

Six of Them

Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick

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This is the Story

Mrs. Sidgwick's new story, *Six of Them*, is a veritable portrait gallery of delightful characters. She has given to Mrs. Brooke, the narrator, a graphic, sympathetic and almost homely pen with which to record the upbringing of her six daughters, and every woman who has brought up a family herself will appreciate the simple realism of the resulting novel. Every girl, too, who has to make her choice of a career or a home will follow with lively interest the love affairs and ambitions of those six different types of womanhood emerging into practically the same world. While the loving Mrs. Brooke has told the story of each of her girls with great impartiality, somehow Celia is most memorable; and small wonder! She is as charming a personality as ever pervaded the atmosphere of an English home. But your favourite may be Nancy, the efficient lady doctor; Hester, the modernist, with revolutionary ideas of love and art; or even Sally, the irresistible schoolgirl. Certainly you will enjoy meeting the Six of Them!

Also by Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick

COME-BY-CHANCE
NONE-GO-BY
LONDON MIXTURE
THE BRIDE'S PRELUDE
HUMMING BIRD
SACK AND SUGAR

SIX OF THEM

By

MRS. ALFRED SIDGWICK

Author of "Come-by-Chance," "Sack and Sugar," etc.



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CHAPTER I

My name is Elizabeth, and I have been married to Nicholas Brooke for twenty-five years. We have seven children, and six of them are girls. Fancy that! Celia, Nancy, Martha, Hester, Jane, Sally. The boy came last but one, and we called him Ambrose. I know a woman who managed her family affairs cleverly. She has six boys and one girl, born after her brothers and therefore sure to marry young. Because when there are six young men bringing their friends to the house a girl can pick and choose. Besides boys can always make their way in the world if they have health and brains. But six girls and no money! I stay awake at night sometimes and wonder what lies before them, and at such moments I can see clearly that they ought not to be there at all. There's a good deal of talk nowadays about equal chances for men and women, but none of my girls, except Nancy, has wanted a career. They are happy at home, they are well behaved, and their brains are not above the average. In some ways all that makes things worse. Sally is only ten, so I put her out of my mind for the present, and Nancy is a medical student. She says she will soon be earning a living, and that if she attains eminence as a surgeon she might make thousands a year. She removed an appendix successfully the other day, and Nicholas is proud of it. I suppose I am too, but only with an effort. I never speak of it as Nicholas does, to all and sundry. He is wrapt up in his children and thinks our rather threadbare home a paradise, but then he has a sanguine disposition, and I have not. When I talk to him about what would happen to us all if he died, he says he isn't dead yet; but that is not argument. You never know. Fell diseases come on people suddenly and accidents happen. Besides he is fifty-five, and how many years of work lie before a man when he is fifty-five? He is well insured and I have two hundred a year of my own, but if he died and none of the girls were married, there would be eight of us left; and eight people to house, feed and clothe on next to nothing becomes a problem. Nicholas has not been able to save much, because when you have seven children life is O.D.T.A.A. It begins with teething, goes on to measles, and continues with love affairs. None of our girls are married yet, but all except Sally are of a marriageable age. I needn't count Nancy either, because she says she would rather be a great surgeon than a wife and mother. Anyhow she is in London and can mate there if heaven pleases. But Celia, Martha, Jane, and Hester are all at home and as far as I can see are likely to remain there.

We live at Porthlew in Cornwall, and Nicholas runs the China Clay Works for the Clevelands. He ought to have had a partnership years ago, but although Nicholas has brains and energy where his work is concerned he is wanting in push. At least I think so, but I never say much about it because it would hurt his feelings. Mr. Cleveland died two years ago leaving a large fortune, a flourishing business, a widow and an only son. The son is now nominally at the head of affairs but he depends entirely on Nicholas. He is not a fool, but he is young and inexperienced and unfortunately very much in his mother's hands.

She wants him to marry Isabel Godolphin, and he wants to marry Celia, so it's pull devil, pull baker, and none of us know yet what will happen. But I'm afraid Celia hasn't a chance. Mrs. Cleveland is an overbearing woman with a glib tongue. She got her own way with her husband and I greatly fear that she will get it with her son. Bill Cleveland will marry Isabel Godolphin, and Celia will cry her eyes out.

I've tried to make my children truthful, polite, unselfish. It sounds too old-fashioned to write down, but in my opinion fashions change with the generations while the qualities we value in others do not. They have all been educated at the High School, because that was the best we could afford for them, and none of them have as many clothes or go to as many dances as they would like. As I have said, they are girls of average intelligence and, except Celia, not much above the average in looks. Nancy is not as handsome as her sisters, and perhaps that is why her thoughts turned to medicine at an early age. She has improved lately, but she is too much like her father to be pretty. She has a downright steady face with dark eyes, a mouth that pouts slightly when she is concentrating. In fact she is the image of Nicholas, and I love her for it. But compared with Celia, for instance, she is plain. I have heard Celia described as the prettiest girl in Porthlew, but she won't be that long if she cries her eyes out for Bill Cleveland.

All sorts of things happened on our silver-wedding day, some pleasant and some not. I did not sleep much the night before, because the children had insisted on a party, and I had a great many little things to think about. We were not giving the party in our own house, but were having one or two old friends to dine with us after it, and I went down in the middle of the night to make sure that the larder door was shut. Because last week Alberta, our cook, left it open, and Toby our fox terrier got at the ham. Unfortunately I have the kind of mind that worries about problems of conduct one minute and a larder door the next, so I don't get much rest. Nicholas never worries about anything. He sleeps all night and works or plays all day, and is even

tempered whatever happens: which I am not. However, the larder door was shut. I felt at peace with every one except Mrs. Cleveland. I tried not to think of her and before long I fell asleep. At seven, the whole household, including Alberta, the cook, Melinda the parlour maid, and Toby the fox terrier, burst into our room, laughing, singing, barking, issuing orders, yelling congratulations, and dragging with them a long heavy package. Ambrose and Toby arrived first, Toby alighting plumb on my chest, and licking my face in a delirium. There are very few rules made and enforced in our house, but one is that nobody comes into our bedroom in the early morning except Melinda with hot water and tea. However, it was our silver-wedding day, and here were our young, all of them except Nancy, who had not been able to get leave. Ambrose, my only boy, has red hair and freckles. He is not like either of us, but Nicholas says he had an uncle on his mother's side who was known as Carrots, and who went to sea and was drowned. So I am determined that Ambrose shall not go to sea. Sally is red-headed too, and has green eyes and absurd thin legs. She is a lonely child, because her sisters are all grown up, and Ambrose makes friends with boys. Besides, her five elder sisters all send her on errands and keep her in order. It is Sally this and Sally that from morning till night, unless I put my foot down and then I'm told that I spoil her.

They were unrolling the long package now and trying to unfold it, Melinda helping them. Toby had not quieted down yet, but was on the floor, yelping and biting at every one in turn, affectionately. I sat up and saw that what they had in hand was a carpet, a blue Indian carpet.

“Dad's present to you!”

“Nancy chose it.”

“Lizzie, it's posh.”

That was Hester. She always calls me Lizzie, although I always say I will not allow it. But Hester, though tiresome at times, has a way with her. I think she may marry, even if none of the others do.

Martha and Jane were both on their knees. Jane has the best eyes of the lot; starry and true. You love her when she looks at you. At least I do. But probably no one else ever will. Martha, my third girl, has the good looks of youth, and of her steady nature. I hope she won't take to Good Works, at least not yet. They may be a consolation later on if nothing happens. But I have an idea about Martha that may develop before long.

“There!” said some of them, and stood about admiring.

“But the extravagance of it,” I cried, and I bundled them all out of the room for I wanted to thank Nicholas myself, and it was high time to dress.

“You know we can’t afford it,” I said to him.

“Mrs. Cleveland to see you,” said Melinda, putting her head round the corner, three hours later. “I’ve shut her up.”

“Shut her up!”

“In the drawing-room like you told me. The flowers are all dead, and I haven’t dusted there yet. She can write ’er name on the pianner.”

That kind of thing always happens when Mrs. Cleveland comes. With four grown-up daughters at home and two maids, dusty rooms and dead flowers ought to be impossible, but the girls had rushed off with flowers to the Winter Garden, where we were to be At Home, and I had been hindered by presents and telegrams, and was still in parley with Alberta whose mayonnaise could not be depended upon when she was excited.

“You mustn’t hurry it, Alberta,” I was saying, and as I spoke the kitchen door opened, and there stood Mrs. Cleveland. Quite impossible, you will say. In England, people don’t walk unasked into kitchens. She had been locked up in the drawing-room, and if she knew her manners must have stayed there. But Mrs. Cleveland has manners of her own, and sometimes they are bad.

“I thought perhaps you didn’t know I was here!” she said.

I could see her taking stock of the kitchen as she spoke and comparing it with her own. Mine is small and the worse for wear, and of course Alberta had two ragged, discoloured cloths hanging on a string stretched across the top of the range.

“But you have only just come,” I said, and I went with her back to the drawing-room, which looked dreadful. There was dust everywhere, and bowls of dead lilac, and on the hearth-rug a large haddock bone. The grate had not been done, the windows had not been opened, and Toby, after worrying an old bedroom shoe, had gone to sleep with it between his paws.

My house, though threadbare, is well run as a rule, but Alberta and Melinda were both so excited about our silver-wedding that they were off their heads, and the girls were nearly as bad. Melinda does the drawing-room every day before breakfast, but when I asked her what had happened this morning she said she had been all in an uproar over the carpet, and it

had clean gone out of her head. I wished it had been clean, but as it was I had to bear with Mrs. Cleveland's pitying little smile, and agree to her suggestion that we should walk round the garden. She had brought us a present of her own photograph in a silver frame, an embarrassing gift, because when Mrs. Cleveland is not there I try to forget her. She is the last person in the world I wish to have always with me. However, I thanked her politely, showed her some of the other presents we had received, led her into the garden, and when we had been round it, sat down with her in my favourite seat facing the sea. She had told me what to do with the various corners that might easily be improved, and broken it to me that she would not be able to stay long at our party that afternoon; she had asked after Nancy, and advised me how to educate Ambrose; she had pulled up several weeds and exhorted me to be stricter with Alberta and Melinda; in fact she had been insufferably officious and omniscient for nearly a quarter of an hour before she came to the real purport of her visit.

"It seems a pity to go away," she said, "but I have made up my mind that I must have a change."

"Are you going away?" I said, with my eyes fixed on a large dandelion in the path. Mrs. Cleveland's eyes had been on it too, and she had just recommended me a Weed Killer.

"Oh! haven't you heard," she went on. "William and I are going round the world, and Isabel Godolphin is going with us."

Unluckily, I'm so made that when a thing stares me in the face, I see it. Nicholas is different. If you were a trivial impertinent and stared at him for a week, he would never know you were there. So he is never ruffled, even by Mrs. Cleveland, who always spoke of her son as Bill to his equals, and as William to his inferiors. She had called him William to us lately, and I took it to mean that she did not wish him to marry Celia. I should not have been anxious for the marriage myself, if I had not known that Celia's happiness depended on it. The idea of being closely connected with Mrs. Cleveland did not please me at all, and I've no wish to let any of my girls marry where they are not wanted.

"Going round the world takes a long time," I said.

"I want to be away for a year, and forget that there is such a place as Porthlew. I get so tired of it and of every one in it, and so does William. It's not good for a young man in his position to fix himself in a small provincial town. He gets ideas that he would shake off an hour after he started. Unsuitable ideas."

What was I to say to that? I asked for the name and address of the Weed Killer.

CHAPTER II

The real difficulty about liars is that they are not always lying. You have to sort their statements yourself and decide which are true and which are not. I believe that Mrs. Cleveland had Bill well under her thumb and that she wanted him to marry Isabel Godolphin, but I wondered what Nicholas would say if the young man proposed to take a holiday for a whole year. I said nothing about it to the girls when they came back before lunch because I did not want to upset Celia. They all dislike Mrs. Cleveland and when they saw that she had brought us her photograph for a silver-wedding present they put it away in a cupboard. Luckily our world held a great many people besides Mrs. Cleveland, and during the afternoon when friends of all ages gathered round us at the Winter Garden, it was easy to forget her. The Clevelands and Nicholas are not Cornish, but I am. I was a Hendra and call cousins with most of the families round. That is why it is so absurd of Mrs. Cleveland to give herself airs with me and talk of Bill as William. She is a Londoner and therefore "foreign" in Porthlew and her father was on the Stock Exchange. Nicholas and Bill's father were at Cambridge together and when Arthur Cleveland succeeded to the business he gave my husband a post in it and thereby did himself a good turn as well as his friend. The two men worked amiably together for twenty-eight years, but Mrs. Cleveland has never liked either Nicholas or me. Bill is the image of his father, a big athletic man with pleasant grey eyes and an easy temper. He was at Rugby and then at Cambridge and did well at games both at School and at the 'Varsity. He came into the business just before his father died, and Nicholas says he has sound brains. Perhaps he has. I never came across his brains, so I cannot judge of their quality. He is one of your silent men, who only opens his mouth when he has something to say, and he gives in to his mother too much to be called strong. I wish Celia had not lost her heart to him, because he will never have the grit to marry her, in spite of his mother. She has refused two good offers lately, and I know it is on his account. I should like to get her out of Porthlew for a time, and then she might forget him. But I have no money to spare to send her round the world.

At the Winter Garden the floor for dancing is railed off with a wooden railing, and all round the room between the railing and the wall there are little tea-tables. Upstairs there is a room with card tables for people who like bridge, and Nicholas had promised to form fours there for those who wished to play. But to keep a promise of that kind you must be on the spot and at

five o'clock he had not arrived. On his silver-wedding day! when he was expected to be at my side from the beginning and help me to receive our guests. Every one was asking for him and wondering what had become of him, and of course I wondered and worried till I hardly knew what I was saying or doing. It was Celia who had the sense to telephone to the Works and ask what had happened, but the only answer she got was that Mr. Brooke was talking to "Mr. William" in the Private Office and did not wish to be disturbed. I knew what that meant at once. Bill was telling Nicholas that he meant to go away for a whole year and Nicholas was expostulating. It was too bad of both men, but they were both marionettes and could not help themselves. Mrs. Cleveland pulled the strings. Nicholas did not dance to her bidding as a rule and it galled me to think that she had lassoed him just to-day, but I could put no other interpretation on his absence.

The four girls all helped me to deal with the crowd now filling the room, and Celia sorted out the bridge-players and herded them upstairs. The band struck up a fox trot. The older folk found seats, the clatter of teacups behind the railing still went on, and George Vincent, who is our neighbour and one of our oldest friends, persuaded me to sit down with him and have tea. Poor fellow! He lost his wife a year ago and has three young children. He comes to me for advice about them and doesn't take it. But I'm very fond of him, and I told him what was happening at the Works and why Nicholas had not arrived yet.

"A whole year, you know. My husband is to have the whole thing on his hands for a whole year. It's preposterous."

"I don't believe it," said George.

"You never believe anything," I retorted, for only last week he had been obliged to get rid of the children's nurse in the most embarrassing circumstances. If I had not been prompt about getting the doctor and an ambulance, the population of Porthlew would have been increased in his front hall, for the hussy sat there with her mother, the mother threatening to have the law on me because I said what I did say. We were thinking over this affair when Mrs. Cleveland and Isabel Godolphin came towards us, both evidently disgruntled.

"No host and hostess and not enough tea-tables," Mrs. Cleveland was saying in a loud voice. "I wonder what has happened to Bill? I know he thought it was his duty to come. As a rule, wild horses won't get him to an afternoon tea-party. But Mr. Brooke has served the firm for so many years. Oh! there you are, Mrs. Brooke. I didn't see you when I arrived. What a

crowd you have. The whole town. Have you seen William? He promised to come. I made a point of it. But you know what young men are. At least you will when your boy grows up. I suppose young women are more in your line now. Can you squeeze in there, Isabel? They don't allow much room for chairs, do they? You're sure you've quite finished? We don't want to take your places. Isn't it hot? I wish they'd open a few windows. But it won't take us long to have tea and then we must fly."

George Vincent and I had both got up while Mrs. Cleveland yapped and took our places; and as soon as we had seen that she was served we got away. Isabel had greeted me as usual with artificial effusion and had no doubt recognised my frock, which I had worn two or three times in the early spring. There is no harm in Isabel, but she puts on too much colour and her chin is too long. It will meet her nose when she is a little older. But she is an only child and will come into a considerable property, so it is only natural that a woman of Mrs. Cleveland's moral and mental calibre should choose her for a daughter-in-law. I sometimes think that I shall be glad when the marriage is an accomplished fact. At present I can hardly think of my other children because I am so concerned about Celia. The uncertainty is wearing her down.

We had asked about two hundred people to our party, and I suppose a hundred and fifty must have come. The band was now playing and a great many were dancing. The little tea-tables were still occupied and I took up my post near the entrance again to receive a few late comers. I saw that Sally was prancing about with a boy of her own age, Ambrose was eating ices, and Martha was dancing with George Vincent. A very plain red-haired young man I did not know was looking at Jane as young men often do look at her and Hester was upstairs playing bridge. Celia told me so and then she stood beside me for a time.

"What can they be talking about?" she said in my ear. "Have you any idea?"

"Yes, I have an idea," I whispered back.

"Tell me."

I had to make up my mind quickly and perhaps I made it up wrong. I told her what Mrs. Cleveland had said that morning about going round the world with Bill and taking Isabel with them. Celia had been looking pale enough lately, but she turned quite white as I told her and it wrung my heart. That is the worst of having children. Their sorrows are yours and you wish you could slay the people bringing them trouble. Love affairs are light

affairs with some natures, but not with all. Celia was hungering for Bill's affection as a starving man hungers for food, and if she did not get it her beauty would wither and her youth would die. I longed to take her in my arms and hold her to me, but we had to stand there and behave ourselves. And presently Mrs. Cleveland with Isabel came forth from the tea-tables and began yapping again.

“Good-bye, Mrs. Brooke. Such a successful party. Everybody one knows and doesn't know. We must fly, because we have promised to go on to the St. Justs and we want to pick up Bill as he is not here. Good-bye, Celia. How tired you look. I suppose you've had a great deal to do. But you're nearly at the end of it, or are you having people to dinner too? You can't have room for many besides yourselves. I think Sally's legs are thinner than ever. Poor Sally! What is it the farmers call the little pig that is born last and is smaller than the rest of the litter? You should try Ovaltine. *Good-bye!*”

At last, soon after Mrs. Cleveland's departure, Nicholas appeared, and Bill came with him, one elderly, one young, one short and broad, one big boned and tall, both dependable men, and neither of them talkative. Any one could see at a glance that Nicholas was pleased about something. At least I could, and I wondered what it was. He had no business to be pleased with himself, considering that he was an hour and a half late at his own party, and I expected him to show a contrite spirit when he saw me. But he did nothing of the kind. His eyes were twinkling, and before he could reach me he was mobbed; literally mobbed by his children and his friends, reproaching him, congratulating him, asking him what he meant by it, offering him tea, inviting him to dance, and making ridiculous guesses at what had delayed him. For Nicholas is one of those people nearly every one trusts and likes, although he has no showy qualities at all. He is not handsome or brilliant, but in love and friendship he wears well. I have never known him to lose a friend or fail one, or lose his head in a difficulty, or take a wrong turning when the way was doubtful. In his judgments he can be charitable and he can be severe. He hardly ever speaks of his neighbours at all, but I know which of them please him and which do not. He won't have anything to do with a liar if he can help it, but when he can't help it he doesn't lose his temper. He listens to Mrs. Cleveland as if he was believing her and never lets her know that he does not. But she has never liked him because he has never ko-towed to her. Arthur Cleveland, Bill's father, was too much dominated by his wife, but though I've known Bill since he was born I don't understand him. I'm fond of him though, and I wish he would be man enough to defy his mother and marry Celia. He came straight up to me when he arrived with Nicholas and mumbled some sort of congratulation. Then he

spoke to Celia, and I thought he would ask her to dance or go off with her to get tea at one of the little tables. But he did neither. He stood about close to me and said he hoped I should be pleased.

“I’m not pleased at all,” I said, “I’m very much annoyed. Nicholas promised to be here at four o’clock. What delayed him?”

“I’m afraid I did.”

“But you knew we were giving a party.”

“I forgot it.”

“Then Nicholas ought to have reminded you.”

“I believe he did! But we both got so interested. . . .”

“Interested! What business had Nicholas to be interested? Do you mean to say that it was nothing urgent?”

“Not really urgent. We might have had the talk to-morrow. I suppose you know that I am going round the world with my mother?”

“It’s true, then! Was that what you were talking about?”

“Yes. We were making arrangements. Your husband must tell you about it.”

“How long are you going to be away?” said Celia, who stood close to us.

“About a year. It soon passes.”

“I suppose it does when you are moving about,” said Celia.

“Come and dance,” said Bill, and the two young people went off together, leaving me troubled and indignant.

CHAPTER III

The next thing that happened was a complete surprise to Nicholas and me. A hush fell on the room, every one crowded towards one end of it. We found ourselves the objects of general attention. My cousin Captain Hendra made a little congratulatory speech in which he was kind to our virtues and blind to our faults, and as if by a conjuring trick, a magnificent silver tray and tea-set appeared, a present to us from a large number of our friends. Nicholas had to make a speech too, and he did it very well, but didn't say why he was looking pleased or what he and Bill had been talking about. I didn't get that out of him till we were changing for dinner at home, and then we were both too hurried and flurried to talk reasonably.

"Why were you so late, Nicholas? You promised to come early and help me."

"I know I did. What have you done with my clothes brush?"

"I haven't done anything with it. Do tell me what you and Bill were talking about. His going away for a year, I suppose, and leaving you all the work to do. His mother said it was to be a year. Why can't he do his courting at home and stick to his job?"

"I wish I could find my clothes brush. Sorry."

The apology was because he had nearly upset me, as he dashed across the room to get at my dressing-table and my brush. Dinner was ordered for eight and it was now a quarter past. Our two guests, Doctor Little, and George Vincent, had come, and when I recovered my balance I looked out of our window to see a car stop at our door and Bill Cleveland descend from it. As I looked I was trying to put on one of those dresses that you have to worm your way into with outstretched arms. We were both feeling nightmarish.

"Bill has just arrived!" I exclaimed.

"I asked him," said Nicholas.

"You asked him! at the last moment when the table is laid for ten and won't hold eleven."

"It will at a pinch. Sally can sit at one end with me."

“Sally ought to be in bed. You ought never to have let her sit up. Did you tell Melinda? Wasn’t she put out? Luckily I’ve ordered enough of everything. But how inconsiderate of you, Nicholas. Yes, you do want a brush. Here, let me.”

“It was after we settled about the partnership.”

“What partnership?”

“Mine of course. Bill has offered me a partnership.”

“That’s why you were looking so pleased!”

“I am pleased. So are you, I hope.”

“Yes, I’m pleased,” I said.

“Your voice sounds like flat champagne. What’s the matter?”

“I’m thinking of Celia.”

There was no time to think of anything just then, or to say anything more. Sally dashed into the room to say every one was waiting for us, and that Alberta said it wasn’t her fault if the soup was cold, and that the cheese straws had gone to crumbs because I’d given her the wrong prescription, and that there were only ten champagne glasses and what was Melinda to do about it; and then, standing on one leg, as is Sally’s way when excited, her green eyes as impish as a kitten’s, she whispered:

“Melinda’s handing in her notice to-morrow. I heard her say so to Alberta. It’s because of the new tea-service.”

“What were you doing in the kitchen, Sally? You are not allowed there.”

“I am when I’m sent. Celia sent me.”

“What for?”

“When Bill came. I was to tell Melinda to lay for him. She’s foaming.”

“But what has the new tea-service to do with it?” asked Nicholas, who is as incapable as other men of putting two and two together.

“She doesn’t want to clean it,” I explained.

“That’s right,” said Sally. “She says she’d rather die in a ditch than do it.”

“You are not to say ‘that’s right,’ Sally, I’ve told you so before; and you are not to repeat what you hear in the kitchen.”

“But it’s so interesting,” said Sally. Truly it was interesting to hear of Melinda’s intentions, and unpleasant. However, I never allow myself to be much upset by my servants, and although we are a large family I rarely change them. I’ve brought up my girls to be handy about the house, and if there is an interregnum in the kitchen, we five able-bodied women fill it. I had already decided in my own mind that Melinda should not touch the new silver, both because it would have been unreasonable to expect it, and because I did not want it scratched.

But I had more important things than Melinda and the tea-service in my mind as I hurried downstairs. Nicholas had his partnership. Bill was going round the world with Isabel Godolphin and his mother. These two events clashed within me so that I felt *Himmel-hoch jauchzend, zum Tode betriibt*. Goethe says people in love are like that, happy in heaven one minute and miserably on earth the next. But he doesn’t tell us what happens to those who are in both extremes at the same time. I had the dinner to think of too, and the cheese straws that were not straws, but crumbs, and Sally, who took a chicken bone in her fingers and gnawed it with her eyes on me. Celia ought to have stopped her, but Celia was talking to Bill at the time. I was glad she had put on the dress she had worn at Rose Trelawney’s wedding, because she looks lovely in it. She has rather short, well-cut features, beautiful grey eyes and thick wavy hair. She is slender and graceful, and I believe that if she wrapped an old sack round her shoulders, other women would wear old sacks too. For she always seems to be well turned out. She has an elegance of mind and person that are rare, and in my opinion she is too good for Bill Cleveland. I should like her to marry a man who had a great career before him, but they are not plentiful anywhere, and I know of none in Porthlew. Besides, what you really want most for your children is happiness, and that is not dependent on careers. Nicholas says that we are a happy household, or that we should be if I worried less. But how can I help worrying when I am responsible for the welfare of so many people. The mayonnaise was a success, for a wonder, but the bread-sauce was too thin, and though Nicholas is the kindest man in the world, he asks those exasperating questions that men do ask when cooks go wrong. In a sudden lull in the conversation he beamed at me from the other end of the table and said:

“Why is the bread-sauce so thin?”

“I know,” piped Sally, her eyes full of mischief. “Alberta burnt the first lot and had to make this in a hurry, and there’s none too much bread in the house.”

Then all those grown-up people, who ought to have known better laughed at her; so I went on talking to George Vincent about the eclipse which was to happen in June, and which he wanted to see. He said he would like to go north for it, and did I think he could safely leave the children?

I asked him if he had no elderly relative who could take charge in his absence, and he said he had several but that, unfortunately, he didn't like them. I couldn't tell him that his troubles would be over if he married Martha, who sat beside him and who is as fond of his children as if they were her own, so I said vaguely that some of us would keep an eye on his nursery if he went away, and that if Sally ate all the trifle she had heaped on her plate she would be ill. I could not help being rather distracted, because when Sally sits next to Nicholas she knows she can do as she likes. He never seems to mind how naughty she is, or how ill she makes herself, and you can imagine what my feelings were when George began about the eclipse again, and I saw that little devil put both hands into the dish of cheese straws and scoop them full of crumbs. She didn't even put them on her plate but began to eat them out of her hands. And then, what must Hester do but follow her little sister's example. As if it were a game. In a way it was Alberta's fault. The cheese straws were nothing but a mound of crumbs, that could only be managed with spoons. I refused them, and so did George and Martha. But the others ate them as Sally did and said they were excellent. I suppose the champagne had gone to their heads. After dinner we played bridge and Sally went to bed. But Ambrose had to take a hand because there were only seven of us without him. Bill and Celia said the night was too fine to stay indoors, and they strolled about the garden. When they came in Bill said they had been killing slugs. I thought he seemed better pleased with himself than he had any right to be, so I asked him when he was going to start on his journey round the world and whether we should be able to get him back in a hurry in case of need.

"Nicholas isn't a young man," I said. "He might break down under the strain."

"Do you mean the strain of doing without me?" he asked, looking still more pleased with himself, and as Nicholas came up just then he told him what I had said. They both looked pleased with themselves then, and that annoyed me.

"You'll have double work for a year," I said, but he only laughed.

"We've talked over all that," he said, looking affectionately at Bill, and then we rearranged the bridge tables while Ambrose went to bed, and I went

into the dining-room to have a look round. For Alberta and Melinda are only young themselves, and they had had a long heavy day. I found them with several of their friends and relations looking admiringly at the presentation plate, which was on the sideboard. Everything to do with dinner had been cleared and put away already, and I had no doubt that some of the girls with them had given a helping hand. They melted away, however, when I appeared, leaving Melinda behind, and I wondered whether they all knew that she was going to hand in her notice, and whether she would do it to-night.

“About this here silver,” she began at once, to my surprise; for as a rule I find that threats in the kitchen are not carried out in the dining-room.

“It’s handsome,” I said.

“Brae and handsome. Fit for the king’s palace, I should say. It’ll want covers. Covers of that green stuff like you keep round the best candlesticks.”

“I don’t think so, Melinda. We shall use it every day.”

“Every day. Clean all that every day, just for a cup o’ warm at four o’clock. I couldn’t do it, Mrs. Brooke, not with everything else I got to do.”

“I shouldn’t expect it, Melinda.”

She looked rather taken aback when I said that and suspicious.

“It’ll want cleaning,” she said. “I couldn’t take in silver as was spotty. I can’t abide it.”

“It won’t be spotty. We shall see to it ourselves.”

“What for?”

“To save you the extra work.”

“I never bin afraid of work.”

“Never. You’re a good worker.”

“S’pose you think I’ll scratch it?”

“It mustn’t be scratched.”

“Nor it will be. Miss Hester, she did that scratch on the old teapot. She knows she did. I’m very careful.”

“Yes, I know you are, Melinda. You hardly ever break anything. But you have a good deal to do.”

“No such thing. Not after tea I haven’t. I’ll give it a lick every day after tea, and put it away in them green covers. That’s what my uncle does with ’is silver, and ’e’s been butler at Lidcot for forty years. ’E ought to know, and if I told ’im the young ladies cleaned my silver ’e’d foam at me.”

“Well, Melinda,” I began, but I was not allowed to go on.

“I’ll take the measure for them green covers to-morrow, and I’ll make ’em myself on my machine, because I know eggsackly how they ought to be made. I’ll keep ’em in my pantry like my uncle does his. He taught me how to clean silver. That’s why ours looks so nice. It’s a lot o’ trouble, but if I wasn’t doing that e’d be doing something else I s’pose. I can’t sit idle. It worrets me.”

CHAPTER IV

Alberta and Melinda both came from comfortable homes and I had known them all their lives. Their fathers were farmers on my cousin, Tim Hendra's land and Alberta's people milked thirty cows. Whenever I saw Alberta's mother she reminded me that there was no need for any of her children to go out at all as there was work enough and to spare at home, but Alberta was no good at farm work and liked being with us, so they let her stay. Melinda belonged to a large family, too, and had spent her childhood in a tumbledown place on the edge of a cliff, looking through mists at the winter storms and hearing the sea foaming and roaring below. The wilder the day the more beautiful it was if you had eyes to see. But Melinda hated the mud in the lanes and the farm work and the long, dark evenings. In Porthlew, there were pavements, lights, shop-windows, crowds of people and the Pictures.

Both girls had come to me five years ago, soon after they left school, and they belonged to the family, but I had never been able to teach them the formalities of behaviour enforced in more orthodox households, and whenever Nicholas's Aunt Bethia stayed with us my eyes were opened to their deficiencies. All the year round we rubbed along very comfortably, but directly Aunt Bethia announced her annual visit I knew that comfort was not enough. In every self-respecting household there should be a certain frigid polish that the old lady found wanting in ours, and, I fear, missed. I tried to apply a little when she was due, but without success. It would have been easier if she had not brought her maid, Weaver, with her, because Weaver, who ought to have known better, "passed remarks."

Aunt Bethia had never married. She was over seventy but active in mind and body, capable, self-satisfied and accustomed to lay down the law. She was fond of Nicholas and, I fear, thought him rather thrown away on me. She was well off, and had a large house on the Yorkshire moors to which she invited some of us every year: and as she could not take it with her when she went to heaven it was possible that it might belong to Nicholas some day. But she had never told us so. She kept her mouth tight shut about her affairs and regarded us as a scrambling poverty-stricken family enervated by the Cornish climate and slack Cornish ways. When she asked us to Yorkshire, she did so because she thought we needed "bracing," but, short of a permanent family immigration, nothing could have braced us all enough. Our six girls she regarded as my fault and her nephew's misfortune, and

sometimes in the intimacy of family talk she gloomed about their future, when they would be six old maids with nothing to do and a pittance on which to live. I have admitted that in the watches of the night I did this myself, but when Aunt Bethia shook her head about her great-nieces, I turned cheerful at once and told her that they were very much admired and that she must come to their weddings.

“But none of them are even engaged and they are getting on,” she said. “I’m afraid you are not as clever as my neighbour Mrs. Wotherspoon. She has five daughters and three of them have got off already. But she has brought up her girls sensibly. They are not fanciful. When girls haver and waver they end by not marrying at all.”

I wondered whether Aunt Bethia had havered and wavered in her youth, but did not like to ask her and as we sat quietly at tea together, Weaver came into the room white with fury, and her voice quivering. She said she was sorry to upset Miss Ramsbotham, but that unless Alberta and Melinda apologised to her she must take the next train back to Yorkshire where people “beyaved like ’uman beans and not like savages.”

“What have they been doing?” I said, with a sinking heart, for if Alberta and Melinda were going to be tiresome, how were we to get through Aunt Bethia’s visit. She had not been in the house twenty-four hours yet, and here was this hullabaloo.

“They barked at me,” said Weaver, “and Miss Sally was there barking too.”

“Barked at you!”

“Yes, m’m, like puppies. It is not what I’m accustomed to, and I’m all of a tremble with the annoyance of it.”

“I’ll speak to them,” I said and went straight to the kitchen, where sure enough Alberta, Melinda, and Sally were making such a din that they did not hear me open the door. When they saw me they stopped and looked as guilty as Toby does if we catch him in the larder.

“What is this?” I said as magisterially as I could. “Sally, what are you doing here?”

“We’re barking,” cried Sally, shrill with joy and excitement. “Like those puppies next door. Listen, mum,” and she started again, but Alberta and Melinda did not join in. They were ready to giggle though.

“Stop!” I shouted. “Sally, go upstairs at once. Alberta and Melinda, what do you mean by barking at Miss Weaver?”

“We didn’t,” said Alberta.

“She thinks you did.”

“We just barked,” said Melinda. “We don’t like her. She passes remarks.”

“Never mind what she does. You are to be polite to her while she is here. She is very much upset, and wants to go back to Yorkshire at once.”

“Leave her go,” murmured one of them.

“Says the bread isn’t good. Says the butter has a tack. Says heavy cake is muck and left it on her plate. Says the ceiling is black. Wants a cup o’ early tea and porridge for breakfast. Wants to know where we keep our hams. Says she doesn’t think much of Cornwall and wonders how we stick it here. An’ er father milks one cow. She makes us foam, she do. Hussy.”

Anything less like a hussy than the rat-faced elderly Weaver I could not imagine, but it was Melinda’s favourite term of abuse and she applied it without regard to sex. Last week she had called Toby a hussy, because he relieved his teething pains by gnawing our best hall chair. I stayed in the kitchen a little while exhorting my hussies to behave civilly even in the face of provocation and then went back to Aunt Bethia whom I found with her great-nieces. The four girls had returned from tennis and as she conversed with them, I seemed to follow the thoughts in her mind. She did not “pass remarks” aloud as Weaver did, but in spite of that you discovered that she was distressed by the state of our affairs. Four marriageable daughters in the room and not one even engaged. Another in London. Sally coming on. Ambrose to educate and put out in the world. The drawing-room carpet very worn in places. The whole house in need of a lick of paint. Milk in the tea instead of cream. No Yorkshire teacakes. A damp enervating climate. Weeds in the garden. Untrained servants who sang over their work and bobbed their hair. An untrained dog who had just jumped up at her and nearly upset her tea. An untrained child who had slammed the door when she went out of the room. Everything and every one wanted bracing and to be brought up to north country standards. Celia wanted it most of all. She looked pale and was too thin. Twenty-four already, and still at home, although even in Yorkshire she would be considered pretty. Yet there must be young men in Porthlew. Where were their eyes? I am sure that Aunt Bethia thought that she would have managed better than I did and got some of her daughters off by this time. For she was a curious mixture of hardness and sentiment. She

stood on her own feet as self-reliantly as any male, but she entered into no modern nonsense about careers for women. There was only one career for a woman and that was to be a wife and a mother. She was saying so in a domineering voice when I returned to the room.

“But there are not enough men to go round, darling,” said Hester, and I should think that she was the only person in the world who ever addressed Miss Ramsbotham as darling.

“*You* needn’t trouble about that,” said the old lady, her shrewd eyes twinkling at her great-niece.

“We don’t. We say that if we marry, well and good, and if not we’ll live happy ever after like Aunt Bethia.”

Aunt Bethia gave a little grunt and asked what Nancy was doing now and how she was getting on.

“She has just taken out an appendix,” said Martha, who was Nancy’s favourite sister and very proud of her.

“Disgusting,” said Aunt Bethia. “When I was a girl, if an appendix went wrong you died, but you didn’t talk about it in that crass way. You didn’t know you had one.”

“You’ll see Nancy,” said Martha. “She is coming home on Thursday.”

“I shall be glad to see her but I shall not congratulate her,” said Aunt Bethia. “It’s unnatural work for any woman, in my opinion. I think I’ll go upstairs now, Elizabeth, and see what Weaver is doing. She was born a fool and will die one, so I have to look after her. Last time I came away she put a bottle of liniment in my hat box and it broke. My hats smelled of menthol and wintergreen for months and annoyed people who liked violets.”

“Will she go back to Yorkshire to-night?” I asked.

“Go back to Yorkshire! Of course not. Why should she?”

“I’m afraid Alberta and Melinda won’t exactly apologise. I’ve told them they must be polite and not bark at her again.”

“I don’t mind how much they bark at her,” said Aunt Bethia unexpectedly. “She probably annoyed them.”

“She did. She finds fault with everything.”

“She’ll find fault with her harp when she gets to heaven. It’s a habit. Never mind, Weaver. Tell me about the girls. What’s the matter with Celia?”

Is she in love, or is it the climate? Don't tell me if you'd rather not. We can talk about Sally's legs. Drumsticks, I call them. I wonder they don't snap. Doesn't she assimilate her food? Probably she bolts it. You'd never notice. I haven't seen Ambrose yet. What a houseful of women for a boy to grow up in. Nine women when Nancy is at home. Does it ever occur to Nicholas that he feeds nine women at every meal. A seraglio, I call it."

"How many maids do you keep, Aunt Bethia?"

"Seven; but I have ten outdoor men."

"Nicholas employs hundreds of men and Ambrose is with boys all day at school. You needn't pity them."

Here we arrived at the top of the stairs. Aunt Bethia a little out of breath, and I a little out of temper. I know all about the superfluity of women in our house and as long as Nicholas does not mind it I cannot see why it should worry any one else.

"I like women," I said defiantly.

"But you can have too much of them," said Aunt Bethia and passed into her bedroom, where Weaver met us with requests for a different kind of soap, some darker blinds for the windows, a thinner eider-down, cotton sheets instead of linen ones and another bedside table for her lady's early tea.

"Nonsense," said Aunt Bethia. "Don't pay any attention. Soap! What's the matter with the soap?"

