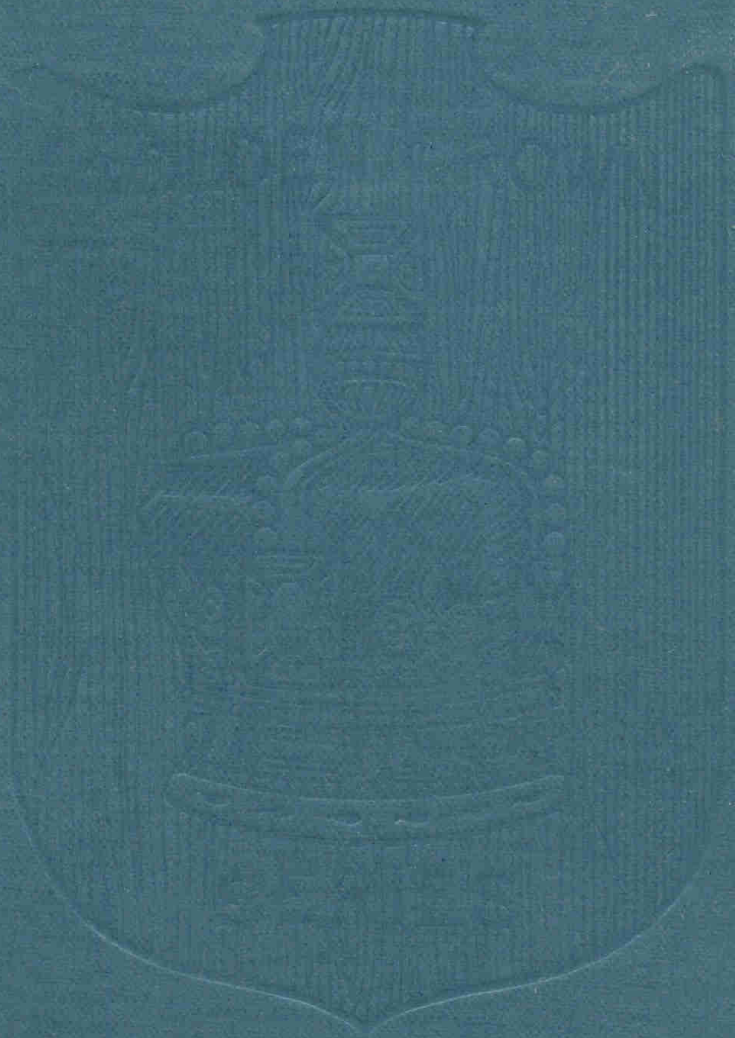
JOAN'S HANDFUL



Title: Joan's Handful
Date of first publication: 1930
Author: Amy Le Feuvre (1861-1929)
Date first posted: July 27, 2024
Date last updated: July 27, 2024
Faded Page eBook #20240710

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

JOAN'S HANDFUL

BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

Author of "Herself and Her Boy," "Four Gates," etc.

PICKERING & INGLIS

LONDON GLASGOW MANCHESTER EDINBURGH

CONTENTS

“BETTER IS AN HANDFUL WITH QUIETNESS, THAN BOTH THE HANDS FULL WITH TRAVAIL AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT” (Eccles. iv. 6).

Joan's Handful

CHAPTER I

THE PAINTER

An October afternoon, bright and sunny; the touch of frost in the previous night had only accentuated the vividness of colour in the beech trees that surrounded Old Bellerton Rectory. In the cobbled stone yard at the back was Joan Adair, busy with paint and paintbrush. She had tucked her skirt up, and was enveloped in a huge white apron. Her deep blue eyes were so intent upon her handiwork that she did not notice the approach of a stalwart young man in a rough shooting costume, who stood leaning against the stable door, and surveyed her with amused appreciation.

"Ahem!"

Joan started. She turned a fresh fair face towards the onlooker. It was a typical English face, not particularly beautiful, but essentially bonny; and when she smiled, a dimple came and went in a most distracting fashion. Her bright brown hair gleamed with gold, though at present an old straw hat, with a crow's feather sticking up jauntily on one side, concealed most of her glory.

"Derrick! How like you! Have you dropped from the sky?"

"Do I look like a cherub? No; I'm out for slaughter. See my gun? Have had an invite to the Hall for a week to help old Jossy with his pheasants. What on earth are you doing?"

Joan waved her brush proudly. It was no sketch of autumn beauty which occupied her clever fingers, but a very shabby little jingle which was being liberally plastered with black and red paint.

"Our chariot," she said laughing. "Oh, Derrick, I can't tell you how I am revelling in the country! Every day here is too exquisite for words."

"How is Dominie?"

"He is as pleased as I am. We're as happy as the day is long; but perhaps that does not say much, as the days are getting short now!"

“I never knew the day that did not see you happy,” said the young man. “Is tea coming on? I’ve got a thirst which needs a drop of something, and I know the Dominie won’t give me a whisky and soda.”

“Go in and talk to him. I must finish my job. Shan’t we look smart?”

“You’ll be taken for the Royal Mail. How fond you are of red! You always were. Do you remember when your red frock was baptised with ink? How you howled! Here, let me take a hand.”

He seized her brush. Joan stood and watched him.

“Any crest to go on?”

“You can paint Dad’s name.”

Derrick did so; but when Joan looked over his shoulder she found “Joan’s a dear!” added in large letters.

“Derrick, haven’t you grown up yet?” Joan said severely.

“I’m trying to,” he said meekly.

Then he threw down his brush, and she led the way into the house. It was one of those very old-fashioned English rectories which are delightful to look at and to live in, if it were not for the thought of repairs. A low, square, oak-panelled hall, dark, and with rather a musty atmosphere; low, long sitting-rooms opening out of it, with oak beams across the ceilings, and deep casement windows overlooking a rather untidy and leaf-bestrewed garden. Pictures and books seemed to cover all the walls, a few shelves of fragile old china lightened the rather gloomy little drawing-room; but Derrick was led into the rector’s study, where Mr. Adair was immersed amongst his books. Here there was a cheerful fire burning, and a square tea-table set by its side. A copper kettle was singing away on the hob.

“Dad, dear, here is one of your former pupils—the black sheep amongst them.”

Mr. Adair turned round and greeted the young man heartily.

Joan’s father was getting on in years, but he enjoyed excellent health. His face was ruddy and cheerful and clean shaven; his white hair and the stoop in his shoulders were the only signs of age.

“I must wash my hands,” said Joan. “We will have tea in a few minutes.”

She left the room humming a little song under her breath. A green baize door opened at one end of the hall, and an elderly woman’s face appeared

with rather an anxious look upon it.

"Is it visitors, Miss Joan?"

Joan laughed. Such a clear, happy laugh! Everyone smiled on hearing it, and the old servant was no exception.

"Mr. Derrick, Sophia! We will not make company of him."

"I'll send in some buttered toast. I remember his liking for it."

"Be careful with the butter," cautioned Joan, the dimple in her cheek appearing as she ran lightly up the wide, shallow stairs. She made her way along a passage till she opened the door of her room.

It was very small, but it bore the characteristics of the owner—whitewashed walls, white dimity bed-hangings, and white dimity curtains in the wide casement window. The carpet was thin and threadbare, but there was a chintz-covered easy chair by the window, and a little table with books and writing materials upon it. A bowl of late roses was on the window ledge over the small dressing-table, and suspended from a mirror hanging on the wall was a bunch of fresh lavender, and a bookcase on the opposite side was crowded with well-worn, shabby books.

It did not take Joan long to tidy herself, but just for one moment she leant her elbows on her window-sill and gazed with far-seeing eyes over the scene before her. An old lawn sloped down to a row of beech trees; beyond, the fields rose up again till they met a belt of pines on the horizon. Behind these pines the sun was already slowly sinking, sending rosy rays across the dusky sky. Rooks were cawing in a rookery close by, there was a smell of wood fires, and a slight whiff of hot bread which delighted her senses.

"What a haven it is!"

Joan breathed the words; then a little shadow stole into her blue eyes.

"Oh, I hope they will be pleased—they must be!" A quick sigh escaped her, then she made her way downstairs and re-entered the study like a fresh breeze.

Derrick glanced at her as she sat down and began making the tea. He was three years her senior, and they had played together and learnt in this old rectory as a boy and girl when his grandfather had been the rector here, and Mr. Adair had been his curate and lived with his young family in a whitewashed cottage at the entrance to the village.

Mr. Adair had gone to a busy town later on, and had taken pupils. Derrick Colleton had gone to him there and renewed his acquaintance with his old playmate. Then he had gone to Oxford, and thence had drifted first into law, and then, not finding that satisfy either his purse or his intellect, had taken a post as private secretary to a member of the Cabinet. He had never lost his boyish spirits, and as his humorous, twinkling eyes met Joan's, she laughed.

"I'd like to know your thoughts," she said.

"I didn't think I'd tumble into such domesticity," he said. "Joan of the inkpot and of midnight studies I remember—never Joan of the tea-table!"

"But Dad must have his tea," said Joan. "He and I have settled down here together with infinite peace. I left Girton two years ago."

"And where is Mrs. Adair? Still abroad with Cecil?"

"They are coming home at the end of this week," Mr. Adair said quickly. There was a light in his eye as he spoke.

Derrick looked round the room, then out into the dusky garden.

"It's so queer your coming back here after all these years. I see my marks still upon that window shutter. I was shut and locked in here one day by my grandfather. He rued his deed when he opened the door. My knife had been busy on every bit of wood in the room!"

"You were an awful little brat!" said Joan, her dimple appearing.

"Yes," said Mr. Adair gravely. "It is queer, I suppose, but very mercifully ordained by God, I consider. Sir Joseph, by giving me the living, has enabled us to be one united family again. I am sure this bracing country air will be quite as good for Cecil as that of the Swiss places in which she has been living, and the house will be far more comfortable for my dear wife."

There was a moment's silence. Derrick was casting his mind back to the narrow terraced house in a dingy street in which the Adairs had lived for the past ten years. He saw again Mrs. Adair moving about it in her restless, preoccupied fashion, her graceful figure and dainty dress—a strangely incongruous sight in that shabby house. He wondered if this country rectory would be more to her liking.

Then he turned to Joan.

"How's the learning? I saw you had taken any amount of degrees and honours. What good is it going to do you?"

Joan's eyes flashed.

"It has done me good. It has quickened and fed the mental part of me. It has developed——"

"Oh, Pax! Don't flood me with your rhetoric. If you want to be pleasant to your neighbours let the past be buried deep. Your Girton knowledge won't be wanted here."

"I'm not going to argue with you," said Joan suddenly, smiling. "You're only a man. All men are dreadfully afraid of cultured women."

"I shall never be afraid of you, Joan—never!"

Sophia at this instant opened the door. She bore a plate of hot buttered toast, and when Derrick saw her he seized it from her and wrung her by the hand.

"Good old Sophia, you're going strong yet! And your toast is as balmy as ever!"

"Mr. Derrick, I hope you're well."

Sophia dropped an old-fashioned curtsy. She was evidently a privileged servant, for she went on:

"I knew your tea would be nothing without a bit of toast; and what the boy is, that will be the man. I fancy you, sir, going through life and looking for buttered toast and takin' it as your right—the right to enjoy what other folks have worked to give you, which is, so to say, a parable. Buttered toast comes to some quite easy, but 'tis not always wise."

"Oh, Sophia, stop," said Joan, laughing. "Don't give us a treatise on buttered toast. If you spoil Derrick, don't blame him for being spoiled."

Sophia edged towards the door. Looking over her shoulder she said:

"Mr. Derrick be one of fortune's favourites. He has never met discipline yet."

"There, Derrick! Sophia knows all about you."

Derrick nodded.

"Have you and Banty met yet?" he asked, munching his toast with much appreciation.

"Yes," said Joan. "I have spoken to her after church. She is usually out when I call. I know Lady Gascoigne best. She is always at home. Banty and

I are strangers; she has nothing left of the small girl I used to know. She was a fat baby then."

"Only a couple of years younger than yourself," said Derrick with a laugh. "Banty is very good sport. She's as good a shot as her father, which is saying a good deal. What do you think of the cousin living with them? He's a queer fish if ever there was one!"

"I haven't met him. He has been up in town. Does he live here? Lady Gascoigne talks of him as if he is a kind of secretary or upper servant. He's a Gascoigne, isn't he?"

"He's the son of a younger brother—Wilmot, his name is. He has travelled a good bit, I believe, is mad over books, and old Jossy is keeping him busy cataloguing his library and sorting out family chronicles. It's the fashion nowadays to publish family reminiscences, and I believe this fellow is trying to do it. He's too literary for me. Those book fellows are always such self-assertive brutes; I longed to pull his nose!"

"By which I know he snubbed you," said Joan with her dimpling smile.

Mr. Adair had sat listening in silence; now he engaged Derrick's attention by asking him questions about the glebe fields and various other matters upon which he hoped he might be able to throw some light.

Joan slipped away to finish her cart before darkness stopped her. Derrick came out to her on his way back to the Hall.

"So you're settling down into a country parson's daughter," he said. "I heard you played the organ better than old Tabbs did. Had he chucked it before you came?"

"Was he the old schoolmaster? Yes; we have a modern schoolmistress now who is practising hard to become organist. She has no idea of time, unfortunately, which is funny, because of course she teaches part singing in school. No, Derrick; I love it here, but I am not settling down. Shall I tell you a secret?" She stood up, and a grave, earnest look came into her face. "Yesterday I had the offer of a post in a first-class high school which will bring me in from £150 to £200 a year."

"Good for you! But, oh, my dear Joan, don't you take to schoolmistressing! You don't know how much better I like you in your present setting!"

"Being a man, that goes without saying," said Joan cheerfully. "But I am panting for higher, wider interests. I don't want to let my knowledge rust,

and I love—I adore—imparting knowledge; they say I have the knack of it. Some, you know, have the brains, but not the faculty for teaching."

"How can your father spare you?"

"That is the rub! Of course he could not, unless Mother and Cecil are here; but it would do Cecil such a lot of good to take my place and run the parish. She wants an interest in life. She is so much stronger than she thinks she is, and I dread her getting self-centred. Dad and I are hopeful that they will settle down. We're going to do our very best to make them like it. Oh, what am I saying? But you know us, Derrick; it's no good hiding it from you."

"Not a little bit!" said Derrick hastily. "But mark my words, your mother is not old enough to settle down in this quiet spot. In your heart you want to be up and away, and so will she. Your mother won't fit into this part. I'll bet you ten quid she won't!"

Joan put out her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't say it. Wait and see. Dad has been a new man since he came here—so much brighter and more hopeful. He said to me last night: 'Please God your mother and I will spend our old age together here. It is all I ask.' "

Joan's voice shook, then she laughed.

"Go away, Derrick; you're making me too communicative, only I know you're as safe as a post! Here, give me a hand and push this into the coach-house. Have you seen our old pony? He is over twenty, I am told, but he goes like steam. We bought the cart and harness from Dray Farm, and they threw the pony in for an extra three pounds. Wanted a good home for him, they said. I like those Drays."

Derrick took hold of the cart and pushed her aside. Then for an instant he let his hand rest on her shoulder.

"Joan, for auld lang syne, don't you leave poor Dominie in his old age! He's worth more than brats of girls who don't know one teacher from another."

He gave her no time for reply, shouldered his gun, and vaulted clean over the white gate that led out into the road. Then, waving his hat, he cried:

"If Jossy doesn't send you some of the pheasants that I help him to bring down, I'll give the order to his keeper myself. Au revoir!"

Joan stood for a moment leaning her arms on the gate and watching his retreating figure in the dusk, then she gave a quick sigh and went indoors.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAVELLERS

Joan was having a busy day. Her mother and sister were expected that afternoon. She had been up since daybreak; both she and her father were nervously anxious that the old rectory should make a good impression upon the travellers. With the assistance of the odd man, Joan had swept and rolled the lawn and paths, tied up straggling chrysanthemums, and brought a fair amount of order and tidiness into the sweet old-fashioned garden. Sophia, after cleaning and scouring everything in the kitchen that she could lay her hands upon, was now immersed in cooking. The house fairly revelled in smells of hot cakes, hot tarts, hot bread, and a variety of other indications that the oven was doing its work in a satisfactory manner. Derrick had been as good as his word. A brace of pheasants had arrived at two o'clock, and Sophia seized them with a cook's delight. When Joan remonstrated, telling her they were too fresh, she triumphantly showed her the label with the date attached.

"Three days old, Miss Joan, and just what is wanted for the mistress. The joint of beef will come in hot to-morrow and will eat cold on Sunday."

So Joan let her have her way. She herself was in every room, assisted by the young housemaid; there were beds to make, linen and plate to be brought out of store cupboards; fresh cushions, and curtains, and tablecloths to take the place of shabby ones, flowers to be arranged, brass to be brightened, furniture to be polished. By half-past three in the afternoon Joan's feet were aching, but her heart dancing. As she piled the wood logs on the drawing-room fire, and looked round the dainty little home-like room, she said to herself, "Mother will fall in love with it. We have never lived in such a sweet house before!"

She had worked hard at the drawing-room. She had bought some faded chintz curtains and hangings cheap at a country sale a few weeks before, and her clever fingers had cut out and made covers for the shabby, old, town furniture they had brought with them.

Bowls of red and gold chrysanthemums brightened the dark corners; some framed water-colours, the handiwork of Mrs. Adair when a girl, covered the walls, which had been freshly hung with a delicate cream paper; the high, narrow, white marble mantelpiece held a few choice bits of china,

and all the newest and brightest books filled the low bookcases in the recesses on either side of the fireplace. Joan's work-basket, the local paper, and some loose magazines on a small table gave a sense of homeliness to the room. Joan pulled up two easy chairs to the fire; she rearranged the cushions on the chintz couch; then she glanced out of the window, and saw her father pacing up and down the gravel path. He was waiting for the country fly which was to take him to the station to meet his wife. He looked very bent and old, and leaned more on his stick than he had ever done before; and yet she knew, although she could not see his face, that his eyes were shining with hope and expectancy, that the wrinkles were smoothed out upon his brow, that his soul was having one of the happiest times in his life. They had had several home-comings of this kind before, but never one under such favourable circumstances as this. As Joan watched him sudden tears filled her eyes.

"Why, oh why are there so many unfulfilled desires!" she exclaimed passionately. "Why are we such an ill-assorted family? Oh, God!"—and her whole soul rose up in its breathless longing—"oh, God, don't let him be disappointed this time!"

Mr. Adair, walking up and down with a smile upon his lips, was living in the past. Step by step he was watching himself as a young man from the time he went to his first curacy. How well he remembered the beautiful old abbey church in which he was so fortunate as to find himself! Would he ever forget the first time he was introduced by his rector, at a little evening gathering, to old General Lovell and his three beautiful and clever young daughters? He remembered now the little thrill that ran through him when, after some conversation in which the General did most of the talking and he the listening, he was clapped heartily on the shoulder by the old soldier, with the words: "Quite glad to speak with a black coat or two; am sick of the red ones. Come and see me, young fellow—come and dine with us to-morrow night!"

How shyly and delightedly he had gone! How his simple soul was dazed at first by the bright brilliance of the Misses Lovell, and then attracted and then bewitched by the fascination of the one who always seemed to understand him and to make allowances for his awkwardness! Cecilia Lovell had been very good to him in those days.

At first he had felt he was an outsider, a stranger in their set. The Lovells had always been a race of soldiers, and very distinguished ones. His forbears for centuries had been quiet churchmen, not very clever, not very gifted, but men of simple gentle lives and unselfish aims—perhaps of narrow

prejudices and small, one-sided views. He could not look at life as the Lovells did; they could not look at life as he did. But Cecilia always seemed to fill the breach; and then, on one unforgettable day, he had breathed in her ear the old, old question, and, with shy averted face, she had given him his answer and the desire of his heart. The old General had been delighted. His motherless daughters were both a care and anxiety to him. Gout was troubling him. He was impatient to go abroad and try a cure, so he pushed on the marriage, and in three months' time Cecilia Lovell became Mrs. Adair. Her father was generous, and gave her a liberal allowance.

In spite of a curate's pay, the young couple were very fairly comfortable, until children began to arrive. Then John Adair gave up his curacy for a better stipend, and settled in the white cottage in Old Bellerton village. Two boys and two girls played with the orphan grandson of the rector, and for a time life dealt gently with the curate and his family. But Cecilia did not make a good curate's wife; she had an impatient intolerance of a small village life, and never rested till she got her husband to one of the large Midland towns.

The rector looked back to his life there with regret that he had not been able to make his wife happy and content in the work which he loved. He was a simple man, and not a clever one; he read only theology; his wife's broader culture puzzled and distressed him. She made no secret of her dislike to the parishioners, and when her elder boy developed delicacy in one of his lungs she took him for months at a time to her old home in the south. Gradually she stayed less and less with her husband. An elderly governess taught the girls and looked after the house when she was away. Then the boys were placed at school. Their mother's idea was for them to enter the Army; her husband objected because of expense, and because he was a man of peace and had a horror of war.

Eventually the elder passed into Sandhurst, went out to India, and died of enteric six months afterwards. The younger one was now his mother's hope. But he developed the same delicacy of lung when nineteen, and though his mother, helped by her father, was able to take him out to Davos, he died of a rapid decline.

Mrs. Adair returned to her husband and girls like a woman without heart and hope. Joan was always strong, but Cecil was as delicate-looking as the boys had been, and, nervously fearing she would go the same way, Mrs. Adair took her continually to Switzerland and to the Riviera by turns. The taste for continental life crept into her veins; she rarely was at home for

more than three months in the year, and though doctors assured her that Cecil's lungs were absolutely sound, she refused to believe them.

The death of General Lovell made it easier for her to gratify her love for sunny climes and dry, bracing air. But she had never been able to economise, and John Adair had the greatest difficulty in sending her as much money as she wanted. To ease the strain, he took pupils and coached them for college.

When Joan's education was nearly finished, her godmother, Lady Alicia Fairchild, a lifelong friend of her mother's, determined to give her a chance of making an independent career. She was brilliantly clever, and her governess could teach her nothing more. So Lady Alicia sent her to Girton, and she had worked hard and successfully there. Then, at twenty-two, she came back to her father, and took the household reins into her hands. She did not anticipate staying at home, but circumstances kept her there. The old governess had left, and the house was sadly needing a mistress.

Mr. Adair got the offer of his present living, and then Joan threw her heart and soul into the move. Mr. Adair had always been painfully conscious that his wife could not adapt herself to the shabby terraced house and the economical life of a poor parson. Now his heart swelled with thankfulness. This living was worth £500 a year, and the rectory was a roomy, comfortable house.

As he paced up and down the gravel path, he felt that good times were coming, that he and his wife would settle down in this quiet spot, and draw closer together than ever they had done before. His loyalty and admiration for his wife had never swerved. He knew she was impatient and irritable at times; he could never forget one revelation which she made to him in a moment of furious passion—and that was that she had married him partly to please her father, partly out of pique, as the man she really loved had jilted her; but in spite of this he trusted that time and his undying love would win her and compel her to come closer to him.

Joan's clear, keen insight showed her both her father's and mother's point of view. Mrs. Adair was distinctly her husband's superior in intellect; she tried, when young, to introduce him to a wider and a higher level of thought, but a certain denseness, some obstinacy, and the firm conviction that a man, and moreover a clergyman, could not and ought not to let his wife dictate or attempt to teach him, made all such attempts a dead failure. She now treated her husband with good-natured indifference. Sometimes Joan felt angry at her mother's attitude; sometimes she felt sorry for her. Now, her sympathies were mostly with her father.

When the fly arrived, she ran out, buttoned up his greatcoat for him, and besought him not to wait about on the cold, draughty platform of the little station. “Take care of yourself, Dad. I know you will be hours too early for the train.”

Mr. Adair had a horror of being late for anything, and his daughter often told him laughingly that his waiting hours consumed a good many days in the course of a twelvemonth.

When the fly was off, Joan ran back into the house. Sophia came out of the kitchen.

“Has the master gone? He be in a dreadful rumpus to-day, Miss Joan.”

Sophia had been with them all since they were children; her tongue was never checked, for her heart was loyal and true.

“I think you’ve been in the greatest fuss, Sophia. I’ve heard you giving it unsparingly to poor Jenny.”

“She’s just one of these shiftless girls, Miss Joan. It’s terrible to think of the children unborn, when their parents are such worthless stuff.”

Joan’s laugh rang out merrily.

“You dear old soul! Go back to your kitchen. Thank goodness, I don’t worry over non-existent beings. And don’t begin to talk to Jenny of her children when she’s still unmarried.”

“What do you take me for!” said Sophia, in a shocked tone. Then she said: “Put on your pretty silk dress to-night, Miss Joan. Show the mistress your best.”

Joan shook her head. “Not to-night. They’ll be tired with travelling. We shall all have our dinner and go to bed.”

Sophia disappeared. Joan went into the fire-lit drawing-room, and surveyed herself for a moment in a long mirror there. She was clad in a pale grey serge, rather Quakerish in style, with fine lace collar and cuffs. It served to show off her golden-brown head and bright colouring, but she shook her head at herself. “I always feel like a milkmaid beside Cecil.” Then she took some pink roses out of a bowl and stuck them in her belt.

It was four miles to the station. The time of waiting seemed long. Joan could neither read nor work; but at length the carriage wheels were heard, and the next moment Joan and the servants were out in the old porch welcoming the tired travellers.

Joan led her mother straight into the drawing-room, and undid her fur cloak before the fire.

Mrs. Adair looked about her, then held out her delicate, white hands towards the fire and shivered.

She was slim and very tall, a woman who was growing old gracefully, and more beautiful now than either of her daughters. Her snow-white hair, clustering round her brow, seemed to soften the rather hard-cut contour of her face. Her blue eyes were almost as deep and bright as Joan's, though her dark brows and lashes made them more severe. When she smiled at people she could make them do anything, but she was hardly smiling now.

"We have had a cold journey. Cecil is very tired. We slept the night in town. Of course, we could not come right through. London welcomed us, as usual, with a thick fog. And you seem bitterly cold down here."

"It's very healthy; we are on high ground."

"Oh, I know, my dear Joan, I know. I have not forgotten the terribly long winters, when fires were a scarcity and it was doubtful whether one was justified in buying warm gloves for all the tiny chilblained hands. Your father speaks as if it is a new neighbourhood to which we are coming. He forgets that I know every inch of every road only too well."

"I suppose you remember this room?"

Joan determined to be cheerful.

Mrs. Adair looked round it in a critical sort of way.

"Yes. I give you credit for improving its looks. The poor curate's wife was invited sometimes up to dinner, and sorely was she bored as she sat in this room receiving good advice from the rector's wife!"

Then she smiled sadly.

"Don't torture me with recollections, Joan dear. When I was last here I had my boys. It cannot be otherwise than sad, returning to this part."

Joan's hopes sank. She felt she had no heart to show her mother over the house. Was it a mistake coming back to the place which held such unpleasant memories for her?

And then through the door came Cecil, like a flash of light.

"Is Mother here? Oh, what a dear, wee, cosy room! Sophia has given me two smacking kisses, Mother, and Jenny—is that her name?—looked as if

she were going to follow suit. I tried to freeze her, but I haven't the inches. Joan, you look blooming! My feet are like ice. How nice it is to be home."

Cecil had drawn a low chair up to the fire as she talked, and was now untying her shoes. Slipping them off, she held out silk-clad feet to the fire.

Joan shook her head at her. "Of course you're cold in such flimsy stockings—open-work, too! I'll lend you a pair of my sensible ones if you come upstairs."

"Oh, I can't stand thick stockings."

Cecil spoke in the accents of a spoiled child.

"Tell me when the luggage is up," she said. "I'll toast myself here meanwhile."

Joan slipped away. Her father and Benson, the odd man, were struggling in the hall with trunks, hat-boxes, portmanteaus, and every kind of bundle and bag. Joan soon sorted out the light luggage, and made Jenny help her in taking it up to the rooms. The trunks were gradually brought up by the flyman and Benson. When the hall was clear, Mr. Adair went into the drawing-room.

"Welcome home, my dear!" he said, stepping forward and kissing his wife. Then, patting her shoulder, he added, with the tactlessness of a man, "And I'm hoping, please God, that you won't be wanting to run away from your poor old husband, now that you have such a pretty home as this."

"My dear John," said Mrs. Adair, moving very slightly away from him, "do you forget that our sojourn abroad has been by doctor's orders?"

"Yes, yes, my dear—of course I know. But little Cecil is getting stronger, and our bracing heath and pines will be the very thing for her."

Cecil looked up at him from her seat by the fire and laughed. "I believe, like Diogenes, you would be happy in a tub, Dad! I am sure your letters led me to expect a mansion, a country seat! You see, I never remembered the place; I was too small when we left. Mother tried to prepare me. It's a duck of a place, and, for winter, very cosy, but in summer I should feel I couldn't breathe. The ceilings seem down on one's head."

Mrs. Adair glanced quickly and anxiously at her daughter as she spoke.

"We must have the windows open," she said. "Do you feel this room airless, Cecil? It is the contrast after our big rooms in the hotels."

"Oh, it's all right, Mother. Don't you worry. I'm too cold at present to want anything but a hot fire. Dad, dear, would you mind bringing me my handbag in the hall? I left my handkerchief in it. I'm so tired or I would fetch it myself."

Mr. Adair left the room at once, and went upstairs to find the bag.

Joan would not let him take it down again. "I'll do it, Dad, dear. Cecil is a lazy monkey not to fetch it herself. You must not spoil her. Dinner will be ready in half an hour. You will find hot water in your room."

"My dear Joan," said Mr. Adair, standing still in the passage, and speaking in a dispirited tone, "they find the rooms too small and airless!"

"Nonsense!" said Joan, laughing. She ran downstairs, afraid to trust herself to say anything further. She chatted gaily to her mother till she had seen her comfortably established in her room upstairs. Then she went down to put final touches on the dinner-table, and then she slipped into her black evening dress.

They all met in the quaint oak-raftered dining-room, a little later, in better spirits.

Sophia's soup, her pheasants, and her sweet omelette were beyond reproach.

When dessert was on the table, Joan pointed to the apples and pears in triumph.

"Out of our own orchard! We are self-supplying. All our vegetables, chickens, eggs—and a fat pig to be made into bacon after Christmas—are our very own. Isn't it delicious, Cecil?"

"It's rather a change after that smoky, grimy Nuthampstead," said Cecil. She leant back in her chair looking exceedingly pretty. She was very slight and small, with an ivory pallor, dark eyes and hair, and delicate features. To-night a faint rose blush was on her cheeks.

"A regular little aristocrat from the top of her head to the soles of her feet," Sophia said of her; and it was true.

Cecil was a reproduction of Mrs. Adair's own mother, who had been a very noted beauty at Court. Her clothes were never anything but dainty in the extreme, though her mother and she had the good taste to dress very quietly. To-night she had a simple blue crêpon gown, with old lace softening the bodice. Her dark hair was bound round with a silver braid, but her neck

and arms were white as the driven snow, and her face was almost ethereal in its delicate beauty.

Joan was rather silent. She let her mother do most of the talking. Mrs. Adair had many amusing anecdotes to tell and talked of many people and things.

"It was so strange," she said. "We met General Long in town, and he brought his son to see us. He is now a captain in the 12th Hussars, and just home from India. They dined with us. It was interesting hearing about India again. But Harry Long gave an alarming account of the sedition about the Bengal district. He says it is simply seething with an undercurrent of hatred to British rule. People make light of it and refuse to believe it—just as in the days before the Indian Mutiny. I suppose we shall go on making light of it until a crisis comes, and then there will be a lot of unnecessary suffering and bloodshed."

"Oh, I hope not," said Mr. Adair, looking across at his wife with startled eyes. "I hope we shall not have another mutiny or war in India. Mrs. White's son has just gone out to India. It would break the poor old body's heart if anything happened to her boy."

A little smile flitted across Mrs. Adair's face. "We will hope young White will have his life preserved, my dear John. But there are a few more English to be considered besides him in our Indian Empire?"

"Yes, yes—of course. War is horrible. May God preserve us from it; and Indian wars always seem worse than those nearer home. How thankful we must be that we have no sons out there!"

Joan saw her mother wince and quiver as if someone had struck her across the face. She stopped talking, and left the table almost directly.

Mr. Adair was perfectly oblivious that, as usual, he had blundered. He sat on in the dining-room and smoked his pipe over the fire, smiling happily to himself.

"It's nice to have them home again. We shall be together now!"

Mrs. Adair and Cecil retired very early to rest, and Joan was nothing loath to follow their example. She had had a tiring day, and foresaw a good many tiring ones still to come.

CHAPTER III

A BUSY DAY

The next day was Saturday, and if Joan had not had a fund of cheeriness and good temper in herself and an unflinching amount of pluck and patience, she would never have been able to get through it as happily and easily as she did.

Mrs. Adair breakfasted in bed. Cecil arrived downstairs at ten o'clock and expected Joan to sit and talk to her whilst she dawdled over her cup of tea and eggs and bacon.

"What can you have to do? Let Jenny alone; you are always fussing after her."

"My dear Cecil, I am due at the schoolhouse to receive club money at ten. I must fly. I expect you will be busy unpacking this morning, so you won't miss me. I wonder if you would mind putting your breakfast things together on a tray. This is a busy morning with us. I shall be back in an hour's time. Do you think you could darn a hole in Dad's surplice? The laundress has torn it in the wash."

Cecil laughed a little.

"You are determined to set me to work; but I think after our hard travelling you might allow me a day's grace. I haven't even been shown over the house yet."

Joan was gone. Cecil saw her flying down the garden path, but she was stopped at the gate by a small boy. Cecil wondered at the serene, cheerful way in which Joan seemed to be talking to him. Then she went on, but a little slower, for the small boy was trying to keep pace with her. Cecil smiled to herself, then yawned.

"I can't take the yoke upon me yet. I do hate the ways of a parson's house! But I'll go and unpack, and I suppose I might put up my breakfast things, though why that small Jenny can't come in and do it is past my comprehension."

She gathered the crockery together, placed it on a tray, and actually carried it out to the kitchen. Sophia, as usual, was immersed in cooking, but her kitchen was beautifully clean, and as tidy and bright as a new pin.

“Here I am, you see, Sophia—back into the midst of the daily drudgery!”

“And why should you not be?” demanded Sophia, rolling up the dough at which she was working with quick, deft hands, and looking up at Cecil with her small, bright eyes. “Why should you not be here to bring a bit of ease into the house by a pair of willing hands? ’Tis not right, Miss Cecil, to make life a burden to Miss Joan.”

“Joan! She never feels anything a burden.”

“That’s your mistake. What brings burdens into the world? ’Tis some folks shifting their share of work to others’ shoulders. If all did their share, none would be overburdened.”

Cecil put her tray down and swung herself up lightly on the old dresser, where she sat swinging her feet, ready to argue. She loved a good argument with Sophia upon any subject.

“But that is folly, Sophia; that is the mistake the Socialists make. They want everyone to be equal. How can they be when some are weak and some are strong? You want a dull, monotonous creation, which God did not want, or He would have made it. You want everyone made after the same pattern, with the same characters and dispositions, all taking the same share of life’s work. Imagine it! When a man who knows he can do it, and has the ambition to bear big burdens comes along, he must never want to do anything or bear anything more than his neighbour! Don’t you see what folly it would be?”

“You may be clever with your tongue, Miss Cecil, but you’re too clever to let all your powers rust, and sit still with folded hands whilst others wait on you. You may not be as strong as Miss Joan, but you be quite strong enough to take those cups and plates into the back kitchen and wash them. It’s what Miss Joan would do, were she in your place.”

“But she isn’t, and she never will be. And I live by principles of my own, Sophia, and I never fold my hands, never! I don’t know how to do it. It’s one of my principles never to interfere with anybody else’s business. I should say the washing up of these plates is Jenny’s business, is it not? Or is it yours? It certainly is not mine.”

She slipped down from the dresser and went out of the kitchen humming gaily to herself.

Sophia shook her head after her retreating figure.

“She has been spoilt all her life, and is just becoming one of these useless creatures which are a curse to them that begat them.”

Joan did not return to the house till nearly twelve.

“I’ve been delayed. I had to go and see a sick woman,” she said, meeting her sister sauntering up and down the garden. “I generally go into the church and clean the brasses at this time. Will you come with me, Cecil? And if you were to pick a few flowers and bring with you I should be glad. Where is Mother?”

“Well,” said Cecil, laughing; “she is preparing a sad sheaf of bills for Dad. She wants to go through accounts with him as soon as she can. He has kept us terribly short of money, Joan! I can’t tell you how awkward it has been!”

“My dear Cecil, his bank balance is much overdrawn now. We have had great expenses settling in here. Of course it will be better in time. I do hope you and Mother will make a good long stay here now. You must try and get her to do it. Then we shall pull round. It has been a great strain on him to find the necessary money.”

Cecil did not answer, but she accompanied Joan into the church and put a few flowers into the vases there, and a little bunch of autumn roses on the grave of the late rector, whose widow had requested that it might be done. Then they came back to the house, and found their father and mother deep in accounts in the study.

Mr. Adair came to the lunch table with a harassed look upon his face and a little extra stoop from his shoulders. Mrs. Adair had flushed cheeks and bright eyes. It was rather a silent meal. Joan and Cecil did most of the talking.

As the rector left the room after lunch, he said to his wife, with his usual smiling face:

“I am not to be seen on Saturday afternoons till tea-time. But you know my parson’s habits, my dear. If Cecil would like to take you for a drive, we have the pony and jingle ready for your use. Joan, you’ll be having the choir practice at three, I suppose?”

“Yes,” responded Joan; “we’ll respect your sermon-making, Dad, and won’t come near you.”

“And you and I will finish and square up accounts on Monday,” said the rector, turning to his wife.

“Oh, very well. I am not in a hurry, I assure you.”

They separated. Joan was conscious of disturbance in the atmosphere. She went up to her room for a few minutes’ quiet. She felt to-day as if she could not overtake things. Her mother had asked her to come and help her unpack. Sophia expected her to give out the linen to be aired, Jenny was hopelessly behind with everything. It was a lovely day, and apples ought to be picked in the orchard. The flowers in the drawing-room and dining-room required to be freshened up.

“Oh!” she thought, “for six pairs of hands at least!”

And then she sat down by her window.

“I will not let my soul get chafed if I can help it!” she said. She drew a well-worn little Bible to her. The quiet and fresh coolness of her room soothed her. She turned to her morning reading, the lesson for the day. She had read it hastily when she rose that morning, but a whiff of its fragrance had been with her ever since; and now she looked at the verse again which had been simmering in her mind:

“Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power unto all patience, and long-suffering with joyfulness.”

“Yes!” she mused. “Patience, long-suffering, joyfulness—a strange mixture, but just what I need!”

A soft, happy glow came into her blue eyes. Joan’s religion was real and very precious to her; but she could not talk about it. For a moment she closed her eyes, and her lips moved. Then a robin perched on her window ledge outside and burst into his autumn song.

Joan smiled happily as she got up from her seat.

“And that small scamp hasn’t the least idea how he is going to be fed through the winter!”

She sang under her breath as she went into her mother’s room. For the rest of the afternoon she was more than busy, but at tea-time she sat down to enjoy a well-earned rest. They gathered in the low, quaint drawing-room.

Mr. Adair asked that a cup of tea should be sent him. He was not a clever man, and sometimes found it very difficult not to repeat himself from Sunday to Sunday. To-day he was nervously anxious that his sermon should be appreciated by his intellectual wife. He sat looking over some very old sermons of his, written with the fire and energy of youth, if not with the mellowed experience of some of his later ones. And at length he

remembered a sermon he had preached in the abbey church in which he had first seen his wife. He remembered two or three people had complimented him upon it, General Lovell amongst the number. He had never preached from the same text again. He looked over it, then determined to take it and improve upon it if he could. He had a longing in the depths of his heart that his wife should appreciate and express her appreciation of his preaching. She was not given to church-going; she hardly ever attended the weekday services, and when she was home had a habit of going to see some of her many friends, and staying with them for the week-end.

Very carefully did the rector read over his old sermon. Very earnestly did he pray, as he revised it, that it might not only be the means of helping and blessing his flock, but in particular his wife and family.

After tea Joan produced a large work-basket.

"You look like the mother of a family," laughed Cecil. She was sitting on the hearth-rug doing nothing. Her mother was at an old-fashioned davenport writing letters.

"The house-linen is in a very ancient stage. Come, Cecil, help me. Here is a thimble."

"I know you are going to hand me over the surplice I would not do this morning. Do you always go on like this, Joan? It is sordid drudgery. You are just an upper servant in the house."

"I won't quote a verse which I'm sure you know, about 'the trivial round, the common task.' Things must be done, Cecil, dear. You would not like to have come back to a dirty, untidy, uncared-for home."

"It's rather a poor, shabby one," said Cecil discontentedly. She rubbed a slipper up and down the threadbare carpet and looked round the room with a puckered brow.

"That's unkind of you," said Joan good-humouredly. "If you only knew how hard I worked to make you like it! And though we've been here such a short time I have already learnt to love it. You haven't seen its beauties. I look out of my window and watch the sunsets behind that belt of pines. They are tipped with gold, and their straight, pure pink trunks are edged with crimson. The owls begin to hoot. Sometimes I put a shawl over my head and go out on that little hillock of heather at the back of our orchard, and when I have inhaled all the delicious odour of pines and heather, I turn back into the house. Its quaint rooms and passages, and the country smell in it is joy to me."

“I feel as if I can hardly breathe here!” Cecil drew a long sigh, then she coughed, shivered, and drew near to the fire. “I find it cold and depressing. I’m not an out-of-door person like you. I don’t revel in open windows, and cold baths, and draughts all day long.”

“Have you caught a fresh cold, Cecil?” Mrs. Adair showed that she was not oblivious of the conversation going on. Her tone was anxious.

“Oh, no,” said Cecil carelessly. “I’m much as usual. Is my bedroom fire lighted yet, Joan? I think I’ll go up and have a laze before dinner.”

Joan dropped her work and left the room. In a few minutes she came back.

“It is lighted now, Cecil, and the room does not seem cold.”

Cecil nodded, then got up from the rug and went out.

Joan took up her work again. Her mother left her writing and came to the fire.

“I want to have a little talk with you, Joan. You seem like a will-o’-the-wisp—in and out of the house a dozen times in an hour.”

“Saturday is a busy day, Mother; but I am quiet now.”

Joan looked up, and her blue eyes encountered her mother’s dark, bright ones fixed upon her.

“I am writing to Lady Alicia; I had a letter from her to-day. She asks me if you have snapped your links with college for good and for all, or whether your career there has led to anything?”

Joan darned away at the surplice, but her cheeks grew hot. She had not meant to confide in her mother at present, but there seemed no help for it now.

“I have been offered the post of a teacher in a high school, Mother. It is a good thing. I should begin with a hundred and fifty pounds a year.”

Mrs. Adair was silent for a moment.

“Have you given your answer yet?”

“No; I must in a week’s time.”

“Do you want to take it up?”

Joan’s eyes gleamed.

“I should love it above everything!” she said.

“The idea is most distasteful to me,” said Mrs. Adair. “But I know girls do it nowadays. I suppose I ought to adapt my thoughts and feelings to the times.”

“Of course,” Joan said quickly and a little nervously, “I feel we could not leave Dad alone now; but I hoped that perhaps Cecil would be strong enough to stay here and help in the parish.”

“Cecil will never be strong enough for parish work,” Mrs. Adair said decidedly. “I am in continual anxiety over her. She looks as if a breath of wind could carry her away. Our doctor at Cannes told me that sunshine was absolutely essential to her. He advised Algiers this winter, but I suppose it is impossible.”

“I believe she would be quite happy and well here,” said Joan desperately; “it is so very healthy, Mother.”

“I did not find it so when you were children,” said Mrs. Adair bitterly. “My memory takes me back to the biting east winds every spring, and the struggle to keep the little ones warm and free from colds and chilblains through the long winters. It laid the seeds of disease in the boys, and made Cecil what she is at present.”

“Oh, Mother!” gasped Joan. “I had no idea you felt like this about it. We ought not to have come.”

“Beggars cannot be choosers. It gives us an extra two hundred pounds a year, and it is all right for you and your father.”

“Are you not—not going to try a winter here?” asked Joan falteringly.

“I don’t think it will be possible. In any case, Cecil cannot take your place, and parish work is above and beyond me. I never ought to have been a parson’s wife, and that is the simple truth. The parish comes before the home with your father. He told me that six months after we were married. I, like the silly child I was, thought only of the cosy home I was going to make and keep for him. The parish was of no account in my eyes then.”

