quite jealous, and you brought her roses and brought me none. I told her you kissed quite nicely," she added, looking up at him.

Dayborn laughed a gloriously happy chuckle and putting his hand under her chin tilted up her face and kissed her on both eyes, which he knew she loved. Then he turned to Robin, and, stooping down from his great height, took her hand in his and kissed it gently.

“It’s a chance not to be missed,” he said gaily.

She blushed red and looked more like a flower than ever, Cecil thought, as she thanked the Captain for the roses and explained that the nice things had included them both. Poor old Cecil, looking on, envied Dayborn. He would have given much for the privilege, but knew that for that very reason it could never be his. Sometimes lately in his dreams of her it had come to him that, if she divorced Peter, as for her own sake he devoutly hoped she would, there might be a chance for him, and although he always dismissed the thought it came up again, and made him more nervous than ever in her presence. The desire to cherish and protect her from the touch of any further sorrow was like a pain within him. If she could have given him the right he would have been content, he told himself, to stand between her and the world and ask for nothing in return. But he was a man and an honest man, and did not hide from himself that the desire of her beauty was strong upon him at times, and made him tremble even when he touched her hand. He was always at his very worst in her presence and generally dumb as he was now.

Perhaps Robin felt that he was out in the cold, for she turned to him with a smile and held out her hand.

“Dear old Cecil,” she said, “how are you?”

He took her hand in his and, holding it a little longer than pure friendship demanded, simply because he could not resist the temptation, stammered out:

“H-how are you—that’s m-much more to the p-point?”

“Oh, ever so much better.”

Just then Jim, the Rector, Dick Raymond and Doris Wilson all came in together. Jim went straight to Robin and she kissed him. That kiss was for both of them a complex affair. It was meant to restore and maintain the friendship which had always been so happy, and it did. But there was more in it now. It sealed the pledge he had given her that she should never be alone again if he could help it. Whatever happened she would never be alone. That knowledge had had more to do with saving her sanity and sense of proportion than anything else in the world. It was her most precious possession, and in some subtle way it changed her relationship to Counihan and made it even sweeter than before.

Supper was laid for them in the Common Room of the Mission, which Captain Dayborn had built on to the Vicarage with two rooms for Joyce above it. Their new quarters, lower down the street, were in course of construction, and it was about them that Dayborn was talking as they sat down.

"We'll always have room for Robin, won't we?" Joyce said, as she sat down beside her, "and I'll try not to be jealous."

Robin's tribute to Dayborn, and her gallantry in her sorrow, had completely won Joyce's heart, and this evening was the beginning of a friendship between the two which was destined to last through life.

Dayborn said that he had an important proposal to lay before the assembled company. His sister Lady Joycelyn had asked him to invite them all to motor out on Whit-Tuesday to her house in Surrey, half-way up the Hog's Back. She would send her big car and that, with the beast of burden for him and Joyce, would take the entire staff and guests complete. Whit-Monday was the Mission children's treat, and they would all be hard at work, and this would give them a breather, as Dayborn said. There was much planning and discussion of details, and some chaff of Dick and Doris, who looked with eyes of consternation at one another when the scheme was broached, having planned a private expedition on their own. Their secret was dragged out of them by Joyce, and they were promised a whole wood to themselves and a private summerhouse if it got cold.

They gave in with a good grace and were toasted in lemonade. After supper they repaired to Jim's study, and Dick went to the piano. The others distributed themselves about the room. Robin was put on to the chesterfield with her feet up, and Cecil perched himself on the end of it. The Rector sat in the arm-chair, Dayborn, with Joyce at his feet, sat on a stool by the fireplace, Jim in his own chair close to Robin, and Doris went into a corner near the piano.

It had been a glorious day and the glow of a splendid sunset made a soft ruddy twilight. Even there, as often happens on a Sunday night, the air that came in through the open window was sweet with the scent of June. Dick began to play Beethoven's Fifth Sonata. As the delicious music floated round them there came upon them all a sense of utter peace. There was not one amongst them who did not love this little band and every member of it. They were friends and lovers all. Good music and loving friends, what more can Heaven offer in the end? Doris in her corner was caught away into Paradise. Music was a passion with her and Dick was rapidly becoming another. Joyce and Dayborn knew their own bliss, and it infected the others with its beauty.

“Happy, dear?” Jim whispered to Robin as Dick broke into Greig’s Spring Song.

“Happier than I’ve been for months, Uncle Jim,” she answered, giving him her hand.

They both looked across at the Rector and smiled. A tremendous gratitude swept over Jim. She was safe now, he felt sure of that. The problem of her life was yet to solve, but, whatever happened now, the child would come through it unbeaten. She had been tried in the fire and had stood the test. There had been times during these months when he had feared for her, when the horror of it all had appeared too much for her. He alone knew what she had been through. It seemed now as though a great black cloud which had been hanging over them all had been cleared away, and there was light again.

CHAPTER XVII

A CHRISTIAN TROUSSEAU?

"Here you are, Robin darling. I'm so sorry we couldn't meet the train, but Gallant and I had promised to go out to Patricia's for tea, and we couldn't put her off. She'd asked a whole crush of people to meet us. It's all your fault, Gallant, hawking me round to relations. Give the Robin a kiss and say you're sorry."

"It did not matter a bit," Robin said, as Dayborn bent to kiss her. "It was quite happy waiting here, and dear old Mrs. Spalding gave me tea."

They were standing in Jim's study. Robin had come up a fortnight before the wedding to help Joyce with the preparations, and hold her hand in these last horrid moments, as Joyce herself had put it.

"It really is an awful business this getting married," she said, now holding out her hand to Dayborn for a cigarette, "specially when you're supposed to be a Christian."

"You don't look as if you found it so bad as all that," said Robin, smiling. "And what on earth has being a Christian got to do with it?"

"Why, everything—just everything," Joyce answered, looking up at the Gallant with a twinkle of fun in her eyes. "Here's a problem for you. What sort of a thing is a Christian trousseau? How much has a Christian girl a right to spend on making herself beautiful for her lord and master?"

"I suppose it depends on what she can afford," said Robin. "After all, it only——"

"Afford?" interrupted Joyce. "That's just it—you haven't begun to understand, little Robin. Be it known unto you that I am rich—disgustingly—vulgarly—unchristianly rich. And he's worse. He rolls in it—wallows in it"—and she turned to the Gallant and hammered on his broad chest as though to drive the terrible accusation home. "Super-tax has no terrors for him. He's just glad to be relieved. He could use five-pound notes for handkerchiefs when he had a cold in his head and never know the difference. Goodness knows what he couldn't afford—and I'm almost as bad. As for the two of us together! It's too horrible to contemplate."

"Well, I'm sure you'll do a lot of good with it," Robin said, sitting back in the arm-chair and looking up at the pair who stood arm in arm before her.

Their happiness and the honest-to-God goodness of them both acted like healing waters to her soul. If now and then a pang of envy came, it was only now and then, and the wound was healed by loving laughter as soon as it was made.

“Oh, Lord! that’s just it, you darling,” Joyce replied, breaking away from the Gallant and sitting on the arm of Robin’s chair. “He’s always doing good. But how much good are we to do? You see, he wants me to have everything that I want, and I want him to have everything that he wants; and I don’t want to have everything that I want, and he doesn’t want to have everything that he wants, and we are always quarrelling. We’re never——”

“Joyce darling,” the Gallant broke in with a little pain in his bright blue eyes, “we never have——”

“Oh, I know. Robin understands. Not proper quarrels; you simply can’t quarrel with that,” Joyce went on, waving her cigarette towards him. “He’s unquarrellable with, you can see that, can’t you? How could anybody quarrel with a thing that length? I’ve tried hundreds of times—but it’s hopeless—he always makes me laugh.”

It was part of the unconscious healing power this jolly couple exercised, their laughter, and it bubbled over now, and Robin joined in naturally and easily.

“It’s a serious business all the same,” said Joyce. “It’s no laughing matter, I can tell you. I don’t know what to do. Am I to build houses for the proletariat, or make myself all beautiful within, like the king’s daughter that came out of the ivory palaces in the psalms? I could spend pots and pots of money on myself and on the house, but if I don’t spend it I can build another house. How’s any poor girl to choose between houses and silk what-you-may-call-’ems? Besides, I can’t discuss it properly with him because he’s not supposed to know these things. It’s hopeless.”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand the tragedy,” Robin said, laughing. “Can’t you do both?”

“Of course I can, you goose. But how much of both? That’s the question. It’s relativity in its most desperate form. You see, this person has reduced the housing business to a fine art. He’ll tell you exactly what fraction of a house any sum, however small, will buy.”

She sat up on the arm of the chair with an irresistibly comic look on her merry face, and, holding up one hand, counted on her fingers with the other. “Let’s see. Sixty pounds buys a room, twenty buys windows and doors, ten

pounds and you have the kitchen range, one pound is so many bricks. He can go right down to half a crown. How is anyone to choose between a cart-load of bricks and a pair of—all beautiful within? The things just don't go together."

Robin was helpless with laughter. They were such a delicious pair, and the happiness of their fine love and comradeship was infectious. Joyce loved to hear her laugh, and went on more recklessly than ever.

"I tell you shopping's a perfect nightmare. I went to buy an evening frock the other day, but I simply couldn't choose one. Every time Madame What's-her-name with the googley eyes brought out a new model I saw cart-loads of bricks. I'm sure she thought I was mad. She showed me a lovely gold thing, and said it was thirty guineas, and I said: 'Oh, Lord! three kitchen ranges and a thousand bricks.' It's desperate. I'm sure I'll go mad, stark, staring mad with joy."

She sprang up from the chair, seized the Gallant, and did a jazz dance with him round the study, singing,

"I want to be happy,
But I can't be happy
Till I make you happy too."

"You must forgive her, Robin," said the Gallant, when they came to a full-stop, a little out of breath. "She can't help it. I've advised her to take something for it, but I'm afraid she's incurable. And now, darling, I must go," he added, taking Joyce in his arms and kissing her. "I'm late as it is. I'll call round for you both in the morning."

Joyce saw him out, and then came back to take Robin over to her rooms.

"There's some trouble on at the Docks," she said. "Two or three thousand men came out on strike this morning, and there is a special directors' meeting to-night. They were at it all morning, and poor old Gallant is worried out of his life really."

"What's it all about?" asked Robin.

"It's the question of holding meetings on the Docks and allowing the Union officials to speak to the men. Gallant is on their side really. He thinks most of the Union people are all right, but there is one fellow who is 'a wrong 'un,' as they say, and is just out to stir up trouble, and the other directors simply won't have him on the place."

Robin's luggage had been brought over to Joyce's rooms and the two went over there as they talked.

"I've got the Club in half an hour," Joyce said, "but I'll just set them properly going, and then we can have a good gossip, and I'll show you all the presents and things."

The Club, however, took longer than Joyce had purposed, and it was half-past eight before the two girls sat down to their meal and could talk. Robin, hearing that it was dance night, had offered to teach the girls, or dance for them. It was the first time she had danced since her illness, but she was feeling much stronger; a month in Devonshire had almost completed the cure. The girls went mad over her, and would have kept her at it all night, but Joyce, who was anxious about her, sternly forbade her to go on, and led her away amid laughing protests and shrill calls to come again soon.

"I hope you're not over-tired, dear," she said as they sat down. "I don't know what the Padre would have said if he'd been there. He gave me endless directions to be careful of you."

"I'm not a bit tired really," Robin said with shining eyes. "I love dancing, and it has done me good. When is Uncle Jim coming back?"

"Not for two or three days. He is speaking up in Yorkshire somewhere."

"How is he?"

"Oh, much fitter now. His fortnight with you and Mr. Peterson did him a lot of good. How is Mr. Peterson?" asked Joyce.

"Not much better, I'm afraid. He has resigned S. Philip's, and is only staying on until the Bishop finds another man."

"Are you coming down here, then? I do hope you are."

"I think so. Uncle Jim wants us to take a house out Epping way. Then we could get backwards and forwards here quite easily."

"That would be lovely. I do hope it comes off."

Robin greeted Elsie Chapman, who came in to wait upon them, and asked about her sister. When the girl had gone out Joyce reported that she was settling down beautifully, and was putting up a splendid fight to keep herself respectable.

