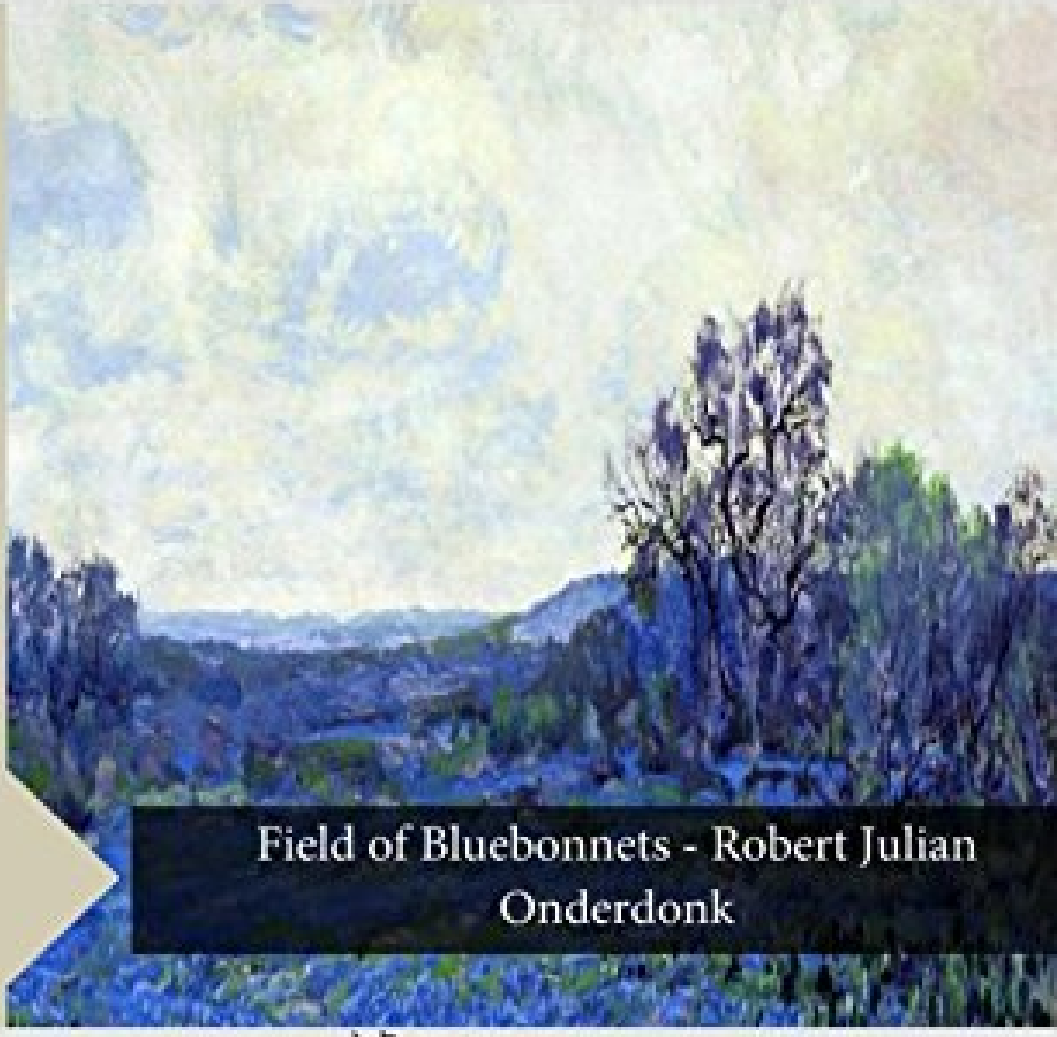
David Christie Murray

Despair's Last Journey



Field of Bluebonnets - Robert Julian Onderdonk

Editore GRIFFO

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DESPAIR'S LAST JOURNEY

By David Christie Murray

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INTRODUCTION—HOW AND WHERE THE STORY OF DESPAIR’S LAST JOURNEY WAS TOLD

I

A solitary passenger alighted from the train, and many people looked curiously after him. The mulatto porter handed to the platform a well-battered portmanteau, which was plastered thickly over with luggage-labels and the advertising tickets of hotels in every quarter of the globe. A great canvas bag followed, ornamented in like fashion. Then from the baggage-van an invisible person tumbled, a canvas bale. The coffee-coloured mulatto held out a grayish-white palm for the quarter-dollar the passenger was ready to drop into it, and stepped back to the platform of the car. The engine bell tolled slowly, as if it sounded a knell, and the train wound away. The curve of the line carried it out of sight in less than a minute, but in the clear mountain air the quickened ringing of the bell, the pant of the engine, and the roll of the wheels were audible for a long time. Then the engine, with a final wail of good-bye, plunged into the tunnel of a distant snow-shed, and the whole region seemed as quiet as a grave.

The little weatherboard railside station was void of life, and there was not a soul in sight. The passenger had given up the ticket for his sleeping-berth an hour before, and had announced his intention to stop over at this lonely place. An altercation with the conductor as to the possibility of releasing the canvas bale from the baggage-van before it arrived at its expressed destination at Vancouver had reached the ears of other travellers who were on duty in the observation car, painfully conscious of the scenery and the obligations it imposed. To experience some ecstasy, more or less, was imperative, and it was weary work for most of them. They stuck to it

manfully and woman-fully, with abysmal furtive yawns; but the skirmish between the conductor and their fellow-passenger came as a sort of godsend, and when the transfer of a dollar bill, incredibly dirty and greasy and tattered, had brought warfare to a close, they still had the voluntary exile to stare at. He was a welcome change from scenery, and they stared hard.

He was a city man to look at, and had the garb of cities—tall silk hat, well worn, but well brushed; frock-coat in similar condition; dark-gray trousers, a little trodden at the heels; patent-leather boots; high collar; silken scarf. Everything he wore was slightly shabby, except his linen; but a millionaire who was disposed to be careless about his dress might have gone so attired. People had a habit of looking twice at this passenger, for he bore an air of being somebody; but the universal stare which fastened on him as the train steamed away was the result of his intent to deliver himself (at evident caprice) at a place so lonely, and so curiously out of accord with his own aspect. What was a clean-shaven man of cities, with silk hat, and frock-coat, and patent leathers, doing at Beaver Tail, in the heart of the Rocky Mountains? Why had he suddenly decided to stay there, of all places in the world? And why had he made up his mind without having so much as seen the place? These questions kept the occupants of the observation car in better talk than scenery long after the lonely passenger had landed, and long after the last wail of the engine had sounded in his ears.

If he had come here in search of landscape splendours, he might have had his fill at once. The railside shanty stood at a height of some four thousand feet above sea-level, but the mountains

heaved vast shoulders and white heads about him.

Below, in the tremendous gorge, a torrent ran recklessly, tearing at its rocky confines with raging hands, and crying out in many voices like a multitude bent on some deed of vengeance—hurrying, delaying, turning on itself, maddening itself. Its bellowing seemed a part of universal silence. Silence brooded here, alone, with those wild voices for an emphasis.