Mrs. Adair smiled, but there was a wistful sadness in her tone. Joan looked at her and thought that she had never seen her mother look more beautiful. As a little child she had adored her, but Mrs. Adair had given most of her affection to the delicate little daughter, and not to the healthy, rosy romp. Joan and her mother, in spite of intellectual sympathies, had always lived apart from each other, and there was a certain amount of constraint between them now. Yet Mrs. Adair had never been quite so confidential with Joan before. The girl’s warm heart quickened and glowed. She dropped her

work and went down on her knees before her mother impulsively. Taking her hands in hers she said:

"Mother, dear, Dad is getting old. He may have made mistakes when he was a young man, but one can't blame him for his enthusiasm for work. Now he appreciates his home very much. If you could only have heard him since he has been here! 'Joan, don't you think your mother will like it? I have cut down that elm to give her a peep of the heath from her window! She must like the space and room in this old, rambling house!' Oh, Mother! his one desire has been that our home should contain us all, as it used to long ago."

Mrs. Adair looked into the glowing fire in front of her. She did not withdraw her hands from Joan's clasp; but her voice came in its cold frostiness like a cold water douche upon Joan's hot spirit.

"My dear, you talk as if I am wilfully staying away from you from mere caprice. Surely you know that it is Cecil's health that keeps us abroad. I have not found fault with the house. I think you have done wonders in it. Naturally the small, low rooms seem airless to us after our lofty hotel rooms abroad, but you have done your best to make them comfortable. And now there is another matter I must mention. You are under-staffed. It is not possible to work a house of this size comfortably with two maids. As Cecil says, you are wearing yourself out doing the work of a servant half your days. And this little Jenny is too young for her duties. Get a third maid as quickly as you can. She will ease everyone all round. Sophia may know of some one locally; she is a native of this place and had a large family of brothers and sisters, if I remember rightly."

"But," said Joan, going back to her chair and taking up her work again; "I am not always in such a bustle as you have seen me. When Dad and I are alone, we get along without a ripple. Of course, every extra person makes a difference, and the extra fires, and the waiting, and the novelty of it has rather turned Jenny's head and made her appear less efficient than she really is. We have to economise just now, because we have had such heavy expenses. Of course, if—if you are not going away just yet—we can get extra help. You see, Mother, if I took this post which is offered to me, I could give Dad some material help. It is rather a puzzle to me how to act."

Mrs. Adair was about to speak, when the door opened and the rector came in rubbing his hands cheerfully.

"Well, Cecilia, dearest, it is delightful to come in and find you here. I have earned a rest, I consider." He pulled up an easy chair to the fire, then

leant over and patted his wife's hand caressingly. "How is your baby? It's such a lovely moonlight night. I'm hoping for a fine day to-morrow. Times have altered since we were here before. I have only two services to take in this village. Old Bradsbrook is worked from Nettleburn, so you see I need no curate. I have never felt heartier in my life! And I really believe both you and little Cecil will soon derive the greatest benefit from our bracing air. Joan, the squire has just sent in another brace of pheasants. Very kind of him, isn't it? You will like to renew your acquaintance with Lady Gascoigne, will you not, Cecilia? You and she always got on so well together."

"Did we? I forget."

Mrs. Adair rose from her chair and went across to her writing-table.

"I must finish my letters," she said. "The post goes at seven, does it not?"

Mr. Adair's face fell. He dearly loved a chat between tea and dinner. He and Joan generally talked over the village at this time, and told each other any interesting bits of information which it had been their lot to gather during the day. And he had been looking forward to a firelight chat with his wife. He had so many things to tell her, and somehow or other he had hardly seen her since she had arrived. For a moment he sank back into his chair like an old man; then his natural liking for country gossip could not be restrained.

"Joan," he said in a husky, penetrating whisper, "Rolleston Court is opened. Major Armitage returned two days ago."

"Please don't whisper, John; it is so distracting. You won't disturb me in the least if you talk."

Mrs. Adair half turned in her chair as she spoke.

Her husband brightened up.

"Very well, my dear. You are clever enough to write, I know, and give half an ear to my news at the same time."

"And has Major Armitage brought back a wife with him, Dad?" Joan asked with interest.

"No; he is quite alone. Rather strange, isn't it? And it seems old Mrs. Bone was officious enough to ask after his lady, and when she was coming. He told her he had no lady coming, and dismissed her on the spot. She is dreadfully put out. He paid her a month's wages, and said she would not suit

him. And now Sophia's widowed sister, Maria Bucke, has been engaged by him. You remember the rivalry between her and Mrs. Bone as to which should get the post as his housekeeper. Of course, Maria is triumphant."

"And Sophia will be delighted. But what a martinet he must be! Does he think a country village will not talk when such dainty furniture comes down by rail? Old Mrs. Bone told me herself that there is a most exquisite little boudoir fitted up for a lady's use, even down to a work-basket."

"Oh, how you gossip!"

Mrs. Adair said it with her light laugh, and Joan joined her in the laugh.

"Major Armitage is the centre of our interest just now, Mother. After shutting up the place all these years because he is too poor to live there, he has come into money and has returned to it. He has spared no money in doing it up. We quite expected he was going to be married."

"We met him in Italy last year," said Mrs. Adair, letting her pen drop between her fingers. "He is a great musician. I never enjoyed anything so much in my life as listening to him playing in a little monastery chapel out in the country. We were passing by, and it was like music from another world. We were told afterwards who it was that was playing. He is a peculiar man—very reserved—and as a rule will not go into society. I suppose he felt leaving the Service very much. Was it not blindness that made him do it?"

"Yes," said Joan. "Lady Gascoigne was talking about him the other day. It was in the Boer War. They said he would lose his sight, and he sent in his papers; and then, four years afterwards, a clever oculist cured him completely."

"I can't imagine what he will do with himself down here," said Mrs. Adair. Then she went on with her writing. Joan and her father chatted on until the dressing bell for dinner sounded.

Both Mrs. Adair and Cecil went to bed very early. As Joan lay her head on her pillow she went over again in her mind her short talk with her mother.

"It will break Dad's heart if they go off again! I wish—I wish—— Oh, why does marriage sometimes bring such a gulf between husband and wife? It makes one dread it for oneself!"

CHAPTER IV

RECTORY LIFE

Sunday morning was bright and clear, but Mr. Adair came to breakfast with a dejected air.

"Your mother is not very well. She is staying in bed," he said to Joan.

It was so like old times that Joan almost smiled. She was sorry for her father, for he had set his heart on seeing his wife in church that morning, and the disappointment was great. Joan was hurrying through her morning duties, for Sunday school claimed her at ten, and she went straight into church afterwards. As she was going out of the house Cecil came down the stairs.

"Are you coming to church?" Joan asked.

"I don't feel much like it. Is the church warmed properly?"

"As warm as a toast. Do come, Cecil. Dad will be so sorry if you don't."

"Shall I see Major Armitage there?" Cecil asked, mischief in her eyes. "I rather took a liking to him abroad. I was the only woman he would speak to in the hotel."

Joan's rather impatient spirit got the better of her. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. What is church for?"

"To meet one's neighbours," said Cecil, provokingly, "and criticise best hats and coats."

Joan slammed the door after her.

"She's as godless as a heathen!"

But before she got to school she was taking herself to task for impatience.

"I shall never win her if I am so hot-tempered. How badly I have begun the day!"

Her class soothed her. Joan was a born lover of children, and they all adored her. When she went into church, and took her seat at the organ, she forgot all her vexations. The little church was full, for Mr. Adair was already

winning the hearts of his people by his simple kindliness and whole-hearted interest in every individual.

Cecil came in late. She sat alone in the rectory seat, and hardly hid her curiosity about the various members of the congregation. The squire's large seat was full. Sir Joseph and Lady Gascoigne were most regular in their attendance at church. Sir Joseph was the rector's churchwarden. Their daughter Rose, or Banty as she was usually called, was with them, also Wilmot Gascoigne, Derrick, and two other men who had been asked down for shooting.

Behind them sat the doctor's wife, a pretty little woman, with two fascinating small boys. A maiden lady completed the circle of Old Bellerton society; but following Cecil's entrance came Major Armitage. He slipped into the last seat next the door, and was the first to leave the church. Cecil's hopes of speaking to him were frustrated. She was looking very pretty, dressed in a pale blue cloth coat and skirt and black furs. When Derrick came up to her after church, she greeted him warmly.

"You haven't grown much," were his first words.

"Don't make personal remarks, or I shall do the same. Do come back to lunch with us. It is so dull. I feel I could talk to a pump, I'm so bored."

"I couldn't be bored if I lived in the same house as Joan!" He tried to look severe, but failed. Then the Gascoignes came up. Derrick did not accept the invitation to lunch, but he had a word aside with Joan.

"How are things going? Are they humming?"

Joan smiled.

"Oh, well—we've hardly shaken down yet."

"Get the little malingerer to buckle to!"

"Oh, hush, Derrick! I won't have it."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She's a radiant picture of health and beauty."

"Yes," said Joan heartily. "I love to watch her. You know how I always have admired Cecil, though I suppose, as she belongs to me, I ought not to do it. I must speak to Mrs. Blount."

She nodded to him and crossed the road to speak to the doctor's wife. The boys, Harry and Alan, seized hold of her.

“You told us you would show us where nuts grow!”

“We’re waiting for you to come out with us.”

“I can’t do it yet,” Joan told them.

They hung upon her arms.

“You must fix a day now. She must, Mums. She promised.”

“Well, I’ll try next Wednesday afternoon,” Joan told them.

They were pacified. Then Miss Borfield, who lived in a tiny cottage at the end of the village, came up to talk to Joan of a sick girl in whom she was interested.

When she eventually reached home, she found her mother in the drawing-room on the chintz couch.

“I have one of my headaches, Joan. I won’t come into the dining-room to lunch. Send me something in here.”

Cecil was quiet and a little glum at luncheon. She was a girl of many moods. When Joan asked her how she liked the Gascoignes, she said:

“That Banty is simply a great cow! ‘Do you hunt? Like to join our hockey club? S’pose you don’t shoot?’ And when I had said ‘no’ to all these queries, she turned her back on me.”

“She is rather awkward,” said Joan, laughing. “But she is very good-natured. I have met her once or twice striding over the heath with her dogs. She loves Nature, and so do I; so we have that taste in common.”

“Did you notice Major Armitage? He was like a man in a dream while you were playing the voluntary. I know he was longing to do it himself.”

“Armitage,” said Mr. Adair, rousing himself out of a fit of abstraction. “He came to me in the vestry; asked if he might have the key of the organ sometimes. I asked him if he was a good enough musician to warrant my turning over our beautiful little organ to him, but he seemed to think he was.”

“Really, Dad!” protested Joan; “you need not have put it so badly. But I don’t feel inclined to give him my key, for I am so often in the church at odd times. The organ is becoming rather dear to me!”

“My dear, I have a duplicate in the vestry. I gave it to him on the spot. I liked the man, and mean to call on him as soon as I can.”

Cecil brightened up.

"Ask him to dinner, Dad. I like him too, and you know mother's weakness for soldiers."

Joan was off again to afternoon school after lunch. Cecil and her mother spent the afternoon by the drawing-room fire. Neither of them attended the evening service, and when Mr. Adair hoped to have a little rest, and quiet talk with his wife after supper, she went up to bed.

It was always the way. For years his wife had eluded his company, though in public she was bright and engaging.

On Monday came an invitation to dine at the Hall. But only one daughter was asked, and Cecil pouted with discontent.

"I'm sure I don't want to go," Joan said good-temperedly. "You can take my place, Cecil."

Mrs. Adair wished to refuse.

"These country people bore me so! Sir Joseph's conversation is only on sport, Lady Gascoigne's on needlework and servants."

But her husband wanted her to go, and said so very emphatically. She smiled at his eagerness, but gave way.

"The position of a parson's wife is pitiful," she said to the girls when her husband had left the room.

"Then why did you become one?" laughed Cecil.

"I know what you mean," said Joan sympathetically; "but I think the Gascoignes like people for themselves. They're too well bred to patronise."

Later that day Joan crossed the heath with her little terrier Bob; she was going to see a sick person. As her feet trod the dead heather underfoot, and she breathed the fresh keen pine-laden air, her spirits rose. The day had been full of small pinpricks; the daily routine of a quiet household had been upset; the rector and his wife had been having long discussions over ways and means, and accounts generally brought him distress of mind. At the back of Joan's thoughts, through everything that was said and done, was, "Shall I be able to leave home?"

She could not see the way out. Every fresh hour convinced her that her place could not and would not be taken by Cecil. She was loth to acknowledge it. Now as she lifted up her head and surveyed the wide expanse above and around her, the words again came to her mind:

“Strengthened with all might . . . unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness.”

“I dare say,” she mused; “that may be the life God has in store for me, not out in the world doing the work which seems big in my short-sighted eyes, but just the humdrum life at home which makes such demands on one’s patience. How glad I am that I can leave it to Him. If He closes the outer gate, I can work within. And I will, oh! I will, if I can, do it joyfully.”

Yet she wiped away some smarting tears as she walked.

Presently she met Banty Gascoigne, who was also alone.

Banty was a fresh-coloured, rather plain young person, and had that slightly roughened and hardened look about her face that comes of being continually out of doors.

“Weatherproof and waterproof,” she called herself. She had fair hair and blue eyes, with rather a wide mouth and square chin. She was always dressed in the severest tailor tweeds, and wore very short skirts.

She waved her stick to Joan as she approached. Though they were not at present very intimate friends, Banty was thoroughly unconventional.

“I do like to meet a walker like myself,” she said; “and you walk as if you liked it.”

“Of course I do,” said Joan; “it takes years off my life when I’m out of doors.”

Banty laughed appreciatively.

“Where are you going? I am *de trop* this afternoon. They had enough guns without me, which was distinctly nasty of them; and mother has a tea-party. I expect you wonder who can be at it, but it is three old cousins who have motored over, and the Irwins from Chesterbrook; and they’re every one of them so Early Victorian that I am a fish out of water; and they’re, of course, shocked and disgusted with me.”

Joan explained her errand.

“Isn’t it a bore to trudge out on such visits?”

Joan shook her head happily.

“You’re a proper parson’s daughter in principles; but you oughtn’t to have that dimple; it gives you a flighty look.”

“I’m so sorry,” Joan said, laughing.

“I’ll walk a bit of the way with you,” announced Banty. “Are you coming to dinner with us?”

“The family is. I dare say Cecil will come instead of me.”

“Oh, no; you were asked, and you must come. Derrick will be furious if you don’t.”

“That won’t distress me,” said Joan, laughing. Then she stood still for a moment, watching a flock of curlews overhead.

“Gould you bring one of them down?” said Banty with gleaming eyes. “I could, if I had my gun.”

“I suppose it is the sense of skill in aim that pleases,” said Joan, looking at her thoughtfully; “it can’t be shedding blood.”

“Don’t talk like a Quaker! I thought you were a good sort! Derrick swears you are.”

There was a little silence between the two; then Banty said abruptly:

“I should die of the dumps if I were in your shoes, and yet you look so jolly.”

“What is the matter with my shoes? They fit me well.” Then a quick sigh escaped her.

“Don’t try to make me discontented; some people put their feet into the wrong shoes, and then comes disaster. I think, personally, I should like to exchange mine for a bigger pair. But if it’s not to be, it is not.”

“I only meant I couldn’t stand pottering about the village and teaching village children and visiting the sick.”

“Teaching is glorious!” said Joan with sudden enthusiasm. “There is nothing equal to it. Fancy being able to take a hand in moulding or forming a character. That is work that will last for an eternity.”

Banty stared at her. She always dropped a subject which she did not understand, and she did so now.

Then Joan began to talk about the country and dogs and horses. Banty waxed eloquent at once. They talked and walked together, and when Banty eventually turned back and Joan went on her way alone, Banty, for one, determined to pursue the acquaintance already begun.

An hour later Joan was returning in the dusk. As she was passing a rather lonely group of pines her small terrier dashed forward, barking

furiously. She saw in the gloom a man's stooping figure, and as Bob would not obey her call, she stepped over to see what was the matter. She could not recognise the man in the dusk, but his voice was that of a gentleman, and he was extricating his own dog from a gin. There was a clump of gorse and brambles in which one had been set for rabbits.

"Can I help at all?" Joan asked sympathetically. "I do hope he isn't much hurt."

"One of his legs, poor little brute. I don't think it is broken; but he is awfully frightened. These confounded gins ought not to be set in the open."

"No; it is very wrong. I'm afraid it is some of the village boys."

Then, seeing the poor little leg was bleeding, she took out her handkerchief.

"Do let me bind him up. I ought to be good at bandages, as I've passed all the exams. in ambulance classes that I can."

"I shall be much obliged. Men are always clumsier than women."

Together they bent over the small dog, who had been snapping at everybody and everything in his pain, but, once released, was now lying exhausted and panting on the ground.

Joan did not take long to bandage the wounded leg, and then advised his master to bathe it well on reaching home. He thanked her courteously, but evidently did not want to accompany her to the village, for he turned off at right angles, the dog in his arms; and Joan knew perfectly well that there was no house in the direction which he took. She smiled to herself.

"I shouldn't wonder if that was Major Armitage. I wish I could have seen his face."

When she reached home she found Derrick making himself very agreeable to Mrs. Adair and Cecil.

"Ah, here you are!" he said, jumping up and bringing a low chair to the fire. "Sit down and give an account of yourself. Your mother and I have been hard on at politics. We don't agree, of course; but we've agreed to differ. I wish I knew as much about our Constitution and its laws as Mrs. Adair does."

Joan sat down and told them about the stranger and his dog.

"That's Armitage, right enough," said Derrick. "Old Jossy asked him to shoot. He came out one day; not a bad shot, but a regular dumb dog. We

each had a try at him. He is too cussedly indifferent to us to open his lips, and declines all invitations to meals. What is he making himself into a hermit for, I'd like to know?"

"Artistic temperament," said Cecil. "You must make allowances. Mother, can't we call upon him? I want to see his house. I'm quite curious to see it."

"Your father will call," Mrs. Adair said.

"I'll bet you a fiver you won't get inside his door," Derrick said, turning to Cecil.

"Done!" said Cecil; "and I'll do it within this next week!"

"I don't think you will do anything that a lady ought not to do," Mrs. Adair said very quietly; and then she took up a book, and the young people chatted on.

Joan began relating her visit to an old woman who had sent a message to her that she wished to see her "very special."

" ''Tis me dyin' wishes, me dear,' she said to me when I got there, 'an' if your mem'ry b'ain't bettern mine, you'd best write of it down.' So, of course, I got pen and ink and prepared to do it in style.

" ''Tis short, me dear. Fust and last, me savin's, in me best chiny teapot, must be spent on me grave, so's to spite Tom's nephews, which be chucklin' over me departure. An' me monyment must be a tasty bit o' stone what will attrac' the toury folk. 'Twill be comfortin' to think on 'em hangin' over me wi' admirin' eyes; not to mention bein' the envy o' that stuck-up Lizzie White, who did have a wooden cross with two doves, and went an' whitewashed it ev'ry Sat'dy; an' all for a drinkin' rascal who oughter be lyin' lowest of the low!' I tried to get her into a better state of mind before I left."

"I don't doubt that," said Derrick, joining in Cecil's clear laugh; "but I reckon you failed."

"I'm afraid I did."

Joan's laughing face grew grave.

"What must it feel like to lie on a bed waiting for death?"

"For mercy's sake, Joan, don't be so gruesome," said Cecil; "and don't talk any more about your old women; we get so sick of them."

“You’re both to come to dinner on Thursday,” announced Derrick, looking at Joan very straightly. “Old Jossy has too many men, and I’ve come to get another lady.”

“Lady Gascoigne has written to me,” said Cecil. “I wrote a refusal first, and then I tore it up. I want to see this Wilmot Gascoigne. Are he and Banty going to make a match of it?”

“Good heavens!” ejaculated Derrick. “Why, Banty wouldn’t touch him with a pair of tongs; and he doesn’t know she’s in the universe. He’s in the clouds all his days. He reeks of fusty musty books and parchment, and is a walking encyclopædia of the Gascoigne ancestors. Their present descendants he regards as clods of earth. The only word he’s spoken to me was when he was watching us depart after the hunt breakfast last week. He had been listening to Banty’s conversation with one of her hunting pals. I can’t say she shone on that occasion; she never does in conversation. ‘Great Scott!’ he ejaculated, ‘and is that a specimen of a civilised and educated woman? She’s a brainless savage, and is living seventeen or eighteen centuries too late!’ ”

“What a nasty little man!” said Cecil.

“His inches are not few, let me tell you. He tops me by a good many.”

“He doesn’t sound pleasant,” said Joan. “Banty is his own cousin, and her parents are giving him a home.”

“He thinks no small beer of himself, I can tell you.”

“I will reduce him, if I get a chance,” said Cecil, nodding her head determinedly.

The talk went on till Derrick took his departure. Joan went off to her father’s study to discuss parish matters, and Cecil turned to her mother a little plaintively.

“Derrick seems to think Joan is overworked and I am a lazy malingerer.”

“Is Derrick’s opinion of any value to you?”

Mrs. Adair shut up her book and looked down upon her daughter with smiling tolerance.

“I value everybody’s liking,” said Cecil thoughtfully.

“I think you are rather lazy,” her mother said. “I wish you would interest yourself more in the topics of the day. There is so much to read and learn of

what is taking place. We are all a part of our Empire's history, and ought to have knowledge of the different currents that form and make it."

"Oh, Mother, don't be prosy," said Cecil, a little impatiently. "I dare say Banty and I are in the same category, only sport is her life, and pleasure—society—is mine. I know I shall get hipped before long. I can't think why father and Joan are so enchanted to live here. It is an awful little hole. I can't breathe, and the grey cold is appalling!"

"Are you not feeling well?"

"I never feel fit in England. I hate the winters, and this poky little village is worse than living in a town. Of course, the house is better. It seems to me that even Joan is getting cramped in her ideas. She can talk of nothing but the village."

"It is a small life—a country parson's," her mother admitted; "but you should occupy yourself with books."

Cecil gave a little impatient sigh.

"Joan is the good daughter and I'm the wicked one," she said; "and father's happiness and content in his small sphere makes me feel impatient with him."

Her mother made no reply. Cecil often voiced her own discontent.

CHAPTER V

RENUNCIATION

The dinner at the Hall went off very well. Cecil was quite happy, seated between Derrick and a young soldier, Captain Harry Clavering, who took her in. Joan's lot was Wilmot Gascoigne. He was a tall, intellectual-looking man, with dreamy eyes and a slight sarcastic curl to his lips. But when he talked and smiled he was an attractive personality. He certainly did not appear to despise women's society, for he turned to Joan at once.

"You are our organist, are you not? I have never had the chance before of coming to near quarters with you, but I study your profile in church."

"How dreadful!" laughed Joan. "I hope you are not a physiognomist?"

"No," he said audaciously; "but you are good to look at, and too feminine in appearance to be a college student. I hear you were at Girton?"

"Yes. I wonder why men always imagine that the cultivation of the intellect alters the sex of a woman?"

"Please don't let us discuss any sex questions. They are so stale nowadays."

Joan would not be snubbed; but he suddenly plunged into the subject of architecture as seen in the university colleges, and Joan, who was devoted to that subject, forgot everything else. From the delicate fan tracery in King's Chapel, Cambridge, they wandered off to continental cathedrals, and Joan held her breath as she listened, entranced by his clever and rapid talk. Then he came back to literature, and here Joan could hold her ground. She and he were so absorbed in discussing Horace Walpole's letters, as compared with Pope's, that their dinner was forgotten. Joan could not say afterwards which courses she had taken and which she had left. She only felt profound regret when the ladies left the table. In the drawing-room Banty stalked up to her.

"What on earth was Motty saying to you? He hasn't been so lively since he's been with us."

"Oh, I think he is so interesting," said Joan. "I envy you having him in the house. He must be a mine of knowledge. I should be always digging some of it out of him."

“Why, he doesn’t know a hen from a pheasant!” gasped Banty, “and would as soon ride a cart horse as a hunter. He’s simply impossible!”

When the gentlemen came in, Joan was taken possession of by Derrick.

“No,” he said; “don’t you cast sheep’s eyes at old Motty. I’ve introduced him to your mother, and they’ll go ahead like a house afire. I was ashamed to look at you at dinner. You were hanging on his words like a fish on a hook. Just hang on mine like it, will you? It’s extraordinary what a gift of the gab will do.”

“You are so very mediocre,” said Joan, smiling, and showing her dimple. “I never feel with you that I can improve my opportunity. I learn nothing by being in your society.”

“That is because you’re so book-proud. Don’t tell me you learnt anything from Motty. He loves to pose as a literary swell; but I know he reads up for conversation like mad. Because he impresses a certain small, stodgy set in town, and fails to impress us, he thinks he isn’t appreciated down here; and he’d discourse with pleasure to an open-mouthed goose if he thought that goose admired him.”

“Do you insinuate——”

“I never insinuate. I hated to see his self-satisfied smirk and your animated and fervent homage to his intellect.”

“How I wish you would grow up,” said Joan.

“I’ve heard that remark before. Aren’t we all a scratch lot to-night?”

He nodded towards a little circle round the fire, which contained Banty and her father.

“That’s our hunting set,” he said. “Cecil is trying to do the smart town set. She has two of the most go-ahead chaps talking to her now. Lady Gascoigne and those three dowagers are gossiping over that poor chap who is shutting himself away from his kind. ‘So wrong of him,’ I heard one of them say. She and her daughters run to earth every fresh bachelor. Your mother and Motty are the literary clique.”

“And what are we?” asked Joan. “I don’t think our conversation is very uplifting at present.”

“Don’t interrupt me. Your father and the Miss Grays and those two parsons represent the clerical section; and you and I, Joan, we are just chums.”

His glance down at her had something more than affection in it.

Joan would not notice it, and she moved over to Lady Gascoigne, deliberately avoiding Derrick for the rest of the evening.

Mrs. Adair returned home with a great liking for Wilmot Gascoigne.

"The first intelligent man I have met for a long time," she said. "I suppose it sounds conceited of me to say so, but these country squires are, as a rule, very slow-witted, and the clergy have minds as narrow as their stipends."

"My dear Cecilia," said her husband good-temperedly, "you are very severe on the poor clergy, but I am glad you enjoyed yourself. I thought you would. These social gatherings are very pleasant."

"I couldn't get any innings with Motty, as they call him," said Cecil. "But I suppose he will find his way round here, if you like him, Mother."

Joan said nothing. She felt that she would see little more of Wilmot whilst her mother was interested in him. Mrs. Adair was a very fascinating woman, and she knew it.

Joan received a letter the next morning which sent her about her household duties with an absent mind and clouded brow. It was to remind her that there were other applicants waiting for the post which had been offered her, and that she must delay no longer in sending her reply.

At luncheon the rector said in his genial way:

"Cecilia, my dear, I want to have a small parish gathering soon—a kind of house warming. I want my parishioners to know you; there are farmers' wives scattered over the heath, and many who used to know us in the old days. It would be nice to gather them together and make them feel that we are their friends. Joan suggests Christmas, but that is a long way off. What do you think about it? And do you think you could manage to say a few words to them? You are so clever at expressing yourself that I am sure you would not find it difficult. It would please me very much if you would."

Mrs. Adair slowly shook her head.

"No, John, I have never interfered with your province, and I have some visits I must make to some of my own people. My brother in Edinburgh has asked me to take Cecil there for a few weeks. It is a long time since I have seen him, so I should like to go."

“It is an expensive journey,” said Mr. Adair in disconsolate tones; “but we must postpone our gathering till you come back.”

“Pray don’t think of such a thing. Joan and you are quite equal to entertaining them. You know how I loathe parish functions of any sort!”

There was a little silence. The rector was bitterly disappointed that his wife was thinking of leaving him again so soon. In a few moments he said:

“I hoped, my dear, after your long sojourn abroad you were going to settle down quietly here for the winter.”

“I am never going to give up seeing my own people.”

Mrs. Adair’s tone was proud and cold.

The rector heaved a sigh.

“Well, well, a few weeks will soon pass; and we shall have you back again.”

Then Joan spoke, though she knew it was an unpropitious moment.

“I am wondering if I must decline this post of teaching that has been offered me. I told you about it, Mother. It is a chance that may never come to me again.”

“Your father and you must settle that together,” said Mrs. Adair; “if he can spare you, I have no objection to offer.”

“He must have one of us here,” said Joan slowly.

Cecil looked up laughing.

“My dear Joan, there is tragedy in your tone. Be thankful that your duties keep you here, instead of going out to earn your bread. You know quite well that you are the only one of us that is cut out for parish work. I should make a pretty hash of it if I tried to step into your shoes!”

“Such a possibility is not to be considered,” her mother said quickly and a little sharply. “You have not the health to do it.”

Joan pushed back her chair and left the room abruptly. Her soul was turbulent and rebellious. She went up to her little whitewashed room, and sinking on her knees laid her hot head on the broad window ledge.

“Oh, God! It is hard. Am I cut out for parish work? Has not my training been for a wider sphere? Why should my talents be buried? An open door before me, with a vista of influence and power, and—and success. Yes, I

know I could fill it. I know it is in me to mould, and organise, and rule, and yet I must shut this door and turn my back on it. And Cecil is doing nothing, absolutely nothing with her life. It would give her a new lease of life if she left her health alone and thought of others more. Oh, it is hard! It is unfair! I feel inclined to break away from it all!"

Hot tears rose to her eyes. She clenched her hands convulsively. Though she had known instinctively she could not leave home, she had hoped against hope that her circumstances might change. She could not bring herself to write the necessary refusal, and knelt there battling with her lifelong desires, and the duty that was crushing them into dust.

But in about half an hour's time her brow smoothed, and the light returned to her eyes. If joy was at present in abeyance, resignation and content had become the victor.

"I will be strong in patience, that is as far as I can see at present." Then a twinkle shot into her eye. "Perhaps if I can't teach and rule on this earth, I may do it in the Millennium!"

She got out her writing-case and wrote her letter in a firm hand. After she had sealed it, she sat looking out of her window.

"A great renunciation," she said to herself; "and yet nobody will believe it. Cecil laughs at the notion. But I have not done it very willingly. Now I must look forward, and never back at it. That phase in my life is over. Thank God, I can still impart knowledge, though of a different kind, to my small Sunday scholars. And I dare say from above it looks the highest class after all. What a lovely afternoon! I will go and get the apples in."

She ran lightly downstairs, and sang her way down the garden into the orchard. Cecil heard her. She was in an easy chair before the drawing-room fire, a novel in her hand.

"What a happy creature Joan is," she said to her mother, who as usual was at her writing-desk. "She is like father, easily satisfied in her small surroundings."

Mrs. Adair looked thoughtfully out into the garden. "I never have understood Joan," she said, more to herself than to Cecil, "but the present weighs more than the future in her calculations. Her apples at this moment are the most important things in the world."

When Joan and the odd man had finished their task, she came into the house to find that Cecil had gone out, and her mother was lying down in her room. The drawing-room fire was out; she ran into the kitchen and sent

Jenny in to relight it. Then Sophia, who was plucking a chicken, detained her.

"Sit you down, Miss Joan, I want a word with ye. There's no getting a bit of talk with you these days."

Joan dropped into a rocking chair by the fire.

"I would like to sit here for an hour, Sophia. You have the knack of making the kitchen the pleasantest place in the world. When I marry—if ever I do—I shall live in my kitchen."

"Stuff! We'll wish you a grand match, Miss Joan; may you be one of they who gives orders only and has the staff to carry 'em out. Do ye know where Miss Cecil be off to?"

"No; where?"

"She have taken a note from me to Maria. Aye, she would have it, she be just wild to get into that house, so she tells me, and, Miss Joan, 'tis no house for a lady, and what is more, no lady is to cross the threshold."

"You sound very mysterious. What has Maria been telling you?"

"A good deal not to be repeated. But I'll tell you this, Miss Joan, Major Armitage be wrong in his head. There be no doubt of that."

"Why do you think so?"

"You'll keep a still tongue over it? I wouldn't let the mistress hear it nor yet Miss Cecil. He be quite unkenny as the Scotch say. You must know Maria do a lot of waitin' on him at times. She says at a certain hour every afternoon in the gloaming—from six to seven—he sits in his big room, the music-room he calls it, because of the big pianny, but Maria calls it the library, for the walls be pretty well covered with books. He takes a big chair by the fire, and he pulls another, a soft ladyish cushioned one, which no one never sits on, opposite him, then he smokes his pipe and he talks in a low tone which makes your blood curdle, not all at once on end, Maria says, but just a word here an' there, and a soft tender like whisper at times."

Joan laughed at Sophia's awed face.

"Why, lots of lonely people talk to themselves; I do very often when I'm out walking."

"Miss Joan, 'tis this way, and Maria says it as knows, he be talkin' to someone not to be seen, *a-sittin' in that chair*!"

“Good gracious! What do you mean?”

“Well, I be charitable and say the poor man be not right in his head. There be people who might say he were temperin’ and playin’ with spirits. Maria come in one evenin’, and he never heard her, and he leant across to the chair, and he says quite distinct, ‘Will you listen, sweet, and tell me how you like it?’ And then he walks to the pianny and he plays, Maria said, like an angel. And once he looks back over his shoulder at the chair and smiles, such a smile as a man gives the one he dotes on.”

Joan began to look interested.

“Go on, Sophia, tell me more. But I don’t think Maria ought to spy on him.”

“ ’Twas by accident, but he have given orders that nobody disturbs him from six to seven every night. And there be other things, Miss Joan. He have told Maria that any gentlemen who call on him must be shown into the smokin’-room, but no lady on any pretence whatever is to put her foot over the threshold of the big front door. And he goes up to the little boudoir which he keeps the key of himself, and he puts fresh flowers every two or three days in it. But Maria dursn’t ask a question. Maybe the lady be dead, and he be keepin’ communion with her spirit, but ’tis a heathenish thing, and I think his poor mind be disturbed.”

Joan did not answer.

“So, Miss Joan,” pursued Sophia, “I want you to keep Miss Cecil out of his way, and you know what she always was like when a body wanted her to do or not to do, so determined to do contrariwise. The less a young lady has to do with such a man the better. Not but what Maria says he be kind and considerate and sensible in all other ways. And he be lookin’ into his estate in the right sort of way, and talkin’ friendly with the tenants. But he must have a kink in his brain, or be in league with spirits.”

“I wish you hadn’t told me, Sophia. Maria ought not to have spied upon him. His private life has nothing to do with us. You won’t let this gossip get about the village?”

“Now what do you take me for? Don’t I know that you’re a safe person to tell things to? But Miss Cecil may get in at the back door—she certainly won’t get in at the front.”

Joan got up from the chair on which she had been sitting.

“I dare say Major Armitage is a child at heart, and was making believe as I used to do! I won’t believe anything ‘unkenny’ about him, Sophia.”

She met Cecil a little later coming in from the garden.

“I’ve bearded the hermit in his den!” she cried out gaily; “I told Derrick I would. I’ve been chatting in his kitchen, to Maria, who seems gloomy and mysterious. The Major was out, but I met him walking up the drive as I was coming away. ‘I haven’t been to call upon you,’ I said to him, ‘but to take a message to your cook. Don’t you remember me?’ Fancy, he had the impertinence to say that he did not! I reminded him of the hotel abroad. He looked bored, lifted his hat and walked on. I have never been so snubbed in my life.”

“I wish you hadn’t gone,” said Joan. “It puts you in a false position.”

“Oh, don’t be so conventional! He wants to be taken out of himself.”

Then she sank down on a chair in the hall.

“I’m tired to death. I hate the country, Joan! I haven’t met a single soul on the way there or back.”

Joan stood still and looked at her with a little impatience and some tenderness in her eyes.

“I wonder,” she said slowly, “what work you were meant to do when you were sent into the world?”

Cecil gazed at her in silence for a moment, then said:

“You do say such prosy things. Work! Everybody is not made for work. I am sure I wasn’t. This life in a parsonage is nothing but work! You are just a slave of the village, Joan.”

“It’s happy slavery, then,” said Joan, laughing, “for I’m getting to love them all, and, when you love, slavery isn’t in it.”

Cecil would vouchsafe no reply. She dragged herself up from her chair and went into the drawing-room to her mother. Joan turned into her father’s study. There was a good deal of parish work to be discussed between them. She found him now with his head in his hands, and his elbows on his writing-table, doing nothing. It was such an unusual position for him that she wondered.

“Are you asleep, Dad, dear?”

Mr. Adair turned heavy eyes and anxious brow at the sound of her voice; then his face cleared.

"Not asleep. I wish I were," he said, trying to speak lightly. "I am only thinking about ways and means, Joan. My pass book is not a pleasant sight."

Joan knelt down by his side and her tone was almost motherly.

"Don't worry. We shall be better off soon. You have had such heavy expenses coming here. We shall not have those again."

He did not answer; then a heavy sigh escaped him.

"Your mother means to go abroad again in January. She told me so this morning."

This was the cause of his depression. Joan could hardly trust herself to speak.

"Perhaps she will change her mind before the time comes. We won't live in the future, Dad, dear. Leave January to take care of itself."

"I suppose you couldn't have a talk with her, Joan? Women understand each other. I always seem to bungle. I really don't know how we can afford it. I simply shall not have the money to send her this year. I withdrew almost the last of my private capital last year. I have been doing it for years, but that has come to an end, and if anything happened to me I should leave you utterly unprovided for. Your mother's money could not support you. It is not nearly enough for herself and for Cecil."

"But I think and hope I could support myself," said Joan gently. "Don't bother over that. We will hope that you will be spared to us for many a long day yet."

Then she added in a different tone:

"I will try to have a talk with Mother again about it." She pressed a light kiss on his forehead, then persisted in talking to him about some of his parishioners, and for the time Mr. Adair laid his private trouble aside. Yet when she was about to leave him, he called her back.

"I hoped, Joan, my dear, I thought we had such a pretty, comfortable home now—I am sure you have taken such pains in making it fresh and home like, I did think it would have been an inducement to your mother to settle down here. And there are such nice friendly people round. I have been wondering if we could not find some people who might take Cecil abroad at a slight expense—I have heard of it being done—if she would make herself

useful to them, I mean, and then your mother would not be obliged to go. She could stay at home with us."

Joan almost smiled.

"No, Dad, dear; Mother will never let Cecil leave her wing. I will talk over things with her. But Mother is not dependent on house comfort. She has so many other things in her life."

"I thought a nice, pretty home would satisfy any woman," said Mr. Adair, sighing; "I told your mother so."

Joan tried to imagine her mother's feelings at hearing that sentiment. But she had an overwhelming pity for her simple, kindly old father, and when she left him it was with tears rising in her eyes.

CHAPTER VI

A MOTHER'S CONFIDENCES

It was not until the following day that Joan had an opportunity to talk with her mother, and then, as she wanted some things which the village could not produce, Joan drove her over to shop in the small town of Coppleton.

The little jingle did credit to Joan's painting, and the old pony trotted briskly along. It was a lovely still October afternoon. The woods were clothed in shimmering gold and brown, the sky was a pure pale blue, and the dark slender pines stood out in silhouettes against the horizon. A happy smile played about Joan's lips; she raised her head, and exclaimed:

"Isn't it delicious air, Mother? It is so exhilarating."

"I find it cold," Mrs. Adair said, drawing her fur cloak tightly round her.

Joan tucked the rug more completely over her knees.

And then she said a little abruptly: "I have sent in my refusal to that offer made me, Mother."

"You mean the post of teacher somewhere?"

"Yes."

"I think you are wise. I do not see how your father could get on without you here."

"No; and he tells me you are wanting to go abroad again this winter?"

"It is the beginning of the year and the early spring that tries Cecil so," said Mrs. Adair slowly. "She is already getting back her cough again here, which I hoped she had lost altogether."

"Father and I are woefully disappointed," said Joan impulsively. "He is not so young as he was; he worships the ground you tread upon, and feels your absence keenly. His heart has been set upon keeping you at home this winter. I suppose it is not possible for Cecil to go abroad without you?"

"Hardly," said Mrs. Adair with a little laugh; "and, my dear Joan, your father will not miss us when we are gone. I cannot, as you know, throw myself into the small life of a small village. There is always an undercurrent

of friction and dissatisfaction when we are home. It is my fault. You are a woman now, and I suppose you have your own thoughts and ideals. They must take you farther than the horizon of Old Bellerton. Your father considers that the four walls of a house is the boundary of a woman's life work and ambition. But then he has a wrong conception of the size of a woman's intellect. And I suppose he, and the class of thinkers like him, are mainly responsible for the rebellious outbursts of many girls who are now swelling the body of militant suffragettes."

"Yes," said Joan quietly; "but you have seen a lot of life, Mother, and must feel, as even I do, that old-fashioned notions about women are not always cruel or criminal."

"Your father is one of the kindest and most tender-hearted men that I have ever known," said Mrs. Adair quickly. Then she laughed.

"We are a very modern mother and daughter to be discussing the head of the house in this fashion. But in choosing a husband, Joan, goodness and kindness of heart are not everything. I suppose a broad outlook on life and intellectual aspirations are not conducive towards content and happiness, when one's companion for life is offering one crumbs from his table."

"Oh, Mother!"

Joan's exclamation was involuntary. Mrs. Adair pulled herself up.

"I have no business to speak so. I don't know why I chafe under the masculine rule. Your father would cut off his right hand for me, but to him the limits of a woman's wants and desires are astoundingly infinitesimal, and his estimate of her capacity in life is what any upper servant would fulfil."

"Yes," murmured Joan; "but he never interferes or tries to dictate to one."

"Well, all this is beside the mark. Cecil's health is the main question. I will not see her droop and die in uncongenial soil if I can prevent it. You are strong, Joan, and cannot understand how the aggressive biting cold of this village can shrivel up the low vitality of a delicate organisation. Your father accepted this living without any reference to me. He wrote of it as a godsend; and yet he must have known that the seeds of disease were sown in both our boys in this neighbourhood."

Joan looked at her mother with startled eyes.

"I did not know," she murmured.

"You were born," Mrs. Adair continued, "when I was a happy girl living in close touch with my old friends and old life. Poverty and privation were unknown to me, for my father's cheque-book was continually supplying extra comforts for us. When we came here I began to experience the humiliation and misery of a narrow income. Both boys were born when I was least able to mother and nurse them. They and Cecil never had a chance. You take after your father's family, they took after mine, and the cold, biting winters here aggravated their delicacy. I could not rear them in comfort, as they should have been reared, and my handsome boys were taken from me before they had seen anything of life."

She paused. She could not even now mention the loss of her sons with composure.

"I suppose I was ambitious," she went on. "As you know, I come from a race of soldiers who have all earned their country's gratitude for their achievements. Do you think it is nothing to me to have no sons to follow in their grandfather's footsteps, to leave a name behind them, to bequeath in their turn sons to serve our Empire?"

There was such passion in Mrs. Adair's tone that Joan was speechless. The mother had never confided in her daughter so fully before. And Joan understood for the first time that it was the want of resignation to her loss that was the canker eating away at her heart, and marring much in her strong and purposeful character. After a few minutes' silence Joan said softly:

"Perhaps you may yet have grandsons to serve their country. Cecil is most attractive. She will marry."

Mrs. Adair heaved a deep sigh.

"She has nothing of a constitution. I feel she may slip away from me as the boys did."

This little talk with her mother made Joan sympathise with her more than she had ever done before. She had always known that she occupied a very small place in her mother's affections. Her very health and strength were almost an offence.

"Like Father's family," said Joan to herself later that day. "Well, I will not wish myself otherwise. I would not have a Lovell's nervous, high-strung organisation, in spite of their aristocratic refinement and dainty graces, because someone must be strong and uniformly cheerful in the house; someone must shoulder the daily vexations and worries, and my shoulders are strong enough and broad enough to bear them. Poor Mother! She lives in

haunting dread that death may snatch away her last treasure from her. And poor Father! To be so delighted with this living, and to imagine that Mother has no remembrances of the past! How I wish I had known more about those early struggling days here. I think I should have persuaded him to stay where he was. There is no possible hope now of her ever becoming reconciled to living here."

She made these reflections in her own room after returning from the drive. And when tea was over she took her organ key and slipped over to the church to have a practice by herself. She was just summoning a small boy from a cottage near to come and blow for her, when she heard strains of music coming from the church. She abandoned her intention and crept softly up into the old porch. There was no doubt that a master hand was upon the keys of her beloved organ. She held her breath, entranced, and then very noiselessly slipped inside and sat down upon a seat behind a big pillar, which effectually concealed her from view. Only two candles were lighted; Major Armitage was seated on her stool and was pouring out his soul in a flood of passionate, vibrating melody, though there was a hush and a sense of restrained force through every note he touched.