"What a lovely ring that is," Robin said, when Joyce had settled her in a chair with a cigarette, and the things were cleared away.

"Isn't it?" Joyce answered, holding out her hand on which the diamonds and rubies flashed and flamed. "It is one of our great troubles."

"I wouldn't mind having troubles of that sort," smiled Robin.

“Well, you see, Gallant will never tell me what it’s worth. But I am afraid it would build two or three houses, and when one tries to work it out in bricks it makes one’s brain reel. I could probably keep a docker’s family for five years on the proceeds if I sold it.”

“But you’d never do that!” Robin exclaimed.

“Of course not, because it is his. I’ll never take it off till I die. But that’s what bothers me. I’d have loved it just the same if it had been imitation pearls like my girls get from their boys. It would have been his still, and that’s all I care about really. Though, of course, it is beautiful, and I love its beauty. It’s like those very deep red roses with dewdrops on them in the morning, isn’t it?”

“It is glorious,” said Robin, “and you deserve it.”

“I don’t. I don’t deserve it a little scrap atom bit,” Joyce answered. “I’ve got tons and tons more than I deserve, without God throwing in rubies, and the love of the best man that ever lived on top of it all.”

Robin bent back her head as she sat at her feet, and looking down at her said: “You’re not really making yourself unhappy over all this, are you? You mustn’t, really you mustn’t. We haven’t got so many happy people in the world that we can afford to lose one. You don’t know what your happiness is worth to us all; you mustn’t let anything spoil it.”

Tears flashed in Joyce’s eyes more brilliant than the diamonds on her hand.

“Of course I’m not unhappy,” she said. “I’m so happy that I could burst. But I want to give it away. There’s so much sorrow and poverty, and I’m so beastly—beastly rich. I want to give it away, and I don’t know how to. That’s my trouble, our trouble. He’s just as bad as I am really. That’s partly why I adore him so.”

“You do give away, dear, both of you, much more than you know. I don’t know what I’d have done without you,” Robin said, kissing her.

“Oh, but that’s another thing altogether. That’s just because you love us and we love you, and you give us more than we give, you darling. But it’s this money business. You see, it isn’t as if either of us were ignorant and felt sentimental about it. We neither of us do that. Gallant has one of the best business brains in England, and I’m not altogether an ignoramus about these things. I know the elements of economics fairly well. I pretend to be a Bolshevik and all that, but I know perfectly well that there is no solution of the problem along those lines. Even before I met Gallant I knew the mere redistribution of our present wealth would not cure poverty, and talking with

him makes that perfectly clear. And I know that the luxury of the rich does not really mean much from an economic point of view. We can't and don't spend enough on pampering our beastly bodies to make much difference to the main problem. But you see, dear, the fact that we are really poorer a good deal than we were before the war, and that there is no El Dorado from which to draw the decent living wage all people ought to have, makes the duty of using rightly what we have more pressing and urgent. You understand what I mean. All the money that is wasted and energy that is spent on luxury is not sufficient to turn the scales, but that makes it all the more disgusting that we should waste any at all. It's so stupid and selfish."

"But what is luxury, and where does it begin?" Robin said, thinking hard. "I see what you mean, and I understand what was behind all your fun this afternoon, you darling person. But how are we to tell what is luxury?"

"Oh, that's the maddening part of it. That's where my ring comes in, and all the toggery for the wedding, and where we are to spend our honeymoon, and a million other things."

"Doesn't it give employment to those who work at those trades when you buy beautiful things?" Robin asked, with the puzzled frown on her face which was a signal that she was up against something big.

"Heavens, how I wish that that was the truth and that the more we spent on luxuries the better it was for us all. But it isn't true. There are all sorts of complicated reasons why it isn't, but the net result is that luxury is not really good for trade in the long run. It leads to the position we are in. We can spend wealth and energy on rebuilding Regent Street, and can't do a blessed thing to shift Bethnal Green." Joyce was pouring out the burden of her soul and finding it comforting to do it to a sympathetic listener. Robin had never thought in this way before, and it struck her now with sudden force that there was a whole world of difference in the way these two looked upon and talked about money when compared with Peter's outlook on it, which she had taken for granted as the ordinary thing. To doubt that money was meant to be spent on a jolly good time, to hesitate about getting at once whatever he wanted, would never have occurred to Peter, and, except for the reason that she could not afford certain things, it had never occurred to her. But here were these two, with the world at their feet, preparing to take it up as a burden to be wisely and intelligently borne, and not as a prize to be grasped at.

"I think you're wonderful, both of you," she said.

"Gallant is," replied Joyce. "He is the most wonderful man in the world. Of course, I know that sounds sloppy, and every girl says it when she's in love.

But Gallant is just bone good. Good all through. There's nothing much wonderful about me, except that I'm a wonderful fool."

"Well, I think you're wonderful too. I've never met anyone who thought about money as you do—and I've met lots of wealthy people," said Robin.

"Oh, but there are some, and there must be more, lots more. We simply can't go on living like fools or silly children, slopping money about anyhow without thinking of the results. It's stupid. But it's when it comes down to details that the rub comes. Shall we go to Majorca or to Margate for our honeymoon?" Joyce asked with a joyous smile. "Which?"

"Margate?" Robin answered. "What a place! Why Margate?"

"Oh, that's only figurative and because it begins with M. We really want to go to Majorca. Gallant's been and says it's heaven. But it comes down to bricks and mortar again. He says we have got to build, and there is any amount of it to do. Capital won't go into the building trade naturally, so we've got to pump it in, and to get people with more wits than a cabbage to think of saving and investing in it at a low rate of interest, or none at all, is one way of pumping it. Majorca means so many bricks less, and money spent abroad when we want it at home. It's the same way with a thousand other things. I've got to have an exceeding glorious wedding-dress because we have asked the whole Mission to the wedding, all the halt, and the maimed, and the blind, and they'd break their hearts if it wasn't a real slap-up, silk-and-satin, flowery bridesmaids' wedding; but the rest of it is going to be done on the cheap, and the difference goes into fire-grates."

"You make me feel ashamed of myself," Robin said thoughtfully. "I've always lived among the poor, because Daddy has a poor parish, and I've visited and done things for them. But I never thought about not spending money."

"Well, I never did," Joyce answered, "until Eric, my brother, went to the War. He was everything to me, you know, and he used to tell me about his men. He was ashamed of the conditions under which many of them lived, and used to wonder what made them fight for England at all. He made me hate poverty and vow I'd fight it. When he died I took it up as my work, because I knew it would have been his. He was all against charity and the Lady Bountiful business, said it was disgusting cheek. He always said that if we wanted to help we must study, and go down to the roots of the evil. That's why I went to the School of economics. But I've got no brains really, and it has so many roots. My dear, I abominate, loathe, and detest slums. I can't make out how God allows such places to exist. It isn't easy to believe in God; sometimes

I want to swear, and swear, and swear at Him, and then I see something beautiful, and I'm all ashamed of myself again. Don't you ever feel like that?"

Robin was looking away from Joyce, and when she turned her eyes were troubled.

"No," she said, "I never have. I've been too wrapped up in myself."

"You're not to say such things," Joyce cried, taking both her hands. "You're not a bit——"

"Yes, I am," Robin went on. "You see, I'm not very old, and I have no brains at all. I never could do anything but dance. Life was all beautiful for me, and the poor people were just put there for me to be kind to. Then it all went black and ugly, and there was nothing—nothing except Daddy. I've been asleep in my own trouble, and now I think I'm waking up. You and Gallant and Uncle Jim have been waking me up. I've been selfish, and I'm sorry."

"What a beast I am," cried Joyce. "I've been talking like a stuck-up prig, and never thinking of you a bit. I shan't say another word. Come and look at the presents, and forget——"

"But I don't want to forget. I want to remember all of it. I want to learn more, and understand more. I want to remember all the other people—and then perhaps I shall forget myself, and my own selfish——"

Joyce stopped her with a kiss.

"You mustn't say it," she cried, "or I shall kick myself all around the room five times. Come and look at these treasures and then you're to go to bed. You're looking white and tired, and I shouldn't have let you dance for those greedy females. Come on."

"Nuts for them as 'as no teeth," she said as they stood by the table on which the presents were set out. "I've got all I want, so of course I must have more. The girls like looking at them, that's why we have them here. These are all Mission presents."

All the cheap or home-made articles from her poorer friends were in the front, accorded the places of honour.

"Some of these make me cry," she added, holding up an exceeding magnificent tea-cosy. "Old Mrs. Janson made this. She drinks like a fish and never washes, but she's an old dear, if only you can stand the smell. I've had it disinfected."

"Now you must come to bed," she said, when they had admired "the

fortuitous conglomeration of heterogeneous atoms,” as she called the assemblage on the table.

Before they parted for the night it was arranged that in the morning Robin should go shopping with the pair of them. Joyce told her of a way out of the evening-frock difficulty that had been suggested to her. A young girl of good family, whose parents had lost all their money in the War, had set up, in partnership with a friend, a smart little shop in the West End. She tried to supply really beautiful clothes at reasonable prices, and was reputed to be a genius at it, and very generous to her workpeople.

“We’ll try her,” said Joyce, “and remember, if I utter the word brick or show any symptoms of seeing fire-grates, you are to poke me hard underneath the fifth rib on the left-hand side, and to say kindly but firmly, ‘Fig-leaves and aprons neither fashionable nor permitted by police regulations in the colder climates. Knock on with the job.’ ”

Next morning Gallant brought round “the beast of burden,” an ancient but undaunted Sunbeam, and conveyed the two to Mademoiselle Diana’s.

“You’d better fade away at this point, darling,” Joyce said to the Gallant, as they drew up at the door of a brightly painted little shop in a rather dingy street off S. Martin’s Lane. “Go, repent of your sins, and smoke a cigarette at the Club, and come back in half an hour.”

They were greeted by Diana Stanley herself, a tall, slender girl with a beautiful head of very golden hair, and a pair of large hazel eyes. She took them into her neatly furnished little sanctum at the back of the shop, and entered into Joyce’s plans with enthusiasm. They eventually worked out a scheme for two frocks “at the cost of Madame Googley’s one,” as Joyce said, and Miss Stanley began to tell them about her venture.

“Of course, I couldn’t have done it without my partner,” she said. “She’s Capital and I’m Labour, you see. Here she is,” she added, taking a large photograph off a table in the corner of the room and handing it to Joyce. Joyce found herself looking at a singularly lovely face, which was either made or marred, she could not quite decide which, by something peculiar in the eyes. A vague feeling came to her that somewhere or other she had seen the face before. She was still trying to recall where it was, and why it seemed familiar as she passed the photograph to Robin.

“What is her name?” Robin asked as she took it.

“Juliette de Mauray,” Miss Stanley answered. “She married a French airman during the war, but he was no good.”

Robin started when she heard the name, and her face went crimson and then pale as she looked at the face. She could not hear what Joyce was saying, and was in a panic for fear she would betray herself.

“I think Gallant has come,” she said in a trembling voice, as she gave the photograph back to Miss Stanley. “I’ll run and tell him we’re coming.”

Joyce felt that something was wrong, but Robin was gone before she could speak. She hurriedly bade good-bye to Miss Stanley and followed her, still wondering about the girl’s face.

“I’ve got it,” she said, as she reached the door. “I remember now who she is. She’s the Flame girl at——”

Then she looked at Robin.

“Robin darling, what is the matter?” she cried. “Are you ill?”

“No, dear,” Robin answered tremblingly. “But that is the girl Peter has gone away with. He mentioned her name in a letter I had a week ago.”

“Oh, Robin, little Robin, how awful,” said Joyce.

“She is very beautiful,” Robin said. “I hope she will help him, and that he will not hurt her.”

CHAPTER XVIII

ROBIN AND JULIETTE

Two years passed by and it was June again. The move from Ranchester had been made. Mr. Peterson had retired from active service, and taken a small house with a lovely little garden just beyond Epping. It stood on a hill overlooking a great sweep of the forest which stretched out as far as the eye could see, clad in that exquisitely fresh green raiment which is its peculiar glory in the early weeks of June. Time soon soils its splendour, and another year must wind away before Dame Nature does it again to make us sure that beauty cannot die.