"It's the same as you use at home, m'm, and I thought you'd like a change," said Weaver in a suffering voice. "And the curtains let in a little light, and I've always heard that in a damp steamy climate cotton sheets are recommended."

"I don't like cotton sheets. Everything is very nice, Elizabeth."

"Very nice indeed, m'm, but the windows will have to be hermetically sealed at night and so I thought that a lighter eider-down was wanted."

"What are you bleating about, Weaver? You know I have my windows wide open."

"Asphyxiated! I'm sorry, m'm, but that's what I should find you in the morning and you couldn't say you'd not been warned. In the hospital we didn't allow a buttercup in the rooms at night much less heavy odours that float in at the window. This room doesn't smell respectable."

“She means the tobacco plants,” I cried, “they are all along the front of the house. I’m so fond of them.”

“So am I,” said Aunt Bethia firmly. “Take that hat box away, Weaver. It stinks. I’ll keep this eider-down and I won’t be crowded up with a second table. Anything else?”

But Weaver was too much annoyed with us both to ask for anything else at the moment. She stood there with a pair of shoes in each hand, looking for a shoe-cupboard, and discovering derisively that there was none in the room.

CHAPTER V

Aunt Bethia was unusually active for her age. She was one of those guests who come down to breakfast full of vim and, looking round the table, say in a hearty voice.

“Well, what are we going to do to-day?”

“What would you like to do, Aunt Bethia?” some one would ask, and she generally proposed a picnic. That was why Ambrose and Sally looked forward to her annual visit, and why it left me limp and weary. When you live in a place, and have your days filled up with housekeeping, the care of a large family and small social obligations, you have not much time for picnics. Besides, although I am twenty years younger than Aunt Bethia, I am long past the age for them. So is Nicholas. But he got out of them by going to business, which as he said was comparatively restful.

When we decided on a picnic, Aunt Bethia always hired a large car that held five of us comfortably, and six or seven uncomfortably; so we were always seven. Three at the back, two on the little seats, and the children next to the driver. At least we started in this way, but we usually had to take Sally inside before long because the driver said that he could not be responsible for our lives with two of them scrimmaging all over his gears. Nancy arrived home in time for the first picnic and came with us. So did Celia and Martha. We were to take tea as well as lunch. I protested, but was overruled by Aunt Bethia, who said it would be no trouble because she would make Weaver pack the tea-basket. All I need do was to send Ambrose to Market Street to buy seven pork pies, a dozen bananas and some chocolate.

“What a digestion you must have, Aunt Bethia,” said Nicholas.

“I never pay the least attention to it,” she said briskly. “Half the modern ailments are fuss.”

That engaged Nancy, and I left them at it hammer and tongs, while I went into the kitchen to give my orders for the day, and see about luncheon, for I did not mean to be at the mercy of Aunt Bethia’s pork pies. Celia and Martha both helped with the sandwiches. I tried to remember everything else we should want. Weaver hindered us all by fumbling over the tea-basket, asking questions and upsetting the milk. Ambrose arrived at the last moment with a bunch of unripe bananas, a bag of chocolate and some saffron buns that he had bought because the pork pies were not out of the oven. Sally

shed tears because I sent her upstairs for her mackintosh and made her take it. Weaver staggered into the hall with the tea-basket and hoped she had forgotten nothing, but said her head was never as clear in Cornwall as it was in Yorkshire. Seven of us scrambled in and out of the car collecting wraps and sticks, cameras and bathing dresses. Toby went mad with excitement and barked at our heels, Aunt Bethia refused to start without her map of Cornwall, which Weaver had been told to bring down with her Burberry, but had forgotten. Alberta reminded me that I had not told her what sort of soup to make and Melinda wanted the laundry money. It was past eleven before we got off and midday when we decanted ourselves at Roskestral, the farm at which the car would wait while we walked across the moors to the Blow Hole.

This was Aunt Bethia's twenty-fourth visit to Cornwall and every year she wished to do the same things, and go to the same places. We had taken her to see Tol Pedn and the Blow Hole when she first came and she had never missed a visit there since, even if she had to go by herself. Because sometimes the second fortnight in July had come at a time when a new baby was so new that I could not go about with her. I doubt whether I shall be able to walk from Roskestral to the Blow Hole when I am seventy, but Aunt Bethia seems to get hardier as the years pass by and she tramped ahead of us with Nancy, helping herself with a stout stick, wearing strong low-heeled shoes, and sniffing the keen air with enjoyment. The air in Porthlew was not air at all, she said, but vapour, and if she stayed in it too long she felt smothered; but out here on the rolling moors with no trees in sight and the Atlantic sending you its breezes, with the heather in flower and the sun shining with the larks singing in the sky, and the good short grass underfoot, she could almost make believe that she was in Yorkshire. When we came to the narrow neck of land that has the Blow Hole on one side and the steep granite cliffs of Tol Pedn on the other she would not accept a hand although the descent to it was slippery. She scrambled down with the help of her stick, and when she got to the Blow Hole lay down flat on her stomach beside Ambrose and Sally and stared over the edge into its perilous depths.

It is a pity that this cannot be a murder story because here, if anywhere, a murder could easily and effectively be staged. How easy it would have been, for instance, for two of us to have seized Aunt Bethia's ankles and shoved her firmly and relentlessly over the edge. The sea would have swallowed her and we should have said she had fallen in by accident. Nothing could have been done to save her, for even if any one was brave and skilful enough to shin down the cliffs, the battling seas would have dashed the poor dear to pieces before any hero could rescue her. These thoughts made me so

uncomfortable that I went gingerly towards the Blow Hole myself and seized Sally suddenly by the legs to pull her away from it. I suppose I did startle her but she need not have made such a to-do, and Aunt Bethia need not have more or less called me a fool before five of my children.

“We might, any of us, have slipped over the edge,” she said. I did not like to tell her that it was the idea of her slipping over the edge with our assistance that had caused me to pull away Sally. She has often said that my mind works in a peculiar way, but I believe myself that I am just like other people. One thought leads to another and what you say or do has all you know and all you are behind it. I can’t kill a snail without a pang, but I read detective stories because I find them soothing; so I live in two worlds, my own in which people have difficult divided natures and that other where every one is either black or white. Aunt Bethia always says that murderers are just like other people and that she once knew one herself, and that he was unusually clever with chickens. Nicholas says that long ago she had an under-gardener who went out of his mind and shot his wife and that she would rather not talk about it as she liked the poor young man. But sometimes she does talk about it with gusto, and I should say without understanding. It takes some one with greater depths than Aunt Bethia to explore the hell of insanity and crime; and most of us have the sense to know that life is a matter of varying moods and contacts. Even those who are afflicted or are evil are not always in a state of violent dementia or always killing their neighbours; but if a man gets you with a bullet or a knife it is not much consolation to know that in his normal moods he is clever with chickens. Thoughts of this kind wandered about one bit of my mind, while the other bits attended to Aunt Bethia and our lunch, which we had packed in brown paper carriers that could be thrown down the Blow Hole when we had finished. Ambrose being the man of the party had carried the tea basket and had grumbled about its weight. I had wanted to leave it in the car and have tea somewhere near Land’s End, but Aunt Bethia said that she would rather not be hurried away from Tol Pedn, as she had brought her sketch book. The idea of the splendours of Tol Pedn finding any shadow of themselves in Aunt Bethia’s twopenny-halfpenny sketch book was absurd, but as she took herself seriously we had to humour her. This was easy because when we had all eaten twice as much as we ever eat at home, we felt lazy and sleepy. Any games the rest of us started soon languished. Ambrose and Sally were still nibbling sticks of chocolate but without zest. The grass in front of us was strewn with broken food thrown there for the gulls, who circled above us and lighted suspiciously on rocks out of reach, but did not trust us yet. The sea sparkled in the sunlight, and boomed

drowsily in our ears, there were no clouds in the sky, there was hardly a breeze and the sun was pleasantly hot. I dozed and waked and dozed and waked again. Nancy began one of her hospital stories and then fell asleep herself. The children started a friendly quarrel but had no energy to finish it. From where I lay, when I half opened my eyes I could see the brown sails of a fishing boat hardly stirring in its course. Celia and Martha had brought books and were using them for pillows, and Aunt Bethia sitting bolt upright measured the mighty lines of the cliffs with her brush, clicked her teeth with determination, and said that she had promised the rector to show him what the coast line was like in Cornwall. It took her a long while and she owned later in the day that when she had finished she fell asleep too; not, she added, because she was replete, but because after the intense concentration required for one of her sketches, she always relaxed for half an hour.

At any rate it was nearly four o'clock when some of us began to sit up and say we were thirsty, and it was then that Celia and I looked into Weaver's tightly packed tea-basket and hoped that she had forgotten nothing.

"Weaver was born a fool and will die one," said Aunt Bethia. "So I gave her a list and told her to mark off every item as she put it into the basket."

By that time Celia and I had taken out some of the things in the basket and could see what remained.

"Aunt Bethia," I said shakily.

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

"Did you put water on your list?"

"Water! Of course not. Even a fool like Weaver would know you can't make tea without water."

"There is none here."

For a moment Aunt Bethia seemed to be taken aback, but not for long.

"There should be a stream," she said, and we all felt as we were apt to feel during Aunt Bethia's fortnight, that Cornwall as compared with Yorkshire didn't come up to the mark.

"In Yorkshire, when you have a picnic you get water from a stream," she went on. "It is apt to be a little peaty but none of us mind that. When the water boils you put in your kitten."

"Your kitten, Aunt Bethia?"

“We put our tea in a long muslin bag and when you fish it out of the kettle it resembles a drowned kitten. Hence the name. You always were slow in the uptake, Elizabeth. I can see the kitten from here. Ambrose, you must walk back to the coastguard’s cottage and bring up a pailful of water.”

“It will take me a long time,” said Ambrose.

“Not if you run there.”

“Why can’t we all walk to the cottage and have tea somewhere near it,” said Celia.

That seemed to solve the problem so sensibly that I began to pack the tea-basket again. Ambrose shouldered it. Aunt Bethia put together her sketching materials, Martha and Sally threw our paper bags into the Blow Hole, Nancy sat up and said she had not slept a wink and Celia stared at two figures appearing on the sky-line in front of us. One was a very tall man and one was a slim short one and both of them began to run down the slippery grass at a breakneck pace.

CHAPTER VI

The older and heavier man did not run as quickly as his slim friend but he kept his balance. The other as far as we could see tripped over a stone. At any rate he fell headlong and with violence on his left shoulder and instead of picking himself up he gave a cry of pain. The other man reached him and tried to help him. We, who were all on our feet now, walked towards them and as we did so we saw that the little man had raised himself to a sitting position, and that he was shielding his left arm as if he did not wish his friend to touch it. Aunt Bethia, who always took command of any company she adorned, went a little ahead of us and spoke to them first.

“Your friend has hurt himself,” she said to the older man.

“I’m afraid he has.”

“Can we do anything?”

“You can go away,” said the little one, and in an undertone that I heard distinctly, he said to his friend, “Send them away. I don’t want six females staring at me.”

“Poor boy! He’s wandering,” said Aunt Bethia.

“Nonsense,” said Nancy, who had inherited her great-aunt’s temperament and was considered by the family in general to be much too bossy. “Of course he doesn’t want a crowd staring at him. All of you go on, and don’t wait for me. I may be some time.”

She spoke to us over her shoulder as she hurried past her aunt towards the two young men. For the moment we came to a standstill, but we were near enough to see what Nancy was doing and even to hear what was said. None of us felt inclined to go on. We were too much interested.

“Nancy always takes too much on herself,” said Aunt Bethia.

“We must get his coat off,” some of us heard Nancy say, “and his shirt, too.”

“Elizabeth!” said Aunt Bethia, glaring at me, “are you going to allow this?”

“Allow what, Aunt Bethia. Nancy knows what she is about.”

“I’m not going to let you touch me,” growled the young man. “I’ve broken my arm and what I want is a doctor.”

“I’m a doctor,” said Nancy.

“You! Nonsense!”

“That’s luck for us,” said his friend. “Come, Andy.”

“Come! I can’t come anywhere with my arm in this state. You must get an ambulance, Luke, and they’ll take me to Porthlew. I’m not going to trust a broken arm to a woman.”

“He’s very fractious,” said Aunt Bethia in her penetrating voice. “I should leave him alone if I were you, Nancy.”

“Go away,” said the sufferer, and he flapped his uninjured arm at us as if we were poultry. None of us felt annoyed, for we could see that he was in great pain and we only stayed there for a moment because we had been taken by surprise and wanted to help if we could. Celia was the first to move. She looked at Martha, beckoned to the children and walked on. I was going to follow when Aunt Bethia’s voice recalled me.

“Elizabeth! You and I stay here. Nancy may want us. Besides— —” She did not finish what she was about to say but I knew what was in her mind. If the young man had to be undressed we two old women were the people to do it; and not a girl of Nancy’s age. Aunt Bethia had a powerful character in some ways but not much imagination; and she could not picture to herself what Nancy had seen and done as a matter of course during her training.

“I shan’t want you,” said Nancy. “But I shall want some bandages and safety pins. Run after them and get the towels.”

She was kneeling down beside the young man now, and gingerly touching his arm. Nancy has beautiful hands, a surgeon’s hands, sensitive and carefully kept. I had never seen her at her work before, except once when Sally cut her thumb badly and her sister washed it and bound it up. I had noticed then how quiet and capable she was and I saw it now again. But she could not find out what the young man had done to his arm without giving him pain and he seemed to think that this was because she was a woman.

“Get a man,” he shouted. “Get a man, I say. I can’t stand this.”

“You’re behaving like a child,” said Aunt Bethia. “Pull yourself together, my lad. Where do you come from?”

“From Leeds,” he groaned.

“From Leeds! Do you mean to say you’re a Yorkshireman?”

“I am that.”

“Then I’m ashamed of ye,” said Aunt Bethia, and she cast the towels she had fetched on the grass beside him and addressed his friend.

“If you want us to go away, we’ll go,” she said. “But my niece knows what she is doing.”

“I am sure she does,” said the other man, who looked worried both by what had happened to his friend and by the way he took it. The other man had a face that attracted me from the beginning. It had character and strength.

“What’s wrong with his arm?” he said now to Nancy. “Has he broken it?”

“I don’t think so,” said Nancy.

“Damned fool,” muttered the little man under his breath. “Of course I’ve broken it.”

“Sit up,” said Nancy sharply, “I want to get your coat off.”

His friend and Nancy between them now helped Andy to sit up and wriggled his sound arm and then the injured one out of his coat sleeves. Aunt Bethia no longer glared at me but watched what went on, and producing a little bottle of smelling salts held it anxiously under the young man’s nose.

“Take it away,” he said. “I hate it.”

“Now his shirt,” said Nancy. “We must tear it down the front.”

“Can’t you get it over his head,” said Aunt Bethia. “It seems a pity to tear a good shirt.”

Nancy took out a pocket knife, unbuttoned the shirt, made a cut in it at the end of the flap and pulling it out of the young man’s trousers tore it as far as the hem. That she cut. Aunt Bethia groaned and I didn’t know which was paining her most; the destruction of a good shirt or the sight of her great-niece so intimately occupied with a young man’s toilet.

“It might quite well have been taken off over his head,” she whispered to me.

“Nancy knows what she is about,” I whispered back.

“What’s the matter?” said the older man, who was watching Nancy get her patient out of the shirt, and then look carefully at his shoulder and arm.

“Dislocated shoulder,” said Nancy briefly. “I’ll try to reduce it.”

She told me to put the young man’s coat under his head and got him to lie down again. I thought he was going to faint and I wished I had some brandy for him, but he was still game enough to snap at Nancy.

“What’s the good of that?” he said. “If my shoulder is out put it in again. No, not you. You wouldn’t have the guts. Luke, you do it. I’ll tell you how. Take off your shoe.”

“Don’t do anything of the kind,” flared Nancy, who had a temper and was losing it fast. “I know how to get this shoulder back and I’m going to get it back in the proper way.”

“Is it my shoulder or yours?” muttered Andy, and though he was so ungracious, I felt sorry for him because any one could see that he was in pain. Besides it was his shoulder, and he knew nothing about Nancy, and as Luke was behind him he could not see that the matter was being settled for him by the older man’s glances of apology and consent.

“But why does he want his friend to take off his shoes?” murmured Aunt Bethia. “I’m sure he’s delirious.”

I was watching Nancy. She was manipulating the injured arm now very gently and skilfully and I seemed to have there before my eyes the result of her long, expensive training. The young man bore the pain of it with courage, but I began to wonder how he would have the strength to walk across the cliffs and up the steep lane to Roskestral where he would find our car and be able to go back to Porthlew in it. We did not know his surname yet or where he and his friend were staying, or whether they had a car at Roskestral themselves.

“That’s in position,” said Nancy. “I’ll have the towels now. What about pins?”

No one had any pins.

“Never mind,” said Nancy. “I’ll have your brooch, Aunt Bethia.”

“You will not,” said Aunt Bethia. “This brooch contains my grandfather’s hair, and what he would have thought of his great-granddaughter undressing a male stranger and setting his arm, I don’t care to think. Of course, it is very clever of her; but what is cleverness? Our part in life is to be good.”

Aunt Bethia's remarks were delivered in a quivering undertone, and meant for me only. But I am sure that they reached the others, for the two men looked amused and Nancy had the expression of one who hears the buzz of a fly but is too preoccupied to attend to it.

"Hairpins, mum," she said to me shortly. "Lucky you're not shingled."

I managed to let them have three hairpins and Nancy drove them through the towels. Then she got Andy's sound arm into his shirt and coat again and with the left sleeve hanging limp buttoned the coat across the young man's chest.

"Now we must get him to Roskestral," she said to the older man. "Have you a car there?"

"No, we were walking to Land's End by the coast road. We meant to sleep there."

"You can't do that now. You must get back to Porthlew. He ought to be X-rayed to-morrow."

"What for?" said Andy.

"And I want him to go to bed at once. He has had a shock."

"I've had several," said Andy. "But I feel much better now and I'm obliged to you. We must meet again before long. Shall I come to see you or will you come to see me?"

"I'm going with you now," said Nancy.

"Where to?" said Andy, taken aback.

"Elizabeth!" said Aunt Bethia in a furious aside to me. "If you don't interfere, I shall. A female Bob Sawyer and in my family. Nancy, these gentlemen can take care of themselves now and would probably prefer to do so."

"What's your name?" said Nancy to the little man.

"Andrew King, and this is my cousin Luke Hardacre."

"And I'm Nancy Brooke and that is my great-aunt Miss Ramsbotham. I'm considered very like her both in appearance and disposition."

"Your sisters are expecting us to tea," said Aunt Bethia severely.

"Where?" said Andy eagerly.

“Come along,” said Nancy, and without further argument the five of us trailed over the cliffs towards the coastguard’s cottage, Nancy and Luke both keeping near Andy until we found the rest of our party and sat down to tea with them. When we had finished it was decided that the two men and Nancy should go back in the car with Aunt Bethia and me and that it should return as soon as possible for the others.

“We have spoilt your day and given you a great deal of trouble,” Luke said to me when we put them down at the Red Lion Hotel. “May we come and see you?”

“You can call in a man to-morrow,” said Nancy. “You won’t hurt my feelings.”

“Of course he will want a second opinion,” said Aunt Bethia as we drove away. “Nancy can hardly expect the case to be left in her hands at her age. She has had no experience. We shall all look rather silly if a real doctor says he must set the shoulder differently. Still, you did your best, Nancy, and I’m not blaming you. But why did you stick to him like a limpet till he got to the car? He was not in need of your support as he had his cousin with him.”

“He might have fainted. He looked like it,” said Nancy shortly.

“Bless me!” cried Aunt Bethia. “When I was a girl it was the young women who fainted and the men who knelt over them distracted.”

“I shouldn’t have been distracted,” said Nancy. “I should have put him flat on his back and loosened those bandages a bit. I think I’ll have a look at him after dinner and make sure they are not too tight. And perhaps a quarter of a grain of morphia.”

“Elizabeth!” said Aunt Bethia. “You are not going to allow Nancy to pursue those young men into their hotel, I hope. I never heard of such a thing. I read enough about the modern girl, but I thought there were limits. If Mr. King wants a doctor, he can send for one of his own sex.”

Nancy gazed at her dreamily.

“Morphia and strychnine mixed,” she murmured.

CHAPTER VII

When we got back to the house Aunt Bethia encountered Weaver outside her bedroom and attacked her at once.

“I told you to put everything we wanted for tea into the tea-basket.”

“So I did, m’m, to the best of my ability. I am aware that some of the cups were chipped, but . . .”

“Never mind the cups. What do you make tea with?”

“Why, I made the kitten with my own ’ands as you’re accustomed to have it.”

“Never mind the kitten. What do you make tea with?”

“Tea, m’m, and in a teapot. But in accordance with your wishes . . .”

By this time I could see that Weaver knew what she had forgotten but was not going to admit it, and I did not wonder that her air of sanctified annoyance infuriated Aunt Bethia.

“You forgot the water,” she hurled at her.

“Not at all, m’m. I took for granted you would get that at a stream or a cottage. There is water everywhere.”

“Not in Tol Pedn.”

“Really! How peculiar Cornwall is. Shall I get you a cup of tea, m’m? You always miss your tea if you don’t have it.”

“We did have it: but we had to walk a mile to get it.”

Weaver with an irritating smile on her dough-like face now turned to me.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, m’m, but I should like to have a key for my bedroom door.”

“Isn’t there one?”

“It doesn’t act, and perhaps you would speak to Miss Sally. I’m not accustomed to find a young lady in my room making an apple-pie bed and dancing about like an African savage.”

“But Miss Sally hasn’t come back. There has been an accident.”

“Not one of Miss Sally’s legs, m’m?”

“Certainly not,” I said, for though Sally’s legs do look as if you could snap them with your finger and thumb and though we all tease her about them, we resent outside comment when it is derisive.

“Miss Sally was in my room last night, m’m, with Melinda, making me an apple-pie bed and throwing water about.”

“Throwing water about!”

“Yes, m’m. When they had finished with the bed they began throwing water at each other and shrieking with laughter. Some of the water went on my bed and when I remade it I had to take one of the sheets downstairs to dry.”

Here Aunt Bethia intervened and disappeared with Weaver into her bedroom. Alberta and Melinda, their arms round each other’s necks, came dancing upstairs to tell me all their good deeds of the day, which was their unorthodox but engaging custom. Jane and Hester wanted to know more about the accident and presently Nicholas arrived beaming with pride over Nancy’s skill and cleverness. But dear Nicholas always beams even when things go wrong. I told him about the apple-pie bed, for instance, and the key that did not act and how naughty Sally had been and how tiresome Weaver was, but all he did was to fiddle with the key and show me that it acted if you put it in the lock properly. At dinner he led the talk over and over again to dislocated shoulders and said that he had never been interested in them before but that he wished he had been there to watch Nancy manipulate this one. In fact, he was so innocently the proud father that he irritated Aunt Bethia.

“Considering what Nancy’s training has cost and the years she has wasted on it, I should be surprised if she could not deal with a mere shoulder,” she said.

“But why wasted?” said Nicholas.

“I have my ideas,” said Aunt Bethia: and when she and I sat by ourselves after dinner, I found out what they were. She had made up her mind that Nancy would marry one of the young men we had met at Tol Pedn and that therefore the money spent on her medical training had been thrown away.

“Perhaps not altogether,” she conceded. “She made herself useful and if she plays her cards cleverly now . . .”

“I don’t want any child of mine to do any such thing,” I said heatedly.

“I know you don’t, Elizabeth. You give your girls no assistance. I’ve watched Mrs. Wotherspoon and I’ve seen her manoeuvre a young man into a match before he knew what he was doing.”

“What an odious woman she must be.”

“On the contrary. No more odious than a chess player handling his pawns. Her daughters rise up and call her blessed. Five of them and three happily married already.”

Aunt Bethia was knitting a stocking and as she talked I watched the glint of the four needles in her capable hands. She was wearing her old black velvet and a diamond pendant and she sat back in her easy-chair contented with herself and kindly ready to advise her less efficient fellow-creatures; but somehow her advice though plentiful and given gratis did not irritate me as Mrs. Cleveland’s did. Aunt Bethia had our welfare at heart and was attached to us all: but if she had ever used such a word she would have said we were wanting in pep.

“I agree that the worst blunder a girl can make is to throw herself at a man’s head,” she continued. “I hope Nancy will be careful. Has she gone round to the hotel?”

“She has gone as a doctor,” I said indignantly.

Aunt Bethia made no answer to that and went on knitting.

“Besides,” I said, “you seem to approve of Mrs. Wotherspoon throwing herself at men’s heads.”

“It is all a question of tact and cleverness. Mrs. Wotherspoon never does anything in the wrong way. If you put her down suddenly in a new planet she would know exactly how to deal with her surroundings.”

How I hated Mrs. Wotherspoon, especially as Melinda came into the room at the moment without her cap and with a letter in her hand for Aunt Bethia. In her hand—not on a salver—and looking too as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

“Oh, Mrs. Brooke, could I pop out just for five minutes,” she began; and still thinking bitterly of Mrs. Wotherspoon, I led the little wretch outside and there reprimanded her.

“You know very well, Melinda, that you ought to wear a cap and bring in letters on a salver and address me as m’m.” I said, but unfortunately Alberta appeared at the top of the kitchen stairs just then and when those two confronted each other they invariably began to giggle, not in derision but

from sheer *joie de vivre* as far as I could understand. And of course Alberta wanted to pop out for five minutes and listen to the band on the promenade.

“I hate a cap,” said Melinda rebelliously. “It makes my head ache.”

“And I look hidjeous in one,” said Alberta. “Why should we wear caps when Weaver doesn’t?”

“These things are questions of custom,” I began. “Miss Weaver is Miss Ramsbotham’s maid.”

“But her father only milks one cow,” said Melinda, and then she began to wheedle.

“We can pop out, can’t we, Mrs. Brooke? You’re such a dear and we’ve done all our work.”

So they had. From half-past six this morning till nine at night those two children had not had an idle moment and had done the cooking and the cleaning for thirteen people, ten upstairs and three in the kitchen. And now on this balmy summer night they wanted an hour by the sea, with the band playing and the moon shining on the fishing boats in Penlew Harbour. Doubtless they would meet acquaintances there, thrilling male acquaintances to whom the sea, the moon and the fishing boats would play second fiddle. But what a happy hour they would have. I could never find it in my heart to refuse them and when I went back to the drawing-room where my five grown-up daughters were putting out two bridge tables, I felt rather sorry for my daughters.

“It is just as easy to train servants properly as to let them run wild,” Aunt Bethia was saying in her lay-down-the-law voice. “If I had Melinda for a month you wouldn’t know her at the end of it.”

None of us could tell her she never would have Melinda for a month or a week or even a day, because Melinda would refuse to go to her.

“Alberta’s father milks thirty cows,” squeaked Sally, who ought to have been in bed and was, in fact, bidding every one a lingering good-night.

“I’m tired of hearing about Alberta’s father’s cows,” said Aunt Bethia, getting up. “I fail to see that cows are an excuse for flightiness and insubordination. *Good-night*, Sally. I’ve kissed you once already. Nicholas, you and I will play with Elizabeth and Nancy, and don’t over-call your hand.”

We usually finished the evening with a rubber of bridge when Aunt Bethia was there; and she liked to arrange her own table. She always chose

Nicholas and scolded him all the time for over-calling his hand. She was a sound player herself and pleasant either as a partner or an opponent, never grousing about her luck and taking the rough with the smooth in a sporting way. Nancy was the best player of the younger ones. She had just come in and while Nicholas was dealing he asked her how she had found her patient.

“He isn’t my patient,” she said laughing. “When I got there I found my dear Doctor Little attending to him.”

“Was it at all awkward?” I asked.

“If it was, Nancy brought it on herself,” said Aunt Bethia. “She should have left well alone.”

“It was Doctor Little who let well alone,” cried Nancy. “He said I had done it splendidly.”

“Did he really?” cried Nicholas, thrilled to his marrow, for Doctor Little was considered the best surgeon in Porthlew.

“They are coming to see us to-morrow,” continued Nancy. “At least, Mr. Hardacre will come. We told Mr. King to keep quiet for a day or two. The poor little thing has had a shock. He must be X-rayed though.”

“Are you going to treat him in consultation with Doctor Little then?” asked Aunt Bethia.

“I’m not going to treat him at all,” said Nancy. “He is out of my hands.”

CHAPTER VIII

Although none of the girls had married yet, we were well used to young men in and out of the house paying them attention. I sometimes thought that they found it difficult to choose amongst so many sisters and that if I could have sent Jane and Hester away for a year Martha would have had a better chance. Nancy was in London most of the year and Celia had never had an eye for any one except Bill Cleveland. This summer she moved amongst us like a cloistered creature, consecrated to an inward life in which we could not share. She was inaccessible and quiet. Jane and Hester were both being courted by boys of about their own age, who eventually married other people, but who helped for the moment to keep us lively: and the two Yorkshiremen always found themselves with Nancy and Martha. They seemed to be in no hurry to leave Porthlew. They had given up their original plans because Andy's shoulder needed treatment, so they stayed on at their expensive hotel and were a great deal at our house.

I wish my girls to marry, but Aunt Bethia is right when she says I give them no assistance. At least, I never try to influence them or to treat their admirers as if they were flies and I a fly-paper. I would rather they never married at all than that they married, pushed into it by interfering elders. Aunt Bethia says this is silly and talks about Mrs. Wotherspoon, but we must all act according to our lights and I know my children too well to wish to arrange a lifelong future for them. They must do that for themselves, guided by their own temperaments and their own wishes and opportunities. Aunt Bethia wants me to tell her what happens in foreign countries when the young marry where they are told and according to the state of their finances, but as I know nothing of foreign countries, I can give her no information.

“But these marriages by arrangement are most successful,” she argues.

“Are they?”

“Of course they are. People get used to each other.”

“I was in love with Nicholas. I've been married to him twenty-five years, and I'm in love with him still.”

“You're so sentimental and romantic, Elizabeth. In these days . . .”

“I'm not sentimental,” I flared, “Nonsense, Aunt Bethia. Affection is as much a part of human life as eating and drinking. Your happiness depends

on it. How could you be happy if you had to be morning, noon, and night with some one who bored or disgusted you or who was bad-tempered or who was a fool? I've no patience with people who talk as if our intimate relations with each other were of less importance than our larders and our pockets. Nicholas and I have had most of the things that matter although we've been short of money."

"If you had had one child instead of seven you would not have been so short of money," said Aunt Bethia incontrovertibly.

"I wouldn't do without one of them."

"I like them all very well myself," said Aunt Bethia. "But I wish some of them would get married. The house is too full. When a young man comes into it and sees a whole garden of girls his eyes dazzle and he goes away again. Mrs. Wotherspoon was so clever in that respect. When she was stalking a son-in-law she saw to it that he was thrown together with his future wife and not with her sisters."

"I don't stalk. I've told you so."

"But you should, my dear. Now last night I noticed that when Mr. Hardacre was looking at the stars with Nancy, you and Martha went outside to look at the stars too. You ought both to have known better."

I was not so sure of that as Aunt Bethia, but I did not say so. I saw or felt an atmosphere of tension between Nancy and Martha that the old lady missed. The two sisters were jealous of each other: and I had never seen that happen in our house before. It produced the most uncomfortable situations and I wished that Luke Hardacre would either go away or declare himself: but he did not seem in any hurry to do either. Aunt Bethia said that his intentions were as plain as the nose on her face. He was courting Nancy and all the money spent on her medical education would be thrown away. She hoped it would be a lesson to me not to waste more money on Sally, who had told her yesterday that she wanted to be an explorer and go to Central Africa. She said she could see me, a few years later, giving Sally an outfit and saying that girls as well as men must develop their own characters and shape their own lives.

I listened absently and later in the evening watched the young people, asking myself whether Aunt Bethia saw coming events more clearly than I did. Mr. Hardacre and Nancy were bending over a map of Cornwall, arranging an expedition for next day. Martha sat a little apart and was holding some wool for Aunt Bethia. But she sat so that she could see the others and I knew that her calm exterior covered her inward unrest. Her eyes

went towards the table over and over again and the service she was rendering Aunt Bethia cost her something. I was playing bridge with Nicholas, Andy King and Celia: the children were in bed and Jane and Hester were at Rummy with some hilarious young people in the dining-room. Lookers-on certainly see some of the scene when they know the players as well as I know my children. But I did not know Luke Hardacre at that time and much as I liked him I could not read what was in his mind. He was not a man who wore his heart on his sleeve and I could not see that his manner was warmer to one girl than to the other. I hoped his eyes were not open to the warmth and uneasiness of their regard for him.

I have not said much about Martha yet. She is not as beautiful as Celia or as brilliant as Nancy but when there is anything that has to be done it is usually Martha who does it, quietly and as a matter of course. She finds Aunt Bethia's spectacles for her, takes care of the *Times* for her father, and helps Ambrose and Sally with their home work. I know that a recital of unobtrusive good deeds gives most of us a bias against the person performing them: but in a house like ours, with so many people rubbing against each other, you know very well which ones you turn to for help in a hurry and which have no time for your affairs because their own absorb them. Besides, Martha had wishes and dreams of her own as much as her sisters. I was sorry to see it in the case of Luke Hardacre, for as the days went on it became plainer and plainer that he was being swallowed by Nancy. The expression is Aunt Bethia's and she seemed to think that her favourite niece was about to make a desirable match unassisted by her elders and only half-heartedly encouraged by the young man. It is difficult to say why she was so sure about Nancy. I often had my doubts. Sometimes Mr. Hardacre would leave Nancy and pay his attentions to Martha, as, for instance, on that day when we all went out to Menwinion rocks and he clambered down to the sea hand in hand with Martha and stayed with her for some time peering into a rock pool. Poor Nancy sat high above them with the rest of us and looked as black as thunder. She snapped at George Vincent who had come with us, and intimated that he didn't know how to look after his children, which was true. But if we all went about speaking the truth to each other, the world would be a worse place than it is now and I told her so when George went away in a huff.

"Of course I don't agree with you, Elizabeth," said Aunt Bethia. "In my opinion, people should invariably tell the truth."

"In my opinion they should often hold their tongues," I said, for I felt rather snappy too, because three of my girls had heart trouble and Sally had

stubbed her toe. Ambrose had wanted a stick fire, but was lazy about looking for sticks, Andy King couldn't get a seat that suited him and floundered about so much that I thought he would fall again and Hester stayed so long in the sea with Jane, that they arrived with their teeth chattering and blue with cold. However, when Martha came back with Mr. Hardacre, the atmosphere changed suddenly for while Martha attended to Sally's toe, Nancy strolled along the cliff and gathered heather. Mr. Hardacre went with her, sat next to her at tea, took her and George Vincent home in his car, and after dinner played bridge at the same table. I confess that I felt puzzled and I annoyed Aunt Bethia by saying that he probably had no intentions at all and did not wish to marry either of my daughters.

"He is going to marry Nancy. I know it," she said in her loud dictatorial voice and unfortunately she did not notice that Martha had just come into the room with some fresh flowers.

"He can't marry both of them," Aunt Bethia blundered on. "Why are you making faces at me, Elizabeth? You seem to think me indelicate because I take an interest in your young people, who are my young people too. Why shouldn't we look on at their love affairs and discuss their marriages? I shall give Nancy a hundred pounds for her trousseau and I wish that Nicholas had the money he has thrown away on her. She will make a very good wife and so will Martha when her time comes. I think she might as well marry George Vincent. She would take care of those poor neglected children."

"Thank you, Aunt Bethia," said Martha and she picked up the old lady's spectacles that had fallen on the floor.

"Bless us, child, how you startled me," cried Aunt Bethia. "I didn't hear you come into the room."

Martha, I could see, was both distressed and indignant; and for a day or two she seemed to me to shrink into herself more than usual and to avoid Mr. Hardacre. I said nothing to either girl. It has never been my habit to talk to them about the young men coming to the house. In fact Nicholas and I do not talk much of our friends and neighbours at any time and we have brought up our children not to do it either. Of course, we all have our likes and dislikes. But Aunt Bethia's way of speculating openly on a love affair and prophesying a marriage seems to us as gross as the dialogue in a Restoration Drama would seem to her if she read one. If you are the mother of girls, you have thoughts and hopes about them and sorrows too. But you mostly keep them to yourself.

I liked Mr. Hardacre so much that I wished Aunt Bethia might be a true prophet, but I did not think she was going to help things on by asking Andy King questions about his friend's position and prospects. She actually did this one day in my hearing, and a child could have seen what she was driving at.

"These are hard times," said Andy. "We just rub along."

"What do you mean by rubbing along," said Aunt Bethia. "I never know when you are serious and when you are pulling my leg. How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Then why don't you get married?"

"I'm thinking of it."

Aunt Bethia gave him one of her piercing glances and the absurd boy pretended to turn shy and blush. He was always having friendly passages with the old lady and he seemed to like her better than any one else in the house except Sally. She had forgiven him for losing his temper at Tol Pedn and for his ungracious behaviour to Nancy, saying that she would feel just as he had done if a woman came meddling with her in an accident. Some of us reminded her that he would have been worse off if Nancy had not been there and she admitted that handsomely, but argued that it would disconcert any man to see a girl of Nancy's age in a short skirt and silk stockings take upon herself as Nancy did.

"I've had a proposal," said Andy.

"You've had a proposal! You mean you've made one. I'm glad to hear it. A young man of your age ought to marry. If I were the government I should tax bachelors eight per cent. of their earnings. That'd teach them."

"I said I had had a proposal," repeated Andy firmly. "I didn't say I was going to be married. Unfortunately that is impossible at present."

"Why is it impossible, and what are you talking about. Do you mean to say that the girls propose to the men nowadays?"

"They do," moaned Andy, hiding his head in a cushion.

"Then I hope you sent her packing. No one can have it both ways, not even a modern girl. If she proposes she can be refused. Nothing else would be fair."

"I didn't refuse."

“You didn’t! Are you engaged then?”

“More or less.”

“Bless us!” said Aunt Bethia, startled into her favourite expletive. “What’s the boy mean! Are you going to be married?”

“Not for a long time. In seven or eight years perhaps. But we shall correspond.”

“At any rate it can be no one in the house,” said Aunt Bethia. “I am glad of that.”

“But I thought you liked me,” cried Andy in well-simulated dismay. “I hoped for a welcome from the whole family.”

“Elizabeth,” exclaimed Aunt Bethia. “You hear what he says.”

“But I’m not paying much attention,” I answered, for I was looking at the *Times*.

“One of your daughters . . . Elizabeth, will you listen, please. Mr. King says that he has received a proposal of marriage from one of your daughters and that he is more or less engaged.”

At that moment the door was flung violently open and Sally dashed into the room.

“Has he told you?” she cried. “He said he would. We’re going to be married when I’m eighteen. It’s six years less than Jacob waited for Rachel, so that’s all right. He says he hasn’t got much money yet, Aunt Bethia, but he’s very nice. And we’re going to live in a caravan. I wish we could start at once. Melinda says he ought by rights to have married Nancy, but he likes me better so we fixed it up yesterday on the rocks. Isn’t it amusing?”

It wasn’t at all amusing to me and I was so angry with Melinda that I nearly parted with her. I told her that if ever she spoke of marriage to Sally again out of the house she would go that very hour.

“I wasn’t meaning any harm,” she said. “It was Miss Sally’s idea when I gave her a ring out of a cracker, and when all’s said and done we’re not in ’eaven yet, Mrs. Brooke. If girls don’t think about marriage, what are they to think about?”