Joan had an intense love for music, and her ears quickly perceived that a strain of unfulfilled desire and expectation was in his music, and it made her heart ache to hear it. She almost felt that she was intruding upon a sacred time, when a soul was baring its griefs and longings, and for one moment she felt inclined to leave.

Then the music died away. A short silence fell, and then suddenly, in a soft, mellow tenor, he began to sing. The words were familiar, but Joan had never heard such an exquisite setting to them. She concluded it was an anthem, and yet from the harmony, it seemed more fitted for a solo.

I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope.
My soul waiteth for the Lord more than they that watch for the morning; I say more than they that watch for the morning.

As he played the darkness of the night seemed to loom around them, and then the first faint light of dawn took its place.

The triumphant emphasis of the first words, the assurance that waiting was the soul's steadfast and hopeful attitude, imprinted itself upon Joan's soul. When the Major came to a pause, she stole out of the church, and her eyes were moist with emotion.

"No wonder Maria said he played like an angel! How I long to have his gift! I wish I knew him!"

Then she shook her head with a little smile.

"There are other people in the world who are practising patience like myself."

When she joined the others, she found that her father was giving them an account of his visit to the Major.

"A very pleasant and well-informed man. He has been through deep waters. He just touched upon his profession. I should like you to have heard the way he spoke of it, Cecilia, and the grief it was to him when he left it. But he told me his father had a place in Yorkshire with a private chapel attached—it has gone to his eldest brother now—and from quite a youngster he spent all his spare time at the organ. Music is his hobby. He sometimes plays the organ at Queen's Hall, in town, for the weekly popular concerts. And I believe he composes and publishes. He told me if his blindness had continued he would have become an organist somewhere. This place belonged to his mother, and she left it to him. He thought he ought to come down and live here, he said; but I think his heart is in town. I begged him to dine with us, but he asked me to excuse him. He walked back with me, and then went into the church to try the organ."

"I have just heard him playing there," said Joan.

"It is a treat to listen to him," said Cecil. "But it is very surly of him to shut himself away from society."

"He may have reasons for it," said Joan. In her mind's eye Sophia's graphic picture came before her—the lonely man in the empty room, playing to somebody unseen.

There was a good deal of bustle in the rectory for the next few days. Mrs. Adair and Cecil were packing and getting ready for their Edinburgh visit. Cecil had plenty of mending, which she laughingly turned over to Joan.

"You are a born needlewoman; I am not. Oh, how I wish I could afford to have a maid of my own!"

Mr. Adair did not approve of this visit.

"You say this place is cold for Cecil; why, Edinburgh will be a hundred times as cold. It is the wrong time of year to go up to Scotland."

This remark was made to his wife.

She answered him impatiently.

“My brother’s house is rather different from ours. It is heated with radiators, and has every comfort. Cecil will be in the lap of luxury.”

He sighed.

“I am afraid it will be an expensive visit for so short a time.”

His wife did not reply. She had made up her mind to go, and nothing would prevent her. She was not entirely heartless or indifferent to her husband’s struggles to make both ends meet; but she had never been able to economise, and money seemed to leak away through her finger ends. She had periodical fits of retrenchment, but after making herself and everyone around her perfectly miserable by knocking off real necessities, she would relapse into her old happy-go-lucky way and spend as if she were a wealthy woman.

“I shall be thankful to get to a house with the *Times* in it,” she said to Joan that evening, as she turned over the local paper rather impatiently. “It is no wonder everyone is so sleepy in these parts. You have not even a magazine club going.”

“We are starting one,” said Joan quickly. “I suggested it, and if everyone will join there will be no difficulty. I felt the dearth of books when I came here. Mr. Wilmot Gascoigne is taking the matter up, and they say what he does at all he does thoroughly.”

“It is strange that he has not called,” Mrs. Adair said. “He told me he quite intended to do so.”

The very next day he was announced about tea-time. When tea was over he sat and talked to Mrs. Adair. Cecil yawned, and finally took up her novel, saying audaciously:

“I hate listening to other people’s talk. And I cannot join in myself, for you are flying from one subject to another, and each one is deeper than the last. I’ll leave the listening to Joan, who appreciates it.”

“But we want Miss Adair to be more than a listener,” said Wilmot, turning to Joan as he spoke.

Joan was too interested to remain silent. Wilmot Gascoigne was a good talker, and, what was rarer still, he liked to listen to others. Mrs. Adair and

he had many things in common; but when they touched on politics Joan became silent.

"I am no politician," she said, when Wilmot asked her opinion upon a certain statesman. "Everybody always believes in himself or his party, and seldom credits those who disagree with him with either principles or common sense. I should like the party spirit ousted from our Government."

Wilmot shook his head.

"It sounds simple, but it would be inextricably involved. If there were no longer two parties the balance of power would be lost. And would measures ever be passed? Imagine the length of discussion when every member would have his individual idea, and each and all have a different scheme to propose."

"Everything is sacrificed to party now," said Joan; and then she was called out of the room by Sophia, who had someone from the village waiting to see her. When she came back her mother and Wilmot were discussing Venetian history. He stayed for a couple of hours, but before going told Joan he would like to send her down a couple of new books on Constitutional History, and she accepted the offer with much pleasure.

"I quite agree with Derrick," said Cecil, when he had gone away; "he is as dogmatic and book-musty as all such bookworms are. He is the kind of man who thinks any book above criticism, just because it is a book."

"Now, Cecil, you are talking nonsense," said her mother. "He is a man who has learnt as well as read. You can feel it in every word he says."

The next day they went, and Joan felt at first a terrible blank in the house, though she had infinite more leisure, which she occupied by visiting the parishioners. Derrick met her coming home very tired one afternoon, after a long round.

"Take my arm," he said.

Joan looked at him with laughing eyes.

"The village would see us, and say we were courting," she said.

"It is a capital suggestion," said Derrick eagerly. "Let us begin at once."

Joan rebuked this levity.

He heaved a sigh.

“I’m going back to town to-morrow, and to work. Joan, don’t you think, as an old pupil of the Dominie’s, and an attached and grateful friend, I might be asked to spend Christmas at the rectory?”

Joan looked grave and considered.

“I don’t think so, Derrick. We expect Mother and Cecil back, and our house is small. It sounds inhospitable——”

“Oh, I’ll wait till Easter. You and the Dominie will be alone then. And, look here, Joan, let me advise you for your good. Don’t be getting too thick with Motty. He’s easily flattered, poor brute, and he really isn’t the sort of fellow who will do you any good. What do you think he told me this morning? He said the annals of his family ought to be kept in the Zoo, for, as far as he could see, they had never got beyond their animal powers. Fighting, eating, drinking composed their lives, and that in no record since the Conquest could he find a Gascoigne who was a scholar and had used and cultivated the brains which had been given to him.

“ ‘But you’re a Gascoigne,’ I said. You should have seen him rise to the bait. He simply swelled visibly.”

“Derrick, I will not listen to you,” said Joan, half laughing, half vexed. “I thought men’s natures were too big to allow of backbiting. Why do you dislike Wilmot Gascoigne so?”

“Because you like him,” said Derrick manfully and promptly. “And I know he will be your undoing.”

“You are talking nonsense.”

“So I am. Now, look here, Joan, I mean to talk good, sound, honest, sober sense with you now. My life and yours have always run together. But since I have lived in town we’ve drifted a wee bit apart, and I want to remedy this. Will you let me do it in my own way?”

“No,” said Joan quickly, and edging a little away from him. “I have my life here; you have yours in town. If we meet occasionally as old friends, it is very pleasant. Don’t let anything spoil our friendship. And, oh, please, Derrick, be merciful this afternoon for I am very tired.”

Derrick took her hand and tucked it in his arm.

“It is dark,” he said. “Confound convention! Well, I will be patient, but you must realise, and I don’t want you to forget it, that you have a very patient waiting friend in town. And his determination and patience are vying

with each other in strength and—and in endurance. He will wait till he gets what he wants, but he will get it in the end."

Joan's hand trembled a little. She tried to withdraw it, but Derrick had captured it, and though he felt the quiver of it, he would not let it go.

When they were at the rectory gate, he said:

"This is my good-bye. I leave to-morrow."

Then his stern gravity melted, and it was in his most coaxing boyish tone that he said:

"Oh, Joan, my heart's dearest, do let me kiss your dimple!"

"You are preposterous, Derrick!"

Joan fled from him. Half-way up the drive she turned. He was leaning his arms on the gate looking after her.

"Good-bye," she waved. "And work hard for your country, and think of your party last."

"I shall come back here for Easter," he said defiantly; "so mind you keep a spare room ready for me."

She laughed light-heartedly, and Derrick turned away with her sweet laugh ringing in his ears, not altogether dissatisfied with his parting talk with her.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAJOR'S HOSPITALITY

Joan was making apple jam in the kitchen. Jenny was attending on her, for Sophia had gone to the dentist's in Coppleton; she very seldom had an afternoon out, and would not have gone now unless Joan had insisted and had promised to make the jam instead of her. Poor Sophia had had three days and nights of raging toothache, and Joan bundled her up in wraps, seated her in the jingle, and the odd man drove her in. It was a cold grey afternoon in November. The wind soughed in the old rectory chimneys, and the sky had that peculiar metallic blue-grey hue which betokens the coming of snow. Joan looked out of the cosy kitchen through the window.

"I would rather be in than out to-day, Jenny, wouldn't you? I hope Sophia won't be caught in a storm."

"The master be out too," said Jenny. "Old Dan'l Tucker be taken very bad and sent for him."

Joan looked anxious as she turned to her jam and stirred it.

"I did not know he was going there. It is quite three miles off. I thought he was only going his round in the village."

Jam making continued, she could not leave it, but when dusk began to gather, and neither Sophia nor the rector was back, Joan began to worry. Snowflakes appeared, not very large at first, but growing bigger and thicker as time went on.

At last sounds of wheels across the yard were heard, and Sophia staggered into the kitchen.

"Oh, Miss Joan, glad I am to be back. 'Tis blowing a blizzard. I can't feel my hands or feet."

"Have you seen Father? He has actually gone across the heath to the Tuckers. I am quite nervous about him."

Sophia looked horrified, then she spoke in a reassuring tone.

"They'll keep him over the night. The Tuckers be superior folk, and their farm be as big and comfortable as any gentlefolk's. Don't you fret, Miss Joan. They'll keep him there sure enough."

“I don’t think Father would stay. He would know that I should be anxious.”

She left the kitchen and went into the dining-room, which gave her a glimpse of the road for some distance. Mr. Adair had a slight cold, and Joan remembered now that he had complained of oppression on his chest that morning.

“I ought to have looked after him. I was too engrossed in my jam, and in Sophia’s toothache. I ought not to have let him go out at all this afternoon.”

As she watched at the window she saw a man in the distance making his way down the street. For one instant she thought it was her father, and heaved a sigh of relief, then she saw the figure was taller and more erect than the old rector was, and she waited to see him approach. He came in at the rectory gate and up the drive.

Joan impulsively dashed out into the porch.

“Have you come from my father? Do you know where he is?”

“Safe in bed at my house, and I hope he will stay there.”

It was Major Armitage who spoke, and in her anxiety Joan drew him into the hall.

“Has he met with an accident? Is he ill?”

“Well, Miss Adair, the fact is I came across him leaning up against my fence a couple of hundred yards from the house. He was panting for breath, and pretty well exhausted by his tramp across the heath. I took him straight in and gave him some brandy. It did him good. I consulted my housekeeper, and she thought that bed was the best place for him. And then to ease his mind I came off to tell you where he was. And on the way I met the doctor and sent him to have a look at him, for I think he has some kind of bronchial attack.”

“Come in where there is a fire,” said Joan, opening the door of her father’s study. “How kind of you to keep him. But I must go to him; I understand him. Is he not well enough to come back here to-night?”

“I shouldn’t advise it. By all means come back with me now. Perhaps we shall find the doctor still there.”

Without a word more Joan left the room. She called Sophia to her and told her what had happened, whilst she got ready to go out.

"Aye, dear Miss Joan, here's trouble. But Maria will know what to do. She be a first-rate nurse, and maybe to-morrow will find him quite himself again. 'Tis no use to drag upon our heads the burdens of the morrow, so we'll just leave it at that. And if it will ease your mind, just tell Maria to make you up a bed in his room and stay the night. If you don't come back in the hour, that's what I know you'll do. And remember, a good mustard poultice will ease his chest!"

Major Armitage looked about him when he was left alone. He noted the comfortable chair drawn up to the fire, the warm slippers on the fender, the dainty little tea-table awaiting the rector's return. And he muttered to himself:

"A woman's care."

Joan was back almost directly. She said very little, but outside, her swift strides had no trouble in keeping pace with the Major's.

"It was you who befriended my small dog," said Major Armitage in a friendly tone.

"And now you have befriended my father," replied Joan quickly. "I believe I have been most ungrateful, for I have never expressed my thanks. I was so anxious at Father's non-appearance that I could think of no one else."

"Don't worry over him. A few days' rest and warmth will set him all right again; but it is not pleasant weather to be out."

They were met here by a sharp squall of snow and wind. Talking was impossible. They could hardly keep their footing, and for the rest of the way they reserved their breath for battling with the elements. He did not take Joan to the front entrance, but turned in by a side door and ushered her into a comfortable smoking-room.

"I hope you don't mind the smell of smoke," he said, drawing up a chair to the fire for her. "I will send my housekeeper to you, and she will take you to your father. May I relieve you of your cloak?"

He helped her out of her snow-covered garment, but as he did so his lips snapped together like steel, and a hard stern look came into his eyes. Joan, glancing up at a mirror in front of her, caught sight of the frowning face behind her. She wondered at it, and then remembered some of the talk about him, and spoke in her impulsive fashion.

"I am afraid this is all most unpleasant to you, Major Armitage. Don't think of entertaining me or coming near me. It is only my father I want to

see."

He gave a little courteous bow.

"I hope I know my duties as your host. I assure you I am not a misanthrope, though I know I do bear a bad character in the village."

Joan's cheeks grew hot. She felt she had blundered, and then she said in her natural tone:

"Oh, dear, I always do say the awkward thing if I can manage it."

He gave a short laugh.

"We won't stand upon ceremony with each other. Do sit down and warm yourself."

He left the room, and the next moment Maria appeared.

"Ah, dear Miss Adair. Your pore dear father, there! when I saw him staggerin' in with the master I thought he was struck for death! I assure you his face were a dark purple, and he were gaspin' like a dyin' fish! But we got him some spirit and put him to bed, and he have had hot bottles to his feet, and he be now lyin' in a heavy doze, and his breathin' raucous—well, I must say it is that, but not worse than to be expected."

"Take me to him," said Joan as soon as she could get in a word. "Has the doctor gone?"

"Yes, has ordered a steam kettle, says it's a sharp attack of bronchitis, and he mustn't be moved. Come you this way."

She went upstairs, and Joan followed her, hardly noticing where she was going, until she found herself in a big comfortable-looking room with a blazing fire. Her father lying back upon the pillows in an old-fashioned tester bed recognised her, and smiled but could not speak.

Joan went up, and stooping down spoke in her cheeriest tone:

"Well, Dad, dear, this is unlucky, isn't it? I'm so thankful Major Armitage took you in. Now don't try to speak. You'll be better to-morrow, and you must just stop here till you're fit to be moved. I shall look after you to-night. Try to go to sleep."

Relief and comfort was expressed at once in Mr. Adair's troubled face.

"Now, you know, you'll do everything that is right," he murmured, and then he closed his eyes.

Maria appeared, but Joan drew her out of the room, where they arranged everything for the invalid's comfort. Joan said she would sit up in the big easy chair by the fire all night.

"I shall have a nap when I can, but I will keep the fire in and the kettle going, and give him what he needs."

She heard all the directions that the doctor had given and promised to carry them out. The master of the house was of no account in her eyes, nor did she think of him again until she was sitting up awake in the silent hours of the night. Then she began to wonder about the life that he led in this lonely house, and who was the lady of his choice, whether she were but a sweet memory or a living reality. Mr. Adair slept a good deal, and by the time the dawn broke his breathing was considerably easier. When Maria appeared, Joan smiled up at her.

"We have had a good night, and he is not worse, but better I should say."

Maria brought her a cup of tea, then persuaded her to go into an adjoining bedroom and have a bath, so as to refresh herself.

An hour later she was downstairs in the hall just in the act of going out of the door, when Major Armitage appeared from the dining-room and stopped her.

"You are not going off without any breakfast? I could not allow you to do that. I am glad to hear good accounts of your father."

"Yes, I'm so thankful. I must get home to ease our old servant's mind. I thought I might run up again to see the doctor when he comes, and to ask him how Father can be moved."

"I have already sent a message down to the rectory. I am not going to let you go till you have had something to eat. Come in here."

Joan could not resist his pleasant peremptoriness. She followed him into the dining-room. It was a large comfortable room, with a broad bay window overlooking the garden. The expanse of dazzling snow outside gave a reflected light into the room. Joan was conscious as she looked at the smart soldier-like neatness of the Major, that she herself was tired and unrefreshed by the night's watch. But he was thinking as he took her in with one swift glance that he had seldom seen a woman with a sweeter, fresher countenance.

Breakfast was laid on a small round table near the fire. The long dining-table in the middle of the room was evidently not used.

Major Armitage presided over the coffee and tea himself. He waited on Joan with cheerful alacrity. There was nothing in his manner to prove that he disliked women guests. Their talk was, of course, about the invalid.

"I dread my father getting bronchitis at the beginning of the winter. He has had it before, but I am so immensely thankful and grateful to you for finding him. How did you manage it?"

"I heard one of my dogs barking outside. I'm afraid he took the rector for an intruder. It is my dog you have to thank for telling me of your father's whereabouts."

"But you offered him shelter and hospitality."

"Who would not? If I had been in a similar case, would you not have taken me in and nursed me?"

"I hope I should," said Joan with a smile; "which reminds me of an old man in the village—do you know him? A superannuated postman, Dicky Grubb. He called me in to take shelter from the rain, and when I thanked him, he said: 'Why, that be all right. I do reckon I'd have asked the evil one hisself in if I'd seen 'im. I do be just desperate for a talk wi' somebody.' "

"These country folk have a great belief in the personality of the evil one," said Major Armitage with an amused smile.

"I must rank myself amongst them," said Joan, a soft grave light coming into her eyes at once. "If we believe our Bibles, we must, but the comfort is to feel that the Power above him is greater."

"Do you believe in a gracious providence overlooking our lives and ordering all things for our eternal good?" questioned the Major abruptly.

"Yes, I do," said Joan simply. "I believe it with all my heart. I always have liked that verse in Job. Do you know it?—'For He performeth the thing that is appointed for me.' It takes the sting out of so much if we can feel it is His hand behind."

"Life has a good deal of bitterness in it," said Major Armitage, "but I think if I hadn't believed in that Hand I should have blown my brains out long ago. As one lives on, though, one's patience gets exhausted."

Then he pulled himself together, as if he had said too much.

"What a beautiful little organ you have."

"Yes, isn't it? I have been wondering if you would ever like to take our services for us. We should enjoy it so much if you did."

"Would you? I always think organists are tenacious of their position and resent any amateurs touching their beloved instrument."

"But I am much more of an amateur than you are," said Joan, smiling. "And I have heard your playing once, and I long to hear it again."

"Music is the comfort of my life," said Major Armitage. "I have only a piano here, but I am thinking of building an organ. Meanwhile, I tell you that I have very happy times in your little church."

Then he began to talk over organ music with her. The personal note in his conversation disappeared, and Joan was rather glad of it. He was as yet too great a stranger for her to touch upon the deep things of life with ease in her talk with him. She was always shy of mentioning them herself; and he had surprised her by his words. Yet as they talked there over their comfortable meal, Joan felt an increasing liking for this man. He seemed so frank and straightforward that she could not reconcile the account of him which Maria had given to her sister with her actual experience now. When breakfast was over and she was about to depart again, Major Armitage stopped her.

"You have a mile and a quarter to walk to the rectory through the fresh snow. If you want to see the doctor, he will most likely be here in an hour's time. What is the good of rushing home and back again before his visit? Stay with the rector till he comes, and write a note to your old servant. I will send my groom over with it at once."

Joan considered a moment and then agreed. He took her across the hall to his smoking-room, and left her at the writing-table there. She wrote her note, gave it to the groom, who was waiting in the hall for it, and then with rapid steps went upstairs to her father. Maria was superintending one of the housemaids, who was tidying up the room.

"I'm glad you haven't gone, miss. The rector has been asking for you."

Joan went up to the bedside. Her father was awake and feverishly anxious to get up.

"I have been told by this good woman, my dear, where I am. I could hardly remember how I came here. I must go home, Joan. If I am ill I must be in my own house; and there is Sunday coming. To-morrow is Saturday. If I cannot take the service we must get someone else to do it. There are a lot of things to arrange. I must——"

"Now, Father, dear, I will see to everything. We are only waiting till the doctor has been. You must not worry, and you must not talk."

Joan was very firm. She sat down by the bed and began telling her father of some funny experiences she had had the previous morning in the village. His attention was diverted from himself; he smiled, then became sleepy again, and had a good half-hour's nap before the doctor arrived. Dr. Blount gave a good report of his patient.

"I believe he has just staved off an attack of pneumonia. You must not attempt to move him to-day. Send over your old servant; she and her sister here will manage him nicely, and you can ease his mind best by running his business."

For practical common sense Dr. Blount had no equal. When Joan was once convinced that her father was in no danger, and only required rest and care for a few days, she went straight down and interviewed Major Armitage again.

She found him out in the garden directing a lad how to sweep the snow off the paths.

He anticipated her in what she was about to say.

"I am not going to let your father go to-day or to-morrow, whatever the doctor says."

"It is most kind of you," Joan said; and then she told him what the doctor wished.

"If you do not mind Sophia coming up, she will be a great comfort to Father; and I have really so many things to see to in the parish that I shall be quite content with Sophia's reports once a day."

"I'll do anything you like to suggest; but I hope you will feel free to run up whenever you have time. I am going up to town to-morrow for the night, but I'll come down to you myself on the way to the station, if I may, to tell you how I leave him."

Joan thanked him with a lightened heart. Then, looking round her, she could not help exclaiming:

"What a beautiful old home you have! Isn't it wonderful how grand and majestic a heavy fall of snow makes its surroundings? We might be now in the depths of a huge forest. Your trees and snow glades through them are magnificent."

Major Armitage turned with her to face his old, weather-beaten, ivy-covered house. The wind had gone down, and there was that peculiar silence and stillness that fallen snow always brings.

“It is a waiting house,” he said, somewhat dreamily. “It has always borne that characteristic on its walls to me.”

Joan hardly knew what to say. He turned to her with a slow smile upon his face.

“Do you know any of its history, Miss Adair? For over a hundred years it has been the abode of lonely souls. No children’s voices or steps have ever brightened its rooms. Three old bachelor brothers succeeded each other, then a childless couple, then two single women, and each heir was well over fifty before taking possession. My mother was the first who broke the chain, but she died six months after it had been bequeathed to her. And she told me that it had always been considered an unlucky legacy.”

“Has that any foundation?” Joan asked with interest.

“There is a saying that until it reverts to the old family to whom it originally belonged there will be no luck to its possessor.”

Joan was about to ask the name of that family, but such a stern shadow came over the Major’s face that she refrained, and he turned almost abruptly away from her for a moment. Then, as she moved away from him, the smile came back to his lips again.

“My house and I wait,” he said.

Joan went home that morning with much food for thought, and though her father figured foremost in her mind, there was another who figured in it too.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ENCOUNTER WITH WILMOT

In three days' time the rector was moved home, and in a fortnight he was going about much as usual; but the result of his sojourn with Major Armitage was a distinct friendship with the lonely man. He often dropped in to see the rector and have a chat with him; he exchanged organ voluntaries with Joan; took the service himself one Sunday night, and fascinated everyone there by the beautiful music he gave them after the service was over. But though to Joan and her father he was always genial and pleasant, he refused to extend his friendship to society in general. And whispers were still circulated that he was queer, and had "a bee in his bonnet." Joan contradicted these rumours with much warmth, but the gossips shook their heads and retained their own opinions.

A little incident that occurred made her realise that perhaps they had some foundation for their circulation, and yet, understanding a little better, as she did now, the working of an artistic nature, and withal an intensely dreamy one, she felt more distressed than ever that gossip should ferret out the secrets of an upright, honourable gentleman.

One afternoon, after a visit to the rector, Major Armitage promised to send Joan a Christmas carol of his own composition. She had been planning some carol practices for Christmas, and he had told her of some with which she had never become acquainted. And then he had added:

"With an author's egotism, I am wondering if you would like to have a look at a carol which was sung in Ely Cathedral one year. The organist was a great friend of mine, and got me to compose the music for some old words he had found in an antiquated history of Cambridgeshire."

Joan accepted his offer with delight, and the roll of music came. As she was unrolling it, a rough sheet of manuscript tumbled out of it. It had evidently slipped in by mistake. She glanced at the words, and then with caught breath and tearful eyes she read them through again, and then an overwhelming feeling of shame took possession of her for reading them at all.

"Sweet of my heart, we are quite alone,
Alone in the twilight grey;
Eyes are not needed, only our souls
Touch in an exquisite way.

"Do I not see thee! I close my eyes,
I need not the light of day;
My lady sits here by the flickering fire—
I know she has come to stay.

"How can I paint the sweet face that is mine,
The face so purely serene;
The eyes that are softly searching my soul
With their glance so bright and keen;

"The proud little head, with its poise half gay,
Yet so bewitchingly shy;
The lips that quiver, that open to speak,
Then close with a pensive sigh?

"Heart of my heart, and queen of my love,
I gaze on thee, full of bliss,
The ache of a lonely hearth is worth while
To give a moment like this."

R. A.

It was the key to the Major's silent hour by the fireside of the room which was full of his music and poetry; the room which was closed against outsiders and strangers, but which was a hallowed spot to his soul.

Joan comprehended in a flash as she read, and for some minutes she stood wrapped in thought with the paper in her hand. Then she wondered what she had better do. She dreaded letting Major Armitage know that she had seen and read it. She felt she could not tell him; she could not write to him. Finally she rolled up the little song and sent it back to him by post, writing across the wrapper:

"Found inside the carol."

By neither word nor sign did the Major ever let her know that he had received it.

Mrs. Adair and Cecil still stayed away. They wrote occasionally, and one morning the rector looked up from his wife's letter with disappointment in his face.

"I was hoping they would come home for Christmas, Joan, but your mother says they are going to spend it in Cheshire with a cousin of hers. We shall not see much of them, I am afraid. Your mother wants to go abroad again in January."

"I think," said Joan gravely, "that you and I, Dad, dear, had better make up our minds to run this parish without them. When they come home we will welcome them gladly, but we won't keep on expecting them; their visits will be always short, I know."

"But why?" Mr. Adair demanded rather impatiently; "why should they not stay in their own comfortable home when they are in England? I can imagine Cecil's delicacy necessitating a warmer climate, but Edinburgh and Cheshire are colder climates than ours? It is not right; your mother ought to be here."

Joan was silent. She knew her father had never grasped and would never grasp the fact that Mrs. Adair had a real distaste for her clerical home.

After a few minutes she said gently:

"Cecil can have a good many more luxuries away than she can at home, and at less expense."

"Yes, yes. I know that. But these visits seem to cost a good deal. I must send your mother another cheque this morning, and a bill has come in from some London shop. I suppose it is for clothes; you will understand the items, but it is for a big amount, seventeen pounds!"

Joan took the bill, a dressmaker's, and then she said:

"I think I should forward this to mother. She settles for these."

But she doubted in her heart as she said so whether Mrs. Adair would do so. She never could cut down her private expenses to her private income, and her husband had to pay for a good deal.

It was one of those days when clouds seemed heavy overhead. Some quarrel amongst the bell-ringers had to be inquired into and set straight; then Jenny was sent for from home to attend to her mother, who had scalded her leg badly, and Joan had to get another village girl to take her place.

Miss Borfield called, and poured out a grievance which she had been nursing in private for some considerable time. The last rector had always consulted her over various village matters. She was being shown now that her services were not valued or needed. She had not been asked to tea at the rectory for over two months; Joan never came to see her, and so on.

Joan listened, sympathised, apologised, explained, and promised that things would be different for the future. At half-past three in the afternoon she had found herself feeling so irritable and impatient with everybody, indoors and out, that she ran up to her room, flung on her hat and coat, and started out to walk off her bad feelings.

The air and solitude were a certain cure with Joan for depression, for she held communion then with One Who was able to rest and calm the turbulent waters.

She walked to her favourite pine wood. It was a cold but bright afternoon. The words that she had quoted to Major Armitage a short time ago came into her mind: "For He performeth the thing that is appointed for me." And as she thought upon it peace came into her soul. Amongst the silent pines, looking down upon a vista of valley and clustering cottages round the old grey church, she lifted her heart heavenwards. "Just the cutting and shaping and friction that I need," she said to herself, "as Major Armitage said, 'I believe in the Hand behind.' "

Her thoughts turned to him as she retraced her steps homeward, and then suddenly she met Wilmot Gascoigne. He had been supplying her with books of late, but though he had called several times upon her father, Joan happened to have missed him.

"What a walker you are!" he said, as he shook hands with her. "I always find you out, but have never had the luck to meet you before. Have you been on one of your usual errands of mercy?"

"No," said Joan, smiling. "I have simply and solely walked out to please myself; in fact, I have been walking off bad temper."

"I wish I could do that. But I don't believe in your black words. You are always the personification of radiant cheerfulness. I am, or have been, in the devil of a temper all day, when every living human creature is an annoyance to me. I am going to chuck up the Gascoigne Chronicles for a time. They have got on my nerves. I am going up to town for a few weeks. I want to have a look at some books in the British Museum. Do you know what I am thinking of doing?"

"No—what?"

"Taking a tour in America, and lecturing on the Ancient Homes of Britain. Nothing takes over there like the histories and legends of the aristocracy. And I want a wider sphere and a change of work."

"I thought you were always content and happy amongst your books."

"Yes," he said, with a bitter smile, "that is what my good relatives think; they are continually flinging it in my teeth. Books are my food, my meat and drink, and my life; but I have other aims in life, and just now I need money. My American tour will bring me in a golden harvest."

"I should like to hear you lecture," said Joan, thoughtfully. "Why won't you give us a village lecture one day? Take some subject that will suit our villagers. One of the greatest pleasures in life must be to impart the knowledge which we have."

"I know that is your creed. You inspire me to try. Now what possible subject could interest the intellects of your villagers?"

"It requires consideration," said Joan.

"Will you think it out, and I will do the same, and I'll drop in on Saturday afternoon to compare notes. I know the rector is always in then; he told me so."

"Very well. I'm sure my father will be pleased at the idea. We were wishing we could give the men some kind of entertainment."

"I am not a village entertainer," said Wilmot, with a laugh, "and it is the most difficult thing in the world to talk down to such an audience. But I'll have a try at it to please you. How have you got on with Müller's 'Indian Philosophy'?"

"I am afraid I have had little time for reading lately," said Joan.

"It's an awful waste of a cultivated intellect to be placed where you are," said Wilmot, with earnestness. "Why don't you strike?"

"No," said Joan, with a shake of her head. "My circumstances necessitate it. I am trying to be content."

"Any fool could run a country parish!" said Wilmot hotly.

"Thank you, but I disagree. My father is no fool, and he cannot do it single-handed and alone."

"There's a paper I want you to read in the *National Review*," Wilmot went on. "I want a woman's view on it. I left it at the rectory just now. Will you make time to read it?"

"Yes, I will try. I shall enjoy it, I expect. Magazine articles do not want the leisure that philosophical treatises do."

He turned to another subject which was then filling his mind, the dawning of the Renaissance Period, and he talked fast and furiously over it. When he lost himself in his subject he was intensely brilliant and interesting. Joan listened entranced, and when they reached the rectory gates she heaved a sigh of regret.

"Oh," she said impulsively, "I could listen to you all night; you have taken me right out of myself and my surroundings!"

"It is a treat to meet with a kindred soul," said Wilmot, enthusiastically. "Look here, Miss Adair, we must see more of each other. I assure you I haven't a single person in this neighbourhood with whom I can exchange a few ideas."

"Do you know Major Armitage?"

"No. He's a musical genius, I hear, and a crank. I should say he never opens a book."

"I believe he has a very good library."

"Has he? If I thought that, I would look him up. Well, then, Saturday you will see me again. Au revoir!"

Joan turned indoors. She liked Wilmot Gascoigne, and she did not like him. Her intellect appreciated his; her spirit clashed with his, and her instinct told her that his influence was not wholly uplifting.

"I like and admire him as a teacher," she said to herself, "but I would not have him as a friend."

Saturday came, and he turned up to tea full of the village lecture he proposed to give.

Joan suggested a lecture on the historical events that had happened in the county, with special reference to those of local interest. Mr. Adair thought a talk about drink and politics would suit the labouring men. Wilmot himself proposed a lecture on political economy. They finally settled that he should give a lecture on "Country versus Town Life," and he and Joan had a very long and animated discussion upon that theme. She broke away from him at

last. “You must excuse me. Do stay and talk to my father. This is his free evening. But I have a Sunday school lesson to prepare and some mark books to make up, and it is half-past ten.”

Wilmot did not stay. He liked the rector, but it was his daughter he came to see, and for the next ten days before the lecture came off he was continually at the rectory. Banty arrived one afternoon, and found Joan sweeping the garden paths.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m getting some leaves together to go on our bonfire. I’m tired of the untidiness of the garden, so I’m making a clearance of a lot of rubbish. Come into the orchard and see it burn.”

“I always like you so much better out of doors,” Banty remarked; “you’re so much more like an ordinary human being then.”

Joan laughed. “What am I indoors?”

“A very superior rector’s daughter.”

“Oh, I don’t think I deserve that. I assure you I don’t feel so.”

“What have you been doing to Motty? He has left the seclusion of the library, and is for ever coming down here. He told Father to-day that he must have a holiday; and we hear he is going to give a village lecture. I warn you they won’t understand one word of it. Have you bewitched him?”

Joan was busy stacking up her bonfire. She did not answer for a moment; then she said lightly:

“Father and your cousin like a smoke and chat together. I don’t think you give Mr. Wilmot much of your company as a rule.”

“I should think not. Can’t stand his stilted talk. But why is he so keen on coming here to talk to you? That’s what I want to know!”

“I suppose we have tastes in common,” said Joan, a little indifferently. “I am very fond of books, and so is he.”

Banty looked at her in silence; then she said abruptly: “I believe everybody likes to talk to you; I do.”

“Now that is nice of you,” said Joan, turning a smiling face towards her. “I thought you were going to be disagreeable a few minutes ago.”

“I meant to be. Motty provoked me by singing your praises and saying that you were wasted upon us. ‘A village of clodhoppers,’ he called us; and I

know he meant to include the Hall in that disparaging epithet. We are not clever—I know we aren't—but we are happy and contented with our country life, and Motty spends his time in abusing it and sneering at all our neighbours. He tells me he is going to speak about country and town life to the villagers. I suppose you know what he will do? He will make London a paradise, and set every young man by the ears to go there. He'll stir up discontent and restlessness, and make them all hate their country lives. You see if you don't bring a hornet's nest into our village schoolroom when he gets up on his hind legs to speak."

Joan had never heard Banty speak at such length before. She looked dismayed at the picture which was painted.

"I don't think he will do that. I will talk to him about it."

"I suppose you are infatuated with him," said Banty, a little rudely, "just as my cousins are in town. Motty is full of himself. I wish he didn't live with us. He always makes us uncomfortable by his airs of superiority. Now, Derrick Colleton is quite different. It is a pleasure to have him in the house."

"Derrick is a dear," assented Joan, warmly.

"What I like about you is your variety," pursued Banty, watching Joan feeding the bonfire with critical eyes. "You may be a bookworm at heart, but you don't mind painting a jingle, or mending a gate, or making a bonfire—versatility is the word I want!"

"It's just necessity," laughed Joan; "but I enjoy it all, and any fire in the open exhilarates me—doesn't it you? I made a fire up in the pine woods the other afternoon, and sat by it, and had an hour's reading. It was delicious!"

"I'll come up and join you one day, if I may. I want to talk to you, only, when hunting is on, I haven't much time."

"All right," said Joan, feeling rather sorry that she had given her quiet retreat away. "But will you join me in reading or do you want to talk?"

"To talk," said Banty, frankly and unfeelingly. "I can't talk indoors—I never could. Out of doors I feel at ease. Let us meet in the pine woods to-morrow. I can't hunt till next Monday. I've knocked up two hunters this week, and father has got riled and says I must give them a rest."

"To-morrow afternoon?" said Joan, dubiously. "Well, I will try."

"Let us boil a kettle and have tea out there," suggested Banty, with alacrity.

Joan agreed, for she wanted to win the confidence of Banty, and knew it would not do to damp her friendliness.

“Then I think I’ll go now,” said Banty. “You’ll get sick of me if I give you too much of my company.”

Joan laughed again as she shook hands with her. “You have a very humble opinion of your own powers of attractiveness.”

“I’m not attractive to women,” said Banty, bluntly; “never can understand them. I always vote them a bore, and they vote me one. Good-bye.”

Joan looked after her. She swung away with a boyish stride, and was soon out of sight.

“Oh, dear! What waste of time it will be. Why should she fix upon me to beguile her dull hours! And what can she have to say to me?”

Joan poked away at the bonfire rather fiercely. Banty was quite right in her estimate of herself. She was not an attractive personality to any of her own sex, for she never troubled to make herself pleasant to them, and Joan did not look forward with any pleasure to the appointment made.

CHAPTER IX

JOAN'S GODMOTHER

Joan nearly forgot to meet Banty as arranged, for a letter in the morning absorbed her thoughts. It was from her godmother, Lady Alicia, saying she was coming down into their neighbourhood for a week's visit to some old friends, and would much like to spend a few days at the rectory and see her goddaughter. Lady Alicia had been to Joan from the time she was a tiny child the embodiment of all that was enchanting and delightful. Joan had almost worshipped her, though the times in which she had seen her were very few and far between. They had corresponded for many years. Lady Alicia had refused to lose touch with her even after her confirmation, and Joan felt that she could never express her gratitude sufficiently for having been enabled to go to Girton by her godmother's generous help. Never before had Joan entertained Lady Alicia in her mother's absence, and it was five years since her godmother had come to see them. When Mr. Adair was told, he became rather flustered.

"My dear Joan, your mother ought to be here. You must tell her. Perhaps it will bring her back. Lady Alicia is one of your mother's greatest friends. I should not like to have her here when your mother is away. I don't think she would care about it either."

"She has seen Mother in Edinburgh, Father. She tells me so, and Mother knows she is coming, for she told her she would like to do it. She is coming to see me, for she is my godmother, remember. I am delighted."

"She is a very pleasant woman," said Mr. Adair; "but I hope she is not going to persuade you to leave your work here and take up teaching. I know she is a clever woman herself, and learning of any sort is her hobby."

"I am not going to leave you, Dad," said Joan gently. Then she went out to tell Sophia, and that worthy was as pleased as Joan.

"We shall be very pleased to see her ladyship, of course, and I'll have the best spare bedroom aired at once; and we must just plan out some tasty little dinners. How many days do you say, Miss Joan? A few? Then we'll say four dinners at the most, and I'll think them out and let you know what we shall be wanting. She's a real nice lady, is her ladyship, and I'm glad to think you'll be here alone, for the last time she were with us 'twas your

holidays, and you were sent out of doors whiles the mistress talked and talked and talked! Oh, how she talked! And when her ladyship went, she says to me, whiles I were strapping her box: 'Sophia, my little goddaughter will grow up a fine woman. I'm sorry to have seen so little of her.' And a fine young woman you be, Miss Joan, and I'm sure her ladyship will think so when she looks at you. I often think in the present time that we shan't have their lordships and ladyships with us much longer. So we must make the most of them when we can get them. Now the House of Lords is humbled and made nought of, and these dreadful agitating strikers and social ruffians are for destroying their houses and lands, well, the poor things will be driven out of the country; and then it's the ones who've driven them will wish them back again!"

"Oh, Sophia!" said Joan, putting her hands to her ears. "For mercy's sake stop. Thank goodness Lady Alicia has no houses or land to be taken from her!"

She left the kitchen, wrote to her godmother, and went about her daily duties as if in a dream. It was not till late in the afternoon that she remembered Banty; and it was not in the best of humours that she got her tea basket and started out for the pine woods. But a walk across the heath restored her equanimity. It was a soft, mild day, with a wild-looking sky; the sun shone out between masses of grey, scudding clouds; the west wind soughed in the pines. The distances were blue and clear, here and there, on far away hills, were wonderful effects of sunshine and shadow. Joan found Banty first at their trysting place, and she was building a fire in a very business-like manner. For a little while they chatted together in a light-hearted fashion, then, when they were sitting down watching for the kettle to boil, Banty began:

"I want to talk to you. You're not an old frump, and I'm sure you have plenty of common sense. Do you think girls nowadays are better unmarried?"

Joan had hoped for some better subject for conversation than this; but she checked her momentary feeling of impatience and answered:

"Certainly not. If they meet the right man it is in every respect good to marry."

"Yes; but how does any girl know that the man who proposes to her is the right man?"

"I think her heart will tell her. Are you wanting to be married?"

"Me? Rather not! But Mother wants me to think about it. She told me this morning that if anything happened to Father I should lose my home and hunting. I could do without a home, but to give up hunting! Why, I think I would die! You see Father's heir is a distant cousin, a married man with a family, and Mother and I would have to promptly clear out. But, of course, Father may outlive us—at least he may live many years. I've always felt I'm not made for a wife. I have no domesticities about me, and men like and expect that, don't they?"

"You will not always be able to hunt," said Joan slowly. "What will you do when you get rheumaticky and old?"

"I mean to live and die in the hunting-field," said Banty firmly.

"It means a very sudden death, then. Do you wish for that?"

Banty stared at Joan with big eyes.

"Why, no; it would be terrible, awful!"

She shuddered. "Don't let us talk about death; it seems so gruesome. It is such an appalling upheaval, isn't it, of our very pleasant matter-of-fact lives."

"You *do* think sometimes."

Joan said this almost to herself.

Banty laughed a little awkwardly, then shied some fir cones into the fire.

"I was wondering the other day," she said, "whether I had better say 'yes' to a man who is pestering me with his attentions. And I thought I would ask you. For I assure you I can't make up my mind. Mother wants me to have him, because he has lots of tin, and I'd have a jolly good time if I married him. But I'm not so keen on money as on good company, and he's the dullest man in the whole field—rides well, but nothing else. If I got bored after I had married him, what should I do?"

"If you don't love him, don't marry him," said Joan quickly.

"Well then, supposing I don't get another offer, and Mother's gloomy forecast comes true?"

"But, Miss Gascoigne, there really are other enjoyments in life besides hunting."

"There isn't one to me."

"What do you do in the summer?"

"I have a vile time."

Joan looked at the girl softly and seriously, then she put out her hand and laid it on her arm.

"Wake up!" she said. "You're half asleep. Somewhere inside you you have a spirit, a soul. There are tremendous possibilities for that soul of yours, and an awfully happy life for you if you can only get it to stir and prove that it is alive. Happiness all the year round, and not only in the winter!"

Banty stared at her again, but Joan did not say another word. She occupied herself in making two very good cups of tea, and brought the conversation into lighter channels. Banty was led to talk of otters and of their habits, and then she gave Joan a lot of interesting information about the different birds in their locality. She did not mention the subject of marriage again; but when they at last rose to go their different ways, she said with emphasis:

"I'm not quite the sleepy fool you take me to be."

Joan walked home wondering if she had wasted the hour in the woods or not. She had a very small opinion of her own powers in influencing anyone for good, which was rather strange, as she had a wild enthusiasm for imparting all other knowledge to those who were without it. Outside her own gate she stood gazing at the distant hills; the sun was sending long, crimson streaks across the sky as he sank behind the pines. She lifted up her face to inhale the soft west breeze which seemed to be bringing her the aromatic scent of the heather and pines.

"Oh," she murmured to herself, "it's good to be alive in this beautiful world—and I've a delicious bit in front of me. How I shall love to have Lady Alicia all to myself!"

The following evening Wilmot Gascoigne gave his village lecture. Lady Gascoigne insisted upon coming to it herself, and persuaded Sir Joseph to accompany her. Banty refused to be present. The village schoolroom was crowded. Joan was rather nervous when Wilmot opened his lecture by a comparison between a town and country boy at fourteen. He gave an imaginary conversation between them which tickled and delighted his audience, but which showed the country boy at a great disadvantage. Then, as he talked on, he forgot his class of audience, and his talk became absolutely unintelligible. He drifted into political economy, he quoted various authors with whom, of course, nobody was acquainted; he grew

more and more rapid and enthusiastic in his talk, and finally ended his lecture by declaring that the country bred flourishing bodies, but that town produced, and could only produce, brains.