Robin sat in the garden in a very large cane chair in which she had curled herself up because she was too small to fill it comfortably. She was reading, and it was obvious from the serious look upon her face, and the frown between her eyes, that it was not altogether easy reading. It was a book on the population question, lent to her by Joyce Wetherby that had been, Joyce Dayborn that was. Joyce herself had already added one stout unit to the vital statistics of the year, and Robin had been one of the first to hold the tiny Gallant in her arms. She had felt his small hands clutching at her thumb, and had somewhat abruptly laid him down, and made an excuse to leave the mother's side for a while. She was in danger of being pathetic, and that was not allowed. Steadily throughout the last two years she had refused to pity herself, or to allow any bitterness to creep into her heart. To her father she was a perpetual miracle, and he was in consequence perfectly happy. His unconscious selfishness had been her salvation by one of those queer paradoxes which defy the wisdom of the moralist. Only Jim knew the cost of the miracle. To him she had brought the letters she had received from Peter, and he alone knew how deeply they had wounded her. But his confidence had been justified, and she had come through every test. For the last year she had heard nothing at all from Peter. She refused to touch the allowance he made her, and the house at Bellarmine was still shut up. There had been no mention of divorce in any of the letters, and she had always begged him to come back, or offered to go out to him wherever he was, only pleading that her father might come to see her settled down. It never even occurred to her as a possibility that she should take the initiative and divorce Peter, and she had never hinted at it even to Jim. She had taken up dancing again on Miss Grayson's suggestion. Her old friend had retired and was living on her savings, and a small allowance from her brother, in a tiny flat at Hampstead. Robin had

a dancing class at the Mission which flourished exceedingly, and had led to her going to other girls' clubs to teach. This, and some visiting she did for Jim amongst the very poor, kept her busy, as she had the house to manage as well. "The Refuge" had been named by Jim, and it justified its name. Whenever he, or any of the Mission staff, found that the work was getting on top of them, they fled to Epping, and there were sure of finding a loving welcome and an atmosphere of peace. They could wander in the forest, or put on a red coat and go down to the golf-links with the Rector, who, to his great satisfaction, still played a good game, though a bit slow on his pins, as he would say in apology when playing with a younger man. Elsie Chapman had come out as maid at "The Refuge." She was prettier than ever, and as good as gold, though she appeared to be engaged to a different man every two months on the average. The latest venture was the chauffeur at the big house farther up the hill. He seemed to be a steady fellow, and Robin remarked to her father that she thought Elsie was fixed at last. There was, however, no mention of marriage as yet. "Lor' bless ye, mam," she would say, "I ain't in no 'urry to get married. Once you're married your troubles begins. Look at our Mary, six of 'em living and another coming to town next week, and 'im on the dole." Elsie was nothing if not frank, and Robin, to whom she was devoted, learned from her conversation many things about life in that class which she had not realized before. Elsie it was who told her that being religious lessened your value in the marriage market.

"Boys don't like 'em religious, you see, mam—they says they're slow. That makes it 'ard for us girls. It ain't so easy to be just right. An' I must say I 'ad a sickner myself of the very religious sort. I went with a boy just after Miss Joyce—I mean Mrs. Dayborn—took me, and 'e were religious, and well, you know, mam, 'e were the pale pink limit. We never went to nothin' but meetings, and 'e never—well, 'e never did nothin'—honest to God 'e didn't. I don't like 'em cheeky, mind, but 'im! Well, there! I never went with such a feller, it was same as if we was in church all the time." Elsie put her hands together and turned up her eyes, looking so utterly and incredibly pious that Robin laughed until the tears ran down her cheeks. But there was stout stuff in the girl, and Robin learned to respect her. She put up a tremendous fight to keep straight without being a prude. That difficulty, as Robin reflected, was not confined to Elsie's class of life. She had been through it herself, and perhaps had not succeeded. Was she a prig? That was a question she often put to herself. Had she failed to hold Peter because she was a prig? She was never quite certain, and sympathized with Elsie.

Her visiting among the down-and-outs of the Mission district had brought her face to face with other facts which Elsie was able to throw light upon from

experience. She described graphically, and with a wealth of detail, what it was like sleeping with the Chapman children, who kicked you vigorously in the back every five minutes, and got pains in their tummies and were sick. She told Robin how her sister's life had "fair sickened" her, with its endless procession of babies, and the constant dread of more. This problem of unwanted children had never been real to Robin before, and it was partly Elsie, and partly the controversy which still came up from time to time at the Mission, that led her to borrow books on population and study them. The results of her study bewildered her. Instinctively she sided with Jim, and shared his horror of the whole thing; but the facts, as she found them, and as they were put before her in what she read, made her more than doubtful as to whether he was right. She had talked over the question with Cecil and with Joyce, and, on one very memorable occasion, with Jim. Having been terribly upset about a family of degenerates she came across in her rounds, she burst out in horror to him. He had been very patient, but declared that such people ought to be segregated, and that he was quite prepared for that, but that the other method was immoral and productive of immorality. Robin came to see that it was no use arguing with him, but, with the help of Joyce and Cecil, she was forming her own conclusions, and some of her worst cases found their way to the Castle Street clinic.

The book she was reading now was *Woman and the New Race*, by Margaret Sanger, and she found the facts it contained terrible to face. It threw, what was for her, an entirely new light on the history of motherhood, and she caught a glimpse of the long-drawn-out tragedy of child-murder all down the ages.

She laid the book down, and looked out across the forest. Life was full of unfathomable mysteries. She had always thought of children as sent direct from God to the homes prepared for them by an unerring providence. Facts which seemed to contradict that simple faith she had either failed to notice, or had dismissed as being part of the nasty side of life with which she had nothing to do. But her own experience, and her work in the slums, had gradually robbed her of every illusion, and she was now, like millions of her sisters in this generation, face to face with the naked tragedy of life. She no longer lived in the pleasant, compact, and manageable world of nice people into which she had been born. She seemed to be lost, and wandering in a monstrous, maze-like universe, full of immensities which made her feel helpless and afraid. She was even afraid of herself at times, and was no longer sure that she was a nice person. Lately there had been days when she had been swept by moods of passionate rebellion against her lot in life. She did not understand it. Perhaps it would be better not to read books like this, or to think about the world at all.

What was the good if it only served to make one doubt and be discontented? And yet if what they said was true, surely it was better to know the truth. If God did not prepare a home and a welcome for every baby born, what was the use of pretending that He did? There were, and there always had been, unwanted children born into the world. Here all down the ages were women whose arms were too full, and who were content to murder rather than bear the burden; and here was she with empty arms, and cut off for ever from the chance of one, even one. She was not pitying herself, she was just trying to face up to facts, and see the meaning of them. But it was dark. The facts were such hateful facts, and she could see no meaning in them. She could have given her baby such a lovely home, and such a wealth of love, and there was another coming to that dreadful Blackwell Buildings.

It was only during the last year that thoughts like this had come to her with any force of feeling behind them. At first she had been ill, her vitality had been low, and her emotions numbed. But now she was in perfect health again, and sometimes when she met a pair of happy lovers on the road, or as she walked in the forest and heard the ripple of laughter from behind a bush, there would come a stinging pain of emptiness into her heart which she cried on God to fill. It did not come often, and when it did she crushed it down; but it was a lovely morning, and it came now. She left the larger problem and came back to herself. She dreamed that she had dreamed the last four years, and that in reality she was young again with all her life before her. Her mind swung back to foolish little love-affairs of her girlhood. Sheila's brother Eric, a nice red-haired boy, had kissed her once at a Christmas party, and for a month she had imagined herself in love with him. He was dead, killed in the war. If only he—then there was Cecil. He had always loved her, and he was such a dear—why couldn't she love him? But he was like a brother. Then, clear as a cameo, came the Deanery garden, the moonlight on the Cathedral, the sigh of the wind in the trees, and Peter the Splendid. A quarter of an hour passed by and she sat there still with the book on her lap, dreaming. She was brought back to earth and reality by the sound of a taxi-cab drawing up outside.

The gate opened, and a woman walked up the garden path. Tall and slim, she moved with an easy, careless grace which fascinated Robin, as all fine movements did. Her arms, bare almost to the shoulder, were half covered by long white gloves. She wore an exquisitely made light green frock, and a small green hat which, crushed down at an angle on her shingled head, hid half the outline of her face. As she turned to ring the bell Robin glimpsed a pair of grey eyes set wide apart with something queer about them. The glimpse was enough. It was the face of the photograph.

She felt suddenly terrified; not angry, insulted, or jealous, but simply panic-stricken. She wanted to run away. But curiosity came to her rescue. What was she like?

Presently Elsie came across the lawn.

“Madame de Mauray to see you, mam,” she said.

Robin could not speak. She sat there silently struggling with an overmastering desire to escape the ordeal of this meeting, until Elsie said:

“Shall I show ’er out ’ere, mam?”

Then she gave a gasp of relief. What a splendid idea! The thought of facing her in their little drawing-room was terrible, but out here in the open air it would be easier somehow.

“Yes, please, Elsie, ask her to come out into the garden.”

Elsie hurried off, and with a hammering heart, and a queer choking sensation at the back of her throat, Robin waited. All sorts of utterly trivial and inconsequent things flitted through her mind. “Thank goodness Daddy’s out for lunch. I believe I’ve got a hole in my stocking, but it’s at the back, and won’t show. I wish I were properly dressed. She had a lovely frock. I wonder—but what on earth does it matter?”

Had she but known it, Robin was very properly dressed. A white knitted silk jumper wide open at the throat, and with short sleeves, a well-cut tailor-made mauve skirt, flesh-coloured stockings and a pair of brown slipper shoes. It was all quite simple, but it brought out the lines of her perfect figure, and, crowned with her flower-like, typically fine bred English face, made a picture that would have warmed the heart of any decent man alive.

Juliette was fully conscious of it, and her eyes, as she came across the lawn, were bright with a frank and generous admiration. She stood opposite to Robin for a moment in silence, looking at her as though she were trying to take her in, then she said:

“You child! You blessed lovely child!”

She did not offer to shake hands, and Robin made no attempt at a conversational opening. She couldn’t. The panic she had felt at first, and only partially recovered from, came back upon her with redoubled force. She could not understand herself. Indignation, scorn, jealousy, any or all of these would have been natural enough, but this fright was humiliating and absurd. She ought to despise this woman and she didn’t. She ought to hate her, and she didn’t. She even—yes, there was something about her that she liked. She had a

sudden feeling that she was going to cry, and the tears started unbidden to her eyes.

“What do you want?” she gasped out, biting her lip.

To her amazement and consternation tears came into Juliette’s eyes, and she seemed to have some difficulty in controlling her voice. Without being asked, she sat down in the chair Robin had left, and threw the very expensive cloak she was still carrying on to the grass by her side, with a gesture that made it seem as though she were throwing it away, and wished she could throw something else away with it.

“I don’t know,” she said, blinking back her tears and staring straight in front of her, “I don’t know now, now that I’ve seen you, I don’t know from Adam. I thought I could talk to ye when I came, but now . . . look at ye standing there like a wild rose-bud with the dew still on it in the morning. Juliette de Mauray, you’re a rotter, a nasty low-class rotter. You’re a cat, a common cat, you with your squint eyes and kiss-me-quick face! Ugh! I hate the sight of ye. Ye ought to have been smacked when you were young.”

She delivered this diatribe against herself with a vehemence and apparent sincerity that took Robin’s breath away. Her consternation gave place to complete bewilderment, and, quite at a loss for words, she stood there silently waiting.

“What in the name of heaven made you take up with Peter Craddock?” Juliette went on after a pause, and with a note of desperation in her voice that somehow made Robin feel what seemed an insane or hysterical desire to laugh. “Sure you’re not his sort at all. You’ve no more to do with him than ye have with me, no more than the devil has to do with holy water and the saints. How did ye come to be with him, anyhow?”

“Peter wasn’t always like he is now,” Robin said, speaking, to her own surprise, quite calmly, and addressing herself rather than Juliette. “He has his good side. He was splendid when I first met him.”