“Their work,” I said sternly, but Alberta was there too and their eyes met.

CHAPTER IX

Aunt Bethia's visit was coming to an end, the weather was bad and I was busier than usual because my family expected me to make raspberry jam whatever happened and you have to buy raspberries in large quantities when you can get them. They won't put off their ripening for you however preoccupied and anxious you are. So one day when the others said they would defy the weather and go to the Lizard, I gave them all my blessing and stayed at home. I could not trust the jam to Alberta and I rather like a quiet day in the house sometimes. Weaver had gone with her mistress, because she had expressed a wish to see the Lizard, Melinda was turning out the drawing-room and I started weighing raspberries and sugar in the kitchen with Alberta to help me. At first I had to put my mind on what I was doing, but when it came to sitting beside the fire and stirring the fruit so that it should not burn, I was able to think of other things and to reflect with some satisfaction that Aunt Bethia would leave us the day after to-morrow. As a family we very much dislike being watched and criticised. Aunt Bethia meant well, but she was more interested in our affairs than we wished her to be and she was too much inclined to interfere with them. There had been an example of this the day before when she had invited us all to have lunch with her at the Land's End Hotel, and after lunch had contrived to keep Martha with her and send Nancy to stand on John Wesley's rock with Luke Hardacre. Aunt Bethia made no secret of her wishes and we all objected to her methods which were childish. Nancy was as much annoyed as any one although she was her aunt's favourite. But she went off with Luke Hardacre and no one followed them. They were away together nearly an hour and when they came back Luke sat down near Martha and me and talked about Wesleyanism. He is a well-read man and interested in the big movements of the world, in politics, history and economics. He has better brains than most people and because of his brains and his good judgment he makes a great deal of money. To see Aunt Bethia try to place him where she wanted him matrimonially and to see Nancy set her cap at him, half distressed and half amused me. He was not showing his hand yet, for he was equally courteous and pleasant to us all, but I felt sure that he would play it himself and not allow any one to interfere with him.

While I was stirring my jam I was trying to make up my mind what my own wishes were and it seemed to me that whatever happened was bound to bring trouble. If Luke married neither of my girls they would both be

disappointed and if he chose one of them her sister would suffer. I could not even be sure which of them would take it more heavily than the other. Nancy has a tempestuous nature and often gets what she wants by storm: Martha is quiet, but she never forgets. I believe that she has a deeper nature than any of the others and I think that on that account she will probably be unhappy. I wished I could have sent her out of the way for a time, but it was of no use to ask Aunt Bethia to take her to Yorkshire. Martha would not have wished to go. While these thoughts were pouring through my mind all the great concerns of the world were occupying greater minds: and it seems absurd to have let two girls and a love affair interest me more than any of the headlines in the daily papers. But most of us are the creatures of our affections and of our immediate surroundings and what happened to Nancy and Martha mattered to me more that day than what happened anywhere else. It was very quiet in the kitchen because Alberta had gone into the drawing-room to give Melinda a helping hand; the raspberries had been galloping ten minutes and were nearly ready; the jam pots stood in rows on the table and I was wondering whether I could lift the heavy pan off the fire without help when Martha came into the kitchen and did it for me. She had no hat on. Otherwise her sudden appearance would have alarmed me. I should have thought there had been an accident.

“You didn’t go!” I said in surprise.

“No! I didn’t go.”

We said nothing more to each other because there was no need. Martha never had thought much of herself and she had never been a fighter. I suppose it seemed as likely to her as it did to Aunt Bethia that Nancy would be the one chosen by a man like Luke Hardacre. We began to fill the pots with the jam and when we had finished it sat down for a moment while Martha filled the preserving pan with water and tidied the table. Then she sat down too.

“I want to talk to you, mum,” she began. “I’ve been thinking.”

I could see that she had been crying a little too and I wondered what was coming.

“Counting Alberta and Melinda, there are nine females in this house all living on poor dad,” she went on.

“I often think of it,” I said. “But he never seems to mind.”

“It is time some of us were off his hands.”

“I suppose you want to leave home and have a career,” I suggested.

“A career is a big word for such as me. I think I ought to earn my own living.”

“How?”

“I should like to have something to do with children. I might be a Norland nurse perhaps.”

“I know nothing about them,” I said feebly.

“One could find out,” said Martha, and that was the beginning and the end of the argument, for her voice died away on her words. She sprang to her feet at the sound of Luke Hardacre’s voice at the front door. I let her get ahead of me and by the time I reached the hall she had disappeared and Luke had gone into the garden. I found him there smoking a pipe.

“I’ve been making jam,” I said. I was not going to express surprise at his appearance for I sensed a crisis and did not wish to meddle. I rather badly wanted to know how he had got away from the others and whether he and Martha were going to be in to lunch, because there was no lunch for them. But I thought it better to show no curiosity so I sat down beside him, lit a cigarette and stared at the sea.

“Hot work on a day like this,” he said: and then we both stared at the sea, but not for long because Martha appeared, wearing a hat and carrying a tweed coat. Her eyes had lights in them now, but they were a little puzzled and troubled too.

“You’ll never get to the Lizard in time for lunch,” I said, for it was past twelve already. “Would you like to take sandwiches?”

But Luke had put his pipe in his pocket and would not wait for sandwiches. He had a car at the door and the two young people departed in it without explaining anything to me.

It was six o’clock before the others came back and then I managed to get hold of Celia and ask her what had happened.

“None of us quite know,” she said. “Just as we were starting Martha sent word by Sally that she had a headache and was not coming with us, and when we got past Long Rock Andy overtook us by himself. I’m afraid . . .”

Celia did not finish. There was no need to. We were both troubled by that seesaw of events when whatever happens sends one up and the other down. We should either have to rejoice with one sister and grieve with the other, or have both of them affronted and distressed. Just before dinner I spoke to Nicholas about the state of affairs with the usual result. He seemed to think

that Luke Hardacre would be a desirable son-in-law but that if marriage was not his purpose everything would remain much as usual. As for the state of tension between the two sisters affected, he could not enter into it or believe in it.

“He can’t marry them both,” he said helpfully.

“But they are both in love with him, Nicholas.”

“Have they told you so?”

“Certainly not. But I know it.”

“Well, I don’t, and after all they are my children. You may be mistaken. Anyhow I shouldn’t worry. We can’t do anything.”

That was true, but I could not emulate my husband’s detached frame of mind. When we sat down to dinner, Martha had not come back and when Andy came in for bridge at nine o’clock he came by himself.

“They must have had a breakdown,” he said cheerfully.

Nancy had hardly spoken a word since she got home and I knew that she was miserable. Aunt Bethia was not miserable but she was annoyed and disappointed.

“My judgment is not often at fault,” she said to me stiffly, “but it seems to have been in this case. I made so sure that the young man was going to propose to Nancy that yesterday I told her what I wished to do about her trousseau and there was an unfortunate *contretemps*.”

“Was there?” I wondered anxiously what could have happened.

“Yes. We were on the rocks at Menwinion and Sally had pattered back to us and was closer than I knew. Sally ought to go to a strict school. You spoil her, Elizabeth. She heard what I said and asked me whether I would do the same for her when she married Andy King in eight years. I told her I should probably be dead in eight years, but she took no notice of that and when Andy got up to us, she told him what I had said both about Nancy and about herself. I could not stop her.”

“What did Nancy do?”

“Glowered at us all and walked away.”

I said nothing to Aunt Bethia but I thought the more. Probably her indiscretion had reached Luke Hardacre’s ears and alarmed him. Probably he did not mean to marry at all and would go back to Liverpool as arranged on

Saturday. We should get a polite letter from him thanking us for our hospitality and perhaps his good wishes at Christmas. On Saturday he would pass out of our lives, leaving scars behind.

“None of our girls will ever marry,” I said dismally.

“There are too many of them,” said Aunt Bethia.

“They must make up their minds to it. Martha has done so. She is going to be a Norland nurse.”

Aunt Bethia did not say Pish or Pooh. I have never met any one who did. She intimated her contempt inarticulately by a little half grunt and by increasing the pace of the knitting needles on which she fixed her disapproving eyes.

“Nancy can come and stay with me if she likes,” she said, after a time. “What she wants is bracing air.”

“Won’t Martha want it too?” I asked meekly.

But Aunt Bethia only glanced at me and did not extend her invitation. As we sat there Nicholas joined us and I saw in a moment that he had something to tell me of which I might or might not approve.

“Nancy is so tired that she has gone to bed,” he said. “She will see you and Aunt Bethia in the morning.”

We both looked up inquiringly.

“She is running up to London,” he explained. “I had enough for her fare in my pocket luckily, but I had to give her a cheque for her expenses.”

“I’m ashamed of her,” said Aunt Bethia hotly, “and as for you, Nicholas . . .”

“Well, what about me?”

“Any one can get over you and any one can get money out of you. At least your children can. I wonder you’re ever solvent. Such an unnecessary expense. I had just arranged with Elizabeth to take Nancy with me to Yorkshire on Saturday. No doubt she wants bracing after all this.”

“All what?” said Nicholas. “I don’t know what you mean. Nancy has a chance of a hospital appointment and is going up to see about it.”

“Why haven’t we heard of it before?”

“She has only just made up her mind. She showed me the letters. It isn’t a good appointment, but it’s a beginning.”

“Very odd,” said Aunt Bethia, and got up because it was time for bridge.

“What will you do if Martha doesn’t come back to-night?” she inquired.

“What would you advise?” said Nicholas.

“Martha will come back,” I said, and before we had finished the first round Luke and Martha came into the room.

“You’ve revoked, Elizabeth,” said Aunt Bethia a moment later: and I had. But I didn’t care. I threw down my hand, told Luke to finish the rubber for me and got out of the room with Martha, whose eyes had been delivering messages to me ever since she had come in. There was no need for me to go. I knew what had happened and I saw what lay before me.

“He is going to speak to dad to-night,” she whispered.

“Nancy is going to London to-morrow,” I said.

“He is not to blame. He never thought of Nancy.”

“But you were sure he did, only this morning.”

“And now she is unhappy. She will get over it, won’t she, mum? But not yet. Nancy takes things hard, and we’ve always been such friends. Must I tell her, or will you? You tell her before the children can. Go now and get it over.”

“But she is in bed,” I said, hesitating. However, I went and found Nancy in bed. The windows were open and the late lights of summer filled the room.

“You’re not asleep,” I said, for she had not moved or sat up when I went in.

“I’m not going to discuss it,” she said fiercely.

“Then you know!”

“Of course I know. Andy told me. Little beast.”

“Martha wanted me to tell you.”

“Well, you’ve done it. Good-night, mum.”

“I’m sorry, Nancy.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Tell Martha not to worry. There’s as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it. Anyhow, there’s plenty to do and I’m going to do some of it. Go and cry over Aunt Bethia, poor old dear. Does she know yet?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Break it to her gently. She wanted me up north. She said Martha could marry a Cornishman.”

CHAPTER X

Aunt Bethia was so busy standing over Weaver while she packed next day that I did not see much of her, but we had enough time together to have a word or two about Nancy. I thought it was plucky and sensible of her to clear out as she did. She could not rejoice with us, and she would not be a wet blanket. Some girls in her place would have hung round looking dismal and shedding quiet tears. Not so Nancy. She gathered up the fragments of her broken heart and went off fiercely determined to work hard and recover. "A true Yorkshire woman," said Aunt Bethia, who would never admit that I had any part in Nancy although I was her mother. I think she grudged Luke, who was a true Yorkshireman, to Martha, who did not like oatcake and had an easy musical voice without the suspicion of a burr in it. Aunt Bethia and Luke could both talk broad Yorkshire when they were telling stories against each other. I could not always understand them, and I hoped Martha would get on well amongst people so dour and so critical. It was to be a very short engagement, because Luke wanted to go to the Italian Lakes for his honeymoon and to get to them as early as possible in September. His business talks to Nicholas went off without a hitch. We had no money and he had a good deal and he did not seem to think that this mattered. He was not like any money-maker I had ever read of or ever met and the better I knew him the more I wondered how he came to be one. The quality of his brains and the furniture of his mind seemed to me to be too scholarly for use in markets: but if I hinted at such a thing he laughed. The generosity of his gifts to Martha and of the settlements he made on her took our breath away at first, because we were not used to the idea of our child as the wife of a rich man. I think Porthlew in general was amused and surprised. One woman said that she had expected dear Martha to marry a curate and be brave about making two ends meet. But most people were pleasant and friendly for Martha was not a girl who made enemies. She was too much like her father for that. Aunt Bethia sent her the hundred pounds she had meant for Nancy, but she did not come to the wedding. Nor did Nancy. She had taken a poorly paid appointment at a small Children's Hospital in one of the Eastern Counties and said that she liked the work but had no use for the matron. She did not go into details and we hoped she would settle down for a time and then get a better job. When the bustle and the business of the wedding were all over we all felt relieved but rather flat. For weeks the house had been littered with clothes and presents, all rational talk and

ordinary interests had been shelved, and George Vincent said that he had been obliged to engage a new nurse for his children without my assistance, because I had not had time to attend to him. Crowds of friends and acquaintances came to the wedding and I was so tired when it was over that I was glad to think there would not be another in a hurry.

Our silver-wedding in the spring had been no strain at all compared with this one, because there had not been many clothes to buy, there was no parting to tug at your heart when you had time to feel and no shabby old house to get ready for a large reception. We settled down to a quiet autumn and winter. At least Nicholas and I said we would, but where there are young people there are always disturbing elements. Hester began to bring a young man to the house whom none of us liked and Mr. Beale began to show marked attention to Celia.

Mr. Beale was not a Cornishman; nor did he come from the north. I never knew quite where he did come from; but he was well off and had bought a house and garden near Porthlew because he wished to grow daffodils. He was a small chubby man with a chatty tongue and a fidgety manner and he thought a good deal of himself. He told me that he had never married because until he was thirty he could not afford it, and since then he had watched the modern girl and decided that he could not do with her. He objected to everything about her, especially to the way she sprawled and exhibited her underclothing.

“I couldn’t stand a wife who did that,” he said, fixing his eyes on a recent bride who was wearing an attractive pair of pale green silk pants that matched her stockings and her dress. You certainly saw them very completely.

“None of your daughters sprawl,” continued Mr. Beale. “I admire their deportment exceedingly. I can’t think why Miss Brooke let a younger sister steal a march on her. They say one wedding makes many, so I suppose you are wondering which of your charming family will leave the nest next. Some men are afraid of several sisters-in-law but I see no reason to be in this case. Such well brought up girls are sure to marry. Every one speaks highly of them and says it is wonderful the way they have turned out considering how few advantages they have had. Home influence, I am sure. There is nothing like home influence. You have never allowed them to sprawl.”

“I’ve never thought about it,” I said mildly amused. “Perhaps our chairs are uncomfortable.”

“I am not as well acquainted with your chairs as I should like to be, I’ve so rarely been in your house, or you in mine. Are you interested in daffodils? I should like to show you my garden.”

“I saw it in the spring, when the daffs were in flower. I shall never forget it.”

“How charming of you to say so.”

“There was a wind like a knife. Nicholas and I sneezed all the way home.”

“That couldn’t happen now. Down by the sea where I have my flowers it is warm. Is Miss Brooke a gardener? She looks as if she might be. No. I don’t mean her hands. She has beautiful hands. It would be a pity to spoil them. What do you think of an absolute community of taste between husband and wife. I’m against it. A little sympathy, a little understanding on both sides by all means. But not twin souls as people say. Especially not in a garden. It would worry me if any one wanted to interfere with my plans and impose her own. If I ever marry I should like my wife to take an interest in the vegetables. At present I leave them to the gardener and I never get enough spinach. I’m addicted to spinach. It’s wholesome food, I believe. Not that I’ve any fads about food. Any one who married me would not be marrying a faddist. On the contrary. I have a delicate digestion, but if I am offered lobster I eat lobster, or even crab. As long as they are fresh they are wholesome, at least I think so. Is Miss Brooke interested in cooking? Now that’s what I call a useful hobby. Cooking! So many women have souls above it. Such a mistake. Your health depends on your food and your soul depends on your health. At least I think so. But perhaps I’m a materialist.”

By that time I didn’t care what he was as long as I got away from him and although he was a good match, I hoped Celia would have nothing to say to a man whose flow of talk was incessant, and self-centred. However, he showed great persistence and before long Nicholas, Celia and I had accepted an invitation to have lunch at his house on a Sunday and see his garden afterwards. He came for us in his car, and when we got there we found that he had not asked any one to meet us.

“I want you to have a look round, inside and out,” he said. “I’m thinking of building on. At least I may do so before long. When I bought the place I paid more attention to the garden than the house. Bachelors do not require much accommodation, but I saw there would be room to expand if occasion arose. A wing could be added without interfering with the garden. Are you

interested in lacquer, Miss Brooke? I have some fine pieces of lacquer that I picked up when I was in the East.”

As I watched Celia walk round the room with Mr. Beale, looking intelligently at his lacquer, I wondered what was in her mind. I could not believe that she would marry him. I could not picture her attached for life to the fussy elderly little man, who seemed to react to nothing except his own interests and his own self-importance. It was difficult to probe beneath his chatter and find the foundations of his nature and the qualities on which happy companionship depends. Was he kind? Was he generous? Was he good-tempered? I wondered what Nicholas thought of him.

We had a very good lunch. “Bachelor housekeeping,” said Mr. Beale with an air of apology and he told us what he paid his cook and how long she had been with him. He would be sorry to lose her, he said, because she understood his palate and the little infirmities of his digestion, but he feared she was one of those women who can tolerate a master more easily than a mistress, still if she found herself under a mistress she would have to make herself pleasant or go. He had considered the question this spring of redecorating the house, but he had decided not to do it in case he built on his new wing; and he felt sure now that he had decided wisely.

“The evenings are lonely,” he said turning to me. “I don’t know what to do with myself. I’m not much of a reader and you can’t play games by yourself. At least, I can’t. Some people play patience, but I’ve never taken to it. What do you do in the evenings, Mrs. Brooke?”

“We often play bridge,” I said.

“Do you really? Do you play bridge, Miss Brooke? I should never have guessed it. We must have some bridge. I’ll give a bridge party. Five tables, I think. How many of you could come? Let me see: how many are there of you? There seemed to be a good many at the wedding the other day, but are you all grown up? Try this port, Mr. Brooke. You’ll like it. Mrs. Brooke, some walnuts. I’ll show you my plans for my new wing before we begin on the garden. The garden will take us a long time. You’ll be interested in all I am doing. I found it quite neglected. The last people were badly off and let it go to pieces. A garden is like a beautiful woman. You can’t spend too much on it or give it too much attention.”

He fixed his eyes on Celia when he said this and raised his glass to his lips as if he drank to her. Even Nicholas who never sees anything that is happening to any of us began to look amused and interested. I wondered

how he liked the idea of Mr. Beale as a son-in-law and I thought that when we were by ourselves I would ask him.

“What a funny little thing he is,” said Celia to me as we sat together for a few minutes while the men finished, so I felt sure that she would never marry Mr. Beale and I hoped she would soon let him know it. But some people go through life with such a thick coat of self-complacency that unless you prod them you cannot convince them that they are not wanted. And Celia was not a girl who could prod. She found it difficult to be irresponsible when any one was kind to her, and after lunch, when we went round the garden and Mr. Beale asked her advice about shrubs, she showed some interest and recognised several of the rarer kinds. You can hardly help doing this if you live in Cornwall, but it pleased Mr. Beale and when we went away he gave her a *Tricuspidaria hexapetala* that he had raised from a cutting and a large bunch of magnificent chrysanthemums. He said he did not care for the chrysanthemums himself, but his gardener liked growing them. The same with grapes. He never ate grapes, but he grew them. He cared for nothing but his daffodils and some of his rare shrubs. He found gardening an absorbing hobby, but it left a man high and dry after dark. Of course there were gardening books and papers. You could put in a good deal of time with them. But he would always rather talk than read.

“He talks your head off,” Nicholas said when we got home. “He is what Aunt Bethia’s grandmother would have called an agreeable rattle.”

“He is agreeable on the surface,” said Celia.

That was my impression of Mr. Beale too. I doubted whether his amiability would stand the wear and tear of intimate daily life and whether his chatty tongue would flow pleasantly under provocation.

“We needn’t see much of him,” I said.

CHAPTER XI

When I said we need not see much of Mr. Mostyn Beale I had not reckoned on his persistence. Somehow or other he contrived to see something of us. He seemed to be here, there and everywhere as a blue-bottle is when you can't catch it and I soon found his chatter as annoying as a buzz. He attached himself to me whenever he could not get away with Celia, who, he was pleased to say, was made in my image.

“They talk of *mater pulchra filia pulchrior*,” he said, “and certainly, in my opinion, Miss Brooke is the most beautiful girl I've ever seen and for a travelled man like me to say that, well, it carries weight. Many renowned beauties are disappointing, I assure you. Some are hard in line and some are poor in colour and some have a lovely head on a poor figure, and most of them are affected and a great many brainless. A woman should have enough brains to be a pleasant companion to a man. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Brooke? But I'm sure you do. You've brought up your daughters so sensibly. None of them rushing off to live by themselves and have careers. All of them staying pleasantly at home till the right man comes for them. An ideal household only to be found in an out-of-the-way little sea-side town like Porthlew.”

“One of my girls is a doctor,” I said, when I could get a word in edgeways. “Sally wants to be an explorer and Hester is thinking of the stage. I approve of girls striking out for themselves when they know what they want. The difficulty with us has been the expense of training. Nancy has cost all we could spare and now we are sending Ambrose to Rugby.”

“I should be sorry to think that any one connected with me was on the stage. Such temptations, such notoriety, and such mixed company. Glamour, no doubt, but what is glamour? Dead Sea Fruit, I assure you. Amateur theatricals, now! I've no objection to them. I always go to see the Porthlew Players. It encourages them.”

The idea of the Porthlew Players being encouraged by seeing Mr. Beale across the footlights struck me as so funny that I caught Hester's eye and we both laughed. Luckily he thought we were laughing at Sally, who was talking dog-talk to Toby, and throwing an old tennis ball across the room for him to catch. I could see that Mr. Beale did not like the noise they made. It disturbed the flow of his ideas and made him start and even scowl slightly; so I told Sally to take Toby away and play with him in another room. I

couldn't tell her to take him into the garden because it was raining and she reminded me that Ambrose was at work in the dining-room and would not want her there.

"This is a small house for a large family," I said, "I'm afraid we do jostle each other sometimes."

As I spoke, Sally, who can be very naughty, threw the ball at us and Toby with a yelp of excitement hurtled after it, not caring who was in his way or what. He flung himself headlong upon Mr. Beale, seemed to think he had hidden the ball in his neck, and went for it with his whole body quivering and active. Mr. Beale gave him a violent shove, pushed back his chair and upset a tall glass of Michaelmas daisies on a table at his elbow. The water streamed over him and on the floor and the glass was broken. An unnerving scene. Hester fetched a towel to wipe him down, Melinda came with a dustpan and brush, he apologised, I apologised, Sally and Toby vanished.

"I came to consult you about my bridge party," he said when we had partly recovered. "Which evening would suit you?"

I could not say that no evening would suit us because we did not want his attentions, but when I told Nicholas that we were going to a party at Penalven on Saturday he was rather annoyed.

"Why are you annoyed?" I asked, for I often try to get Nicholas to tell me what is in his mind, but I never succeed. As I always know, it does not matter much perhaps, but I wish men were not brought up from early youth to be so inexpressive.

"There is too much of Mr. Beale," he said, "A little goes a long way."

"He is well off."

"What has that to do with it?"

"I'm sure that he wants to marry Celia."

"Does Celia want to marry him?"

"I can't tell you what she would do under some circumstances."

"Don't talk in riddles, Elizabeth. I hate it."

"My dear man, you ought to know as well as I do what I'm talking about. If Bill Cleveland marries Isabel Godolphin . . ."

"I hope that won't drive Celia to take Beale. I think better of her."

“Why do you dislike him, Nicholas?”

“I don’t know that I dislike him, but I don’t want him as a son-in-law. Do you?”

“Aunt Bethia says that marriageable men are scarce nowadays and that as we have six daughters and hardly any money, we ought to do our best to get them off. She says that girls who haver and waver end as old maids.”

“Did she haver and waver then?”

“I longed to ask her, but I didn’t.”

“I don’t like such talk,” said Nicholas, and not another word about our children’s matrimonial prospects could I get out of him. I, myself, hovered and wavered between his point of view and Aunt Bethia’s. Sometimes I wished I was a Mrs. Wotherspoon manoeuvring and plotting for my daughters and sometimes I was glad to be nothing of the kind. Sometimes I thought that the Continental system of arranging marriages had points and sometimes I wondered how the young could submit themselves or the elders accept such responsibilities. However, I was too busy with the present to brood much about the future. Besides, no brooding would make the future plain. The fate of the young is on the knees of the gods and we old people have to look on while it shapes itself.

Mr. Beale asked five of us to his bridge party but only three of us went. As a family we are agreed not to go about in a pack except to our own picnics. When we got to Penalven, we found that there were seven tables and that most people had arrived. George Vincent had taken us in his car and was to bring us back. He and Nicholas both wanted to know why they had to turn out after dinner for a rubber of bridge when they could have had a better one at home, and they both talked about the partners they hoped would not fall to them. I asked whether Mr. Beale played well and they looked at each other and laughed. However, when we all began I did not find myself at my host’s table; but I was close by and could see and hear a little of what went on. At other tables Nicholas and George both had those with them they had wished not to have but they seemed to be bearing up pretty well. I was glad to find myself playing with my cousin, Tim Hendra, and with Mr. Gilfoy of Fernaise. A woman I did not know made a fourth, a Mrs. Barber, who said she played every afternoon and most evenings all the year round. “Really good bridge,” she said, fixing Mr. Gilfoy with a beady eye. “I live in London.” This intimidated Mr. Gilfoy who as a rule over-calls his hand and he rarely made a bid, but I held good cards and we won the first rubber. At the next table Celia was playing with Mr. Beale and once or twice her eyes

met mine with amusement. But when I had to change my seat I could no longer see her. And I had to attend to our own game for I found Mrs. Barber needed watching. She was either careless or tricky. I could not make up my mind which. At any rate she was careless. She bid out of turn, and did not like it because Mr. Gilfoy and I exacted the penalty, she played from the wrong hand when it suited her, she revoked twice, and she groused about her cards until we all wished she was playing good bridge in London instead of bad bridge in Porthlew. She had a silly voice and laugh and talked a good deal and it did not occur to her that in a country town people know each other and are probably related. I suppose that comes of living in London.

“What a pretty girl that is at the next table,” she said. “Quite well dressed too. Somehow one doesn’t expect that down here. Our host has an eye, I wonder who she is.”

“My daughter,” I said.

“Really. I should never have guessed it. The only other well-dressed woman in the room is that dark one at the table beyond.”

“My wife,” said Tim Hendra.

“And my daughter,” said Mr. Gilfoy.

“But it’s a family party. I must be careful what I say. Are we playing one heart?”

“No,” I said. “We are playing three doubled. I doubled you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“But look at my partner’s hand. How could I guess that my partner had no hearts? Couldn’t you have let me know, partner, or have taken me out or pushed them up or something. You didn’t say a word. Now we shall go down. But they have everything. You can’t play without cards, can you? Five down, doubled. I think, partner, you ought to have taken me out in clubs. You have five to the queen; and I have two small ones. We should have done well in clubs. I like a bold bidder. If you wait till you’ve everything, you may wait for ever. In London we are almost too dashing. I often say so but no one listens to me. You call no trumps, partner? I double no trumps and I hope you know what I mean. Some people are against the informative double but I believe in it every time. Two spades, you say. What a pity. I wanted diamonds.”

She put down a hand on which it was folly to have doubled, but Tim, who is a fine player, and had some cards, made four spades and won the rubber. This, however, gave no satisfaction to Mrs. Barber because they had gone down so heavily that they had to pay us instead of our paying them. I thought she must have been glad that we insisted on threepence a hundred instead of the half-crown to which she said she was used in London, for she lost heavily, but she told us that if we had played for half-a-crown she would probably have won. None of us could contradict her, but we were all glad to see two late arrivals who cut in and before long rearranged all the tables. I found myself then with Mr. Beale, Doctor Little, and Celia: and as Mr. Beale became my partner I soon knew why Celia had twinkled at me. His manner was always pompous, but it became more so at bridge, especially when he was instructing his partner in what he required of her. He was fidgety too, sliding his cards to and fro instead of holding them fanwise and, when he had to play one, inordinately slow however little it mattered which he played. Doctor Little was one of the best players in Porthlew and Celia is fair to middling because she has a memory and has been well grounded.

“Now, partner,” Mr. Beale said to me, “if I double no trumps I shall expect you to give me your longest suit; and if you have a bad hand when I bid no trumps you must take me out. You won’t forget, will you?”

I made inarticulate noises in my throat and hoped for the best. I’m not at all a strong player myself, but I sit down for an hour most nights with people who play well and have hammered the rudiments into me. So when I found that Mr. Beale had only one idea about the game and that was to play his own hand, I sometimes took him out and sometimes steadily refused to support him. He got quite ratty when I did either and said that as a rule he only played with men, because women were not daring enough to please him. We lost two rubbers and then every one stopped for refreshments. These were served in the dining-room and were more elaborate and substantial than we are used to in Porthlew on such occasions. Mr. Beale made an attentive but rather fussy host, Mrs. Barber stood near me and explained that as she lived in London she did not know Porthlew people, Celia was close by but was talking to Cressida Hendra and Tim Hendra eyed me as if he had something to say, but would reserve it until I could get away from Mrs. Barber. She had just told me that she was distantly related to Mr. Beale and thought a great deal of him.

“Such a dear little man and *so* well off. He will be able to give his wife everything a woman wants: jewels, furs, cars, horses if she hunts. Does your daughter hunt, Mrs. Brooke?”

“She can ride,” I said evasively and I was glad to see Tim come a little nearer.

“He could afford a yacht. I’m sure he could afford a yacht. Such a chance for a girl, isn’t it? Because if I may say so, pretty girls are as plentiful as blackberries. At least they are in London. Champagne, Mostyn? Yes. I never say no to champagne, especially on occasions like this. I hope I’m not wrong in speaking of it as an occasion. Or am I? Dear me! I’m afraid I’ve dropped a brick. He looks rattled, doesn’t he? Or am I fancying things?”

She pushed after her host and apparently dropped more bricks for I saw Mr. Beale scowl at her and then hurriedly introduce her to some one else so that he could make away. Meanwhile Tim Hendra came up to me and said what he had to say in an undertone.

“Did you know that the Clevelands were on their way home?” he asked.

“No,” I said, a good deal startled. “Surely we should know. Bill would have written to Nicholas.”

“They are coming suddenly because Isabel Godolphin’s father is dying. Colonel Godolphin has just told me.”

Celia and Cressida were both close by now and I could see that Celia was listening eagerly and that Tim who had his back to them did not realise this.

“He says that Bill Cleveland and Isabel are engaged,” he went on. “The old man is pleased about it. I suppose it must be true as he says so.”

I saw Cressida give a quick glance at Celia. I saw Celia receive the news as if her heart stood still but as if she did not mean any one to know it. She did not speak.

CHAPTER XII

A few days later Isabel Godolphin's father made a sudden and surprising recovery; but the Clevelands did not turn back and continue their journey round the world. Bill wrote to Nicholas from Paris and did not mention his engagement and Nicholas said he only half believed it. The news had come through in a letter from Mrs. Cleveland and as she had never told the truth in her life he did not see why she should begin now. But Porthlew on the whole believed in it and most people took care not to speak of it to us. That showed good feeling on their part but it showed too that they thought that Celia had been jilted by Bill. It was what I thought myself so I could not blame them. We could do nothing about it, and we could do nothing for Celia. Outwardly life in our house went on as usual and inwardly I felt I was watching a creature I loved hurt to death. I have often argued that physical suffering is worse to bear than mental and that I would rather have a broken heart than a broken head. But I am not as sure of this as I was. When you have a large family you are bound to have your share of accidents and illness amongst them; but for such troubles there are doctors and remedies. The pain passes and the patient recovers as a rule. But I could not call in a doctor to see Celia. At least not yet. I wanted her to go away for a bit and said that Aunt Bethia would surely have her at Woden's Garth. But she did not want to go.

And then there was Mr. Beale, more attentive than ever. I told Celia she ought to make up her mind and get rid of him if she did not mean to accept him; but she said I might as well tell her to get rid of the red and black butterflies fluttering round the Michaelmas daisies. They were beautiful and he was not but they both knew what they wanted and came for it.

"The analogy is absurd," I said. "You can't talk to a butterfly."

"I can't tell Mr. Beale I won't marry him till he asks me. At least I would rather not."

"You won't marry him, then?"

"I don't think so."

"Oh! Celia, aren't you sure?"

"As a rule I am. Sometimes I think it doesn't matter much what I do."

"You couldn't think that for long. You are too sensible."

It was early October now but so warm that Celia and I were sitting in the garden watching the red and black butterflies amongst the Michaelmas daisies.

“I like money,” said Celia suddenly. “At least I like all the things you can do and buy with it.”

“Every one does.”

I knew what she was thinking of. A letter had come from Martha that morning from London and she told us that Luke had bought her two fur coats, a white one for evenings and a Broadtail for day wear. He had bought a new car and they were to drive back to Liverpool in it. They were choosing furniture too and were as happy and busy as birds about their nest.

“There are not many Lukes in the world,” I said.

“Mr. Beale is 'ere!” said Melinda, pouncing upon us from behind some shrubs. “Will 'e stay to lunch?”

“Probably.”

“Then you'll want coffee.”

“Yes.”

“'E didn't ask for you. 'E asked for Miss Celia. 'E've brought grapes this time.”

I was hurriedly thinking over the lunch and deciding that if Mr. Beale stayed there must be some addition to it. Celia had gone into the house. Melinda stood there staring.

“Be us goin' to 'ave another wedding?” she asked with interest.

“Tell Alberta that if Mr. Beale stays she must make a sweet omelet,” I said.

“There's rice pudding.”

“I know. There must be an omelet too.”

“'E's too old for Miss Celia and too fidgety,” said Melinda. “Alberta and I don't like him. How don't Miss Celia marry Mr. Cleveland? They was walking out together all last winter, wasn't they? Is it true as 'e's goin' to marry Miss Godolphin?”

“I believe so,” I said and got up.

“If a man served me that way I’d ’ave ’is life. Miss Celia, too. The dear of her: ’ow don’t she scratch ’is eyes out?”

“You go in and see about that omelet,” I said, but I could not help laughing for Melinda stood there with her eyes ablaze and her arms akimbo ready to strike a blow for Celia “the dear of her.” Besides I agreed with her about Mr. Beale. He was one of those tiresome men who are puffed up with conceit of themselves and their sex, while no part of their nature is built on fine foundations. He did stay to lunch and he intimated that after lunch he would like a little talk to me as he needed my advice. He said that in his own house he never got such a good omelet as Alberta made and he asked me how many eggs had been used for it; and whether my hens were laying well now. He kept fifty hens and yesterday only two eggs had come in.

“I said to my under-gardener that it was bad management on his part and that if he didn’t do better he’d get the sack. Two eggs! and I eat that myself every day for breakfast. Suppose I had had a guest! one of us would have had to go without. It’s absurd. With fifty hens I ought to be well supplied all the year.”

“But you can’t expect many eggs in October,” said Jane, who likes poultry and keeps an eye on ours.

“I do,” said Mr. Beale. “I expect them all the year round. It’s a question of management. Of course he had a lot to say about foxes and moult and whatnot, but I paid no attention to him. I said either you bring in eggs or you go. That stopped him.”

“He’ll buy you some at the nearest farm,” said Nicholas.

“He’d better not. Farm eggs are never new laid; not what I call new laid. I know immediately. I’ve a marvellous eye for an egg; and as for pickled ones I don’t allow any in my house. If I ate anything made of pickled eggs I should be sick.”

A ripple went round the table that had to be stifled or diverted quickly before it broke into laughter. For most of us knew that Alberta’s admirable omelet had been made of pickled eggs and for a moment I feared that Sally was about to give us away. I heard Hester say something to her fiercely in an undertone, Melinda who was trying not to giggle offered Mr. Beale cheese and biscuits, Nicholas passed him port and we all began to talk about apples. Mr. Beale was ready to talk about apples too, for he had a large crop and did not know what to do with it. He would not sell them cheap and he could not sell them dear and he could not use them himself even though his cook

wasted them. He had asked her this morning how many she put into an apple charlotte and she said she had not noticed.

“How many apples go into an apple charlotte?” he asked, turning suddenly to Celia.

“I suppose it depends on the size,” she said.

“A very sensible answer. It goes to the root of the matter at once. No doubt if you were giving orders to a cook you would say, ‘So many apples to-day when there are two in the dining-room and so many another day when there are four.’ I must send you some of my apples. That one you are eating is a Blenheim.”

“Yes,” said Celia. “We have a tree of them.”

“But you have not room for many trees, have you?”

“We have four,” said Celia.

“Four! Only four. I should hardly call that having apples at all. I have fifty and I’m putting in fifty more this autumn. I like doing things on a grand scale, don’t you?”

I didn’t hear what Celia answered. My own thoughts occupied me for I felt sure from Mr. Beale’s manner that he wished to propose to Celia after lunch and to speak to me about it first. He was going to sound me as to his chances and no doubt inform me as to his magnificent intentions. It was easier for him to come to me than to go to Nicholas, because he was the kind of man who thinks it easy to persuade and impress a woman; while my quiet good-natured husband was not at all easy. Bill had told me that people in business found that. So did we at home on occasion but it hardly ever happened.

I went into the garden with Mr. Beale after lunch, and we sat where I had sat with Celia that morning in our revolving summer house facing the Michaelmas daisies and the red and black butterflies and the sea. Although it was early October it was a hot lazy afternoon and some fishing boats moving slowly towards Land’s End looked as sleepy as a lullaby. I did not feel a bit inclined for a serious discussion, but I drank my cup of coffee and tried to wake up. Mr. Beale was in a deck chair and did not seem to like it.

“I think I’ll try one of those high ones,” he said and shifted to a high one.

“This isn’t quite my shape either,” he went on. “It’s too high. If I sit back my feet hardly touch the ground. Cushions! Oh, thank you. Yes. They make a difference. And a footstool. That’s better. It’s so difficult to talk when one

is in any bodily discomfort. You see, Mrs. Brooke, I have just made up my mind on a most important matter. I didn't mention it just now at lunch, but the fact is that this morning when I spoke to my cook about the apple charlotte she gave me notice. It has upset me terribly. In fact it has raised my blood pressure. I'm sure of it. That is why I refused port just now."

I thought as I listened that if I had been Mr. Beale's cook, I should probably have given him notice and I wondered what he expected me to do about it. But he went on talking and explaining himself.

"I feel sure that I could prevail on her to stay," he said. "I am most anxious to keep her because she has been with me for some years and understands my stomach, if you will forgive me for saying so, Mrs. Brooke. I can't think why we English are so afraid to speak of stomachs. We all have one and suffer from it if we are foolish. But the trouble about my cook is that she will only live in a bachelor establishment. I think I told you so when you came to lunch with me; and this morning she said so quite clearly. So now the cat is out of the bag."