"Bosh!" exclaimed the squire in audible tones.

Joan felt a great inclination to laugh. Her father, who was taking the chair, got up in his genial and good-natured way and tried to stand up for his parishioners.

"I think the lecturer is hard upon the countryfolk," he said smiling. "I am not very learned myself, but I do remember several authors and poets who have done all their best work in the country, and some of them were country bred."

"The Brontës!" prompted Joan. The rector did not hear her. The gaping audience had hardly taken in any of the lecture. They clapped when their rector proposed the vote of thanks to the lecturer, and went to their homes declaring that it was the "finest performance" they had ever heard, and Mr. Wilmot was just a "speakin' dictionary."

Wilmot did not seem so pleased with himself as Joan expected him to be. He turned into the rectory to have some supper.

"Well," he said a little defiantly to Joan, "my rôle is not that of a village lecturer, is it?"

"No," said Joan, laughing. "I don't think it is; but I am sure you gave a great deal of pleasure. One old woman said to me coming out: 'Ay, me dear, he ought to be a parson, sure enough! That's the style of praychin for we—a reg'lar clap-up style with plenty of noise with it!' "

Wilmot tried to smile.

"Oh," he groaned, "it was like talking to rows of stolid cows. There wasn't one spark of life amongst them. Their eyes were as thick and vacant as a fish's! How can you peg away at them, rector?"

Mr. Adair looked at Wilmot rather gravely.

" 'Line upon line—here a little—there a little,' They are not so stupid as they look."

"You had some interested listeners," said Joan. "Major Armitage was at the back. He slipped in late and went away early."

"He's a crank," said Wilmot shortly. "I'm much more interested in his house than himself. It has a curious record."

"Yes; I know about it," said Joan. "To whom did it originally belong?"

"To the Rollestons. They sold the property about a hundred years ago, and the Armitages bought it. Don't let us talk about that fellow. Do you ever go up to town, Miss Adair?"

"No, never. We are expecting a visitor, an old friend of my mother's, so my time will be taken up."

"Does that mean you will have no time for me? I am going to get you to read up that book on the Renaissance. I shall expect to hear how you like it when I come back from town."

"How long will you be away? You seem to have no idea of the life I lead. I cannot have infinite leisure for reading; I wish I could."

"I shall be away about ten days or a fortnight. Don't let your mind rust. We are told to use our talents. Your most important duty is to cultivate the intellect that has been given you."

Joan smiled at these platitudes, but the earnestness of Wilmot's tones made her reply:

"The difficulty with me is to refrain from reading. It is not a duty, but a real pleasure."

She was relieved that Wilmot was going up to town. She found his constant visits rather a detriment to her parish work.

The next day Lady Alicia arrived. Joan met her at the station with the one shabby fly that Old Bellerton possessed.

Lady Alicia was of medium height and rather slender. She was always extremely well dressed in a quiet style of her own. Her white hair and delicately-cut features, with a pair of brilliant, dark eyes, gave her a remarkable and attractive look.

"Why, Joan, dear, I don't think I should have known you. You are looking bonny," was the greeting she gave her goddaughter.

"Yes; I am always in rude health," said Joan laughing. Then, as she led her to the fly, she added: "I still feel as I always used to feel, that you are a kind of fairy godmother, quite different from the usual people I am accustomed to mix with."

"I dare say you will find me stepping down from that pedestal before long," said Lady Alicia smiling. Then they talked about Mrs. Adair and Cecil, and they arrived at the rectory just after four.

Mr. Adair came out into the porch to meet them. Lady Alicia delighted him by expressing herself charmed with the old rectory. Joan took her up to the spare room, which looked dainty and bright with its blazing fire, and fresh flowers on the dressing-table.

"Ah," said Lady Alicia, as she sat down in the easy chair by the fire; "your father has his right setting at last, Joan. I always told him a country rectory would be his fate one day. I'm sure he is much happier in the country; is he not?"

"Yes, he certainly is. He loves this place, and is only disappointed that Mother finds it too cold to stay here."

"She must stay here in the summer, then. I told her so. You will have her back in May, I hope, Joan. I want to ask you ever so many questions, but they will keep. What a dear, quaint, little house you have! I love its dark oak and low rooms. There is such a sense of peace and quiet in it!"

"Do you feel it so?" Joan asked eagerly with a flush on her cheeks. "It impressed me like that the first time I saw it. In the rush and hurry of every day I lose that sense, except when I have been out and come in; then it always strikes me as a haven. And rectories ought to have restful, peaceful atmospheres, ought they not? So many who have lived and died in them have been in close touch with heaven."

"Yes," assented Lady Alicia gravely; but her eyes softened as they rested on Joan's fair, happy face.

Joan left her, to see that tea was ready, and old Sophia, beaming in her best black dress, slipped upstairs to "wait on" her ladyship.

Lady Alicia shook her by the hand.

"Well, Sophia, your young lady is turning into a beauty. She was a gawky schoolgirl when I saw her last."

"Ah, my lady, she's the best of the bunch; nothing comes irksome to her. And she shoulders her burdens with a joke and a laugh. The master would be lost without her. He's getting to lean upon her. I always do say, my lady, that women be the props of the nation. A man has no common sense to guide him without her."

"I think we can stand alone better than they can," said Lady Alicia smiling.

She and Sophia understood each other thoroughly, and Sophia now bent forward with an anxious look in her old eyes.

“Ah, my lady, could you not get the mistress to be more here now? She’s wanted. The master fair pines for the sight of her.”

Lady Alicia shook her head.

“No, Sophia. How often have you asked me that before! But I sometimes think it is a little kink in her brain. She will not settle down in her own home. And don’t you see that now, when she has a daughter who so well fills her place, she will be less likely than ever to come back and work in her husband’s parish?”

“If she were only to bide in the house along with the master ’twould ease his dear mind. She were never cut out for parish visiting.”

“That she was not!” said Lady Alicia with her pleasant laugh. “You are a good creature, Sophia. I see you are determined to unpack me; but, I assure you, since I have travelled about the world as a lone woman, I am quite accustomed to maid myself. I’m in love with your old house. I feel as if I were transplanted back a hundred years.”

She came into the drawing-room a little time later, and the rector and Joan and she had a very cosy tea and chat together. Then the rector went off to his study, and Joan and Lady Alicia sat on in the firelight talking of many things. Joan described the neighbours, the villagers, and the life surrounding the rectory. She told Lady Alicia of the offer which had been made to her and which she had refused.

“You think I was right? I hope you don’t think I ought to have gone. I do not feel that my college education has been wasted, for I am always hoping that the time may come when I shall be able to profit by it. In any case, knowledge is never waste, is it?”

“Not unless you bury it in a napkin,” said Lady Alicia. “My dear Joan, I think you could not have acted otherwise, but I gave your mother a good scolding when I saw her in Edinburgh. She is ruining Cecil. That girl is no more delicate than I am; it is just a case of nerves and fancies.”

“She will never be different,” said Joan.

“I don’t know,” Lady Alicia rejoined, looking thoughtfully into the coal fire in front of her. “I felt that I should like to take possession of her and see if I could not wake her into life. She has brains.”

“Yes,” said Joan; “I often wish she would use the brains she has. But I don’t think sisters can ever help one another. Cecil laughs at me and calls me old-fashioned.”

"Poor little Joan!"

Joan was sitting on a low chair, and Lady Alicia for a moment laid her hand caressingly on her head.

Then Joan turned a flushed face and tearful eyes towards her.

"Oh, Lady Alicia, I do want to work; I do want to do something with my life. There is so much that we women can do nowadays. This is such a small sphere for an able-bodied woman! I feel sometimes as if anyone could potter in and out of the cottages and talk to the old women. It sounds conceited if I say it isn't worth my while, but I really do fear lest this easy, monotonous country life should paralyse my powers. Do comfort and help me, if you can. Sometimes I feel as if I can never go on."

"And I have helped you to test the power of your wings. I wonder if it was wise."

Lady Alicia looked affectionately at her as she spoke.

"I can never thank you enough. You lifted me into another atmosphere altogether."

"Yes, I am not going to regret sending you to Girton. But, Joan dear, you and I believe in the ordering of our lives by One Who never makes mistakes. Why fret over this bit of your life, even if it seems to you somewhat inactive? It fits in all right with the plan. If we don't have the key to it, it does not signify. There may be some soul here whom God has purposed shall be helped by you. I know a good woman who was sent out all the way to India to help a gay young bride. Of course, she did not know the reason of it at the time—she hated Anglo-Indian society, and she was placed in the midst of it for four months—but she understood afterwards, and was so thankful that she had not yielded to her inclinations to stay at home with congenial friends. There may be some troubles which are hard to bear, but I never think the plain force of circumstances, however uncongenial, ought to fret us in the least. Instead of spending our time in useless repining, let us look about and discover the bit of work which we are meant to do. The best tools are used for the simplest work. If you have an aptitude for teaching and moulding and influencing, there is somebody in this part of the world who is waiting for you to begin on them."

"That is delightful to think of," said Joan slowly. "Somehow or other I have felt it must be to shape my own character and make me patient in the day of small things, and though I have prayed to be made willing, yet it has been a constant struggle to be so. I am ashamed of myself as I think of this

sweet home. I love the country, too, and if I could feel sure that I was not missing better opportunities, I would settle down contentedly here. You have done me such a lot of good."

"Settle down," said Lady Alicia. "It may seem a small life to you, but 'Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.' Do you remember that wise saying of Solomon's? You do not know from what you may be saved. I know you are ambitious, and feel that you have powers that are not being used at present. A public life for a woman very often brings great strain. You have a 'handful with quietness' here. It is God's will for you; glorify Him in it."

And then there was silence between them. Both were occupied with their own thoughts.

For the rest of that evening Lady Alicia touched on more general topics. She was a good talker, and had the gift of suiting her conversation to her company. Mr. Adair always enjoyed a talk with her, and, when dinner was over, he did not retire to his study, as was his usual custom, but came into the drawing-room, where he and Lady Alicia had a long and interesting discussion on Church methods.

Joan listened, and enjoyed it; and whilst she listened she pondered over Lady Alicia's words.

"Settle down." Yes, she determined she would, and Wilmot Gascoigne should not make her dissatisfied with her sphere. There was no stagnation where there was life—and if village life was to be her opportunity for work, she must do it with a glad heart.

CHAPTER X

OFF TO THE RIVIERA

Lady Alicia threw herself heart and soul, for the time being, into the village circle in which she found herself. She walked out with Joan, and visited the old and sick; she took a Sunday school class of girls, she attended the choir practices, covered library books, checked club accounts, and was as keen as Joan herself over the welfare of the parishioners. One evening after Joan had been practising Major Armitage's carol, they began to talk about him.

"He must be a real musician," said Lady Alicia. "I should like to hear him play. I know his brother in Yorkshire, and have often heard about him."

"He has been in London for the last fortnight," said Joan. "He often comes round for a chat with Father when he is at home, but I have never had the courage to ask him to play. He is a very reserved man in many ways, and I always think he has a history." She then told Lady Alicia of the gossip about the place and of what Maria had confided to her sister.

"Poor, lonely man!" said Lady Alicia softly.

"For what and whom is he waiting?" Joan asked. "I have never forgotten the quiet, determined way in which he said to me: 'My house and I wait.' Somehow I cannot believe that his unseen companion is simply an ideal of his imagination."

"No," said Lady Alicia very quietly. "I think I can tell you that that is not so."

"You know his story?"

"I do. Would you like to hear it?"

A faint flush rose in Joan's cheeks.

"I can't help feeling an interest in him. But I do not want to be curious. He told me the unlucky history of his house, but no more."

"I do not think there would be any harm in your knowing what I know. I happen to be acquainted with the girl. She was a Miss Irene Waldborough. They met at the house of a friend of mine before he went to the war in South Africa. She was only about nineteen then. They were not engaged; I suppose

there was mutual attraction between them. He was foolish, I think, not to speak. In any case, she thought he did not care for her, and when her mother, who was of French extraction, and believed in arranging things for her daughter, pressed a certain young and rich American upon her, Irene yielded and became engaged to him. I saw her when the news of Major Armitage's wounds reached home. Everybody thought he would be blind for life. I knew then that he still held her love. She was in great distress of mind; and when he eventually returned home, she wanted to go and see him. Her mother prevented this and urged Frank Denbury the American to marry sooner than was proposed. The marriage was hurried on, and was about to take place, when Major Armitage and Irene met. He had sent in his papers and was staying with his brother. He had not even heard of the engagement. I don't know how it was done, as you may be very certain Major Armitage would never have spoken. But young people have instincts. She came to her mother and refused to marry. Mrs. Waldborough was furious. There was a great disturbance, and I suppose in the end her will got the better of her daughter's, for the marriage took place. It was one of those things that one cannot understand. Three days after the wedding, the bridegroom was summoned back by cable to America. He could not take her with him, and he has never been heard of since. About two years ago there was a report of his death, but though all the best detectives were set to work, and no amount of money was spared in trying to trace evidence of his movements, the inquiry did not prove satisfactory. Irene was married five years ago, and seems now neither maid nor wife."

"And did she meet the Major again? Does she know he has recovered his sight?"

"Yes. You see she lives only five miles from his brother in Yorkshire. I saw her about a month ago. She told me all this herself, and told me, too, that she is determined to wait seven years if necessary, but that she can bring nobody else into her life until she has more definite proof of her husband's death."

"If I were Major Armitage," said Joan slowly, "I should go out and find proofs."

"That was the first thing he tried to do. He went out two years ago, directly there was this indefinite report; but he could find nothing beyond the facts already known, that one night Frank Denbury had ridden away from a certain small town with two friends. These both swore that he parted with them at a certain point and went in another direction towards a village which he never reached."

“And so Major Armitage is waiting for the seven years to pass,” Joan said meditatively. “What a romantic story! Tell me what she is like, Lady Alicia.”

“Irene is small and slight and dark, rather like your Cecil, but with a great deal of sweet dignity about her and a certain dainty shyness that makes it difficult to believe that she is a married woman.”

“And he comforts himself in his solitude by imagining that she is with him,” said Joan almost under her breath. “I do pity him more than ever; but he seems very sure of her. He has got his house ready for her.”

“Everyone firmly believes the husband is dead,” said Lady Alicia. “It is the doubt in her own mind that makes her wait for him. It is a very unfortunate story, and I think you had better keep it to yourself.”

“I will,” said Joan. “Is she fond of music?”

“She plays the violin most beautifully. It is that which drew them together.”

Joan said no more, but Major Armitage and the girl he loved, and for whom he was waiting, were constantly in her thoughts.

The day before Lady Alicia left, Banty arrived to see Joan. At first she rather seemed to resent Lady Alicia’s presence in the room, but before very long, her brusque manner left her, and she began confiding eagerly in the gentle lady before her.

“It’s so beastly dull in frosty weather,” she said. “I’m quite glad to come down here, and Joan is always cheerful and good tempered. The very sight of her does me good.”

Joan had been called out of the room for a moment when Banty made this remark.

“She’s a dear girl,” said Lady Alicia warmly. “It is a great talent, I consider, to be able thoroughly to enjoy the little comforts in our daily life. Joan loves the scent of a flower, the breeze on the moor, the sight of a sunset, a fire-lit room, and a hundred other details which would escape some people’s observation altogether.”

“They wouldn’t mean much to me,” said Banty frankly. “I love sport, you know. That comes first with me. The country, with all its scents and sights, is only a background. Joan scolded me the other day. I’ve been puzzling over her words. She told me to wake up, and said there was a part of me that wanted to be stirred into life. Now I consider I’m alive to my

finger-tips. I can spot a fox two or three fields off, and there isn't much going on out of doors that I don't know about!"

"You must ask Joan one day what she did mean," said Lady Alicia, looking at her kindly.

"I don't think she's one of that preaching lot. I couldn't stand any of that. She's too jolly in herself to mean anything canty."

Lady Alicia wisely changed the subject. After Banty had gone, she said to Joan:

"There's a girl who needs a helpful woman friend. I am so glad that she likes you, and that you have begun to influence her."

"I don't know that I have. I tried to say something the other day, but she did not respond. Banty is very difficult, Lady Alicia. I feel, in talking with her, that unless you're on the subject of sport, you might as well be bumping your head against a stone wall for all the impression you will make."

"I think you will make way in time. Pray a lot before you speak."

"Oh, I wish you were going to stay longer," said Joan impulsively.

"I wish I could. One day you must come and stay with me. I should like to take you abroad. But I shall like to look back and remember this visit of mine. Your environment is the right one for you, Joan, and I am quite content that for the time your literary powers should be in abeyance."

When Lady Alicia had left, Joan felt rather lonely. But the rush and bustle of Christmas was upon her, taxing all her powers; and when it was over, Mrs. Adair wrote saying that she and Cecil would be coming home for a couple of weeks before they went abroad. Those two weeks brought a mixture of pleasure and pain to Joan. Cecil was in high spirits, and Mrs. Adair much less captious and difficult to please. But the rector grew very depressed, and confided to Joan that he did not know where the money would come from for all that was needed. And it seemed to Joan that every post brought parcels from town with expensive gowns and wraps, and odds and ends, from shoes and boots to soap and veils and gloves.

She remonstrated with Cecil when she showed her a delicately painted chiffon scarf that had cost four guineas.

"Do you forget that Father is a poor man? This will never come out of your allowance, and he has already a sheaf of bills which he does not know how to pay. It is not honest or right, Cecil. I could not do it if I were in your place."

“My dear old strait-laced Joan, your mouth is drawing itself down till your lips meet your chin! Do, for pity’s sake, mind your own business! Bills can wait. It isn’t cash on delivery with us. And Father is too fussy! He always makes a moan over his poverty—always has! And he is not a poor man now. Now just tell me if you think these blue feathers match that blue cloth gown of mine. I’m not satisfied with them. I think I shall send them back.”

Joan curbed her impatience. She shook her head at her. Cecil continued in a different tone.

“Of course you live in such a hole here that you can have no idea how people in society dress nowadays. I’m simply nowhere and nobody—in the swim. Why, your old black evening dress was made six years ago, now wasn’t it? But it does quite well for the frump parties in Old Bellerton. Have you been to any more dinner parties? And have you got to know the proud scholar and the hermit major?”

“Yes,” said Joan quietly. “I know them both. Mr. Wilmot Gascoigne is still in town. He has been there for some weeks, and Major Armitage has just come home. He took the service last Sunday evening and played exquisitely.”

“Get him to play this next Sunday and come to supper afterwards. I like him. He’s a mystery.”

“He won’t do that.”

Joan spoke with conviction. She had rather timidly suggested to Major Armitage that he should come to dine when her mother returned, and he had promptly though courteously refused.

“Ah, well,” said Cecil, “thank goodness in another week we shall be in another clime.”

A day or two after this, Joan approached her mother on the subject of expense. She dreaded speaking, but her father had asked her to try to make her mother understand that it was not meanness on his part, but sheer inability to produce what was required. And she knew that her father shrank from all altercations about money affairs.

Joan plunged into the subject with heightened colour. She was packing a trunk in her mother’s bedroom—a trunk of miscellaneous articles which was also to contain a good many books.

“I wish Cecil would pack a few more books and a few less gowns,” she said. “She seems to have no idea of economy in dress.”

“She is rather extravagant,” said Mrs. Adair. “But I was like it at her age; I hope she will require less as time goes on.”

“She does not realise how really poor we are, Mother. Do you know that Father has overdrawn two hundred pounds from his bank this year already? And he has a big bundle of bills all waiting to be paid. I don’t know what we are to do. I feel I must make money if I can in some way; but how to do it in this village is the difficulty!”

After a moment’s pause Mrs. Adair replied:

“I think I shall be able to help him more in future. I am thinking of writing a book on the Riviera. I have had it formulated in my own mind for a long time—not a guide book, but a chatty history of the sunny shores of the Mediterranean. And this, in addition to my reason for taking Cecil, is why I wish to go abroad this year; I want to locate some of my facts. There is nothing that pays so well, or so quickly, as writing books. If this one is successful there will be no money difficulties in future. I tell you this in confidence. I do not want it talked about until it is accomplished.”

“I do hope it will be a success,” said Joan warmly. “It is sure to be, Mother, if you write as you talk.”

This idea of Mrs. Adair’s did much to bring comfort and hope to Joan’s heart. And the last days were, on the whole, pleasant to them all.

On the evening prior to their departure they gathered round the drawing-room fire for a last talk together. Mr. Adair patted his wife’s hand affectionately as he sat next to her.

“I shall look forward to having you back very soon, Cecilia. When the early summer comes you will lose your heart to this place, and, please God, we shall have a happy summer together.”

Mrs. Adair smiled. She was in one of her softest moods that night, and Joan was glad afterwards to be able to look back and remember it.

“It is a pity you cannot take a chaplaincy abroad in the winter, then we could be together.”

“Ah! but I could not leave my parish, and I do not think I am cut out for that kind of billet. I love my poor folk, and am very happy here. I think you would like it, if you would try to settle down. We must hope Cecil will grow stronger. She looks very well just now.”

" 'Her looks never pity her,' as your poor folk say. I wish she could outgrow her delicacy."

"We must be thankful we have one daughter who does us credit," said Mr. Adair, looking across at Joan with much pride and affection.

Cecil laughed:

"For mercy's sake don't pit Joan and me one against the other. This talk is much too personal. I hope you will pursue the friendship of the Major, Joan. I must tell you a very interesting fact. You know what the people say of his property, that no heir will be born in it till it reverts to its old owners?"

"Yes, I have heard it quite lately."

"Well, at Uncle Robert's we were looking up some of the family genealogies one evening, and, lo and behold! we have an ancestress, a certain Gertrude Rolleston, who was the only daughter and heiress more than a hundred years ago. She married a Lovell, and her cousin came in for the property. I can't think why she did not. She seems to have dropped out of the running. Now, if you and the Major would only make a match of it, the spell of bad luck would be broken, and Rolleston Court would be flourishing once more."

"Don't be ridiculous, Cecil."

"Tell him you are a direct descendant of the last of the Rollestons and see what he says."

"But I think from what I hear," put in the rector, "that the Major's affections are engaged elsewhere."

"Then he must promptly break it off and bestow his affections on Joan," said Cecil. "He will if he knows she will bring luck to him again."

"Some people value love more than luck," said Joan lightly. She knew it was of no use taking Cecil seriously.

Cecil made a grimace.

"Who thinks of love nowadays! People who go in for it are simply cultivating misery for themselves. If there's no love there's no jealousy or grief in separation. It's the greatest mistake in the world to let your heart govern your life."

"My dear child," said her mother, feeling obliged to remonstrate, "don't affect such misanthropy. Be simple and natural, and don't pretend you believe what you say."

A slight flush came to Cecil's cheeks. Her mother so seldom reproved her that she hardly knew how to take it.

"I should be sorry to be as soft and sentimental as Joan is," she said a little scornfully.

"Am I?" Joan returned good-naturedly. "The other day I was visiting an invalid dressmaker in the village who feeds her mind on penny novelettes, and when I suggested a different kind of literature she said: 'Eh, Miss Adair, 'tis easy to see that you carry no feelin' heart, for there be no wrinkles on your brow. You would smile—now wouldn't you?—if all your lovers were languishin' and dyin' for reciprocation from you. It wouldn't make so much as your eyelashes flutter!' "

"I can't conceive how you can let the villagers speak to you so," said Cecil, crossly refusing to laugh.

"Well, you see what my character is in their eyes."

Conversation then turned on other things. When the sisters separated for the night, Joan said affectionately:

"I wish you and I saw more of each other, Cecil. We hardly know each other, do we?"

"No," said Cecil, looking at her half curiously, half wistfully. "You are an enigma to me. You seem to feel some things so intensely and others not at all. If I had to live your present life I should die of the dumps within six months. I suppose your requirements are fewer than mine, and yet Mother tells me she considers that I haven't half your brain."

Joan was silent for a moment, then she said slowly:

"Content can be cultivated, Cecil."

Cecil shrugged her shoulders.

"Content would make a beggar live and die in a ditch."

They went the next morning. Both Joan and her father drove to the station to see them off. They were all cheerful up to the last minute; but as Joan was driving her father home again in the little jingle, he said to her:

"These dreadful partings are a sore trial to me. I feel now as if your mother and I will never live together again. It is hoping against hope. I never thought they would go away this winter. I did expect that our altered circumstances would induce them to stay at home."

“It is the cold, Father, dear. Cecil has been so accustomed to winter out of England that she does not seem as if she can endure our cold.”

The rector shook his head, and it was days before he could overcome his depression. Joan needed all her cheerful spirits to make the wheels go round. Even Sophia was cross and grumpy.

“The mistress will repent it one day, when the dear old master be taken from her,” she said to Joan.

“Hush, hush, Sophia! It is not your place to criticise my mother.”

Joan’s head was held high as she spoke. Sophia gave a sniff.

“ ’Tis like the rest of the world—’tis most of it mixed wrongly. There be women who don’t know the value of men, and then there be men who make havoc of faithful women’s hearts. The single are the blessed of the earth, as I tell M’ria. If he only knew it, the Major is courtin’ disaster when his heart is so full of a wife.”

Joan was wise enough to make no reply. She occupied herself more than ever in the parish, and in a week or two her father had recovered his usual equanimity of mind, and had settled down into his customary groove.

CHAPTER XI

LITERARY ATTEMPTS

"Joan, will you entertain Major Armitage? Our smoke and chat have been interrupted, for John Veale has come up to have a talk about the bell-ringers."

The rector ushered the Major into the drawing-room as he spoke. Joan was sitting by the fire, a big work-basket by her side; she was mending house-linen with a skilful hand, but her thoughts were far away. She was in a thin blue-grey gown, which became her fairness and intensified the deep blue of her eyes. Her thoughtful, abstracted air vanished, her smile and dimple appeared, as she rose to greet the guest.

"I did not know you were here," she said. "I have heard voices in the study, and concluded it was John Veale, who was expected. I am so glad you have been having a chat with Father; he does so enjoy it. But he and I generally separate after dinner for an hour. He very often has a nap."

"I hope I am not an interruption to you."

"Indeed you are not." Joan sat down and took up her mending again. "I can work as well as talk."

"I don't doubt that, but it was interruption of thoughts which I meant."

Joan looked up at him and smiled.

"They were unprofitable," she said. "The fact is, I was worrying over things, and I am glad to be interrupted."

"And that was what brought me out and down to your organ," said the Major; "and after I had quieted myself I turned in here. The rector has good, sound, wholesome views of life. He did me good in five minutes."

Joan did not answer for a moment. The Major looked across at the piano, a semi-grand, belonging to Mrs. Adair. "May I play to you what I played in church just now?" he asked simply.

"Oh, please. I shall like to hear it."

He sat down and played Sullivan's "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes."

His liquid and exquisite touch, the expression and tone which he got from the instrument, and the sweet melody itself, brought tears of delight to Joan's eyes. She was emotional and impressionable where music was concerned, and when the last notes died away she sat with misty eyes gazing into the blazing fire. Then she roused herself.

"Don't stop," she said. "It is heavenly!"

Major Armitage ran his fingers over the keys and began to improvise. From discord to harmony, from unrest to peace—that seemed the burden of his theme. He stopped rather abruptly at last, and came and reseated himself by the fire.

"Feel better?" he inquired cheerily.

"Ever so much," said Joan. "How well I can understand Saul being soothed by music. It lifts one right outside oneself and up into infinity. How I wish I had your gift!"

He shook his head in disapproval.

"I don't think it has brought me any good. It makes one unfit to mix with one's fellow-creatures, and fosters unsociability and the habits of a recluse. And I am not the musician I ought to be. I give so much time to composing that I leave little time for practising."

"You have published a good deal, have you not?"

"Chiefly songs. I want to instil a love for melody into the present generation. It is despised nowadays—our grandfathers and grandmothers loved it—and it touches the emotions and heart like nothing else."

"Yes," said Joan, thoughtfully; "I know what you mean. One hears so much brilliant and hard playing, such good technique, and such weird harmonies that music does anything but soothe; it needs all one's brain to understand and follow it. And, somehow or other, people are afraid of playing anything else. There is so little music in the average home now. Girls are not able to attain to the standard put before them, and so they refuse to play at all. Even Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn are out of fashion, though they will never lose their charm." Then she added in an impulsive tone: "That is what I was wishing when you came into the room, that I could originate—compose—not music, but books. My mother says it pays so well. I am half inclined to try."

"There are a good many in the field," said Major Armitage, doubtfully. "Don't turn yourself into a writer, Miss Adair; so many want you in your

capacity of general adviser and comforter. You will become like me, self-absorbed and isolated, and indifferent to your fellow-creatures."

"Oh, why should I?"

"I don't know. I suppose the creatures of one's brain are dearer to one than those of flesh and blood. One lives in imagination, and not in fact."

"I don't think I could write stories," said Joan; "but I was always good at essay writing, and I thought of trying a few articles on country life and Nature. I want money badly, Major Armitage, though perhaps I should not say so to you. I feel I must try and earn something, and it is difficult when one is tied to a country village like this."

"Have you tried your hand at poetry?"

"No," said Joan, slowly; "at least, I suppose I am not an exception to most girls. When we are very young we all try to be poets! But it is not my line."

"I wish it were mine," said the Major, with a little sigh. "I get ideas at the piano for which I want words. I make a few bungling attempts, but I am not cut out for it."

Joan thought of the sweet little poem she had returned, but said not a word.

"Try your hand at writing, Miss Adair, if you want to do so. I have a great friend. He is editor of 'English Thoughts,' and he is very fond of country articles and Nature studies. If you would allow me to submit one of your ventures to him, he would say at once whether he could use it or not."

"I am afraid it would be a quick refusal, but you inspire me to try, and I should be most grateful for the introduction." Then she added: "Of course, I need not say that I want my efforts to be unknown."

"I will respect your confidence, but"—and here a little smile came to his lips—"I am not a talker, so I shall not be dangerous in that way." Then he said: "I have an invitation to Ireland, and I do not know that I ought not to accept it; but I can't leave home for another month, for I have work that must be finished. I have a widowed sister, with one child, living in the country near Donegal."

"Of course, you will go?"

"Yes; I am the only one who can. I have no responsibilities. My other brothers are all married men."

They were interrupted in their talk by the rector's entrance, and soon afterwards Major Armitage went. But Joan found her thoughts straying after him. She was becoming very interested in his affairs, and mused upon the strange mixture that was in his composition—the dual nature of a dreamy and imaginative musician and a keen soldier.

The very next day she started her first attempt at literature. Her father was so increasingly anxious about ways and means that she felt desperate. But she found it extremely difficult to get quiet time for writing. It was an impossibility throughout the day, as she had incessant interruptions. But after dinner, in the evening, when her father retired to his study for a nap, she seized her pen and paper, and, sitting by the drawing-room fire, tried to produce some of the thoughts and impressions of her brain. It was difficult work at first. She wrote, and destroyed, revised, and destroyed again; and when, eventually, she accomplished a short article, which she entitled, "An Autumn Afternoon on our Heath," she was strangely dissatisfied with it. She was shy of mentioning it to her father, and the more she read it the less she liked it. At last, plucking up her courage, she sent it over to Major Armitage, with the following note:

> "Dear Major Armitage,—I send you my first attempt. If it is too crude, too uninteresting and amateurish, do not send it to your friend. I will wait till I can do better. Is it troubling you too much to ask you to read it, and act according to your judgment?—Yours sincerely,
>
> "Joan Adair."

She received an answer in two hours' time:

> "Dear Miss Adair,—Pluck up heart! It is first-rate, and I have dispatched it by this evening's post. May it prosper in the hands of the editor.—Your sincere friend,
>
> "R. Armitage."

Joan resigned herself to patient waiting. Meanwhile fortune favoured her, for one morning Mrs. Blount, the doctor's wife, arrived to ask her advice about a governess for her two little boys. Joan promptly proposed herself as teacher, and Mrs. Blount was delighted. She agreed to send the children to the rectory every morning from nine to twelve.

Mr. Adair made no objections, and Joan took the children into the dining-room, where they were busy all the morning. It was not liberal pay, for the doctor was not a wealthy man, but two pounds per month was well worth to Joan the few hours of her time, and she did not grudge the extra work thrown upon her shoulders in the afternoon. The boys were already devoted to her, and they proved docile and intelligent pupils. One morning Wilmot Gascoigne appeared, and was very much annoyed when Sophia told him that Joan was engaged and could not see him. He came round again about tea-time, and reproached Joan with having treated him so.

She explained, but the frown did not leave his brow.

"What waste of good material! How can you bring yourself to do it?"

"I love it. They are dears. Besides, I want the money."

"Oh, what a curse the—the want of money is! I should be in America now if it were not for that reason. And poverty is a shameful incentive to talent or genius. It is so degrading—the matter of pounds, shillings and pence!"

"I don't know," said Joan, impulsively. "Poverty is an incentive to me—to attempt! I am trying my hand at writing."

Wilmot smiled and held out his hand.

"Shake hands. I always thought you would be a success in that line. May I see the attempt?"

"Major Armitage has it—or, rather, a friend of his has it by this time, I hope."

The disgust, as well as astonishment, depicted on Wilmot's face made Joan laugh.

"That music crank! Well, I did think, considering our friendship and intercourse, that you would have come to me first for advice about a literary effort."

"You have been away," faltered Joan.

"Then could you not have written? Is it a case of being out of sight out of mind?"

Joan hardly knew what to say.

"The fact is I have too many friends," she said lightly, "and I am perfectly certain that this poor attempt of mine is doomed to failure. It is just

as well that you have had nothing to do with it, Mr. Gascoigne."

"Have you any of your writing which you could show me?" Wilmot asked eagerly.

"I am such a beginner. I am simply doing it to get money, not from love of producing. I don't even know if there is anything inside me that is worth producing."

"If there is, and I believe there is," said Wilmot, looking at her thoughtfully, "you and I will produce something together. I'll stay down here on purpose. It will be worth it."

"I couldn't think of working with anyone else," said Joan, quickly. "Why, all my ideas would run dry at once!"

"You never know what you can do till you try. You must have a copy of what you have sent up. Do prove yourself a friend and show it to me."

Very reluctantly, Joan left the room to get her much corrected and very untidy MS. Wilmot frowned impatiently when she had left the room.

"It's always my luck to be too late on the field. Plague take that dotty Major! Why on earth does he poach on my preserves! And what a Hebe she is! I haven't seen a woman in town who can hold a candle to her! She's utterly wasted in this hole. If she is to be a literary success—and she has no average woman's intellect—I'm determined that mine shall be the hand to lead her to fame, and no other!"

Fate was against Wilmot at present, for Joan entered the room again much more hurriedly than she left it.

"Oh, I am so sorry, but they have sent for me; I shall have to fly. Little Johnnie Craddings has scalded himself, and his mother is out for the day. Do you care to come down the village with me, or would you like a chat with my father?"

"I will come with you, if you are not going to adopt motor speed."

"Poor little Johnnie!" gasped Joan. She was literally running down the drive, and Wilmot Gascoigne, with a face as black as night, was trying to keep pace with her. He endeavoured to turn the current of her thoughts to literature again, but it was hopeless. Johnnie's accident engrossed Joan's mind to the exclusion of every other subject.

He accompanied her to the door of the cottage, then took a surly farewell of her, and returned to the Hall, feeling furious with Major Armitage and

with poor Johnnie.

Joan did not see him till a fortnight later, and, meantime, she had the joy of hearing that her article was accepted and that others of a similar character could be taken.

With her two small pupils and literary work in addition to her usual household and village duties, Joan was now more than busy, but she enjoyed it all; and when she handed the cheque for her first article to her father to help pay some of the numerous bills which were so distressing him, it was the happiest hour in her life.

He was at first reluctant to take it. “It is yours, my dear child. Why should I rob you of your first earnings?”

“Ah! but I am earning to help you; and, after all, Dad, dear, the bills are as much mine as yours. We cannot separate ourselves from our joint expenses.”

“They are mostly your mother’s debts—and—and Cecil’s.”

“Yes—well, that is what I mean. You and I are going to try to pay them off. They belong to our family.”

It was a day or two after this that Joan was invited with her father to dine at the Hall. It was not a dinner party; only themselves, another neighbouring rector (who was a bachelor), and a General and Mrs. Thane. There was a sister of Lady Gascoigne’s staying in the house. Wilmot took Joan in to dinner, and talked hard about literature as a profession the whole time.

“It is the most satisfying life on earth,” he said enthusiastically. “Singers lose their voices, actresses their charm, when age creeps on; but the brain only mellows and ripens and gains in experience with every added year. You are great on influence, Miss Adair. Think of the wide-reaching influence of the pen! No other profession can touch it in its infinity of power and scope.”

Joan felt her heart throb as she caught some of his enthusiasm. She, who had longed to impart knowledge and mould character, now had a vision of a wide and never-ending stream of influence flowing from her pen.

Then he came to more personal details.

“I read your little article, and see much promise in it. You have the faculty of seeing with your own eyes, and describing with quaint freshness your own impressions; and they are original. We do not want platitudes or mediocre writing in these days. There is a lack of style and finish which can

soon be remedied. If you would allow me to look at your next attempt, I could show you in a moment what I mean."

Joan murmured her thanks. She was grateful for the interest which Wilmot showed in her first effort and for the encouragement which he was giving her.

When dinner was over, and the ladies were in the drawing-room, Banty came brusquely up to her.

"Now, look here, don't you get too thick with Motty, for he has a way of preying on likely subjects who minister to his self-love and become his willing and devoted slaves. He took up a poor cousin of mine who thought she could write poetry. I believe she could have done so if he had left her alone, but he altered and clipped her work to suit his own ideas, and subjugated her mind to his, till it became a mass of confused pulp, and then, when her writing turned to insipid rot, he shrugged his shoulders and cast her from him in contempt."

Joan looked at Banty in surprise. She had never heard her talk on any subject but hunting, and was for a moment silent.

Banty gave a nervous laugh.

"Yes, I can see through Motty, though he considers me on a level with the lower animals. 'A good old cow,' I have heard him call me. But cows perhaps notice more than we give them credit for. You're too good a sort to be crushed by him. He is mostly gas, you know! And all his big talk won't make me believe in him. Now, let us put him out of our thoughts. I want another tea amongst the pines with you."

"The weather is too wet at present, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I think under the trees we shan't feel it. But I expect you're not quite so weather-proof as I am. I'll come round to you. Will you be in the day after to-morrow? I'm not hunting, so I'll look in about four."

"All right. I shall expect you then."

"And now you must talk to Aunt Hetty. Ask her to play. She rather fancies herself as a musician. Motty says it's like a cat scrambling over the keys; but she attends every concert going in town, and is up in all the musical jargon of the day."

Joan was then introduced to Miss Parracombe, who was a tall and angular lady, with a very large nose and a small chin.

“I hear you play the organ in church?” she began at once. “I hope it is from choice, and not from duty, that you do it. It’s a sad pity this is such an unmusical house. I feel like a fish out of water. I was hoping to meet a Major Armitage. Do you know him? They tell me he shuts himself up in the country. But I know friends of his in town, and, as a composer of a certain style, he is well known. I asked my sister to have him to dinner. She says he always refuses to dine out. But I can quite understand that he finds no kindred soul in this house, and does not want to spend the precious hours of his time in uncongenial society. I find it a trial myself. This perpetual talk of hunting and sport bores me to death. Will you play to us, Miss Adair? I am sure you are musical.”

Joan shook her head, but asked Miss Parracombe if she would play herself, and she went to the piano with much alacrity. She began a fugue of Bach’s, which she certainly played correctly, though without an atom of expression. Joan listened with interest. She had expected the old lady to play some of the old-fashioned “fireworks” of her young days. Banty yawned, and Lady Gascoigne exchanged whispered remarks with Mrs. Thane. It was a relief to all when the gentlemen came into the room, and very soon afterwards Mr. Adair and Joan took their departure. Wilmot accompanied them into the hall.

“Will you be in on Friday afternoon?” he asked Joan.

“Yes. Banty is coming to tea. Do come with her.”

“Dash her!” he muttered. “The next day, then?”

“I am afraid I am engaged. Father and I are going over to a neighbouring rectory to tea.”

“When will you be disengaged?”

His voice was coldly quiet.

Joan looked up at him and laughed. “I’m a very busy person!”

“So I gather. I’ll drop in on Saturday evening, after dinner. I shall be in town to-morrow for a night. I must see you soon. I want a talk with you.”

“Very well. I shall be at home.”

Joan and her father drove home in their little jingle. They could not afford the village fly, for Joan was economising in every direction. She was silent for some minutes; then she said:

“Do you like Mr. Gascoigne, Dad? Do you think him a reliable man? I always think you’re a judge of character.”

“He does not appeal to me,” said Mr. Adair, promptly. “He is a man who can only talk shop, and if anyone is not interested in his tastes, he will not trouble to make himself pleasant to them. Naturally, I prefer Major Armitage’s society, for I know nothing of literature, especially of the literature that Wilmot Gascoigne likes to talk about. With Armitage I am at home. He doesn’t discuss music, but village topics and politics—anything which he knows interests me.”

“Yes,” said Joan, slowly. “I suppose Mr. Gascoigne is one-sided; but it is difficult to suppress the fullness of one’s heart. He is so enthusiastic! Perhaps he may be selfish and intolerant; Banty thinks he is. But he carries me away when once he begins to talk.”

She wondered, as she lay awake that night reviewing the evening that was past, whether he would, as Banty said, seek to subjugate her mind to his, and fetter and clip her originality.

CHAPTER XII

TROUBLE AT ROLLESTON COURT

Banty arrived on Friday afternoon.

"My aunt has been putting her foot in it," she informed Joan. "Would you believe it, she forced her way into Rolleston Court yesterday afternoon? She went out for a constitutional, and a shower of rain came on. She was told that the Major was engaged. 'Oh, never mind, I am sure he won't object to my taking shelter for a short time,' she said, and in she went. His housekeeper took her into the drawing-room and entertained her for about half an hour. She gave her tea, and though it was getting dusk, Aunt Hetty wouldn't budge. She talked away to the housekeeper, and I expect made her giddy with her talk. I know she does me! Then she heard the sounds of music upstairs.

" 'Yes, 'tis the Major playing in the music-room,' she was told. Then she got up, and I can fancy her excitement.

"I am a musician myself—a fellow artiste. We are kindred spirits. I must hear him. He will not mind." She stole upstairs, and listened outside the door at first, then boldly opened it and crept in behind a screen. His music was so exquisite, she told us, that she forgot herself and clapped her hands loudly. She said he sang a perfectly lovely little song about some invisible lady love, and it was that which bowled her over. In an instant he appeared; and she says his eyes flashed fire and he was white with rage. He took her by the arm and marched her downstairs.

" 'If a man cannot have privacy in his own house,' he spit out, 'where can he have it? I don't know who you are, nor do I care; but this is an unwarrantable intrusion!' She tried to explain who she was, but he firmly and quietly ejected her, and she came home boiling and spluttering with rage.

"I left her writing a long letter of explanation to him this afternoon. She seems to think her appreciation of his music is sufficient excuse for an impertinence on her part. What awful tempers these writers and musicians have! It's the artistic temperament, isn't it? That's what they call it. I must say I'm thankful not to possess it. It takes a good bit to rouse my ire; but Motty is awful to live with, and they're all so restless and excitable. Of

course, I don't know much of Major Armitage, but he's queer. I expect my aunt will come down and victimise you pretty soon. She wants to get up a village concert. Do put her off it if you can. I'm morally certain Major Armitage won't appear at it, and you and she will have to do the whole of it."

Banty paused for breath.

"I'm sorry for poor Major Armitage," said Joan feelingly. "Maria told Sophia that he is most tenacious over his privacy. When Dad was ill in his house, I never saw the inside of that music-room. It is his sanctum in every sense of the word."

"Well, don't let us talk any more about him. I'm amused at Aunt Hetty's set-back. Let's talk about ourselves. Only first of all I wish you'd tell me why you've turned yourself into a governess. Is it from sheer love of teaching?"

"No; want of money," said Joan frankly.

"I'm sorry. Don't think me a meddler, but isn't this a fairly good living? I'm sure nobody could accuse you of extravagant living."

"I hope not," Joan said with her happy laugh. "But we had heavy expenses before we came here."