“Don’t I know it?” Juliette broke in. “Don’t I know it? Haven’t I lived with him these last three years, God forgive me. When he’s sober and right way out he’s splendid now. But, oh, God——”

She stood up from the chair, turned her back on Robin, and for a moment or two tried vainly to control herself. When she turned round again her eyes were full of tears, but through them shone a reckless whimsical smile.

“I’m goin’ on like a fool,” she said. “The sight of ye knocked me off me perch entirely. By right ye ought to turn me out of this, and send me about me

business. I've wronged ye, and I know I've wronged ye. But you're not that sort. I know you're not. Can I talk to ye properly now?"

"I want you to," Robin said quietly. "Sit down again, won't you? And can I get you anything? A cup of tea?"

Juliette sat down, and with a swift sudden motion pulled off her hat as a schoolboy pulls off his cap, and put it on her knee. She sat there with the sun shining on her black shingled head and making the tears sparkle like diamonds in her eyes.

"I wish I could give ye a kiss," she said abruptly. "No, I know ye can't," as Robin made a slight involuntary movement of withdrawal. "I know ye can't. And—and—I'd love the tea. Oh, Lord——"

"I'll tell Elsie," Robin said. She hurried off across the lawn, glad of a moment's respite in which to collect herself.

Why did she shrink from that offer of a kiss? And how had it been possible to arrive at a point where it could be offered? But then anything was possible with that girl. She did not arrive at a point, she was there all the time. There was something about her—what was it? Again there came that impulse to laugh. "She was such a——" But thought failed to formulate, as it always does fail to formulate, the impression of a vivid personality. When Robin returned she found Juliette lying back in the chair with her eyes closed. She had not heard her coming, and Robin was struck by the difference the veiled eyes made. All the provocative challenge was gone, and the face in repose was calmly and gently beautiful. It was as though some mischievous devil had been exorcised from the woman's soul, and she were coming to herself, a very gracious lovely self.

"It will be here in a moment or two," Robin said softly.

Juliette opened her eyes, and, looking at her with the same challenge of appeal that had staggered Robin when she asked for a kiss, said:

"Your child died, didn't it?"

"He was born dead."

"Oh, God! How can ye talk to me at all? And how can I tell ye what—what I've got to tell? I'm going to have a child, his child. That's what I came about. I—they told me this morning—and now it's all different. I never knew it was like this. I thought I did not want—but now——"

Elsie came across the lawn carrying a small wicker-work table on which tea was set out. It was a merciful interruption for Robin. The colour faded from

her face and left her white and trembling. A tempestuous urge of feeling swept over her. It was too primitive and too complex to analyse, but the strength of it frightened her again. Elsie set the table down, and, looking at the two, went without a word, wondering, "Was the little mistress ill? She looked that white. Who was this fine lady with the funny eyes?"

"Can I tell ye about it?" Juliette asked.

"Yes," answered Robin. It was all she could trust herself to say.

"Ye'll think I'm going to excuse myself, but I'm not; nor him. I'm no good. Never have been. But I did try to get him to go back to you at first. I tried hard. Honest Injun! I did." She stretched out her hand and laid it on Robin's arm, and she, to her own amazement, did not shrink from the touch.

"I loved him," Juliette went on. "I love him now, God help me! I've never wanted anyone since I met him. He hasn't stuck to me. He couldn't stick to anyone, he's that sort. But he—he comes back to me in the end, always. I didn't want to want him. I tried not to. But it's no good. He's my man, ye see. He lied to me at the start. He swore there was no one else. I'm rotten, but I didn't want to hurt anyone. I didn't want to hurt you."

The grip on Robin's arm tightened. She, poor child, sat perfectly still, unable to say a word.

"I was furious when that old walrus, Sir Edward Compton, told me about you, and I wrote Peter a beastly letter. Then I went mad. I didn't care what happened. I tried to go the pace, but I couldn't. I hated all men, and hated myself. One rotten little Frenchman told me he'd seen you on your honeymoon. He was a pig. A beastly Frenchman is the beastliest thing on earth. I quarreled with my father, and came to London. I don't know why I came. I told myself I never wanted to see him again, but I suppose I did. Then I met Diana Stanley and we started the shop. You've been there, haven't you?"

Robin nodded. "Yes—I saw your photograph there."

"Diana told me that. Well, she and I went one night to No. 18—the night club. You know where I mean. It was in June—I remember because it was my birthday. Peter was there and he'd been drinking, and was with that Moira Denton. You met her, didn't you?"

Robin remembered the girl with the doll-like face and hard blue eyes, and the sneering, cynical talk she had shot at her in spasmodic slang, between puffs of cigarette-smoke.

"I cut her out quick," Juliette went on. "She hadn't a chance with me. I

made him stop drinking, and told him to look after you. I tried to play square then.”

Robin remembered that for a month or two before that September Peter had been better.

“Yes, he was much better then. I hoped——” she said half to herself and half to Juliette, who interrupted:

“I mean I tried to be just friends with him. Then—well, then he wanted more. We had a howling row, and he started drinking again. I went off to Paris. When I came back he was worse. Moira had got hold of him again, and he was going to the devil. I couldn’t stand it, and I gave in. Och, don’t hate me. I loved him, and he swore he’d go to hell his own way, if I couldn’t. I’m bad, all bad, and I wanted him, but I wouldn’t have taken him from you. ’Twas the money was the ruin of him, and that crowd of vampires round him. Then the end came. He said he was through with you, and would clear the country, and go his own way unless I came with him. I’m putrid, but I loved him, and I love him now, although it’s hell at times. I’m not good like you—never was——”

A sudden sense of humiliation swept over Robin. Here was this woman, a bad woman by her own confession, but she loved Peter still. She had forgiven him, and taken him back, and coaxed him from the drink. She had succeeded where his own wife had failed. Hers was the greater love.

“I’m not good,” she choked out. “I’m a wretched little prig. I failed him, and couldn’t give him what he wanted. I’m not good, I’m only goody-goody. I’m not as good as you.”

“You’re not to say that. Don’t I know you’re good? Can’t I feel it in me bones? What I’ve told you is God’s truth, as far as it goes, but it’s not the whole truth. You don’t understand men like Peter, or women like me. I’m not fit to touch ye. I’m no good, never have been. But now baby’s coming—and ——”

“What do you want me to do?” Robin asked miserably. “Do you want me to divorce Peter?”

“I do. That’s it. You see, it’s all come together. Gascon’s dead, that was the man I married. He was killed in a motor accident at Tours last Christmas. I think I’ve a chance with Peter. It’s not his money I want. I’ve money of me own. But I believe I can keep him straight, or nearer straight than anyone else. And then there’s baby. He won’t ever ask ye himself. He won’t know that he’s in the wrong ever. You know he won’t. But he’ll never come near ye again, and if he did he’d make your life a hell. He’s—but I love him. Oh, child, I hate

asking ye, but could ye do it?”

“Well, I can’t do him any good. I never could have done him any good. I didn’t love him enough, and was too much wrapped up in myself. I know that now. I was just a stuck-up prig—and—and I hate myself.”

Robin sat pale-faced and desolate with the tears raining down her cheeks.

“Och, darling, ye mustn’t say it. It’s a lie on yourself, and on the good God who made the likes of you. Doesn’t he know you were too good for him? ’Twasn’t your fault. You’re not his sort.”

Robin took her hands away and stood up facing Juliette. She was white as death, and her lips were quivering piteously, but she was determined.

“You’re not deceiving me?” she said. “You do love him? You honestly believe you can help him? And it is his child?”

“I am not deceiving you. I know it’s his—and I will do my best for him. I love him and always shall.”

“Then I’ll set him free. I do not believe in divorce much—and—and I hate the Court and that. But I’ve failed and been no good. You may succeed.”

“And will ye try not to hate me?”

“I don’t hate you. I—I like you. I liked you from the very first. I wish—but it’s no good wishing.”

“My dear, we must never meet again, and I want ye to say you forgive me.”

“I’ve nothing to forgive. It’s my own fault.”

“It isn’t! It isn’t! It isn’t! Why can’t ye understand? I’d give the world to be like you, to be clean, and sweet, and fine. It’s not your fault. It’s his—and mine. You didn’t fail him, he failed you. You must believe it.”

Juliette made as though to take her in her arms, but drew back.

“I’ll get out of your sight now,” she said. “I’m not fit to touch ye. Say a prayer for us both and—and the baby.”

“You may kiss me if you like,” Robin said.

They clung together and Juliette whispered: “I swear I’ll do my best, and be better for seeing you, child of the morning.”

Then she picked up her cloak and ran to the gate without looking back.

Robin stood by the two empty chairs, desolation and grey disillusion in her

heart. The little world she had built about herself was all smashed to pieces. She was no good, never had been. She was just a nasty prim little prig. She had lived through these years on a false picture of herself as the noble martyred woman doing the fine thing. Everyone had praised and loved her, and she had supposed she was bearing a cross, but in reality she had only been playing a part. She ought to have followed Peter and fought the world for him, as thousands of women did. Even her prayers for him had not been real prayers; they had been part of the play, and had caused her self-satisfaction. She had been secretly proud of her prayers. Lord, what a little beast she was! She didn't know how to love. She wasn't properly grown up even yet. She had run away from the cross of love like a coward and found a shelter from its pain, leaning on Uncle Jim. He had borne all the burden really. He had dried her tears and comforted her, while she fooled herself into the belief that she was helping him, with her silly little dancing class, and her pottering about among the people. Without him she would have gone to pieces and shown herself up for what she really was. She was alone again now—and she would have to remain alone. It was no good telling Uncle Jim; he would tell her she was wrong, and that what she knew to be the truth was not true. He would love her and comfort her—and try to build up the picture again. It was this being alone that she had dreaded. But there was no escape from it now. She would have to manage alone from now on with no fine martyrdom idea to keep her going. She had failed, and that was all there was in it.

While these thoughts were beating through her brain she had been walking slowly towards the house, and she stood now in her bedroom. She knelt down by her bedside and prayed for Peter. There was no self-satisfaction now. It was the sacrifice of a broken and a contrite heart. But she was young, and in the utter generosity of her soul she went beyond her strength. Only the saints can live on that level, and she was very human.

Poor child, the real tragedy and the glory of her life was not revealed to her yet. She was very near the truth, but it was so deep in the unconscious recesses of her mind, and so completely covered by the conventions which are second nature to a soul as fine and clean as hers, that it could not come to light. She wronged herself in her penitence because she was blind. She had never really been self-satisfied. The love she bore her father was as fine and selfless as human love can be, and that had dominated her conscious life. Underneath that, unrecognized and unacknowledged, there was another love as selfless and as true. She did not understand that if she had leaned upon Counihan, he had leaned upon her. She did not understand it any more than he. If he had been her salvation, she had been his. All that they did for one another seemed as nothing because their unconscious love turned every sacrifice into joy. Robin

would have gone through fire and water for him without feeling the flames or fearing the waves, and he would have come to meet her unconcerned for himself. Steadily under the disguise of “Uncle Jim” and “Little Robin,” in the castle of convention called “We Three,” this great love had grown and was growing. The castle still stood, and love was locked safe within it unsuspected and unknown. But on this day of Juliette’s visit, and at the time of Robin’s prayer, there began a crumbling and a cracking in the walls.

CHAPTER XIX

LOVE IN THE CASTLE OF "WE THREE"

Dinner was just over at "The Refuge" and Elsie had brought in the coffee. It was November and a bright fire burned a jolly welcome in the grate. Opposite to it, on a deeply cushioned chesterfield, Joyce and Robin sat side by side. Joyce, having lighted her own cigarette, held the match for Robin, while Dayborn and the Rector, in two comfortable arm-chairs, were cutting their cigars.

"Can't you persuade him, Robin?" Dayborn was saying. "Couldn't you get him to come out here for a fortnight and make him rest? He'll kill himself if he goes on like this. He's always at it."

Robin looked into the fire and shook her head.

"I've asked him and asked him," she said, "but he never stops more than an hour or so now."