"But yours is a bachelor establishment!"

"Not for long, I fear. . . . I mean, I hope. I don't know which I mean. I'm distracted. I can't make up my mind. What a very slippery cushion this is. I hope I'm not keeping you when you are busy, Mrs. Brooke. I need hardly tell you, need I? that if I do marry, my wife will be a lucky woman, financially. I will leave it to you and to her to say whether she will be lucky in other ways. But there is no doubt whatever about my money. I'm not a man of straw."

"I'm sure you are not," I said.

"I'm fifty, but what of that?"

"I'm not far off fifty myself," I said, for I hardly knew what to say. I hardly knew what he was driving at.

"But women age more quickly than men."

"So people say."

"There is no doubt of it. Except for my delicate digestion I'm as hale and hearty as a man of thirty. But all this is off the point. I've been talking round what I really want to say. It's very upsetting. I could not have gone on quietly forming my own conclusions if it had not been for this cook business. Perhaps I had better take the bull by the horns. Do you know the state of your daughter's affections?"

“I could not discuss such a thing, Mr. Beale.”

“Not with the world and his wife. But with me. You see my predicament. I’m very much attracted. Very much indeed. So much so that I’m thinking of marriage. A week ago I had pretty well decided it. But my cousin, Mrs. Barber, has heard rumours. You know what some women are; they batten on rumours. She does. So I have come straight to you: before committing myself I come straight to you.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“Whether there is anything between Miss Celia and young Cleveland. Because if there is I shall keep my cook.”

CHAPTER XIII

I felt inclined to tell Mr. Beale to keep his cook, for I could not see Celia married to him. I should have hated it. The conceited trumpety little man, so oversure of himself and his money. But I could not refuse him on Celia's behalf.

"I understand that Bill Cleveland is engaged to Miss Godolphin," I said.

"May be. May be. That is what every one is saying. You see my predicament, Mrs. Brooke."

"I understand about the cook. You don't want to lose her."

"I'm not thinking about the cook now. I'm thinking about myself. All this gossip about young Cleveland and your daughter affects me. It affects me seriously. In fact it may be that that has sent up my blood pressure. I'm told to avoid all worry and try and keep calm. I wish I could."

"I wish you could," I said and I picked up his cushion again. It was of leather, and as he said, rather slippery, and whenever he bobbed his head too much sideways it fell at my feet.

"I once read a novel about a girl who was jilted. I believe it was from the French. She instantly accepted a rich man she detested, married him at midnight, and when they got home told him she'd have nothing to do with him. Now I shouldn't like that at all. If I marry, I want a family life. It's only reasonable, isn't it?"

"Quite reasonable," I said, remembering his blood pressure and trying to soothe him. "But I don't think you could be married at midnight, not in Porthlew."

"That's off the point. I know your sex finds it difficult to be logical. It is one of your charms but it hampers discussion. You must surely see what I mean, Mrs. Brooke. To put it plainly, I want to be married for myself and not for my money."

"Quite right."

"And therefore I should like very much to know whether this gossip is true; because if it is I should hesitate; deeply as I am attracted, I should hesitate."

“I can’t tell you whether what you have heard is true, because I don’t know what you have heard,” I said as frigidly as I could.

“They say young Cleveland has jilted Celia and that Mrs. Cleveland has been very clever to bring it about. They say Celia is going to marry me for my money and that I’m a mutt. It’s most unpleasant, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Do nothing at all.”

“But I want to marry Celia. I’m set on it. I admire her immensely. At the same time I don’t mean to be fooled. You can’t blame me.”

“I don’t blame you, but I can’t help you. You must wait.”

“But you can tell me what Celia’s attitude is. She must have noticed that I am paying her attention. I’ve made no secret of it. And how do I stand with Mr. Brooke? Does he like the idea of me as a son-in-law, or does he not?”

I wished I could get away from Mr. Beale without answering his inconvenient questions. I wished I could fly into a passion and tell him that my girl had not been jilted and that there never had been and never would be anything between her and Bill Cleveland. In fact, I wished I was one of those spontaneous feminine liars, so charmingly portrayed by eminent male novelists. Unfortunately I have been brought up to tell the truth in all circumstances and every one knows how difficult it is to form new habits late in life. Besides Mr. Beale put his case in such a way that I did not know what to say to him. I could not tell him that Nicholas would not like him as a son-in-law because it would have been rude and I could not tell him that he had no chance with Celia, because I did not feel sure of it.

“I can’t speak for either of them,” I said, and my manner intimated that his inquisition must cease. He looked far from satisfied, but he got up and bid me good-bye, saying that he would now go home and come to terms with his cook.

Next day a choice assortment of apples arrived from Penalven and the day after that the Clevelands and Isabel Godolphin returned to Porthlew. Nicholas went to meet them at the station, but I did not and when he came back he said they were all very well and in good spirits. Bill had said that he would turn up at the Works the following day. Mrs. Cleveland had lost a trunk and blamed Bill, and Isabel had talked of her father’s illness and his recovery. I looked at Nicholas and he looked at me. I had waited for him in our bedroom, because we could be sure of being by ourselves there, and I had waited in great anxiety. The time had gone slowly and yet feverishly

while I waited. I had expected to see the news I wanted written on his face as he came in but he looked much as usual and I could not understand him.

“Nicholas, why do you keep me in suspense?” I said. “Is it true or not true?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The only thing there is to talk about. The only thing in my thoughts and on my mind. Is Bill engaged to Isabel?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t tell me.”

“Do you mean to say that you’ve been with those people more than half an hour and don’t know that?”

“My dear, I was helping Bill with the luggage. They’ve lost a trunk. One of Mrs. Cleveland’s.”

“How can you talk of trunks when Celia’s happiness is at stake?”

“I couldn’t talk of Celia’s happiness on a station platform,” said Nicholas. “Do be reasonable, my dear.”

“But you’ll talk of it to-morrow the moment you see Bill.”

“You know I shall do nothing of the kind.”

“Bring him to lunch then.”

“I’ll see.”

That was all I could get out of Nicholas and the next day he came to lunch without Bill. He said he had not asked him and that Bill had gone to lunch with the Godolphins. I had some calls to pay in the afternoon and I took Jane with me. Hester was out too, and Sally had gone to tea next door with the Vincent children. So Celia was left by herself and said she would be busy in the garden. But when we got back rather late for tea we found her in the dining-room with Mr. Beale and Bill. I could feel at once that there was tension in the air, but for the moment it was relieved by our arrival. Bill never says much, but he seemed pleased to see us and congratulated me on Martha’s marriage.

“When is your own to take place?” said Mr. Beale unexpectedly.

“I don’t know,” said Bill, and you could hear in their voices that they had taken a dislike to each other.

“But I understand that it has been arranged,” persisted Mr. Beale. I felt ashamed of him. Bill did not answer, and there was an uncomfortable silence

that I broke by asking Celia where an embroidered silk shawl came from that was making a gorgeous background for her, hanging on her chair.

“Bill brought it,” she said.

“I didn’t know you wore shawls,” said Mr. Beale. “You’re too young for them. Shawls are for old women. But if you like them I’ll give you an Indian one. Embroidered cashmere. Where does this come from? Venice?”

“China,” said Bill, and said nothing more.

“It’s magnificent,” said Celia and wrapped it round her. The two men stole glances at her and glowered at each other; Jane and I went on with our tea. Outwardly nothing happened, but some of us were in a volcanic mood and some of us were in suspense.

When Sally came in from next door, she threw her arms round Bill’s neck and told him how much she had missed him. This annoyed Mr. Beale for Sally had only shaken hands with him frostily. He tried to be facetious with her and asked her if she had eaten up all his apples yet and would like some more, and she had shown no interest in apples but had turned to Bill.

“When are you going to be married?” she said to Bill and she was sitting on his knee now with her face on his shoulder.

“I don’t know,” he said again.

“Very odd,” said Mr. Beale bad-temperedly. “Very odd indeed.”

“I want to be your bridesmaid,” said Sally.

I finished my tea hurriedly and got up. I hoped that Mr. Beale would take his departure then, but he came into the drawing-room with us, looking very sulky and evidently meaning to sit out Bill. Celia wore her shawl as if it was working a charm. She looked happy for the first time since Bill had gone away; and Bill, who never showed his feelings, sat beside her and smoked an old pipe. He must have heard what Mr. Beale said but he behaved as if he had not heard or as if he did not think him worth answering; and his manner to Celia was proprietary; which was absurd. I was not surprised that Mr. Beale got cross and restless and I hoped nothing serious would happen to him. I should have liked to run in next door and ask Doctor Little about his blood pressure but that was impossible, so I opened the window wide and hoped it was the right thing to do. It may have been, but it did not please him. He changed his seat so as to be out of the draught and said something quite testy about there being moderation in all things.

Celia looking incredibly beautiful wrapped her shawl more closely round her. Jane at a glance from me shut the window again and Sally began to tell Bill about Martha's wedding and about what she had worn as a bridesmaid. It was a rambling narration and after a minute or two I stopped it by sending Sally into the dining-room to prepare her home lessons with Jane. I wanted to get them out of the way for I did not like the look of Mr. Beale. He was on his feet now and bristling with fury.

"That shawl should have been given to your future wife," he spluttered. "It's valuable."

"Steady on," said Bill, completely taken by surprise.

"I am steady. I repeat that that shawl should have been given to your future wife. You are engaged to one young lady and yet you come here trying to turn the head of another. But there are other shawls in the world and other men. Mrs. Brooke knows what I mean."

"It's more than I do," said Bill. "Who says I'm engaged?"

"The whole of Porthlew."

Celia was looking at him as if her life hung on his reply and I did not speak. But he went on smoking and said nothing.

"Are you going to give me an answer?" shouted Mr. Beale.

"No," said Bill. "Why should I?"

"But, Bill, we all want to know whether it is true," I said. "Colonel Godolphin told us at Mr. Beale's house the other night that you were engaged to Isabel."

"I wish people would mind their own business," he said with an annoyed air and then he got up to go. I didn't know what to make of it. Celia got up too and in doing so the shawl slipped from her shoulders. To my amazement and discomfort Mr. Beale pounced on it, rolled it hurriedly into a shapeless bundle and almost threw it at Bill.

"Here," he said, "this belongs to you."

Bill just looked at him and then he looked at Celia as if she puzzled him. She took the shawl from Mr. Beale's hands.

"It belongs to me," she said.

"I want to speak to you," he said fussily. "In this house there are so many people about. Mrs. Brooke, you know that I want a word with your daughter.

Something must be settled. I cannot go on in this state of uncertainty. It must be one thing or the other. I have sacrificed the cook. She is going at the end of the month."

"Is he dippy?" said Bill to me as we stood together near the front door. "What's the matter with him?"

"At the present moment he is proposing to Celia," I said.

"She won't look at him; will she?"

"I don't know. He is well off."

Bill wriggled himself into his Burberry and got out his pipe again.

"I think I'll fill it before I start," he said. I sat down on our only hall chair and watched him.

"Oughtn't you to go back?" he said.

"Why?"

"He may turn ratty when Celia refuses him."

"Perhaps she will accept him."

He stuffed tobacco into his pipe, lighted it and emitted clouds of smoke.

"You know it isn't true about Isabel," he said.

"Isn't it?"

"Certainly not."

"But it was in a letter from your mother to Colonel Godolphin."

"Well! you know what mother is. Always thinks she can bluff."

"Isn't it rough on Isabel?"

"It's rough on all of us. I'm letting the Godolphins contradict it. I don't see what else I can do. Hullo!"

It was Mr. Beale.

CHAPTER XIV

He was purple with rage and I was so afraid that he would then and there have a fit in the hall that I stared at him speechlessly. He snatched at his coat which was hanging on a peg, took up his hat and made a queer choking noise in his throat as he came close to me. I stood back a little to let him pass and I did not offer him my hand because I was anxious not to infuriate him further. I would gladly have vanished through a trap door and as I could not do that I kept quiet and hoped he would dash out of the house without speaking. Bill stood next to me watchfully, but he did not speak either. I was glad he was there. But as Mr. Beale approached the door he seemed to change his mind. At any rate he did not open it but turned on his heel and spoke to me.

“Infamous,” he said. “Infamous.” And then he made those gurgling noises in his throat again that were so alarming. I tried to look friendly and soothing but I was afraid to open my mouth.

“I’ve been kept dangling all the autumn. Dangling. As if I was anybody. Why wasn’t I warned? I’ve been made a fool of and all Porthlew will know it. I was told that I should be a fool if I married your daughter. . . . This gentleman . . .”

Bill was on to him before I could speak or move. It happened in a moment. The door flew open, Mr. Beale was thrust out of it into the darkness and the younger man and I were by ourselves again.

“Swine,” said Bill; and then Celia hearing a rumpus came into the hall to know what it was about.

“It was only Mr. Beale going away,” I said but I daresay I looked upset. They both helped me into the drawing-room because my knees were trembling and I felt what Sally calls all wiggley inside.

“I hope he will never come here again,” said Celia; and when Bill had gone she told me that Mr. Beale at first had not exactly asked her to marry him but had intimated that he would do so if she could satisfy him as to her relations with Bill. She had not seen what he was driving at at first, but he had gone on to talk of the modern girl, so she knew he meant something unpleasant. That naturally led her to freeze him and then he had lost his temper badly and wanted to know why she had accepted his presents of fruit and flowers.

“What could I do?” she had said. “I couldn’t send them back.”

Then he picked up Bill’s shawl again and said that he was old-fashioned in his ideas and considered that respectable women should only accept valuable gifts from the men of their family or from their husbands. In fact he had been officious and quarrelsome and in the midst of his nagging he had actually blurted out a proposal of marriage and taken violent offence when Celia refused it. He told her over and over again that she had encouraged him and that if she was wise she would accept him as Bill’s engagements were elsewhere.

“He seems to have said a great deal in five minutes,” I pointed out. “Bill and I had not been very long in the hall when he came out of the room.”

“Did Bill say anything about Isabel?”

“Yes. He is not engaged to her.”

By degrees that became known in Porthlew and as the news of the engagement had come through Mrs. Cleveland, every one was more amused than surprised. I was obliged to call on her on her return and unfortunately found her at home. She was very patronising about Martha and glad to hear that one of our six daughters had married quite a prosperous business man. She said that the Godolphins did not wish to have the engagement between William and Isabel announced yet because of Mr. Godolphin’s poor state of health, but that as she had seen a great deal of the young people lately she felt sure that they would not wait for each other much longer. She also congratulated me on Celia’s engagement to Mr. Beale.

“Celia is not engaged to Mr. Beale,” I said.

“Really! and I heard it on such good authority. I was told that he had paid her great attention. Such a suitable marriage too. A charming house and garden and not a bad little man. A good deal older than Celia, but there is usually something. It would be so delightful for you to have a well-married daughter near you. Little Martha has gone such a long way off. Those Lancashire towns seem as much out of the world as the Middle West. Is Mr. What’s-his-name at all like Babbitt? I should like to meet Babbitt; just for a moment. I wonder how Mr. Beale made his money? In trade, I suppose?”

“You should ask him,” I said and got away as quickly as I could. Sometimes I thought there would be compensations if Bill married Isabel. The idea of a more intimate connection with Mrs. Cleveland depressed me, for her gods were not ours and never would be. The only person I knew who could trample on her effectively was Aunt Bethia, and she did it with a

brutal downrightness that appalled me. They had not met often but when they did they joined battle at once, and Aunt Bethia got the best of it. I wished she had been there to hear Mrs. Cleveland patronise the sacred north and call Luke Mr. What's-his-name. However, when I got home my thoughts were diverted from my own affairs by Melinda, who said that Mr. Vincent had called twice and particularly wanted to see me.

Poor George. He was forever wanting our advice because, although he was a capable lawyer, he was the most incapable man I ever met as the head of a house, and that is saying a good deal. His wife had died some years ago leaving him with three small children who were persistently mismanaged and neglected by the servants he engaged to look after them. He was a clever man but unpractical and absorbed in his work. He believed in trusting people and putting them on their honour, which is very well if you know how to choose your people. But George did not know. His servants were all paragons until he discovered that they were villains and he never seemed to come across those mixtures of good and bad who are much the same stuff as we are ourselves. While he and his children were attended to by paragons he went about beaming, gave little dinners to his friends and told us how marvellously the newest Nanny kept the nursery in order. When the moment of disillusionment arrived, they preyed on his mind so much that you would have thought the cook had grown horns or the housemaid ridden a broomstick. As for the three children, Rose, Dermot, and Kenneth, they had been as much with us at times as in their own home. At other times a new nurse had kept them rigorously away from us and then we wondered what was happening to them. No one could call them well brought up children, and if we had not all been fond of George we should probably have taken measures to keep them out of the house and the garden. This spring, when Rose had a birthday party, she had given each of her guests a bunch of tulips gathered in our borders, and when Sally asked her where she had got them she had clouted Sally over the head with a ruler and given her a black eye. She was the same age as Sally, but bigger and stronger. A handsome unruly child, inclined to be bumptious and usually noisy. Dermot and Kenneth were two delicate boys, younger than Rose, and as often in mischief as if they had been strong. Besides the nurse, the children had a daily governess and stories reached us from various sources of the battles that raged between these rival authorities; so when I went to see old George, I was not surprised to hear that the governess had delivered an ultimatum that morning, in a letter left for him on the hall table. Either she left or the nurse did; and she would be glad to know as soon as possible what Mr. Vincent meant to do about it. It was impossible, she added, to make civilised little Christians of

children who were not only allowed but encouraged to be rough and rude for twenty-one hours out of every twenty-four.

“They can’t be rough and rude when they are asleep,” I said, gazing at Miss Wood’s letter and trying to make up my mind. I knew Miss Wood. She was amiable and genteel. She would have done well enough for some children, but not for the little Vincents, who needed a firm hand over them and probably needed no encouragement to be rude to her. On the other hand, I did not like what I knew of the nurse. She had a mouth like a trap, small hard eyes and an insolent manner. I could see that George was afraid of her.

“I should sack them both,” I said.

George looked so unhappy that I wished I had not suggested it. That advice was not what he wanted.

“I thought perhaps you could make peace between them,” he said. “You are so clever.”

“But do you want to keep them, George? Do you like them?”

“I don’t have much to do with them. Miss Wood is amiable and Nanny manages the children well. At least she seems to. They do as she tells them. These everlasting changes are so uncomfortable. I never know what will happen next. What should I do if they all left at a moment’s notice?”

“Go to a hotel till you found new ones.”

“But it might happen when I was away. I’m obliged to go to London next week.”

I was very fond of George, but he made me impatient. The truth is that there are two Georges, one in his office, learned in law, honest and hardworking, and the other at home, dispirited and afraid of women. And I had to do with the widower in his home where even children seemed more of a plague than a comfort. I wished he would marry again. He is a good-looking man, tall and dark, with eyes that are as kind as a dog’s and when he is talking about his troubles as wistful.

“I’ll keep an eye on the children while you are in London,” I said.

“But what am I to do about Miss Wood? Shall I accept her notice, or shall we talk to her and to Nanny and persuade them to be reasonable?”

He sighed heavily.

“I’m constantly doing this with clients,” he said, “and when they are men I often succeed.”

“You can but try it,” I said, and, as if that was what he wanted, his face lightened and he rang the bell.

“I’ve had tea,” I said hurriedly and got up. But he waved me into my chair again.

“You’ll be such a help,” he said. So much against my will I stayed, and when the Nanny arrived she looked past me as if I had been a blank wall and spoke to George.

“I’m busy ironing,” she said.

“Come and sit down. I want to speak to you,” said George, and his manner reminded me of people who distrust a dog and try to curry favour with it. The woman took the chair he offered her and sat on the edge of it, her mouth set hard and her chin in the air.

“It’s about Miss Wood,” said George, considering the letter in his hand: and then he looked at me as if he thought it was my turn to play.

“There ought to be no difficulty,” I began, with hesitation, but I never said what I was going to say because Nanny turned on me in such a fury that I thought she was going to spring at me. Her eyes were nearly shut and her pallid face quivered as she spoke.

“I’m not in your employ, am I?” she said.

“Mrs. Brooke is a very old friend,” said George in a soothing voice: but you might as well have tried to soothe a wolf or a tiger. I wished he would give her notice instead, but that was not George’s way.

“There must be a clear understanding about their respective duties,” I said, addressing him.

“If you’re talking about Miss Wood, either she goes or I go,” said Nanny, also addressing George. “Interference is what I will not put up with from anybody.” Here she glared at me. “I’m an experienced nurse and I know how to deal with children, even when they are being made unmanageable by a silly young woman like Miss Wood. She tells them I’m harsh. So I am when they come up to the nursery out of hand for the day through her nonsense. She doesn’t know enough to keep a canary in order.”

“But they are only with her for three hours in the morning and not at all on Sundays,” pleaded George. “I suppose she teaches them something.”

“I can’t say, I’m sure. Either she leaves or I do this day month, and perhaps it had better be me. Interference is what I will not put up with nor

spies, however long you've known them: and while I'm here I'll thank every one who has no business in my nursery to keep out of it."

"Has she given me notice?" said George in a dazed way when the woman had flounced out of the room.

"I know what I should do in your place," I said and he looked up hopefully.

"I should pay her a month's wages, send her packing to-morrow and have Miss Wood in to look after the children till you come back from London."

George shook his head and turned dismal again.

"I'm afraid I couldn't do that," he said. "You see there would be no one to wash the children."

CHAPTER XV

I suggested that the housemaid might be persuaded to wash the children until a new nurse was found or that Miss Wood, although genteel, might consent to do it for a short time. But George took a gloomy view of both proposals. He said that he had just increased the housemaid's wages because she considered herself overworked: and that Miss Wood had once been asked to superintend the children's ablutions when the nurse was out for the day and had said that she could not undertake anything so indelicate. However, he told me next day that the nurse had not given him notice but was staying on for the present and that Miss Wood was leaving before he went to London. When he came back he would have to make new arrangements about the children's education and while he was away they would be washed. He thanked me for saying that I would keep an eye on the children, but he did not know how I could do it with a Nanny so jealous of her authority. He was afraid that if I went in to see them she might make herself disagreeable. He was only going to be away a week and nothing much could go wrong in a week; could it?

I thought that things had been going wrong in his house ever since his wife died; but perhaps not seriously wrong until lately. There had been neglect and waste both in the kitchen and in the nursery: but so far the children had survived and been riotously out of hand. I had said I would keep an eye on them because I expected that they would be straddling the low granite hedge dividing our gardens and dropping down on our side when they could escape from their unpleasant nurse. If they did that sometimes, I could make sure that they were well and wearing their winter clothes. I could ask them in to meals too and then see in that way that there was nothing much amiss. The thought of the three children being left in the care of George's servants always disturbed me, because I never liked or trusted them. I knew that his children were mischievous and troublesome. I was afraid of accidents or of their setting themselves or the house on fire. But the day after George's departure Miss Wood called on me and hummed and hawed so much about what she wanted to say that I grew impatient as well as uneasy.

"Children should be led and not driven," she said. "I see that woman with a whip in her hand harrying our poor black brethren on a cotton plantation."

She shut her eyes and shuddered. I waited for what she had to say next.

“Discipline is all very well though there may be too much of it, but cruelty is not right. No one can say it is.”

Her voice was a bleat and her silly amiable face was so wanting in energy that I wondered it didn't dissolve. At the same time I believed her to be conscientious and I could see that in coming to me she was making a painful effort.

“Cruelty!” I echoed and hoped in my mind that she was not going to make a mountain out of a mole-hill. Perhaps the Nanny had smacked the children when they richly deserved it.

“Cruelty,” she repeated firmly. “I find I can't sleep at night for thinking of it. She thrashes them.”

I looked at her, but felt as yet unmoved: for I had often wanted to thrash George's children myself.

“They are very naughty sometimes,” I murmured.

“Not with her. They are terrified. With me they were extremely naughty. She encouraged it.”

“Did you tell Mr. Vincent?”

“I did not. I meant to keep what is going on locked in my bosom. I've a great horror of the Law. It is invariably on the wrong side. If this woman brought a case against me she would get damages and I should lose the little I have. That would recoil on my poor mother, as you know.”

I did know. The sad creature partly supported and lived with an aged paralysed mother and I felt sure that she would not have given up her morning engagement with George's children unless she had been driven to it. I felt sure too that she was not a vindictive woman.

“I suppose you could prove what you say?” I suggested.

“Not unless the other servants and the children told the truth. There is very little we know about people that we could prove in a Law Court. I would far rather have said nothing, but I believe she will kill Kenneth if he is not taken from her. She has a grudge on him and he isn't as strong as Rose and Dermot. But they are not the same children as they were before she came.”

They were not. We had all noticed that ourselves. They still trespassed in our garden and trampled on our flower beds, but they had a scared way with

them when they saw any of us, and Rose had told Sally that they were not coming to see us while their father was away because their Nanny didn't like us and wouldn't allow it. I had noticed too, that when I met her with the children she had glowered at me as if she wanted to cut my throat and had refused to answer my greeting. It seemed a pity that any one with such bad manners should be in charge of George's children.

"I shall have to write to Mr. Vincent," I said to Miss Wood.

"But you won't mention my name. You promise not to mention my name. Mr. Vincent being a lawyer naturally has a higher opinion of the Law than I have. I really must keep clear of it."

I don't know that I had ever met any one before quite so terrified and at the same time contemptuous of the Law. She regarded it as an evil octopus sustaining life by entangling and swallowing the innocent. I don't go as far as that myself. But it is always expensive and I hoped to get rid of George's nurse without resorting to it. I promised Miss Wood that at any rate she would not be involved and I told her she had done right to come to me. I tried to make her tell me more exactly what was happening next door and how it was that the two other women in the house looked on passively at cruelty to children. She said they did whisper and disapprove but that so far they had not been roused to action and that probably they, too, went in terror of the Law and its clemency to evil-doers. She said that the children were knocked about and bullied, deprived of food, tied to bed-posts, shaken, and threatened with worse things if they dared speak. One of Nanny's favourite punishments was to seize a child and hold its head under a water tap until it was drenched and gasping with cold. She had found this out because they often came down to their lessons with their hair wet and she had cross-questioned them until Rose had told her a little of what was happening upstairs. But they were afraid to say much in case it reached Nanny's ears.

I knew too much about children to be surprised that these three had not gone straight to their father and demanded the woman's instant removal. Children never act in that way. They endure everything from those set over them as their elders endure miseries that cannot be helped, with what stoicism they may.

"But Kenneth is ill," said Miss Wood. "I am sure that Kenneth is ill. Have you seen him lately?"

I had not, and when Miss Wood had gone I went straight to the gap in the hedge and looked over it into George's garden, hoping that the children were playing there. But I could see no one and hear nothing. Then I went

indoors and wrote to Rose asking her and her brothers to tea with Sally that afternoon. I could not bring myself to write to the Nanny or to ask her to tea for I believed what Miss Wood had told me. I sent the note next door by Melinda and asked her to bring me a verbal answer. In five minutes she came back.

“They’re not coming,” she said.

“Whom did you see?”

“That woman with a face like a brass pan. ‘They’re not coming,’ she says and slams the door in my face. And you could write your name in the dust in the hall. How does Mr. Vincent get such trash? I wouldn’t be seen with one of them. Nor would Alberta.”

“The nurse answered the door?”

“That’s right. The others are always cursin’.”

I knew what this charge meant on Melinda’s lips. She pronounced it as if the “others” were using bad language and she implied that George’s cook and housemaid were taking their pleasure abroad instead of doing their duty at home.

“Furren trash from up along. All three of ’em. Gone to St. Ives for the day they two are. Alberta saw them start. Two sailors went with ’em and they had a car. They was out all yesterday too and what I ask is, who cooks for they poor worms? I couldn’t smell nothin’ and it’s dinner time. I must lay my cloth or Mr. Brooke’ll be foamin’.”

I told Nicholas about Miss Wood’s visit when he came in and he agreed with me that we must write to George and that for the moment there was nothing else we could do. I felt uneasy and unhappy but I could not think there was any immediate danger to the next-door children. What was going on now had been going on under George’s nose ever since the Nanny came six or seven weeks ago and he had not interfered. He was not going to be away long and meanwhile it was difficult for us to act. I supposed that legally the father had left his children in the nurse’s care and that it was impossible for us to take them away without his consent. Nor could we dismiss the woman. Besides from what Melinda said and from what I had seen myself, the cook and the housemaid were not much better. Foreign trash from up along, what could any one expect?

I told Sally at lunch that I had asked Rose and her brothers to tea and that they were not allowed to come, because I wanted to find out whether she knew that they were being ill-treated, but I did not expect to get much

out of her as, now that she went to school every day, she was going through a stage of thinking the next-door children too young for her, and seeing as little as possible of them. I had not discouraged this, because they were so much out of control and so mischievous.

“Alberta says something ought to be done about it,” she said, scraping her plate in a way she was not allowed to do and quoting Alberta with the impish glint in her eyes that told me she knew she had done wrong and was unrepentant. She had been gossiping with Alberta again and I wanted to know what she had heard. I felt sure that the kitchen had more idea than the parlour of what was happening next door.

“Done about what?” said Celia.

“About the Vincent children. Alberta says all those girls are something chronic, but that the nurse is a devil. Yesterday she tied Kenneth to a tree and left him there for hours when it was dewing. Alberta heard him crying and she shinned over the hedge and cut him loose, but he was that skeery he didn’t dare go into the house and he was blue with cold.”

Sally looked round the table to see what impression she had made.

“Blue with cold,” she said again. “Alberta had a good mind to fetch a policeman, but she says that seeing the children are gentry, it’s more your lookout than hers. I can’t see that it makes any difference myself when it comes to lungs, but Alberta says she doesn’t want to get into trouble about it. I wish I’d seen the poor kid.”

“What would you have done, little Miss Nosey Parker?” said Hester.

“I think I should have gone for Dr. Little,” said Sally pensively. “Policemen are not much good as a rule except for burglars. Dr. Little could have bearded the nurse and had Kenneth put to bed.”

“I agree with Sally,” said Nicholas.

“But I wouldn’t trust a sick child to a brute like that,” said Jane.

“I think I’ll wire to George,” said Nicholas. “He ought to come back and take his own household in hand.”

At that moment, to our amazement, Nancy walked into the room.

“I’ve had lunch,” she said to Melinda, who had just come in with the pudding, and she kissed some of us and wagged her hand at the others. She looked in blooming health and her dark eyes were twinkling so cheerfully that I knew her broken heart must have more or less mended itself.

“I’ve had a fearful row,” she said, “and I’ve run away.”

I loved hearing her deep voice again and seeing that she looked well and happy. I did not mind about the row. When Nancy had one she was usually in the right, but she did not conduct her rows judiciously, she hated compromise and she would never meet a foe half-way.

“But why do you arrive at this hour?” asked Nicholas. “There is no train.”

“I came by car with the Trelawneys. We slept at Exeter last night.”

“But what about your post at the hospital?”

“Don’t talk to me of the hospital, I want to forget it. A blind sheep with paralysed legs could run one better. I told them so.”

“Well!” said Nicholas.

CHAPTER XVI

We sat over the fire with Nancy after lunch and she told us about the row. The hospital had been a small suburban one run on old-fashioned lines and when the Committee appointed a woman as house-surgeon they expected her to be wax in their hands. Instead of which she had been explosive. When we heard of the things that were done and left undone in that hospital I thought of Florence Nightingale and all the misery and red tape she had found and conquered.

“But she didn’t run away,” I said. “She stuck to her guns.”

“When I left there were no guns,” said Nancy. “The place is closed for the moment. That’s my doing. If ever it opens again it will be under new management. I got hold of the right people and they stood by me.”

“But what are you going to do next?” said Hester.

“The duty that lies nearest to me,” chanted Nancy, and watched the smoke of her cigarette.

“There’s no hurry,” said Nicholas, who liked all his family around him, and wished that Martha had married in Porthlew. Then he looked at his watch and said he must go.

“I think I’ll write to George,” he said. “You can say more in a letter than a telegram.”

“Is George away?” asked Nancy, and so amongst us, and in bits, we told her what was happening next door to George’s children.

“But how long have you known this?” she asked, and I explained that Miss Wood had been with me till it was nearly time for lunch and that since then we had heard Alberta’s story through Sally.

“We are all very uneasy,” I said. “But what can we do? George has left this woman in authority. It is his business to come back and dismiss her.”

“George is a noodle,” said Nancy, and I saw that her face was beginning to light up as the face of your born fighter will with the joy of battle.

“I don’t know Miss Wood,” she said to me. “Can you trust her?”

“Yes. You can. Of course, she ought to have gone straight to George, but she was afraid to because he is a lawyer.”

“Silly fool.”

“She is afraid of being involved in a libel action. She is very poor.”

“Well, I’m not afraid,” said Nancy, shortly. “I’m going over there.”

“But, my dear, George may be back the day after to-morrow,” said Nicholas. “If you blunder in and interfere you may make it worse for the children. This woman has been there for weeks with George in the house. I can’t help hoping that things are not as bad as Miss Wood fears. Certainly I don’t like Alberta’s story of a child being tied to a tree. I suppose, Elizabeth, that Alberta was not mistaken?”

“How could she be mistaken?”

“Children play at being William Tell or Red Indians. I used to myself. You are sure the other children were not about?”

“I’ll speak to Alberta,” said Nancy, and then we all got up and scattered for the afternoon.

But as I was going out Melinda caught me in the hall, her eyes wide with excitement.

“They’re getting over the hedge,” she whispered.

“Who are?”

“Alberta and Miss Nancy. Alberta didn’t want to at first but Miss Nancy pulled her along. I’m scared to go, I am.”

“What are you scared of? It’s daylight.”

“Alberta says she doesn’t know as he mightn’t be dead to-day, tied up to that old tree. She says he was all weak and silly-like, yesterday. Poor kid.”

“Why didn’t you or Alberta tell us what was happening? It was very wrong of you not to. We heard of it by chance through Miss Sally.”

“Alberta says as it’s no more your business than it is ours. She says an Englishman’s house is his castle. She read that somewhere. She says her father used to thrash her and well she deserved it. Run the cows she used to and hang on to their tails.”

“I’m going over the hedge,” I said, and did so. Melinda scuttled back into the house.

It was a soft damp, sunless November afternoon. The leaves lay thick on the garden paths, the ash trees and the sycamores were bare and the oaks yellow, but the flowering shrubs made a green bank encircling a good-sized

lawn. The back windows of the house overlooked this and I wondered whether any one within was watching what went on. For I had not walked far before I saw Nancy and Alberta. They were on their knees on the grass and as I got nearer I made out that they were bending over the prostrate body of a child. Like Melinda, I felt scared, but I hurried on. Nancy rose to her feet when she saw me, and her face was as stern as justice and as angry as the face of an avenging god.

“He isn’t dead,” I cried, for it was Kenneth, and his eyes were shut. But when he heard my voice he opened them a little and stared at me sleepily.

“He must come to us,” said Nancy, “Alberta must carry him in and put him to bed.”

“He can have Ambrose’s room,” I murmured, “what’s the matter with him?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll get Dr. Little to see him too. You ring him up. I’m going into the house.”

“I’ll come with you,” I said, but Nancy did not hear me. She had fled like the wind to the back door and vanished. I was left with Alberta and the child. I took a step or two towards the house, and then a step back towards the child. I wanted to be with it, and I wanted to be with Nancy, and as I hesitated, Alberta and I both listened. Another child was screaming in one of the upstairs rooms.

“Take him into our house, Alberta. Can you manage it?”

“Listen to that! She be killing Miss Nancy, the besom.”

“I must go in there. Can you carry Kenneth?”

“I believe so. Come with me, my handsome. No one shall harm ’ee. You’re not afraid of Alberta. He be shivering, Mrs. Brooke, and he’s as light as a bird.”

“Take him in. Put him on the couch in my bedroom for the moment,” I said hurriedly. “Tell Melinda to make Master Ambrose’s bed as quick as she can and put in a hot bottle; and don’t feed the child till we come.”

“A good cup o’ tea wouldn’t hurt him and a bit of heavy cake surely. He’s got nothing in his wame. He’s telling us so. He keeps touching it. Us don’t want to starve the poor worm, do us?”

She was half talking to me, and half crooning over the child, who was now in her strong young arms.

“Not a crumb, and not a drop until I get back,” I said, for with seven children I had nursed this and that over and over again, and I could see that Kenneth was ill, and feverish. He seemed to be in pain too, and he was drowsy and too weak to stand. But I could not stay with him another moment for piercing shrieks were now coming from the house, and I fled towards it as Nancy had done a minute or two ago, and made my way in by the back door which was unlocked. No one seemed to be about downstairs, and as I hurried up I saw that the whole place was desolate and chilly. I did not stop to look at the rooms on the ground floor. I could not stop for anything, because I wanted to get to the nursery and find out who was screaming like that, and why. The stairs and stair-carpet were filthy. Hurry as I might, I had to see that. The screams were mingled with sobbing threats and curses now.

There was a crash as of a heavy body falling and of furniture being overturned. A child was crying too. There was another scream that was like the howl of a wild beast. I hurried so much that I was breathless and speechless when I went in. The nurse crouched on the floor, her face distorted by pain and fury. Nancy stood over her clutching her arm firmly, while she belaboured her mercilessly with a birch rod; evidently the one with which George’s children had been beaten lately. The nursery looked as if there had been a struggle, for chairs and tables were overturned, and crockery had been broken. Rose, her clothes disordered, and her face patchy with tears stood there, too much frightened to realise what had happened. Dermot was nowhere to be seen.

“Nancy! Nancy!” I cried, aghast at the turn events were taking; for though I knew the nurse deserved a whipping I did not want my girl to administer it. She was taking the law into her own hands, and when you do that in a civilised country like ours the law bites you.

“She was thrashing Rose,” said Nancy, “I wish I’d a dogwhip. It would have hurt more.”

The woman now scrambled to her feet and shook her fist in our faces. She was in considerable disarray, especially as to her hair, which was half down, and hanging about her shoulders. It was poor sandy hair, but there was enough of it to give her a mænadic appearance that her gestures, her disordered clothes, and her shrill voice all helped to heighten.

“I’ll have the Law on you,” she screamed. “You’ll pay for this. I’ll have you locked up. What you mean by it? Hear what I say? What you mean by it? Get out of this house. I’m in charge here. Get out or I’ll call the police.”

“Do,” said Nancy, very quiet, but as I saw at boiling point within. And then she spoke to Rose.

“Go and get your coat and hat, and some night things for yourself and the boys,” she said. “You are coming to us to-night. And be quick, dear. I want to see to Kenneth.”

“Oh, it’s Kenneth, is it?” mocked the nurse. “Kenneth, indeed! Sick all over the place and shamming diarrhoea every five minutes. Little beast. I never had to do with such children in my life. I’m used to children as have been taught to behave, and to gentry as know their place and don’t come prying into other people’s houses and not only prying but committing assaults on respectable women. Which there is a Law I’d have you know, and you’ll find it out, my lady. Coming in here by the back door and half murdering me and kidnapping the children.”

As the woman raved, she twitched at her loosened hair, writhed when her sore shoulders hurt her, tore at her disordered clothes, shot malignant glances at Nancy, and again muttered something about the police. I felt most uneasy for I did not know what would happen if she gave Nancy in charge, and Nancy gave her in charge. I thought of ringing up Nicholas and asking him to come here at once, but I did not want to leave Nancy alone with this demented woman.