"How is your sister Cecil?" Banty asked abruptly. "I always think she ought to make a good marriage; she is just the sort that men admire. I think a girl who hunts hasn't the same chances as one of these feminine, alluring girls who give men such copious admiration. We become good chums with men, but no more. Only a few care for open-air wives—you know what I mean. You'll think I'm always talking about marriage, but I feel sore. I thought it well out and have sent Mr. Nugent about his business. I came to the conclusion I couldn't run in harness with him. I should jib! Yesterday I heard he is just engaged to Molly Lambert. She lives in the next county. So much for deep attachment! I expect he only wants a housekeeper, and in that case Molly will suit him better than I, for she has managed her father's house since she was twelve years old. But he didn't lose much time, did he? And Mother is quietly furious. Do you think I have a miserable time ahead of me if I remain single?"

"Of course not; but——"

"Yes; give me your 'buts.' I loved your little preach some time ago. I think you almost made my soul—as you call it—flutter, for, do you know, I'm beginning to believe I have one."

"I can only repeat what I said before, that there is one side of us—and the only side that can bring us lasting happiness—which needs to be cultivated."

"The religious side, I suppose you mean? If church doesn't cultivate it, what will? And I'm a most regular attendant at church, let me tell you. But it has never made the least difference to me."

"You want to be in touch with God Himself," said Joan softly.

Banty leant back in her chair and stared at her perfectly uncomprehendingly.

"That wouldn't make *me* happy," she said with conviction, "quite the reverse. Now I'll be quite honest with you. There's nothing in me that responds in the least bit to religion. I don't see the need for it. I don't want to live my life up in the clouds. This world is good enough for me."

There was silence. Banty frowned, then said:

"I've got enough, thanks, for to-day."

Joan smiled, then laid her hand caressingly on her arm.

"I shall end by getting very fond of you, Banty."

The colour actually deepened in Banty's cheek.

"Same with me," she said a little gruffly.

They talked of other things then, and when Mr. Adair came in, Banty lapsed into her usual abrupt and rather dull style of talk. Before she went, she said to Joan, in the hall:

"I'm getting interested in you. I'm planning out your future."

"As you wish it to be, or as you think it will be?"

"As I wish it. I mean to frustrate one possible future for you if I can."

She gave her a nod, and went without another word. Joan gazed after her with a smile and a sigh.

"There are depths in her after all. What bunglers we are!"

Wilmot Gascoigne did not forget to appear on Saturday night. He sat over the fire with Joan and fascinated her with his talk. Just before he left he said:

"I have left the main object of my visit till now. I feel that you and I have the same intuition about certain phases of life. For a long time I have been

anxious to write a book which will do more than amuse the public—that kind of novel has a run for a year, then disappears as quickly as it came. I want to write for futurity. Now, my theory is that a woman writer can never write naturally and effectively about a man in all his various stages, nor can a man gauge a woman's fluctuating moods correctly, for each can only judge of the minds of the opposite sex by what they see and hear, never from the fount of their own experience. I want to instruct and to awaken the dormant intellects of my readers. To do this, the book must be strong; it must have no weak points; it must not flag in interest; it must stimulate the curiosity, and, in short, I need a woman collaborator. Now, will you be that woman? Down in this quiet hole, we shall have plenty of time and opportunity for discussion and suggestions. I have already simmering in my mind a dozen plots. I want a woman's delicate intuition, her feminine instinct, to help me in evolving a creation of what a woman should be in our present generation. I don't want to create one of the shrieking sisterhood—a mockery of all that is truly feminine and uplifting—nor do I want a flimsy, insipid Early Victorian doll. I know you are the one woman in the world who can help me at this juncture—will you do it?"

"It is rather a startling proposition," said Joan, with a long-drawn breath. "I suppose I ought to feel flattered. I do. I thank you for thinking of me. Writing is so new to me that I feel like a duckling on the edge of a pond trying for the first time the element of water. But I am afraid I shall have no time. I can hardly get through my days as it is. And how about you? Are you nearly through your Chronicles? Won't they have to be finished first?"

Wilmot gave a little snort.

"They'll never be finished," he said. "I'm already bored to tears with them. There's nothing in the dull, monotonous lives of the Gascoignes to make the book live. It will be a series of births, marriages, and deaths, and of dates. I would like to make a bonfire of the whole."

"Why don't you finish them up?"

"Because I'm always hoping to rake out something racy from the piles of dusty manuscripts and letters I have given to me. They won't let me invent. It would be easy sailing then. I tell you the Gascoigne Chronicles are dulling my powers and fettering my genius. You can't live for ever on dry bread. I want to sandwich my book in; it will be jam and butter to me!"

Joan laughed. She felt strangely stirred. Wilmot's society was delightful to her. He talked of books and of subjects of which she had heard and talked at college. He had theories on every fact of life, and opened vistas of new

thought and conjecture to her. She longed to throw herself heart and soul into this project of collaboration with him, but she felt, under her circumstances, that it would prove too engrossing an occupation.

"You must give me time to think about it," she said. "I will give you an answer in a few days, but I doubt if I could really help you."

"I shall not allow you to refuse me," he said, with one of the smiles that always transfigured his face.

But when he had gone Banty's words recurred to her: "He has a way of preying on likely subjects who minister to his self-love and become his willing and devoted slaves."

They made her feel a little uncomfortable, and then she resolutely put them from her.

"Banty and he are at daggers drawn. She is unfair to him. I will not believe that she is right in such a statement."

Sunday came. It was a busy and a happy day with Joan. She loved her Sunday scholars, she loved her choir, and the music she produced from the sweet little organ. The services were always a rest and refreshment to her. Major Armitage came into the rectory after evening church and stayed to supper.

"I suppose you have heard of my iniquities?" he said to Joan. "I expect the Hall will be cuts with me now."

"No, I think they must all have felt that Miss Parracombe was to blame."

"Ah! You have heard about it, then? I lost my temper and manners, and showed her the door. But I have always believed that an Englishman's house is his castle. They say I have a bee in my bonnet. I will entertain ladies one day—at least, that is my hope—but never until I have one of their sex to help me do it."

The shadow fell upon his face. Joan was silent for a minute; then she said gently:

"Miss Parracombe is a musician; she longs to meet you."

"Oh, yes, I know; and I don't like musicians, Miss Adair. Isn't that a bad confession? I have suffered from them in town, and I cannot take part in their ready jargon. It is the clash of sounding brass to me; I would rather shut my ears to it. Don't you think we all talk too much?"

“I don’t know,” said Joan a little wistfully. “I learn a good deal from other people’s talk; and is not exchange of ideas always good?”

The hard, set lines about his face disappeared. He smiled.

“I like to talk to you,” he said simply. “Well, Miss Parracombe has sent me a voluminous explanation and apology, and I a very short and curt one. She insisted upon shaking hands with me after church this morning, and I have again been invited to the Hall—to lunch, to tea, or to dinner. I have declined politely, and that is where we stand at present. How is the writing getting on?”

“I want to see myself in print,” said Joan, laughing and colouring. “When do you think my article will appear?”

“Any time between this and next Christmas, I should say. Have you been paid for it?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, you’ll see it soon.”

“I have written a few more on the same lines, and two have been accepted, one returned. The editor tells me not to go ahead too fast.”

“Why does he return one?”

“He said it had too much of a religious element in it.”

Joan’s face was very grave as she spoke; then she turned towards him and her gaze was sweet and earnest.

“Major Armitage, if I cannot write about what is breath and life to me, I will not write at all.”

“What is your object in writing?” he asked slowly.

“To make money, I am afraid.”

“Then you must be guided by the taste of the public and the advice of your editor.”

Joan’s brows were furrowed with deep thought.

“I hear you sing in church,” said Major Armitage; “will you sing to me now?”

She was rather glad to have a change of subject.

“I haven’t much of a voice,” she said, “but I will do my best.”

"Will you sing 'O rest in the Lord.' I will play for you."

They went to the piano.

Joan's voice was true and very sweet; it had a pathetic ring in it which often brought tears to the eyes of those who heard her. The Major drew a long sigh when he had struck the last chord. Mr. Adair, who was always very tired on Sunday night, and who had been napping in his arm-chair whilst the talk had been going on, now roused himself to say:

"That is beautiful, my dear Joan. Will you sing the evening hymn now? —'Abide with me.' "

Major Armitage knew at once which setting it was, and ran his fingers over the keys.

When she had finished he rose from his seat and held out his hand.

"I want that to be the last thing I hear," he said, smiling at her. "It will ring in my head as I walk home."

When he had gone Joan sat down by the fire and relapsed into deep thought. If her voice was still in his ears, so was his in hers. "You must be guided by the taste of the public if you wish to make money." "What do I wish?" she said to herself. "If I can write, how awfully responsible I am for what I write. I could make money, I suppose, in lots of ways that would be neither honourable nor consistent with my principles. Shall I throw my principles to the winds for the sake of money? I cannot. And yet, when I think of lifting the strain from Father's shoulders, of easing him of this dreadful wearing anxiety, I feel as if I must throw everything to the winds and do it."

A few days after this, Sophia called Joan into the kitchen in a mysterious way. It was six o'clock, and Joan at first thought that something had gone wrong with their simple dinner. But Sophia pulled the low arm-chair out for Joan to sit upon, and she knew then that a talk was forthcoming.

"You want a gossip, Sophia; I know you do; but it's a funny time to choose."

"Miss Joan, I never neglect my work. The steak pie is in the oven, and my pudding is in the steamer. My vegetables are ready to pop into the saucepans. I've sent Jenny upstairs to make herself tidy. There never was such a tousled, fuzzy head as hers in all the world before. M'ria has been to tea with me. She's in a sad way, M'ria is, for she says a body must get attached to the Major, with all his cranks. I told her he was here on the

Sunday night, and he went off with such a cheery word to me as I held open the door!

" 'Good night,' he said; this house always seems like the gate of Heaven to me. The atmosphere and harmony and music to-night have put fresh life and hope into me.' Now, those were his very words—his very last words."

"Why, Sophia," cried Joan in a startled voice, "what has happened? Has Maria brought you bad news of her master?"

"Very bad. Miss Joan. Now, listen. Yesterday, at four o'clock, the second post came in. M'ria generally takes the letters and puts them on the table in the smoking-room. The Major sees them there directly he comes in. As it happened, yesterday he hadn't gone out; he was writing business letters. M'ria knows it was business, for he called her to ask about some new kind of lamps they had had down from town for the kitchens, and he told her he was going to pay for them."

"Oh, Sophia, do get on. I don't care to know about the Major's business."

"Now, don't you fluster me. Of course, as I said to M'ria, it's just a sign of the modern times, when folks write bad news without taking the trouble to put it into a becoming black-edged envelope. They won't reckernise affliction; 'tis just that; they won't pay respect to the dead, because it makes them feel bad; and tears and becoming grief and seclusion is all things of the past. Even widows——"

"Sophia, you're doing it on purpose! Leave the widows alone and get on with your story."

"Well, Miss Joan, M'ria she handed the letters to the Major without a thought, and then, as the curtains weren't drawn, she went across to the windows and occupied herself with them; and she threw, so to speak, a look over her shoulder, for she heard him draw a very heavy breath. M'ria says she never saw a living man before turn into stone. His face was white and blue and fixed. He held a letter and gazed at the air as if—well, M'ria says it came to her in a flash that Lot's wife must have looked like it when she was turned into salt. She was so scared, M'ria was, that she crept out of the room and left him standing there. She daren't go near him; but she heard him go straight upstairs and lock himself up in the music-room. When dinner-time came he didn't come out, and then M'ria got nervous and went to the door and knocked. You do hear of such dreadful things, Miss Joan, and, of course, she was fearing the very worst. But he answered her quick and sharp:

“ ‘I want no dinner, and no disturbance,’ he said, or words similar. M’ria goes away, and she said her knees were trembling all the evening. The house was silent as a grave. And then, about ten o’clock, when the other maids had gone off to bed, to M’ria’s great relief she heard the piano playing in the music-room. She slipped upstairs to listen, for she hoped now he’d got to his music he’d be feeling better; and she was keeping a basin of soup hot against the time when he came out. And what do you think he was playing, Miss Joan? M’ria said in the empty, silent house it gave her the curdles all over. Nothing but that awful rumbling funeral march for the dead!”

Joan could say nothing. She only gazed at Sophia in silence.

“Well, M’ria waited, all of a shiver, for him to stop; and when he stopped there was silence, and still M’ria waited; and then at last the Major came out, and he walked straight for the stairs. Then she made bold to speak. ‘Please, sir,’ she began, but he stopped her with a little wave of his hand.

“ ‘Don’t speak to me,’ he said; ‘I’ve been burying my dead.’ With that he goes straight up the stairs and locks himself in his room, and M’ria said she was so overcome with tears she just had to go back to the kitchen and drink up the hot soup herself.”

Joan was too miserable to smile.

“Poor Major Armitage! I hope no very near relation has died.”

Sophia shook her head gloomily and mysteriously. “There’s no mistake, Miss Joan, in who it was. This morning, M’ria says, he’s pulled down the blinds of the boudoir and locked and bolted the door, and told M’ria that nobody is ever to go near that room again. M’ria says he’s like a tomb, stony and dead like. It’s his lady which is dead, sure enough. In fact, he kind of apologised for wasting a good dinner last night. He said to M’ria: ‘I had had bad news, and I couldn’t eat.’ Then M’ria asked, gentle like, if the household were to be in mourning; and he looked at her as if he didn’t understand her meaning. But his look so awed her that she daren’t say one word more, and that’s how it stands with him. I thought you’d be interested. I feel full up of it myself.”

“But Maria and you will keep this to yourselves?” said Joan, almost imploringly. “You won’t let the village gossip over it?”

“Miss Joan, M’ria and me know our duty towards them we serves,” said Sophia loftily.

And then Joan slipped quietly away.

Her heart ached for the lonely man; she almost felt as if his grief were hers.

CHAPTER XIII

A FATEFUL TELEGRAM

"You cannot walk so far."

"Indeed I can. It is only four miles there. I shall rest when I get there, and have my lunch and walk back. It is nothing for a strong and hearty female like myself."

"I hope Toby is not really ill?"

"No; it's only a slight swelling on his hock. He is being bandaged, and only wants a few days' rest. Don't worry, dear. I must see this woman. I have promised her husband I will, and if I cannot drive I must walk. It's a lovely afternoon. I shall enjoy it."

Joan and her father were talking together at lunch. She was taking advantage of a birthday holiday given to her small pupils to go to see one of the parishioners who had been taken to the infirmary in the neighbouring market town; and owing to the indisposition of the pony she could not use the little jingle.

"You could hire a trap from the inn," her father suggested.

Joan shook her head.

"That would be reckless expense. Have your tea, for I shall be late, as I have a good deal of shopping to get through; but I am perfectly equal to the walk."

She started in good spirits, taking Bob, her little terrier, with her. Spring was in the air; there was blue sky and bright sun shining overhead. She crossed the heath, and the fresh, pungent scent of the pines and peat refreshed and delighted her. Joan often said she could walk her worries away, and to-day was no exception to the rule. She did not feel tired when she arrived in Coppleton. She saw the sick woman, did her shopping, and had her lunch at a small confectioner's. Then, at three o'clock, she started homewards. The blue sky was gone now, and heavy black clouds were rolling up. Joan began to wish she had brought an umbrella. Before she had gone a mile from the town, rain descended in torrents. It was a lonely road, and there was no shelter of any sort near. She buttoned her coat up to her chin and pressed steadily on; but wind and rain beat her back, and she began

to feel quite exhausted. Suddenly she heard quick-trotting hoofs behind her, and a high dog-cart overtook her. She glanced up and saw it was Major Armitage. He did not seem to see her; his face was stern and set, and he was about to pass her, when in desperation she called to him. He pulled up at once.

"Good heavens, Miss Adair, what are you doing out in this storm so far from home? I can offer you a seat, but not an umbrella, I'm afraid."

"Thank you. I shall be delighted to get a lift."

She climbed in and told him where she had been. She had not seen him since Sophia had told her what had happened, and as she glanced up at him she saw a great change in his face. The dreamy wistfulness had departed; his profile might have been carved in granite, so stern and immovable it was.

He was very silent, and so was she, for a few minutes. Then she said:

"You promised to play at our evening service last Sunday, but as you did not turn up I suppose something prevented your doing so?"

He looked down at her quickly.

"I did not know I had. My promise must have been made in another life. I seem in a new era now. I'm sorry if I inconvenienced you; but the fact is I cancelled all my engagements. I—I have been through a—a good deal since I saw you last."

"I am so sorry. I am afraid you have been in trouble."

There was another silence. Then he gave a short laugh.

"My house has asserted itself. I was a fool to think I could break the long chain of ill-luck. I am thinking of shutting it up and going over to Ireland."

"So soon? We shall be sorry to lose you."

"It isn't that I run away from it," he went on slowly; "but it will never fulfil its purpose to me now, and so it is useless to me."

"But your tenants will miss you."

"Oh, no, they will not; my bailiff will look after them."

Joan hardly knew what to say.

"I have been living at the gate of paradise," he continued, "expecting and glorying in the hope that it would soon be opened to me. I have been shown that it will always remain bolted and barred to me. I have been wasting my

life, my time and thoughts, Miss Adair, over an illusion. Yet some words you uttered once have continually come to my mind: 'He performeth the thing that is appointed for me.' Do you believe it?"

"In my own experience I try to do so," said Joan thoughtfully.

Major Armitage said no more for some time. The rain and wind beat in their faces and made conversation difficult. But when they came into Old Bellerton village Joan spoke:

"I am very grateful to you for driving me home, and, if I may say so, still more for what you have told me. I am sure none of us ought to believe in ill-luck, and you are strong enough to rise above it."

"No, I am not," said Major Armitage; "but I suppose I can live doggedly on. Do you know Dr. Sewell's couplet?

" 'When all the blandishments of life are gone,
The coward sneaks to death; the brave live on.' "

Joan's eyes brightened.

"I like that. And life is a wonderful thing, is it not? Our own lives are so small compared with many others; it is the lives of those around us that really matter, and what we can be to them."

"You think we ought to be entirely detached from ourselves? That would make us mere mechanical machines."

She was silent. Then, as he reached the rectory gate, he pulled up his horse and held out his hand to her.

"Good-night, Miss Adair. You have done me good, and I promise to play for you next Sunday evening. I shan't be leaving just yet. But I tell you in confidence that my house now is very nearly a hell to me!"

She looked up at him when she was turning in at the gate. Her eyes were shining.

" 'He performeth the thing that is appointed for me,' " she repeated with emphasis. And then the Major drove off and she went in to change her wet clothes, and to think much of the blow that had befallen her friend.

Before the following Sunday came round, she had a great many other matters that demanded all her time and attention. Wilmot Gascoigne had cajoled her into co-operating with him over his book, and she found it extremely difficult to give up the necessary time to it. She finally arranged that upon every day on which he could come over, they should work

together between tea and dinner. Very often he asked if he might stay to dinner, so as to continue the work immediately afterwards, and not "break the thread" of their thoughts. Joan was so carried away with his enthusiasm, with his flow of ideas, with his many problems needing deep discussion, that for some days she was merely a listener, offering a few feeble and inadequate suggestions; but as time went on she began to criticise, protest, and utterly disagree with Wilmot's plot and principles. To her his moral instincts seemed warped; his conceptions of right and wrong confusing and shadowy. But he had the gift of eloquent persuasion, and often stopped her objections with a torrent of clever talk. Then he would listen to her alternative course of reasoning, sometimes apparently falling in with her views, but never eventually swerving from his point.

She, on her part, gave him fresh ideas and thoughts, which he seized with approval. But after a very few days of talking and working with him, Joan had to acknowledge to herself that it was most fatiguing and unsatisfactory. In addition to this, her father's affairs seemed more and more involved. Letters came from his wife and daughter with demands for money, which was simply not forthcoming. Every penny that could be scraped together was sent out to them; but it was not sufficient, and Mrs. Adair could not, or would not, understand her husband's difficulties. Joan and her father grew to dread the sight of a foreign letter lying on the breakfast-table. Joan at last quietly went into Coppleton and parted with an old necklace of amethysts which had been given to her some years before by Lady Alicia. But the task of cheering her father, teaching her small pupils, working in the parish, helping in household duties, and trying to keep her head and brains clear and bright for Wilmot's hours, proved almost too much for her, and she found it quite impossible to continue her own writing. She had neither the time nor the ideas. She told Wilmot once that she had been forced to stop writing. He did not seem much impressed.

"Those short articles don't pay well, do they? And I want you to do better work. You will. This book of ours is going to be a success. I feel it is. We have got the right atmosphere, but it needs all our concentration and purpose. We will put our best and strongest into it. We must."

So Joan braced herself afresh, but she felt strangely exhausted at night; and could not feel assured that her help was as much as Wilmot seemed to require and demand.

On Sunday evening Major Armitage played the organ, and came into supper at the rectory afterwards. Joan thought him looking worn and ill, and there were grim fixed lines about his face that used not to be there. He

seemed very distrait, as if conversation were an effort. Only once he roused himself, and that was when he asked Joan to sing some of her sacred songs. Mr. Adair remarked when he left that he must be in some kind of trouble.

"Of course, they say in the village he has lost someone dear to him. Do you know anything about it, Joan? He has not gone into mourning."

"Men don't," said Joan briefly.

"They usually wear a black tie; not a coloured one."

"We won't trouble about the village gossip, Father dear. If he had wanted us to know he would have told us."

But the very next day Joan wrote to Lady Alicia asking her if she could tell her whether Irene Denbury was dead.

Lady Alicia wrote promptly back.

> "My dearest Joan,—So you have not heard the news! Frank Denbury turned up after all these years perfectly safe and sound. It is like a book. I hear he is much improved; but he was wounded and ill, and tied by the leg in some out-of-the-way place, and his letters never reached home. You must forget the story I told you. Bury it deep. But how wise and right Irene was to wait! What disaster she would have brought upon herself if she had not. She goes out with him to America the end of this month. She seems as if she wants to get away from England, and I think it will be best for her. I am so interested in hearing about your writing, dear, but don't forget that it is a trust and talent given to you to develop and to use for eternity. I have heard from your mother. She seems very happy and well. Much love,
>
> "Yours lovingly,
> Alicia.
>
> "*P.S.*—Frank Denbury has quietly been adding to his fortune. I fancy his wife might have been in the way; and, of course, he had no idea that she thought him dead. But I consider him much to blame for his long silence. It was not fair to any girl."

Joan pondered long and deeply over this letter. She felt unreasonably angry with Irene for having inspired Major Armitage with such love and hope.

“If she really loves him, how can she go off with her husband so easily and happily? I couldn’t have done it. And yet I suppose religion and convention would say it was her duty to do so. She will most likely settle down very comfortably with her husband, and forget the man who is suffering tortures at present, and will never get over the blow.”

She pictured him in his music-room playing the “Dead March” and burying deep for ever in the grave of his heart his first and only love.

“A man of that age and temperament will never get over it,” she said to herself. “I wonder if he has enough religion to keep him sweet and tender! His music is still his solace. I’m glad to think it is, for no musician can get bitter and hard.”

Lady Alicia’s letter gave her food for thought, and doubts again assailed her as to whether Wilmot’s book was a suitable one for her to help to produce. When next he and she were working together he propounded a certain situation from which her soul shrank.

“No, that is blasphemous,” she said hastily. “I will not be a party to it.”

“My dear girl, don’t be a prude. What is blasphemy? We must move with the times, and we are not invoking the Deity in any way, or infringing upon His prerogative.”

Joan looked at him with grave, sweet eyes.

“Mr. Gascoigne, you and I can never work together. I see this more and more. It was a mistake our making the attempt.”

“I have frightened you. We will leave this situation. I will work it in so that it cannot possibly offend your principles. My dear partner, we have gone along too far to dissolve our partnership. Now take these sheets, and make a statement of our heroine’s thoughts on this fatal night. Put your soul into it, and let your words scorch and burn. Be strong. Put yourself in her place, and write your thoughts as they would have been in her circumstances.”

Joan gave a little sigh, but set to work; and the interest of her theme took hold of and engrossed her. Afterwards, when Wilmot was taking his leave, she strove to speak again.

“I don’t agree with so much that you write. We shall never see things from the same standpoint. Don’t you think you would get on quite as well without me?”

"No, I am not going to release you. Do you think I would take the trouble to come out all weathers and spend the best part of my day down here if I did not mean business? And think of the chance you would miss. Fame is in this book—I feel it—and money, and you and I will be partners in it."

It was always the way. He would not take her objections seriously, and Joan's conscience was uneasy and troubled in consequence.

Banty could not understand the situation. She remonstrated with Joan one afternoon when she called.

"I warned you of Motty. He has got hold of you, and will suck your blood to nourish himself. Don't look shocked! I mean it. He has done it with other women, and he thinks you very promising material."

Joan would not listen to her; but in her heart she sometimes longed that she had never given him her promise to help him.

And then one day it was all stopped—for the time.

"A letter from Cecil," said Joan in the morning, as she poured out a cup of tea for her father at the breakfast-table. "I have not read it yet. I hope it is not for more money. She wrote to me only a few days ago."

"It is to tell us when they are coming home, perhaps," said Mr. Adair cheerfully. "I am setting my hopes on having your mother here for Easter, Joan."

"But, Father dear, it wants only a fortnight to Easter, and they have not talked of a move yet."

"Read her letter and see."

So Joan in a leisurely way opened the envelope, and the next minute looked up with startled eyes.

"Father dear, Mother is not at all well. She has caught a bad chill and has an attack of pneumonia. Cecil is quite anxious and has called in a nurse."

Mr. Adair started to his feet.

"Let me see what she says. Cecilia ill? I must go to her."

Joan put the letter into his hand, and gazed out of the window with troubled eyes. Riviera doctors and nurses meant heavy additional expenses. How were they to be met, she wondered? And then she took herself to task for grudging her mother anything. Was she really seriously ill? Cecil seemed

to think so, and Mrs. Adair was not one to succumb easily. She had always had good health, and made light of ordinary ailments. But this letter was three days old, surely if she had been worse Cecil would have wired?

As if in answer to her conjecture, she saw a village lad come up the drive, and recognising him as the postmistress's son, Joan dashed out into the garden. When he produced a yellow envelope her heart sank. She tore it open.

"Mother died last night. Come at once.—CECIL."

She could not believe it. She dismissed the boy and took the telegram with trembling fingers to her father. She hardly knew how she told him, but from her face he guessed the worst. And sinking down upon a chair he buried his face in his hands. Joan stood by his side white and immovable. The awful shock of it had stunned her. Presently heartbroken sobs came from her father. To Joan, who had never in her life seen her father shed a tear, it was an awful experience. She touched him on the shoulder.

"Dad, dear, we must do something. There is no time to lose."

"Time!" sobbed the rector, "what does time matter now? Everything is at an end for me."

The intense pathos of his tone brought the tears with a rush to Joan's eyes. She let herself weep unrestrainedly for some moments, and Sophia found them both unable to regain their composure. She herself was terribly shocked, but said in her practical way:

"There's Miss Cecil to be thought of."

Joan dried her tears at once. Her self-control was restored to her.

"Dad dear, what must be done!"

The rector lifted his head.

"I must go to them."

Even now he could not separate Cecil from her mother.

"Can I catch the morning train to town?"

He stood up. Like his daughter, he put his grief aside for the time.

"I must go at once," he repeated dully.

"You can catch the twelve-twenty. But what about money?"

Mr. Adair looked at her rather helplessly.

"How much shall I want?"

"You can cash a cheque at the bank before you start. We have twenty pounds in our current account. Take it all. I suppose I cannot come with you? I know I can't."

Joan was now perfectly composed. She packed his things, looked up his route in the foreign Bradshaw, listened to his directions for supplying his place on the following Sunday, then went out and ordered the jingle to be brought round. She drove him to the station, and it was not till he was actually in the railway carriage that father and daughter had courage to look into each other's eyes. Mr. Adair's composure almost went again. "My darling wife," he murmured; "oh, Joan, pray that resignation to God's will may be given to me."

Joan nodded.

"I can't yet take it in," she said brokenly; "I feel almost stunned, but I know that God will be with you and comfort you, Father dear."

The train went out, and Joan drove slowly home, trying to bring her practical common sense to the surface, but all her heart crying out for her brilliant, beautiful mother. Perhaps it was fortunate that she had so much to do and think about.

For the next day or two she had not a moment for quiet thought until she went to bed. She had many anxious fears about her father, who had never in his life been abroad, and who was apt to be rather absent-minded in travelling. But a wire announcing his safe arrival, on the second morning after his departure, eased her mind. She had many notes of condolence and of sympathy; but saw only one of her friends, and that was Major Armitage. He called one morning and told Sophia he was going away that day. Joan came down into her father's study to see him.

"I felt I must wish you good-bye," he said, "and tell you that you have my deep sympathy in your loss. I am going over to Ireland to be with my sister, and have shut up the house for the present, but I shall not easily forget the warm welcome I have received in this house."

"Oh," said Joan, looking up at him with misty eyes, "my father and I will miss you! We have learnt to count upon you as a friend. Will you never come back to this part again?"

“I was going to say I hope not,” he said gravely; “but I will add, not to the ill-fated house I inherited. Every room is a torture to me now. I never told you, Miss Adair, but I expect you guessed. I came down here to wait patiently for a woman to come to me, and now that is over. She will never come. And I have been wasting my time in useless dreams. Now, as you said the other day, my life is going to revolve round others. It has no centre in itself. And I think my sister needs me most. Perhaps we may come to England one day, but till then, good-bye.”

He held out his hand. Joan took it, and felt tongue-tied for a moment or two, then she said softly:

“Thank you for giving me your confidence. I knew you had been going through deep waters, but when you say your life has no centre, you do not mean to leave out the One who is our centre? The One in Whom ‘we move, and have our being.’ ”

He looked at her with sombre eyes.

“I have believed all my life in the Hand behind,” he said; “I suppose I still believe in it.”

He shook hands and went. Joan watched him disappear down the road from the study window.

“And so he goes away out of my life,” she murmured to herself. “The only one I have really liked in this part of the world.”

She gave a heavy sigh. Life was inexpressibly sad, and it seemed to her to get more and more difficult as time slipped by.

CHAPTER XIV

STRUGGLING IN THE NET

A week later Mr. Adair returned, bringing Cecil with him. The meeting between the sisters was a very sad one. Cecil for the first time had been brought face to face with life's greatest reality. All her gaiety had left her for the time; she looked scared and miserable. And Mr. Adair seemed ten years older, the stoop in his shoulders was intensified, and his whole demeanour was listless and dejected. Yet he gave Joan quite simply every detail of the quiet funeral amongst the olive trees in the little English cemetery. And with many sobs and tears Cecil told her of the sudden illness and the last four days.

"She stayed out too late one evening and caught a chill; but never told me that she felt much pain until the next day, and then her temperature went up suddenly, and she hardly knew me again. The only thing she was anxious about was the book she has been writing. She told me to take it back to England with me. She seemed to know she would not come herself. It seems like a nightmare. How shall I live without her?"

Even in her grief Cecil thought first of herself; Joan's greatest sympathy was with her father. She went into his study late that evening and found him sitting at his writing-table, his head bowed in his hands. When he looked up at her his eyes were dim and lifeless.

"Oh, Joan, my dear, we must comfort each other," he said, as she impulsively knelt by his side and put her hand lovingly on his shoulder. "The centre of my being seems to have disappeared. I have been counting the days to having her back again with us. The coming summer has only held her to me. I hoped she would love sitting out in the garden and orchard, and become so fond of it here that she would never want to leave us again. And I feel I have not been half tender and sympathetic enough with her. I have kept her short of money, though God knows I could not help it. It is so strange that she, so beautiful, so strong, and in the prime of her life, should be taken and I left!"

"We could not do without you, Father dear," murmured Joan, tears starting to her eyes in spite of her efforts to keep them back.

"She always was so much more clever than I was," went on Mr. Adair; "but I loved to have her so. And your mother was a good woman, Joan. She never talked much, but she never missed her daily Bible reading, and I have found her Bible marked and worn from constant reading."

"Yes," Joan assented softly.

"So we have the hope of seeing her again," went on Mr. Adair in a more cheerful tone; "but the blank will never be filled in my heart. Pray for me to-morrow, Joan. I must preach, and I feel unfit for it."

"Don't try, Father dear, let Mr. Rushbrooke come over and take the services for you, as he did when you were away."

Mr. Adair shook his head, and as he looked at Joan there was something in his attitude that made Joan steal away and leave him.

And the message was given with singular power on the following morning.

"*For He maketh sore, and bindeth up; He woundeth, and His hands make whole.*"

The rector touched very little upon his own trouble, except to say: "I have been through deep waters, and I want to pass on to you what has been a comfort and help to myself." His people listened with softened hearts; and even Banty went home saying to herself, "There must be *something* in Mr. Adair's religion!"

Cecil would not go to church. She shut herself up in her room and stayed in bed for most of the day.

On Monday, as she did not come down to breakfast, Joan went up to her. She found her very busy ordering herself mourning from a Bond Street dressmaker whom her mother had patronised. Joan's little pupils were waiting for her; so she thought that it was no propitious time for discussion, and she only tried to persuade her to come down to lunch.

Cecil allowed herself to be persuaded, and after it was over wandered into the drawing-room disconsolately. Joan followed her. She felt if she did not speak now, she never should, and wanted to get it over.

"What has possessed you to have those noisy spoilt boys here every morning?" said Cecil crossly. "I hear you teach them in the dining-room, and Sophia calmly told me the drawing-room fire was never lighted till after lunch. You complain that I shut myself up in my bedroom, but where am I supposed to sit?"

“There’s always a fire in Father’s study, and he is usually out in the morning. I want to talk with you about ways and means, Cecil. I have had to do some teaching. I am most grateful for the money it brings me. You know we are not yet clear of debt. And Father and I do dislike it so. I always think a clergyman ought to be extra careful in money matters. I think I mentioned in my letters that I have been writing a few simple articles for a magazine. I have a little literary experience. I want you to let me see mother’s book. Don’t you think it would be a good plan for me to look over her notes and see if I could not finish them, and offer it to some publisher? If it sold, it would be a tremendous help to Father just now.”

Cecil did not answer. She seated herself in an easy chair by the fire, and her brows were furrowed with thought.

“I can’t conceive why Father is always so behindhand with his bills. He simply cleared out the small balance we kept in our bank abroad, and brought me home literally without a penny in my pocket!”

“I don’t think you realise what his income really is. I want to talk to you about it. You must not order expensive clothes from London, Cecil, you really must not. We cannot afford it. There is a very good little dressmaker in Coppleton who will come out and do anything that you want. Father and I have strained every nerve to pay the many bills for clothes which have come in; but we can’t do more, and I’m sure you will help us now by trying to be economical.”

“Don’t mention the word ‘economy’ to me,” flashed out Cecil passionately. “I hate the sound of it, and so did darling Mother. It has been the curse of our lives, and if you think that now she has gone you can bully me over clothes you are mistaken. You grudge me my mourning for her! Father has stripped me of every penny I possess. You are going to try to make me as great a fright as yourself in your country bumpkin clothes. But you won’t do it. I give you fair warning! Mother’s money is as much mine as yours. If she had known, she would have made a will and left it to me. She meant to do it—I know she did. And as for taking her book and making money out of it for yourself and Father, you shall not do it. It is in my keeping and belongs to me!”

Joan was absolutely dumbfounded by this outburst. Cecil ended it by a passionate burst of tears. Joan instantly was on her knees beside her, putting her arms tenderly round her.

“Oh, Cecil dearest, what cruel things to say! You are miserable, and so am I. We are both Mother’s daughters, we both love her, and are mourning

together for her loss. Don't let us hurt each other by unkind words and thoughts!"

"Oh," sobbed Cecil, "you never understood her. You never loved her as I did. I am left alone. Nobody cares for me!"

Joan assured her of her affection; she felt as if she were talking to a passionate, unreasonable child. It was absolutely impossible at present to convince her of the need of carefulness over money. Joan's one desire was to gain her love and keep it, so she gradually soothed her into quietness again, and Cecil went so far as to own that she did not mean all she said.

"I feel beside myself with misery," she confessed. "It is an awful, a terrible thing—death. I can't get over it. Why, only a fortnight ago Mother was talking and laughing with me, now we have buried her under tons of earth—glad to get rid of her!"

She gave a shudder.

"No, no," protested Joan. "Her self, her spirit is not there, only her worn-out body."

"It was not worn out—that's the—the cruelty of it! Oh, I know that shocks you. But if I do believe in God I shall never love Him. He does such terribly cruel things or allows them to be done."

"God sees farther than we do, and from the other side," said Joan firmly and gravely. "He sees *both* sides. We only see one, so how can we judge correctly? I wish you had heard Father's sermon yesterday."

Cecil gave a little snort.

"Father! Well, he is my father, but nobody can say his sermons are anything but the simplest platitudes!"

"Our Lord's words were very simple sometimes," said Joan with flushed cheeks. "It is heartfelt experience that impresses me, more than any amount of head knowledge and clever theories."

Cecil shrugged her shoulders, but relapsed into silence. She had recovered her temper, and peace was restored, but she quietly went on her way, and ordered London clothes at very high prices.

Joan said no more. She felt she could not. She was intensely desirous of winning Cecil's affection, and she had a tremendous pity for her, as she knew the loss of the mother who was always so devoted to her and to her interests would be felt by her very deeply.

She herself could not adjust her life to her fresh circumstances. She foresaw trouble in the future, for Cecil was more than ever determined not to adapt herself to her home environment, and Mr. Adair had said sadly but quite decidedly to Joan the day after he returned:

"We must be very patient with poor Cecil, as she must be content to stay at home now. Her days of going abroad are over. I know our doctor here thought it quite unnecessary."

After a week or two of quiet seclusion, when Cecil tried everyone in the house by her exacting demands and fretful complaints, life slipped back into the usual grooves. Wilmot Gascoigne had purposely abstained from troubling Joan about their book, but now he appeared again and made great demands, as before, on her time and attention. She could not give them to him in the same way now that Cecil was in the house; and she had been having great heart searchings with herself about the book since her mother's death. Joan was conscious that her work with him was not uplifting. She had often gone to bed in such weariness of body and such mental confusion that her peace of mind had suffered; she had become irritably impatient under the daily difficulties and trials, and she was conscious that her soul was drifting from its sure and certain anchorage. She had tried to break away from her writing, but Wilmot, with his insistent pertinacity, had refused to let her go. And the fascination of creating had taken possession of her. She had been pleased when she had influenced Wilmot to omit questionable passages and insert something that was really good. She had thrown a sop to her conscience by asserting to herself that she was improving the tone of his writing; but all the time she knew too well that if she did raise his standard a tiny bit, she lowered her own a great deal. Her mother's sudden illness and death had brought the unseen world very near to her, and the realities of life and death impressed her deeply.

One afternoon Wilmot left her hastily. She had ventured to disagree with much warmth with him over a vexed question of moral perception, and she refused to give way or allow herself to be outtalked. He gathered up his papers.

"Very well. I have no time or use for such unprofitable discussion, and must work on by myself till you come to a reasonable mind."

Without another word he marched out of the house. Joan watched him go with hot cheeks and ruffled feelings. Her father was visiting in the village; Cecil was lying on her bed with a novel. The house was quiet. Tea was over, and there was a good hour and a half before dinner. Joan betook

herself to the orchard, to a secluded spot under the pink and white apple blossoms, where she could remain unseen.

There was a low bench, on which she seated herself.

"I am caught in a net," she told herself, as, resting her chin in her hands, she determined to wrestle out things with herself. "I am wasting my talents and time on gathering straws on a muck heap! Oh, how angry Mr. Gascoigne would be to hear me say it! If his work is strong and goes down to posterity, will it be for the real welfare of those who read it? What will be my share in it? Am I not denying my faith and creed to please Mr. Gascoigne, and stifling my conscientious scruples? Am I not aiding and abetting him in his absolutely irreligious views of life?"

She covered her face with her hands. A rush of conviction of failure came over her, and tears crept to her eyes. The sweet spring air, the twittering of birds getting ready for their nightly rest, the cooing of wood pigeons in the distance seemed to be purifying and cleansing her befogged brain. Nature always drew her to Nature's God.

She had for a long while denied herself time to think, and her quiet time of thought now showed her where she was wrong. How long she sat there she did not know; she was deep in thought and prayer when a well-known voice made her start and rise to her feet.

"Here's the bad penny again! Good luck to you, Joan, my darlint!"

It was Derrick, standing within a few feet of her, looking very handsome and very mischievous.

He took off his soft felt hat with a flourishing bow.

"I told you I would be down for Easter. I couldn't get an invite out of old Jossy, and I knew"—here his face grew grave—"I knew your trouble, and I have written my sympathy, so I won't repeat it; but I could not quarter myself upon you in your circumstances; and I was determined to come, so I've settled myself at the Colleton Arms, where I arrived last night. Now, then, we're chums, remember; tell me how things are going."

He sat down on the bench by her side. Joan heaved a sigh, half of pleasure and relief at seeing him, half of regret and remorse for her actions in the past.

"Oh, things are going badly," she said with a smile; "but they never do go very well with us, you know, only I am, as a rule, loath to acknowledge it. Don't let us talk of ourselves; tell me of your doings."

“What are you crying about?” Derrick demanded gravely. “I don’t think I have ever seen you with tear-stained cheeks before. How you used to rush away, as a small child, and hide yourself till all traces of them were removed.”

“You have taken me at a disadvantage,” said Joan, trying to speak lightly. “I was really taking myself to task for my own sins and shortcomings. You mustn’t pose as my father confessor, Derrick. Hasn’t it been a lovely day? Shall we come indoors? Cecil will be so pleased to see you.”

“No, we will stay here. Now, then, start away. Tell me your trouble.”

Joan at first resented his determined tone, then the longing to get somebody’s advice about her literary efforts made her plunge into her difficulties. She told him that she wanted to earn money, that she had been doing so before she began to help Wilmot in his book, that his scheme was taking all her time and strength, and that now she felt it was even taking her religion from her.

“I suppose I am tired, but I look upon it as a huge octopus fastening itself upon me and draining me of all that is best in life. It fascinates me when I am at work, but I want to break away from it, and I can’t. I hoped it would not be such a long business, but, of course, a big book can’t be written in a couple of months or so, and we have not been at it much longer than that. And I am really longing to put Mother’s notes in order and bring out her book. She has done about half of it, and I am persuading Cecil to let me undertake it. I feel I can do it, and I shall love to do it. It is so pure, so—so cultured and interesting.”

“And what is Motty going to pay you for helping him?”

Joan coloured.

“Oh, there has never been any question of payment. I suppose when the book is published he will let me have some share in it.”

“If you haven’t had an agreement in black and white Motty won’t give you one penny! I know him. And I question whether it will ever get into print. Motty is no good as a novelist. He is too heavy and dogmatical, and hasn’t any sense of humour. You have been wasting your goods, my dear Joan. Don’t look so downhearted. I’ll get you out of his clutches. Fancy stopping off your own compositions when you can get them placed in a good magazine! It’s high time I came down here to look after you, but I warned you against that chap, now didn’t I?”

Joan tried to laugh.

"You talk like an old grandfather! I can't give you leave to interfere between Mr. Gascoigne and myself. I must get out of my own difficulties, but I am glad of your counsel."

There was a little silence. Derrick was scanning her from head to foot. Joan always felt that he had a possessive way of talking to her, and she did not want to encourage it.

"You are worried and thin, and Motty ought to be horsewhipped. He has taken advantage of your sweet good nature to benefit himself, and he does not intend that you shall have any reward for so doing."

"Don't let us talk any more about it," said Joan, sitting up briskly. "Tell me about your political doings. I love to have a good talk with anyone who is in the know in politics."

Derrick complied with her request. He could be very patient as well as very pertinacious when he liked, and he had registered a vow in his heart that Wilmot should hear his views very soon on the subject of his novel.

He and Joan sat on till dusk enveloped them, and then Joan took him into the house. Cecil came out of the drawing-room to greet them.

"I couldn't think where you had gone," she said to Joan, extending her hand to Derrick.

She looked very fragile and graceful in her long, trailing, thin, black gown.

"It's good to see you, Derrick," she went on; "but I would welcome any village lout, I do believe! I am so sick of my own society."

"Why don't you take brisk constitutionals this fine weather?" demanded Derrick. "Women have no sense. You and Banty go to extremes; she is never indoors, you are never out. One is just as bad as the other."

"Oh, don't preach! Joan is given to that. What are you doing down here?"

Derrick laughed in his open, happy way.

"I've just come down for an Easter rest. Have clapped my papers and pens together, and fastened them down under lock and key, and I'm out for a spree. I'm going to make things hum for you here, and also make it hot—oh, very hot—for a gentleman of my acquaintance. Yes, Miss Joan, I am. Now,

sweet Malingerer, you and I must plan out some Easter dissipation. What shall it be?”