They were speaking of Counihan, who was a source of anxiety to them all. In addition to the work of the Mission, he had become well known as a preacher now, and was in continual request all over the country. The double burden was becoming more than he could bear. No one worried about him more than Robin, and it was not only his health that troubled her. She had felt lately that there was something on his mind which he either would not, or could not, confide to her, something indeed that he wanted to hide from her. Sometimes she reassured herself, after one of his flying visits when he was just the same as ever, and "we three" had been for a walk on the links or in the forest. It was just imagination, she would tell herself. He was the same old Uncle Jim, only so dreadfully busy nowadays. But he wasn't. Counihan was terrified. It began with him the night that Robin heard that her decree was made absolute. The letter came by the late post when he was staying the night at "The Refuge." Robin read it and then put it hurriedly away and went on talking to Jim and to her father, as though nothing had happened. But, after the two had settled down to their game of chess, she slipped away quietly and left them alone. Half an hour later, after soundly beating the Rector, Jim missed and went in search of her. She was sitting on her bed with the letter in her lap, dry-eyed and desperate. Somehow the curt typewritten announcement had made her realize more fully than she had ever done before how final and irrevocable this miserable ending was, and she was staring out into a future in

which she saw no light.

“What is it, Robin dear?” Jim asked.

She passed him the paper without a word.

He turned away to read it and then turned back to her. Two large tears glistened unshed in her eyes, and as he watched, a moment that seemed like an eternity, they fell and rolled down her cheeks. In that moment Jim knew. He loved her. A mad desire to take her in his arms and carry her away, a longing to kiss her and kiss her until she laughed and was young again, a hunger for her that made him tremble, all this swept over him as though a dam had burst within his soul. A loathing of, and rebellion against, the squalid misery of the world in which he worked, came upon him. Why shouldn't he be happy like other men and make her happy like other women? She was young and beautiful—God, how beautiful she was! He could make her love him as he loved her. Heaven was open, why should he go back to hell? He hated filthy streets, and sodden women trapped by their own lusts, and whining men who would lie their souls away for sixpence. Why should he live his life among them, marry them with their unborn babies, bury them riddled with disease and worn out with bearing animals to wallow in the filth they escaped from by the only way of escape, cheap enough for the poor—the way of death? This Mission of his was madness. What was the good of it all, patching—patching—patching a garment made of holes? By the law of the land he was free and she was free. They had money enough—and he could earn with his pen. Oh, God, to write and read to Robin while she sat and sewed—to work in beauty, not in ugliness!

This was the real mind of Uncle Jim that night. How he did it, he never knew; but he did. He played the part to perfection, and Robin did not guess. He comforted her, joked with her, talked to her of the glory of the Christian life of love and service. He put his arm about her and brought her downstairs, and with firm, untrembling hands built up again the crumbling walls of the castle of “We Three.” They sat and talked by the fire again, she at his feet leaning against his knee. They planned another holiday together, and recalled the past, summoning its pure, unsullied happiness to hide the sting of the present. When he kissed her good night it was with a laugh and on the end of her nose, which was a joke between them.

But that exhausted his endurance, and, making an excuse that he was tired, he went at once to bed. His room was next to Robin's, and lest he should disturb her, he sat for an hour almost motionless, but with a panic in his soul. Robin slept. Jim had done his work well, and, though at first she had deliberately helped him, gradually the sense of effort ceased, and she had

really been able to put the past behind her and face the future with some quiet hope. But there was no sleep for Jim. He realized that he could not carry this on now, and must get away. By a happy accident, which under ordinary circumstances he would have deemed a misfortune, a letter received next morning made it necessary for him to go up North a day earlier than he had expected, and he was driven to town by Robin exactly as Uncle Jim had been driven hundreds of times before.

From that time on he purposely piled on work for himself, refusing to think. The longing for "The Refuge" was like a gnawing pain against which he drugged himself by feverish activity. Every now and then he braced himself and went out for an hour or so to play Uncle Jim, but he could not trust himself for more. Robin saw him sometimes at the Mission, but that was easier, they talked about the work. She had taken on more visiting, and was a success with the girls, who loved her as slum children love bright flowers, and in her work she found some happiness, and began to feel it was worth doing and worth while. Only now and then she was puzzled and anxious about Uncle Jim, and, as she said, had often begged him to come out to Epping for a long rest.

"I can't do anything with him either," Joyce said. "He gets worse and worse, and I don't believe he sleeps. We'll have to kidnap him, and appoint you and Robin as gaolers."

"I wish you would," said the Rector. "I've missed the dear old chap lately, and so has Robin, I know."

"Good men are scarce, and we cannot afford to lose him. He's a changed man lately. He used to be such a practical, level-headed fellow, but sometimes now he talks to me like a fanatic. The poverty of the people seems to get on his nerves, and he grudges himself the least relaxation. We haven't had a proper burst for months, have we, Joyce?"

Dayborn spoke with real anxiety on his face and in his voice.

"No—not since July," Joyce said. "Of course, it does make you feel that way working down there. I often wonder what right on earth we have to all this," and she nodded round at the pretty drawing-room in which they sat. "There is something wrong with the whole business. I don't wonder we breed Bolsheviks. Don't you feel that, Robin?"

"Yes, often," she answered, "but I forget it when I come out here. It is easy to forget. Uncle Jim never forgets, he bears it with him all the time. That is what I'm frightened of. It seems as though he couldn't play properly now, and he doesn't laugh like he used to do."

"That's just it, Robin," Dayborn said. "A man must get away from it, or he would go mad in time."

"I suppose that is what bearing a cross really means," Robin went on thoughtfully, "bearing other people's miseries like he does, and making them your own. He does that all the time with everybody. There doesn't seem to be any limit to his love. He's been like that always."

"He's the best fellow God ever made," Dayborn said huskily, "but no one could go on like this. It isn't human."

"No—but it might be divine," Joyce said. "He lives very near to God, the Padre does."

"But I don't believe God meant us to kill ourselves like that."

There was silence for a moment or two. They could hear the rain dashing itself against the windows, and a big motor hummed up the hill outside.

"Christ was crucified," Robin said quietly.

There was an uncomfortable pause. The normal English reluctance to talk about such things held them in its grip. Robin was surprised at herself. But Joyce wanted to go on. The mists were breaking for her, and she saw a light.

"Is that it?" she said. "That makes me understand what the Cross means. I've read books on the Atonement, but they are worse than the thing itself—more puzzling, I mean. All that about Sacrifice to the Father, and the law of Justice and Propitiation, I don't understand it. But if love is the passionate desire to save life, and if God is love, love like the Padre's, then, of course, He must bear our sins, He must be always bearing them. He must be a crucified God. I don't understand a bit why there is any evil in the world, but there is, and if there is a God at all He must be like Christ—and—and like the Padre."

"He'd hate you to say that," said Robin, "but it is true. You see, most of us run away from other people's sorrows and sins; we just say a word of sympathy and then escape. We dare not face them. We dare not make them our own. I find myself shirking the houses where I know there is trouble when I'm visiting. I can't stand it. It gets on top of me like a weight. Uncle Jim stands more than anyone I know. I suppose Jesus stood them all, and it crucified Him. But, as Uncle Jim says, it did not conquer Him, because He rose again."

"I've run away all my life," the Rector said, "always. That is what it means to be a Christian, not to run away. I've never been a Christian really."

No one took any notice of this speech. They applied it to themselves and felt it true. Only after a minute's silence Robin realized that it had cost her

father something to say it, and she got up, and taking his coffee-cup from the table by his side, kissed him.

“Dear old Daddy,” she said.

Just then the telephone in the hall rang loudly.

“I’ll go,” said Robin.

“Hullo! Is that ‘The Refuge’?” She recognized Cecil Weyman’s voice.

“Yes—it’s me—Robin.”

“Oh, Robin—there’s been an accident—the P-Padre’s hurt—badly—could you and Joyce c-come at once?”

Robin felt sick with fear, and for a moment could not speak.

“Is—is he in danger?” she got out at last.

“Yes—b-but not hopeless, thank G-God! Come quick! He wants you.”

“We’ll come now.”

The others heard the note of horror in Robin’s voice and the question, “Is he in danger?” Joyce sprang up with a fear in her heart that it was little Gallant taken ill.

“What is it?” she asked as Robin hung up the receiver and stood white and trembling with her hand up to her head. “Is it Gallant?”

“No—it’s Uncle Jim. He’s had an accident. Get your things, and bring mine. I’m going for the car.”

“I’ll do that,” Dayborn interrupted. “Come on, Rector. You girls get your things on and wrap up well. It’s a beastly night.”

In a few minutes they were rushing down the London road through the rain. Robin drove. Their car had been the easiest to get out and she knew it best. Being occupied with the driving, she had no time to think and was conscious only of a deadly fear. But that fear was playing havoc with the castle of “We Three,” battering steadily on the walls which Jim had so painfully repaired. She was very near the truth. If Uncle Jim died the world was at an end for her. Traffic was not heavy on the road until after they passed Whips Cross, but from there on she had her work cut out to keep the pace up. The others were silent, and though she drove fast it seemed to them all an interminable time before they turned round the corner of Castle Street and drew up at the Mission-house door.

Cecil Weyman met them. He had been on the lookout and heard the

squealing of the Morris-Cowley brakes.

“How is he?” Dayborn asked.

“Very b-bad, I’m afraid,” Cecil said. “Sir M-Maurice Craythorne’s with him now and may operate at once.”

“What is it?” Joyce and Dayborn asked together. Robin could not speak. Her legs were trembling underneath her and her hands shook as she pulled off her gloves.

“It’s his s-spine, they’re afraid. He was run over by a m-motor lorry. The thing s-skidded down there near the ‘P-Painter’s Arms,’ that corner. He has b-broken a leg, but the real fear is his s-spine.”

“Is he conscious?”

“N-no. Never has been quite. Though he has been asking for you, Robin.”

They had made their way to the study by stages as they talked, and were standing there now speaking in whispers in obedience to a signal from Cecil.

Robin laid her hand upon his sleeve.

“Can I see him soon if he wants me? He won’t die before I see him, will he?” she said with quivering lip.

“I d-don’t think so, Robin dear. S-sit down. You look faint Can I get you something?” He pushed the arm-chair towards her, and she sank down into it.

“I’m all right,” she said, pulling herself together with an effort. “How long will they be before they tell us?”

“N-not long now, I don’t think.”

Silence fell upon them and they sat listening for a sound from upstairs.

Mrs. Spalding padded in in a pair of soft slippers, bearing a tray with a teapot and cups on it. Her stern old face was white and haggard and her eyes red with weeping. Robin stood up when she came in and smiled. The old lady laid the tray down and then took her into her arms and kissed her.

“Oh, Miss Robin! Miss Robin!” she said, and, choking back a sob, hurried out.

No one offered to touch the tea, they sat silently waiting. That silence brought Robin nearer and nearer the truth. She loved him. But then of course she loved him, she had always loved him. The old love and the new, mingled as they were destined to be mingled for ever in her heart, confused one another now. She tried to pray for him and did, but with a half-conscious longing at the

back to go to him, and hold him in her arms, and kiss him. She had never thought about kissing him before, now she longed for it. "My dear! My dear!"

A door opened upstairs and there were sounds of steps coming down.

Sir Maurice Craythorne, a tall, grey-haired man with a face like a fine ascetic priest, came in.

"Which of you is Robin?" he said with a kindly smile which lighted up his grey eyes and gave to his whole face an uncommon beauty.

Robin came forward, biting her lip to keep back her tears. He laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"You had better go to him, my dear," he said. "You can do more for him than anyone else just now."

"Is he going to die, doctor?"

"I don't know, my dear, I don't know. But go to him now. There is a nurse, but he wants you."

She ran upstairs. Counihan lay quite flat on his back. His face was uninjured except for a slight bruise over his left eye. One arm was in a sling and the bed-clothes were raised up to keep them off his left leg, which was in splints. He appeared to be asleep. A bright-faced girl with very intelligent blue eyes behind big gold spectacles was standing by his side, and greeted Robin with a smile.

"Are you Robin?" she asked. "He wants you. He may sleep now. But if you would not mind waiting to see if he calls again, and you could make him understand, if he does, that you are here, it would help him, I think. I am going down to see the doctor before he goes."

She slipped out, leaving Robin alone with him. For some time he lay quite still, and she stood holding his hand, her eyes bright with tears.

Presently he turned his head and said quite distinctly: "Robin—Little Robin—I love you so—I love you so—but she must never——" Then his voice trailed off into a groan of pain.