“If you call in the police, I shall charge you with gross cruelty to these children,” said Nancy, when Rose was safely out of the room. “If Kenneth dies it will be manslaughter or murder. I think he’ll die. Seven years’ hard labour at least, I hope. Where’s Dermot?”

“Where I put him,” said the woman sulkily, but her face had gone gray and her voice hoarse with fear.

“Probably we shall find that you’ve been in trouble before,” said Nancy, but she was on her guard and when the woman made a tigerish spring at her she was ready, caught her by the wrists, wrestled with her and was the stronger of the two. But she got scratched and bitten for the creature was more like a wild cat than a human being and though I tried to help I was not much use. Then Rose came in again and the situation became more embarrassing and confused than ever, for we wanted to keep a watch on the nurse, to send Rose away from her, to find Dermot, to get hold of Nicholas if possible, and to hurry back to Kenneth.

“Where is Dermot,” asked Nancy.

“In the coal-hole,” said Rose, staring wide-eyed at the woman we were still holding down in a chair and not knowing what to make of it.

“Can you unlock it?”

She nodded, but she seemed to hesitate.

“Go and get him out and take him across to us,” said Nancy: and to me she whispered that we could come back later for the children’s night things; for Rose had brought none with her.

“He’s got nothing on,” said Rose stolidly.

“What?”

“I don’t know where his clothes are.”

“Go downstairs and let him out and bring him up here.”

Rose trotted off obediently. Nancy and I waited.

“I wonder what you think you’re doing,” jeered the nurse, when the child had gone. “Mean to stay here all night, I suppose.”

“If you’ll behave yourself and tell us where Dermot’s clothes are we’ll let you go now,” said Nancy and her eyes met mine. I nodded my assent.

“They’re on the kitchen table, of course.”

We took our hands from the woman’s shoulders. She was on her feet in a moment, struck out at us with her clenched fists, dashed out of the room before we could stop her and was in the night nursery next door with the key turned in the lock. It was a relief to be rid of her, but she had caught me a back-hander in the mouth and Nancy one in the left eye. It took us a minute or two to come to our senses, and then Rose came upstairs to say that she could not turn the key in the cellar door and that Dermot was shrieking with fright because the rats had got him. Nancy rushed out of the nursery, and I sat down, for by this time my knees had had as much as they could stand, not to speak of my nerves. Rose stared at me.

“There’s blood on your mouth,” she said, and when I put my handkerchief to my lips I found there was. The woman, whose name I did not know, had loosened a tooth.

“Has Dermot ever been locked in the coal-hole before?” I asked.

“Twice.”

“What for?”

“Once because he got all muddy in the garden, and the other time because he kicked her.”

“He shouldn’t have done that.”

“Yes, he should. We both did it to-day. She was holding Kenneth’s head under the tap and said that’d cool him. I wish dad would come back. She is much worse when he is away. Miss Wood has gone too, and Harriet and Maggie are always out. We’re not coming to stay with you really, are we? She’ll never let us.”

“You are going to be with us until your father comes back,” I said, and then Nancy came in with Dermot, who was quaking with fright, still sobbing his heart out, and so grimy with coal dust that we could not think of putting on his clothes until he had had a bath.

“I wonder she gave herself the trouble,” I said.

“It wasn’t trouble to her,” said Rose. “She made Dermot get clean by himself in a cold bath, and clean the bath too, and then there was words between her and Maggie over the towel.”

“Is there no hot water in the house?” I asked.

“Not when dad’s away. Harriet said it wasn’t worth while for us and she said it didn’t matter.”

“We’ll take him across in a blanket,” said Nancy.

CHAPTER XVII

Rose, helping to carry Dermot's clothes, trotted across the two gardens beside me. Dermot in his blanket scrambled over the wall with Nancy's help. On his feet he had a pair of goloshes that were too big for him, and whenever he lost one we stood by while he recovered it. I was wondering what would happen about the nurse, how we should house three unexpected guests, and what Nicholas would say when he saw them.

"If we want to give her in charge, we ought to have waited there until the police came," I said to Nancy, when we halted at the wall. "Now she will get away."

"I must see to Kenneth, and you can't wait there alone."

Then we shall thank God we are rid of a knave, I thought, but I said no more. I should like to have done anything that would make it impossible for that woman to go near children again, but we had to act quickly and do the best we could for George's children. We got into our house from the garden, by the back door, and when we reached the hall we found the front door open and Melinda telling Mrs. Cleveland that none of us were at home. Mrs. Cleveland paid no attention to that when she saw us but came forward and spoke to me.

"Charades, I suppose?" she said, staring at Dermot in his blanket.

I took her into the drawing-room and left Nancy to battle with everything else for the moment. The other girls were out.

"Is Nancy having a holiday then?" she asked at once. I said yes rather shortly and wished she hadn't come. I didn't know yet whether Nancy's row with the hospital was bound to be spread abroad, and now on the very day of her return she had gone next door and thrashed a nurse. It gave me great joy to think the nurse had been thrashed, but I didn't want to talk about it to Mrs. Cleveland. The story would be broadcast before long, because the children would chatter to Alberta and Melinda and they would chatter to every one they met. But I did not feel ready yet to speak of what had happened next door, partly because I didn't know what would happen next.

"I hear that Mr. Beale has gone to London for some time," she began. "I'm so sorry."

“I wonder he leaves his garden,” I said, for it was easier just then to talk of Mr. Beale than of Nancy, and I felt inclined to enlarge on him and gradually drift from him to something else that did not matter. “There is so much to do in a garden in November, isn’t there? Are you making alterations at Rosecassa? I want to put in a few more apple trees and I’m redoing the small herbaceous border. Isn’t it sad about the Lorimers having lost their money? I’m so sorry for them. Mrs. Lorimer says they have next to nothing left.”

“I’m not sorry for them. It’s their own fault. People shouldn’t put their trust in swindlers. Only fools do it.”

“But the man who has absconded is Mrs. Lorimer’s uncle.”

“My dear Mrs. Brooke, if you are going to trust your money to a rogue because he’s your uncle you’ll probably be swindled too, and if you are, don’t expect me to pity you.”

“I won’t,” I said truthfully.

“Of course, people should take their opportunities. If they don’t they suffer for it. Every one knows that.”

“But isn’t there such a thing as a wrong opportunity? The Lorimers thought they were going to make a fortune but they are ruined instead.”

“I always said Mr. Lorimer was a fool. He took me into a ball supper once and offered me chicken salad that had no chicken in it. I suppose that if you’re a fool in one way, you’re a fool in another. I hate unpractical dreamy people. They are no good to themselves or any one else. How is Celia?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“But really, Mrs. Brooke, speaking as an old friend, you must be sorry that she let Mr. Beale slip through her fingers. Such a nice little man. Not rich perhaps but comfortably off. I should put him down at three thousand a year, wouldn’t you?”

“I dare say.”

“I’m so interested in your girls. So many of them and only one married. I hope you have good news of her? I hear you had Miss Ramsbotham staying with you this summer. What an infliction. I see a car at your door. I wish I lived in a house where I could hear and see everything and every one that passed. You must get to know all your neighbours’ affairs. It’s Dr. Little? Why is he calling? Is there any one ill?”

I felt like a butterfly on a pin. Unfortunately, I always react to Mrs. Cleveland in that way and no doubt she knows it. I didn't want to tell her about George's children and listen to her comments on what he had done and left undone. I determined not to.

"Dr. Little sometimes comes to see Nancy," I said. "He thinks very well of her."

"But it is so difficult for a woman to make her living by medicine, unless she is of outstanding ability. I should have recommended nursing or massage. There is quite a shortage of nurses. By the way, do you know anything about that nurse next door? A horrid-looking woman with a flat forehead and sandy hair? I'm told that she ill-treats the children."

"Who told you so?"

"Some one who knows that silly Miss Wood. She makes a secret of it and tells every one in confidence. I believe Porthlew is roaring with it. I think we ought to let Mr. Vincent know. He is away, isn't he? I wonder why he doesn't marry again? Shall I write to him or will you?"

"We can both write," I suggested.

As I spoke, Melinda came into the room with eyes like tea-saucers and said that Nancy and the doctor wished to see me upstairs, that tea was ready and might the three children have it in the kitchen for a treat? She added breathlessly that "Dermot was quite clean now, but that Alberta said it would take any one an hour to clean the bath."

"But why do your servants have to give Dermot a bath?" inquired Mrs. Cleveland, "What an odd idea!"

"This is an odd household," I said, and with the tail of my eye I saw Celia through the open door trying to slip upstairs. She had just come in and could not know what had happened to us since she went out after lunch. So I hurried towards her.

"Go and talk to Mrs. Cleveland and don't answer any of her questions," I murmured. "I'm keeping Dr. Little waiting."

I didn't give Celia time to ask any questions but fled past her upstairs to Ambrose's room. They had got Kenneth to bed already and lighted a fire. Dr. Little had waited to tell me that he agreed with Nancy's diagnosis. It was typhoid, and it might have been a mild case if the child had been properly treated, but misery and exposure had brought him to death's door.

"That woman ought to be hanged," said Nancy vehemently.

“She would plead ignorance,” said Dr. Little. “What have you done with her?”

“Nothing. She got away and locked herself in.”

We were outside the room now talking in whispers, and Nancy hearing some sound slipped back to her patient.

“Did she tell you that she thrashed her?” I said.

“Nancy! Thrashed the nurse!”

“It will be all over Porthlew. Will she prosecute for damages? Can she get Nancy put in prison?”

“Bound over to keep the peace, I should think,” said Dr. Little, and he seemed so cheerful about it that he made me feel cheerful too. For I did not mind having a case of typhoid in the house and the three children with us. What worried me was the thought of what would happen to Nancy. We live in a highly civilised country, where knight errants are not wanted and usually get the worst of it.

When I got back to the drawing-room I found that Mrs. Cleveland had gone and that Celia was looking down in the mouth.

“Has she been worrying you about Mr. Beale?” I asked.

“Not in so many words. But she talked about elderly middle-class women with no money and no training, and said that most of them might have married if they had not turned up their noses at their chances. She says the misery and loneliness of their lives is unimaginable.”

I sat down for a moment opposite Celia, and the chill breath of Mrs. Cleveland’s reminder settled on us, partly no doubt because I was tired. Celia, Nancy, Jane, Hester, Sally. Five of them still, and Celia had refused Mr. Beale.

“Did she say anything about Bill?”

“She said that there had been a little delay about William’s engagement to Isabel, but that it would be announced at Christmas.”

“I don’t believe it.”

Celia looked as if she neither believed nor disbelieved. Then the tea-bell rang and we went into the dining-room. Jane and Hester were there before us, and when I told them about the children next door they said they wished they could go in there and thrash the cook and the housemaid, who must

have known what was going on and did nothing to stop it. Nicholas, who arrived later, said that he did not know what view the law would take of Nancy's conduct, but that George would be able to tell us to-morrow. Nicholas had changed his mind and wired, and George had wired to say that he was coming. I had done the only thing possible in bringing the children into the house. After tea he went upstairs to see Kenneth, and when he came down he said that he hoped George would prosecute the nurse, and that she would get at least seven years. We, none of us, knew what was likely, and I had an idea that cruelty was not easily proved, and was not as serious in the eyes of the law as offences against property. We were by ourselves in the drawing-room and were discussing this when Melinda came in to say that the servants from next door wished to see me. She spoke of them as Mr. Vincent's "girls." I told her to show them in. They were both "hack" servants, who ran from place to place, intent on nothing but their own pleasure, full of rancour against their employers, and talking the jargon of their class and their day in and out of season. They flounced in and sat down without being asked, showed two pairs of fat legs cased in pink silk stockings, stank of cheap scent, and had so much rouge and powder on their faces that you could have scraped them with a wooden spoon.

"We want to know what has happened to Miss Tibbs and the children," said the cook, who was the older of the two. "We went to the back door and Alberta shut it in my face. I've lived in the best families and I'm not used to such low behaviour."

"Certainly not," said the housemaid.

I disliked them both so much that I found it hard to be civil to them, and I was glad Alberta had not let them into the kitchen. They were both hefty women, and might have picked up the two children at tea there, and carried them next door again.

"Who is Miss Tibbs?" I asked.

"The young lady in charge of Mr. Vincent's nursery, of course," said the cook, who was the more truculent of the two, and had an inflamed, red face.

"Her suitcase is missing," said the housemaid, "and the nursery in an uproar. If it's burglars . . ."

"Nonsense, Maggie," said the cook. "Burglars have no use for children."

"Nor have I," giggled Maggie. "But where are they and where is Miss Tibbs?"

"The children are here," I said.

“What! All three of them?”

“Kenneth is very ill.”

“Miss Tibbs said he was shamming.”

I was not going to discuss anything with these women.

“They will all three stay with us until Mr. Vincent comes back to-morrow,” I said.

“To-morrow! I thought he was to be away another week.”

“We have asked him to come back at once.”

“What for?”

“To set his house in order,” said Nicholas severely, and his tone as well as what we had said seemed to take them aback.

“We done our best,” began Maggie; but I was in no temper for the old whine.

“You have both seen children ill-treated and not raised a hand to stop it,” I said. “You have both behaved abominably. And if Kenneth dies, I hope that Tibbs will be prosecuted for manslaughter and given seven years’ penal servitude. She deserves it.”

“I don’t see what it’s got to do with us,” said the cook sullenly. “The children wasn’t our business.”

“Then you ought to have made them your business when you saw what was going on.”

“Who’s going to the police about Tibbs then?” asked the housemaid.

“Mr. Vincent will act as he thinks best to-morrow,” said Nicholas.

“Mr. Vincent, being a gentleman, won’t blame us for what we couldn’t ’elp,” said the cook, eyeing me with a hostile glare.

“Certainly not,” said Maggie, and then Nicholas, who had been civilly but decidedly edging them out of the room, saw them depart to the front door and closed it with relief.

CHAPTER XVIII

Kenneth died. Dr. Little and Nancy fought for his life night and day; but the treatment he had endured during the early stages of his illness had exhausted him. Even now, when I think back of that time, it seems one of great confusion as well as of great sorrow. The house was overcrowded, the maids were overworked, and our anxiety and fatigue grew from hour to hour. George was inconsolable and blamed himself so bitterly that we had not the heart to blame him ourselves. He ought to have known more of what was going on, but this astute lawyer knew nothing when it came to dealing with children and servants. He did not go to the police and try to find Tibbs, with a view to having her arrested and convicted. He seemed to think that her conviction was not a certainty and he shrank from the publicity of a trial. Besides he would have had to act immediately and for a day or two he had no thought for anything but his child.

I thought he was wrong to let such a wicked woman go unpunished, but if I hinted at that he began on legal doubts and technicalities. That I could not understand. I have often noticed that your highly respected family lawyer is slow to invoke the law either for himself or his clients. He is wanting in the faith in its simplicity and justice that urges the very ignorant to threaten you with it when displeased.

George did not even dismiss the cook and Maggie directly he returned, because he wanted to live at home for the moment, but he gave them notice and left his children with us. I am glad to say that he frightened them, too, by telling them what view the law might take of their behaviour if Tibbs was found and there was a trial, and he did not tell them that he was not taking steps to find Tibbs. He kept them for a day or two and then he went to a hotel, paid them off and refused them characters.

Aunt Bethia wrote very kindly and sent us a generous cheque for our extra expenses, so we used some of it to send Rose and Dermot to Sennen for a fortnight with Celia and Nancy. That relieved the household and gave us time to get straight again. George went over to Sennen as often as possible to see the children and came back with good reports of them, but when the fortnight was at an end he asked if he might keep them all there a little longer until he had found new servants. But it was getting so cold at Sennen that I said I would rather have the children with us again for a week or two.

Our own girls looked after them and our two little maids had had a rest. But I saw that George would never get new servants unless I found them for him, and that his children would be our children for time everlasting if I did not see that he set up house again and took them into his own keeping.

The death of his child under such distressing circumstances had broken him down, and he was even less fit than he had been before to deal with the difficulties his widowed state imposed on him. Whenever he was not in his office he was with us, settling this matter and that with our help, consulting us in every emergency, and when there were no emergencies, smoking his pipe by our hearth as if he felt happier there than by his own. He came in and out of the house at all hours, bringing us problems of various sorts and sizes, some comical and some demanding the domestic knowledge and experience that he lacked.

Nancy and I had gone over the house with him, and as you might expect, had found it dirty and neglected; so I advised him to have it cleaned down before the new servants I had engaged for him arrived. To this end I sent him a Mrs. Johns, who worked for us sometimes, and when he had seen her he came round to see me with a list of what she wanted.

“She says it will take her a week,” he began gloomily. “And then she won’t be able to do herself justice. She says you could scrape off the dirt everywhere with a knife. I hadn’t noticed it.”

“The house is dirty, George. I saw thick dust under the beds.”

“It doesn’t hurt any one there, does it? After all, what is dust? Only finely powdered earth or ashes. You don’t mind it in a garden. However, you know more about houses than I do. I wish I lived in a tent with a brass pot or two. Look at this list of things she wants. I’ve never heard of most of them. What’s Zebo?”

“You clean grates with it.”

“She says they must have used the grate brush for my brown shoes. I’ve noticed they were getting blackish. How very complicated housework seems to be. I had no idea of it. She says the brooms are worn out and that she can’t begin until she has a pail and a floorcloth. The pails leak.”

George got out his pipe, stuffed some tobacco into it, lighted it and looked at his list again.

“Brooms, a scrubbing brush, hearth brushes, shoe brushes, two sets of shoe brushes. Now, why two sets?”

“One for black shoes and one for brown.”

“Can’t they be washed in between? I suppose that would use too much soap. She wants a lot of soap, also Brasso, soda, Vim, furniture cream, beeswax. That’s an odd thing to want. Turpentine. And she says that before she begins the chimneys ought to be swept, and have I dust sheets? How am I to know whether I have dust sheets? Have you any?”

“Of course I have, George.”

“Have I?”

“I can’t say. Haven’t you ever noticed things covered up when the rooms were got ready for the sweep?”

“Never. I’ve noticed all my books and papers covered with soot when the sweep had been. I said I wouldn’t have him again.”

“I hope these new servants will be satisfactory. When do they come?”

“I’ve put them off for a day or two. I wonder if you and Nancy would mind looking round the house some time and telling me what is wanted. I don’t mean Zebo, but things like towels and tea cups. There doesn’t seem to be enough of anything and we certainly had plenty at one time. I’m glad Nell isn’t alive to see the state the house is in. She would have broken her heart.”

“She would never have let it get into such a state. You have to keep up a house. I daresay you’ve not renewed things for years.”

“I couldn’t ask any girl to take it on as it is, could I? I wonder which would be best; to do it up now, so that it looked rather inviting; or wait till it was settled.”

“Till what was settled?”

“My marrying again.”

“It would be the most sensible thing you could do.”

“Certainly it would for the children and me; but what about the girl? Looking at it from her point of view, I’m more than doubtful, and I’m not going to hurry things on. It may come right and it may go wrong. I wouldn’t bet on it either way.”

“Have you any one in view then?”

George puffed away at his pipe and looked as if he saw some one clearly, but was not going to say anything about it yet. But he had more hope

and briskness about him than he had had since his child died. I knew that he reproached himself bitterly for all that the child had suffered, but I could not blame him as he blamed himself. The woman had had a quiet, plausible manner and a soft voice that misled most people; and as for the other servants, they were no worse than many of their class who run from one place to the next and wage war on their employers.

When Nancy and I looked over the house again with a view to making inventories of china, glass, silver and linen, we found the linen in rags, a good deal of silver lost or stolen, and hardly any glass and china left. A fire or a burglary would have done less damage than a procession of unscrupulous women in five years. I feel ashamed of my sex when I write of these people, and I doubt whether any set of men would do as badly in the same circumstances. Nicholas says that I am quite right and that men are invariably honest, careful and industrious when left to themselves. He always laughs at me if I inveigh against women as compared with men, for in his opinion there is not much to choose between us. Most of us are fools and some of us are knaves.

I certainly did not pay much attention to what was going on during the next few weeks; but then I was much occupied with other affairs. There was Celia looking off colour and being told by Doctor Little that she was run down and ought to have a change; there was Martha in Liverpool writing happily to book me for a long visit in July, and then through some moment of carelessness in getting over a stile bringing all those hopes to nothing and being very ill. Celia went to her for some time and I was glad to get her away. I was glad, too, to observe that Bill Cleveland showed decided annoyance when he came in one day and found her gone. He seemed to think he ought to have been consulted or at least told about her departure, and when he heard that she would probably spend Christmas in Liverpool he pulled such a long face that for Celia's sake I felt quite exhilarated. It was understood in Porthlew now that no one except Mrs. Cleveland believed that he and Isabel Godolphin would ever make a match of it. Jane had gone to Woden's Garth to stay with Aunt Bethia, who wrote that she was feeling lonely and would like to have one of the girls with her. She asked for Nancy, but Nancy said she could not shut herself up in Yorkshire when she was looking for a job. As Aunt Bethia thought that you were shut up anywhere in the world except in Yorkshire, we did not frame Nancy's refusal in this way, but said that she was very much occupied at present with George's children and George's house. So she was, but I did not see anything in it that apparently Aunt Bethia and the whole of Porthlew saw. As I said before, I was busy. Hester was being tiresome again, for one thing. Our other children

have their ups and downs, like the rest of us, but Hester is the one who is tiresome. She has what some people call “temperament,” and what Nicholas and I consider a want of balance. She attaches herself violently to the wrong people, violently desires to do what is inconvenient or expensive, and, in short, gives more trouble than all the others put together. She had been saying lately that Porthlew was too small to hold her, that she was nothing but a parasite on society, and that she wished to go up to London with her friend Cockles and earn her living. As Nicholas would have to support her until she did earn it we thought it would be expensive, but we never thwart our children if we can help it, when they wish to strike out a line for themselves. The trouble with Hester is that she never wants the same line for long. However, we had not come to any decision, but were only being badgered a good deal and seeing more of Cockles than we wished. It annoyed us all to have that young woman brought to the house wearing flannel trousers and a velveteen coat. Hester ought to have known better, and on one occasion when the trousers and Mrs. Cleveland met at tea I said so. Hester’s view was that it would do Mrs. Cleveland good to meet any one as original and brilliant as Cockles, and that I was behind the times. I said that if Cockles expressed the times I would rather be behind them. So there was some strain between Hester and her benighted family and she fled more and more to the sweetness and light shed by Cockles and her circle.

Then just when Ambrose came home for the holidays and we were getting busy for Christmas my invaluable Melinda fell ill. Not seriously but enough to make her depressed and unfit for her work. Her mother came to see me about it and said that she had known last Sunday that Melinda wasn’t herself, because she had been as teasy with her as an adder. So I let her go home for a week and ran the house with Alberta and Mrs. Johns. I had no daughter to help me. Three were away, Nancy was in George’s house all day putting things ship-shape with his new servants, and Hester was nursing her soul in Cockles’s company. I was glad to let Sally scour the country with Ambrose, because she had been getting nervous and fidgety lately. Kenneth’s illness and death had upset her, and so had the tales told by Rose and Dermot of what had gone on in their home of late. When they went back I tried to keep her away from them, but there was so much intimacy between the two houses that it wasn’t easy. There was intimacy, and yet in some way George behaved oddly. The more clean and comfortable his house became, the longer he stayed at his office, and although Nancy spent so much time there, they never seemed to meet except when he came to see us. I should have thought he wished to avoid her if he had not come so often.

CHAPTER XIX

At Christmas Nancy was still at home. There was a possible post in the offing, but nothing was decided yet. Miss Wood was looking after George's children again in the mornings, but so far no nurse had been engaged for them, and Nancy constantly looked after them in the afternoons. Sometimes she brought them round to us, and sometimes she took them for a walk and then stayed to tea there. When she came back she usually said she had not seen George. Quite often she found him at our house having a pipe and looking at the paper by our fire. This never struck her as odd, but after a time I began to see that he designedly kept out of his house when she was in it. One bitter cold December afternoon I went into the garden with a flash light after dark to make sure that the gardener had put a small portable frame over my Christmas roses and to my surprise I saw over the gap in the granite hedge that George was in his garden too. He came through the gap when he saw the light and said something about the bitter weather and there being frost at night. I knew he did nothing himself in his garden, so I wondered why he was out there shivering with cold; and then suddenly, without a word from him, I knew. It was late on a Saturday afternoon, a time when any of his friends might expect to find him at home, and he did not think it right that they should find Nancy there too. I agreed with him. The difficulty would be to present the idea to Nancy, who had taken the house and the children into her hands because they were neglected and there seemed to be no one else to do it.

"It's very cold out here," I said, shivering.

"Horrid!" he agreed, and shivered too.

"Are you gardening?"

"I never garden. Besides it is dark."

There was a silence between us then that amounted to a deadlock and I wished I knew what to say next. My wish was to relieve his mind about Nancy and assure him that she had no matrimonial designs. I could not believe that she had forgotten Luke yet, and I knew that no girl would desire to marry a man she spoke of as a noodle. We had seen a good deal lately of the side of George that was noodleish and we had never had much to do with the business side that was efficient and resolute, and when a woman marries she has to consider what a man will be like at home as well as what he is

abroad. I wished to tell George that even if he wanted Nancy he would not get her because she was still in love with Luke, and keen about her work, and of the opinion that he, George, was a noodle. I thought that it might be a relief to him, but it was difficult to begin. So I suggested that he should come back with me to our house and have a pipe with Nicholas. I knew that Nicholas had not come in yet, but I expected him soon and I did not need a long talk to George. The house was very quiet when we got back to it. In spite of my large family it often was now, and I remarked on this as we sat down.

“It will be quieter still when all your girls are married,” said George. “Unless they marry men who live near so that they are in and out a good deal.”

“They are not likely to do that,” I said cheerfully.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t think Celia will marry at all. Martha has gone up north. Nancy won’t marry either. She will probably get this post in the Midlands and after that she wants to set up in practice.”

“Is she determined not to marry? Has she said so?”

“Not in so many words. But I know what her ambitions are.”

“I suppose you do. I suppose one could hardly expect a girl as brilliant as she is to settle down to a humdrum life with a humdrum man.”

He said it to himself and I only had to acquiesce by smiling at the poker as I stirred the fire. But he had not quite finished.

“I think I must either send Rose and Dermot to school or engage an elderly resident governess for them,” he said. “I don’t want to leave them to servants again. I must have some one quite elderly. People are so ill-natured. If a young woman came to the house they would talk.”

“I suppose they would.”

George was evidently going on to say more, but unfortunately we were interrupted by Nicholas and a friend; and finding George and me there they wanted bridge. As a rule I won’t play before dinner, but Nicholas said I could not have anything else to do late on a Saturday afternoon. So we played, and George, who usually played well, revoked twice. He seemed to have his thoughts elsewhere and to be wrapped in gloom, so I could not flatter myself that I had cheered him up by relieving his mind about Nancy. However, I hoped I had said enough to show him that he need not spend the

winter afternoons in the garden in order to avoid her, and the next day tried to give Nancy a hint; but without much success. I asked her whether George's new servants were shaping well and whether the children could not now be left to them in the afternoons as I should be glad of her help with my preparations for Christmas. She pointed out that she was making herself of use next door, while Hester was only getting herself unpleasantly talked of by going about with a woman who wore men's clothes. She could not understand how Nicholas and I could allow it.

"We don't like it," I said, "but you must remember that Cockles is an artist."

"What has that to do with it."

"She despises conventions."

Nancy then used an adjective in conjunction with the word fool that still shocks me, although Mr. Bernard Shaw has made it fashionable. So I will not write it down. I seized at Nancy's opening, however, and agreed with her that conventions were useful and that the disregard of them usually led people into difficulties. But when we were so far we ceased to discuss the question, because Rose and Dermot were expecting Nancy to take them to the Cinema that afternoon and she could not keep them waiting. When she had gone I went to do some Christmas shopping, and in our bookshop I met Mrs. Cleveland choosing children's books upstairs. She said that William had asked her to find some for George's children and for Ambrose and Sally, and that as Ambrose was at Rugby she felt sure he would rather have *Tom Brown* than anything else. I reminded her that she had given it to him last Christmas and that annoyed her. Perhaps I ought not to have done it. However, she began to toss about Children's Annuals in a pettish way, put aside four, all suitable for nurseries, complained that she was tired of standing about in crowded shops, and then asked me whether Nicholas was not very much upset by all the talk raging round Nancy. She said that William never told her anything and that when she inquired after us he invariably said that as far as he knew we were all right.

"Martha has been ill," I answered, disregarding what she had said about Nancy. "We were anxious about her for a few days. Celia is with her."

"I heard that Celia had gone away for a time and I told William that you had been quite right to let her go. After all the gossip there had been about Mr. Beale it was wise of you. And now Nancy! It doesn't do any girl good to be talked of in that way. Can't you stop it?"

"I don't hear it," I said shortly.

“But, my dear Mrs. Brooke, I hear nothing else. Porthlew is agog with it. There are bets on what will happen, and you can’t blame Porthlew. When a girl puts herself into such an invidious position she is asking for trouble. Do you know that when people go to the house they are told that Mr. Vincent is out but that Miss Brooke is at home. She hasn’t quite made her home there yet, I suppose; or has she? I nearly wrote to you about it the other day because it has quite preyed on my mind. I’ve known your children since they were tinies and I don’t like to hear of them going all to pieces. People are gossiping about Hester, too. She has been making herself conspicuous lately. William says that he would not have her friends inside his house. I tell him not to worry. He need not fear that I shall ever take up with cranks. I like normal people and people who behave themselves; don’t you?”

I was saved from answering by other people coming upstairs, and I was glad of that because I was a good deal perturbed and had no answer ready. I went home feeling downcast about the family affairs, for they did not seem to be going well; and after tea when Nicholas came back from business I got hold of him for a few minutes and told him what Mrs. Cleveland had said of three of our girls.

“I don’t like the idea of them all being so much talked about,” I said.

“Not all. They’ve not fastened on Sally yet.”

“Do be serious, Nicholas.”

But Nicholas said he could not be serious where Mrs. Cleveland was concerned and that her pinpricks did not matter. Then I told him that it was not only Mrs. Cleveland in this case. George was really being kept out of his house by Nancy and on winter afternoons this was inconvenient for George. However, we got no further, because Nancy came in with a telegram telling her that she was one of several candidates chosen as likely for the Children’s Hospital at Blankton, and that she was to go there on Monday to be interviewed by the Governors. She was not in the whirlwind of hope and excitement that I should have expected, but she said she supposed she must go. She was rather gloomy all the evening and so was George, when he came in after dinner for bridge. I tried to cheer them up by telling them what I could about Blankton and how pleasant it would be for Nancy to get work there; but the more I sang the praises of the place the more down in the mouth they both looked, and in the middle of a rubber Nancy thrust her cards on Hester and said she must go next door now and have a look at Dermot.

“But isn’t he asleep?” I said in surprise.

“I hope he is,” said Nancy, and fled from the room.

“She isn’t happy about him,” explained George. “She thinks he got influenza at the Cinema. She found he had a temperature at five o’clock.”

He sighed deeply and paid for the rubber he had just lost. I began to deal, but with an air of embarrassed apology he got up.

“Nancy may want me,” he said.

We could not detain him and he went back to his own house; but a few minutes later he returned to tell us that Dermot was very feverish and that Nancy would like her dressing-gown as she meant to sit up with him all night.

“The servants have both gone to bed,” he added.

I glanced at Nicholas, because I hardly knew what to say, but Nicholas was putting away the cards and markers and did not seem to be at all agitated. George looked anxiously at me.

“Nancy knows just what to do,” he said. “She is so clever. She says Dermot must have some one there.”

“Perhaps I had better be there too,” I suggested.

“I said something about that, but Nancy thinks you would only fidget her,” said George tactfully.

“You must have your night’s sleep, Elizabeth,” put in Nicholas, who was still not agitated. Even when we were going to bed and I said that I felt rather worried, he only laughed at me.

“But, Nicholas, do you realise that Nancy is spending the night in George’s house?”

“Looking after a sick child.”

“The tongues of Porthlew will leave out the child.”

Even that idea did not trouble Nicholas: although I reminded him that we are told to avoid all appearances of evil.

“Nancy will soon be at Blankton,” he said, “and then the tongues of Porthlew will get busy about some one else.”

But next day Nancy came in to breakfast looking tired but cheerful, and said that Dermot was getting on as well as could be expected and that she was going to marry George.

CHAPTER XX

Nicholas looked as if he liked the news, I only half believed it, Hester reminded Nancy that marrying George would mean living like a cabbage at Porthlew, Ambrose went on stolidly with his breakfast, and Sally talked more than any of us, so anxious was she to know what her relationship would be to Rose and Dermot and whether they would have to call her aunt.

It was not till after breakfast that I could get Nancy to myself for a moment and ask her whether she had really made up her mind and how it had come about. Had George proposed to her late last night or early this morning? I could not feel surprised that he had proposed, for though Nancy is too much like her father to be a beauty, she has a good-humoured smile and twinkle that help you to make mole-hills of mountains and to find life pleasant even when the mole-hills are being thrown up just where you don't want them. But she had not her father's placid disposition, and I wondered how a girl with her tempestuous nature would settle down to the quiet life that a man like George could offer her. It was a shallow view to take of life, however, and as it arose I dismissed it. The life you lead depends partly on your nature and partly on your surroundings. If you want to thrash round like a whirlwind you will find opportunities, even in a country town.

"George didn't propose at all," said Nancy, to my amazement.

"But you said you were going to marry him."

"I am. Some one must. He can't go on as he is."

"But, Nancy!"

"I made up my mind last night. I've been thinking of it for some time; and the telegram about the job more or less decided me. I can't leave that house and George and the children; and there doesn't seem to be any one else. Besides we suit each other. I like looking at him; and he's good at his work. I couldn't stand a man who interfered at home and he never will. Besides I shan't be at home from morning till night. I should petrify. I'm going on with my work, George and I have settled that."

"But, my dear, what happened? You say he didn't propose."

"No. I proposed. I couldn't do otherwise. You know how fond of dogs I am, and the way a dog looks at you so that you have to pat it and talk to it. George is like that, and when I said something about Blankton I thought I

should break his heart, so I said I'd stay here if it made him happy: and he said it would make him too happy, but that he couldn't let me sacrifice myself. So I said I wasn't made that way and didn't believe in it. If I took on a job it was because my heart was in it and I wanted to do it as well as I could. We talked backwards and forwards a bit in that silly way and at last I said he must tell me one way or the other, because I had to let Blankton know, but that I'd marry him if he wanted me to."

"Nancy!"

"Don't be silly, mum. I had to have it settled and he didn't seem able to get the words over his lips. When I did! Well, you should have seen him! I was afraid he would wake Dermot. We are going to be married as soon as we can. There is nothing to wait for and I'm longing to take that household in hand."

"You know nothing of housekeeping."

"I soon shall. We are going to have a very quiet wedding, because of Kenneth. But I want to get a month on the Riviera or in Rome. It would do George good. He likes the idea, but he made difficulties about the children."

"I would have them here if Jane came back to help me with them."

"I knew you would. I said so at once. Isn't it queer how life changes. I'm the one who was marked out to be away from my family; and here I am planted for good next door. You don't look as delighted as I thought you would, mum. What's the matter?"

There was nothing the matter and I said so. If Nancy could make herself happy with George, I should feel happy about her, and of course Nicholas and I were glad to keep one of our girls close to us in Porthlew. But it did seem as if all the money spent on her medical training had been thrown away, for I did not believe in her going on with that work. I thought she would find enough to do at home. However, she pointed out that my ideas were behind the times and that the modern girl, being efficient and alert, did her housekeeping in ten minutes and had the rest of the day on her hands, for work or for pleasure, as the case might be. George agreed with her and told me that he would not have married Nancy if it had meant putting an end to her career. He believed in married women having a profession and he did not believe that their housekeeping was the worse for it. After all, he said, what was housekeeping? You gave a cook good wages and told her whether you would have beef or mutton for dinner. Or you did not tell her but let her market for you, only pointing out what you wished to spend a week on food.

“You will want a good cook,” I said, foreseeing that in future I should be hearing Nancy’s opinions on the faithful George’s lips.

“Nancy says not. She means to take a girl straight from home as you took Alberta.”

I didn’t argue with them. It would have been useless. In George’s eyes, whatever Nancy said and did was right, not because he was a fool, but because he was the kind of man who chooses his wife sensibly and then believes in her through thick and thin. Nicholas was that kind too, and they are comfortable men to marry. I wondered what Aunt Bethia would say to our news and whether she would rejoice or deplore. Her letters did both and Jane said that represented her state of mind. She was delighted to tell Mrs. Wotherspoon that another of her six nieces was going to be married, but she wished that we had been as sensible as Mrs. Wotherspoon and not wasted our money on education. However, she sent Nancy a handsome cheque and regretted that she could not come to the wedding.

But the wedding was so quiet that except for the presents we hardly knew there was one. One morning early George and Nancy were married, went away together, and five weeks later came back to Porthlew: both looking well and happy. The house was just as they had left it and so were the servants, but the servants gave notice the day after Nancy returned and she engaged two young untried ones who were to be moulded by her into replicas of Alberta and Melinda. But Nancy forgot that she had not moulded herself as a housekeeper yet: and that therefore she could not train others. It was no use to tell her this, and I could only hope that George’s children would not be the worse for her experiments. She would learn in time, but till she learned I wondered what would happen. I did not attempt to give advice or interfere, but one night when Nicholas and I were asked to dine there Alberta told me that she would leave a few sandwiches in the dining-room in case we were hungry when we came back.

“We shall not be late,” I said.

“You’ll be hungry,” said Alberta.

As it happened, Nancy began to expound her theories of housekeeping to her father while we were kept waiting for dinner, and she had plenty of time because dinner was half an hour late. She said she had made two careful time-tables and given the cook a cookery book; and that every morning she wrote down what she wanted at each meal. They had breakfast at eight-thirty and by nine-thirty she was free for the day. She did not even do her own shopping, as she thought it was good for the young cook to learn to choose

food and order the right quantities. I nearly asked whether this plan was good for George's pocket but I refrained. I thought George was in an apologetic mood; as much as to say that Nancy was a paragon but a novice: and that we must make allowances. I thought the room looked badly kept, and so did the silver when we went into dinner. The soup was either Bovril or Oxo and was described by Nancy as "clear."

"I know dad likes clear soup so I ordered it," she said cheerfully. Nancy is a person who never knows or cares what she eats and drinks herself, so I suppose she has no palate. However, we lapped up our Bovril and then we talked. The little parlourmaid had disappeared, leaving the door ajar. Nothing happened. We went on talking and Nicholas, who was hungry, ate two chunks of bread. George looked anxiously at Nancy. I admired the early daffodils and wished I had Alberta's sandwiches, for I was hungry too.

"Shall I ring?" said George at last.

"Yes, do," said Nancy. "I can't think what has happened. I wrote down our dinner in block letters so that there should be no mistake."

At this moment the little parlourmaid, whose first place it was, pushed her head through the door and asked Nancy whether she had rung.

"The fish," said Nancy.

"You can't have it yet. It's not done," said the little maid and vanished.

"The same thing occurred yesterday," said George, confiding to me. "I read to Nancy between the courses."

"They'll learn," said Nancy cheerfully. "Look at Alberta and Melinda."

"But they have been carefully trained by your mother," said Nicholas.