Right and left the gorge swept out into dreadful magnificences of height and depth, and glow and shadow. Cliffs of black basalt, scarred and riven by the accidents of thousands of years, frowned like eyeless giant faces. One height, with a supernal leap, had risen from the highest, and stood poised a mile aloft, as if it were a feat to stand so for a second, with a craggy head cut out of the sheet of blue. Mountain torrents, too far away to bring the merest murmur to the ear, spun and plaited their quivering ropes of silver wire. The shadows in the clefts of near hills were like purple wine in a glass. Above and beyond they were bloomed like an ungathered plum. The giant firs looked like orderly pin-rows of decreasing size for half a mile along the climbing heights. Before they reached the snow-line they seemed as smooth as the smallest moss that grows.

The passenger regarded none of these things, but stared thoughtfully at the platform at his feet. He drew a cigarette from amongst a loose handful in a waistcoat pocket, struck a lucifer match upon his thigh, and smoked absently for a minute or so. Then he took the portmanteau in one hand and the brown bag in the other, and, leaving the railway platform, crossed the single line, and made a plunging, careless scramble through a narrow belt of undergrowth. In a minute or less he came upon a moss-grown way cut

through the wood along the side of the mountain—the old Cariboo Track men used before the days of the railway. Weighted as he was, he found it warm work here, shut in from the cool breezes of the mountains and yet exposed to the rays of the mid-day sun. He wrestled along, however, for some quarter of a mile, and, reaching a small wooden bridge which crossed a runnel of clear water, set his burden down and looked about him, mopping his brow with a handkerchief.

'This will do, I fancy,' he said aloud, and then began to undress.

He stripped to socks, drawers, and vest before opening the brown bag, from which he took an old black felt hat, a shirt of gray patternless flannel, coat and trousers of gray tweed, a belt of leather, and a pair of mountain boots. Having attired himself in these things, he lit another cigarette, and smoked broodingly until it was finished. Then he walked back to the railside shanty, found the canvas bale, and slowly and with great exertion lugged it down the slope and along the trail. He panted and perspired at this task; for though he was sturdily set, and large of limb and stature, he was obviously unused to that kind of work, and by the time it was over he was fain to throw himself upon the moss and rest for a full half-hour. Being rested, he rolled over, and, stretching out a hand towards the discarded frock-coat, drew from its inner pocket a ball of Canadian and American notes, crushed and tangled together like papers of no value. He smoothed them out, flattening them upon his knee one by one, and, having counted them over, rolled them up tidily, and thrust them to the bottom of the brown bag. Next, he began to untie the cords which fastened the canvas bale, muttering 'Damn the thing!' at intervals, as the

knots refused to yield to his unskilful handling. Finally, when the work was two-thirds done, he made search for a pen-knife, and, having found it, severed the remaining knots, and threw the cords away into the runnel.

'That's emblematic,' he said. 'Anything's emblematic if you're on the look-out for emblems.'

The canvas bale, being unrolled, displayed a bundle of gray blankets; a tent-pole, jointed like a fishing-rod, and in three pieces; an axe; a leather gun-case; a small gridiron; a small frying-pan; a tin quart pot, close-packed with loose cartridges; and a pair of folding trestles and a folding board for the construction of a little table. The canvas in which all these things had been packed afforded material for a tent, and the Solitary, with a seeming custom and alertness which no man would have argued from his aspect of an hour ago, began to set up his abiding-place in the narrow natural clearing he had chosen.

In a while everything was tidy and ship-shape, and when he had made a fire, and had constructed a tripod of branches from which to hang the quart pot, newly filled with water from the sparkling runnel near at hand, the lonely man sat down and smoked again, letting his eyes rove here and there, and seeming to scan the scene before him with a dreamy interest. The pot boiled over, and the hissing of the wet embers awoke him from his contemplations. The brown portmanteau, being opened, proved to be filled with packets of provisions of various kinds. He made tea, broke into a tin of sardines and a packet of hard biscuits, and then sat munching and sipping, with his feet stretched wide apart, and his back against a tree—a picture of unthinking idleness.

A rustle near at hand awoke attention, and he

rolled his head lazily on one shoulder. The rustle drew nearer yet, and round the bend of the trail came a man in moleskin trousers, a gray shirt, and a shapeless felt hat, which seemed to have no colour but those lent to it by years of sun and rain.

‘Hillo, mate!’ said the new man.

‘Hillo!’ said the camper-out.

‘Come here by the last train, I suppose?’

‘By the last train.’

‘Got a mate with you?’

‘No.’

The new-comer stared, and said ‘Hm!’ doubtfully. He looked from the other man’s pale, clean-shaven face to his white hands.

‘New to this kind of game, ain’t you? he asked, at length.

‘For a year or two,’ the other answered.

‘I spotted the trail you made from the platform,’ said the new-comer. ‘I seen something had been dragged away. I was bound to follow.’ There was a part apology in his tone, as if he knew himself unwelcome. ‘You might have been Indians,’ he added, ‘or any kind of riff-raff.’

‘Quite so,’ said the man of the camp. ‘Not many of ‘em hereabouts, I suppose?’

‘One or two in a year, perhaps. And harmless, what there is of ‘em; but as thievish as a set of jackdaws.’

‘You in charge of the station?’ asked the man of the camp, looking composedly down the canon and sipping at his tea.

‘Yes, I’m in charge.’

‘Alone?’

‘Alone? Yes.’

‘Fond of being alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘So am I.’

‘All right.’ The man in the moleskin trousers and the shapeless hat laughed, lounged indeterminately for a minute, rolled his quid in his cheek, spat, wiped his bearded mouth with the back of a sunburnt hand, and laughed again. ‘There’s room enough for both of us. Good-night, mate.’

‘Good-night’

The keeper of the station strolled away with a backward glance, and the man of the camp sipped his tea and stared straight before him. The sound of the retreating footsteps had died away, when the Solitary raised a powerful voice and cried, ‘Hillo!’

‘Hillo!’ came the answer, so muffled by the trees that it sounded as if from a considerable distance. The two men walked towards each other and met face to face. They had exchanged a greeting of good-night together, but the sun had some two hours to travel before it set upon the plains. Here it was out of sight already behind a monstrous hill, and although the dome of the sky was one translucent quiet splendour, dusk lay in the shadow of the mountain and the nearer shadows of the sombre pines.

‘I want to ask you,’ said the camper-out, ‘if you’re a teetotaler?’

‘No,’ said the station-keeper, ‘not in particular.’

‘Any whisky about here just now?’

‘A gallon,’ said the station-keeper; ‘new in yesterday. Like a tot?’

‘No.’

The word was snapped out savagely, and the

station-keeper said ‘Oh!’ like an astonished echo.

‘It’s not at all unlikely that I may ask you for some,’ the camper-out went on.