He seized hold of Cecil by the arm and marched her back into the drawing-room. Joan smiled as she watched them settle themselves into two very comfortable chairs. She was quite content that Cecil should enjoy his stimulating society for a little time, and she went to tell her father of his arrival, and then out into the kitchen to consult with Sophia about the dinner, for she knew that Derrick would stay for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XV

DERRICK TO THE RESCUE

Easter, on the top of their trouble, was a trying time to the Adairs, but Derrick helped them very much by his sunshiny optimism. Joan's creases smoothed out of her brows; she gave herself up to the enjoyment of his society. Cecil grew more cheerful and less exacting, and though, of course, they were very quiet owing to their deep mourning, he insisted on hiring a motor from the neighbouring town and taking them out for long days in the sweet spring sunshine.

Wilmot went away to friends for Easter. He had been down to the rectory once, but had found everyone out, and Joan felt that he was deeply annoyed by their last interview.

The Gascoignes had a house party, but though Derrick dined with them twice, he was quite content to spend most of his time at the rectory.

"It is home in a double sense to me," he confided to Cecil. "This house was my boyhood's home, and now you are all in it I feel quite a member of your family."

He chaffed and laughed with her a good deal, but it was to Joan that he showed the tender protectiveness of his nature; and she was so unaccustomed to be shielded and waited upon that she hardly knew how to take it. Her small pupils went away with their mother to the sea for their holidays, so her time was much more her own. One morning Derrick came in early and asked her to come for a long walk with him.

"Let us take some lunch with us, and then we need not hurry back."

Joan's eyes danced, then she shook her head.

"Don't tempt me. I had determined to mend some of the Sunday school library books this morning, and Sophia is at this moment making some paste for me. What a pity Cecil does not care for walking! You could take her if she did. It would do her such a lot of good."

"I don't want Cecil, I want you; and the school books can wait. Now hurry up! I will give you half an hour to get ready. I shall go and get Dominie to support me if you are still obdurate."

There was no gainsaying him. Cecil was still in her bedroom; she rarely came down before lunch, and always breakfasted in continental fashion by herself. Joan told her that she might be out to luncheon, then she went out to the kitchen, and Sophia and she soon packed a small basket of food. In a very short time she was stepping across the heath with a light heart, and Derrick was well satisfied with the success of his move.

"Motty is back again," he informed her. "I met Banty in the village this morning. She's like a fish out of water when the hunting's over—asked me to come up this evening to dinner, so I'm going. I mean to have it out with Motty."

"Now look here, Derrick, you must promise me not to discuss our book. It is our private business, and nobody else's. We don't want it to be made public property."

"My dear child, everyone at the Hall knows about it. Old Jossy told me Motty was down at the rectory every night of his life, and it seems he taxed him with trying to win your affections. Jossy is never delicate in his speeches. Then Motty told him all about it. Banty considers he is doing you! She and I know him for a fraud! You haven't altered your mind about bringing it to an end, have you?"

"I would prefer to settle it myself with him."

"You're afraid I shall be nasty."

"Perhaps I am," said Joan, laughing. "Mr. Gascoigne has been very kind to me. I think the fact is that two people cannot write a book together unless they are absolutely of the same mind about certain things. At first I was diffident and inexperienced. I wrote as he wished; but now I find my principles are involved, and I will not sacrifice them to the public taste or demands. I do not think I should ever be a successful novelist. I am out of my element in tragedy and sensation."

"You keep to your nature studies," said Derrick; "they are first rate. Now let us change the subject. Now that the Malingerer has come home—and I hope she has come back to stay—you will be able to leave, will you not? I want you to come up to town. You have met my cousin, Mrs. Denby; she will be delighted to take you about, and I'll get you into the House to hear some of the debates. Can't you manage to come back with me when my holiday is up?"

"Oh, Derrick, you are too absurd!" said Joan, laughing gaily. "I shall never be able to leave home. And as to a visit to town, I shall be as likely to

go up there as to Timbuctoo! No; my place is here, and here I shall stay. It's waste of words to suggest anything else."

Derrick was silent for a short time; he put back what he was longing to say, for he did not want to spoil their day out. They tramped over the dead heather and bracken, and his natural good spirits asserted themselves. He and Joan were like a boy and girl together, and when they sat down on the top of a heather-covered hill and looked over a vast extent of fresh green country with purple distances, Joan exclaimed:

"I haven't a care in the world at this moment! Isn't it funny how one's senses minister to one's soul? My mouth and eyes and nose are enjoying this to distraction, so my soul follows suit. Did you ever smell such fragrant, delicious air? I want to inhale it as much as I can. I want to bottle it up and take it back with me. And isn't that stretch of country in front of us a sight for sore eyes? Did you ever see such pure, deep blue hills?"

"Don't you understand the tramps' and the gipsies' hatred of towns? I say, Joan, when the summer comes shall we do a tramp together? We might go down to Hampshire and start on the edge of the New Forest."

"There is a Mrs. Grundy still," said Joan.

"I thought she was dead long ago. There's safety in numbers. I could get another fellow to join us, and Banty might come. You could chaperon her, or she could chaperon you. She's improving. This time I've quite liked her, and she worships you. I'm all for getting you out of your rut now that the Malingerer is at home."

"It's no good planning such things," said Joan with a laughing shake of her head. "They make my mouth water, but you and I know they are impossible. I am not to be moved out of my rut. I am going to settle into it very snugly; I shall end by liking ruts. Now shall we attack our lunch? I am voraciously hungry!"

It was when their walk was nearly over that Derrick spoke his mind:

"Joan, do you realise that I'm still waiting for you?"

Joan looked at him reproachfully.

"Oh, Derrick, I hoped you were growing wiser."

"Don't talk like a grandmother. There's only one woman filling my heart. I've been waiting all my life for you, and you know it. I want to settle down like other men. This is my side of it. But I also want to have a right to take care of you, to give you pleasure, to put you in a better atmosphere than

you have at present. You would do us a lot of good if you came to town. We get so cynical and worldly, and grub so for money and position and power that you'd act as a splendid check, and also as an exhilarating tonic." Then, seeing Joan's eyes twinkle, he added hastily: "I only say this because you're so strong on influence and that sort of thing. And you're wasted here. But, of course, the real truth is I want you. I'm your devoted slave now as I always have been; but I'm getting tired of waiting. Oh, Joan, do listen! Give yourself right away to me now and for ever. Let us walk the world together, oblivious of anyone else. Won't you take me on trial?"

"How? One can't marry on trial, and, Derrick, dear, I hate to say it, but I couldn't risk it. You're a faithful chum and a staunch comrade—I'm always happy with you—but—and I think this is a test of love—I would not be as happy if we were in closer relationship. I never want to get nearer to you. Do you understand? Our present friendship satisfies me completely. I do see this is selfishness on my part. You deserve to receive more, and this is the reason I did not want you to come down this Easter. I want you to forget me, and learn to care for some nice girl who will be as much in love with you as you are with her. I believe real love is the only foundation for a happy married life. And you are too good to waste your best on one who never can return it. You think I do not know my own mind, but I do; and I wish you would let this talk between us be the final one on this subject. I shall never alter. I always have looked upon you as a brother, and I always shall."

The earnestness and force with which she spoke crushed Derrick's budding hopes. He was absolutely silent, fighting down his deep disappointment, and Joan felt almost as miserable as he did. She hated to have hurt him, and yet she felt it was necessary. He walked up to the rectory gate with her, then held out his hand.

"I'll try to get over it," he said huskily. "I'm at last convinced that it's no good to hope any longer."

Joan looked rather wistfully at him.

"Do you want my friendship still," she asked him, "or do you feel it must be all or nothing?"

"I don't know what I feel at present. A crushed, battered piece of pulp, I think. I suppose I had better get back to town to-morrow. I did promise Dominie to drive him into Coppleton, but I'll send him a line."

Joan said nothing. She gripped his hand and smiled at him, but her eyes were misty, and she fled into the house. It was a comfort to her to get inside

her bedroom and relieve her feelings by a flood of tears.

"I shall lose the only friend I have," she thought, "and I have brought wretchedness instead of happiness into his life."

She had not been in her bedroom for half an hour before Cecil came to the door asking for admission. After a little hesitation, Joan let her in, and Cecil was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice anything the matter with her sister.

She seated herself in Joan's low chair by the window.

"Wilmot Gascoigne has been here most of the afternoon," she announced. "He said he could not stay to tea. I don't think there is much love lost between him and Derrick. Why hasn't Derrick come in? I thought he would be sure to have tea with us."

"He did not think of it, nor more did I. Did Mr. Gascoigne want to see me?"

"At first he did. But we got into very interesting talk. He knows the Riviera so well that we had a lot in common. I like him. It's an education to hear him talk. And I have given over Mother's book to him. I feel he is the right person to undertake it. It is very good of him to do it. He looked through a lot of it and liked it immensely."

"Oh, Cecil, how could you?"

Joan's bitter, passionate cry escaped her unawares. It had been her great hope to do it herself. She felt that she could do it, and Cecil had almost agreed that she should.

"I don't think you should have done such a thing without asking Father's advice, or—or mine."

Cecil tossed her head.

"My dear Joan, what does Father know about such things? And do you think for a moment that you could do it better than a clever literary man who knows the country in which it has been written? Why, you have never been abroad. Your experience is as narrow as Father's. I consider we are very lucky in having such a friend to take it off our hands."

"I don't think you know Mr. Gascoigne as well as I do, Cecil. I am very, very sorry you have given it to him. To begin with, he has too many irons in the fire already. He has not finished the Gascoigne book yet; and we really

do want Mother's book to be taken in hand and finished. I am bitterly disappointed that you have done such a thing."

"I suppose you thought you could have made a name for yourself over it," said Cecil; "but I haven't confidence in you. Because you have been successful with a short magazine article, it does not follow that you could compile and edit a book like Mother's. I am ambitious for her sake. I don't want it to be a failure."

"Well," said Joan, struggling to speak gently, "it is done now, so there is no use in talking about it. We must hope he will do it well. Did you arrange anything with him about the profits from it?"

"Of course not. There is time for that when the book has been finished and accepted by some publisher."

Joan did not speak.

Cecil got up from her chair.

"I thought you would like to hear about it," she said airily. "Are you coming down to tea? It is ready."

"Yes. Don't wait for me."

Joan felt desperately that she must have a little quiet to digest this heavy blow.

When Cecil had left her she pushed open her window and knelt by it.

The fresh spring air, the scent of the violets and sweet brier hedge below rose to greet her.

Her whole spirit resented Cecil's summary proceeding. She knew now from experience that Wilmot Gascoigne was not wholly to her liking as a writer. She had waged war with him more than once over certain passages descriptive of Nature's beauty. He belittled and scoffed at the recognition of a Divine hand in it, and she could not bear to think that her mother's book should be placed in his hands to be cut up and revised as he judged fit. And she felt that she had it in her to bring out all the best in that book. She also had fears now that Wilmot would not make a profitable sum out of it, and this was a very important matter to them all.

"Why do things go so crooked?" she sighed to herself. But when she rose from her knees she was able to go downstairs with a serene face, and, if her laugh was not quite so frequent or her smiles so bright, there was

nothing in her demeanour to show vexation or resentment. When Mr. Adair heard about it he looked annoyed.

"You should have asked me first, Cecil," he said. "You had no right to give your mother's book to a stranger."

"Mother gave me her book," said Cecil, with a wilful curve to her lips. "I am not a fool, and I have full confidence in Motty, as they call him."

Joan wondered if she should hear any more of the book she and he were writing together. She hoped that Derrick would not interfere too much about it, and consoled herself by thinking that he would be too full of his own feelings to approach the subject that night, as he had threatened to do.

It was of no use to argue with Cecil about the wisdom of her impulsive action, and Joan appeased her father by saying that Wilmot was certainly very clever, and was in touch with several of the leading publishers of the day.

The next morning, her small pupils being still away, Joan betook herself to the garden. There was always a great deal more to do there than the odd man could possibly get through. She was very busy weeding a patch of ground, when a voice close to her startled her.

"I can't keep away, you see, even after our talk yesterday; but I want to tell you about my interview with Motty."

Of course, it was Derrick. Joan greeted him quite cheerfully.

"Tell me," she said; "but don't expect me to stop weeding. I can do that and listen too."

"It won't hurt you to rest for a bit. Here, sit on this old hen-coop. Now, then, where shall I begin? I nearly went for him at the dinner-table last night. What a conceited ass he is! But I bided my time, and old Jossy helped me, for he actually left us alone in the smoking-room together to enjoy a brand of his best cigars."

"Derrick, I asked you not to interfere."

"I had to take my thoughts off the gnawing ache in my heart. Isn't that the phrase they use in books? And I was longing to pitch into someone. I was in the right mood for it, and he was the right man for me. What on earth has the Malingerer been doing? We were at cross purposes at first, for he thought I had come to take away your mother's MS. from him. He is very keen on that now, and means to run the Malingerer for a bit. It seems she and he are going to do it together."

Joan almost laughed, though she felt sore at heart.

"Why, Cecil is too restless to stay at her writing-desk for more than half an hour at a time."

"Just so. Well, he thinks, of course, you have treated him badly and have left him in the lurch. So that gave me my innings, and I told him what I thought about him. Oh, yes, I did; and if we were in France I suppose there would have been an early morning duel to-day. He is coming down to have a personal interview with you; but I rather think he will back out of that, and write instead. We went at each other like hammer and tongs. How I wish you and Cecil would keep clear of him."

Joan looked distressed. Derrick was unusually grave.

"I wish you could talk to Cecil about it; but I am afraid she has already committed herself; and we do not want to quarrel with Mr. Gascoigne, Derrick. He has been very kind and good."

Derrick shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I'll go straight in and have it out with the Malingerer. I had better see where she stands. I know you think me an interfering fool, but women are so helpless in the clutches of a man like Motty; and you've no brother."

He was off. Joan went on with her weeding with a distracted mind. Half an hour later Derrick came back to her.

"I've done no good," he confessed ruefully. "The Malingerer is infatuated with him, as you were; but I'll keep an eye on him, and if he gets the book ready for publication, I'll have my say as to the publisher and the price. I know a man in town who will look after it for me."

He did not stay, for he told Joan he was going up to town by the twelve o'clock express. They took farewell of each other very quietly. Late that afternoon Wilmot made his appearance and asked to see Joan. She went into the drawing-room with a beating heart, but he was perfectly courteous.

"I want to talk to you about our book. Did you think I had forsaken you for good and all? The fact is I called directly I came back from town, which was only yesterday. You were not in, and your sister, as you know, begged me to undertake the compiling and editing of your mother's notes on the Riviera. I suppose you were vexed that I had undertaken a fresh book without first finishing the other; but, as I told you before, I can work best when I have two or three books going. They supply a vent for my every mood and serve to quicken my faculties. I had no intention of stopping my

work with you. You can picture my astonishment when Colleton attacked me like a fury. I won't tell you all he said. It was unrepeatable! I could only imagine he had found you hurt and indignant, and inclined to say hastily that you would have nothing more to do with me. His passion was too impotent and childish to touch me in the least. I could only think he had made a little too free with my cousin's old port. He seems to regard himself as your protector and guide, but I hardly think he was speaking with your consent upon matters which were strictly confidential between ourselves."

Joan's cheeks were hot, yet she spoke with her natural sweet dignity.

"Derrick is like a brother to us. I am sorry there was any friction between you. It was wrong of him. Of course, I did not wish him to attack you in such a way. I am very glad you have come round, because I was going to write to you, and it is so much easier to talk than to write. You must disabuse your mind of the idea that I was hurt or indignant with you. Why should I be? Frankly, as I have often told you lately, I don't feel I can help you in this joint book of ours, and I do want to get out of it."

"But this is a very serious thing! If you had not been such a friend I should have drawn up an agreement, and got you to sign it. You could not have then withdrawn without giving me some compensation for doing so."

He looked straight at her as he spoke and snapped his lips together in an ill-tempered way.

"Don't you see," he went on, "that, unless I am able to finish that book single-handed, you have made me waste my strength and mind and time on a task that you make useless?"

"But I am sure you will be able to finish it yourself," said Joan, eagerly seizing upon the loophole he gave her of extricating herself from his toils. "I am a drag on you; I feel that I am. We are not suited to work together. I pull you back, and you fetter me. And I want you to release me. I cannot hold to my principles and write as you wish. If you desire compensation, I will try and meet you, but it is impossible to go on writing with you."

"Very well," said Wilmot very stiffly, "we will say no more. I was mistaken in my estimate of your powers and in your adaptability to my methods. I cannot force you to continue working with me. Only, it is a pity that you did not know your own mind—or, shall I say, principles?—when we first started. I hope your sister will not treat me in the same way over this MS. of your mother's. Have you any objection to offer on that score?"

Joan was so overwhelmed with his reproaches that she could say nothing for a moment.

"My sister gave it to you without consulting me," she said quietly.

"Which means that you would have prevented her doing it if you could?"

Joan hesitated. He gave a little bitter laugh.

"It is a case of being wounded in the house of one's friends," he said. "I wonder what I have done to turn you so against me? I suppose I have to thank Colleton for it. He is madly jealous of anyone poaching on his preserves."

"That is quite unjust and untrue," said Joan warmly. "I had better be entirely frank with you. I was looking forward to editing my mother's book myself. It would have been a keen pleasure to me to do so, and I was naturally disappointed when Cecil told me that she had given it to you. It is nothing personal against you; I am simply disappointed, that is all. I know you have more experience of the scenes in which the book is laid, and I am sure Cecil is much happier in the thought of your undertaking it than if I were to do it."

"You place me in a very unpleasant position. I think I had better see your sister, and suggest that I should hand it back again to you. I really have such a lot of literary work in hand that I shall be relieved than otherwise. It is a thankless task—editing other people's books."

Deep annoyance underlay his words. Joan began to apologise and protest. He stopped her abruptly and asked her if he could see Cecil.

Joan went to find her. She felt miserable, and knew that nothing would make Cecil take back the MS. Hastily she explained the situation to her sister, who was lying on the couch in her bedroom reading.

"Wilmot Gascoigne here! Why was I not told? Came to see you? What about?"

Then, when explanation had been given, she hastily left the room.

"I never shall forgive you, Joan, if you have tried to force him not to undertake it. He must do it, and he shall."

Joan left her to talk to him. She wandered out into the garden.

"Oh, how I love peace! And how I bungle and stir up strife! Everything seems going wrong. I wish—I wish I had never tried to write."

She began to tie up some straggling rose branches. She felt she did not want to meet Wilmot again, and yet was too proud to keep out of his way. She knew he must pass her as he went home. He was not very long in coming. To her surprise, he stopped when he reached her and held out his hand with one of his transforming smiles.

"Be friends with me," he said. "Your sister won't hear of my returning the MS., and she says her mother gave it into her hands to do as she thought best with. I promise you that I will give my most careful attention to it. And you will be able to reap laurels on your own account. If I have spoken unkindly this afternoon, forgive me; but I was hurt and sorely—bitterly disappointed in your casting me off and refusing to work with me any more. I must come down very often and consult your sister about this book. She knows your mother's mind, and can supply many blanks in her notes. How can I do this if I feel you are unfriendly towards me?"

"Indeed I am not that," poor Joan protested. "I am very grateful to you for all the help you have given me. I want to be one of your friends still."

"Then we will shake hands upon it and wipe our slate clean," he said almost gaily.

Joan shook hands with him, but watched his quick steps down the drive with a heavy heart. Certainly, Cecil was bringing discord into their hitherto peaceful life, yet she wondered if the fault was in herself.

CHAPTER XVI

JOAN'S ILLNESS

When the holidays were over, and her pupils came back to her, Joan grew happier. Her life was too busy to allow her much time for brooding. She found more and more to interest her in the parish, and began to have a real liking for those she visited. She always made a point of absenting herself from the house after tea, for Wilmot was incessantly there and shut up in the drawing-room with Cecil. Sometimes she felt amused at the quick ending to her own intercourse with him, and the easy way in which he had transferred his society to Cecil. If she met him she always said a pleasant word to him. In a way she was thankful for the interest and occupation brought into Cecil's life, who looked forward eagerly to Wilmot's visits, and, if irritable and exacting the rest of the day, was always her gay sweet self when with him.

Sophia shook her head over the visits.

" 'Twas well enough with you, Miss Joan, my dear. You meant business, you did; and if you'd worked all day and night with him I wouldn't have had a tremor, but I've eyes in my head, and I've been into the room at times on messages, and Miss Cecil she doesn't mean business—she means amusement! And if she plays with fire she'll get burnt. There's too many smiles, and arch looks, and playful ways, and honeyed words to please me. It's my belief 'tis just flirtation over the inkpot, there! 'Tis plain words, but just the truth."

"Oh, Sophia, you're a foolish old dear, but you don't understand," Joan would say.

"Don't I? I know Mr. Gascoigne has a level head and a still heart, but Miss Cecil haven't, and she'll be the one to suffer."

Joan felt a little uneasy, but could not do anything. She knew if she warned Cecil in any way she would only make matters worse.

And then an epidemic of a bad type of influenza swept through the village, and Joan herself became one of the victims.

She kept up as long as she could, but at last went to bed, and stayed there for nearly three weeks. When she got up again she felt very weak and

depressed. Cecil had not helped much during her illness. She was so afraid of being infected with it herself that she had spent most of her days out of doors, only returning to the house to sleep. It was beautiful weather, too dry to be healthy, for rain had not fallen for over a month. Cecil would take her books and luncheon to the pine woods, and there Wilmot would often meet her, with his roll of MS. under his arm. Naturally, when Joan came downstairs again, she found a great many things demanding her attention, and she had little strength to give to them. Her father, like a man, did not realise her weakness, and was so glad to get her help again in parish matters that he spared her little and made greater demands than she had the strength to fulfil. But she made every effort to please him.

One afternoon Sophia came into the dining-room and found Joan literally sobbing over some parish club accounts. She tried to laugh when she met Sophia's concerned gaze.

"I'm such a fool! I think I must have left half my brains in my bed. I can't add the least sum, and poor Father is hopeless with accounts. The books are so muddled that I can't make head or tail of them. I've been a whole hour over them, and the figures are now swimming in a thick haze before my eyes."

Sophia swept the books up with her arm, and carried them off.

"If you look at them again to-day, I'll put you straight to bed, Miss Joan, and keep you there. You come into the drawing-room and lie down for an hour. You're as weak as a baby."

"I can't do it, Sophia. I have the schoolmistress coming to see me about some school difficulty. Here she is, coming up the drive."

Sophia snorted, then went out to the kitchen and seized hold of pen and ink.

"Jenny," she said sharply, as that young person came past her, "you go out of this kitchen, and don't come into it for half an hour. I've business to do which will take all the head I possess, and I won't be scatterbrained by you fussing round!"

In half an hour's time a letter was written, and then Jenny was sent to the post office with it. It was addressed to "The Lady Alicia Fairchild."

Three days after Mr. Adair received a wire:

"Can you put me up for a few days?—ALICIA."

He was rather perturbed at first.

"I suppose we must say 'Yes,' my dear? I was hoping to get a little more of your time and attention now that you are well again. It has been a strain whilst you have been laid aside. Cecil seems as if she cannot give any help, and there are so many things that have got out of gear. But, of course, we cannot refuse to have Lady Alicia, and it will be only for a few days."

Joan felt rather pleased. There was a triumphant gleam in Sophia's eyes when she was told that the spare room must be got ready. And Cecil acknowledged that a visitor would be very acceptable.

Joan dragged herself about the house, feeling everything an effort, but determined to have all as dainty and fresh as possible for her godmother.

Banty happened to call upon her the afternoon when Lady Alicia was expected, and exclaimed at Joan's white face and tired eyes:

"What have you been doing to yourself? You ought to be in bed! You aren't fit to be up!"

Joan's eyes filled with tears. Then she laughed. "I cry like a baby at nothing," she said, meeting Banty's surprised gaze. "The 'flu' has knocked me all to pieces. I feel quite aged. But I suppose I shall get all right in time."

"You never will, if you slave away like this. What are you doing? Flowers? Why doesn't Cecil do them? There's nothing more tiring. I never touch them at home."

When Banty took her leave she said bluntly to Cecil, who walked to the gate with her:

"You should make your sister rest, and run the show yourself for a bit. She's knocked all to pieces—couldn't believe my eyes when I saw her. Are you like me—no good in the house at all?"

"Joan is a difficult person to manage," said Cecil sharply. "She will fuss about, doing everything herself, and will allow nobody to help her."

"I'd pack her back to bed and lock the door," said Banty, as she walked off; but Cecil did not take the hint.

When Lady Alicia eventually arrived she was met, as usual, at the station by Joan, whose white, strained face moved her to instant pity; but she said nothing to her about herself. When she was having a cup of tea in the drawing-room, Lady Alicia noted that Joan's hand visibly trembled when she lifted the teapot, and that she had a way of passing her hand over her eyes when anyone spoke to her. When Cecil dropped a teaspoon, she started with a little cry.

In a few minutes Jenny appeared at the door. “If you please, miss, the master wants to know if you’ve found the key of the poor-box?”

Joan got up at once. Turning to Lady Alicia, she said, with a laugh:

“I do believe that whilst I was ill Father lost every key he ever possessed, as well as making hay of all the parish accounts and registers. We haven’t reached our normal state yet.”

She left her tea untasted. Lady Alicia turned to Cecil at once when Joan had left the room.

“Cecil, dear, do you know why I came down? I see I was right to come.”

“To see Joan, I suppose. I know you wouldn’t come so far to see me.”

“To take her away with me for a rest and change. Don’t you realise that she is badly needing it?”

Cecil’s laughing face grew grave.

“Father pesters her so! He seems as if he is perfectly lost without her. She will never leave him.”

“You must help her to do so by promising to take her place.”

“I couldn’t. It would be an impossibility. I am not cut out for parish work. I hate the lower orders, and they, of course, know it, and hate me back!”

“Well, many of us have to do things we dislike, and you are going to prove your courage by doing it, too.”

Lady Alicia laid a gentle hand on her arm.

“My dear child, you must, unless you want Joan to have a serious relapse. Don’t pretend to be more selfish than you really are.”

“Father won’t hear of Joan’s leaving. He can’t even let her have her tea in peace. Here they come, together. By their faces I should say the key is found.”

Mr. Adair came in beaming.

“Found in the lining of my hat,” he said. “Joan remembered that I have a trick of putting things there. Now I can enjoy my tea.”

“Joan’s tea is quite cold,” said Cecil severely.

But Mr. Adair could never take a hint. He was quite unaware that he was inconsiderate in his continual demands for Joan’s help. Joan sat down at the

tea tray again and gave her father his tea, then leant back in her chair and listened to the conversation with an absent air, forgetting to take her own.

"I am on my way to Ireland," said Lady Alicia. "I dare say you may remember that I have an old house there, which for the last ten years has been let to a retired colonel and his wife. They have become alarmed at the prospect in front of them, for she has delicate health, and gave me notice to leave last quarter. They have actually left now, and I have an empty house on my hands. I am afraid, in the unsettled state of poor Ireland, that tenants will not be forthcoming, so I must go up there and see what I had better do about it. People tell me it may be needed as a hospital or convalescent home, but I pray that even yet some settlement may be arrived at to prevent the awful cloud of war coming down upon our unhappy land."

"I never knew you had Irish property," said Mr. Adair. "Unless you live there yourself, you will, as you say, have no chance of letting it in these days."

"No; it is in Ulster, and that fact alone, all agents tell me, is enough to keep people away from it."

"Are you going to the choir practice to-night, Joan?" asked Mr. Adair.

Joan started. She swallowed down her cold cup of tea.

"I suppose I must. I had forgotten it."

"Can't you let it slip to-night?" pleaded Lady Alicia. "You are not fit to do it, Joan dear. Do you know, Mr. Adair, I find Joan looking very ill?"

"She has been very poorly," said Mr. Adair, quite cheerfully, "but she is well again now, thank God."

Cecil laughed.

"Oh, Father, Lady Alicia will not think much of your powers of observation! Now, Joan, you sit still for once in your life, and I will step across to the church and dismiss those choir boys."

She sauntered out of the room. After rather a feeble protest, Joan remained in her seat.

"I do feel frightfully lazy," she said, "and perhaps it will not matter missing a practice for once."

Mr. Adair put on his spectacles and looked across at Joan with a puzzled air.

“Joan, dear,” said Lady Alicia, “could you let me speak to your father alone for a few minutes?”

Joan looked surprised, but immediately left the room. She went upstairs to see if Lady Alicia’s luggage had been carried to her room.

She found Sophia there unstrapping the boxes, and when Joan said that that was Jenny’s work, the old servant shook her head.

“I’m waiting to see her ladyship, Miss Joan.”

“How fond you are of her!”

“She is my only hope,” said Sophia, “for she’s a sensible woman, and never lets the grass grow under her feet.”

Joan sat down in the easy chair.

“Oh, Sophia, I wish I did not feel so tired. What is the matter with me, I wonder?”

“The matter! Have you given yourself a chance? Haven’t you just left your bed to run up and down everywhere, after everybody and everything? You’re just tempting Providence—that’s what you’re doing.”

Joan did not answer. Sophia was down on her knees, unpacking now. It was not very long before they heard the drawing-room door open, and in a moment or two Lady Alicia was in the room. She held out her hand to Sophia.

“It is all settled,” she said. “Miss Joan is coming over to Ireland with me next Tuesday, and I shall keep her there till she is her bonny self again!”

Sophia’s face glowed with pleasure, but Joan protested in amazement.

“How can I leave home! It’s impossible!”

“It’s perfectly easy. Your father has consented to part with you, and it will be Cecil’s opportunity to prove her abilities.”

Joan could hardly believe her ears. The prospect of a change and a holiday with her beloved godmother almost overwhelmed her. She still would not believe that it could be realised.

“Cecil will never take my place,” she said. “Father will get miserable and ill, and the whole parish go to pieces.”

“Perhaps you over-estimate your powers,” said Lady Alicia dryly.

Joan flushed crimson.

“Oh, ask Sophia what it was like when I was ill. She said she could never go through it again!”

Sophia looked a little abashed.

“I may have spoken rash, Miss Joan, but I’m willing to do it again, for if I don’t you’ll just sink into your grave. I want to see your face smile and hear you singing as you go about. It’s been a dreary time of late. Her ladyship has my full sanction, as she knows, to take you away, and glad I’ll be to see you go!”

With that, Sophia stumped out of the room; and, looking up at Lady Alicia, Joan cried, between tears and smiles:

“I believe it is a plot between you.”

“It is, my dear. Sophia wrote to me asking me to come and look after you. Now, Joan, you must help me by making it easy for them to spare you. Your father is willing; that is the one thing that matters. I am going to have a long talk with Cecil to-night. I think she will rise to the occasion.”

At mention of Cecil’s name Joan’s face clouded.

“I am afraid I cannot, ought not to leave her. You know what she is, Lady Alicia. So difficult to influence and restrain. Yesterday I heard some unpleasant gossip in the village about her. She and Wilmot Gascoigne are going to publish my mother’s book. I wrote to you about it, did I not? They spend hours together in the woods over it—Cecil never does conform to convention—and the village will have it that they are ‘courting,’ to use their own expression. Don’t you see that if I go away matters may get worse? There will be nobody to look after Cecil; she does want looking after. Mother shielded her and lived for her; she is quite unaccustomed to stand alone. And if she wants to do a thing, she will do it, regardless of appearances or consequences.”

“My dear child, your absence will prove her salvation. She will be kept too busy in house and village to have the time for long rambles with this young man. Is he not the one with whom you were going to write a book?”

“Yes—oh, I have so much to tell you, and so much to talk about!”

Lady Alicia noted again the weary gesture of the hand across the eyes.

“We shall have plenty of time for talk by and by. It will all keep for the present.”

“I can’t believe I shall go with you. I haven’t thanked you yet. It seems too like a dream to be true. I wonder if it will be possible for me to leave?”

“I can tell you, my dear, that I do not intend to leave this house without you.”

“But my pupils! Oh, dear Lady Alicia! There are such crowds of objections to my going. You see, my illness has been such a set-back. Harry and Alan are running wild; it isn’t fair to them.”

“I think, if I may say so, you ought not to continue to teach them. Surely, my dear Joan, there is not such pressing need now for money?”

“I am afraid we have still back bills troubling us. You are no stranger, Lady Alicia; you know what a struggle it was when Mother and Cecil were abroad. My Father has never got straight since the expenses of our move, and Cecil will not realise the necessity for economy. I have now in my possession bills to the amount of thirty pounds which she has incurred since Mother’s death, and nearly all of them are for clothes. I dare not let Father see them; he would worry so!”

“But, my dear Joan, this must be stopped. I am very glad you have told me—I always feel I come next to your mother with regard to you two girls, and Cecil is a little influenced by me, I know. Does not your father give her a settled allowance?”

“No. You see, Mother and she were always together, and Mother gave her a free hand.”

“I will try and get him to do it at once, and then, if she exceeds it, she will be responsible for her own bills. You will not mind my helping you in this matter? You know I am fond of Cecil, though I see her faults. And I will call on your doctor’s wife and put the case before her. Perhaps she can manage to teach her boys herself till you come back. Be strong minded, my dear. Refuse to worry, and things will smooth themselves out.”

Lady Alicia certainly worked wonders. She went out into the village the next day, arranging what part of Joan’s duties should be undertaken by the schoolmistress, and enlisting Miss Borfield’s help as well. Mrs. Blount was flattered by a visit from her, but announced her intention of sending her boys to school.

“Their father fully meant them to go this term, but we did not like to take them away from Miss Adair. She has taught them splendidly, and I am very grateful to her. My husband was only saying yesterday that she ought to go away for a thorough rest and change. He met her on her way to the station,

and thought her looking shockingly ill. I am sure he will be very glad to hear that you are taking her away."

Then Lady Alicia came back to the rectory, and had a very long talk with Cecil about helping her father in Joan's absence and keeping down expenses.

Cecil was at first airily indifferent; then she grew hot and indignant, and, finally, her better self prevailed.

"I never can make money go far—it slips through my fingers like water; but I'll just keep things going till Joan comes back. She does deserve a holiday; I know she ought to have it. I dare say it will be easier to do things when she is away than when she is here. Anyhow, I am not a fool, and Sophia is a host in herself. We shall manage."

Lastly, Lady Alicia talked to Mr. Adair, and before she left he arranged with Cecil that he should give her a dress allowance, which allowance she was not to exceed.

On Tuesday Lady Alicia and Joan set off for Ballyclunny, in the north of Ireland.

CHAPTER XVII

A VISIT TO IRELAND

It had been raining all day, but when the little local train drew up at the station, the sun was shining through the clouds, and every tree and bush held thousands of diamond points of wet glistening in the golden rays.

The soft, moist air was refreshing to the travellers, who were both tired. An antiquated landau was waiting outside for them, and when Lady Alicia suggested that it should be opened, the old coachman looked very troubled.

"The colonel's lady has never ridden with her head bare to the heavens, me lady. Sure, the fastening will be rusted entoirely; but if so be that Mr. Murdoch here will put his shoulder to the cratur, we'll be able to open her between us." Then, in a loud aside, he ejaculated: "May the Holy Virgin kape a hold of me coat tails, for me body as it is be burstin' through!"

Joan laughed out, and Lady Alicia said that she would not trouble them to open it if it was so difficult. But the station-master, Mr. Murdoch, was hot and impetuous; he called two porters, and the four men threw themselves upon the vehicle, where they wrestled and talked and swore to such an extent that Joan thought they were indulging in a free fight. At last it was wrenched open, and Pat McQuick, the old coachman, mounted his box again in triumph. But the seams of his coat justified his fears, and the neck of it was ripped open in more places than one.

"We are true to our traditions," said Lady Alicia, laughing softly. "After our immaculate English servants these give us rather a shock. I have lived so little in Ireland that I have not had much personal experience of it; but my friends tell me it is impossible to keep their servants tidy. Of course, in the towns it is different, and in the big houses; but my house is very old and very primitive. I wonder what you will think of it?"

"I shall love every inch of it," said Joan enthusiastically.

They drove along a flat, marshy moor; the wild duck and peewits seemed to have it to themselves. Then they came to woods, climbed a steep hill, and there had the most lovely view of the blue ocean below them.

"I did not know you were near the sea."

"Three miles from it."

Then they descended into a green valley, twisted in and out of some very narrow lanes, and eventually came to a cluster of cottages and a small church. Some barefooted children raced after the carriage cheering and gesticulating wildly.

"That's a welcome to us," said Lady Alicia, smiling. "We are only just outside the village."

They stopped at a very imposing-looking iron gate, flanked with massive pillars. There was a little lodge inside, and an old woman, curtsying deeply, opened the gate.

Joan looked out with great interest as they drove up the avenue. Rather an overgrown shrubbery flanked it on either side, then they turned the corner and came out upon a large grass lawn. Two goats and a flock of chickens were perambulating across it. The house faced them. It was a little grey stone building, with a rose-covered veranda running along the front of it.

To Joan it seemed very unassuming after the long avenue and pretentious entrance. The door was opened by a very stout, smiling woman in a red striped cotton dress and a large, coarse, white apron. She wore no cap. Lady Alicia knew her, and called her Biddy.

"Glad we are to see you, me lady," she said; "but there's few enough to greet ye. The kornel an' his lady, well they just ran the house with meself an' me niece Mary; but sure it wasn't the kornel that was masther, but his valet—just a sojer man. And then there was the foine English maid that turned her nose upwards and her lips down, an' she an' the kornel's man—they just had very clever heads an' lazy bodies—for 'twas orders here and orders there, an' even Larry was under the cratur's thumbs!"

Talking all the time she led them into a stone-flagged hall, and then into a long, rambling room at the back of the house with quaint corners and recesses, and three casement windows opening into an untidy flower garden. There was a small fire lighted, and the room looked comfortable. It was furnished more for comfort than show, though it had some good pictures and china on the walls.

"This is, or was, the drawing-room, Joan," said Lady Alicia. "You see we shall not be in luxury, but it makes a cosy living-room. We have a dining-room and small morning-room besides; but if the weather is fine we must spend most of our time out of doors. Now, Biddy, how soon can you give us something to eat? And then we will go to bed early, for we are very tired."

Biddy assured them that dinner could be served in half an hour, and then she took them up a broad, shallow flight of stairs to the bedrooms. They lay on both sides of a wide corridor running the length of the house, and Joan was delighted with her room. She could catch a glimpse of the sea from her windows, and roses were climbing the wall outside and scenting her room with their fragrance. When she came down to dinner later, Lady Alicia said:

"Why, Joan, you are already looking rested; what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing," said Joan, laughing, "except that I have thrown off the burden of housekeeping and responsibility, and mean to enjoy every minute of my time here."

"We will lead the simple life. I have great confidence in Biddy, for I have known her since she was a girl. I really came over to see who I could place here as caretakers. If she and her niece will stay on, I could not do better. But I see I shall have to have some repairs done. It is an old house, and wants a good deal of attention from time to time."

They enjoyed their simple little dinner, and then, as the evening was fine, they wandered round the old garden. Joan felt as if she were in a dream. She had not left home for so long that she loved the very novelty of a fresh atmosphere and environment. And it was a real treat to be able to confide in her godmother and receive her sympathy and counsel. It almost seemed unreal to her to be absolutely detached from duty, and be able to indulge in rest and recreation just as she felt inclined.

Lady Alicia looked after her well. She sent her early to bed, and told her that breakfast would be served to them in their rooms.

"Then you can sleep on, if you like. We need not meet till lunch time."

But, tired though she was, Joan was not fond enough of her bed to stay there; and very early the next day found her out in the garden, making friends with the horses and dogs in the stable, listening to old Larry's yarns of bygone days, and at last settling down on a charming old seat on a knoll overlooking a wide expanse of country and the ocean upon the horizon. Here she sat for a full hour with her hands loosely clasped in her lap and her eyes and thoughts far away.

The soft air fanned her brow. There was the scent from a sweet brier hedge close to her, and a waft of burning peat and wood from the chimneys of the house.

Her thoughts flew back home. “What was Cecil doing? Would she remember that this was the day for ordering the groceries and that the village women came to the vestry to pay in their club money? Would Mr. Adair remember that clerical meeting in the afternoon? And would Benson remember to earth up the potatoes and mend the orchard fence?”

Then she gave herself a mental shake and began to think of some nature studies that were simmering in her mind. But very soon her mind was back in the old rectory. Would Wilmot Gascoigne be continuing to come there? Was there a fragment of truth in the village gossip? Was it possible that Cecil was learning to care for him? And if Wilmot really cared for her, would it be a good match for them both? Again she determined not to worry. Lady Alicia came out in a few minutes to find her.

“I wonder if you would like to drive out to the sea this afternoon,” Lady Alicia said. “I must go over the house with Biddy and do a good deal of business with her; but Larry could drive you down in the pony trap. There is a fat pony out at grass who wants to be exercised, and the coast is lovely; I am sure you would enjoy it.”

Joan was delighted at the idea, and at two o’clock she set off in a jingle. Larry used a good deal of whip and tongue before the pony could be persuaded to settle into a steady trot; but time was no object, and Joan was so interested in everything which she saw that she was in no hurry to end the drive.

Once a motor whizzed past them.

Larry gave an indignant snort.

“Bad luck to those that use ’em!” he said vindictively. “Me son’s wife have lost foive pigs this very year, an’ sorra a bit did the craturs giv’ her for the slaughter of ’em, for she were seven mile from town, an’ the police never got in toime to tak the number, an’ they just tore on for all they were worth! ’Tis one of the things we hope for when this Home Rule comes, that them motors be kep’ under strict control of police.”

“But I thought they were! What else do you expect Home Rule to do for you, Larry? I thought you were all against it up here.”

“ ’Tis like this, Miss. There be a lot of injustice to us Oirish, and I were born in Cork and be a strict Catholic. The priests tell us the good old times be comin’ back, an’ I believe ’em. An’ we shall have a king an’ parlyment all of our own one day, an’ money will run the streets like water, they say. A gran’ toime be comin!”

He shook his head slowly from side to side.

Joan did not attempt to argue with him; she drew him on to talk, and when they came out upon miles of rough moorland by the sea, she left off talking to enjoy the scene before her.

At last she got out of the jingle, told Larry to wait for her, and made her way down to the beach. The tide was out. Great waves in the distance dashed and foamed over long reefs of rock; the golden sand with its seaweed and shells proved an enticing place to Joan. She wandered on, meeting nobody, and revelling in her solitude.

Suddenly she turned a corner, and heard a child's shrill cry for help. Looking out upon a rock close to the sea, she saw a small figure waving a handkerchief. She set off running towards it, and saw it was a tiny girl quite surrounded by the sea. The tide was evidently on the turn, and had crept in round her before she had noticed her peril. She was tugging at something which was evidently caught in a wedge of the rock. Joan wasted no time in thought. She pulled off her shoes and stockings, tucked up her skirts, and walked right in, till she reached the child. She was surprised to find the water reach her knees.

"My fis' net! My fis' net! A nas'y cwab has got it in his teef!" the child cried excitedly.

Joan made a grab at the stick, and with a jerk pulled up a shrimping net; then she lifted the little girl in her arms and waded back into safety. Putting her down on the sand she said:

"Now, where's your nurse? You might have been drowned."

"Yes," nodded the small girl. "I screamed and screamed because the wicked sea ran at me so quick, and I couldn't and couldn't get my fis' net out of that hole! And then I see'd you, and I waved my hanky, and then you comed. And now I'll go back and sit down where Uncle Randal putted me. He'll be coming soon, but poor Rory hurted his foot and it bleeded, and he was carrying him to the car."

"Your uncle ought not to have left you on the beach alone," said Joan severely.

"I did pwomise him I wouldn't move; but then—why then—well, I had to, for a little cwab ran away from me, and I followed him, and then I forgot!"

She trotted across the sand—a dear little barefooted mite in white jersey and cap and a rough serge frock, with a crop of golden curls and mischievous, sparkling face.

Joan stayed to slip into her shoes and stockings, then leisurely followed her. By the time she reached her a tall man had appeared down an opening in the cliff, and the little girl was gesticulating wildly in Joan's direction.

Joan came up, then started in amazement, for the man strode towards her in no less surprise.

It was Major Armitage.

"Miss Adair, have you dropped from the skies?"

"No, indeed I have not; have you?"

"I brought my small niece for a motor ride. She inveigled me down to the sea; then our dog cut his foot, which necessitated my taking him back to the car, which is waiting for us above; and I find, as usual, she has nearly brought catastrophe upon herself by not doing as she was told. How on earth do you happen to be in these parts?"