Nancy stared at me as if she had never seen me before; or as if she was suddenly face to face with qualities she had never yet discovered or suspected in me. Then she murmured something again about the cookery book and the block letters: and then a fine brill arrived, half raw. The next thing we were to have eaten was a roast hare, always a difficult dish for a young cook to manage. She had not stuffed or larded it, and I should think it had been in the oven all the afternoon. The potatoes were a watery mush and the greens were underdone. As for the apple tart and the coffee; let us draw a veil over them.

"I shall sack them both to-morrow," said Nancy violently, when we were by ourselves.

“I should,” I said.

“Little fools.”

I said nothing.

“I suppose you think I’m a fool too.”

“You’ve no experience. They’ve none either. What can you expect?”

“What would you have done with that dinner?”

“I should have made the soup and the tart, and probably juggled the hare in the morning. After tea I should have made the sauce for the fish, and I should have seen that the fish kettle was on in good time. I should have told her exactly how long to cook the greens and made her steam the potatoes.”

“But who taught you to cook?”

“I taught myself.”

“Then why can’t they do the same.”

“They will in time, perhaps.”

“But not here,” said Nancy; and I was not surprised to find that three days later two elderly women had been found to come in by the week until permanent ones were engaged. In short, Nancy kept house at first by a series of explosive experiments; first expecting two children just out of school to cook and serve dinners with the assistance of block letters, and then flying to the other extreme of expensive temporaries, who preyed on her ignorance and robbed her right and left. She came in one morning and told me that nine pounds of butter had been used in a week and she thought it was too much. I said, “Poor George,” and that set her off. This business of housekeeping! It was stupid and sordid. It was wasting her time. It gnawed at her mind which should have been set on higher things. Men left it to women just as we left ash-heaps to the poor; because it was degrading work. Her laundry bills were scandalous. George was beginning to look serious about their expenses. Catering was monotonous and tiresome. So was cleaning. The house was no more comfortable than it had been before George married her. This morning the cook had said she was too busy to make treacle tart for the children, so she had made one herself and the cook had burnt it. She had a good mind to run the house without any servants. It would cost next to nothing then. Nine pounds of butter in a week! What did I advise?

Nicholas and George both disapproved, but I advised Nancy to try doing all the work of the house for a short time; with the help of a morning girl to light fires, fill scuttles, clean boots and keep the kitchen clean. I thought it would teach her more than years of housekeeping with servants and that she was strong enough to survive it. Perhaps the hair of Porthlew would stand on end if she answered her own door: but it would lie down again a little later when she went back to cooks and parlourmaids. I told her that if she would undertake to cook the dinner she had given us I would write it down for her in block letters. She said she would when she had had a month's practice: and for a month I hardly saw her. Nor did any one else. At the end of the time she told me she had reorganised the house and that she could now do everything there was to be done upstairs and down. The morning-girl had taught her a great many things: how to sweep a room, for instance, how to polish metals and silver and how to have a spotless bath and a tidy sink. As for saucepans, in her house they were to be as clean outside as in forevermore. She was now trying to make George and the children tidy.

I said "Poor George" again.

CHAPTER XXI

Before long Nancy compromised. She engaged servants who had some experience and she found two fairly good ones. By that time she had set the house in order from cellar to garret and had learned a great deal. I saw that she was rapidly becoming a knowledgeable housekeeper and that her good humour made her a pleasant one. Sally was so much next door now that Alberta and Melinda complained of it. They said she no longer thought it a treat to have tea with them even when Alberta baked heavy cake for her. George lost his melancholy hangdog expression, and while Nancy cooked was told by his dentist that he was well nourished. This pleased them both immensely. They were a happy household even when they were being tidied and I did not have to have my thoughts on them much. Martha was quite well again. Celia came home. Jane stayed on with Aunt Bethia and Hester badgered her father into letting her go to London with Cockles and her newest friend Elfrida Weekes, always spoken of as Weekes. She was a solidly built young woman with the smallest button nose I ever saw, insignificant brown eyes, a large loose mouth and bare legs. Nicholas said there was no harm in her, but I shall always believe that he let Hester go to London because it made him so uncomfortable to see her with Cockles and Weekes in Porthlew. He said that in Chelsea they would not be noticed and Hester proposed to share a bed-sitting-room with Weekes in Chelsea, while Cockles pigged it (her expression) in a corner of a friend's studio close by. Weekes had discovered that Hester was a genius and that it was a crime on our part to bottle her up in Porthlew. It was not quite decided in what direction Hester's genius would expand but Weekes said that the inspirational air of Chelsea would settle that before long. Meanwhile she would be living amongst workers for the first time in her life and learn to look at things from their point of view. She belonged, she explained, to a little coterie known to be advanced and she hoped that Hester would soon become advanced too. They were people united in one serious purpose which was to undermine the present social system and destroy it by fair means or foul. She said that men and women with such ideals had something else to think of than stockings and that when they had achieved their aims no one would be wearing any and the world would be a better place. She was so intense and so foolish that Celia and I could not feel angry with her even when she went on to intimate that Hester's family was not worthy of her and to point out obliquely that we were parasites and blood-suckers. We found

afterwards that we had both been looking at her legs while she held forth and wishing that some of nature's little blood-suckers had not left them so spotty.

As soon as I could I shifted the conversation to the bed-sitting-room and asked if it was comfortably furnished, but the last thing you can ever get out of any one like Weekes is any kind of accurate description. She mumbled something about a cupboard and a gas-ring and said that Hester could always go out to a meal if she was hungry. I wanted to know what her weekly expenses would be, but I did not find that out either because Weekes said it depended on how often they "mealed" with their friends or entertained other advanced spirits in the bed-sitting-room. I was very sorry that Hester was going to London with a young woman who used "meal" as a verb, and I felt sure Weekes would talk of "bathing" herself if she ever did such a thing. I should like to have known a little more too about her friends, but all I could get out of Weekes was that their leader was a man called Tcherikov and that every one agreed that he reminded them of Lenin. She was the funniest spectacle sitting there, with her tiny red button of a nose, her large mouth and her straight hair, talking of social upheavals and of the heaven on earth to be brought about by blood and hell.

I could not understand how any child of mine could endure her as an associate but Hester seemed to be quite blind to her deficiencies and to see qualities of brain and character in her that escaped us. At any rate the idea of living in London with her and with Cockles went to her head and at the end of May she cheerfully left us.

For a little while we had none of our children in the house except Celia and Sally, but we saw Nancy every day, Martha sent us happy letters and Jane would soon be coming back to us with Aunt Bethia.

I rather dreaded Aunt Bethia on one account this year and that was because the Clevelands were to the fore again. Last year they had been away. I dreaded the battle light in Aunt Bethia's eye when Mrs. Cleveland gave herself airs and the disparaging comparison that would be made between Mrs. Wotherspoon and me when Bill was seen to be still dancing attendance on Celia without proposing to her. I felt sure Mrs. Wotherspoon invariably stopped that kind of thing at once and I wished I knew how she did it.

Isabel Godolphin had gone to Switzerland with friends and it was understood everywhere now that she never had been engaged to Bill and never would be. That was so much to the good, but for the life of me I could

not see what Bill was driving at. If he wanted to marry Celia it was time he said so and if he did not want to, he ought to have kept away.

When Aunt Bethia came, she said that Nicholas should tell him this and that if I would not instruct my husband in his duty she would. After all he was her nephew and she had known him since he was born. I said I had known Bill since he was born but it made hardly any difference to our present terms. I was fond of him, but he was not an easy man to tackle because, as likely as not, if you tried it he would look at you and walk away. But Aunt Bethia insisted that Bill ought either to be tackled or discouraged: and one day in my presence she tried saying so to Nicholas. But although she had known him as a boy, my husband was not a boy now and one of the things he would not do was to discuss his children's matrimonial prospects and their little love affairs with any one except me. As for either forcing Bill's hand or cold shouldering him, one course would have been as repugnant to him as the other. He said this very shortly to Aunt Bethia and showed her that he was not pleased. I felt sorry for her because Nicholas hardly ever shows displeasure and I think it must have been the momentary sense of defeat that drove her to a fiercer battle than usual with Mrs. Cleveland next day.

It was a gorgeous afternoon and some of us were having tea in the garden when Mrs. Cleveland walked in at the side-door and joined us unannounced. Aunt Bethia shook hands with her frigidly and I told Sally to ask for another cup and plate.

"It must be years since we met," began Mrs. Cleveland, addressing Aunt Bethia. "You didn't come last year, did you? or did I miss you?"

"I have spent the second fortnight in July here ever since my nephew married," said Aunt Bethia.

"How boring. I mean how boring for you to be so regular in your ways. At least it wouldn't suit me."

"No," said Aunt Bethia, consigning Mrs. Cleveland with a monosyllable to lower depths.

"I like change and surprises, don't you?"

"I like some surprises. Elizabeth, if your bells are out of order they should be seen to at once."

"Are they out of order?" I said, looking up from my tea-tray.

"They must be, as your friends come in by the Tradesmen's Entrance."

“Not at all,” said Mrs. Cleveland, unabashed. “I came that way because I heard voices in the garden. I didn’t ring.”

Aunt Bethia’s face expressed only too plainly what she thought, but she said nothing. Sally, followed by Melinda, came up to our table with a cup and a plate.

“That girl’s legs are fatter every time I see her,” said Mrs. Cleveland, speaking so that her voice must have reached Melinda as she returned to the house. “You ought to make her wear longer skirts, Mrs. Brooke.”

A dead silence ensued, one of those silences that make themselves felt. Even Mrs. Cleveland who has the hide of a rhinoceros mentally and socially must have felt it, for she coloured and began to talk about the large garden-party she was about to give at Rosecassa on the third of August.

“I hope you will be there for it, Miss Ramsbotham,” she said graciously to Aunt Bethia.

“I leave on the thirtieth,” said Aunt Bethia.

“But can’t you stay a little longer?”

I did not endorse Mrs. Cleveland’s invitation because I wanted to hear what Aunt Bethia would say. She said nothing and Mrs. Cleveland looked uncomfortable again. However, she glibly ran off a string of names, all important and all coming to the garden-party. The girls and I knew none of these great people would be there, but of course we listened politely and did not say so.

“Prince Borovitch and his daughter Sonia will be staying with us. You really ought to see Princess Sonia, Miss Ramsbotham. People talk about English girls. There isn’t one that I’ve ever seen to compare with her, and William agrees with me.”

“Then he must be a fool,” said Aunt Bethia in a stage aside to Celia.

“When Prince Borovitch gets back his property he will be one of the wealthiest men in Russia and Sonia is his only child. If it had not been for the revolution she would probably have married a Grand Duke. If she marries an Englishman the Prince will confer one of his titles on his son-in-law.”

“Fudge,” said Aunt Bethia, quoting Mr. Burchell in *The Vicar of Wakefield*: and whispering to Celia again.

“What did you say?” inquired Mrs. Cleveland.

“I am amused,” said Aunt Bethia. “I know the Borovitches. They stay with the Wotherspoons sometimes.”

“Really,” said Mrs. Cleveland, and after a perceptible pause she added: “Poor things. I suppose they are glad of invitations.”

“But we call him Mr. Borovitch. He is not a Prince and Sonia is not a princess.”

“Perhaps not now, in England.”

“Not in England and not anywhere else. Mr. Borovitch was a teacher of languages in Petrograd. Sonia is at least thirty. . . .”

“But so unusual: so attractive: and so clever.”

“I see nothing unusual about a squint, and it doesn’t attract me,” said Aunt Bethia.

“Perhaps we are speaking of different people,” said Mrs. Cleveland. “I think we must be.”

“I think not,” said Aunt Bethia. “I met the Borovitches just before I left, and I had to explain that I was not Lady Ramsbotham, and that I could not get Mr. Borovitch a post in Leeds University. They said they had met you at a tea-party and that you had been most kind in offering to manage it: through me. They are now in Paris.”

That is what I meant by Aunt Bethia’s sledgehammer way with Mrs. Cleveland and it always embarrassed me. Luckily just when I wished the earth would open and swallow some of us, Sally created a diversion by upsetting a milk jug and that scattered the tea-party. I took Mrs. Cleveland to another corner of the garden to look at my Canterbury Bells and Sweet Williams which were very fine this year. She discoursed to me on how to grow them so that they were still finer and when we sat down together she said that she had come to say something she wished to confide to my ears only and that she hoped it would not give me pain. I wondered what was coming.

“Your girls are being too much talked about, Mrs. Brooke. First Celia and Mr. Beale. She ought never to have let him slip through her fingers as she did. I hear he is making quite a brilliant marriage. A girl with a large property and young and lovely. Such a dear little man. And then there was Nancy horsewhipping that nurse, who was probably doing her duty. Those children are ruffians. Besides she was too much at the house. I heard all sorts of stories. You can’t muzzle people, unfortunately.”

“But you can shut your own ears and hold your own tongue,” I suggested.

“You can, of course, but it isn’t always wise. I think you ought to know that Hester has been seen in London in most disreputable company. If I were you I should insist on her coming home at once.”

“Who saw her?” I asked.

“I can’t tell you that: but there is no doubt about it. She was at a night-club drinking and dancing with an unsavoury person known as ‘The Red Herring.’”

“Was any one else with her?”

“Yes. Those two women she went about with here. How you and Mr. Brooke can allow it! What do you think Miss Ramsbotham would say, for instance? She is an insufferable woman and I am always so sorry for you when she descends on you. But she is respectable.”

I said nothing.

“Why don’t you ring Hester up and order her home at once?” persisted Mrs. Cleveland. “That is what I should do. But then I stand no nonsense from any one.”

CHAPTER XXII

Bill Cleveland came in a little later and told me that he had been in London for two days and had met Hester at a night-club and danced with her. He said she was in the pink and liked her life in London and that Cockles and Weekes had not looked as peculiar at the night-club as they did here because they were with others of their kind. I asked him whether he had noticed a man called The Red Herring, and he said he had. He and his friends formed a little society who were "advanced" in their views, but otherwise harmless. Bill had been taken to the club by a friend who was an artist, and he had felt like a fish out of water until he saw Hester.

"Your mother thinks I ought to have her home at once," I said.

"Why?"

"She says Hester is being talked about."

"Where?"

"Here in Porthlew, I suppose."

"I shouldn't worry," said Bill. So I didn't for the present. As usual, during Aunt Bethia's visit, I had a good deal to do at home, especially as she was taken ill with an attack of lumbago towards the end of her fortnight with us and could not leave on the thirtieth. But she was able to go to the Rosecassa garden-party and she gave Celia a new dress for it.

"Mark my words," she said to me. "When he sees Celia in that he'll propose to her. Any man would."

My ideas and hopes for my children were never as clearly defined as that. I was fond of Bill and I wanted Celia to have her heart's desire, but I dreaded any closer association with Mrs. Cleveland. I suppose that if I had had the power to make or mar the marriage I should have made it, for Celia's sake, but I should have done it half-heartedly. Luckily I was only a looker-on and at the garden-party when so many things happened, Aunt Bethia was more in the movement than either Nicholas or myself.

We found Mrs. Cleveland in the garden with a great many of her guests around her already, and as we knew nearly every one there we were soon busy ourselves talking to various people and having our attention called to a man standing beside his hostess and looking as if he wished he could break

away. We were told that he had come with the Hendras and that he was a Sir Arthur Embsay, who had a place somewhere in Yorkshire, and had been in the navy before he inherited it. He looked like a sailor and he certainly had a sailor's eye for a pretty girl, for when he saw Celia he seemed to see no one else for the afternoon. Mrs. Cleveland did not introduce him to us; but he introduced himself to Aunt Bethia whom he claimed as a neighbour and said he had met before. May be he had, but Aunt Bethia did not remember him and Nancy told us later that as we approached Mrs. Cleveland said something in a peevish voice about that tiresome old Yorkshire woman turning up after all. However, she received us politely and advised me to find Aunt Bethia a seat out of a draught under some distant trees. Her manner to Celia was always glacial and she actually turned her back on her when she saw her in her new dress, which was diaphanous and the colour of those delphiniums that are a heavenly blue. But the hostess at a large party is tied by her duties and as other people were arriving Sir Arthur slipped away from her and said he would escort Aunt Bethia to the trees where there were seats out of any draught. Before we reached the trees Bill joined us and then you know the kind of thing that happened. It is not easy to describe, because in a sense nothing happened. Nicholas had stayed behind with some friends, Aunt Bethia and I sat down and talked of the garden and the two men glared at each other and paid court to Celia. But we were not left to ourselves long. Mrs. Cleveland came across the lawn, suave but furious, sent Bill about his business and told Sir Arthur that she wished to present him to Lady Godolphin. They had to go, but before long Sir Arthur was back again inviting Celia to stroll round the garden with him. They disappeared amongst the trees and as they did so Bill came striding towards us saying that tea was ready and would we all come in.

“Where are the others?” he said, and when we told him he went after them.

Tea was served at small tables in the hall and there were enough to take about half the guests at a time. When any of them had finished others took their places and so there was a good deal of coming and going while Aunt Bethia and I were there. I saw Nicholas at a table with George and Nancy, Jane was with the Hendras and Mr. Gilfoy sat down with us. Before long Bill arrived by himself and said something to his mother, who was still moving amongst her guests. They were close to us and Mrs. Cleveland now turned to me.

“What have you done with Sir Arthur Embsay?” she said.

“Is he lost?” said Aunt Bethia.

“Lost and strayed with Celia; and I shall want him directly for the Treasure Hunt.”

“I met them as I was coming away from the ponds,” said Mr. Gilfoy in his dreamy high-bred voice.

“I should like to see the ponds,” said Aunt Bethia. “We have finished tea, Elizabeth. Let us walk there.”

“But they are half a mile away,” I objected. “With your lumbago, is it wise?”

“Come with me,” said Bill, and he whispered something to Aunt Bethia under his breath. He probably did not mean me to go with them, but I thought that I would. He took us straight to the space where the cars were parked, bundled us into one and started with Aunt Bethia beside him. I could hear all they said to each other because they both shouted.

“Who is the fellow?” began Bill.

“What fellow?”

“Embsay.”

“He’s a Yorkshire man.”

“Is he married?”

“Married! No. Why should he be married?”

“Why not?”

“In Yorkshire,” said Aunt Bethia, “young men don’t make love to girls like my niece unless they have honourable intentions. Their elders don’t allow it.”

“Quite right,” said Bill.

Aunt Bethia snorted. I wished I had not come and the car swerving suddenly nearly landed us in a rhododendron. It swerved to avoid the Yorkshireman and Celia, who were coming heavily and slowly towards us, both soaking wet. The sailor bore up bravely and was as cheerful as he had been when he was dry, but poor Celia’s thin clothes were as closely moulded to her as a bathing dress is after a bathe, and she was pale and shivering with cold. Bill stopped the car, which was an open one, and spoke to Celia.

“Get in,” he said, “I’ll take you home.”

“But I’m dripping wet,” objected Celia, “and that’s George’s car.”

“Get in,” said Bill again and Celia did as she was told. She could see that Bill was in a towering passion, so she would probably have stood on her head if he had ordered her to in that tone.

“Tell them to give you some dry clothes,” he said over his shoulder to Sir Arthur and then he drove off without decanting Aunt Bethia and without troubling about me. But the idea of the short broad-built Yorkshireman in Bill’s clothes was so absurd that we had a laugh about it as we hurried back to the house: and then he told me what had happened. It was not his fault at all. Celia had ventured across a narrow plank, probably used by the gardeners, and it had shifted unexpectedly. She had tumbled headlong into a dense tangle of water weeds and Sir Arthur had waded in to help her out. The mud had clung about their ankles and he said it had been a sticky job to get themselves to shore. He certainly was muddy as well as wet and so was Celia. The new diaphanous dress looked like a dishclout about her knees and I wondered what Aunt Bethia was thinking, both about her prophecy and about the waste of her good money. When we got within sight of the house Sir Arthur asked me if I knew of a back way that would take him to his car, as he too wished to go straight home and get into dry clothes. He said he would be back in half an hour. So I managed that for him and then I appeared on the lawn where Mrs. Cleveland was waiting with every one else for Bill and Sir Arthur to start the Treasure Hunt.

“Have you seen Sir Arthur Embsay and William?” she said suspiciously, as I came within hearing.

“Sir Arthur will be here in half an hour,” I said.

“But where is he?”

“He has gone back to Sidcot to get into dry clothes.”

“Dry clothes!”

“He waded into the pond.”

“What for?”

“To help Celia out.”

“But what was Celia doing in the pond? Why couldn’t she stay on shore? How tiresome of her. The Treasure Hunt is timed for five-thirty and it’s nearly six. People will be going directly. Where is Celia?”

“She has gone home to get dry clothes.”

“Did they go together then? Why couldn’t Celia find some clothes here. She might have had a dressing-gown.”

“Bill has taken her home.”

Mrs. Cleveland made one of those half inarticulate sounds that express uncontrollable annoyance.

“In one of our cars, I suppose, and she must be dripping with mud and water. Besides he knows he is wanted here. What can he be thinking of? Really, Mrs. Brooke, I wish you had left Celia at home.”

A great many people were near enough to hear how rude she was and I wished I had an edge to my tongue and could stop her. No doubt it was annoying to lose her son and her star guest just when she most wanted them, but even when you are annoyed you can behave yourself: if you know how. I can only suppose that in her early youth Mrs. Cleveland’s elders had not taught her how. But I was able to relieve her mind on one point.

“I’m afraid they’ve borrowed your car,” I said to George who stood near me.

“That’s all right,” said George, “as long as Celia doesn’t get a bad chill. . . .”

I waited for the Treasure Hunt to start and then while there was a general scrimmage Nicholas and I got away and walked home. We should have waited for George’s car but I wanted to know whether Celia was the worse for her wetting. George’s car was still before our door and that surprised us. We went in and found Aunt Bethia by herself in the drawing-room knitting. She told me afterwards that knitting quieted the nerves if you persisted but that when we arrived she had not persisted long enough. I saw at once that she was a good deal excited and amused and I thought pleased.

“Such a to-do,” she said, putting her knitting down. “You’d think a young woman had never had a tumble into a pond before. Bless me! At Woden’s Garth I fell into one of our burns a year or two ago trying to find a moorhen’s nest and no one helped me out. I scrambled to shore myself and Weaver was cross for a week about the mess my clothes made on the bedroom carpet. I didn’t even have a hot bath.”

“Has Celia had one?” I asked. “Has she gone to bed?”

“Bed! No, of course not, Elizabeth. What ideas you have. She has had a hot bath and a glass of hot brandy and water and now I suppose she is in the dining-room wrapped up in shawls like a mummy.”

There was more behind Aunt Bethia's words than the bare facts they imparted, and I turned to find Celia myself when the old lady caught me by the arm.

"Stay here," she said. "They don't want you."

So then I knew that Celia was not by herself and that probably "they" did not want me. Nicholas vanished into the garden, where he always had things to do and I sat down near Aunt Bethia to listen to her account of what had happened. She said that Bill had brought them back in about three minutes, had bundled Celia out of the car and had rushed upstairs himself to see if the bath-water was hot. Then he rushed down to the kitchen and gave his orders there. Alberta was out so he asked Weaver to go upstairs and help Celia, while Melinda got him boiling water and what else he wanted as quickly as she could. Unfortunately the spirits were locked in a Tantalus, so he came to Aunt Bethia for some and she lent him her little travelling flask of brandy. He emptied every drop of it into a glass and she told him that Celia was not used to it and that so much would go to her head but he said that did not matter: and when she came down from her bath he made her drink it. Then he had borrowed shawls from Weaver and wrapped them round Celia until she looked like David Copperfield after he had had his first bath at Miss Trotwood's and then, having ordered a fire to be lighted in the dining-room he took Celia in there to sit by it. She told him she was all right and that he ought to go back to his guests and his Treasure Hunt but he took no notice. He was still in a temper and said it would not have happened if he had been with her and that the Yorkshireman was a fool. Besides the plank that had caused her to slip was his plank, so he was responsible and she was not going to die of a chill for want of a little care. He said these things in few words for it was not his way to talk much, but Aunt Bethia said she had never seen a man more roused and anxious and she esteemed him for it. I wondered what Celia was feeling like on this hot August night after hot brandy and water, wrapped in shawls and sitting by a fire. Besides it was nearly dinner-time and Melinda would soon be laying the cloth. So I opened the dining-room door and looked in.

There was a roaring fire. The big easy-chair was drawn close to it, and had its back to me. I saw Bill's head just above it, but I did not see Celia until I went further in. She was fast asleep in his arms.

CHAPTER XXIII

Bill had not left George and Nancy in the lurch. He had sent a car for them and they came back with Jane. George did not find much wrong with his car as Celia had been swaddled by Bill in a rug directly they were clear of the house and that was easily dried and brushed. We never heard what happened between Bill and his mother when he went home, but it was widely known that Mrs. Cleveland did not like the marriage and spoke of Celia and me as “those designing women.” She descended on us the day after the garden-party, prepared to make herself disagreeable, but Aunt Bethia was prepared too, and I let them encounter each other while I sat in the garden close to them and lazily shelled peas. It was a hot, sleepy afternoon, the fishing boats were at anchor on a calm sea, the bees were busy in the garden and the air was full of sweet scents and a low hum and whirl of tiny wings. I was so happy about Celia that any kind of discord seemed to profane the peace in my heart and all around me in the summer day. I was glad that Aunt Bethia was there to do battle for me and mine and though I was only half awake I followed what they said. They both began politely, Mrs. Cleveland said at once that she had come to inquire after Celia and Aunt Bethia had allowed me to reply that Celia was quite well. Then Aunt Bethia sat down weightily between us and hostilities began.

“I’m afraid poor Celia must have been a little bit clumsy,” said Mrs. Cleveland.

“Not at all. One of your gardeners had been careless. The plank was not safe,” said Aunt Bethia.

“Who says so?”

“One end slipped into the water as Celia stepped on it.”

“I can’t think why she should want to step on it. Some people are so tiresome. Poor dear Sir Arthur is in bed with a bad chill.”

“He wasn’t in bed this morning.”

“How do you know?”

“Because he came here.”

“Came here! Why should he come here?”

Aunt Bethia and I both knew why Sir Arthur Embsay had come post haste to us this morning demanding to see Celia. It had been a case of love at first sight and he had gone away a disappointed but still cheerful man when he heard that Bill had forestalled him.

“I suppose he came, like yourself, to make kind inquiries,” said Aunt Bethia.

“I have come to say that I cannot give my consent to William’s marriage,” said Mrs. Cleveland. “I believe in being straightforward. I never have wished it, and I wish it less than ever now.”

“Why?” asked Aunt Bethia.

“To be plain, because he could do better for himself.”

“So could Celia, very much better. I am probably more against it than you are, but what can we do?”

“I don’t know why any of you should be against it. It would be a brilliant match for Celia.”

“I can’t agree with you. Your son has solid qualities and Celia is attached to him, but there is nothing brilliant about him or about his position. Celia is one of the loveliest girls in England.”

“She is twenty-seven and she hasn’t a penny.”

“She is twenty-five and I understand that your son is able to support a wife.”

“My son is a wealthy man.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“I’ve no doubt you are.”

“My dear Mrs. Cleveland!”

“If I could stop the marriage I should.”

“So should we. We dislike some aspects of it exceedingly.”

“They will have to find a house for themselves. I refuse to turn out of Rosecassa or to have Celia there.”

“Is Rosecassa your house or your son’s?”

“I believe that legally it belongs to William but I don’t see what that has to do with it. I intend to stay there.”

“Really!” said Aunt Bethia, and there the argument ended for the moment, because Celia herself came into the garden and shook hands with her future mother-in-law. Mrs. Cleveland’s manner to the girl was acid and she made no further allusion to her son or to his marriage until, to our relief, she went away.

But after all she could do nothing except make herself disagreeable to our faces and talk disagreeably of us behind our backs, and she had been doing that for years without our being a penny the worse. Bill was his own master and I was not surprised to find that when he was married he meant to live with Celia at Rosecassa. I wondered how he had managed it, but Celia said that he had not regarded it as a matter for management at all. The house was his and he told his mother that he would want it when he was married, and what would she like to do? I asked if she had been much upset but Celia said that she did not know. Bill had only told her that it was arranged and that Mrs. Cleveland was to take what furniture she liked and establish herself in a flat in London. We were all glad to hear it, but at the same time I felt sorry for her. She was losing her son and her home to a girl she had always tried to snub and this must have been galling: the more so when a chorus went up from Porthlew congratulating her.

The marriage took place early in September, for the moment Bill had spoken he wanted, as he said, to get it over. He hated the fuss of a wedding and wished Celia would go off with him directly they were engaged. Nicholas said to me that he agreed with Bill, and wished Celia would have done it because to marry off two daughters in a year in the usual way was a heavy drain on his income. But now that Mrs. Cleveland was going to London we were all extremely happy about the marriage and Nicholas said that in his opinion girls were easier to put out into the world than boys. Here were three of our daughters provided for and he did not know yet whether Ambrose would ever make a man of business and if not, what was the boy to do? He talked like this before Aunt Bethia’s cheque came. She sent it to Nicholas and said in her letter that she knew weddings were expensive, and that Mrs. Wotherspoon had always contrived to have only one in a year: but that Elizabeth had never been of a contriving nature. She was glad that three of our girls were off our hands as only a year ago it had seemed as if none of them would either marry or earn a living. Her own income would be required first by Nicholas and then by Ambrose to run Woden’s Garth and she had often talked things over with Mrs. Wotherspoon and wished that Elizabeth had her acumen and determination. She did not approve of what Hester was doing and hoped that she would not be marrying the male counterpart of her peculiar friends. Elizabeth ought to remember that the old

Quaker's advice to his son about not marrying for money, but going where money is applied in other directions. If you consort with oddities you may find yourself tied for life to one.

It was a long letter and a well-meant one and I was used to being compared to my disadvantage with Mrs. Wotherspoon so I did not mind that part of it. But her fears for Hester found an echo in my thoughts and I wondered what the child was doing in London and what we would think of her associates if we met them. We knew Cockles and Weekes, but not any of the others and Bill said there were others still funnier. He laughed at the thought of them and said they were all too clever for him, but he could not tell us anything else. Bill may be able to deal with men and women but he cannot describe them.

There was a great gathering at Celia's wedding and all her sisters were there except Hester. We had sent her money for her fare, but she said she needed it for other purposes and that such a marriage as Celia was making put heaven in a rage. I sent her our local paper with three columns of description in it and she wrote back to say that when she read it she felt sick. She sent Celia a present of a watercolour by Cockles, but no one knew which way to hang it or what it was about.

It seemed to be the red ribs of an umbrella with nebulous blue nudes spatchcocked on it apparently in pain. Bill was the only person who enjoyed it and he said he would hang it in his office because he liked something cheerful there. Luke said it had the same effect on him as the Porthlew newspaper had on Hester and that the proper place for it was a bonfire. I was very glad to see Luke again. If I had a thousand sons-in-law I should like him the best. I talked to him a little about Hester and told him I was worried about her; so he asked me to stay with them in London in October. He said that I could then see as much as I chose of Hester and find out what her new associates were like and what she was doing. Martha told him that I had not had a holiday from my house and family for twenty-six years, but this was not strictly true as Nicholas and I had once made a dash to Paris at Easter. We were not there long though, because some of the children got measles and we had to dash back and nurse them.

Mrs. Cleveland is right when she says that I have a humdrum life. At least nearly every one would agree with her. I don't myself, because I believe that you make your life according to your nature and that the man who rolls about the world may have a duller time and be a duller creature than he who stays at home. For the great mysteries and the great joys and the great beauties of life are on your threshold if you have the wit to find them.

However, Nicholas encouraged me to accept Luke's invitation. He said it was just as well that we should know what Hester was doing and that Jane would keep house for him and look after Sally.

I packed a hamper full of things to eat for Hester. Chickens and eggs, and butter, medlar jelly and Cornish cream. I hoped she had somewhere to keep them outside the bed sitting-room. I took for granted she would be at Paddington to meet us, but she was not there so I went to Chelsea with the hamper in one taxi while Luke and Martha drove to their hotel in another. A decent-looking woman opened the door, but she told me that Hester's room was on the third floor in a tone that suggested disapproval of Hester, and she looked at the heavy hamper as if she wondered whether there was contraband in it. I got the driver to carry it upstairs and then I knocked at the door. Hester opened it and looked more put out than pleased when she saw me. The room behind her seemed to be full of smoke and full of people, but it was not a large room and when I got inside I found that there were not more than six. Cockles and Weekes were there, another girl whom I did not know, and two young men. One of the young men was an Oriental in European clothes. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles, was short and fat, had thick lips and a greasy skin. Hester did not introduce her friends to me, but stood there uncertainly looking at me and at the hamper as if she did not know what to do with us. Cockles and Weekes, who had been sprawling on the floor, got up heavily and slowly to speak to me. At first the second man did not get up. He stayed put, in the way a Cornish bumpkin does when you find him sitting in your kitchen. The Cornish man does not wish to be uncivil and you never mind at all. He has not been taught better. But this man looked a gentleman. He was a tall, loosely made man, with a noticeable scowl and a crazy look in his eyes. He had carefully kept hands and when I went in he was manicuring one of them and laying down the law about the proper function of Art in a Revolution. The Babu was trying to speak too, but was stopped by Weekes, who put her hand across his mouth and told him hoarsely to shut up. This happened just as I walked in and reduced them all to an astonished silence. For an instant we stared at each other and did not speak. I had never felt so much a fish out of water in my life, and I was sorry that I had come there with my hamper to embarrass Hester and her curious friends. Of course, amongst them I was the curiosity, because both my appearance and my ideas were in violent opposition to them. I did not stay long. I made an appointment with Hester next day. I said a civil word or two to Cockles and Weekes and then I departed. Hester took me down to the front door.

“That man with the red handkerchief round his neck is Tcherikov,” she whispered as we stood there for a moment.

“So I supposed,” I said.

“Lenin is his god.”

“He looks like it.”

“Darling, you are so behind the times.”

“There’s a taxi,” I cried and hailed it, thanking my gods as I got in that I was going back to sane people.

CHAPTER XXIV

The appointment with Hester was with Martha and me for lunch next day at Harrod's. Luke had business in the city, but he told us to ask Hester to dine and go to a theatre either the same night or the next one, and he told Martha to get tickets. Martha and I did some shopping first, and then went upstairs to lunch in good time: but after waiting for Hester nearly twenty minutes, we ordered what we wanted and began. We were half-way through when Hester arrived looking absorbed in her own thoughts, and either indifferent or unmindful of her unpunctuality. She carried a large American cloth satchel under her arm, there were some smears of paint on her clothes, and she could have done with a wash and a brush up before sitting down with us. Nancy would have pounced on her for being late and untidy; but Martha never pounced on any one, and I was too uneasy about the child to wish to antagonise her. I knew what was the matter with her. She was in love with the Red Herring. I did not know yet how serious it was, or what could be done about it. My darling Hester was the only one of our girls who struck other people as clever, and was known to her family to be a fool. For we are a commonplace family with no ardent desire to reform our neighbours. Hester had always worried over the sins of her neighbours a good deal, and had been up in arms about various matters at various times.

"You've begun," she said, flopping into a chair as if she was weary.

"We said one o'clock," I reminded her. "What will you have?"

A waitress had now come forward and handed her a menu.

"What wicked prices," she said, "and the place is crammed." She put the menu down as if it scorched her.

"Bring me some bread and cheese," she said to the waitress.

We didn't remonstrate with her. We both knew that she expected us to, and that if we had implored her to eat roast chicken she would have done so under protest, and enjoyed it. But when Hester is in one of her exalted moods we have found by experience that the more you leave her alone, the sooner she comes out of it. Even as a small child she was like that. She would stubbornly refuse to eat her dinner, and when her plate was taken away with the others, cry to have it back. I stopped that by refusing to let her have it back, and Nicholas said I was barbarous. But it just shows how little you change a child's nature by education. The rest of us are fairly sensible

people, but Hester was born a clever fool, and will die one. The only salvation for her would be to marry a man like Luke, but when I told him so, he said a man wanted peace in his house, and not brainstorms. I could see to-day that Hester was in a stormy mood, and that whatever we said or did would upset her. So at first I talked to Martha about what we meant to buy that afternoon.

“Have you been squandering money the whole morning on things you don’t need?” said Hester.

“We’re going to squander a little on you this afternoon,” said Martha. “That’s why we got you here. Mum is going to give you a winter coat and Luke would like to give you a ring velvet for bridge parties, and I’ll get you a new hat.”

I didn’t think the bread and cheese was agreeing with Hester. She had always bolted her food when she was out of sorts, and she was doing it now: and scowling at it. This scowling was a new trick and not natural to her, and I wondered where she had picked it up. Then I remembered the scowling eyes of the Red Herring and how easily Hester had always mimicked people. She was the only one of us who could act, and we considered her a good bridge player. At one time she had taken up bridge violently, had sat about in corners with one of Manning Foster’s manuals, and had striven violently with George, who said books were no use, and that all you wanted was common sense. Hester had told him that perhaps he was right, but that neither he nor she had enough common sense, and this had annoyed him, because in those days he was a poor player. He has improved since he married Nancy, and as everything she does is right, he does not mind when she flies at him after each round. But when Martha had said that Hester was to have a ring velvet for bridge parties, Hester had first scowled and then laughed a low, mirthless, derisive laugh. You know the kind. It is frequently heard on the stage, especially when amateurs are acting.

“Bridge parties,” she echoed. “Bridge parties, and we are all heading for the abyss.”

“Are we?” said Martha, putting two lumps of sugar into her coffee, and having that pleasant air about her of being at peace with the world. “Well, studio parties then. You go to them, don’t you?”

“I go to them in pyjamas or a bathing dress.”

“Why?” asked Martha.

“Because we are serious people with a purpose in life. We are all too busy and too poor to dress up.”

“So you undress instead,” I said lightly, but Hester was in such a heavy mood that lightness offended her, and made her scowl more than ever.

“This is waste of time,” she said, pushing back her chair. “We understand you, but you will never understand us. That is why it is necessary for us to do what we shall do. It will be horrible, but it has to be. I see it now.”

“What has to be?”

She waved her hand comprehensively at everything around us.

“All this must go,” she said.

“Do you mean Harrod’s?” I asked.

“I mean everything of the kind everywhere. You can’t create a new world until you have destroyed the old one. I should have thought that even the bourgeois brain might understand that. It is so simple.”

Martha and I agreed when we were talking to Luke later on that it was simple: so simple as to be stupid and impossible. But we had no desire to irritate Hester, so I paid my bill, and suggested that she might as well get some clothes while Harrod’s was there, and that she might find something in the Drug Department to remove the stains of paint from her coat and skirt. She said that when your job was to remove mountains you could not stop for mole-hills. It would be like mopping up a drop of water when a waterspout was about to break over your head. I thought her synonyms were too mighty for the thing in hand, and said so.

“Spots of paint on your clothes look bad wherever you are,” I said. “Be as Red as you like, darling, but do be tidy.”

She said something about tidiness being a bourgeois virtue invented by the rich to annoy the poor, and then she fell foul of Martha for looking at a red dress and being tempted by it.

“Why should you wear red?” she said violently.

“I like it,” said Martha, who is very fair and looks best in red.