‘You’re sweetly welcome,’ said the other; but he was waved down by an impatient gesture.

‘It’s not at all unlikely that I may come and beg for it. You’re not to give me any. You understand?’ The station-keeper stared in the dusk, but made no answer or sign of answer. ‘It’s not at all unlikely that I may come and try to persuade you that this was a joke, and that I didn’t mean it. I may offer you ten dollars for a drink—twenty, thirty, a hundred. I’m not to have it. And if you allow yourself to be persuaded to give me so much as one teaspoonful, no matter when or why, I’ll shoot you next day, so sure as I am a living sinner.’

‘Oh, you will, will you?

‘I will, by God!’

‘That’s all right,’ said the station-keeper. ‘You’re a very pretty neighbour, you are, *by* George!’

‘I am,’ the other man assented—‘a very pretty neighbour.’

They parted there without another word. The man of the camp went back to his fire, and the man of the station to his shanty. Away below the camp the cañon was dense with shade, but far off up the valley one rod of blinding sunlight struck the most distant peak, and made its snows dazzle on the eye. The snow-peak shone for half an hour, and then by imperceptible changes mellowed to a clear pale gold. Then by fine gradations it grew to a pale rose, a deep rose, a cold gray, a solemn purple. By this time the sky beyond the peak was a fiery glory. This faded in turn, first in a gush of liquid amber, then in soft green, then in blue, then violet. A lone star

scintillated over the for crest, went out, relit itself, went out again, twinkled for a time, and at last shone steadfast with a diamond lustre.

As the darkness gathered, the fire, which fora while gleamed more brightly, sank to a dull red, fading and brightening at the falling and rising of the wind, but growing with every minute less responsive to that soft influence.

The stars twinkled over the sky in myriads. The man of the camp threw away the stump of his last cigarette, entered his tent, pulled off his boots, rolled himself in a blanket, and lay down, facing the distant peak and the one shining speck of a world above it.

'You have made a hideous muddle of things.' he said at last—'a hideous muddle. Nothing to fear, for everything has happened. Nothing to hope for, for nothing can happen any more. Fortune wasted, friends wasted, genius wasted, heart wasted, life wasted. Ah, well! I ought to sleep to-night; I'm tired.'

The torrent roared in the heart of the primeval silence. The peak and the star swam apart from each other in the solemn spaces of the sky. Under the tent, which showed ghostly in the starlight, the man lay silent for hours, but when next he spoke his voice was choked with tears.

'Not that,' he said—'not that! I can endure the rest, but no repentance. To repent would drive me mad.'

II

Twice a day the mountains echoed to the clangour of the passing express train, and at intervals less settled and orderly to the slower rumble of luggage-trucks, laden or empty. The iron artery stretched from coast to coast, and here and there touched and fed a ganglion. To one living alone in those mountain fastnesses the roar and shriek and roll brought insistent memories of the world. No inmate of the oubliette could have been more lonely, and yet life was accessible, and even near.

A month went by. The solitary man of the camp fished and shot, ate, drank, wandered, slept, and saw no face and heard no voice. He had run out of supplies, and having pencilled a note to that effect, had slipped it, with a five-dollar bill, under the door of the railside shanty. His wants had been supplied—they extended to tea and biscuit only—and he had taken care to be out of the way. Sometimes he heard a distant shot, and knew that the man of the shanty was afoot in search of game. Within a very little distance of the railway track sport could be had in plenty.

Loneliness was broken at last. The rustle of boughs and the sound of steps and voices reached the Solitary's ears one day as he sat at his favourite outlook staring down the gorge. At the first note of one of the voices he started and changed colour. Nobody would have taken him for a man of cities now, with his beard of a month's growth, and his tanned hands and face. The open-air colour was the stronger for being new. With continued exposure it would fade from a red tan to a yellow. Deep as it was now, it paled at the first-heard sound of the approaching voice. The man threw a soul of anger and hatred into his ears and listened.

'About a month?' the voice said 'Yes. I heard of his

leaving Winnipeg on the twentieth. I went on to Vancouver and found he wasn't there. Then I got news of a fellow stopping off here, and, of course, it couldn't be anybody else. He's my brother-in-law, and I've got a letter for him which I'm pledged to put into his hands.'

'Indeed, sir!'

The answering voice was the voice of the man of the shanty. It sounded very rough and uncultured after the dandified drawl it followed, but it sounded manlier for the contrast, too.

'He's a queer fellow,' said the first speaker; 'but this is the queerest trick I've known him play. Tell me, is he—is he drinking at all?'

'No,' the other answered. 'He's not drinking. The first day he was here he promised to put a load of shot into me if ever I gave him liquor.'

'Did he really? That's Paul all over. Oh, this the tent? Nobody here, apparently. Well, I must wait. I have a book with me, and I must spend four-and-twenty hours here in any case. Good-afternoon. Thank you.'

The listener was within twenty yards, but invisible beyond the crowded undergrowth. The new arrival was perfectly attired, and handsome, in a supercilious, brainless way. He wore a Norfolk Jacket and knickerbockers, and his tanned boots were polished till they shone like glass. For a while he poked about the tent and its neighbourhood, and, having satisfied his curiosity, drew out a cigar-case from one pocket, a silver matchbox from another, and a paper-clad novel from a third. Then he disposed himself so as to command a view of the landscape, and began to smoke and read.

He had occupied himself in this way for perhaps

half an hour, when a sudden voice hailed him, and startled him so that he dropped his book.

‘Hillo, you there! Come here!’

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘is that you, Paul, old fellow? Where are you?’

‘Here,’ said the voice ungraciously.

The latest arrival made his way in the direction indicated, but though the voice had sounded not more than a score of yards away, he had to call out twice or thrice, and wait for an answer. The brush was dense and tangled, and he could have lost himself for a lifetime in it.

‘Oh, there you are, Paul! Upon my word, I shouldn’t have known you.’

‘I heard you say you had a letter for me. I’d a good deal rather not have seen you, but since you are here you may as well discharge your commission, and when you’ve done that you can go.’

‘I’ve got a letter for you, Paul. It’s from poor dear Madge, and I’m bound to say that I think she’s beastly ill-used, and very unfortunate.’

‘Doubly unfortunate,’ said the camper-out —‘unfortunate in a brute of a husband and a cad of a brother. Give me the letter.’

‘Here it is, Paul. You may think what you like about me, of course, but I have travelled something like seven or eight thousand miles to find you.’

‘On Madge’s money?’ asked the other, balancing the letter in a careless grip between thumb and finger. ‘Nobody asks you to stop to hear yourself described. You were a cad from your cradle; you were a liar as soon as you could learn to lisp, and a sponge from the happy hour when you found the first fool to lend you half a crown. You needn’t wait,

George, but so long as you are here I will do my best to tell you what you are. You are a fruitful theme, and I could be fluent for a week or two. Going? Well, luck go with you, of the sort you merit. I'd call you a cur, but there isn't a cur in all the world who wouldn't walk himself blind and lame to bite me in revenge for the insult I put upon him. Go—you infinitesimal! you epitome of unpitiable little shames!'