Joan told him. He listened with the greatest interest. He seemed more animated and in better spirits than when she had seen him last; but he did not compliment her upon her appearance.

"You must have been ill," he said to her, "to lose your colour so! I have never seen you anything but radiant and blooming."

"And now I am a haggard wreck," said Joan, laughing, the colour and light coming into her eyes and cheeks. "This is a very surprising encounter. Of course, I knew you had gone to Ireland; but my mind has been so engrossed with difficulties at home that I never thought of associating you with this part. You know Lady Alicia, do you not?"

A shadow came over his face at once.

"I have never met her, though she has often stayed at my brother's. She is charming, I believe. We are about twenty miles away; that is nothing to us, for my sister keeps a car. We will come over and call."

Then he looked down upon his little niece. "Sheila, this lady who rescued you just now is an old friend of mine. Kiss her and thank her for what she has done for you."

"I don't call her old at all, at all!" responded Sheila quickly, then she sprang lightly up and seized hold of Joan round the neck, and gave her a

hug. “She’s my fren’ as well as yours, Uncle Randal, but I shan’t call her old as you do. She’s young—quite young, like Mummy!”

“May I say what a pleasure it is to see you again,” said Major Armitage, letting his eyes dwell on Joan in almost a tender way. “The one bright memory of Old Bellerton is my evenings in the church on Sunday, and supper at the rectory afterwards. I have felt such a long way off from you all that the sudden sight of you is a very delightful experience.”

“We have missed you very much,” Joan said quietly, looking up; and then she turned again to the child, for somehow or other she was shy of meeting his eyes.

“I can’t conceive how Lady Alicia managed to spirit you away. What will they do without you? You were indispensable to everybody.”

“I’m afraid I thought so; but I’m not at all, and Cecil is home now, and she is looking after things. I was cross, and slack, and very unpleasant after my attack of ‘flu,’ and I dare say they are glad to get rid of me!”

“Look here, how are you going back? Can’t I offer you a seat in my car? I’ll run you to Ballyclunny in no time.”

“Thank you, but I must return the same way I came. Old Larry would feel quite hurt if I were to desert him. He is the old coachman, and has driven me here in a small jingle. He let me know that it was a great favour to have his company; and said that it was only because I was fresh to ‘Oireland’ that he had come with me himself instead of sending the boy. I can’t give you his accent, but he said I was the very divil for getting information, and he was the only one in that part of the country who could give it to me!”

She laughed merrily as she shook hands with the Major. He smiled, then grew grave.

“I hope you did not get wet in rescuing this naughty child? I blame myself for having left her. I am really deeply grateful to you, and so will her mother be, when she hears of her escapade.”

“I did very little.”

Then glancing at the laughing, dancing child, she said:

“I am so glad you have a small niece, Major Armitage. Children are an exhilarating tonic.”

“And you think I wanted one? I am not a man who sits down with a broken backbone when life deals him blows. When I left your part of the world I closed and sealed a chapter in my life. Here I am in a fresh one.”

He spoke bravely, but in the tired, weary lines upon his face he carried the stamp of suffering; and when Joan had left him and was jogging home behind the fat pony, she wondered if he would ever be quite the same man again.

Lady Alicia was very interested when she heard of the encounter.

“You are not able to get away from your Old Bellerton friends even here. I had forgotten he had a married sister. What is her name?”

“I think she married a Mr. Donavan.”

“Oh, I know! The Donavans have a beautiful old place about twenty miles away. Well, how strange! But I am not sure that I like your being drawn back into your old atmosphere. I wanted you to have a complete break from it.”

“Oh, we are not likely to meet very often. Major Armitage is not fond of society.”

Lady Alicia looked in a meditative fashion at Joan, then shook her head.

To herself she said:

“The man that prefers one woman to many is dangerous!”

Two days afterwards a car drove up.

Mrs. Donavan and Major Armitage were announced. Meta Donavan was a bright, vivacious little woman. She took hold of Joan by both hands and said:

“I feel inclined to kiss you! You saved my darling from what might have been a watery grave. And I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Of course, I have heard of you, and I pictured you a Madonna and a saint. You look quite like an ordinary being! Saints don’t have dimples. I congratulate you upon that possession!”

Joan could not help laughing. Then, as Major Armitage was talking to Lady Alicia, Mrs. Donavan gave a little nod in his direction.

“How do you think he is looking? I flatter myself Sheila and I have done him a world of good. He came up here looking like a ghost. I could hardly get a word out of him; but I never rested till I got him at my piano, which

happens to be a very good one, and then he relaxed, and I won a smile out of him!"

Joan wondered if she was her brother's confidante. She hardly thought so, but she could well understand that she would win her way with anybody.

And then presently whilst tea was being got ready, they sauntered out into the untidy garden, and Joan and Major Armitage were thrown together.

"Are you coming back to us again?" she asked when he had been asking for village news.

He gave a little shudder.

"God forbid! I told you that bit of my past is sealed."

"But what are you going to do about your house?"

"I'm never going to live in it again."

Joan looked grave.

"Your tenants will be sorry. Are you going to sell it?"

"No; at least, I have not made up my mind."

"I am very inquisitive," said Joan apologetically; "you must forgive me. I get so very interested over everyone that I almost regard their affairs as mine, which is most foolish."

"Not at all," said Major Armitage quickly. "You are a friend. You have a right to ask me questions. If things became quieter over here, my sister would like to leave Ireland for a time. Then I thought she might like to have my old house. And I shall perhaps go abroad or drift into club life in London."

"Oh!" said Joan impulsively. "You talk as if you have no object in your life."

"I don't think I have."

"But your music! Your music!" she cried. "You must not lay that gift aside. If you do not compose you can play. And you like Church music. If I had your gift I would take some big post as organist and would speak to souls with my music. Oh, Major Armitage, you have not given up your music?"

He looked down upon her and smiled.

“I wish I could have you always near me to rouse me from my lethargy and inspire me! I think one needs to be very happy, or very miserable, to produce good music. And over here I have been living a day at a time, refusing to think at all deeply, or do more than enjoy the present. But I don’t mean to give up my music. You are quite right there. And already I am being pestered to return to town and undertake several things there. But for the present I am looking after my sister’s estate for her. It badly needs a man upon it.”

“And brains,” said Joan, smiling. “I do acknowledge the superiority of your sex. I might have known you would not be idle. Forgive my impertinence.”

Then the others joined them, and they went indoors to tea.

Mrs. Donavan insisted that they should come over to lunch in two days’ time, and this they did. Joan thoroughly enjoyed the day. It was one of the very few old houses in Ireland which had not been allowed to suffer decay, and the gardens were beautifully kept. She thought Mrs. Donavan must be a very happy woman till she took her up to the top of a turret tower to see the view, and then leaning her arms on the parapet the young widow gazed away to the distant country with misty eyes.

“Oh!” she cried, “for a log cabin and a man to take care of me! Miss Adair, you were saying just now you envied me my home. I have come to see that no environment compensates for the loss of close companionship. I have been a lonely miserable woman since my husband died, and if civil war comes to our poor country, I will almost welcome the opportunities I shall have of doing and denying myself in the great cause. I am tired and sick of comfort and prosperity. I am not made for it, unless I have someone I love to share it with me.”

“You have your brother now.”

“Yes,” and her face sparkled through its tears. “I can’t tell you what he has been to me! He has had his trouble, poor fellow! The world is full of it, but as I tell him, his bliss was snatched away from him before he tasted it. I tasted mine to the full, and the miss of it is agony!”

Then she shook off her emotion, and after that one glimpse of a hidden self, Mrs. Donavan relapsed into her usual sparkling and charming gaiety. Major Armitage was in a quiet, grave mood. Joan did not see much of him, for Sheila claimed her as an old friend, and carried her off to see her pets

and her own little garden. When they were driving home, Joan said to Lady Alicia:

"I think if I were given very favourable circumstances I should live a very lazy self-indulgent life. I do love spending my days in idleness."

"You are resting now. I should not be afraid for you, Joan. Life is too real to you to waste."

Joan shook her head doubtfully.

"I don't want to go home and settle down in the old routine. You don't know how I chafe against it, Lady Alicia. I am so weary of it, and Cecil tries my patience, and I even get fretted by my father's continual cheerful optimism!"

"You must remember you have been ill. You will feel quite differently soon. I would remind you of a favourite text of yours which will be made your experience, and has been, has it not? 'Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness.' "

Joan drew a long sigh.

"My dear child, *being* is as important as *doing* in God's sight. A life lived consistently is a sermon in itself. Think of Cecil and of Banty Gascoigne. Both watching you, both keenly conscious when you fail in gentleness and patience. Are they not worth winning?"

"I feel it would need a miracle to alter Cecil," Joan said despondently.

There was a pause, then Lady Alicia said: "I want you to go back invigorated and refreshed, and I expect you will. But you are not ready yet either in mind or body."

And Joan found that Lady Alicia was right. As the days sped on and she found her keenness and energy return to her, thoughts of her home duties no longer oppressed her. She revelled in the simple outdoor life she was leading, and drew fresh health from her surroundings. When next Major Armitage met her he complimented her on the improvement in her appearance.

"It is the Irish air," she said, laughing. "I can no longer pretend that I am an invalid."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CHURCH IN THE HILLS

"Such a long letter from Cecil!"

Joan spoke joyfully. The post had come in rather later than usual. It was a lovely morning in June. Joan had met the postman in the avenue, and had just settled herself under a shady beech tree on the lawn to enjoy her letters. Lady Alicia took a chair, too, under the tree. She had a fair-sized packet of letters in her hand.

Joan had troubled over Cecil's silence. She had only written to her once, and that was a hurried line. Mr. Adair was not a good correspondent, and though he gave her parish news, the little details of daily life at the rectory were not mentioned. She glanced at the closely written sheets in delight, and then caught her breath in astonishment and almost dismay.

Lady Alicia looked up.

"No bad news, I trust?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose it is only my fears come true. Cecil writes to tell me that she is engaged to Wilmot Gascoigne."

Lady Alicia did not speak. Joan went on hurriedly reading her letter. None of the details for which she craved were there; only a long dissertation on love and marriage and the description of Wilmot in the light of a devoted lover.

"We are convinced that there is mental affinity between us," Cecil wrote. "I inspire him, he tells me, and to be the inspiration of such a genius is enough for me. It is not the common foolish love we feel for each other. It is intellectual appreciation, that soul to soul intercourse which is only understood by ourselves."

Joan almost laughed as she read it. Then an anxious look came into her eyes.

She finished her letter.

"I don't think I shall be betraying confidence if I let you see it," she said to Lady Alicia. "Cecil has no reserve in her nature. I expect she has told everyone by this time all she thinks and feels about her engagement."

“I don’t know that it is such a misfortune,” said Lady Alicia. “They may suit each other. Cecil wants waking up. This may do it.”

“I am afraid I have lost my confidence in him,” said Joan in a troubled voice. “I would not say this to anybody, but I know you will not misunderstand me. He came perilously near making love to me at one time. He would have done it in a moment if I had encouraged him. Oh, I hope, I hope he will be true to Cecil. I feel awfully afraid for her. And she is not accustomed to yield her will to another. He will be master. I am convinced of that.”

“Love makes all things easy,” said Lady Alicia.

“Yes; but Cecil’s letter hardly gives me that hope. It is all so wordy, so analytical.”

Lady Alicia read the letter and handed it back in silence.

Joan looked beseechingly at her.

“Do tell me what you think.”

“I don’t know Mr. Gascoigne, and I don’t know what to think. It may be the best thing for Cecil. I don’t think she would ever have settled down happily and contentedly in Old Bellerton.”

“No; I am sure she would not. She told me by hook or crook she would go abroad again in the autumn. I must write and offer my congratulations, I suppose.”

It was quite natural that Joan should feel a little sore at heart. It was not so very long ago that she was assured most fervently that she inspired and uplifted Wilmot’s soul. Now he had transferred his liking to Cecil; and she could fancy from past experience that the passionate outpourings of his heart would be very pleasing and convincing to Cecil.

She shook off forebodings which descended upon her, and wrote an affectionate, sisterly letter to Cecil. For the rest of the day she was distrait and depressed. Lady Alicia wisely left her alone. She knew that if Joan wished to talk to her she would do it.

In the afternoon Major Armitage and his small niece arrived in the car. It was Sheila’s birthday, and she had elected to come and tell Joan of it, for, as usual, Joan had won the child’s heart.

They all had tea together on the lawn. Joan watched the uncle and niece with amusement and astonishment. Sheila was a little autocrat, and the

Major was as wax in her hands.

She persuaded her elders to play hide and seek with her, and the formerly gloomy and solitary man was as agile in pursuing and being pursued across the lawn as his small niece.

At last both Major Armitage and Joan refused to play any more, and they sank exhausted upon the garden seat.

Sheila surveyed them pityingly.

"You poor fings! I'm not a bit tired."

Then, looking at them with her head on one side, she announced:

"I've a picture of Daddy and Mummy sitting on a seat just like you; only Daddy has his arm round Mummy's neck."

"Yes," said Joan hastily; "but we're not daddy and mummy, you see."

"But couldn't you be another daddy and mummy and have a little girl just like me?" demanded Sheila.

Joan's sense of humour overcame her embarrassment. She laughed outright, then jumped up and chased Sheila across the lawn to the house.

Lady Alicia, from her chair under the tree, looked across at Major Armitage and smiled.

"That is what I wish for you," she said. "You must forgive my impertinence."

Major Armitage did not resent her speech, as he would have done a few months ago.

"I have used up all my affections and emotions over an empty fancy," he said in a low, husky voice. "I have nothing left to give a woman now."

"I don't know," Lady Alicia rejoined. "You have respect and liking; that is a good foundation for love. And as I get older I see many happy marriages take place amongst very matter-of-fact, unemotional people."

He made no reply, but his eyes followed Joan's figure in the distance; he watched her seat herself upon the low steps of the veranda and take Sheila in her arms.

Lady Alicia said no more. When Joan and the child joined them again conversation turned on Irish affairs. Presently Major Armitage said:

"Where do you go to church on Sunday?"

“We have to drive six miles,” said Lady Alicia. “We go into the town.”

“Have you ever heard of a certain parson called Dantman? He has a little church away in the hills, and is a most remarkable preacher. My sister told me his story. He is a bit hot-tempered, and got into trouble with the priests in the south. I think it was in Cork that he drew crowds to hear him; and then there was a shindy of some sort, and the bishop gave him this little living and let him know he must accept it. They say the people walk for miles to hear him, and he has the most wonderful influence over them. My sister says he would draw tears from a stone. You ought to hear him. I believe it is as near you as it is to us—a matter of about fifteen miles.”

Lady Alicia laughed.

“It always does amuse me to hear the airy way motorists speak of distances. How do you think we could manage to drive fifteen miles there and fifteen miles back?”

“The fat pony would do it in a week,” said Joan, laughing.

“Let me call for you in the car next Sunday. The evening is the best time to hear him; only the car can’t get to his church. There is a mile and a half walk across the hills, and the scenery is wild in the extreme.”

“Then what do you do with the car?”

“We put it up at an inn the last time we went.”

“Your sister may want to go elsewhere.”

“Oh, I think she doesn’t go out in the evening, as a rule. She did come with me once; but I shall drive the car myself; she’s very good in letting me have it when I want it.”

“What do you say, Joan? It is very kind of Major Armitage to propose taking us. Would you like to go?”

“It sounds delightful,” Joan replied. “I should enjoy it very much.”

“Then I’ll call for you at half-past five next Sunday,” said Major Armitage.

“Come to tea, won’t you?”

“Uncle Randal can’t do that,” said Sheila, shaking her curls disapprovingly. “He an’ me spread each other’s toast on Sunday. I couldn’t do without him.”

“Then we will expect you to supper on our return,” said Lady Alicia.

“Thank you.”

The matter was settled, and when they had left Joan said:

“I love to see Major Armitage with that child. He is almost boyish. It is a much better life for him than shut up alone with his music.”

“He ought to get married,” Lady Alicia rejoined gravely. “I hope he will.”

Joan did not reply.

When Sunday evening came, Lady Alicia, who had been struggling with a headache all day, told Joan that she was afraid she would not be up to the walk.

“But there is no reason why you should not go,” she said; “and then you will be able to tell me about it when you return.”

So when, at half-past five, Major Armitage drove up in his car, only Joan awaited him. He tucked her up comfortably in the rugs, and they started. It was a lovely evening, and as they sped through the lanes, bordered by verdant green meadows, and hedges over which the wild rose and honeysuckle rioted in lovely profusion, Joan drew a long breath of delight.

“This will be a Sunday to remember,” she said. “This day week I hope to be home again.”

“Are you really going so soon?”

There was regret in Major Armitage’s voice.

“I want to go back, and I don’t,” said Joan, with her happy laugh. “This has been such an easy, peaceful time that I should like to prolong it; but I am well and strong, and feel able to tackle all my small difficulties with a light heart. Cecil wrote yesterday wanting me back. She is going up to town, for Wilmot Gascoigne will be there for some weeks, and she wants to go about with him.”

“I hardly like to ask you, but do you like that engagement?”

“I suppose I must. Honestly, I am afraid of how it will turn out. But at present they appear very happy.”

It was odd, she thought, how few men liked Wilmot. She had never heard anyone praise him in a warm-hearted fashion.

Major Armitage was silent for a few minutes; then he said, more as if he were speaking aloud his thoughts:

"He is, at all events, better suited to her than to you."

Joan was rather amused.

"There was nothing of that sort between us," she said, "though I dare say the village gossiped over our employment together. The world in general cannot understand an ordinary business-like, matter-of-fact friendship between man and woman."

"Oh, I heard no gossip," said Major Armitage hastily. "I rarely had intercourse with the outside world when I was at home. Looking back now, I see it was a mistake. I got wrapped up in visions and dreams, to my own detriment and hurt. Now I believe in the wisdom of the Almighty: 'It is not good for man to be alone.' "

"I don't believe a lonely life is good for any of us," said Joan slowly; "and it is so unnecessary. There are always so many who would be the better for our help and friendship, and for whom we should be the better too."

"My sister has shaken into me a little of her practical sense. You see, since I left the Service and my trouble connected with my sight came to me, I shrank from everyone, and after a time isolation became a habit which I could not break. I always count it as one of my blessings that your father was brought to my gates and laid up in my house. I think if I had not had your friendship things would have gone badly with me later on. And—and, Miss Adair, I don't want to lose your friendship, for I have learnt to value it."

Joan's heart gave a little throb. It told her then how much she valued his friendship; but she answered very simply:

"You have it."

There was silence between them. The car took them away now from the lanes across a wide expanse of moor; then hills appeared, and very shortly after they came to a standstill.

A cluster of small cottages round a very dilapidated inn was the end of their drive. Major Armitage was welcomed by the landlord of the "Black Pig," who showed him a big shed, into which he could run his car.

"Sure an' you'll be goin' to hear the praycher?" he ejaculated; "he's a holy sowl, if there be wan on this airth; but a powerfu' scaldin' hot dressin' he gives to the people, Oi can tell ye!"

Joan and the Major were not long in starting up a narrow sheep-track across the hills. Here and there were little groups of the peasantry crossing

the rough moorland. The sun was sending slanting rays across the hills, touching up here and there a little cluster of trees with golden glory.

The stillness of the summer evening made Joan say thoughtfully:

"I always think a summer Sunday evening the most delicious time in all the year. We might be away from the world altogether up here—caught up to receive a heavenly vision."

Major Armitage looked at her with a smile.

"That's rather good," he said. "I do hope you won't be disappointed in him."

It was rough walking, but at last they emerged from their irregular stony pathway upon a level bit of ground; and there, tucked away in a copse of trees and brushwood, with a high cliff behind it, was a tiny iron church.

"What an extraordinary place to build a church in!" exclaimed Joan.

"It was built and endowed by a rich farmer. You will see the tablet to his memory in the church."

They went inside. It was fast filling, and they took a seat just inside the door. The music was not very good. There was a wheezy harmonium, and no pretence at a choir. The congregation took a hearty part in singing and responses. It was just a very plain, simple little building; and John Dantman was at first sight a very commonplace little man.

Yet when he mounted the pulpit, Joan saw that his eyes were magnetic in their compelling power, and his preaching thrilling in its force and reality. He did not rant or rave, he leant over his pulpit quietly, and seemed to search and speak to every individual soul before him. He took for his text:

"*Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men.*"

Very stern, unflinchingly true, and convincingly earnest was the first part of his sermon, but suddenly his voice broke and softened.

"We persuade men," he said; "that is our vocation, we are not here to scold, to upbraid, to frighten. We have told you stern facts, that is all."

And then followed such loving, persuasive pleading that Joan listened herself with a swelling heart, and when it was all over and she came out into the soft, summer air, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Major Armitage, I feel a burning desire now to exercise a little of my persuasion upon others. It is quite true what you say. If we all believed

earnestly what we profess to believe, we could not live so indifferently, and selfishly ignore the needs of those who have not grasped the truth. If I were a man! Oh, if I were a man!"

She stopped, a little ashamed of her emotion.

"What would you do?"

"Oh, I don't know, the field would be so wide. I think I have wanted all my life to impart knowledge, to influence, to take a part in moulding the characters of the next generation. Teaching those younger than myself has always been before me. I have been distinctly shown that my sphere is to be in my own home, in a country village, learning lessons myself instead of teaching."

"What kind of lessons?" asked Major Armitage, wishing to draw her out.

"Lessons of patience and endurance and long-suffering with joyfulness," she said in a low tone.

Major Armitage was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Those are hard lessons for any of us. And very few of us attempt to learn them."

They lapsed into silence.

The going down was more difficult in the waning light than coming up. Joan was glad to take Major Armitage's offered arm. To her the memory of that evening would always remain with her. She had enjoyed every bit of it; she hardly liked to acknowledge to herself how happy she was in company with the man who walked beside her. From having had a deep pity for him, she found herself taking an absorbing and increasing interest in him. He never disappointed her in anything he said or did. They were very silent on their return journey. Just before they reached Lady Alicia's house Major Armitage said:

"I am afraid this will be good-bye for the present. I have to go away for a few days on business for my sister, and when I return I shall find you flown, shall I not?"

"Yes, I leave on Wednesday."

"Will you remember me to your father? I wonder if you would send me occasional news of Old Bellerton? It would be a great pleasure to hear from you."

"Certainly I will."

Joan's voice had a little tremor in it.

"Thank you."

He said no more. And then they went indoors, and found Lady Alicia waiting to hear about their service.

When Major Armitage took his departure a little later, he looked rather wistfully at Joan as he took her hand.

"How glad your father will be to have you back again!" he said with emphasis.

Joan laughed.

"Yes, I think he will. He and I have lived so long together that we know each other's ways, and he says he is lost without me."

"But he can't expect to keep you with him always."

"Why not? I don't think anything will call me away from him. I feel my life is meant to be in that quiet corner, and I am going to be content."

He looked at her, seemed as if he was about to speak, then shut his lips sternly and wrung her hand.

And Joan felt when he had left as if the sunshine had gone out of her heart, leaving it grey and empty and cheerless.

CHAPTER XIX

CECIL'S ENGAGEMENT

Joan arrived home to find a good deal awaiting her. Cecil was in a fever to be away. She was going to stay with some friends of her mother's. Wilmot was already in town; Mr. Adair was not very well. He had got wet one day, and bronchitis, his old enemy, was hovering over him. Jenny had had words with Cecil, and had given notice. She was sullen when Joan spoke to her; and Sophia said that she was determined not to stay. Benson, the odd man, had become very slack in his work. The garden had suffered from having no superintendence, and weeds had grown apace. There had been friction between Miss Borwill and the schoolmistress at Sunday school, and two steady members of the choir had resigned.

Joan found life bristling with difficulties; but she was her bright, capable self again, and tackled everything with a cheery spirit. She had expected to find a slack household under Cecil's rule, and so was not dismayed in consequence. Upon the night of her arrival Cecil came into her room when she went up to bed, and regardless of Joan's fatigue kept her talking till past one o'clock.

The question Joan asked at once was:

"Is Mother's book finished?"

"My dear Joan, how ridiculous! Of course it is not. Wilmot thinks that he must go out to the Riviera with a camera and get some snapshots. He says a book of that sort must be prettily illustrated, or it will not be attractive. And if—if we are married in November, we could go together to the Riviera. I shall never be able to winter in England, I know."

"But is the writing of the book finished?"

"Oh, no—not nearly. It shows how little you know about writing a book like that! We have done about half. I am persuading him to throw over these Gascoigne Chronicles. It is a never-ending task, and he works better in town, he tells me. I can quite believe it. The rush and throb of life there must stimulate and quicken your brains. This deadly country life paralyses one! He and I are thoroughly agreed upon that point."

"Have you seen anything of Banty?"

"Oh, of course. I was asked to the Hall to be thoroughly inspected and criticised. Banty has no manners—she is like a new-fledged schoolgirl. She never has a word to say for herself. Wilmot says she has no intelligence at all."

"And you are really happy, Cecil?"

"My dear Joan, I am not overwhelmed with ecstasy because I am going to be married. I have seen too much of men to expect much from them. But Wilmot and I understand each other, and I shall have the life that suits me; that is the main thing. I want you to speak to Father about money. I can't go up to town without a penny in my pocket; I may go to other friends whilst I am there. Everyone will soon be leaving town, and I want to take advantage of my opportunities. I can't possibly make my allowance cover my travelling expenses. And I dare say I shall be able to get some of my trousseau in town. I suppose Father intends to give me that, doesn't he?"

"Oh, dear!" sighed poor Joan. "I do not see how Father can give you money at present. But I will talk to him and see what we can do."

When Cecil eventually left her, Joan buried her face in her pillow with determination.

"I won't worry. I'm going to trust. God will guide and provide."

And her sleep was sound, unshadowed by any difficulties or troubles looming ahead.

Mr. Adair found he was able to give Cecil what she required, and she left home in high spirits. She did not often write, so Joan was quite satisfied that she was enjoying herself, and went her way happily, helping her father in parish matters, making peace between those who were quarrelling, and finding time to send up to her editor one or two more short sketches from rural life.

And then one day Derrick appeared. He walked in at luncheon time. Mr. Adair was away at a clerical meeting in the neighbouring town, and Joan, being alone, was lunching off bread and cheese and salad. But Sophia, who was always ready in an emergency, produced two grilled mutton chops and a savoury omelette, and Derrick did justice to both.

"I'm not going to desert you, Joan, though you won't have anything to say to me. And as you look upon me as a brother, I have come down to give you a brother's hint. Have you heard from the Malingerer?"

"Not for more than a fortnight. Why?"

"Oh, I've been seeing a lot of her. And that rat Motty is going, in vulgar phrase, to chuck her!"

"Oh, Derrick, don't speak so!"

Pride for her sister, and hot indignation at such a supposition, made Joan's cheeks burn.

"I tell you it's true! Why was she such a fool as to get infatuated with him? Now don't rear your head and look so lofty. I'm talking like a brother. I want you to warn her. Motty is as fickle as the wind! You found him out, didn't you? I was pretty sick when I heard the Malingerer had taken him on, for I knew it could only end one way. Have you seen Banty lately?"

"No, she is away. I have not met her since I came home."

"Well, I was asked down for a week-end whilst you were away, and old Jossy was in a fine stew. He couldn't get Motty to finish up his Chronicles. He has been at them three years, and they never get any forrarder. He runs some other book at the same time, and that gets all his time and attention. I think your mother's Riviera notes were too absorbing; those and the love-making together, and old Jossy spoke out straight, and told Motty unless he would stick to his work with him he could go. So Motty packed his bag and walked off for good, leaving the Chronicles behind him."

"Cecil never told me he had left his uncle's," said Joan, a troubled look coming into her eyes.

"Didn't she? Well, I've seen a good bit of her in town, and I can tell you Motty is conspicuous by his absence. She can't understand it, and is getting restive. I happen to know that a rich American girl has got hold of him, and is running him for all she is worth. He goes about everywhere with her, but the Malingerer has only seen them together twice. Motty told her when she questioned him about it that she was a most clever photographer, and he had hopes of enlisting her in the cause of your mother's book. She had promised to give him some of her snapshots of the Riviera for it. I don't think the Malingerer quite swallowed it. Motty always has been wild to get to America, and I believe he'll be on the briny before the Malingerer knows where he is."

"Do stop calling her the Malingerer," said Joan. "She is so much stronger now that we hear nothing about her health. Poor Cecil! I do hope that he will be true to her. It will break her heart."

Derrick laughed.

“Not a bit of it. Her heart isn’t in it. I could tell that from the way she discussed him with me. I should like to get hold of Motty by the neck and shake him as a terrier does a rat!”

“What can I do?” asked Joan helplessly.

“Get her home again.”

“She won’t come.”

“Can’t you get an attack of the ‘flu’ again and go to bed and then wire to her?”

“Oh!” said Joan impulsively, “how I wish you would marry her, Derrick!”

Derrick’s eyes danced.

“Do you think she would have me? You know who I want to marry.”

“Oh, that is past. And just think, Derrick, how nice it would be to have you as a real brother! That is the position I want you to be in.”

“Your morals are deficient. She is an engaged girl at present.”

“I will write to her by this post,” said Joan; “but I hardly know what to say.”

Joan never wrote that letter, for before Derrick left her that afternoon she received a wire:

“Coming home this evening. Arrive six o’clock.—Cecil.”

Derrick was quite relieved.

“They’ve had it out, then. He was to take her to some gallery yesterday. He had failed to keep two appointments with her, and I could see she meant to bring matters to a point. I might have spared myself the trouble of coming down, except that you’re always such a ‘sight for sore e’en.’ Sophia says you’re like a breeze in the house; I should say you stilled it. I suppose I had better make myself scarce. I’m sleeping at the Hall for a few nights. But if I can do anything for you, let me have a line before I go back to town. A horsewhipping or a ducking in the round pond would be too mild for him!”

“You are thinking the very worst of him,” said Joan. “They may have drawn closer together after meeting. I hope so.”

“Never!” said Derrick with conviction.

Joan drove slowly along the leafy lanes to the station, thinking deeply. The old pony would not be hurried, and Joan let him take his own pace.

She was wondering if Cecil had been disillusioned, and, if so, whether it would be a blessing to her or the reverse. She dreaded having her back embittered and disappointed. A rush of sympathy for her welled up in her heart. Cecil had gone to London careless, gay, and perfectly sure of her future; she was coming back perhaps empty and forlorn. Yet, when the train came in and the sisters met, Cecil looked much as usual. She was dressed in a grey linen dress, and wore a shady hat with violet pansies round it. She was already lightening her mourning for her mother. Joan was still in black.

"Well, Cecil dear, welcome home! You have returned very suddenly."

"Yes; it's too hot and airless in town. I can't stand it; and, of course, everybody is leaving."

"Derrick made his appearance yesterday. He told me he had been seeing a good bit of you."

"Yes. He is rather nice, isn't he? And knows the right people in town, which is a great thing."

They chatted together on the way home on trivial matters. Cecil gave no hint of being disappointed or unhappy, and Joan came to the conclusion that all must be right with her.

Mr. Adair was away for the evening, taking some festival service at a neighbouring church, so the girls had a quiet dinner, and, pleading fatigue, Cecil retired early to bed. One thing Joan noticed, and that was that Cecil did not mention Wilmot's name. She had not the courage to ask after him. She waited up for her father, who returned about ten o'clock. At half-past ten, just before finally bolting the front door, Joan stepped out upon the gravel path to inhale the sweet night air. Then she noticed that a light was still burning in Cecil's room, and knew that, though she had retired an hour and a half previously, she was still awake.

As she went upstairs to bed she debated with herself as to whether she should go to her sister.

If Cecil had anything to tell, night was the best time for her to tell it.

After a little hesitation she went across the passage and knocked gently at her door.

There was silence for a moment. The light was being extinguished, and then Cecil's voice spoke:

"Come in."

Joan slipped in and felt her way to the bedside in the dark.

She put out her hand and touched Cecil's head.

"Cecil dear."

In a moment Cecil's arms, to her surprise, were put round her neck, drawing her down to her, and Joan was conscious that her own cheek was touching a very tear-stained one on the pillow.

"I felt I must get back to you. You're always the same, and you'll understand and feel for me. It's all over between us. But *I* have broken it off, I'm thankful to say."

A little sob broke her voice.

"Tell me, dear. I was afraid of it."

Cecil steadied her voice.

"He treated me abominably, shamefully! I think when he was turned away from the Hall he began to weigh me in the balance, and he certainly found me wanting in the matter of pounds, shillings and pence! Then he was taken up violently in town by some Americans, who have accepted him at his own valuation, and believe that he is a genius. He was more and more with them, and less and less with me. They are going to take him over to America, and arrange a tour of lectures for him, and, of course, he means to marry the daughter. I suppose I have discovered, as you did, that he is a gasbag, and has no grit or purpose in him. I am thankful for my escape, but oh, Joan, it humiliates and hurts! And I feel alone. I miss Mother, and—and—well, I'm desperately miserable!"

Joan felt it all so pathetic that she mingled her tears with Cecil's. She asked presently about Mrs. Adair's notes.

"He has really done very little to them. We must get them back. I did say something to him, but he says he will not let all his labour go for nothing. He says he has been spending his time and brains on other people's property, and will not be treated by us as he has been by his relations. As a matter of fact, I know Sir Joseph paid him handsomely. But what can we do. Joan? Could Derrick——?"

"Yes; Derrick will tackle him," said Joan confidently; "and, if he goes to America, we must hope that we shall never see him again. Don't worry,

dearest. I am glad that you have found him out before you were married to him. It would be so awful to be disillusioned afterwards."

"I suppose everybody here will laugh at me, but *I* have broken it off, Joan, remember!"

"Yes," said Joan, almost smiling at Cecil's eagerness for that fact to be known. "I am afraid Wilmot has not many friends in this part, so I do not think you will be blamed."

She stayed with her some time. She had never before seen Cecil so softened and affectionate, and longed to improve the occasion. Yet she felt tongue-tied until, just as she was saying good-night, Cecil said:

"I felt quite thankful that you were at home, and not in Ireland. Oh, Joan, sometimes I wish I were good like you! Whatever comes to you makes you content and happy, and life is not happy to me. I hate my surroundings here; they make me miserable, and this dreadful want of money cripples one so. Don't you ever want to break away from it all?"

"Often and often," was Joan's frank reply. "But it is good to be able to trust one's life to God, Cecil dear."

If Joan expected Cecil to be a different girl after that evening's conversation, she was much mistaken. Cecil was exceedingly irritable and exacting in the days which followed. She would not leave the house or grounds, and shrank from seeing visitors. She lay in bed late, and spent most of her days in a hammock in the garden, complaining of the heat, and flies, and other annoyances.

Derrick paid a flying visit before leaving for town, and, though Cecil tried to escape him, they met in the hall. He put out his hand at once.

"My fervent congrats.!" he said. "Joan has told me. I never could congratulate you before, you know. I admire your pluck. My fingers, figuratively, are tingling to be at his throat. May I call on him in town and get that book of your mother's from him? I was able to help Joan in her difficulty with him, and I'll do the same for you."

Cecil at first received his speech with haughty head and stony face, but Derrick's sunny, genial manner always won his cause. Her whole demeanour softened; she threw her pride to the winds.

"Oh, Derrick, I'll love you for ever if you get it from him! He'll never finish it! I know he never will."

Derrick nodded.

"You must have someone to do battle for you, and Motty and I understand each other perfectly. What a good for nothing scoundrel he is!"

In a fortnight's time Cecil received a registered packet by post. It was the MS. And without another word she put it into Joan's hands.

"Don't let me see it again. Do what you like with it without asking me."

So Joan had her heart's desire, and put all her spare time to it. Then one day she received from Ireland a packet of roughly scored music and a note.

> "Dear Miss Adair,—I am still waiting to hear from you. I want you to try enclosed upon the organ, and tell me what you think of it as an anthem. We shall not soon forget the words. Does the music represent the force and beauty of them sufficiently? I wish I could hear you take the soprano part. Remember me to your father. Music seems out of place in this country at present. It is seething with discord and hot rage. The memory of our evening walk together is like a far-away melody.—Yours in true friendship,
>
> "Randal Armitage."

Joan took the anthem down to the church when her day's work was over.

The music, as she expected, was lovely. First, the crashing thunder, then the exquisitely soft and beautiful pleading. Joan felt her heart stirred and swayed by its power and pathos. And when she tried to sing it, she felt a longing to sing it to some tired, wayward hearts. "Knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men."

"What a gift he has!" she thought, when at last she closed the organ and came through the dusky garden to the house. "And now I must write to him. I ought to have done so before."

She wrote a bright, natural, chatty letter, telling him all the village news which she thought might interest him; and then she mentioned the anthem:

> "I can't tell you how much I like it and how much it brings back to me! As I hear the music I shall always see that little Irish church amongst the hills, with the ignorant, expectant faces all round us, and the wonderful stillness, with the one human voice speaking to and stirring our souls. Are you going to have it printed? I do hope you will.—Yours most sincerely,
>
> "Joan Adair."

CHAPTER XX

BANTY'S ACCIDENT

"Miss Joan, have you heard the news?"

Sophia burst into the dining-room one morning about eleven o'clock. Joan was busy dressmaking. She was not a very good hand at it, but she was now, with knitted brows, cutting out a serge skirt for herself, and she looked up just a little impatiently at the interruption.

"Is it another baby, or has one of the villagers come in for a fortune?"

"Miss Gascoigne at the Hall has been killed by a horse she was riding!"

Joan dropped her scissors on the table with a clatter.

"Sophia! What do you mean? It can't be true!"

"It is, then. The butcher's boy brought the news, and he has come straight from the Hall. They were carrying her in before he left."

Joan's face was absolutely colourless. She stood staring at Sophia in horror.

"Banty? She was only here yesterday, and she asked me to have tea in the pine wood with her to-morrow! Oh, Sophia, it must be a mistake."

Sophia shook her head gloomily.

"She was exercising a young horse in the paddock, the boy said, and he bucked and threw her against the stone wall."

"I don't believe it," said Joan.

"Don't believe what?"

Cecil asked the question as she sauntered into the room. She had only just left her bedroom. Joan blurted out Sophia's news, and Cecil was stricken dumb for a moment. Then she recovered herself.

"It's only a report. She is, most likely, stunned for the time. Is Father in?"

"No. I shall go and inquire at once."

Joan dashed out of the room, seized her garden hat, which was hanging up in the hall, and set off at a quick run down the village.

Bad news travels fast. There were knots of women at their doors; two men she met both assured her it was a terrible accident, but knew no more; everybody was conjecturing and discussing the event. It was long since the quiet village had been thrown into such a ferment.

"I seed two magpies only this morning; I knowed somethin' were comin'."

" 'Twas strange her passin' the remark to me only yesterday when she saw gran'ma: 'Well,' she says, 'I only hope,' she says, 'I shan't live till I can do nothing but sit and smile in a chair,' she says. She be always so blunt in her way, but she had a good heart, that she had!"

Scraps of conversation like this came to Joan's ears as she passed by. She was determined to get at the truth, and would not even stop at the lodge, but pressed on up the drive as fast as her breath and feet could carry her. She saw the old family butler.

"She's alive, miss," he said in answer to her question, "but we don't know how long she will be. There is complications, they say. We've wired for two nurses and a London doctor, and Dr. Blount is upstairs now."

"I will call again," said Joan. "Will you tell Lady Gascoigne that I am ready to do anything for her if she wants help in any way?"

Then she went home with lingering steps. It seemed so impossible for Banty to be ill: Banty, who had always boasted of her superb health, and had never stayed indoors in the roughest weather! Joan longed to know details. Later in the day her father called at the Hall, and Lady Gascoigne saw him. She told him as much as she knew herself: how Banty was exercising a young hunter, and was thrown against a stone wall as she cantered round the field. She was picked up unconscious; her head was badly bruised, her right wrist broken, but the most serious injury was to her right leg and thigh. They hoped now there were no internal injuries. The London doctor was hopeful of her recovery, but feared she might have to lose her leg.

When Joan heard this, her heart sank within her. If Banty lost her leg, she would never be able to ride and hunt again; and that was her life.

As the days went on it seemed very doubtful whether poor Banty would pull through; and when her leg was finally amputated above the knee, she turned her face, like Ahab, to the wall, and refused to eat. "Let me die! I want to die!" was her cry.

At last, in despair, her parents sent for Joan. She obeyed the summons promptly, but was shocked at the change in Lady Gascoigne, who was bent and feeble and seemed ten years older. Tears were in her eyes as she greeted Joan.

"Oh, Joan, you must help us! She is our only child. She won't try to live. She seems as if she is stricken dumb. She will not answer us or take the slightest notice of anything we say to her. But this morning I said, 'I must get Joan Adair to come and persuade you,' and she turned her poor eyes round and looked at me. 'Get her,' she said; and those are the first words she has spoken for two days. She was so fond of you. Perhaps you may be able to influence her."

"May I see her alone?" Joan asked.

"Of course you may if you wish it. But she seems quite oblivious as to whether there are few or many in the room."

"I would rather be alone with her," Joan persisted.

She was led upstairs to Banty's bedroom. A nurse opened the door.

"I think she is sleeping," she said softly. "I want her to take some beef tea, but it is difficult."

"Will you let me be alone with her for a little?" Joan asked.

The nurse demurred, then gave way, but asked Joan not to stay long and not to excite her.

Then into the sick room Joan went. Banty was lying back on her pillows. Her face was sharpened by suffering, her eyes were closed. Joan bent down softly and kissed her forehead. Then, as Banty's eyes opened slowly, she smiled at her.

"Here I am, Banty."

Banty gazed at her in silence. Joan's fresh, fair face, with her sunshiny, dimpling smile, seemed quite out of place in that room. But Banty found her voice.

"Lock them all out!" she said tersely and sharply.

Without any demur, Joan walked to the door and turned the key in the lock. Then she drew up a chair to the bedside, and seated herself upon it.

"Now we are alone," she said.

A flicker of a smile passed over Banty's face.

“They’ve never left me, night or day,” she said.

Joan put out her hand and took hold of Banty’s caressingly.

“And I’ve been thinking of you night and day,” she said quite cheerfully. “But, before we have a chat together, do drink this beef tea, will you, or else the nurse will be back to give it to you.”

Banty raised herself a little on the pillows. Joan tucked another pillow behind her, and saw every drop of the beef tea disappear. She was not in a hurry to speak, so she waited in silence till Banty said, slowly and haltingly:

“They talk over me, and cry over me, and bewail my lot till I feel nearly mad. The parents’ faces nearly reach to the ground! The nurses put on their nurse’s cheeriness and talk to me as if I am just born!”

Joan laughed. She could not help it, though her heart was aching for the girl in bed.

Banty looked up gratefully.

“Laugh again! I’d forgotten there was any laughter left in the world. I’ve been tied up in this bed at their mercy. I can’t—can’t get away from them.”

A rebellious, untamed soul looked out of her anguished eyes. Joan pressed her hand sympathetically. Then she spoke:

“Look here, Banty, I’ve promised not to excite you. I’ll talk as much as ever you like, but if I’m to come again I must not make you worse. I haven’t told you yet——”

“Don’t you pity me! Don’t you say you’re sorry for me. I’m fed up with that.”

“I won’t. It goes without saying.”

“Thank goodness you can speak in your natural voice!”

“Well, now, I’m going to be quite natural. You have to get out of this bed as quickly as you can. I can quite imagine the prison it has been to you. I shall expect you very soon to come along to the pine woods in a bath-chair, and then we can spread a rug on the ground, and you shall lie on it and throw cones at the squirrels, whilst I make a fire and boil the tea.”

Banty drew a quick breath. She looked up at Joan with wistful longing.

“Will you manage it for me?”

“You will have to do that. Feed yourself up, get strong and cheerful, and send your nurses about their business. As long as you are weak they must be with you. The remedy is in your own hands.”

Banty gazed at Joan without speaking; then she said:

“Do you know what Father did when he was last in my room? Crept to that drawer over there, and took away my pet revolver. He thought I didn’t see him. I did. It was my one hope from the time they told me my fate.”

“Then I’m glad he took it,” said Joan stoutly. “You never have been a coward, Banty, and you won’t be one now.”

Banty did not reply. Then came a knock at the door. She scowled.

“Let them knock! This is the first bit of peace I’ve had. They had me in their power.”

Joan crossed the room and unlocked the door. It was one of the nurses.

“I shan’t stay much longer, nurse; but the beef tea is taken, and Miss Gascoigne is quite quiet and comfortable.”

The nurse glanced suspiciously round. Joan looked at her with one of her irresistible smiles.

“Miss Gascoigne and I are old friends. We wanted to pretend she was not ill, and had no doctors or nurses. She is going to get well as quickly as she can.”