For a moment her heart stood still. The castle walls were shivered to pieces and the truth was out at last. There was no mistaking the meaning of that cry, and no doubt of her response to it. There was no thought in her mind that she was not free to love; she loved him, worshipped him, and he was not going to die. She would not let him die. She would love him back to life. There was no self-deception about her now, she knew that this man was her man and that she

wanted him body and soul. She felt brave, and strong, and happy again. She would make him live whatever happened.

She bent and kissed him gently on the lips.

“Jim, my Jim, I love you so—I love you so.”

Whether he understood or not she could not tell, but he smiled and fell asleep.

All that night she sat by his side, refusing to leave him for a moment. About four o’clock in the morning he woke and was apparently fully conscious.

“Hullo, little Robin,” he said in the old kindly way. “You must not sit there, child, you must go to bed.”

She laughed. The dear old thing was going to keep it up. He didn’t know what he’d been saying. It was delicious to hear that voice and to know what lay behind it.

She came and stood over him, bright-eyed and smiling.

“Uncle Jim, I’ve told you often and often you’d be killing yourself, and you’ve nearly done it this time. Of course I’m not going to bed. I’m going to sit here until you go to sleep again. Now close your eyes.”

He did as he was told, and she kissed him on the eyes, and on the end of his nose, which made him smile.

“I’m not done for, am I, little Robin?” he asked presently.

“Of course not,” said Robin.

“Are they going to cut me? I have the devil of a pain inside.”

A spasm of agony passed over his face and the sweat started out upon his forehead.

The nurse came in and gave him a second hyperdermic injection which sent him to sleep again. When he had gone right off she persuaded Robin to go to bed, promising to wake her if he called. She yielded and went, and being utterly weary, and in some strange way that she did not understand, perfectly happy, she was soon asleep.

She woke about eleven o’clock to find her father standing by her bedside with a cup of tea.

“Sir Maurice has operated, and it is perfectly successful. He is sure now that he will live.”

Robin's eyes filled with tears of joy.

"Oh Daddy," she said, holding up her arms to him. "God is good—God is good."

Although it was a successful operation it was by a long and weary way that Jim had to travel back to life, and through it all Robin was by his side. He was still Uncle Jim and she was little Robin. He did not know that she was any the wiser. He was puzzled at times by the happiness, radiant and infectious, which shone in her eyes and rang in her laughter. She was young again.

The question of the future she simply put aside. It was enough for her now that he loved her and she loved him, and that he was getting better. Sometimes she hoped that he would not be too quick about it, but would linger pleasantly on the way.

Only very slowly did the old horror come back upon Jim himself, but inevitably it came. He must not love her. It was sin. He was not free to love anyone, nor was she. He would have to send her away. As his strength came back to him the appeal of her glorious beauty became stronger, and there were times when, as she sat there reading to him, the longing to take her in his arms was almost unbearable. He began to go back and the doctors were puzzled about him.

One morning when Robin came in to bring him a glass of milk and some biscuits as he sat in his study chair, she found him sitting with his head buried in his hands. He sat up when he realized she was behind him, and greeted her with the old kindly smile.

"Hullo, my dear," he said, "has Bob come in with you to-day?"

"Yes," she said, kissing him on the top of his head. "He will be here in a moment and so will I, which is Irish like you. I must just ask Joyce about something."

As she closed the door behind her she heard an exceeding bitter cry:

"My God! I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it."

She closed the door, and stood for a moment her hand to her lips, and the shadow of a heartbreak on her face.

CHAPTER XX

THE MEANING OF THE VOW

“Dear Mr. Counihan,—

“I hope you won’t think me taking a liberty writing to say how sorry me and Charlie was to hear of your sad accident, and that we both hopes this letter will find you much better as it leaves us very well at present thank you. Dear Mr. Counihan we both wants to ask you a favour, to Christen our little baby girl. Miss Robin said as we might call her Robin after her which she has been our best friend and says she will be godmother. We will bring her up to be Church same as me and Charlie always had been though not being properly married we can’t go to Communion which makes us both very sad at times when we hear the bells ring for morning service. Love to Miss Robin and the Rector.

“Yours respectfully,
“MAISIE.”

Jim Counihan sat in “The Refuge” garden with a pile of letters on his knee. Maisie’s, written with laborious care, was on the top, and he was thinking. From where he sat he could see the yellow pathway winding like a ribbon through the bright green grass down to the golf-links, and at a bend in it, Cecil Weyman’s red coat as he walked to the Pavilion with Robin, all in white, at his side. It was May again, and perfect May, and the forest was shouting out its triumph in the strength of life renewed. Upstairs in his bedroom the Rector lay dozing. At the end of March, just when Jim was beginning to get on his feet again, his old friend had been stricken with paralysis down his left side. This new sorrow had, for the time being, reconstructed the entire castle of “We Three.” It was utterly impossible, under the circumstances, to break it, even had he desired to. So for a month Robin had had her two beloved invalids in the house, and had teased and tended them both, quietly happy and resolutely shutting her eyes to the double disaster that must, sooner or later, smash this temporary Paradise to pieces. There were times when both she and Jim, in the secret places of their hearts, found the position almost unbearable. But the much more unbearable alternative of separation, and the fear of endangering the Rector’s life, kept them playing their parts. Once or twice he had caught her looking at him with such a beacon light of love in her eyes that he had been

gripped by a panic of fear lest she had guessed his secret, but the next morning she was little Robin again, and he easily dismissed the fear he did not want to entertain.

There was another possibility which sometimes tortured him, and at other times seemed a way out of utter desolation. There was Cecil. The boy was a fully qualified doctor now, having passed his final M.B. just after Christmas. His devotion to Robin had never wavered, and they had seen a good deal of one another lately. Jim knew that the idea of her still being bound in any way to Peter was to Cecil impossible and repulsive. He was unable to discuss the matter calmly in relation to Robin, never having recovered from his passionate hatred of Peter. But, apart from that, on the whole question of Divorce, as on the question of Birth Control, he was in uncompromising opposition to Jim, declaring roundly that rotten as the State divorce laws were, they were more really Christian than the inhuman legalism of the Church which he regarded as cruel and, through the system of legal separations, directly productive of immorality. If he proposed to Robin now he would be in no way violating his conscience, and Jim was well aware how deeply and truly he loved her. He loved the boy as a man loves a brother or a son, and Cecil was worthy of it. He was a clever, clear-headed man with great possibilities as a surgeon. His character and convictions, unlike his speech, were clean cut and uncompromising. A Christian and a practising Anglo-Catholic with a genuine love of Christ, which was the motive power of his life, he was, nevertheless, shocked and scandalized by the complete absence in the teaching of the Church of what he called a decent physical conscience. She seemed to regard the soul as dwelling in, but independent of, the body, and this false, and fundamentally unchristian, notion had enabled her for years to tolerate with apparent indifference the disgusting and degrading physical conditions in which multitudes of her children were obliged to live. It made her also completely indifferent to the physical fitness to bear children of those whom she joined in wedlock and encouraged to increase and multiply. Some of the marriages celebrated at S. Jude's filled him with horror, and the prospect of their fruitfulness made him sick. It seemed to him that, largely owing to this blindness of the Church, mankind was engaged in the hopeless task of building up the New Jerusalem with one hand and tearing it down with the other. Science had enabled men to attack death and disease, which were Nature's method of destroying those unfit to live, and Christianity had, after some hesitation, encouraged the attack, and taken it under her wing. But she resolutely set her face against any parallel attack on birth, and thus left the race without any adequate protection against the most deadly of all perils, the multiplication of the unfit.

The assumption underlying this attitude seemed to be that, while God's providence did not inevitably determine death and disease, and man was at liberty to eliminate epidemics, plagues, and famines, and indeed was bound in duty so to do, a particular providence presided over the birth of children which it was wicked and blasphemous to interfere with. For this assumption there did appear to him to be a shred of evidence of any sort whatever. Driven by a deeply planted instinct of race preservation mankind had discovered new methods of checking population to take the place of the older and more brutal ones. This they had done as usual in a blind and blundering fashion, and many of the new methods were more harmful than the older ones. But instead of guiding and assisting men in their extremity of the Church, dead to the double peril of bad birth control and no birth control, was refusing to face the issue altogether, finding refuge in the plea for self-control, without apparently considering what she meant by it. Self-control, as a means of preventing the birth of the unfit and of checking the rising tide of population, could only mean total abstinence, and this was least likely to be practised by those for whom it was most necessary, the parents of the unfit child. The fact that many of the methods commonly advertised and used were harmful, and that they got into the hands of young unmarried people made the need for moral teaching and drastic action more urgent.

Again and again during the last three years Cecil had stammered out his convictions upon this subject on which his mind was as clear as his speech was confused. He had made Jim think and read, and caused him often to be deeply troubled in his mind. Maisie's letter and the sight of the beloved pair disappearing into the distance brought back that trouble now.

"Of course I must baptize the child," he thought. "It would be wrong to refuse. I am not sure what the technical position is. Both parents are excommunicate and stubbornly unrepentant. I am not sure that they have any right to ask baptism for their child born in wilful sin. But I simply can't refuse. Now why can't I? Well, first of all, I suppose, because it is not the babe's fault anyhow, and I don't suppose my Christ wants her any less because her parents are not married. Secondly, I am quite sure that Maisie and Charlie will bring her up as a Christian child, and show her a good example in every way. I have baptized hundreds of children when I could not be sure of that. I've baptized 'em when they paid the godfather sixpence and a drink to stand. Lord, some of those baptisms! What parents! and what children! Talk about Christian homes! But that's not the bottom of it. When it comes down to rock bottom I am sure that Maisie and Charlie are good people, good Christian people. They are not married and cannot be married now, even by the State. That blighter Smith presented a perfect alibi, and there is no real doubt that the other fellow did it

and deserved to be hanged, if anyone ever deserved to be hanged. Maisie could not get a divorce now because she has lived with Charlie, and, as the law stands, the surest way of making a marriage indissoluble is for both to be unfaithful to their vow. That the boy did wrong in taking the law into his own hands there can be no doubt. Marriage can never be a purely private matter. He has landed himself into a perfectly impossible position now. But I am partly responsible for that. I taught him that Divorce was nothing but public license to commit adultery, and that it was just as wrong to live with Maisie with a divorce as without it. Am I right there? That's the point. Let me get clear. I am not concerned now with the divorce laws. There is no doubt that by the law of the land Maisie was entitled to divorce and could have married Charlie legally. Robin is now divorced and can marry anyone she likes and so can I. The state must have its divorce laws and I am sure that a wise state must make them strict. I have not the slightest doubt in my own mind, nor has dear old Cecil, that easy divorce for trivial causes such as prevails in certain States of America is a curse to any country. The State divorce laws should be strict, absolutely equal as between men and women, and equally available for rich and poor. About that I have no doubt, and anyway it does not come into my problem at all. The question is whether Christian people are allowed to marry again after State divorce under any circumstances whatever. When a woman has been betrayed and tortured as Maisie and Robin have been, when their homes have been broken up and their lives ruined, must they remain lonely all their days, or be cut off from Communion, and be considered as living in sin? It is not the great multitude of men and women who would possibly take advantage of easy divorce from base and sensual motives that I have to consider, it is the much smaller number of decent people who, having been wronged and insulted, desire to make a Christian home and live in Communion with the Church of Christ. It is people like Maisie, my little Robin, and me—God help us. It is not even a question of all innocent parties as they are called. It is a question of those innocent parties who desire to live a Christian married life. Must they be refused Communion, and regarded as sinners?

“We are a very small minority in the Christian Church and an almost negligible minority of the human race. We are not an enormous body of selfish sensual people clamouring to secure cheap and easy satisfaction for our passions. But the Church at present lumps us all together and brands us as adulterers, Maisie and Charlie are living in adultery and would be even if Maisie had been divorced. If Robin marries Cecil she will be living in sin, and could not come to Communion. I could not marry them. Yet I, like all other priests of my Church, have married people to whom Jesus Christ was an oath or a joke and marriage licensed sensuality. We do it at both ends of the scale:

Westminster, with unlimited champagne, and Whitechapel with unlimited beer, and not an ounce of real religion in either. We are as slack in our administration of the Sacrament as we are stern in holding people to it. I do not really believe that Maisie and Charlie are living in sin, nor do I believe that Robin and Cecil would be. I'm leaving myself out because I cannot keep steady if I start there. I don't believe what my Church believes. Why does the Church say this hard thing?