The bearer of the letter, who had travelled so far for so curious a welcome, had found a beaten trail which led him back to the woodland road. He had gone a score of yards by this time; but the voice pursued him—level, heavy, sonorous, driven by full lungs.

'Put your fingers in your ears, George, or I shall find a word to scorch you. You are the poorest thing in Nature's bag of samples. A well-bred woodlouse wouldn't employ you for a scavenger. If you shrank to your soul's dimensions you might wander lost for a century on the point of a cambric needle. You are the last rarefied essence of the contemptible—the final word of the genius of the mean.'

This was not shouted, but was sent out in a steady trumpet-note that swelled fuller and fuller, like the voice of a great speaker in haranguing a clamorous audience, rising steadily, as if measured just to dominate clamour, and no more. In the pauses of his speech the camper-out had heard the noise of running feet. The sound seemed still faintly audible, though perhaps only fancy caught it. He sent out one clarion cry of 'Good-bye, George!' and surrendered himself to a fit of uncontrolled laughter. This coming to an end of sudden gravity, he took up the letter, which had fallen on the moss between his outstretched legs, and looked at the superscription.

‘Madge!’ he said. ‘Poor little Madge!’

He put the envelope to his bristly lips and kissed it. Then he broke the seal and began to read:

‘My own darling Husband,

‘You *must* have the enclosed, and George has promised not to rest until he finds you and lays it in your hands. The last lines your father ever wrote in this world——’

‘What?’ he said aloud. ‘What?

‘The last lines your father ever wrote in this world arrived on Saturday, the twentieth, and news of his death reached me by wire on Monday, the twenty-second.’

‘That’s a big enough dose for one day,’ he said. ‘I can’t stand any more.’ He thrust the letter into his breast-pocket. ‘Another impossibility. No prodigal’s return to end *that* story. Veal was never a favourite meat of mine. Lord! I could laugh to see what a mess I have made of things. I could cry if anybody else had made it, and had meant as well, and hoped as blindly.

‘Monday, the twenty-second. That was the day I came here. Strange it is—strange! I’d have sworn he was alive that night—that first night in the tent here. I seemed to feel him near me. We had that knack—the old governor and I—poor old chap! He could jog my mental elbow when I was a thousand miles away from him, and I could make him talk of me at any time.

‘Ghosts? No. Death is death, and there’s an end of it. Ah!’ He stood suddenly arrested. ‘Six hours’ difference between here and England. That explains it. His last wish was towards me. He loved nobody as he loved me, I think. Well, I shall vex him no more. His tribulation is over.

‘Why cant a wrong-doer have a hell of his own, and be saved from singeing innocent people? The smoke of my torment ascendeth, and even George goes coughing at the smell of brimstone. George would be much more comfortable if I had been virtuous—Madge would have more to lend him.

‘Now, if I had a bottle of whisky here, I’d put an end to this for an hour or two. But I haven’t, and I must do something. I must drug this down. Bodily labour.’ He laid his open palm on the knotted rind of the big tree against which he had leaned his back whilst he read the first phrases of the letter. ‘You’ll do as well as anything. It took many a score of years to bring you here, but now you must come down. You’ll sleep in the gorge before I have done with you, old piny monster, three hundred feet below your roots.’

He walked to the tent, and returning jacketless, axe in hand, fell upon the tree with a measured frenzy. The sun was still high, and before he had been at work ten minutes the sweat poured from his brow like rain. He paused to breathe, and to survey the gash he had made in the side of the tree. Compared with the girth of the forest giant, it looked the merest trifle, but he nodded gaspingly.

‘You’ll sleep in the gorge before I have done with you, you old goliath of your tribe. I shall have you down.’

He laboured with dogged fury. His hands blistered at the unaccustomed task. The helve of the axe was stained with blood, and clung to his grasp as if his palms were glued. His blows grew altogether ineffectual The axe fell sideways often, and at such times the blow jarred him to the spine. ‘You will come down,’ he said, ‘if I die for it’ He went back to

the tent, and casting himself on the turf before it, laved his hands in the ice-cold mountain-stream. In half an hour he returned to his task, and worked at it until he could no longer lift a hand. Even then, as he walked brokenly away, he turned with an angry murmur:

'I'll have you down!'

He built his fire, and brewed and sipped his tea and munched his rations in great weariness that night, and it was earlier than usual when he rolled himself in his blanket and lay down. But though he ached with fatigue from neck to heel, there was no sleep for him. He seemed to hang suspended over a great lake of slumber, and to hold, in spite of his own will, to a bar which magnetized his burning palms. He had but to release the bar to fall deep into oblivion, but his grasp was fixed, and he had no power to loose it. So, after many hours of tumbling this way and that, he arose, and fed his fire with dry chips until it flamed; and then, in alternate gushes of light and darkness, he read his father's letter.

'Hendricks has just left me, and I succeeded in getting from him at the last a plain statement of his opinion. I may last a month longer, but he thinks it unlikely. I may go in a week. A chill, or a shock, or any little trifle may precipitate the change, and make an end at any moment. I can write for a few minutes at a time, and I am trying for Paul's sake to say one or two things which will make my future task more likely of success....

'I was fifty when my father died. I had been bred in the strictest Calvinistic school; but my heart had revolted against the creed, and from the time when I was five-and-twenty my mind had rejected it with equal decision and disdain. I looked for no other

faith or form of faith. At the centre of the negation in which I lived there was this one thought: There may, for anything I can tell, be a great First Cause. I cannot know. I can neither affirm nor deny, for the whole question is beyond my understanding. But this at least seems clear: If there be a God at all, He is far away. He is great beyond our dreaming—distant beyond our dreaming. If there be a scheme in the universe, there is at least no care for the atoms which compose it. God sits far withdrawn, beyond our prayers, beyond our tears and fears. This fretful insect of an hour, who cannot even measure the terms he uses, speaks of the Eternal, the Immutable, and strives by his prayers to change Its purposes. I am writing now by lamplight, and the agonies of the singed moths whose little bodies encrust my lamp-glass do not move me from my purpose. I realize their anguish at this moment with a deep pity, but I do not stay to save them. My heavier purpose will not wait for them. Thus I dreamed it was, likening smallest things to the greatest, with God.