The nurse understood, and wisely gave way. “Ten minutes more, then; and you will find me in the little room at the end of the corridor.”

Joan nodded; then came over to Banty again.

“It’s better to coax than to force,” she said. “Oh, Banty, dear, you must get well quickly. I want you, and so do your parents.”

“Do you know what my being well means?”

“Yes; we won’t shirk it. It means, possibly, an artificial leg, a stick, and a slight limp; but there’s the wide world waiting for you outside and wanting you. It will mean no riding or hunting; but the country isn’t taken from you. You will drive yourself about, and I believe a new world will dawn for you, a world which you have never entered, and which is very fair indeed.”

Banty lay still. Not a word did she say, and very soon Joan took her leave.

“Come again soon,” was the request.

“Yes; and soon you will be sitting up by your open window.”

In the hall Joan met Lady Gascoigne.

“How did you leave our poor darling? Did you talk to her about resignation and patience? I hoped you would do her good.”

Joan shook her head.

“I’ve only tried to shake and wake her,” she said; “and I think, dear Lady Gascoigne, I should leave her a good deal to herself. Banty has always liked being alone.”

“But not now. I assure you we don’t leave her a minute for fear she should want something.”

“I think she would like to be alone sometimes.”

But though Joan had not talked to Banty of the things she loved, she had been silently praying for her the whole time; and, as she walked home, her whole heart went out towards her in sympathy and love.

Joan had accomplished what none of Banty’s family had been able to do. She had shaken her out of her despairing lethargy and had given her the desire to live.

Banty’s wonderfully healthy and strong constitution stood her in good stead now. When once her will was exercised on the side of recovery, she began to make rapid strides towards convalescence, and, if she made exacting demands on Joan’s time, Joan was cheerfully anxious to comply with them. She put in an hour with Banty nearly every day, and they talked of many things; but for a long while Banty would not touch upon her own helplessness, and Joan always fell in with her mood. As autumn came on, and the days became shorter and colder, Joan felt unutterably sad for the girl who would necessarily be so much shut up in the house this first winter. She hated needlework of every kind, she rarely read; indoor occupation of any sort was intolerable to her.

“She had much better have been killed outright,” said Cecil one day when Joan was talking about her. “When the hunting comes on, she’ll be desperate. There is nothing for her to live for.”

“Oh, Cecil, think how full life is! Hunting is, after all, a very small matter.”

“Hunting was her life.”

“It’s a good thing we are made up of different parts,” said Joan. “Banty has only developed one part of her nature up to now. She has still others lying dormant.”

“She has no intellect,” said Cecil sharply. “Even your partiality to her cannot own that.”

“I believe she has,” said Joan. “Time will show.”

The day came when Banty could propel herself in a wheel-chair, and after that she was seldom found indoors. Perhaps the worst time to her was the day of the opening meet. At first her father said he would not go, but Banty urged him to do so.

“As I’m making up my mind to live, the sooner you slip into your old ways the better. You go your way and I will go mine. I suppose I shall enjoy hearing about your run by and by!”

The people round were wonderfully sympathetic with poor Banty, but were all so shy of seeing her suffer, that they wrote their condolences and shrank from seeing her personally.

One afternoon Joan’s suggestion was carried out, and Banty drove herself to the pine wood in the low cart that was now set apart for her use.

When she was comfortably settled, Joan produced some needlework.

“Now we’ll enjoy ourselves,” she said.

“Joan, if you hadn’t been here, I should have put an end to myself,” Banty said suddenly. “I couldn’t have gone through these awful months without you.”

Joan shook her head at her.

“Don’t try to think of what you might have done in other circumstances. Everything was planned out and arranged for you.”

“I believe it was,” said Banty in an awed voice. “Joan, I must take up religion. All cripples do, don’t they? They always lie on couches, with saintly smiles, and their corner is the haven of peace and refuge for the rest of the house.”

Banty spoke so gravely that Joan wondered whether she were in jest or earnest.

“I want you to have the religion that will make your life fuller than it has ever been,” said Joan earnestly.

“As full as yours?” queried Banty in a bantering tone. Then with sudden gravity she burst out: “Joan, I tell you honestly I’ve envied you ever since you came to live here. You never go about and enjoy yourself; you’re half a servant, half a parson, half a teacher, half a housekeeper. You look after everybody, and keep them all in a good temper, and yet you’re as happy as a sandboy through and through. It isn’t on the surface, for I’ve watched you closely. How do you manage to do it?”

“It’s the realising that you’re just doing what you are meant to do,” said Joan, “that brings content and happiness to me. I have a motto; have I told you it before? Three words: ‘Patience, long-suffering, with joyfulness.’ That’s what I aim at. And, may I say, Banty, that I think your courage and patience now are wonderful!”

“Oh, stow it!” said Banty, colouring. “Of course, I show my best to you, and, out here in the fresh air, who could be cantankerous?”

Another silence fell on them. Then Joan jumped up and got tea ready.

“What does Cecil do with herself every day?” Banty asked presently.

“She has driven into the town to-day to do some shopping.”

“Is she going abroad this winter?”

“I—I don’t think so. She wants to go, but I’m afraid it can’t be managed.”

“I should like to think she would be away. She worries you.”

“Oh no, she doesn’t. We understand each other perfectly.”

Joan led the conversation to other subjects. She never criticised Cecil to others.

They stayed in the woods an hour longer, and then, very reluctantly, Banty allowed herself to be tucked up again in the trap, and her small groom, who had been amusing himself by gathering blackberries, took her home.

CHAPTER XXI

A CHANCE FOR CECIL

Autumn passed. To Joan it seemed that her life was very full. Banty demanded a great deal of her time, but she did not grudge it to her. Talks with Lady Alicia came back to her in which she had been told that she might be kept in her rather narrow sphere with the object of helping one particular person; and Joan could not but feel that Banty's sad misfortune had opened the way for a good many real talks on the deep things in life. Banty repeatedly told her that she had been a refuge to her in a raging storm, and, slowly and almost imperceptibly, Banty was feeling her way towards the real Refuge. But, though learning lessons of patience and endurance, and dimly seeing as 'through a glass darkly' the glories of the new world opening to her soul, Banty did not always exercise self-denial in her dealings with her friend. Joan had come to her help in a dark hour; then it was Joan's purpose in life at present to continue that help and come to her aid at any time. When fits of depression seized her, she sent for Joan. When she had been cross and unreasonable to those around her, and was in a contrite, repentant mood, Joan must come and be her father confessor, and make peace with those she had vexed and hurt. When the hunt was meeting in the close vicinity of the Hall, and she was driven frantic by the hooting of the horn and the baying of the hounds, Joan must come up immediately, and sit with her, and amuse and entertain her till she was able to regain her fortitude and composure. And Joan rarely failed her; but it was at the cost of much effort and self-denial on her part to respond so willingly, and Cecil was very wroth at her prompt compliance with Banty's unreasonable demands.

Cecil herself, at home, was another unceasing trial to her sister. She was angry with Banty for her selfishness, yet failed to see that she, in her turn, was continually making demands upon Joan's time and attention. She had her black moods of depression and contrariety, when nothing would please or cheer her, and, as the weather became stormy and cold, she would incessantly grumble at the English climate.

One rainy afternoon, as dusk was falling, Joan came in from a visit to the Hall to find Cecil crouched by a dying fire in the drawing-room, looking the picture of woe.

“My dear, what a miserable room!” Joan said brightly, shaking up some untidy cushions on the couch with much energy and then stirring the fire. “Why, you look blue with cold! And you have let the fire nearly out. Have you been asleep?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I have rung three times for coal. I never saw such servants, and Sophia had the impertinence to put her head in at the door and tell me I ought to have made the coal-scuttle last till tea-time! She said she was in the middle of making a cake, and if I wanted more coal I could get some logs from the wood cupboard! I really wonder you don’t give her notice to leave. She’s getting quite unbearable.”

“I would as soon think of asking Dad to leave!” said Joan, laughing. “Sophia is always cross on her cake days, and Maggie has gone out. Her mother is ill and wants her. I’ll go and get some wood.”

She was out of the room and back again in a minute. Cecil went on grumbling.

“I’ve a great mind to apply for a post as companion to someone to get away from home. I shall be ill if I stay on here longer. I must get abroad. Why don’t you help me, Joan? Tell Father I can’t, and won’t, stay here all the winter. I never saw such a benighted place. We haven’t had a visitor inside the house for a fortnight, at least. My bedroom wall is reeking with damp. Haven’t you finished Mother’s book yet? If only you could get it done, Derrick says he will get it taken by some publisher friend of his, and that will bring enough money in to make it easy for me to go abroad.”

“I have so little time to write it, Cecil dear; but I am very nearly at the end of it. I should like to sit down and write it now, but I promised Father to do some accounts with him after tea. I think I’ll go out and bring the tea in myself. We won’t wait for Sophia. You will feel quite another being after it.”

Cecil listened to her singing under her breath as she went out to the kitchen. It never entered her head to offer to help. She had a headache; that was quite sufficient excuse to remain idle.

When Joan came back Cecil looked up at her.

“Joan, you *must* help me. You are so absorbed in Banty that you can think of nobody else. I will and *must* get away. You will have me dying on your hands if I don’t. I woke last night, and could hardly breathe. I am getting back all my old breathlessness and my cough.”

Joan looked at her a little anxiously, but she could not see any appearance of delicacy about her.

“You fret yourself ill,” she said. “I wish you would make up your mind to get through a winter here. Be patient, and we will hope great things from Mother’s book.”

She made a mental resolve that she would work in her room at night. It was the only opportunity she had for quiet. She was as anxious as Cecil was that the book should be finished, but her days seemed too full for any time to write.

For the next few weeks Joan kept this resolve. She came down to breakfast in the morning with tired eyes and brain, but with a lightened heart. The book was progressing. And then came the day when it was packed off to Derrick. He did not keep them waiting long to hear its fate. It was accepted. A few alterations were deemed necessary, and Joan had a good deal of correspondence with the publisher over it.

About the end of November she received the sum of fifty pounds for advance royalties, and Cecil went joyfully to her father to demand permission to go abroad. To her amazement, he refused.

Mr. Adair was not a very strong-minded man, and very obstinate on some points. Joan could not persuade him to give way. He had suffered too much in the past from having his wife and daughter away when he could not afford to send them. Now that Cecil was fairly strong, and had not her mother to back her up, he considered that it would be weakness on his part to give way to her.

“I cannot afford it. You ought to be helping Joan at home. Everyone tells me she is wearing herself out. Why should you expect this sum of money to be spent on you? If it belongs to anyone, it belongs to Joan, who has had all the labour of producing it. And there are still debts of ours to be paid. Until I am actually free from debt, I will not incur the fresh expense of sending you abroad.”

“If the money got by Mother’s book is not spent according to her wishes, it is abominable injustice!” said Cecil passionately. “You know how she wished me to spend every winter abroad. It is why she commenced to write, to earn money for our comfort there. And, if the money belongs to Joan, I know she will give it to me gladly. When I am dead and in my grave, you will reproach yourself. You’re killing me fast.”

She flung herself out of the room, and went off to Joan. It was not often she spoke so passionately to her father. He was much hurt and indignant, and Joan had to receive the confidences of both, and try to make peace

between them. But she could not move her father from his standpoint, nor alter his decision. Cecil raged and sulked by turns, would not eat, and spent most of her days in bed. In despair, Joan wrote to Lady Alicia. She saw that Cecil was making herself really ill, and she hardly knew how to act for the best.

In a few days she had Lady Alicia's reply, and it was astounding in its force and brevity:

> "My dearest Joan,—Smooth the creases out of your brow. I have written to your father and to Cecil by this same post. I leave for Nice this day fortnight, and hope that Cecil will accompany me as my guest.—In greatest haste, your loving godmother,
>
> "Alicia."

Joan received this letter at the breakfast-table. Her father and she were alone, and they looked up simultaneously at each other. He had been reading his communication from Lady Alicia at the same time she had been reading hers.

"Well, Joan, the difficulty is solved. I am glad, for I was beginning to dread these winter months for that refractory girl."

"Isn't it noble of Lady Alicia? I am so delighted. I must go up and see Cecil, and hear what she thinks of it."

She slipped upstairs. Cecil was in bed; her breakfast-tray lay beside her, but she was still heavy with sleep, and had not looked at her letters.

"Cecil, Cecil! Wake up! You can go abroad in a fortnight, if you like!"

Cecil opened her eyes. She was generally very cross the first thing in the morning, and had a great dislike to anyone entering her room before she was up. Joan's smiling, eager face roused her.

"What is the matter?"

Joan pounced upon a letter lying upon her tray addressed in Lady Alicia's handwriting.

"Here! Read this, and you will have the news!"

Cecil sat up in bed and took the letter.

"I don't know why you are so excited. Can't you speak?"

But Joan stood silent, letting the letter tell its own tale.

Cecil did not show any excitement. She read the letter through very calmly, and then handed it to Joan.

"I suppose she has written to you, too? I dare say Father will object, and I am not sure that I should like to go abroad with Lady Alicia. She is rather prudish and dull. She says she's ordered to go by her doctor, and must have a companion. Why doesn't she ask you? Does she expect me to be a kind of maid to her? I shouldn't fancy that."

"Well," said Joan, "if you don't jump at her kind offer, you mustn't expect any more sympathy from me. I really think you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Cecil!"

Cecil laughed. Her good humour came back.

"Of course I shall accept it," she said. "I would rather go with a tinker than not at all. Does Father know?"

"Yes; he is quite willing."

Cecil attacked her breakfast with vigour.

"It's rather short notice," she said. "I must get some things down from town."

"Now don't be running up bills! You always look nicely dressed, and Lady Alicia is very simple and quiet herself."

"I am not going to be a duplicate of Lady Alicia! How pleased you will be to get rid of me!"

Joan bent down and gave her a quick little kiss. "You know it is for your sake. I am so glad."

Cecil looked up at her with laughter in her eyes. "You're a trump, Joan! But we do not fit together very well. You are always such a saint that you provoke me to be a devil!"

Joan looked at her gravely and a little tenderly. "Lady Alicia considers you have the making of a fine woman in you."

With which diplomatic remark she left the room.

The fortnight that ensued was a very busy time for both sisters. Cecil did at times feel ashamed of herself when she saw how Joan slaved for her, and the night before she left home she said to her:

"I wonder you don't hate me, Joan! However much you may deny it, I know that when I am gone you and Father will settle down with the greatest

happiness and peace together. Sophia will thank Heaven she has seen the last of me. There isn't a soul here who would care if they never saw me again. I think it is this that makes me so bad tempered. Nobody wants me or likes me. I feel I am a very big fly in the small pot of ointment. The only one who really cared for me and wanted me is in her grave!"

"Oh, Cecil, you mustn't talk so! You don't know how I care, but you don't encourage me to show you any affection, do you?"

"No; I hate all that kind of thing. Some day, perhaps, I shall turn to you for what I now seem to spurn. In my heart I know that your view of life is the right one, and mine is wrong. But everything will have to be taken from me before I shall be content with what you are. My health and strength and powers of enjoyment will have to go before I can hope to settle down into such a narrow groove."

Joan did not speak; she felt tongue-tied. Her face showed how Cecil's words distressed her.

"Don't look so shocked. Perhaps Lady Alicia will work a wonderful change in me. Who knows? I may come back to you a perfect miracle of goodness and unselfishness. You can hope for it. Anyhow, you're a dear old thing, and I'm very grateful for all you've been doing for me!"

She put up her face for a kiss, and Joan had misty eyes as she gave it. In spite of all her waywardness, Cecil did occupy a big place in her heart.

When she had gone, the house seemed strangely silent and empty. Mr. Adair openly expressed his relief at his younger daughter's absence; and, as the days slipped by, Joan found that Banty and the parish more than occupied her time and thoughts.

Mrs. Adair's book was published in the new year, and it was a keen pleasure to Mr. Adair as well as to Joan to read it through and discuss every page of it. Banty received a copy. She was becoming a great reader, and though, as a rule, her reading was of the lightest description, she took the greatest interest in this special book.

"I have been telling Father," she said to Joan, "that he had better get you to finish our ridiculous Chronicles. Would you be above completing Motty's leavings?"

"I couldn't do it satisfactorily, I am afraid," said Joan. "Why don't you try it yourself, Banty? It would be such an interest to you!"

"It wouldn't be the smallest interest to me, except"—here her eyes brightened—"to ferret out all the Gascoignes who followed the hounds."

"Where is your cousin now?"

"He is still hanging on the skirts of those rich Americans. If he doesn't get engaged quickly to the girl they will find him out, and it will be all UP with him."

A few days afterwards Banty told Joan that she had been looking over the MSS. already written about their family.

"Of course, I'm not a writer, and never shall be. Motty has put together all the papers and letters connected with us up to 1700; so he really has done the worst of it. And I have told father I will string together some of the letters and papers since. It is only to put them according to date, isn't it? I'm actually getting interested in my great-grandfather. He kept a pack of hounds and wrote the raciest letters to his lady love. In one he says 'I toasted you last night, and found the port a sorry substitute for your sweet lips!' It sounds as if he meant to drink them. I dare say his metaphor was mixed, like his brains, at the time, for they say he was a hard drinker."

Banty spoke with animation. Joan encouraged her all she could to persevere in the task.

"Your father will be so pleased if you can do it, Banty."

"I shall want something to keep me going," said Banty. "I get a sick longing to be on a horse again, Joan. It's all very well to talk of the glories of the future world; but if I can't ride there, it won't be any pleasure to me!"

On the whole Banty was meeting her misfortune with great pluck and fortitude.

"I know you think the hunting-field a very poor place, Joan," she said one day, "but I can tell you it gives you lessons in discipline and self-control like nothing else. It teaches you to bear fatigue without a whine, to take a few ugly bumps and tumbles as all in the day's work, and to wait patiently half a day, if necessary, when the hounds can't find. I've been well schooled in endurance all my life, and it helps me not to pull a poor mouth now."

As the spring came on, she grew wonderfully stronger, and could soon walk about with the help of a stick. She refused to use a crutch, and her nimbleness in moving surprised even the doctor.

It was a very happy day for Joan when Banty asked her rather awkwardly whether she would like her help in the Sunday school.

“I’d like to do something. I can tell them what you’ve told me. If I’d been taught by you as a child, what a saint I might have been!”

Joan gladly gave her a class of boys, and Banty not only developed a genius for managing them, but for interesting them; and she very soon became quite enamoured of her work.

Lady Gascoigne said rather pathetically to Joan:

“That dreadful accident has given me a daughter of whom I am proud. I was so afraid that she would be an unhappy, lifelong invalid. As it is, she does more for me and her father now, with her one leg, than she ever did with her two! And we never hear a complaint from her lips.” Which was great testimony for such a high spirited, wilful girl as Banty had always been.

CHAPTER XXII

HEART TO HEART

It was spring again, but Cecil was not back. Lady Alicia and she were now doing the Italian lakes together, and Cecil's letters, though few and far between, were very happy in tone. Joan's mind for the present was at rest about her. Life was getting easier. The last of the back debts was paid, and Joan felt that she could now hold her head up and look the whole world in the face. She started out for a walk one day with her terrier, in a very happy frame of mind. Her old, discontented longings for a larger sphere of influence and work had left her. She realised now that there were individuals all round her who were as precious in their Creator's sight as those far away, and she cheerfully set to work to find out their various needs. The villagers loved her. There was not a house which did not welcome her warmly, and men and women besides the children learnt to confide to her all their difficulties and troubles.

Crossing the heath, she met an old shepherd who was a special friend of hers, and for some minutes she stayed gossiping with him; then, going across to a little knoll under some pines, she seated herself on a fallen log, and, gazing down upon the smiling valleys below, she fell into a reverie.

Her thoughts took her back to Ireland. She had heard from Major Armitage once or twice through the winter. He was still managing his sister's estate, and the unsettled state of Ulster, with the apprehension of civil war, was keeping them engrossed with their own affairs. She was startled suddenly by the furious barking of her little terrier. Looking up, she saw approaching her the object of her thoughts, and she sprang to her feet with a little exclamation of astonishment and pleasure. He shook hands with her with great energy.

"Now, what a marvellous coincidence!" he said. "I had no idea I should meet you out here, but my whole thoughts were with you, and I was planning an interview with you."

"But why plan?" said Joan, laughing. "You had only to walk up to the rectory to receive a hearty welcome. I am astonished to see you. Have you been over here long?"

“I came last night. Some business with my tenants brought me. And I came out this afternoon to get away from everybody.”

Joan was silent. She looked up at him, and then turned her eyes away, for he was standing close to her, leaning against a tree trunk, and his eyes told her why he wanted to see her. She tried to still the throbbing in her heart and veins; she tried to keep a cool, clear head; but she was mentally asking herself this one question over and over again:

“Does he care for me?”

“I had to think matters out,” he went on slowly. “As you know, I lived in a world of dreams when I was here before. I lived upon one hope, one idea; and when it was shattered I wished I had been shattered with it. I have been through my house this morning, and in every room I sought to raise up the ghost of my vision; but it would not come. And the strange part of it is that I would not welcome it if it did. I buried it when I was here before; and time and reason have convinced me that my heart and affection are free to offer to another. The past is absolutely gone. You may think me fickle, but from the time I knew that she was willing, and rightly willing, to cleave to the one she had promised to love and live with, I never had any more desire to win her. And now, Miss Adair, I come to you. I am conscious that my circumstances and my past are against me; but as you are never out of my thoughts by day or night, I thought you would let me tell you so. I have come over from Ireland, not only to see my tenants, but to see you. I don’t want your friendship; I want something more; and I do ask you not to answer quickly. I am afraid that you will feel I have no right to ask you so soon, that I cannot care deeply enough; but I have learnt to care for you so much that nothing else in the world seems worth living for.”

Joan sat very still. Her heart wanted to answer him at once, her head cautioned delay. How could she leave her father? She could not see a way out. At last she looked up. Major Armitage was white and stern, his lips were set determinedly together, but his eyes were almost wistful. He tried to smile as he met her gaze.

“Well!” he said with a quick-caught breath. “Do you see anything in me worth your love? I don’t myself, and I’m steeling myself to bear a refusal.”

“Oh!” said Joan impulsively; “I can’t give you that. I care too much already. But I am thinking of my father.”

“Do you really care for me, Joan?”

He bent over her eagerly, then took hold of both of her hands and drew her gently up towards him.

“Joan, if you care, as I care, no one on earth has a right to separate us.”

Strong man as he was, he trembled with emotion; but Joan stood very still with his arm round her. The moment to her was almost a sacred one. Just for an instant her head rested on his broad shoulder.

“No,” she whispered; “they will not be able to.”

Then he bent his head, knowing that he had won her, and his lips touched hers, sealing the compact.

A few moments after, he and she were sitting together on the fallen tree. His face was radiant with happiness; she was very quiet, but deeply, enchantingly content.

“Joan, Joan, have you cared about me long? Tell me when you first thought anything about me?”

“Oh,” she said, “how can I say? I liked and admired you, and felt intensely sorry for you from the very beginning. I was honoured by your friendship; but I suppose when it really came home to me that my heart had escaped out of my own keeping was when we were walking back from that little church over the hills in Ireland. I felt I should like nothing better than to go on walking with you for ever!”

“And that was the night I wanted to speak to you. I tried to do so, if you remember, but I felt I could not. I was so terribly afraid of being repulsed, and I thought it was too soon. I funked putting my fate to the test. I cannot believe in my good fortune even now.”

They talked on as lovers have done from time immemorial, and at last Joan made a move.

“I must go to Father. He will be wanting his tea. I don’t know what to do about telling him. He often says he hopes I shall marry; but I don’t know if he really means it.”

“May I come back with you?”

“Of course.”

They found the rector pacing the drive. He was delighted to see Major Armitage again. When Joan ran on into the house to make the tea, the Major spoke.

“Mr. Adair, I have come back because I could not keep away any longer. I am afraid you may not welcome me so warmly when you know my errand, I want to take away Joan from you.”

Mr. Adair drew in his breath.

“Ah, dear! It has come at last, then!”

“Will you give her to me?”

“What does Joan say? But I need not ask. She is a good girl, Major—too good to remain single all her life. I believe in women marrying; but I shall be lost, quite lost, without her!”

“We have not talked over matters yet,” said Major Armitage sympathetically; “but when I can leave my sister, I mean to come back and live here. And if I did that, could not Joan still keep a good bit of her parish work and still help you?”

Mr. Adair’s downcast face brightened at once.

“Capital! You have your music, and Joan is too energetic to like a life of ease without any work to keep her from rusting. I know this, Major, there isn’t a soul on earth I would like as a son-in-law better than yourself. I know you will make my girl happy.”

He went straight into the drawing-room, where Joan sat over the tea tray with hot cheeks and bright eyes, and patted her affectionately on the shoulder.

“I have been told, Joan dear, and I shall be glad in your happiness. I know Major Armitage, and can trust you to him.”

Joan’s eyes filled with sudden tears.

“He is such a dear, I couldn’t help losing my heart to him,” she said. Then, as her lover came into the room, she brushed her tears away and smiled radiantly up into his face.

They were a very happy little party, but Major Armitage did not stay to dinner. He was expecting a visit from some of his tenants at six o’clock, and had to be home to meet them.

Joan walked down the drive with him when he went.

“Will you come over my house with me to-morrow morning?” he asked her. “I’ll come and fetch you if I may.”

“I can’t fling my duties to the winds,” she said, looking up at him and laughing. “I am going to the school to-morrow at ten, but at eleven I shall be free.”

“Then I shall be here at eleven.”

At the gate, under the shadow of the old yew tree, he took her into his arms again.

“I can’t believe you are going to belong to me,” he said. “What a happy man I shall be!”

“I hope I shall bring happiness to you,” she responded. “I want to do it; I have always thought that you wanted a woman to look after you.”

He gave a quick little shake of his head.

“That is not the view you ought to take. I am happy because I mean to care for you and to wait upon you and to give you a good time. You have always been so busy looking after other people that you have never given yourself a thought.”

Joan laughed softly.

“I have hitherto gloried in my independence; but love alters everything, does it not?”

When he had left her, Joan leant her arms on the gate and watched him out of sight, and then she raised her face to the evening sky.

“Oh, God! I thank Thee. Bless us both, and make us blessings to one another.”

Before she went to bed that night she had a long talk with her father.

Mr. Adair, though he still asserted stoutly that he was very pleased, had great heart sinkings about the future; and Joan wisely made him voice his fears.

“I will not leave you, Dad dear, until the way seems easy. Sophia is a host in herself, I know.”

“Oh, Sophia is a capital housekeeper,” her father said hurriedly. “She will make me comfortable, and I shall not wish selfishly to spoil your life, my dear. It is the thought of Cecil reigning here in your stead that appals me. I assure you it was an awful time when you were in Ireland! If it were not for Cecil, I should jog on pretty well.”

“But, Father dear, if I marry, you must remember that we still live in your parish. I shall hope to play the organ, and run the Sunday school, and do all the club accounts. You will not be left without my help.”

Mr. Adair looked at her very gravely.

“That is a comforting way of putting it; but remember, Joan, if a woman marries, her husband and her household must and ought to be her first interest. Never let your work come between your husband and yourself.”

Joan knew why he spoke so emphatically.

“I don’t think Major Armitage is a selfish man,” she said musingly. “He has lived so long without home comforts that he will not be exacting. And he has resources in himself, and real work to do; for he considers his music a gift given to him to use for the benefit of others. Oh, I have already weighed it in my mind, and as long as you want my help in the parish I mean to give it to you.”

She sat up late that night writing to Cecil and Lady Alicia. When Sophia heard the news she was not so congratulatory as she might have been.

“Whatever will Mr. Derrick say? And I do hope, Miss Joan, that you aren’t getting a crank for a husband. There be no doubt about it as he has behaved very strange. Certainly, M’ria says she has no complaints to make after that death occurred. I suppose it did occur?”

“I think I had better tell you the whole story, Sophia,” said Joan patiently.

And when she had finished her account Sophia gave a sniff.

“Well, we must hope you’ll be happy with him, but I consider a fancy for another woman, even if it comes to nought, takes the bloom off a man, so to speak. Now, Mr. Derrick has never altered from the time he were a boy. ’Twas Miss Joan first and foremost, and there was none her equal.”

“Mr. Derrick is a dear boy,” said Joan; “but Major Armitage is—— Oh, I can’t describe him, Sophia, but he is wound round my heart, and to be in the same room with him thrills me through and through.”

Sophia could say no more. She looked at Joan in a pitying way, and when she was left alone in her kitchen, muttered to herself:

“It’s a good thing for me that no man has ever made me thrill. Poor Miss Joan be but a child, after all said and done, and ’tis to be hoped she won’t live to change her mind when ’tis too late!”

The sun was shining full on the old weather-beaten house as Joan and Major Armitage walked up to it the next morning.

She looked at it with an absorbing interest. This was to be her future home. How little she had thought when she stood there last that she would be the means of bringing the waiting house to its fulfilment.

She went back in thought to the words its owner had spoken:

"My house and I wait."

As they mounted the old stone steps she glanced up at her lover. She remembered his determination that no woman's foot should cross his threshold till the one for whom he was waiting should come.

For the first time a touch of jealousy clouded her mind—jealousy lest the remembrance of the woman who had formerly so obsessed him should recur to him here and now. He was looking straight before him, and not at her; but when they reached the big door he paused, and then his eyes met hers and the smile spread all over his stern, set face.

"This is an unlucky house," he said. "Do you believe that the strength of our love will break that spell?"

Joan caught her breath, then light and colour swept into her face; she slipped her arm into his.

"Let me tell you something which has just flashed into my mind before we go in. I know the superstition about your house, that no luck will come to those living in it until it reverts to the Rollestons. Do you know that Cecil and my mother discovered that we are directly descended from one of the daughters of this house, a certain Gertrude Rolleston?"

"What an extraordinary coincidence! You must tell me the details. I have the Rolleston genealogy in my library; we will look it up. But, Joan, my dearest, there would be no spot on earth which would not be sanctified and blessed by your presence!"

Then very solemnly he raised his hat before he opened the door.

"May the God who instituted marriage bless us both on the threshold of our home, and lift up the light of His countenance upon us and give us peace."

After that Joan felt as if the stepping across the threshold was a sacrament. Certainly, she assured herself, Major Armitage was different

from any other man in the world. And when she had crossed the threshold he stooped and kissed her.

Maria came bustling across the hall to greet them.

She was tremulous with excitement and emotion. Joan shook her by the hand very warmly.

"Eh, Miss Adair, this be a happy moment to me, and Sophia's loss will be my gain!"

"There!" said Major Armitage cheerily; "what prettier or truer speech can you expect than that, Joan?"

Then he led her up the stairs to the music-room.

"I have laid the ghosts here," he said. Then, pointing to the old-fashioned fireside, he added:

"I used to dream as I sat there alone in the evenings that a woman in a soft silk dress might one day sit opposite me and talk and laugh as I smoked my pipe. But latterly that woman's face grew misty and finally disappeared. Now I see it again, a fair, sweet face, the sweetest in the world to me, with deep, true, tender blue eyes and a smile that always brings two distracting dimples into play, and hair full of sunshine. Don't stop me. I see her clasping her hands round her knee—it is a way she has—and showing me by turns her eager, earnest soul, her boundless patience and sympathy, her sweet, reverent faith in all that touches the unseen world."

"I must stop your rhapsody," said Joan, half laughing but much moved. "My cheeks are hot with such flattery. Show me your piano and books."

He did so, and then led her along the corridor to a locked door. He unlocked it and showed her the dainty little boudoir, which had all been renovated and cleaned and made fit for use.

A shadow came into Joan's eyes as she looked at it. She felt almost as a second wife might feel when being shown the belongings of the first.

"You must tell me truly," she said, impulsively turning to him. "Does this room remind you of the one for whom it was meant? I don't think I could be happy here."

He wheeled round, drew her out of the room and turned the key in the lock.

"Then you shall not have it," he said. "Joan, sweetest, I told you I had laid my ghosts, but if they are there for you I will dismantle the room at

once. There are plenty of others to choose from. Look! I shall give you this one over the west wing; you will see the sunsets; and you shall furnish it as you please."

He drew her into a quaint octagonal room, with a window overlooking the heath and distant hills. Joan knew she would love it the instant she was inside, and she was content. Then they wandered through the rest of the house and made many plans.

When Joan eventually came away she said to him:

"I feel I shall be taking all and giving nothing."

To which, of course, Major Armitage replied:

"You are giving me the priceless gift of your own sweet self, the only gift in this wide world that is worth anything to me!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LUCK OF ROLLESTON COURT

The neighbourhood was very much surprised when it heard the news. Banty was too taken aback to congratulate Joan.

"I didn't know you liked him," she said bluntly. "He has been so unsociable and cranky that none of us has seen much of him. I hope you'll get on with him, Joan. He isn't good enough for you."

It was a trial to Joan to be constantly made aware of the fact of Major Armitage's unpopularity. There is nothing a country village hates more than reticence and exclusiveness. The poor consider that if anybody shuts himself away from society there is something to hide, and that something is most likely criminal. The rich resent their overtures of friendship being repulsed. Major Armitage himself was supremely indifferent to it all, but for Joan's sake he made an effort and accepted an invitation to dine at the Hall. It was the beginning of a little more sociable intercourse between himself and his neighbours, and the fact of his engagement led many to make fresh endeavours to know him.

In due time Joan received letters from Lady Alicia and from Cecil.

Cecil's was characteristic of her.

"My dear Joan,—

"I suppose I must send congratulations. I have to readjust my estimate of you. I should have said from my lifelong knowledge of you that you would have cheerfully sacrificed yourself at duty's or Father's shrine and refused to leave your sphere of work. But I am glad for your sake that you have been sensible. I, of course, pity myself exceedingly. Will Father expect me to slip into your shoes? They never did fit me, and never will. But I am not home yet, and 'things may happen,' as we used to say when we were small. I am much amused at you and the Major coming together. Did I not propose it to you? I hope you will make him less uncanny than he was. Of course, you have told him of our descent from the Rollestons? You will bring back the luck to his house. He ought to be very grateful to you for liking him. I wonder if you are really in

love. I can't imagine you! You are so sane, so wise, that it does not seem to be your rôle.

"Love,

"Your affectionate sister,

"CECIL."

"P.S.—I have read this over, and it doesn't sound *quite* nice. I wonder why? But I can't gush over the engagement, for I don't know Major Armitage. I can only wish you happiness."

Joan's face became rather downcast as she read this. She did not know that Cecil was sore and bitter since her broken engagement, and angry with Joan in an unreasonable way for her present happiness. Lady Alicia's letter brought warmth and comfort at once. She allayed the scruples that were always troubling Joan's sensitive conscience.

"It is right, dear, that you should marry when you love, and when that one, like Randal Armitage, is worthy of your love. Your father will be far happier in feeling your future provided for and in seeing your happiness. If you were to sacrifice all your future for the sake of being for a few years a help to your father, the time would be certain to come when you and he would regret it; and I think your circumstances will be wonderfully favourable to you."

Derrick also wrote to Joan.

"DEAR OLD CHUM,—

"Hearty congratulations is the conventional phrase, is it not? I congratulate him on getting you, and for the rest—well, I don't bear him malice, and if you're happy, that's the main thing. I'm going on the Continent for a holiday. My respects to Dominie, and if I meet the Malingerer, will let you know how she is faring. Adieu.

"Yours,

"DERRICK."

"Poor Derrick!" sighed Joan. "How I hope he will forget and marry!"

Yet, though she said this, it was a tremendous shock to her, a month later, to get another letter from Cecil.

"I suppose," she wrote, "your engagement made me restless and unsettled. We are now at Lucerne, and, to our amazement, one day Derrick walked in. As he has always been one of the family, he and I went about a good bit together. We have talked you and the village threadbare, and at last, as we had nothing else to do, we made up our minds that we would try to follow your example. You see, he and I have both been foiled in our first experience, so we can feel for each other. He knows I am not domesticated; but I feel I could run a London flat and make it a success. And we don't jar on each other. In fact, I have a wonderful sense of rest in his company. I know I could help him in his work, and am determined that he shall be an M.P. very soon, and later on Prime Minister at least. Well, all this rigmarole means that we're engaged, and as we've known each other all our lives, we mean to marry straight away. I could not face wedding bells in Old Bellerton village. Lady Alicia is a trump; she has been as anxious as a mother over us. She talked to him and talked to me, and warned us not to be in such haste. But we've got her on our side now, so make your mind easy over us. Derrick will like to hear what your views are about our match. Write him one of your nicest letters."

Joan went to her father, who was as astonished as she and very delighted.

Joan herself was honestly and deeply thankful. At first she was almost afraid that both of them were plunging into matrimony more from expediency than from real love or liking for each other; yet she remembered how Derrick had always admired Cecil's dainty grace and beauty, and though he had teased her unmercifully, Cecil had never resented it, but invariably showed the best side of her nature to him.

But the speedy marriage made her anxious; and she thought Cecil's indifference to her home and her father a bad beginning for her married life. Derrick wrote to Joan in a day or two.

> "I'm doing all there remains to be done. I have lost you for good. I want to marry and settle down; and Cecil and I suit each other as well as most people, and a good deal better. The Malingerer has died; in her stead is an exceedingly beautiful and attractive woman. I shall be the model husband, and she will daily be moulded to my will. Joking apart, we are going to be happy; but I always and for ever intend to remain,
>
> "Your old chum,
> "DERRICK."

“I always wanted him as a son,” said Mr. Adair, “but I hoped you would marry him, Joan. Do you think Cecil will make his home happy?”

“I am sure she will,” said Joan stoutly. “Cecil has a heart and depths which as yet have not been reached. She will develop as a married woman.”

Cecil’s marriage was the means of postponing Joan’s. She was not in haste to leave her home, and Major Armitage felt obliged to go over to Ireland to his sister again. He much wanted Joan to accompany him, but she steadfastly refused.

“My father wants me. I will not leave him yet.”

The summer slipped by. In the middle of it Cecil and Derrick came for a visit, and the visit was a complete success.

All Cecil’s old irritability and laziness seemed to have disappeared. She was full of the little flat in town which was going to be their home. She was gentle and considerate to her father, very affectionate to Joan.

And one day she told her, with a burst of confidence, that she was going to make religion a power in her life.

“Derrick is really good, you know, though he never talks about it. And Lady Alicia lived her religion every day, like you do. I am going to read my Bible every day and say a prayer.”

“Oh, Cecil!” said Joan, half amused, half sad, “I hope you will get farther than that.”

“I heard of Motty when we were staying in town,” said Cecil, turning the subject. “That American girl didn’t marry him, and he has left them and is touring round America with a spiritualist and his wife. He will never keep at anything long. It’s a great pity, for he has brains and is a fascinating talker.”

“I am so thankful you did not marry him,” said Joan. “I prayed that you might not.”

“Oh, how wickedly unkind I should have thought you if I had known that at the time. But it has all turned out for the best. Joan, my dear, tell me truly, does your heart ever fail you as you think of settling down in this small corner of the world for good and all? Won’t it be an awfully dull, monotonous life?”

“I should have thought so once,” Joan responded; “but I have learnt to look at life differently. I suppose I used to long for power and the sphere for using it, but I am content now. And you must remember I have my writing,

and my friends, and my parish work, and, last of all, my husband. My life will be quite as full as yours."

"Well, you must come up and see me when you want waking up; and I will come and see you when I want peace and quiet."

And that compact was made between them before Cecil left for town.

Two years have slipped by.

It is a cold, frosty day in December.

In a big easy chair by the fire in the music-room of Rolleston Court sits Joan. There is a wonderfully soft and radiant look in her face as she looks down upon a little bundle of clothes upon her knee. The firelight flickers on tiny, helpless fingers clutching the air, and as the mother bends her face lower and moves a Shetland shawl, a pair of big blue eyes look expectantly up at her. Such a wee face, with a round, sturdy chin and red, soft lips, and a brow that reminds her of Randal.

And then the door opens and in strides Major Armitage. Marriage has erased the gloomy lines in his face and given him a spring in his walk, an eagerness in his voice, and a free and upright carriage. He stoops over Joan and gives her a kiss, inspects his son and heir, then sinks into the other big chair on the opposite side of the hearth and heaves a sigh of relief. The sparkle comes into his eyes as he glances across at Joan.

"I've been to the other side of the heath to see the new cottages. Young Garton was there, and gave me somewhat sheepish thanks. I told him he deserved to have a wife and home; and I told him, too, that I had learnt the value of them. Joan, dearest, how few dreams come true in life! Yet mine has. I have you there sitting opposite to me, ready to comfort, to advise, or to——"

"Scold," put in Joan with her dimpling smile. "And now here is a third coming to demand our care and attention. Oh, Randal, I have been thinking big thoughts this afternoon. What a wonderful thing motherhood is! What an awful responsibility! This little creature in my arms now occupying his position as a future citizen of our Empire, all his gifts and powers, that will be for good or evil in his future life, wrapped up dormant in his tiny brain. And we have the training of him, the making of him. I want him to be a great man, strong, purposeful, pure, honourable, and high principled."

An interruption came.

Banty, in her rough tweeds, walking with something of her old vigour, though with a limp, entered the room.

"I have interrupted a happy family party," she said brightly; "but I've come to see my godson."

Major Armitage pulled forward a chair for her. If his *tête-à-tête* with his wife was brought abruptly to a conclusion, he was too courteous a gentleman to allow his disappointment to be seen. Banty was always welcome, and she knew it.

After a little time he left the women together and went off to the smoking-room. Joan put the baby into Banty's arms, and the girl held him with some delight and a little anxiety.

"I'm not so used to nursing as you are," she said; "don't laugh at my awkwardness. It seems so ridiculous to think of you with a child, Joan."

"Does it? It seems the most natural thing in the world to me. And yet, as I was saying just now, he will make a big difference in my life."

"You won't have so much time for your writing or for the parish."

"My parish work seems drifting away," said Joan. "My father told me yesterday that he had hardly missed me since I was laid up, for you have proved such a good substitute."

Banty looked pleased.

"It's all I have to do. It gives me the excuse of getting out of the house. You're a lucky woman, Joan."

Joan looked quickly at her.

"What is at the back of that speech?"

"Nothing. A wave of restless discontent takes possession of me sometimes, when I think that I shall live on in this village all my life, doing the same things and seeing the same people."

"Yes, I know. I used to feel the same. I longed to be in the rush of life; but I think I have learned to be content."

"What did you want to do?"

"To be the head of some big school or training college, where I could train and influence the rising generation. That was my ideal when I was at college and when I left it. I did get the offer of being senior mistress in an important school, but I could not be spared. It was not to be. You see, I

wanted big things for myself, and was given small. I have been trying to learn to be faithful in the little things of life."

"I don't know about little things," said Banty musingly. "I think you have done some big things amongst us. If you had not been here I should either have blown my brains out or have become a useless, whining invalid. And a good many in the village owe you much. What a change you have wrought in Major Armitage! You have a wonderful influence with everyone with whom you come in contact."

"We all have influence, Banty," Joan said quickly. "You have a great many guests coming and going at your home. You can help others as you say you have been helped. Yours is not a small life at all; and there are the Chronicles!"

Laughter was in her eyes as she added this.

Banty smiled.

"I'm beginning to have sympathy with Motty. They are endless, perfectly endless! I go into the library and shut myself up there as a penance when I have been cross to Mother or furious with my maid. I peg away at them, and suppose they'll be finished some time; but it is not very elevating work. I am not as proud of our family history as father is. Oh, I am content, on the whole, Joan. But sometimes I look forward. An old maid's life!"

"My dear Banty, you are not upon the shelf yet."

Banty laughed a little scoffingly.

"Who would want to marry a cripple? And I don't think I shall ever be taken with any man now. I feel a hundred years old sometimes, when I see an otter hunt sweep by in the meadows below us, or hear the hounds. And then—well, I come back to your verse, which you have practised to such success. I wonder if I shall be helped to do so too. I believe I shall."

When Banty had left, and the nurse had come for the baby, Joan still sat on in the firelight. In thought she was reviewing her life within the past few years—the life of an ordinary girl in a country village. Yet she would not now have had it different. She started when her husband's voice sounded again in her ear.

"Are you dreaming? Shall I play to you?"

"Please."

He went to a beautiful little organ worked by electricity, and the full soft tones of an anthem of his own setting brought a wonderful hush and peace to Joan's spirit.

"The Lord thy God bare thee, as a man doth bear his son, in all the way that ye went, until ye came into this place."

And then he sang the words, and Joan joined him softly under her breath.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by George Alexander Neilson (1898-1995) have been omitted from this etext.

[The end of *Joan's Handful* by Amy Le Feuvre]