As Hester would not have a ring velvet, I tried to persuade her to choose a mixed tweed that would not show paint as easily as a plain material, but she wanted red too and chose a crimson velveteen. She was very arbitrary in her manner to the assistant serving us, and that seemed odd to me: both ill-

bred and odd. I was not used yet to the want of cohesion in people with Hester's views, and I thought that she ought to treat a wage slave with sympathy. But Martha and I had to do that when we saw that the courteous girl was upset by Hester's want of courtesy. I was very sorry to see that Hester's "advanced" views were affecting her manners so unfavourably and I said something about it. But she said that when you were contemplating the sudden and complete ruin of a social system, your thoughts were set on vast issues in which our peddling bourgeois ways would have no place. Everybody would be too busy and too honest to be polite.

"What shall we be busy about?" inquired Martha.

"Earning your right to live: if you do live. One never knows. The Chief says he is not going to be stopped by a little blood. Better that every one should perish than that his ideas should."

"I seem to have heard that sentiment before," I said.

"I suppose we shall have to wear armllets as for St. Bartholomew," said Hester pensively. "I wish you would all take my advice: but I know you won't."

"What is your advice?"

"Leave the country at once: every one of you, and realise what you can."

"My dear child, the men of the family can't leave their work. Besides . . ."

"Luke wants to know whether you will dine with us and go to a show to-night or to-morrow," said Martha, evidently thinking it time for a little sense and cheerfulness to break in.

"Cockles wants you all to dine with her to-morrow in her studio. I forgot to ask you. She can cook mum's chickens. The Chief is coming."

"I suppose he won't begin his blood-letting on a festive occasion?" I said.

"There is never any knowing what the Chief will do. He is marvellous. But he is more likely to begin with the House of Commons."

"Like Guy Fawkes."

"He was a bungler. What the Chief plans, he carries through, and he says the Reds in the House are of no use to him. He would just as well have them out of the way. He says he would rather leave a Tory alive than a half-hearted Red. He hates the member for Silvertown with a deadly hatred."

“Why? What has the member for Silvertown done to him?”

“He makes people laugh,” said Hester solemnly. “The Chief never laughs.”

“What’s his name?” I asked. “If we are to meet him to-morrow we can’t call him either the Chief or the Red Herring.”

“He doesn’t mind being called the Chief.”

“But he isn’t our Chief.”

“He will be,” said Hester, and then Martha intervened again saying that she had to meet Luke at four-thirty, and was she to get theatre seats for three or for four people. Hester hummed and hawed in an embarrassed way and said at last that she had half promised to dine somewhere in Soho with the Chief, but that if it was agreeable to us we might perhaps form one party and after dinner go to a Cinema. His name, she said, was Tcherikov. At least that was the name he chose to be known by, although he had been born in Leicester and was the son of bourgeois parents whom he had disowned.

She said we were to be careful to pronounce it properly, sounding the ov short like off: because once some one at the club, who was jealous of him, had addressed him as the Cheery Cove and that had led to a free fight with broken heads and a bill for broken glass. He had found the name on the map of Russia long ago, and had not foreseen that it could be made a mock of by a rival: nor did he know that he and his friends were called Red Herrings, because they met at the club for supper once a week, each member bringing his own herring and cooking it on a gas-ring. The fish-like smell on these occasions had been so strong, especially when members burnt their herrings, that the landlord had received complaints from several tenants, but Tcherikov had replied that he and his friends had as good a right to their supper as other citizens and that if he pleased he would cook herrings till the cows came home. After that the landlord had tried to evict them, but had not succeeded. The law had protected the Red Herrings.

Martha had looked rather taken aback by the suggested change of plan, but I nodded to her to accept it as far as the dinner in Soho was concerned. I felt so anxious about Hester that I was in a hurry to see more of the man she had set up as a prophet.

“Of course, evening clothes are out of the question,” said Hester. “None of us wear them.”

Finally it was decided that we should meet at the Chat Noir that night, and that Luke could do what he pleased about our entertainment after dinner.

Hester said that if we liked we might leave that to the Chief, and that he would possibly take us to the club, where we would hear speeches made about the better world being prepared for us. She said that in that case we must not be surprised if men got excited and that last time some one called Prutski had outed a knife and nearly cut the throat of some one called Liebmann, because Liebmann wanted a guillotine while Prutski thought machine guns were quicker and better. They had been separated by other members who said that if only they would be patient, they could probably have both. Liebmann played the flute and Hester said she liked him.

CHAPTER XXV

“Do I sleep; do I dream?
Do I wonder and doubt?
Are things what they seem
Or is visions about?
Is our civilisation a failure?”

While I listened to Hester, visions had been about; blood-curdling visions that made you uncomfortable although you knew that you were silly to see them. But when I was sitting over the fire with Luke in our sitting-room at the hotel, the visions gave way to anxieties that were more disturbing because they had their foundations in fact. I had told Luke everything that Hester had said as well as I could and how she had been concerned for us and wished we would leave the country and take what we could with us before the Chief commenced dictating and slew his foes; and Luke had said that Hester had a kind heart but a yeasty head. Perhaps she would grow out of it.

He agreed with me that we ought to meet Mr. Tcherikov and judge for ourselves whether he was a dangerous fool or only a fool; and in saying this we were both thinking of danger to Hester. England would probably stand firm even when challenged by a handful of Red Herrings. At least we hoped so. If it had not been for Hester we would not have broken bread with him, but Martha had seen as clearly as I did that her sister was in one of her ecstasies, and that she ought to be saved from herself somehow. The obvious way of stopping supplies and taking her home did not seem a good one to any of us.

When we got to the little restaurant in Soho we found Hester waiting for us looking just as untidy as she had done at lunch. In fact she had not changed and she looked at Martha and me as if there was something wrong with us.

“I told you not to dress,” she said reproachfully.

“We have not dressed,” said Luke, and went on before us to find a table. We followed him and as the room was hot we took off our fur coats. Hester groaned when she saw us.

“No hats. Velvets. Jewels. Need you have worn jewels? I do so want to make a good impression.”

“We mean to,” said Martha placidly. “You look very untidy, Hester. Why didn’t you change?”

“I haven’t been home.”

“There must be a dressing-room here.”

“It isn’t worth while. There he is,” cried Hester, and we saw the tall man with the scowl coming towards us. People turned to look at him. He wore a long voluminous black cloak, one corner of which was thrown over his shoulder, and a large soft black hat such as you see on cowboy films. Hester introduced him to us and he sat down, having first removed his cloak and hat. He stared at us as if we were unpleasant insects; stared again at Martha, as if he was not quite sure, seized a carafe of water standing on the table, filled a glass, emptied it, filled it again, emptied it and finished a third glass before he spoke. After that he turned to me, but out of the corner of his eye he looked at Martha, and I couldn’t see that her various vanities displeased him.

“I drink nine glasses a day,” he said. “How many do you drink?”

His voice was a surprise to me. It was an educated one. Evidently his bourgeois parents had been educated and had seen to his schooling. I told him I drank when I was thirsty and not to measure and he assured me that this was wrong. He had a short domineering way with him in argument, and I could hear him say, “Off with her head,” unless I committed myself to nine glasses a day, because he believed in them. I noticed that Hester was drinking water at a great rate too, but that was only natural. She even took the same hors d’œuvres that he took although at home she would not touch beetroot. I quite understood this, but I considered it a bad sign.

At first we all talked as people do when incongruous elements find themselves together, of things that lie outside dispute, at least outside social and political dispute. At first this succeeded pretty well for he seemed to enjoy his dinner, lapped up his champagne and stared so hard at Martha that Hester began to notice it. Perhaps the champagne did not suit him. He certainly drank more than any one else did and when the waiter came round with a *bombe glacée* he waved it from him impatiently and began snarling at Mussolini. Hester said afterwards that I started him by saying something about Mount Etna, and that nothing Italian should be mentioned in his presence, so deep was his hatred of the dictator. I thought this was unreasonable, as he meant to be a dictator himself, but Hester said that his dictatorship would take a different form and have different ends in view. He meant to destroy wealth, but the purblind Italian was trying to increase it. At

dinner that night I had not known that it would be unwise to mention Etna and I had only said that it would be alarming to see a jet of lava fifty feet high in the midst of your apple orchard. But he seized on that and turning to me said that before long all of us who possessed apple orchards would flee before worse horrors than jets of lava.

“Cities will be in flames,” he said, and drained his glass gloomily. Luke signed to the waiter to fill it again. I thought this was a mistake as instead of enlivening him the wine made Mr. Tcherikov take blacker views than ever, and when Luke asked him how he meant to get the masses on his side I thought we were going to be present at a case of internal combustion. He seemed to hate the masses even more than he hated us and he called them worse names. He said that they were parasites, boobs, serfs, and milksops, and that he would not mind mowing them down to the last man or woman or child. Sex should not hinder him or youth either. Babes were potentially servile. In fact, his flow of language about those he desired to liberate was even more fluent than about those he was arranging to wipe out; and I understood that a proletarian like Melinda would be no safer than a blood-sucker like me when his Day came.

As he raved, I tried to make out what he was feeling like inside, both corporeally and mentally, for he reminded me most of what before my marriage I had once seen near Naples; a whole tract of drab boiling lava with a crust above it. Where the crust was thin there were cracks and the guide took us near one to see the bubble below. It was a horrid sight and so was Mr. Tcherikov.

However, when he had lighted a cigar, he quietened down and hardly talked at all, but stared at Martha again and took no notice of Hester. He behaved in the same way at the theatre except that he talked to Martha between the acts and looked at her as if he wished he could take her home with him. Martha is not as pretty as Hester, but Hester’s looks were under a cloud and Martha’s were made the most of by her gown, her jewels, and her beautifully waved hair. Martha had always been well turned out in home-made or cheap clothes and now that she could buy good ones she was delicious. I hate that word. When you use it for humans you think of food and when you use it for food it has a greedy sound. Yet it stands for what the French mean when they say a girl is *jolie à croquer* and I thought of it when Tcherikov stared at her and gnawed his lower lip. I wondered if Luke observed him. I felt sure that Hester did.

When the play was over we scattered. Luke sent Hester back to Chelsea in a taxi and I heard her offer Tcherikov a lift: but he refused it curtly and

strode away from us, his cloak over his shoulder and his squash hat pressed down close to his eyes. I felt worried about Hester and wished I could have gone back to Chelsea with her. But I hoped that Weekes would take my place. I asked Luke what he thought of the man and he said he hardly knew yet whether he was a lunatic or a gas-bag or both. He supposed we must go to Cockles' studio to-morrow because we might find her an ally. She might know more about the Red Herring than we did and tell us whether he was married or single and what chance we had of getting Hester away from him.

“There is going to be no marriage or giving in marriage before long,” said Martha. “He told me so. He says that for the first time in history Love will be Free.”

“He doesn't know much history,” said Luke.

“We must get Hester away from him,” I said, and with that uppermost in my mind I went to bed. But next morning I rang the child up and asked her what she was doing all day and whether she would meet me for lunch again. Her voice sounded dejected and she said she had not slept much and that she had an occupied day because she was going to work with the Chief all the morning and have her hair permanently waved in the afternoon. But she would meet me at lunch and she would be glad if I could let her have a little money as she had run short.

So that was the result of our first meeting with Mr. Tcherikov. He had cast an eye on Martha and Hester didn't like it and was having her hair permanently waved.

“I'm going to wear my new frock this evening,” she said when we met. “Weekes thinks he won't like it, but I'm not so sure. I suppose men are all the same, brothers under their skin. Even the greatest have their weak spots.”

“Hester, is Mr. Tcherikov married?” I asked her, for I wanted to know. She looked rather disconcerted but recovered herself before she spoke.

“I've taken for granted he was not,” she said, “But I've never asked him. It would make no difference.”

“What do you mean?”

“He wouldn't consider it binding.”

“But the Law would.”

“A man like that stands above the Law. Besides when he takes London as Lenin took Leningrad he will be the Law. Lenin, he says, is the greatest

statesman that ever lived. He worships at his shrine.”

I helped Hester and then myself to a cutlet and potato chips and I kept the thoughts that arose in me to myself. I had a good mind to ring up Nicholas and tell him to come to London at once. But I thought that I would talk to Luke first while Hester was having her hair waved. I did not answer what she said about Lenin because I thought it was silly. I could not believe that Mr. Tcherikov had any chance of taking London and slaking his thirst for blood there: but I was determined to get my child out of his hands.

“I’m determined too,” said Luke, “but I don’t know yet how we are going to do it.”

“Hester can’t possibly mean to set up with a married man,” said Martha. “We must find out whether he is married and whether we can get at his wife.”

“By the way Hester talked at lunch she would not be deterred by twenty wives,” I told them. “She says he is above the Law, and she is having her hair waved and wearing her new frock to make an impression on him. She was jealous of Martha last night.”

“I hate the way he stares,” said Martha.

“I wonder how he lives,” said Luke.

CHAPTER XXVI

Cockles had dressed for the occasion and was looking very nice. She wore black trousers, a dinner jacket and a soft orange-coloured silk shirt. We had prepared Luke, but I am afraid he felt a little taken aback when he saw her. Not more so than her friend and she were when they saw us. The friend was known as Mike and she looked very nice too in red and black pyjamas. She was bigger than Cockles and had short black hair that she wore in an Eton crop and it was so much oiled or pomaded that I wondered what her pillowslip was like. But perhaps she did not use anything so old-fashioned. I knew that the two young women lived in the studio and there were no hidden corners in it where there might have been beds: nor were there divans. But there were two mattresses shoved against a wall and covered with a large black and orange check: and there were black pillows on them. We were provided with cocktails when we arrived and Cockles told us that Hester and Tcherikov were coming to supper and that a few others would look in later. She hoped I should not mind some of them being rather advanced. I said I thought I could bear it. Round about Porthlew there are a great many studios and a scattered society of artists, and we have been friendly with some of the artists for years. They have their own conventions just as we who are not artists have ours, and I knew they called their evening meal supper even if they sit down to it at eight. I have been told that when you have dessert you dine, and that when you don't have it you sup, but I don't think that is a good description of the difference. Another convention is that the women dress but the men do not; so I understand that my distinguished looking son-in-law was a little out of the picture. I felt sure that Cockles and Mike would have liked to lend him Tcherikov's cloak and hat but they were very nice about it and tried to make the best of things. No doubt they felt as I do, that this is a world in which there must be give and take. I had always rather liked Cockles myself, although I had felt that her trousers did not go down well with our old-fashioned friends. I very much wanted to get a word with her before Hester and Tcherikov arrived, so I simulated an interest in a half-painted picture on an easel at the other end of the studio and when I had finished my cocktail made a move towards it. But you know what invariably happens in such cases. The other three as well as Cockles came after me and we all stood in front of the easel, three of us wondering what the queer splodges and whirls on the canvas meant and not liking to ask. It was bitter cold at that end, so before long I turned towards

the stove again and so did every one else. However, Mike went through the door that Cockles said led into a little kitchen and I made up my mind to say what I wanted to say before Luke and Martha. The table was laid attractively with a blue cloth, blue glass, clean silver and yellow chrysanthemums. Cockles told us that Mike kept house and saw to such things for both of them as she herself did not care for the domestic side of life: and that they employed two charwomen to clean and cook for them.

“It sounds expensive,” I said.

“It is rather,” said Cockles, who was mixing cocktails now and saying that Tcherikov and Hester were late.

“Is Tcherikov married?” I asked.

“I’ve no idea,” she said indifferently. You see, she would be indifferent. She was very pleasant but what she called modern. This usually means that people have thrown the old morals overboard and have not found new ones yet that work well. I wanted to pierce through her indifference and make her understand my state of mind: so I went on.

“Where does he live, and what does he do?” I asked.

“I don’t think he lives anywhere,” said Cockles, “he comes and goes. Sometimes he stays with Prutski, sometimes he sleeps here.”

“Here!!!”

“Yes: if we’re very late, as we often are. He just flops down on a rug and goes to sleep.”

“Has he any occupation?”

“None whatever.”

“But Hester said she was working with him all the morning.”

Cockles smiled.

“He makes long lists and writes manifestoes and corresponds with people abroad. Hester does posters for him. She did quite a good one the other day. . . . Aristocrats and bourgeois, you know, dripping with blood, on their knees to proletarians. He was delighted with it.”

“Has he any money?”

“Not a bean.”

“How does he live?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“I wish we could get Hester away from him.”

“He soon drops people,” said Cockles as if she expected that idea would comfort me. It did make a difference. I was glad to think that Mr. Tcherikov was not likely to take Hester for better or for worse: but I wanted to get her away from him before she was dropped. From all points of view it was desirable that she should drop him.

“He dropped Weekes for Hester some time ago,” said Cockles.

“Did she mind?”

“Not at first, while they shared him. He has very broad ideas, you know. He says that no really great man has ever been monogamous.”

“He seems to ’ave all ’istry vivid to his recollection,” said Luke, quoting from one of his favourite authors, and then Weekes arrived so we had to stop talking about Hester. Weekes ambled into the studio, stockingless as usual, wearing mulberry coloured satin shoes, frayed and down at heel, a pink scarf beautified with spangles and a gown made of some striped material sewn with sequins and reminding you in its design of the Knaves in *Alice in Wonderland*, or of a sandwichman: for it had an oblong piece behind and one in front, caught at the sides and on the shoulders, and with holes left for the head and the arms. Her hair looked as if she had combed it with a garden rake and her funny little button nose was as red as a boiled shrimp. She accepted a cocktail, tossed it off without blinking and handed her glass to Cockles for another. Then for the first time she opened her mouth to speak and informed us that she was fed up.

“So am I,” said Cockles without showing either curiosity or sympathy. “If those two are not here in five minutes we’ll begin without them. It’s past eight and some of the others will blow in at nine.”

“Hester and I have had a row,” whispered Weekes.

“That’s nothing new,” murmured Cockles.

“Worse than usual. Hester is clearing out to-morrow.”

They spoke in undertones, but I heard what they said and felt uneasy than ever. I was so obviously not meant to hear that I kept quiet for the moment but I watched anxiously for Hester to arrive. Mike came back now with a tray on which there were hors d’œuvres and she told us that Mrs. Pinchin said she couldn’t answer for the potatoes unless we started on the rubbish at once. So we gathered round the table and as we did so Hester and

Tcherikov arrived. Before they came the atmosphere had been easygoing, but they brought storm with them. It was as unmistakable as it was indefinable. You could feel that they were both in the throes of an argument that had not found its close and that their thoughts were not with us. Hester was not even interested in her own appearance although she had put on her new frock and had had her hair waved. She took no notice of Weekes, sat down beside Tcherikov and ate hardly anything. Tcherikov ate and drank a great deal, scowled at every one and hardly spoke. The rest of us tried to keep the ball going and to behave as if all was right with the world: but it was uphill work. Luke carved the chickens.

I hoped that after dinner I should get a chance of speaking to Hester, but I think Tcherikov suspected this and designedly prevented it, for he kept close to her and glowered at me whenever I approached them. The dinner things and the table were being removed by Mike and Mrs. Pinchin, Cockles talked to Luke and Martha, we all drank coffee and Cointreau and every one except Mrs. Pinchin and me smoked cigarettes. Before we had finished other people began to drop in by twos and threes and then the dancing began. A gramophone played for them and when it sang every one joined in as a chorus. I should have enjoyed watching them if I had not been so anxious about Hester. It was not officially a fancy dress affair, but both men and women wore anything they pleased with considerable effect. Some of the men were in pyjamas: some wore blue blouses; one came in the costume of an Albanian mountaineer and another who said he had been playing golf all day danced in his brogued shoes and plus fours. Dancing seemed to make every one thirsty and the hospitable Cockles acted as barman at a table crowded with bottles. I thought that if she was hospitable much longer there would not be many sober people in the room and that old-fashioned people like Luke, Martha and myself had better be going. The singing was getting a bit noisy already and once when the Albanian bumped against the plus fours there was the beginning of a row. Hester was as much out of the movement as I was, for she sat in a corner with Tcherikov and let every one pass her by. But I was determined to get a word with her before we left and I seized my chance when Tcherikov went up to the table to get his glass refilled. He scowled at me as I passed him but obliged me by staying near the drinks and talking to Cockles.

Hester did not welcome me. To tell the truth and to use one of Melinda's words, the little hussy scowled at me, but I no more minded that than I used to mind a baby's squawk when you wash it. I sat down beside her and asked why she was not dancing.

“I don’t feel like it,” she said.

“Can Mr. Tcherikov dance?”

“I’ve no doubt he can: but he doesn’t. In his position . . .”

“What is his position?”

“You’ll know some day.”

“Hester, is it true that you are leaving Weekes?”

“Who told you?”

“She told Cockles in my hearing.”

Hester scowled at the dancers, looked past me at Tcherikov and intimated without words that she wished I would leave her. But I sat still.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“When I know I’ll send you my new address.”

“I should like you to come straight to our hotel and then back to Porthlew. Will you do that?”

“I’d rather put my head in a gas-oven.”

I laughed and that seemed to annoy her. I had forgotten that Tcherikov did not approve of laughter and that it would have no place in his New World.

“That is what I feel like,” she said violently. “It’s not a laughing matter. I can’t go home. I haven’t a penny and to-morrow I shall be without a roof to my head.”

“Why can’t you come home?”

“Because my work and my interests are here.”

“Will you come to our hotel for a day or two and talk over your plans with Luke and me?”

“Why should I? We haven’t a common language. We live on different planes. Luke is a capitalist: and you’ve never earned your bread.”

As she finished speaking Tcherikov came up to us and addressed Hester without recognising me.

“I’ve had enough of this,” he said.

“So have I,” said Hester and got up. So did I.

“I must be able to see you after to-morrow,” I said. “What address will find you?”

“I’ll let you know,” she said evasively and moved off with Tcherikov by her side.

CHAPTER XXVII

I felt most uneasy and before I left the studio I got hold of Weekes and asked her whether she knew where Hester was going next day. But she only looked at me gloomily and said that she was not in Hester's confidence.

"But she must leave an address for letters," I suggested.

"You don't trouble about letters when you burn your boats," said Weekes.

"Is Hester going to burn her boats?"

"Well, it is burning her boats, isn't it, for a girl like Hester. She has never really been one of us. Once a bourgeoisie always a bourgeoisie, I suppose, and she won't realise that when you burn your boats you can't get back. What is she going to do when Tcherikov drops her? I told her this morning that her family would cast her off and that she would be in the gutter, but she said she couldn't look ahead as far as that and that if you missed your great opportunities they never came again."

"Meaning Tcherikov?"

"Yes."

"They are going away together?"

"They can't go away. They've no money."

"Hester leaves you to-morrow?"

"That is the idea: and if she is twenty-one nobody can stop her."

"I must stop her," I said.

"They will just flop about together till they fall out and then where will Hester be? Tcherikov never marries them. He doesn't believe in it. He says his ideals discountenance marriage and that it enslaves women."

"What do you mean by 'them'?"

"Tcherikov's women. He's as changeable as the weather."

"I can't understand how any of you can endure him."

"You haven't heard him talk about his ideals. He is a most persuasive speaker and his promises are marvellous. He describes a world in which any

one would be glad to live.”

“I could do that myself,” I said, and when the young man in plus fours came up to Weekes and asked her to dance, I found Luke and told him that I was ready to go. So we thanked Cockles for a pleasant evening and departed. When we were in our taxi I told Luke and Martha what Weekes had said to me and how I wished I could get hold of Hester this moment and carry her home.

“But you can’t,” said Martha. “You don’t even know where she is.”

“I’m boiling inside,” I said, quoting Melinda again. “I shan’t sleep. I don’t know how I can wait. I want to find the child and not let her go.”

Luke had hardly spoken yet, but when we got back to our hotel he persuaded me to go to bed. He said that Hester had told him that she was separating from Weekes next day, because he had asked her to lunch and she had said she would be too busy packing up and looking for a new room to make any engagement. He had suggested her coming to our hotel for a day or two and she had not talked of gas-ovens to him, but had been evasive and unsatisfactory. He agreed that we must act with energy to-morrow but did not think we could do anything to-night. That was all he said but, of course, I knew what he meant. If Hester was with Tcherikov she might be anywhere and we could not find her and if she went back to Weekes so far so good.

When you are in great distress of mind, inaction is unbearable. I would rather have gone to Hester’s room and waited there till she came; or have hunted London for her if she did not come. But I had to keep control of myself and go to bed, partly because at the back of my mind I was remembering all the time that even face to face with Hester I might fail. None of us could compel her to leave Tcherikov and she had just the temperament to think the world well lost for love and to take a knave for a lover. I wished Nicholas was with me. I was tempted to ring him up even at that late hour and tell him to come at once but I didn’t do it. By the time he could reach us the next day would be nearly over and we should know what it had brought forth.

I was earlier than usual and had my breakfast by myself. I left a note for Martha to say that I was going to see Hester and that I would either be back at the hotel for lunch or ring her up at one and tell her what I was doing. I was stupid to be so impatient. When I got to the house the landlady said that Weekes and Hester were there, she supposed, but would probably not be awake till midday and that she didn’t like their goings on and meant to tell them so. Coming in at all hours and then lying in bed half the day so that

their room couldn't be done till tea time. Scandalous, she called it, and she didn't like the people they brought there either. Young women dressed up as men and men no better than play actors by the look of them. Which she was a respectable woman with palpitations and she didn't want no police affairs, not in her house, she didn't.

I got away from her and went upstairs to Hester's room. No one answered when I knocked at the door so I opened it softly and went in. Both girls were fast asleep, Weekes with her mouth open and Hester looking a little flushed and very young. She opened her eyes drowsily, saw me, rubbed them as a child does, stared round at the untidy room and asked me the time. Our voices waked Weekes too, so she sat up in bed and stared too.

"But why have you come so early?" said Hester.

"I wanted to make sure of you," I said. "I want to take you back with me."

"I'm sorry, but I can't come."

"Just for the day, Hester."

She shook her head and looked at me defiantly.

"I'm booked for the day. I told you so last night."

"But you are leaving here."

"May be. May be not. I don't know yet."

"But I must know where to find you."

"Why must you? Anyhow it's impossible because I shall be out and about looking for new quarters."

"By yourself."

"May be. May be not."

"You're a fool, Hester," said Weekes. Both girls were sitting up in bed now, both had tousled heads and both had lighted cigarettes and were smoking them. Hester put on an expression I had known on her face since she could toddle; an expression of dumb, stubborn resistance. The only way to deal with her in this mood was to leave her alone till she came out of it. But how could I do that under the circumstances? Perhaps if Weekes had not been there I might have made some further appeal to her, but as it was I felt hindered and embarrassed.

“You told me yesterday that you had no money,” I said, opening my bag and taking out a case with treasury notes in it.

“Money! You people think of everything in terms of money. We think of everything in terms of work. There will be no money soon. Those who work will be fed. Those who won’t will be forced to, and let me tell you that they’ll get the worst jobs.”

“Don’t rave in that silly way,” I said for I was getting angry. “You’re in London and when you want your dinner you’ll have to pay for it. Do you owe anything here?”

She looked at Weekes but would not answer me.

“We’re about a week behind,” said Weekes. “But I owe Hester two pounds. I haven’t got it.”

I asked one or two more questions and finally left Hester five pounds, as the girls were evidently in debt to their landlady and to some of the neighbouring shops for small sums.

“Will you promise to let me have your new address some time to-day?” I said, getting up to go.

I knew it was of no use to say this. There was a blank wall between my child and me for the moment and I could not reach her. I stood there frozen and thought again that if only Weekes would leave us I could speak more intimately and warmly to Hester and at any rate let her see that I was in distress on her account. But Weekes was not a perceptive person and I could not very well ask her to go away because there was nowhere for her to go unless she dressed herself: and neither Hester nor she seemed inclined to do that while I was there. So I left them, after telling Hester that I should be in our hotel till three o’clock and that I hoped she would come to lunch there or at any rate give me her new address as soon as possible.

“We must keep in touch,” I said as if it was a matter of course, but Hester’s face remained shut up and irresponsive. I got back to the hotel with a heavy sense of failure and wondering what I had left undone that I should have done. Luke and Martha were both out, so I wrote letters to Celia and Nancy, but I wrote guardedly. I thought if we got Hester back the less said the better and that if we did not, they would know soon enough what had happened to her.

When I had written my letters I tried to read but I found I could not fix my mind. I wished Luke and Martha would come back. I wondered if I had been a fool to give Hester money. I wondered what she was doing and what

would happen to her before to-morrow. I wondered whether Tcherikov could be made to marry her and what would be the good of it if he did. I had a mind to go and see Cockles. I repented having come away from Hester. I ought to have refused to do it. I ought to have stayed with her whether she wanted me or not. But she would have given me the slip sooner or later. I walked up and down the room as a Polar bear walks up and down his cage. I sat by the fire. I stared out of the window. I had lunch by myself and then came upstairs again. It was three o'clock before Luke and Martha came in and by that time I was in such a fever of anxiety and impatience that I poured out my heart to them before they could speak. I told them that Hester was going heaven knows where that very day, that no one could stop her and that we should have to get hold of Tcherikov and be thankful if he would marry her. Luke listened without saying much and then he suggested that I should go with him at once and see Cockles. She might put us in touch with some one who knew where to find Tcherikov. It was an idea I had had myself, so Luke and I went to her studio at once and luckily found her in. Her view of the situation was not ours, but she did her best to help us. She said that naturally two people as advanced as Tcherikov and Hester would not allow any one to interfere with them but that we could but try. She advised us to go to the club Hester had described to me and try to get hold of some of Tcherikov's friends or enemies. Luke said that club officials would not give the address of members to strangers, but Cockles said this was not an ordinary Club and it had no officials. It was just a hired garret and if we walked in and asked for Tcherikov we might have the luck to find some one who was thirsting for his blood and would give him away. She said that most of the members were foreigners and that if we liked she would come with us and interpret as she was a good linguist herself.

"Besides," she said, looking at us pensively, "they would get a fright when they saw you and shut the door in your face. Some of them know me."

So Cockles came with us and we drove to a slum in Houndsditch, where we stopped at a tumbledown house and told our taxi to wait for us. The street was alive with evil-looking loafers, frowsy women and dirty children, specimens of the proletariat Tcherikov hoped would follow him when his "bloody baboonery" began. The thought of Hester in this street was horrible and I hurried into the house and after Cockles up the dilapidated staircase. When we got to the third floor she knocked at a door and looked in. We saw a smallish room furnished with an old kitchen table and a few shabby wooden chairs. The wall paper was faded and torn, the carpetless floor was black with dirt, there was no fire in the small neglected grate, the window was shut and the air was thick with tobacco smoke. Two men sat there

playing dominoes and both of them looked to me as forlorn and sodden as the poor creatures who pace the streets with sandwich boards or lean against workhouse walls at night waiting for admittance. Their boots were split at the toes and their coats were torn and faded. Their hands were grimy and one of them had not shaved for days. The other had a black beard and angry black eyes. He looked up when we went in, recognised Cockles, stared past her at us and started to his feet.

“Herr Liebmann,” said Cockles, introducing him, and then turning to the unshaved man she asked him his name.

“Who are you?” he said rudely, and before she could answer he added, “I have no name. I am the Destroyer.”

“Oh! very well,” said Cockles cheerfully. “Mrs. Brooke, Mr. Hardacre, meet the Destroyer.”

“But why do you come here? Why do you bring these bourgeois to us?” said Herr Liebmann suspiciously. “What do you want?”

“We want Tcherikov,” said Cockles.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The Destroyer leapt to his feet and shook his bony fist in our faces.

“You are friends of his,” he screamed in a foreign accent, “I haf always said it. Tcherikov, as he calls himself, is a bourgeois.”

“Oh! don’t say that,” murmured Luke.

“But I do say it. I haf no opinion of him. When the Day comes I shall see that he is kept quiet if I haf to do it with my own hands.”

He gave a lifelike imitation of pressing his broad turned-back thumbs into Tcherikov’s throat and, I suppose, stifling him.

“But what do you know about him?” said Cockles.

“Enough!” growled the man suspiciously.

“I like him,” said Cockles, going farther into the room, perching on one corner of the table and crossing her slim trousered legs. “He often comes to see me and tells me all he is going to do when he has seized London and is at the head of everything.”

I thought the Destroyer was going to have a fit. He made choking noises in his throat, tried to speak but from excess of emotion found he could not. So he made tearing movements at his shirt with his claw-like hands, as if he needed air. Herr Liebmann looked very much annoyed too, got red in the face and pointed to himself significantly.

“It is I who shall be the Head,” he said. “That is sure.”

The Destroyer trampled on the floor with both feet and swept the dominoes from the table with the fury of a child.

“That is what will happen,” he screamed.

They then spoke to each other violently in a tongue none of us understood and shook their fists in each other’s faces; but they quietened down a bit when Cockles got out her cigarette case and offered it round. A moment later all three of them were smoking.

“We want to go and see Tcherikov,” said Cockles when the cigarettes were well alight.

“Why do you say Tcherikov?” said the Destroyer, getting excited again. “He is not a Russian. His name is Grimes and his home is in Fulham.”

“Yes, I know all that,” said Cockles calmly and mendaciously. I really admired her very much that afternoon and have felt warmly to her ever since, for we could have done nothing with those two ruffians ourselves.

“He has asked us to tea,” continued Cockles, looking at her cigarette.

“Then why are you here? Houndsditch is not Fulham.”

“He forgot to give us his address: so I came here for it.”

“How are we to know that you are telling the truth?” inquired Liebmann.

“Look at us,” said Cockles.

“We can find it in a Post Office Directory,” suggested Luke, who had not sat down and who made a movement now as if to go.

“That is so,” said Liebmann, eyeing the Destroyer. “If they try every one of the name of Grimes in Fulham they may not arrive in time for tea, but they will arrive.”

“Tea!” snorted the Destroyer. “He asks the bourgeoisie to tea. He lives at 5 Laburnum Street and pays taxes. At least the bourgeoisie, who is his wife, does. I spit upon him. You may tell him that I, the Destroyer, spit upon him. He is under the slipper of his wife. She objected to me, I did not please her senses.”

I have to record with regret that the Destroyer did not please mine either and I was surprised to hear Cockles tell him that if he liked to sit for her she would pay him so much an hour. He was blowing his nose in a primitive way when she said so and she told me that she wanted him for the central figure in a street scene at night, in just that attitude. Herr Liebmann said that for the moment they were both hard pressed for cash and that he would sit for Cockles too, if she liked. We found that they had no fixed address except this Club and no fixed employment. Liebmann, who was evidently a man of some education and whose clothes hung together, had just lost a job in a match factory and the Destroyer said that he sometimes acted as caretaker in an empty house but that lately he had not been able to get one. He did not say what he had done instead. Luke gave them each a little money before he left so that they could get a meal and a bed for the night. After that Cockles went back to her studio and by the time Luke and I got to Laburnum Street it was five o'clock and nearly dark. But we could see that No. 5 was a two-storied small house in a row, with a bow window on the ground floor and

white lace curtains. The tiny front garden had a grass plot and a gravel path and there were three very clean stone steps going up to the front door. In the fanlight there was a card offering APARTMENTS so we knew that Tcherikov's wife let lodgings. We rang the bell and it was answered at once by a tidy-looking woman who stared at the three of us and beyond us at our taxi.

"I have one sitting-room and one bedroom with two beds," she said, "but I only take gentlemen who are engaged in the City. Ladies give too much trouble."

"Are you Mrs. Grimes?" asked Luke.

"That's my name."

She was a youngish, pleasant-looking woman with fair hair, a plump, short figure and blue eyes. But though she was pleasant-looking she was determined. You could hear that in her voice. She was suspicious too and kept us standing on the doorstep while Luke explained that we did not want rooms but had come to see her.

"But I don't know you," she said.

However, she opened the door to us then and showed us into the sitting-room with the bay window and lighted the gas. There was no fire. Everything was as clean and tidy as it could be. In the window there was a small fringed plush table with a large aspidistra on it. There was one large chair and there were six small ones covered with slippery imitation leather. There was a varnished chiffonier with a glass at the back and a double cupboard below. A large round centre table nearly filled the room and had a flowery chenille cloth on it. There were a great many family photographs in fancy frames and all about there were the kind of china knick-knacks you see offered as prizes in shooting booths at fairs.

"This is the room I let to City gentlemen," she said and I thought of some lonely, tired clerk coming back at the end of his day's work to such a chamber of horrors for his home. If I had been compelled to live in it I should have wanted to treat the china and the photographs as the Destroyer treated the dominoes. I could not imagine any of the three advanced ones at ease there for an hour, or Mrs. Grimes admitting two people as dirty and out at elbows as those we had left in the Club.

"May I inquire how it is that you are aware of my name?" she said, still on her guard and as genteel as the aspidistra.

"We know your husband," said Luke.

“What’s the trouble now?” she said, forgetting to be genteel. She looked startled and anxious at once when her husband was mentioned, and she plumped down on one of the small slippery chairs as if her knees were giving way.

“We should like to speak to him,” said Luke.

“So should I,” said Mrs. Grimes. “Very much indeed. But I haven’t seen him for a week. Where is he?”

“We don’t know,” said Luke.

“We must find him,” I said anxiously, and Mrs. Grimes taking stock of me pursed her lips as if she wanted to whistle. But she spoke instead.

“What’s he up to now?” she said. “A woman again, I suppose.”

Her accent when she spoke naturally was common, but not as unpleasing as when she tried to live up to the *aspidistra* and distorted all her vowels. Her hands were large and red and coarsened by hard work. She put one on each knee and stared at us defiantly, but in spite of her pugnacious manner there was a good deal about her that I liked.

“I sometimes ‘oblige,’” she said suddenly. “Mr. Grimes objects, but what I say is, let him. I’m a good cook. You won’t believe it p’raps, but I can get three guineas a week. When I’m away Mrs. Murphy does for him and he hates it. I should hate it myself, but I ask you what am I to do?”

She paused for a reply, but none of us answered her.

Luke evidently did not follow her narrative, but Martha and I both understood what she was telling us, because we knew that to oblige is the genteel euphemism for taking odd jobs of work.

“You should have seen the house when I got back to it yesterday,” she said. “You could scrape the dirt off everywhere with a knife. I been away four weeks this time and I knew it was a risk. Mr. Grimes is always a gentleman, but he wants a lot of looking after. When I’m at home I can do it, but there it is. One of us has got to bring in a bit. I have a little of my own, but not enough for both of us. Gentlemen are expensive.”

She sighed and then went on again.

“I might have married a fishmonger,” she said. “I should have been spared a lot of trouble. Not but that I’m happy with Mr. Grimes when I have him under my eye. But he isn’t what you can call a domestic man at any time. More like a tom cat than anything else, I tell him. Fond of a roof and a

few lady friends. As for his men friends, I won't have them here and that's that. Dirty furreners."

"Do you know that your husband calls himself Tcherikov?" said Luke.

"He may please himself as to that. His name in this house is Henry Grimes and I have my marriage lines to prove it."

"I suppose you know that he is a violent revolutionist."

"I know he's a silly fool, but I got to make the best of him and keep him straight if I can. I had the fright of my life when your taxi stopped here. 'That's the police for Henry,' I said to myself, 'and he away.'"

"We are most anxious to find him because we think my daughter is with him," I said then.

"What's your daughter got to do with Henry?"

That was such a difficult question to answer that I hesitated and Luke spoke instead.

"We don't wish her to have anything to do with him," he said, "but they have been seeing a great deal of each other lately and now they have disappeared. Until half an hour ago we didn't even know that Mr. Grimes was married."