'At my father's death a change began to work in my opinions. I had convinced myself that this life was all that man enjoyed or suffered, but I began to be conscious that I was under tutelage. I began—at first faintly and with much doubting—to think that my father's spirit and my own were in communion. I knew that he had loved me fondly, and to me he had always seemed a pattern of what is admirable in man. Now he seemed greater, wiser, milder. I grew to believe that he had survived the grave, and that he had found permission to be my guide and guardian. The creed which slowly grew up in my mind and heart, and is now fixed there, was simply this: that as a great Emperor rules his many provinces, God rules the universe, employing many

officers—intelligences of loftiest estate, then intelligences less lofty; less lofty still beneath these, and at the last the humbler servants, who are still as gods to us, but within our reach, and His messengers and agents. Then God seemed no longer utterly remote and impossible to belief, and I believed. And whether this be true or false, I know one thing: this faith has made me a better man than I should have been without it My beloved father, wise and kind, has seemed to lead me by the hand. I have not dared in the knowledge of his sleepless love to do many things to which I have been tempted. I have learned from him to know—if I know anything—that life from its lowest form is a striving upward through uncounted and innumerable grades, and that in each grade something is learned that fits us for the next, or something lost which has to be won back again after a great purgation of pain and repentance.

'It is three days since I began to write, and I am so weak that I can barely hold the pen. Send this to Paul. He has gone far wrong. He will come back again to the right. I have asked that I may guide him, and my prayer has been granted. From the hour at which I quit this flesh until he joins me my work is appointed me, and I shall not leave him. Goodbye, dear child. Be at peace, for all will yet be well.

'When Paul sees these last words of mine, he will know that I am with him.'

The letter ended there, and the reader's dazzled eyes looked into the darkness. One flickering flame hovered above the embers of the fire and seemed to leave them and return, to die and break to life again. At last it fluttered upward and was gone.

The runnel, like the greater stream below, had many voices. It chattered light-hearted trifles,

lamented child-like griefs, and sobbed itself to sleep over and over and over. In the black cañon the river bellowed its rage and triumph and despair. The shadows of the night were deep, and silence brooded within them, and the ears thrilled and tingled to the monitions of its voiceless sea.

'Father!' he whispered.

The night gave no response, but the answer sounded in the lonely man's heart:

'I am here.'

III

In the broad daylight it was not easy to believe that the experience of the night-time was more than an excitement of the nerves. The tide of habitual conviction set strongly against a superstitious fancy. None the less the Solitary spent many hours in tender and remorseful musings over the lost father, and all day long he wondered at the voice which had seemed to answer him.

'It would be well for me, perhaps,' he said, when he had spent two-thirds of the day under the spell of these clear recollections—'it would be well for me, perhaps, if I could think it true.'

An inward voice said, as if with deliberate emphasis, 'It is true.'

The words did not seem to be his own, and the thought was not his own, and he was startled, almost

wildly. But he had been much given to introspection. He was accustomed to the study of his own mind's working, and the inward voice impressed him less than if he had been a man of simpler intellect. The intelligence of man plays many curious tricks upon itself, and he was ready with explanations. He pored upon these, turned them over, criticised them, sat secure in them.

The inward voice said 'Paul,' and nothing more. No call had sounded on the waking ear, and yet an echo seemed to live in the air, as if a real voice had spoken. His heart thrilled and his breast ached with a great longing. He subdued himself, sitting with bowed head and closed eyes, his chin sunk upon his folded hands. There was a bitter pain in his throat.

'No,' he said half aloud, as if he had need to form his thoughts in words; 'it is all at an end, dear old dad It was well for you that you died with that good hope in your mind It shed a ray of peace on your heart in the last dark hour. It would be well for me if I could think that you were here.. I could stand the pain of it I could bear, I think, to turn my whole life's stream back upon itself if that would bring you peace. I could bear to repent if my repentance could avail But you are gone into the great dark. You will be sad no more and glad no more. I broke your heart, and you tried to patch it with that futile hope. And you were not the man to ask me to be a coward, and a liar to my own soul. I will keep what little rag of manliness I have.'

The inward voice seemed to say 'Wait.'

'It would be easy to go mad,' he said, rising wearily. '"They rest from their labours, and their works do follow them."'

He had wandered a mile or two from his tent,

along the track, and now turned his footsteps home again. The afternoon light was mellowing. A great range of hills, with a line of cloud shining across the breast of it like a baldric of silver, lifted parcel-coloured masses of white and violet into a rolling billowy glory of cloud which half obscured and half relieved them. The sky above was of an infinite purity. He stood and looked, until his heart yearned.

The yearning spoke itself in words which had been familiar since childhood:

'"Oh that I had wings like a dove, for then would I fly away and be at rest!"'

'Old earth,' he said, 'why is it? You seem to long for me. You seem to stretch out hands to me, as if you would say, "Sleep here!" We belong to one another, I suppose. This flesh and bone, this breathing, thinking apparatus, grew out of the slime of you, old world, and will go back to your dust and flourish in grass and flower, and float in cloud and fall in rain. You have hidden in your green breast all the millions who have gone before me. Fecund mother! kind grave! And you, too, for all so green and kisty as you look, you are dying. Your life is longer than mine, but you are no Immortal. Your hills roll down to your valleys. Every stream that tumbles from their heights wears away a little. The light snow and lighter air are heavy on those heights of steel, and will make them into dust at last. Your inward fires will cool, and the air that clothes you like a delicate robe will shrink and vanish, and leave you naked to the sun. I shall come to your bosom and be quiet, and you will find the bourne of death likewise, and we shall swing together round and round And the fires of the sun will cool, and you will go spinning in blackness, and split in silent explosions of cold in the blind dark. Dying heart,

beating strong in full manhood! dying earth, smiling and yearning there with pity and rest in your bosom! we are but creatures of a day—my day the briefer. And that would matter little if I had been worthy of my day. But I have played the fool with life, and have earned my own contempt and creep into my hiding-place with shame.'

He strolled back to the tent, and whether he would have it or no, and whether he would believe it or no, the inward voice spoke now and then. Twice in the wide daylight he stood still, and his hair crisped and his blood tingled. The voice was there, and yet he could not guess what it had to say to him. It was as though it spoke in a language to which he had no key.

As he sat musing his eye fell upon the axe, and he started up and seized it as if suddenly reminded of some forgotten urgent duty. He fell to work at the big tree again, and laboured doggedly till nightfall. Inexperienced as he was, he brought observation and intelligence to the task, and knew already the kind of stroke which told most with the least expenditure of effort. When he could see no longer, he leaned gasping on the axe, and gave a grim nod of the head. 'I shall have you down.'

He was at it again next morning light and early. He toiled all day. The great pine leaned somewhat over the cliff, and though the angle was slight, it told as the gash deepened, and when the sun dipped over the top of the western mountain the huge doomed thing gave its first groan and hung a little towards its grave. At this sign the tired worker fell to with a freshened vigour. He was still striking when the royal head bowed, and then swept downward with a rush. He sprang to one side just in time to avoid the backward kick and the enormous flying splinters.

Ten feet from its base and a hundred from its lowest branch the trunk caught the edge of the rock. The leverage and the weight of the fall snapped the two or three square feet of stanch fibre the axe had spared. That last strong anchorage broke, and the tree flashed into the rapids. The churning, shooting waters made a plaything of it.