“He which made them at the beginning made them male and female and said, ‘for this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh. What therefore God hath joined let no man put asunder.’ My Church has always felt that there was a tremendous truth underlying those apparently simple words. Through marriage God creates an entirely new living creature. Every wedding is in a real sense a birthday. It is not merely the establishment of a relationship between two creatures, it is the bringing into being of an entirely new creature, with a new power, which neither part of it possessed before, the power of reproduction. The married couple are a new creation in something of the same sense as the child they bear. They are something that has been made once, and can never be unmade or made again. Their two bodies are one new body possessing a power they did not possess before. There can be no doubt that that, and nothing less than that, is the purpose of God in marriage, and is what true marriage means. But what makes a true marriage? Is it the Sacrament of Marriage in Church? But the Church can annul a marriage which has received Her Blessing but has never been consummated for some physical reason. Whereas she would not be able, or willing, to annul a marriage which had never received the Church's blessing but had been consummated. This looks as if she regarded the act of union itself as constituting a marriage. It seems clear that the feeling that the act of union was in some sense a marriage has always been present in the Christian mind. It is a true and beautiful feeling. It is what every man and woman should be taught. It carries with it a picture of what human nature ought to be. But, if we apply it to human nature as it is, it means that every man who falls into sin with a woman is thereby married to her, and that if he marries anyone else he commits adultery. That, for all her horror of vulgar sex adventure and cheap love, the Church has never taught. She will pardon that sin and unite the man who has committed it with another woman, and bless their love. If she can pardon the man or woman who has sinned outside marriage, and does not look upon that as unforgivable or a permanent bar against true love, could she not pardon Maisie or my poor little Robin who have committed no wilful sin?

“A man can come, and thousands do, to the altar after years of sensual license and the Church will unite him to a maid, and it will be marriage, but if

Robin comes with Cecil they will be turned away. In God's holy name what is the meaning of that? If the new creature has been made, and one part of it breaks away, and leaves the other torn and bleeding, has God no healing for its wounds? Can God through the Church pardon, and use, as a part of a new creation, the body of a man who has sinned out of marriage a hundred times, but has repented, and yet have no use for little Robin's lovely body and her pure unsullied soul? What is it makes the Church say this? Is it the vow? That is tremendous. 'For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health, till death us do part.' It is the most majestic declaration of utter surrender to a life-long purpose of love ever put into words. For any man or woman to treat it lightly is to cast a slur on their humanity, and proclaim themselves unworthy of their name. Used as a merely formal utterance it is a blasphemy against God and man. But it is mutual. It demands the sincerity of both. Supposing one lover is false and faithless, how can it be kept in any real sense? How can I keep my vow to Phyllis? How can I love her when she kicks my love away? How can I cherish her lying in another man's arms? How can Robin keep her vow to Peter or Maisie to Will Smith?

"We can forgive, and go on forgiving. There is, according to Christ's teaching, no limit of forgiveness. Seventy times seven, and then seventy times seven again, it can go on like the forgiveness of God. Yet there is a limit even to that, isn't there? Even God cannot forgive the man or woman who will not be forgiven. But is that a limit to God's forgiveness or only a limit to our acceptance of it? Does not He go on striving to forgive us, pleading with us, and suffering for us? He never shuts the door, and turns away, however much and often we despise and trample on His love. Is that what we are called upon to do—to keep the door open? I believe it is, and from that tremendous ideal of love unlimited there seems, God help me, to be no escape."

At this point in his thought Jim got slowly up from his chair and limped round the garden with an agony in his face. He had come to something from which he, like all the rest of us, turned back in fear. He had come to the challenge of the Cross. There was the possibility that, inasmuch as he has vowed to love Phyllis, he must bear her sin, make it his own, and suffer for it in his body and in his soul. Suffer for it in his childless loneliness, and in the bitter struggle to stifle his affections and suppress his natural desire, the struggle which had been his lot for the last six years. He must suffer because Phyllis sinned. Robin—his mind reeled, revolted, and cried out in pain, but he drove it on—Robin must suffer because Peter sinned. She must go lonely and loveless. Her hand must go on feeling and fumbling for her dead child, as it did that night. The picture started up out of memory and stared him in the face, more vivid and intolerable than the past reality. That must go on because of

Peter's lust. Only so could sin be destroyed in the world, by innocent men and women content to suffer with the Christ. That was what this tremendous vow with its piled-up emphasis really meant, and from it there was no escape without turning in terror from the highest. The Christ-implanted age-long passion for this truth of suffering love was behind the sternness of His Church. She had to keep the flag of Love flying in a selfish, animal, grasping, greedy world, and the flag was the Cross of Sacrifice, the voluntary suffering of the innocent for the guilty, the apparently purposeless, but really redemptive agony of the loyal lovers of the world. Behind all the miserable failures of the Church, behind her contemptible inconsistencies, and apparently dishonest compromises, her instinctive knowledge that natural desire must be lifted to the level of selfless love, persisted and could not be destroyed. Christ still called for sin-bearers, and there never had been lacking men and women who answered to the call. All the gallant women who for Love's sake, and its fine relentless loyalties, bore with brutal, cruel, weak, vindictive passion haunted men, who, being reviled, reviled not again, who, being deserted, suffered in uncomplaining loneliness, all these answered to the call. All the high-souled men who for Love's sake still clung to ailing, hysterical, selfish, bitter, wayward women, or, being forsaken, fought the flesh and went in honourable desolation to their death, all these obeyed the call. He could think of many such men and such women. They did not argue about it; they did it because they knew that it was right. Sometimes they reaped a reward here, more often they had to wait. But did that matter?

He went back to his chair, and sat there staring out into the future.

"Phyllis and I are one flesh, and I must bear her sins, bear them in my body till I die. That is the truth, the highest Christian truth. Can I face it? Well, there's one thing I know now that I had not realized before. I have never fully faced it up to now. What it has been is nothing compared with what it is going to be. Up to now I have lived on little Robin. I did not know it, but I know it now. I have been living on her for years. The thought of her, the sight of her dear face, the sound of her voice, and that delicious chuckle of hers like a tickled child—God knows how often they have saved me. I have not up to now lived without the love of a woman, this child, this wonderful child-woman has been with me all the time. In the old days when Phyllis with that hard laugh of hers used to leave me sore and in the dumps I used to go for refuge to Bob, I thought, but what I wanted really was 'Hullo, Uncle Jim.' Those tempests of temptation when stark lust stands up and stares me in the face, when I have hated Christ and fretted to be free, have always yielded to her mere presence. She has helped me when my prayers seemed useless and my faith futile. That's the truth and it's no good blinking it. Now, poor darling, all unknowingly she

stirs a tempest up. But it is different. It is the whole of me now, body, mind, and spirit. With my body I thee worship. My dear, my dear, must I choose between Christ and you? Without you it looks like being grey, dry, barren hell. I suppose that's blasphemy. It can't be hell with Christ. But there are some men, and some women, too, for whom the celibate life is hell. I'm one of them, I suppose. But I'm not the only one. There are thousands, aye, millions like me. I can't help knowing that. Haven't I seen it in a hundred souls who cried to me for help when I needed help myself? Christ knew all about it, if S. Matthew is to be trusted. 'He was, as always, divinely wise. His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry. But he said unto them, All men cannot bear this saying, save they to whom it is given. For there are some eunuchs which were so born from their mother's womb; and there are some eunuchs which were made eunuchs of men; and there be eunuchs which have made themselves eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.'

'That is what you would expect from Him. He knew men and women through and through. There are some women, and more men for whom celibacy is hell, not merely because it is painful, the pain would not matter if it was a purging, purifying pain. But there are souls that are not purified by this pain, but rather perverted and destroyed by it. I have seen it again and again, souls in whom frustrated and repressed affections come out as envy, hatred, malice, cynicism, cruelty, and dull despair. There is no need to swallow all the madness of the Freudians to be assured of that. All priests know it, and all honest intelligent men. It is true that hard cases make bad laws. But is the Church only concerned with law, or is she concerned with mercy too? Is it not the essence of her commission to administer, not merely the sternness, but the mercy of her Lord? What if hard cases mean lost souls, perverted, distorted personalities. Has she no choice but to lay the cross on all alike, whether they can or cannot bear it? In no other connection does she behave like this. Doubtless the law of love unlimited would demand that all those who are despised, mocked, ill-treated, and robbed should pray for their persecutors, and by patient suffering of wrongs without redress, should seek to turn their hearts. But we dare not, and do not lay that cross on all the children of God under penalty of excommunication. We set a limit to non-resistance of evil. The saints may practise it, and by it be both saviours and saved; but we know that all cannot receive that saying but they to whom it is given. Only in the case of a woman or a man who has been scorned and robbed of the most precious thing in life, as Robin and Maisie have been, do we declare that there is no redress, and refuse to allow justice to lighten the burden of love. In all other matters we say that there is a point beyond which Christ's children are not

bound to endure oppression and cruelty, and that justice demands that they should be protected unless they voluntarily elect to make the sacrifice. But in this we lay the cross upon all alike. I cannot believe that to be right. We are not content with saying that those whom God hath joined no man can put asunder, we declare that those whom God hath joined God Himself cannot put asunder, and that to this matter the binding and loosing power of the Church does not apply. But if we are compelled to stand by and watch souls sink under the cross when honest love would save them, because God cannot absolve them, innocent though they be, from this sin-shattered vow, then it seems to me that Christ became Incarnate and died in vain. I believe that Charlie has saved and healed poor Maisie's wounded soul by the uncovenanted mercy of God. She looks like a woman saved and healed, and I believe she is. A bad man or woman would say that meant free love, but bad men and women always talk nonsense when they talk about love, because they don't know what it is. It should have been possible for Maisie to obtain the State divorce as easily as the rich and powerful, and then it should have been possible for me to go to the Bishop and say, I know these two. I know the story of their lives. 'I believe they are innocent victims of sin and I ask for them Christ's mercy and absolution from the vow.' They should have received it, should have been married in Church, and should now be living in full Communion with the Church they love. But that, of course, is impossible so long as we limit God's mercy, and refuse to loose by God's grace where we have bound. We shall continue to muddle through by means of inconsistencies, and dishonest compromises, losing souls because we dare not try and heal them, until we feel the brutal injustice we inflict on a small body of people who are too few and too bruised to make their voices heard. But the day will come, must come, when we shall cease to refuse to Robin what we would freely give to a woman off the streets or a repentant wastrel, the chance to make a Christian home. The present position is intolerable. There is not a Christian rescue worker who would not gladly see the prostitute she laboured to reclaim settled down and bearing children. But those who have suffered the misery of a broken marriage, if they are unable to walk with the saints and find their loneliness unbearable, and desire with Christ's help to build a home, are turned away from the altar and denied the means of grace. That cannot be the will of Christ.

"The ideal remains, and always must remain, sublime in its beauty, tremendous in its attractive power, the power of the cross, but all cannot bear it to the end. Can I? I have not done so. I see that now. I have deceived myself into believing that I bore my cross when in truth my Robin carried half its weight. Can I go on alone? Can she? If she has learned to love Cecil, must she refuse him? If she has learned to love me? Oh God, then I must not only bear

my own cross, but lay another upon her. Christ in mercy not that! Hasn't she had enough? Let her love Cecil. Let her remain heart free, but spare her that. Let her love Cecil and be happy, and let me bear for both. I will. I'll do my best. I'll give up this hope of happiness that has been born in me, and I'll walk alone. Only spare her. If I have wronged her in my blindness, forgive me—and let me suffer, not her. She's had enough—surely she's had enough, the child.”

He was praying now, sitting there with his head in his hands praying for his love.

When he looked up he saw them coming back. Far away in the distance, the red and white, they came over the brow of the hill. Robin had her arm in Cecil's and they walked slowly. Hope and dread together clamoured in his heart. As they opened the gate he saw that she had been crying. She gave Cecil's arm a squeeze and ran in.