"When he's on the roof he keeps it dark," said Mrs. Grimes gloomily. "Sometimes I wonder why I trouble about him, but he comes back again and again and gets over me. Mr. Grimes is a very fascinating man when he chooses and the way he appreciates my cooking goes to a woman's heart. Well, what do you want me to do about it? I suppose your daughter is old enough to take care of herself."

"Your husband has very odd ideas," I said.

"Don't I know it?"

"We hoped you would help us to find him."

"Has your daughter got any money? Because Mr. Grimes hasn't."

"How do you know?"

"I know him."

"I gave my daughter five pounds this morning," I said.

"Well that was a soft thing to do, under the circumstances," said Mrs. Grimes, and Luke looked as if he thought so too; so I explained that I gave

Hester the money to pay her debts.

While we talked, I could see that Mrs. Grimes was turning over an idea in her head and I hoped it was one that would shortly lead to action. We told her about our interview with Liebmann and the Destroyer and she told us what she thought of them. It seemed to relieve her mind.

“I did once fetch him away from a little pub in Soho,” she said. “Not a place for a lady at all and so I told him when I got him home. But you can’t argue with Mr. Grimes. He takes no notice.”

“What’s the name of the pub?” I asked eagerly.

“Haven’t the faintest, but I could find it.”

“Will you come with us?”

“You won’t get Mr. Grimes if I don’t, or your daughter either. He can talk a donkey’s head off when he starts. I’ve heard him myself. That’s how he gets hold of them. But what I say is let a girl look out for herself. Then there’d be no harm done. Though, of course, if he tells her he isn’t married you can’t exactly blame her either.”

“He doesn’t believe in marriage,” said Luke.

“Oh! doesn’t he?” said Mrs. Grimes. “We’ll see about that; if he’s there.”

CHAPTER XXIX

We dismissed the taxi and waited a moment outside the pub, letting Mrs. Grimes precede us. After a little parley with the proprietor and the transference of a Treasury note that Luke had said might be useful, she came back to us with a look of success on her determined face.

“They’re there,” she said. “At least the young lady is. Mr. Grimes is out for the moment.”

We went inside and a stout, showily-dressed woman with dyed hair and puffy dissipated features took stock of us.

“It’s irregular,” she said, in a bullying way.

“You won’t get any more,” interposed Mrs. Grimes. “You do what you’ve said you’ll do or I’ll bring in the police.”

“There’s the staircase,” she said, pointing to a dark, dirty one. “I’m busy,” and she turned her broad back on us. But at the mention of police she had looked at Mrs. Grimes as if she hoped she would fall down the stairs and break her neck. She was a horrible type and I wondered how Hester could have allowed any one to take her to such a place as this even for an hour. Mrs. Grimes had been wise enough to bring a flashlight, so we got to the top of the dilapidated stairs safely and found ourselves in a narrow, dirty passage with several doors. Mrs. Grimes tried one and found it locked. She tried a second and shut it quickly.

“Hadn’t we better knock?” said Luke in a low voice.

But Mrs. Grimes had opened a third door and there in a squalid bedroom sat Hester doing nothing. What her thoughts were I cannot tell you, but she had been crying. I saw that as she got up hurriedly and then stood still, hardly believing her eyes. The gas was lighted. There was one iron bedstead in the room with a dirty counterpane. On the floor there was a patch of ragged carpet. There was a small battered washstand with a broken jug in a cracked basin, and there was the cane chair on which Hester had been sitting when we came. A torn blind hung half across the window. Hester’s suitcase had not been unpacked.

“This is Mrs. Grimes, Hester,” I said, not knowing quite what to say. The three of us seemed to fill the room and not in any sense belong to it. Hester had not spoken yet, but she had risen and confronted us as a naughty child

might when it knows itself to be in the wrong but will not admit it. Her magnetic self-willed eyes met ours without repentance or even affection. It was plain that she resented our coming.

“Why are you here?” she said. “How did you find me?”

“I found you,” said Mrs. Grimes, coming forward. “I’ve been here before. It was a young married woman last time.”

“I think you had better go again,” said Hester after a moment’s quivering pause. She spoke to us all but she looked at Mrs. Grimes.

“Don’t you want to know who I am?”

“No,” said Hester. “Why should I?”

“Why should you? A young lady like you, brought to a low place like this by a married man. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and if no one else is going to tell you so, I am. When I was young you’d have been taken home and whipped and that’s what you deserve. You’re old enough to know better. Interfering with another woman’s husband, indeed. Shameful, I call it.”

This was not the way to move Hester, and I looked at Luke hoping that he would stop Mrs. Grimes’s too voluble tongue: but he was listening gravely and did not interfere. He told me later that he thought it would do Hester no harm to hear what her conduct looked like to a respectable woman of a different class from her own.

“I have engaged this room, and I shall be glad if you will go out of it,” said Hester, her eyes as angry as a cat’s and her manner ominously quiet.

“I’ll go out of it when my husband goes with me and not before,” said Mrs. Grimes, placing her solid body against the wall.

“Perhaps you don’t understand,” said Luke. “Tcherikov is an alias. He and this lady are Mr. and Mrs. Grimes.”

“Really!” said Hester. “What then?”

“Now, that’s a nice thing for me to hear and the likes of you to say!” cried Mrs. Grimes, and she appealed to us with a glance that almost had a twinkle in it in spite of her wrath. “It’s plain to me that you don’t know what you’re talking about. If you think I’m going to divorce Mr. Grimes you’re mistaken. I wouldn’t trust him to a chit like you. Besides, how are you going to live? Got money of your own, have you?”

“No,” said Luke, as Hester did not answer, “Miss Brooke has no money of her own.”

“Nor has Mr. Grimes,” said his wife. “Only what I give him. So there you are, young lady.”

“He is seeing his organisation at this moment,” said Hester. “If they decide to pay him . . .”

“They won’t,” said Mrs. Grimes with decision. “I know ’em; and they know Grimes. Organisation! What you think they’re going to organise? I wouldn’t trust ’em with a Sunday school treat.”

“You don’t understand!” said Hester with weary patience. “They are organising a revolution.”

“Let ’em,” said Mrs. Grimes. “Not that I want Mr. Grimes in gaol. The food wouldn’t suit him.”

“We are wasting time,” said Hester. “I’m sorry about your husband, but he belongs to me.”

“That’s where you make a mistake.”

“We shall work for our living.”

“Not Grimes. He never has worked and he never will.”

“And such a word as marriage has no meaning for us. We disregard it.”

“Ain’t you ashamed of yourself, talking like that before your mother and this gentleman? What you think you’re going to do in a week or two when Mr. Grimes is tired of you and comes back to me with his tail between his legs. How’ll you like going home with his child inside you? Excuse my coarse tongue, but you got to put the dots on the ‘i’s’ with any one as silly as you, and that’s a fact. You don’t like it, do you? But you’d like it less if it happened, which I hope it won’t, thanks to your mother and me.”

Hester had turned very white. She had been living in such a cloud of words and wild prophecy that a sudden reminder of realities brought her unpleasantly to earth. It was one thing to be the proud companion of the Red Dictator and another to go back to her home deserted and disgraced, and Mrs. Grimes seemed to be very sure of herself. I could see that Hester wavered; and before she spoke the door was pushed open and Tcherikov joined us. For a moment he stood on the threshold of the room staring at us blankly and saying not a word.

“Yes; it’s me. You may well stare!” said his wife, breaking the silence. “What you got to say for yourself? Working my fingers to the bone for you and no sooner am I away on a job than you start these games. That’s what comes of marrying a gentleman when I might’ve had a fishmonger. If I had my choice over again I’d know what to do, and you’d be in the workhouse by this time unless there’s others as soft as me which I believe there is, and what we see in you I don’t know.”

“Oh! do be quiet,” cried Hester. “Your tongue’s enough to drive a man mad.”

“I’ll thank you to keep a civil one in your head when addressing me,” said Mrs. Grimes indignantly. “I done nothing to be ashamed of, which is more than can be said for some of us in this room—if you can call it a room. A filthy hole would be my name for it.”

“I wish you would all go away,” said Hester, not looking at us but at Mrs. Grimes. “I want to speak to your husband.”

“Certainly not,” said Mrs. Grimes. “If you ask me there’s been a deal too much speaking already. Bringing a young lady to a den of wickedness like this and him a married man. I’m ashamed of him, I am.”

“We shall never make them see our point of view,” said Hester to Tcherikov, who, in spite of his scowl, was looking extraordinarily sheepish.

“They keep harping on marriage; but they can do nothing. I’m of age.”

I believe that if Tcherikov had taken Hester masterfully by the hand at that moment and led her away she would have followed him to perdition, and it is true that none of us could have stopped them. She looked at him and her look was an invitation. He hesitated.

“I beg your pardon,” said Mrs. Grimes, not putting her arms akimbo, but giving us the impression that she would do so if driven to it. “Mr. Grimes is coming back with me to supper and I’ll do any speaking there is to do when we are by ourselves. If you think you’re going to carry off my lawful husband under my very nose you little know me.”

“How did they get here?” said Tcherikov, speaking for the first time. “Who gave them this address?”

“You never told me you were married,” said Hester. “They went to your club and were told there.”

“Traitors,” said Tcherikov.

“Come, Hester,” said Luke, picking up her suitcase and speaking with decision. “We will leave Mr. Grimes to his wife.”

“That’s right,” said Mrs. Grimes, and she opened the door wide for us. I saw Hester look at Tcherikov before she moved, but he would not meet her eyes. When she saw that he was not going to stand by her she came with us, holding her head high and not speaking to him again. Nor did she speak to us of what had happened. I think the squalor of that room as well as Mrs. Grimes’ outspokenness had given her a violent shock and brought her to her senses. Then her hero had not behaved like a hero, or even like a firebrand. He had gone back to his smug little house with his wife and allowed her to lecture him and give him his supper. I am sure that Hester’s imagination followed him there as clearly as mine did, although she had not seen the room with the walnut suite and the aspidistra.

Next day we went back to Porthlew and I told Nicholas, but no one else, of what had happened in London. We were both determined that Hester should not go back there by herself, and looked out rather anxiously for signs of her wishing it. But for the moment she seemed glad to be at home again.

Until Christmas she was often with Celia at Rosecassa helping her to rearrange the house and apparently enjoying it. I used to find the sisters busy over samples of curtain stuffs and cretonnes or heavy books of wallpapers, and sometimes I know that when we looked at each other the same picture was in our minds. We both saw that bedroom in Soho and Hester waiting there, her suitcase at her feet.

CHAPTER XXX

The winter was uneventful. There were not many gaieties, because of the King's illness. After Christmas, as there was a plague of influenza, and although we had less snow than other parts of England, we were cold. But Aunt Bethia read in the daily papers that we were warm and sunny and that our gardens were full of flowers. So early in February, when she could not get out of her house till a way had been cut through the snow, she decided to come and see us, and she certainly helped us to bear our own ills by telling us how much worse things were in Yorkshire. Of course, she was proud of what Yorkshire could do in the way of weather and despised us for having nothing but a frost and an east wind; and just to show how soft our climate was she went out in a thin coat and got a bad chill.

At first she refused to have a doctor, because she said that Weaver understood her constitution and knew what to do, and when I insisted on one she said she would have Dr. Netherby or no one. I had never heard of Dr. Netherby, but Aunt Bethia said that he came from the north and that Mrs. Wotherspoon's youngest daughter had married his cousin. These seemed to me inadequate reasons for passing over our old friend, Dr. Little, and calling in a stranger, but Aunt Bethia took the matter out of our hands by sending Weaver to Dr. Netherby with an urgent message.

"I've seen him," said Weaver gloomily to me. "He's nowt but a lad and he's got red hair. I'm sorry for him."

"Why are you sorry for him?" I asked.

"It'll take more than a lad like him to tackle the mistress," said Weaver; "she's that fractious."

But you know what happens in such cases. Aunt Bethia, who certainly led poor Weaver a life, took a fancy to the red-haired young doctor and soon said that he was the most intelligent man in Porthlew. I don't know how she arrived at this, as she had few acquaintances in Porthlew, but perhaps she was comparing him with George Vincent and Bill Cleveland, both of whom she considered rather stupid. Dr. Netherby soon pulled her round, but she did not wish to lose sight of him on this account, and when she came downstairs again she suggested that we should ask him to dinner.

"What about his wife?" I said.

“He isn’t married,” said Aunt Bethia. “But he is in love with Jane.”

I was so startled that I dropped a lump of coal I was about to put on the fire, and Aunt Bethia said she wished I would consider her nerves, which were not as strong as usual. When I had picked up the lump and put it on the fire I asked her what she meant.

“I always mean what I say. Doctor Netherby is in love with Jane.”

“Has he told you so?”

“Certainly not. Why should he?”

“But are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“What about Jane?”

“She is not in love with him; but that doesn’t matter. He’ll marry her. He’s that kind of young man. He’ll be Sir Frederick before he’s forty and Jane will walk in to dinner before her sisters.”

I really wondered Aunt Bethia didn’t go a little further and sketch the careers of the future Sir Frederick’s future children. I had seen hardly anything of the young man myself, but I agreed to ask him to dinner, although I did not believe for a moment that he would marry Jane unless she herself wished it.

“Does he play bridge?” I asked, and I was told that there was nothing he did not do and that whatever he set his hand to he did well. In fact, he was one of Aunt Bethia’s swans, and she told me that Mrs. Wotherspoon would have liked him for her youngest daughter, but had put up with his cousin instead because the young doctor had not had his mind on marriage at the time. He was the second son of a well-to-do manufacturer and would come into money: and his mother had been a Middleton: so that on one side he had blood, on the other money, and to his own credit, character and brains. It sounded good enough. But I did not say a word to Nicholas, because he laughs at Aunt Bethia’s matchmaking and would rather I did not lend an ear to it. He thought we were asking Doctor Netherby to dinner because he was a Yorkshireman and hoped he played a good hand at bridge. We had Bill and Celia to meet him, but he certainly had no eyes for any one but Jane. He was a cheerful, well-mannered boy with freckles and a firm chin, but he was not as good-looking as the men our other daughters had married, nor nearly as tall. I could not see that Jane took him seriously, and after dinner at bridge

she would not have played at the same table if Aunt Bethia had not contrived it rather too markedly for my taste. He played well.

After this he came in and out of the house a good deal and was soon on friendly terms with George and Bill, regarding them no doubt as his future brothers-in-law. Nancy liked him too, and was inclined to take Aunt Bethia's view of his prospects and his qualities. So the stage was set for yet another marriage in the family, and I hoped that at last Aunt Bethia would admit that we were doing as well as Mrs. Wotherspoon. I thought I should like to hear her say so, and one afternoon when we were sitting over the fire together I talked about Hester and Sally and hoped that they would not be leaving us yet.

"There's many a slip between the cup and the lip," said Aunt Bethia. "You still have three girls at home, Elizabeth, and for anything you do they might be there for ever."

"But three are married," I reminded her.

"What's the matter with Hester? Why is she so mopey? Has she had a disappointment?"

I really could not tell Aunt Bethia about Hester, and as one question leads to another I tried to put her off by coming back to Jane. I said that I did not feel certain that she was thinking of Doctor Netherby.

"That don't matter," said Aunt Bethia briskly. "He's thinking of her. If it was the other way about I'd worry."

"The girls of to-day are so independent."

"Not a bit of it. No more than I was myself when I was Jane's age. There's a lot of nonsense talked about that. The chief difference between them and me is in their stockings, and that fashion won't last. I'm quite satisfied about Jane, but I should like to find the right man for Hester."

However, a day or two later, when Doctor Netherby came in to see Aunt Bethia, she had a shock. He told her that he was leaving Porthlew at once to set up in Harley Street and he said nothing about Jane.

"I can't understand it," said Aunt Bethia to me. "I said what I could to put him at his ease and gain his confidence, but when I told him he would want a wife, he shut up like an oyster."

I was not surprised at that, but I wondered myself what had happened, for there was no doubt that the young man was very much attracted by Jane, and when Aunt Bethia announced his imminent departure at dinner that

night the girl seemed to know all about it and blushed. But she too could behave like an oyster when Aunt Bethia was about, because although we were all attached to the old lady, we wished she would mind her own business and not be quite so determined to take ours in hand too. I had an unexpected light on what was happening next day when I met Doctor Netherby in the High Street, and he said cheerfully that he was going to London, but that he would be back before long and that he hoped I should be glad to see him.

“Why not?” I said, a little puzzled by his way of putting it.

“You’re on my side then?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Come into my car for two minutes and I’ll tell you. There are too many people about at your house. That had something to do with it the other day.”

I got into the car and he drove out of town on to a quiet main road before he said anything. I was wondering what he had to say and why he wanted to tell me about it. However, he did not keep me waiting long and he went straight to the point.

“I want to marry Jane,” he said.

I asked him if she knew it.

“Yes,” he said. “She knows it. I proposed to her the other day and she refused me.”

I said “Oh!” in a kind voice. I didn’t know what else to say and I was sure he hadn’t finished.

“It doesn’t matter,” he went on. “I shall do it again. In fact, I shall keep on till she takes me.”

“I don’t believe in that,” I said.

“I do, in this case. We were both rather hurried and flurried the other day. Next time I shall choose my opportunity more carefully. We were in the dining-room in your house and if people peeped in once and went away again they did it half a dozen times. And Miss Ramsbotham was in the drawing-room and Sally was in that little glass-house. Perhaps it will be warmer weather when I try my luck again and we can be out of doors. I’m not at all downhearted as long as there’s no one else. I thought you could tell me.”

“I know of no one else,” I said.

“I’m all right, you know, Mrs. Brooke. I can afford to marry and I’m keen about my work and I’m very much in love with Jane.”

“Why did she refuse you?”

“She didn’t give a reason. She laughed and said she didn’t want to get married yet. Do you think Miss Ramsbotham can have been at her?”

“At her!”

“Telling her to do it whether she wants me or not. That would be enough to choke her off, wouldn’t it?”

“It certainly would: but I don’t think Miss Ramsbotham has spoken of you to Jane: although she has a very high opinion of you and would probably welcome you into the family.”

“Oh, yes,” said the young man. “She as much as said so to me yesterday. But I don’t want any one except you to know how Jane and I stand. I thought you might be a favourable influence without exactly arguing about it. I want to do my own arguing when I come back.”

“No one else can do it,” I assured him. “I’ve interfered to stop a daughter’s marriage, but I’ve never tried to push them into one. I shouldn’t mind if Jane and Hester were at home for years.”

“I won’t be years,” said the young man confidently. “More likely months.”

“You are very sure of yourself.”

“Yes, I am; and Jane is not sure. That’s where it is, you see.”

I didn’t quite see eye to eye with him, but I liked him very much, so I left it at that. I was to exert a “favourable influence” and he was to come back and do his own arguing. And I was not to say a word to Aunt Bethia.

CHAPTER XXXI

Aunt Bethia stayed on with us. Doctor Netherby left Porthlew. Hester made some new friends who were of a different calibre from Cockles and Weekes, for they worked so hard in their studios that they felt obliged to leave the regeneration of the world to others. Martha and Nancy were both in hope, as the Germans say, and Celia was occupied with a series of dinner parties in return for those at which Bill and she had been guests of honour during the winter. Jane was not fretting and as far as I could see did not regret having sent the future Sir Frederick about his business. I wondered what would come of that affair and I wondered what I should do without Jane when she did marry. She was a child who helped to smooth over the little rough places of life and every one in the house turned to her. She was busy from morning till night, both for herself and for others, and she was so even tempered that Hester when moody could snap at her and not get a snap back. She did not make any impression of saintliness, because one does not associate laughter with saints, or a healthy interest in clothes, or a liking for outdoor exercise and games. She was a merry comfortable little creature and when Nicholas wished to annoy her he called her the Sunbeam. But you see what I mean. No one would ever call Hester a Sunbeam, and as for Sally, she was growing so fast and becoming so troublesome at home that we had decided to send her to school in the autumn. When Ambrose was back for the holidays these two younger ones turned the house into a bear garden, and it was always Hester who scrapped with them and Jane who exercised a little diplomacy and got them out of our way. Aunt Bethia admitted all this but maintained that Jane must be a fool to have let Doctor Netherby slip through her fingers. Such a chance for a girl. But she had always said that, as a family, none of us could see a chance or take it if it stared us in the face. So different were we from Mrs. Wotherspoon.

“Perhaps he will come back,” I said.

“Never,” said Aunt Bethia, “I shall now turn my attention to somebody else for Jane.”

I did not discourage her, because when you come to Aunt Bethia’s age, you have not many amusements, and if she paid attention to some young man on Jane’s behalf he might never know what she was driving at. Doctor Netherby had known, but I hoped her methods would not be as crude with any one else as they had been with him. She had not the same chances of

seeing other young men as she had of seeing her doctor. But I ought to have known that Aunt Bethia was a woman who made her chances. In a magisterial and austere manner she actually began to angle in the time-honoured way for two brothers, who, she said, would do extremely well for Jane and Hester. They were both landowners in a small way, we had always known them, they were a good deal older than our girls and none of us had ever given them a thought matrimonially. Nor had they given our girls a thought. Presumably they wished to remain bachelors. But they came to see us occasionally and on one of these occasions Aunt Bethia, being at home by herself, received them and gave them tea. They were known as Sam and Tony to their friends, their surname was Polglase. They were well into middle age, and in the opinion of most people worthy but dull. Their interests were in their crops, their cows and their pigs. They seemed to ruminate when you tried to talk to them. They were red-faced and solidly made, lived well and in a quiet way were pillars of the church; but I had certainly never expected them to come forward as suitors for my girls, nor did I expect my girls to spend a thought on them. But when Aunt Bethia had entertained them at tea, she said that they only needed a little encouragement and that Hester would not be so unsettled if she had a home of her own and a husband to guide her. The idea of Hester being “guided” by either Sam or Tony Polglase was so funny that I had to tell Nicholas about it, and he said that he wished Aunt Bethia would leave his friends alone and not frighten them with her intentions. For Nicholas had a soft spot for Sam and Tony, who were not many years younger than he was, and he did not want them scared. However, Aunt Bethia had apparently fished for an invitation to Lanview, where the brothers lived together, and five of us were asked to tea there one Sunday soon after their visit to us. They said they proposed Sunday, because they hoped to get Nicholas too, and they certainly seemed more pleased to see him than any one else. After tea we were asked to go round the garden, but it was a cold day, so Aunt Bethia thought that we old people would rather sit by the fire. I willingly stayed with her, but Nicholas said he had not seen the garden for a long time and went with the others.

“He should have stayed with us,” said Aunt Bethia, quite put out. I knew that as she had no children of her own, she had taken ours to her heart and that she really thought the best thing you could do for a girl was to push her into matrimony. I believed in matrimony, but not in the pushing process, so Aunt Bethia always said I was apathetic and, as she said to-day, difficult to work with. She wanted me to ask Sam and Tony to lunch next Sunday, but I told her that it was not our custom to entertain each other often and that they would not expect their invitation to be returned for at least six months. So

Aunt Bethia said she would speak to Nicholas about it. The result was that the brothers did come to lunch on the following Sunday, gladly but with some surprise; and after lunch they smoked and talked to Nicholas about the Royal Cornwall Show which was to take place in Porthlew this year and which interested them intensely. This was very well, but it was not what Aunt Bethia wanted, and before they left she talked about the wild blue squills of Cornwall and arranged to go and see them on the Polglase cliffs and to take some of us with her. She managed to take Jane and Hester, and when they came back they told me that after all she had not seen the squills, because she found the walk too far and had sent them ahead with Sam and Tony. In fact her tactics were crude and her wishes obvious and I was not surprised that the brothers began to see what was expected of them and got the fright of their lives. Directly this happened they sheered off, refused Aunt Bethia's invitation, were never able to fall in with her plans, and when they met any of us elsewhere, looked away if possible. This annoyed Aunt Bethia and amused me, and one day when fate placed Sam Polglase next to me at a Godolphin tea-party I thought I would say a word if I could to relieve his mind. He gave me an opening by asking whether Miss Ramsbotham was still with us.

“Yes,” I said, “she is still with us, but she has not come to-day because there is an east wind. She is not allowed out when it is cold.”

He listened to this interesting sentence politely, sighed and said:

“She is very determined.”

“In what way?”

“I wonder she never married.”

“So do I.”

“She cannot have wished it. Otherwise . . .”

“Otherwise . . .”

“She would have fixed on a young man and married him. I have always been told that there are women like that, but I never met one before.”

“Our dear Aunt Bethia is seventy-five. She cannot be thinking of matrimony now.”

“Not for herself, perhaps, but for others.”

The “perhaps” amused me. I could see that poor Sam was rattled and I wondered what I had better say next to put him at ease.

“I don’t believe in matc-making,” I hazarded.

“Nor do I,” he answered, and he almost jumped with relief.

“The young people manage these things for themselves, as a rule. Don’t you think so?”

“Most certainly I do.”

“A man should be about four years older than his wife.”

“Exactly. That is what Tony and I think too. We have no wish to marry quite young girls. To tell the truth, we have no wish to marry at all.”

“Then on no account do it. You and Mr. Tony are very happy together at Lanview. Why not go on as you are?”

“I’m so glad you agree with us,” said Sam.

I believe that would have been the end of the matter if it had not been for Mrs. Cleveland, who was on a short visit to Bill and Celia, and who now came towards us. Sam placed a chair for her close by and without losing a moment she began to make herself agreeable.

“I hear that two more of your daughters are about to be married,” she said, looking hard at Sam. “What a clever woman you are, Mrs. Brooke. How do you manage it?”

“I know nothing about it,” I said, feeling as I always did with Mrs. Cleveland, that I was dowdy and dull.

“Not officially, as it is not announced yet, but I suppose I’m one of the family now. I shall be very glad if Hester settles down. She was with such disreputable looking people at one time. I thought she would probably go off with a Socialist. Of course, people are very ill-natured, but I heard that she took up with something still worse and that you had to go to London and rescue her.”

“Who told you so?”

“I’m not bound to answer that, am I? There is probably not a word of truth in it; but the story is in the air and I shall be glad to contradict it on your authority.”

“You may contradict the story about Hester’s marriage on my authority,” I said, trying to brace myself.

“And what about Jane?”

“I have nothing to tell you about Jane.”

“How disappointing: for you, I mean.”

“Do you like living in London?” said Sam Polglase, who was looking uncomfortable, probably because I showed that I was distressed.

“Yes, I do. There is no gossip in London. Directly I come here every one is talking about every one else.”

“Perhaps they think you want to hear the news,” said Sam, and then some diversion was made by people beginning to go and I got away with them. But on the way out Celia, whom I had hardly seen, asked me if we would all dine at Rosecassa two days later and bring Aunt Bethia. I would rather not have gone while Mrs. Cleveland was there, but I had no excuse ready and Celia seemed to want us. I reminded her that we should be five and that it would be a family invasion, but she said that she would ask four men to make the numbers even, and she suggested that Sam and Tony Polglase should be two of them. I demurred to that and she seemed to be rather surprised.

“Mrs. Cleveland says she hears it everywhere,” said Celia.

“About Sam and Tony!”

“That they are courting Jane and Hester. Yes.”

“There isn’t a word of truth in it. Aunt Bethia has been courting them and the poor lambs are scared. I should leave them be.”

“Very well,” said Celia, laughing. “We’ll have a family party.”

Other people came up to us then and I could not say anything more; but we had a surprise at breakfast two days later, for Doctor Netherby walked in just as we sat down and asked if he might have breakfast with us. He had come by train and proposed to stay in Porthlew till Sunday night, when he would have to go back to London. Nicholas said at once that we would put him up and I said that I would ring up Celia and ask if we might take him to Rosecassa. Jane said very little. Sally invited herself to stay with him in London and go to the Zoo, and proposed that after breakfast she should accompany him to Menwinion. The young man said he was going to be busy and Sally wanted to know where and how. Aunt Bethia came into the room as this was going on, and after looking at him with petrified surprise she told Sally that if she was good she would take her out shopping and give her half-a-crown to spend on herself. Sally wavered and said that she wanted to go to Menwinion to-day and have the half-crown next week. Every one seemed to be talking at once, Melinda brought in a fresh dish of bacon and eggs, Toby, entering with her, bounced on to Sally’s lap and said good-

morning so wildly that in pushing him off he upset her coffee. Doctor Netherby looked as cheerful as the spring morning, and after breakfast, when we all scattered, he took me aside and told me that he wanted to get away with Jane for the day, and that he thought of taking her to Falmouth.

“She wants to buy some bridge pencils at Woolworth’s,” he explained.

I went into Jane’s room a little later and found her getting ready for the expedition. I wanted to know whether they would be back to lunch. She said she thought not. She might be a long while at Woolworth’s. She was putting her hat on carefully and was smiling a little to herself. I wondered what would happen, and of course, when they went off together, having evaded Sally, Aunt Bethia wondered too.

“I never expected to see him again,” she said. “Did you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he told me he was coming.”

“Do you mean to say, Elizabeth, that you’ve known all this time that he meant to try his luck again and that you have kept it to yourself?”

“He made me promise not to say a word.”

“But, my dear Elizabeth, I’ve been doing my best for Jane in another direction. Now there will be disappointment there.”

“The Polglases have no wish to marry. Sam told me so at the Godolphins’ party.”

“You seem to have odd conversations with young men. Did Mr. Sam speak for his brother as well as for himself?”

“He certainly did.”

“Then what is to be done about Hester?”

“Nothing at all. I want her at home.”

“But that is so selfish. The young must leave the nest and have lives of their own. Mrs. Wotherspoon has no one at home now. She says that her work in the world is done and that she is going to enjoy herself. But, of course, she took her responsibilities seriously. You have never done that. Some of your daughters are off your hands, but I cannot see that it has been your doing. You have stood aside. You have never helped things on.”

“But I’ve helped things off,” I thought to myself, and I was tempted to tell Aunt Bethia a little about Hester and Tcherikov. However, I refrained.

CHAPTER XXXII

If Mrs. Cleveland had not been at Rosecassa I should not have minded arriving there without Jane and Doctor Netherby. As it was I minded a good deal.

“We are afraid they must have had a breakdown,” we said.

“There can be no doubt about it,” said Aunt Bethia, answering a look on Mrs. Cleveland’s face that annoyed her. By that time we had been in the room two minutes and I knew that we were going to have a warlike evening.

“They will probably be here in a few minutes,” said Mrs. Cleveland. “Isn’t Doctor Netherby that little red-haired boy who used to be with Doctor Montague? I don’t know him.”

“He is one of the most brilliant young men in England,” said Aunt Bethia.

“There are so many,” murmured Mrs. Cleveland, and then we went in to dinner, but as it was a family party we were all very intimate, and the discords were not as completely hushed as they should have been.

“Where were they going?” Bill asked as we sat down.

“They were going to Falmouth,” I told him. “Celia wanted to get some bridge pencils at Woolworth’s.”

“What an odd thing for a busy and brilliant young man to be doing,” said Mrs. Cleveland, looking across the table at Aunt Bethia. “I think you said he was brilliant?”

“I did.”

“In what way?”

“In his profession.”

“I had not heard of it. Is he still with poor old Dr. Montague?”

“He is not. He has set up for himself in Harley Street.”

Mrs. Cleveland helped herself to mayonnaise and cucumber salad with her salmon.

“I suppose any one can do that who can pay a high rent,” she said; and then there was a lull while Bill told a fishing story, but none of us were much

interested in fishing stories and before long Aunt Bethia and Mrs. Cleveland began again.

“It takes an hour and a half from Porthlew to Falmouth,” said Mrs. Cleveland. “And you are on a main road all the time. When did they start?”

“Perhaps they have gone on the water,” suggested Hester. “If you do that you may be becalmed.”

“Not in March,” said Mrs. Cleveland.

“It has been a very still day,” said Aunt Bethia.

Mrs. Cleveland accepted guinea fowl and said that she had not been out because there had been such a cold wind. Nicholas told a story of being becalmed one day quite early in March near the Helstone river. I got rather anxious and hoped Dr. Netherby and Jane would not have gone sailing by themselves, and Celia told the butler to telephone to our house and ask if they were dining there. He came back in a few minutes and said that they were not. We all agreed that there must have been a breakdown, but none of us could explain why they had not been able either to come on or to send us a message.

“Perhaps they have eloped,” said Mrs. Cleveland when the servants were not in the room. “You are going to have a brilliant young man as a son-in-law, dear Mrs. Brooke. What a change from Bill and little George Vincent.”

“Why do you call George Vincent little?” inquired Aunt Bethia. “He is just on six feet.”

“Is he?” said Mrs. Cleveland. “I never measured him, but I always think of him as little George Vincent.”

Aunt Bethia showed what she thought of Mrs. Cleveland’s manners by a displeased silence, and then entered pleasantly into what Nicholas was saying about daffodils. In March, sooner or later, the talk in Porthlew is sure to turn on daffodils, and until we had finished dinner the atmosphere remained harmonious. After dinner, when we left Nicholas and Bill to their port and gathered round a splendid log fire, Celia, Hester and I all tried to keep the peace but did not succeed very well. I suppose that our presence there antagonised Mrs. Cleveland and that even if none of us had spoken she would have felt annoyed. She had come to stay at Rosecassa because it suited her to do so, but she had not forgiven Celia for marrying Bill, nor did she wish to accept us as belonging to the family. She particularly disliked Aunt Bethia because she knew her to be a woman of property and of standing in her own county, and because in her presence it was not so easy

as usual to belittle us. Besides, Aunt Bethia was a crude fighter and a fierce one. She considered Mrs. Cleveland pretentious and arrogant and did not mind letting her see it. I wished they need never meet, for I would rather put up with rudeness myself than have an altercation; but Aunt Bethia says that is poor-spirited and that when people attack her or her family she is always going to hit back as hard as she can. I nearly went to sleep after dinner while Mrs. Cleveland was talking derisively of Liverpool and Leeds, while Aunt Bethia gave her reasons for not thinking much of London. I did not join in while they wrangled about the fashions, when Mrs. Cleveland got the best of it; and their voices reached me drowsily when Celia and Hester, who had been a little way off, sat down with us and began to talk about wood-pigeons. You would have thought they were not a controversial subject, but, unfortunately, Aunt Bethia told a story of the number of gooseberries that had been found inside a dead wood-pigeon. Mrs. Cleveland said that she did not believe it, Celia tried to say something but was silenced by the older women, and Hester in a tone of exasperation invited me to sit up and take notice.

“I’ve heard everything you’ve been saying,” I assured them, and of course they laughed and to some extent recovered their tempers. But it was not an evening I remember with any pleasure, and later on when I sat over the fire with Mrs. Cleveland and Hester while the other four played bridge I had some trouble to keep the peace myself, because Mrs. Cleveland began to ask Hester questions about her life in London.

“You never came to see me,” she began. “Where were you staying?”

“In Chelsea,” said Hester, on the defensive at once, and therefore rather sulky.

“Chelsea is so far from everywhere else,” said Mrs. Cleveland languidly. Hester did not deny it.

“I have some friends there. They are in one of those large houses facing the river. Did you face the river?”

“No,” said Hester.

“Were you by yourself or with friends?”

“I shared a bed-sitting-room with a friend.”

“Really! How amusing. Was it comfortable?”

“No.”

“How marvellous! Were you there long?”

“I was there till I came away.”

“Really! I heard that you were about with all kinds of odd people.”

“Did you?”

“Free lovers and communists. I said it was impossible. I said that I knew your parents intimately and that they would not have allowed it.”

Hester stared at the fire and did not speak.

“It’s a wicked world,” mused Mrs. Cleveland. “They even hinted that you were living with a communist in Houndsditch and that your father had to fetch you away. I contradicted that flatly.”

“Quite right,” I said, but Hester was in one of her perverse moods.

“It was the communist’s wife who fetched him away,” she murmured.

“What!” exclaimed Mrs. Cleveland, not believing her ears.

“Hester is talking nonsense,” I said.

“Not altogether,” said Hester. “I like communists; but this one had a respectable home and was obliged to live in it, poor man. It was his club that was in Houndsditch.”

Mrs. Cleveland looked as if she hardly knew what to think and I changed the subject. I might have known that Weekes would not hold her tongue even if Cockles did, and that the story of Hester and Tcherikov would reach Porthlew in various versions. Nothing could be done about it. When the rest of the family knew what had happened they were seriously concerned and thankful that Hester had been saved from her folly. Girls did these things no doubt in these days, but no one wants a case of social suicide on his own threshold. We all agreed that we would not speak of it amongst ourselves and that the less said to every one else the sooner the story would die down. I thought that if ever Hester wanted to marry a sensible man she could tell him the truth and he would believe her. There was no reason why she should not marry. But that was not likely to happen yet, for she was still very foolish and talked about Free Love and the Extermination of the Bourgeoisie. However, her new friends laughed at her so much that she was learning to hold her tongue, and yesterday she had come back from them quite elated because they had said that there was money to be earned by drawing fashion plates, and that if she went to a studio they knew of in Paris she could probably learn to do them well. I liked the sound of the fashion plates better than the sound of Paris, but I had not had time yet to consider the idea. It would be good for Hester to be away from Porthlew for a time,

and though clothes are not exactly high gods, they are better than the hells of fanaticism. Some of these broken hopes and fears floated through my mind as I talked to Mrs. Cleveland, but when it was time to go I was thinking mostly of Jane and wondering what had happened to her.

“She will be quite all right,” said Aunt Bethia, looking at Mrs. Cleveland as if she dared her to deny it. “I have great faith in Doctor Netherby.”

This was justified when we got home and found that the young people had just arrived, that after tea they had had a breakdown on a lonely road and that Doctor Netherby had been obliged to walk miles for help. The repairs had taken much longer than they had expected, and they had been so hungry that at nine o’clock they had gone to an hotel and got some supper. They both looked extremely happy, and when Nicholas asked them why they had not rung us up or rung up Rosecassa they said they tried to get Rosecassa, but that no one answered. None of us was surprised at that and none of us minded much. Aunt Bethia said she had felt sure that nothing serious had happened and that gave Doctor Netherby and Jane the opening they wanted.

Something had happened, for Doctor Netherby had proposed to Jane again while they walked on the lonely road and she had accepted him.

“No one interrupted me this time,” the young man said to me.

We all got to bed late, and next day, when Sally was told of Jane’s engagement, she first said she could have spared Hester better and then promised to spend Christmas with them in London. Later in the morning, when Celia came to see us on her way to church, Mrs. Cleveland came with her and made Doctor Netherby’s acquaintance.

“I had forgotten how plain he was,” she said to me when she had an opportunity.

“I don’t agree with you,” said Aunt Bethia, who was near to us. “He has a strong steady face and intelligent eyes.”

“When will he be able to marry?”

“As soon as my niece can be ready for him.”

“But has he any money?”

“Plenty!” said Aunt Bethia. “Don’t you know who he is?”

“I know nothing about him. He wasn’t in Porthlew long and I’ve been away lately.”

“He is the son of one of the wealthiest men in the north of England,” said Aunt Bethia.

“In trade, I suppose?”

“Yes. Like yourselves: in trade.”

“But if he is a man of any position, how is it that I never met him when he was in Porthlew?”

“He works hard. He doesn’t go out.”

“But how sad for Jane.”

“We all have our troubles,” said Aunt Bethia, and she told me afterwards that she meant to talk Hester out of going to Paris and ask her to spend the summer at Woden’s Garth; and that if Mrs. Wotherspoon and she took the matter seriously in hand something would come of it.

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.

Some pages of advertising from the publisher were excluded from the ebook edition.

[The end of *Six of Them* by Cecily Sidgwick]