The next day he fell into deep ennui, and to beguile himself he rummaged out of the canvas bag an old note-book and a pencil, and began a clumsy and uninstructed effort to sketch the scene before him. The effort proving quite abortive, he began to scrawl beneath it, 'Paul Armstrong.' 'Yours very truly, Paul Armstrong.' 'Disrespectfully yours, Paul Armstrong.' 'Sacred to the memory of Paul Armstrong, who died of boredom in the Rocky Mountains.' 'Paul Armstrong: the Autobiography of an Ass.'

He was in the very act of throwing the book away from him when he felt suddenly arrested. Why not 'Paul Armstrong: an Autobiography? It would fill the time. But the idea was no sooner formed than it began to pain. What sort of a record would it have to be if it were honest? What a confession of folly, of failure!

But as he sat his thoughts shaped themselves—

Thus.

THE STORY OF PAUL

ARMSTRONG'S LIFE AND OF DESPAIR'S LAST JOURNEY

CHAPTER I

The first hint of memory showed a hearth, a fire, and a woman sitting in a chair with an outstretched finger. An invisible hand bunched his petticoats behind, and at his feet was a rug made of looped fragments of cloth of various colours. He lurched across the rug and caught the finger with a sense of adventure and triumph. Somebody clapped hands and laughed. Memory gave no more.

Then there was a long, narrow, brick-paved yard, a kind of oblong well, with one of the narrower sides broken down. The bricks of the pavement were of many colours—browns, purples, reds. They were full of breakages and hollows, and in rainy weather small pools gathered in the petty valleys. The loftiest boundary wall had once been whitewashed, but was now streaked green and yellow with old rains. A pump with a worn trough of stone stood half-way up the yard, and near it was a boy—a very little boy, in petticoats, and a yellow straw hat with ribbons. The frock he wore was of some tartan pattern, with red and green in it He had white thread socks, and shoes with straps across the instep. The straps were fastened with round glass buttons, and the child,

with his feet planted close together, was looking down at the buttons with a flush of pride. He was conscious of being prettily attired, and this was his first remembered touch of personal vanity.

He was walking and crying in an old-fashioned village street, crying because his fat small thighs were chafing one another. It was Sunday, or a holiday, for his father was in a tall silk hat and black broadcloth and high collar, and a satin stock which fastened with a shiny buckle high up in the neck behind. His father stooped and lifted him, and carried him all the way to an old house with three front-doors, and porches over the doors, and a cage with two doves in it hanging on the lichened wall. There was a hedged garden opposite the house, with four poplars in the hedgerow. Their tops went right into the blue. Inside the old house was an old gentleman who was called Uncle. Round the room he sat in were hung a number of fiddles in green-baize bags. How he had learned what the bags held the child could not tell, but he knew. The old gentleman took him on his knee, and allowed him to touch his whiskers, which were crisp and soft, and snipped pieces of white paper into the shapes of trees and animals and houses, with a little pair of scissors. He had blue veins on the back of his white hands, and little cords the like of which were not on the child's, as examination proved. This was his first memory of any house which was not home.

There he first saw a piano. It was open, and he beat the keys, sounding now one note at a time and now two or three together. This was a fascinating exercise, but he was bidden to desist from it, and was given a picture-book to look at It was full of wiry-looking steel plates of men in cauldrons, and on crucifixes, and on racks, and bound to stakes in fires.

He remembered it as Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs,' but by a later knowledge.

There was a well in a yard, with a rope and a windlass, and an old wooden bucket all over trailing green mosses. Off the yard there was a blacksmith's shop, with a disused anvil and disused tools in it, and a cold hearth covered with scattered slack and iron filings. A dog, whose chain allowed him to come within a yard of the door of this workshop, woke up at the clank of the tools and barked. The child cried until his mother came and took him away with some show of angry impatience, not with his father's gentleness. He knew her for his mother, of course, but this was his first remembrance of her.

It was baking-day, and so it could not have been a Sunday. In a big 'jowl' of earthenware—that was the local word for it—a batch of dough was set before a fire to rise. It had a clean cloth spread over it, and the dough had been slashed across and across with a knife. Somebody said the sign of the cross was made to keep the devil out of the bread. There was a vague wonder at that, but it soon died. A portion of the dough was used to make what were called 'rough-and-ready cakes.' Dripping was rolled into the dough, and it was sprinkled with sugar and currants. Then it was pulled into all manner of rough shapes, so as to bake with crisp edges, and was put on a greased dripping-pan into an oven. The cakes were served hot with new milk, and made a regal feast.

It grew dark, which for summer-time was a new experience. The child, tired, but wakeful, stood at the door in fear of the dog. Suddenly he roused the household with screams of joy.

'Mother! mother! Look what I've found!'

There was a rush and a swirl of petticoats. The

infant had seen the stars for the first time, and had some trouble in explaining the nature of his find. When it was known that he had discovered the solar system and its neighbouring fragment of the universe, there was a laugh, and he was left alone, humiliated.

'I have made many equally valuable and original discoveries since then,' said Paul Armstrong, and so went on staring down the canon, seeing nothing of what lay before him, but beholding his child-self so clearly that he seemed to be living over again the life of forty years ago.

The child was shy, dreamy, sensitive, inventive, and a liar. He and his brother Dick were together walking in the shabby High Street, and talking about cricket.

'I'll bet you haven't seen what I've seen,' said Paul. He was seven years old by now, breeched in corduroys, which had had time to grow rusty. The middle-aged man, sitting at his tent-door, smelt the odour of the new cords, and heard their disgusting whistle as he moved his limbs in them for the first time. Only the poorest boys went clothed in corduroy, and Paul and brother Dick were bitterly lowered in their own esteem when they were forced by motherly economy into that badge of social servitude. 'I'll bet you haven't seen what I've seen.'

'What have you seen? asked Dick.

He was rather a fatuous boy, with round, innocent eyes, easily opening at tales of marvel, and a temptation to a liar.

'Why, when I was in Scotland three years ago with father,' Paul began, 'I saw the Highlanders play cricket.' He had never in his life been a mile away from his native parish, and Dick knew that as well as

he did, but it made no difference. ‘They wore kilts, and father wore a kilt, and had a feather in his bonnet, and top-boots like Robin Hood, all loose about the tops, and a bow and arrow. And he smoked a cigar, and gave me a whole lot of vesuvians to strike by myself behind a tent. You could smell vesuvians and cigars and sunshiny trod-on grass everywhere.’

‘Tell us about the Highlanders,’ said Dick.

‘They was all ten foot high,’ said Paul. ‘They wouldn’t have ‘em in the eleven without they was ten foot high.’

Dick said that stood to reason.

‘And they played in their kilts, and they didn’t wear pads, and they had their bats all made of iron, and the ball was iron, too. It was a cannon-ball, and they fired it out of a cannon, and the wickets was a mile and a half apart—no, a mile and a quarter—and one man hit the ball, and the other men shouted, “Run it out!” and he ran sixty-four runs. Then he dropped down stone-dead, and Mr. Murchison read the funeral service.’