He came over and stood opposite Jim. There was grey disappointment in his face. Jim looked up at him with a question in his eyes.

“What is it, Cecil, old son?” he said.

“I asked Robin to m-marry me this morning. She c-can't. It isn't that she feels herself b-bound to that fellow. She—she can't.”

Jim stared straight in front of him for a moment, and then looked Cecil in the face, and, reading the message in his eyes, got up, and without a word limped slowly into the house.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CHOICE

Two weeks passed by, during which, with ever-increasing difficulty, Jim and Robin strove to keep the walls of their castle standing for the sake of the beloved third. Then one sunny morning, when May was growing up into June, her father died quietly in his sleep. Robin went in at nine o'clock to bring him his tea, and, finding him still asleep, did not wake him, but, after drawing up the blinds, went quietly out as she often did, leaving the tray by his side. An hour later, not hearing him call or ring, she went up and found him dead with a smile on his face.

The days that followed were like a dream. She did not break down, but went, white-faced and quiet, through it all, with Jim by her side. It had always been her father's wish to be buried by his wife in the churchyard at Barnscombe, a tiny hamlet by the sea, in South Devon. The old Norman church tucked away in a hollow, sheltered from wind and weather by a green hill bright in early June with golden gorse, has never seen the sea, but for eight hundred years or more has stood and listened to its voice as it thunders and roars through winter days and nights, or sings on summer evenings its song of beauty breathing peace. It has gathered to rest within its walls the knights of chivalry and their ladies, whose names can still be read in fading letters on their tombs, while outside in the churchyard lie humbler folk asleep, generation after generation of Devon peasants and fishermen who lived and died unknown. The Rector met and wooed his wife in this little place. Her father, an old Indian civil servant, had bought a cottage there, which was now Robin's, left to her by her mother when she died. They brought him down for the last time, travelling by the same train that "We Three" had always gone by to their holidays, and on a Saturday morning laid him to his rest. It was Sunday evening and Robin had been with Jim, Joyce, and the Gallant to evensong. After service they went and stood by the grave. Joyce gave a sign to Gallant, and they went back to the cottage, and left the two alone.

They left the churchyard, and, holding hands like children, went over the hill to the sea. It lay before them still and smooth with the brilliant sunset colours just beginning to fade as the twilight shadows dimmed the glory of the western sky. The pearl-white cliffs of Bere Regis still glowed faint pink and purple, and the ebbing tide lapped lazily upon the pebbly beach.

For a while they stood in silence on the crest of the hill, drinking in the

beauty of a familiar and beloved scene, with hearts too full of memories for speech. Then, as "We Three" had done hundreds of times, they made their way down, across the busy little stream that bubbles its way through the stones, and sat together on the great natural breakwater of shingle that the waves have built in their wrath, like foolish men who, in their anger, create the enemies they rage against.

Then for the first time there came to Robin the mercy of tears, and she cried upon Jim's shoulder like an over-tired child, and blind with love and pity he held her in his arms.

"Little Robin," he said, "little Robin."

Presently she ceased to sob, and lay quite still. Then, sitting up, she said bravely, but with a quivering lip:

"Dearest, I'm not little Robin any longer."

He could not speak. He caught his breath in dread of what she was going to say, and sat gripping her hand till it hurt, and she loved the pain.

"I'm not little Robin any longer, and you are not Uncle Jim. I love you," she said, turning to him with a light in her eyes that transfigured her face, and gave it a beauty that made him tremble and worship. "I love you, Jim, with another love. I love you as—as you love me."

He swept her into his arms, and time stood still waiting, as he always waits for lovers to awake. Time waited, and with him were all those whose lives were linked with these two lives by memories of love and hate, into that unity from which there can be no escape, not even through the door of death. They were alone in their heaven, but it could not last, life waited and no one can live alone. Everyone who, for good or ill, had touched their lives was present there to play a part in the great decision these two souls must make. Phyllis was there in her shining hard-eyed beauty; Peter in his splendour and Peter in his shame; Juliette with her grey eyes mischievous or dim with tears; Maisie with her little Robin in her arms and Charlie by her side; Cecil with his loyalty; Joyce and Gallant with their happy love; Elsie painted and powdered going to sell her beauty on the streets; Elsie respectable and married to the chauffeur on the hill; and with them a multitude of sinning, repenting, suffering men, women and children, whom both had learned to love, and loved to serve; and, nearest and dearest of all the third of "We Three" with his kindness and his pathetic selfishness. He was there waiting. God grant he did not know it, for, if he did, his poor old heart must have been troubled, and his rest broken by a new and torturing pain. God grant the dead rest from the living, for the living may not rest from the dead. The presence of this waiting multitude was neither

faith nor fancy but hard fact, for there are no harder facts than the facts of memory. The greater part of every present is made up of the past, and it is thus before a cloud of witnesses that every soul, however lonely he appears to be, must fight his battle and win or lose the crown of life. Because each one is one of many, there are many in each one. Not only do I live in my world, but my world lives in me, and is my life. It was Phyllis who awakened Jim. He heard her laugh. Robin felt his arms relax, and looking up into his face, saw the light of love fade from his eyes and a grey pinched pain come into them. He looked suddenly old and hungry.

He put her away and stood up looking down at her.

"It is impossible," he said in a dull dead voice.

Robin knew what was coming, and braced herself to meet it. If he loved her, as she knew he did, she was not going to let him throw his happiness away. He had been cheated, cruelly cheated, of what she knew now that she could give him, and give him in royal generous measure, and she was going to fight for him against himself.

She stood up and faced him.

"Why is it impossible?" she said. "Jim—Jim—why is it impossible?"

She took his hands, and wound his arms about her waist again, looking up into his face.

"Don't look like that. Don't. Oh, don't go away and leave me alone. You said you wouldn't leave me alone. Why is it impossible? Don't take your hands away," as he gently tried to withdraw them. "Jim, I cannot live without you. Sit down again, and tell me why it is impossible. It isn't wrong. Our love can't be wrong. I am so proud to love you, so proud and glad."

He sat by her side, and she held one of his hands in both of hers, and listened in silence while he told her of the way by which he came to the truth from which he turned in horror and yet knew to be the truth, the highest meaning of the vow. As she listened her heart grew sick within her. She was prepared to meet the legal arguments and the texts, but this was to its utmost limit that which she herself believed.

"I'm sure Christ never meant us to lay that burden upon all alike," he said at last, "but if I can bear it, I ought to. I ought to. But it's you—oh God, my darling, my darling."

"Do you really believe God meant that?" she asked in a trembling voice, "that your suffering can atone for Phyllis, and mine for Peter? Do you think it

will do Peter good if I go away—alone—without you?”

He nodded his head.

“I believe it will do good in the world,” he said, “if you can do it willingly and for love’s sake.”

She did not answer “I do not love Peter.” She had learnt her lesson too well for that. She knew what he meant by love.

For a while she sat there silent, despair in her heart. She had been so certain that love like theirs must be right, right because it was so beautiful. Now there was a doubt—a dreary doubt. Her mind went back to the picture of him kneeling by the crucifix that night years ago when she had come up to see Peter. The fear of Christ came back to her. Did He demand this of those that followed Him? Had he not suffered enough? She glanced at him. There was no light in his face, only suffering. Rebellion, passionate rebellion surged up. The thought of his going back alone to bear his burden by himself choked her. It was cruel and unjust. It would not save him. It would break him. It would do no good and kill him. Why should he bear it all alone hungry for what she had to give? She had felt his passion’s strength, restrained as it was by his tenderness, and guessed at the greatness of his need by her own response. She was desperate and in her desperation determined to save him from this. He had done such a lot for God, why should He torture him like this.

“I cannot bear it,” she cried out suddenly. “I can’t. I can’t do it willingly. I don’t believe it will do any good. It is just useless waste. My dear, I want you. I want to be the mother of your child. Oh Jim, I want a home. I want a child. Mine died. He never lived. I’ve done enough for Peter. I’ve tried my best. He killed my baby. Why should I do any more?”

Jim shivered as though a sudden blast of icy wind had caught him. This was the end; he could not bear it.

“And why should you suffer for Phyllis?” Robin went on passionately. “What did she do for you? She was heartless, cruel. I hate her. It’s a cruel, horrible idea this. I cannot bear it. I never hated Peter, but I will hate him if I have to do this. I will hate him and hate him. Oh Jim, my Jim, I cannot let you go.”

He took her in his arms.

“Then I will never go,” he said hoarsely. “I will love you, Robin darling. God how I will love you. You shall be the mother of my child. I will keep my promise, gladly, gladly, and you shall never be alone.”

He kissed her hungrily, but with a protective gentleness that filled with the glorious certainty of a strong, selfless love. The struggle was over for one perfect moment, and she was in heaven again. Then the doubt came back. Was it right? She was terrified to find it there, and she clung closer to him as though his nearness was a refuge from it. She fought it with both hands, trying to tear it away as though it were something tangible. But it remained.

At last she sat up——

“Do you think it will be sin if we marry?” she asked tremblingly.

“No,” he answered. “No. I don’t. It couldn’t be sin, though——” He stopped himself dead, but the one word said all that needed to be said.

“You would have to give up your work as a priest?”

“Yes. I could not go on.”

“And leave the Mission?”

“Yes.”

“And you would do that for me?”

“I would do anything in the world for you, Robin.”

“You would not be able to take Communion?”

“No, dear, nor would you.”

She turned to look at him. His face in the gathering twilight was white and drawn with pain.

“We should be like Maisie and Charlie?”

“Yes, dear, just the same.”

She gave a little moan that sounded like a trapped and wounded animal very near to death. She knew, not from his replies, so much as by his face and the tone of his voice what this was costing him, and, deep in her heart, she was suddenly certain that it could not be done. There was a long silence. She clutched at the stones with both hands to keep herself from crying out. The twilight was almost dead, and under the deepening darkness the sea moved in sombre mystery. A stray gull called shrilly to its mate, sailing like a spot of silver on the waves. Robin was alone, utterly alone. The thought of that grave beyond the hill stabbed her like a knife, and she bit her lip in the pain. She had fought for Jim as long as she believed it was his life she was fighting for. Now she knew that it wasn’t. He was giving his life for her.

“Jim,” she said quietly, “will it do if I bear this willingly for love of you? I

could not do it honestly for Peter, or for the world. I am only a woman, and I cannot love the world like that. But I can do it for you, freely, willingly,” she choked back the tears in her voice and said proudly, “gladly for you. I know now that you ought not to do this. You would give me your child, but you would leave all those children back in the streets. I would ruin your work for God.”

Jim made as though to take her in his arms, but she got up and stood before him.

“My darling,” she said, “I will never forget that you would have done it for me. Yours is a wonderful love. But—but you mustn’t. Will it count if I do it for you?”

He gave a great cry and sprang up.

“You shall not do it,” he said. “I want you. I cannot live without you. I will hate my work. I will hate God if you do this. I want you so.”

But Robin knew the truth. There was something in her man greater even than his love. In this moment of his weakness she was strong enough for both.

“No, dear, you won’t. You couldn’t,” she said. “Your work is you, and you couldn’t give it up.”

She took his arm and turned towards the shore from which the lights were twinkling like stars.

“We must go back,” she said, “there is no other way. Listen, Jim. Do you remember the Fête, and the ‘Dance of the Golden Moth,’ and how I used to Resurrect?”

He bowed his head.

“Well, dear, the light of life has burned me up. It has burned up little Robin. But I’m going to Resurrect for Christ’s dear sake, and you, my darling man. I’m not going to die or be broken. I’m going to Resurrect for you, and God will accept it, won’t He?”

He could not trust himself to speak, but he tightened his arm about her, and they stumbled their way across the stones in silence. At the door of the cottage they kissed for the last time in love.

“Good night, Uncle Jim,” she said and went in.

And there I leave them, a man standing on the edge of the cliff looking out into the night, and seeing the slums of London, and long years; a little woman lying face downwards on her bed, brave—but broken now. Behind them both I

see the figure of Jesus of Nazareth standing, but His back is turned to me, and I cannot see His face.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected or standardised.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been corrected or standardised.

[The end of *I Pronounce Them* by G. A. Studdert Kennedy]