Then the talk drifted. Next Sunday the Rev. Roderic Murchison, M.A., read out from the pulpit a text which gave over all liars to fire and brimstone. Paul went quaking all day. Dick and he slept together in a gaunt attic chamber. Mary, their sister, twenty years Paul’s elder, saw them to bed, put them through a rough form of prayer, and took away the candle. Dick, with nothing on his conscience, went to sleep. Paul lay and sweated, dreading fire, and wondering with open-eyed horror, ‘Why brimstone?’ and imagining extraordinary terrors from its addition. At last conscience would have no Nay, and brimful of fear and contrition—for the one was as

real as the other—he woke up Dick in the black hollow of the night This was hard work, but he was bent on self-purgation, and would not confess until Dick was really wide awake.

'Dick!' he said, gripping his brother in the dark and straining him in his childish arms. 'Dick! Oh, Dick, I've been a liar, and I daresn't go to sleep. Do you remember what I said about the Highlanders last Thursday?'

'Blow the Highlanders!' said Dick. 'What did ye wake *me* up for?'

'It wasn't true, Dick,' the penitent whimpered. 'I never saw a Highlander, and father didn't take me to Scotland with him. It was all made up.'

'I know that,' said Dick. 'You *are* a fool to wake a chap up in the dark to tell him that.'

That was the child's first remembered penitence and confession. The man remembered how he had sobbed himself to sleep. Why had he lied, and *was* a portion his in the lake of fire and brimstone, and what was the good of being repentant and confessing, and being called a fool for one's pains?

When the childish Paul came out of the kitchen-door into that three-sided well of a brick-paved yard, and walked towards the printing-office at the far end of the narrow strip of garden, the first door beyond the pump-trough led him to a flight of stairs. The flight of stairs, dirty and littered, mounted to a lumber-room, where there were great piles of waste-paper, refuse from the shop and office. There were many torn and battered old books here, and most of them were deserving of the neglect into which they had fallen. The father had bought old books literally by the cart-load at auction, and had weeded from the masses of rubbish such things as promised to be

saleable. The rest were Paul's prey, and there were scraps of romance here and there, and fugitive leaves of Hone's 'Everyday Book,' and the *Penny Magazine*, with dingy woodcuts. One inestimable bundle of leaves unbound held the greater part of 'Peregrine Pickle,' the whole of 'Robinson Crusoe,' and part of 'The Devil on Two Sticks.' Brother Bob, dead and gone these many years, had once kept pigeons in that lumber-room, and had driven a hole in the wall, so that the birds might have free going out and in. This was one of the family remembrances. Before there had been so many mouths to fill and so many small figures to be clothed, there had been room in the Armstrong household for some things which were not wholly utilitarian. This keeping of pigeons was, as it were, a link with a golden past, a bright thread in the tapestry of the bygone, which hung on the eye of imagination in contrast with the sordid present, where few of the threads were bright except to the inexhaustible fancy of a child, who can see brightness almost anywhere.

The lumber-room had many memories for the dreamer in the tent-door. He was often banished there for punishment, and he sometimes confessed to faults which were not his, if they were not of too dark a dye, in the hope of being sent thither. There he would grub amongst the mouldy refuse of the place, and would find treatises of forgotten divines on Daniel and the end of the world, and translations of Ovid on the Art of Love sadly mutilated by rats, and nautical almanacs of a long bygone date, and much other doubtful treasure.

The mother came into the brick-paved yard and shrilled 'Paul! Paul lay quiet. The voice called up and down, and was lost in the recesses of the heaped timber in the yard which lay beside the ill-kempt

strip of garden. The hedge which had once divided the neighbouring domains was broken down in many places, and Paul and his brother played often on the timber-stacks, and in the aromatic groves of sawn planks which inclined towards each other in row on row, making an odorous cloistered shade, excellent for enacted memories of Chingachgook and Uncas and the Pathfinder. There was a sawpit in the yard, a favourite hiding-place for the boys, and the turpentiny scent of fresh sawdust had always been a thing to conjure with in the Solitary's memory. The smell of printer's ink which hung about the dowdy, untidy, bankrupt printing-office had a hint of it. Years afterwards and years ago in the studio of the President of the Belgian Academy, when Paul was famous and on easy terms with famous people, a servant uncorked a tin of turpentine to clean his master's palette, and the sawpit yawned again, and every broken brick in the floor of the old office showed so clear that he could have drawn the finest crevice. The odour was in his nostrils now as he sat at the tent-door, and he did not dream that it sweated from the sun-smitten pines. It was all memory to his fancy, and the voice went shrilling 'Paul!' among the timber-stacks, and was lost in the cavernous shed at the far-end of the yard. Then everything went quiet for an hour, and Paul made acquaintance with the poverty-stricken artist who could not take his mistress to the ball because she had no stockings fit to go in, and who hit on the expedient of painting stockings on her legs. How simply and innocently comic the episode was to the child's mind, to be sure! and how harmless were the naughtiest adventures exposed under the lifted roofs when the lame devil waved his crutch from the top of the steeple!

But in the full tide of this retired joy Paul hears a step at the bottom of the lumber-room stairs, and knows it for his mother's. She is coming here, and there is no hiding-place for anything bigger than a rat. The motherly temper is sharp, and the motherly hand is heavy. He has been called and has not answered—a crime deserving punishment, and sure to earn it. The step grows nearer and trouble more assured. Suddenly a ray of hope darts through him, and he feigns sleep. His heart labours, but he keeps his breath regular by a great effort. Mother gazes for a minute, and goes away on tiptoe. There is quiet for five minutes, and Paul is back in fairyland. But mother is here again on tiptoe, and the voice of doom sounds on his ear.

'I thought you was foxing, you little beast!'

Then Paul takes his thrashing as well as he can, aiming to receive most of it on his elbows, and is in bitter disgrace for days and days. The phenomenally guilty and degraded young ruffian who *acted* a lie!—a far viler thing, it would seem, than to speak one!

This is the worst of the household, to the Solitary's mind, that all combine in prolonged reprobation for any crime of his. He has no memory for Dick's offences or Jack's or David's; but Dick and Jack and David are unforgetting, and the girls sniff unutterable holiness and contempt. He knows he is a liar, and he knows that liars have their portion in that awful lake, but he is high-spirited and fanciful, and he forgets, sealing his doom weekly at the least, and making it more sure. This reputation of liar began when Wombwell's Menagerie of Wild Beasts first visited the parish, and the neighbourhood of lions and tigers so flushed his imagination that he saw them everywhere. He came home one day with a story of a tiger running away with the shop-shutters

of a neighbouring grocer on his back. He was chastised for this gratuitous unwarrantable yarn, and stuck to it Perhaps he had dreamed it and believed it true, but on that point memory was silent. Anyway it was fixed and decided that he was a liar, and 'A liar we can ne'er believe, though he should speak the thing that's true.' So nobody believed Paul under any conditions, not even when truth was crystalline.

He was a little older, a very little older, and he lay in bed one moonlight night in summer. He had been to chapel that Sunday evening, and the Rev. Roderic Murchison had preached a sermon from the text, 'To depart and to be with Christ, which is far better.' Paul's small soul was filled to the brim with a sort of yearning peace. The moon yearned at him through the uncurtained window of the bare attic chamber, and he longed back to it. Oh how sweet, how sweet to pass to peace for ever, to lie asleep for ever, with the grass and the daisies for a counterpane, and yet to be somewhere and wideawake and happy! 'Suffer little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' Paul was of the kingdom for a time, but he had the blundering ill-luck to mention it. He put his arms round Dick, who lay awake there, and he cried and said good-bye, and told Dick that he was going to die and be an angel. And in his heart he forgave Dick—nebulously but with sincerity—not particularizing things, but offering plenary grace for all offences. And Dick took fright and ran with bare legs projecting from his scanty nightshirt, and blubbered that Paul was dying —that he said so, that he was sure of it. And Paul, listening at the top of the stairs, heard the news given and forgave everybody, and went back to bed again and was filled with inexpressible joy of assured longing. The good mother came upstairs carrying

Dick, who had been solaced with unaccustomed supper of bread and treacle—he was sticky and crumby with it hours afterwards when Paul still lay crying—and she gave Paul such a hiding for his heartless wickedness as he had never had in all his days till then. It was not the pain of the flogging, though he had been chastened with a liberal hand, that kept him in tears throughout that wretched night. It was the bitter sense of injustice, for Paul had imputed his dream to himself for holiness, and had believed so truly and had meant so well.

And the matter did not end there Paul had slept on his trouble and had forgotten it, as children can. He was stripped to the waist, and was taking his morning wash at the sink in the back-kitchen when his father came, carrying in his left hand an instrument called the ‘tawse,’ a broad flat leathern strap, cut into strips at one end. The strips had been hardened in the fire, and the ‘tawse ‘was a holy horror to the boys, who saw it often and were threatened with it sometimes, but who had felt it never. Armstrong the father came in pale and gray, his hands quivering, and he gave Paul a little sermon. The ineradicable Ayrshire accent shook out in his voice more strongly than common, for he was an idle dreamer, and a man who hated to see pain, and to whom it was an agony to inflict it.

‘This will hurt me far more than it will hurt you, my lad, said Armstrong senior; and Paul, by a swift, sidelong movement of the mind, decided that he had been born a liar because his father was one before him.

Then the father expanded upon the enormity of his wickedness, and told him how he had shamefully trifled with the thought of death, which was the most serious of all things, and how in his vanity he had

tried to alarm his brother, and how this evil lying spirit must be beaten out of him. Paul was silent, for how could he explain? And the kindly father, who had had to work himself up to this cold-blooded severity, went half hysterical when he had once begun, and overdid the thing. Paul's flesh ached and stung and quivered on his bones for days. A fortnight afterwards, when he went to bathe, having forgotten his flogging, his stripes were seen, and a schoolmate christened him Tiger on account of them. To that day there were people who knew him as Tiger Armstrong, though they had forgotten the reason of the nickname.

This was one of the inconveniences of having a reputation. There were more such doleful comedies in the lonely man's mind as he looked down the gorge.

The scenes came back as if they were enacted before him. The old eight-day dock ticked in its recess; the fire rustled and dropped a cinder; the cat purred on the hearth; Paul sat reading, absorbed, and yet in memory he knew of the cat and the dock and the fire, and even of a humming fly somewhere, and a gleam of sunshine on the weather-stained whitewash of the wall outside.

In came Mrs. Armstrong, with the little household servant at her heels, and laid something on the ledge of the old clock face. She was an uncommonly tall woman, and had a knack of putting things on high out of other people's reach.

'That's for the potatoes,' she said; 'run and get 'em as soon as ever you've peeled the turnips.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said the girl; and they both went out together.

Two or three minutes later Paul went out. His

father sat behind the counter of the shop, and Paul was afraid that if he went that way he would be seized upon and compelled to take his place. So he ran up the garden, climbed a wall or two, and dropped into Badger's field. He had not gone twenty yards when he found a halfpenny lying on the grass. He laid hands on it, and made for the confectioner's, where he expended it on a sickly sweet called 'paper-suck'—a treacly, sticky abomination with a spiral of old newspaper twined about it Brother Dick appeared by chance, and shared the treat. Paul at this time had taken to making verses on his own account, incited by a great deal of miscellaneous reading. This was an exercise which demanded quiet and retirement, and he got away into the fields, and, lying face downwards on the grass, gave himself over hand and foot to fancy. It was quite late in the afternoon when appetite brought him to himself. He had forgotten his dinner, but relying on his ability to filch something, he walked home with a light heart He marched innocently through the open door of the shop.

'Paul!' His father stopped him, his spectacles tipped up into his white hair, and his gray eyes half hidden under eyebrows like a shaggy Scotch deer-hound's. The portrait of Sir Walter's 'Maida' had a strong suggestion of the Scottish face, wistful, affectionate, and full of simple sagacity. Just now the gray eyes looked doom. Paul knew he had done something awful, and felt guilty, though he knew nothing as yet of the charge against him. 'What ha' ye dune wi' the threepenny-bit ye stole this morning?'

'What threepenny-bit?' said Paul. 'I haven't seen no threepenny-bit, father.'

The verse he hammered out in his lonely moments

was grammatical, because his exemplars would have it so; but to have been grammatical in common speech would have seemed like a pedantry.

‘The threepenny-bit your mother put on the clock-ledge, ye pelferin’ vag’bond!’ said his father sternly.

‘I never seen it,’ Paul declared.

‘There, there!’ said Armstrong; ‘it comes natural to lie, and I’ll not tempt ye. Not another word. Ye’ll go to your chamber, and ye’ll stop there till ye’re in the mind to confess. There’s the fruits of your crime marked on your lips this minute, and Dick saw ye at the sweet-stuff shop. Away with ye, before I lay hands on ye!’

Paul’s hob-nailed boots went lingeringly up the uncarpeted stairs to the attic room, and there he spent the long, long afternoon. There was nothing to do, nothing to think about, nothing to read. He stared at the tinman’s shop opposite, and at the cheesemonger’s fat widow, and at the window of the Berlin wool shop next door to the cheesemonger’s, and when a customer went in he speculated idly on his purchase. He was very hungry and lonely and dull, and the three other attic rooms which were open to him were as uninteresting as his own. Evening came on, and he seemed to be forgotten. He took off his boots, and crept to the lower flight of stairs and listened. Everything was going on just as it would have done if he had not been alone and miserable and martyred Well, he could starve and die and go to heaven, and then perhaps they would all be sorry, and discover some little good in him. Evening deepened into night, and still he sat there. A little insect behind the wall-paper against which he leaned his disconsolate head ticked and ticked like a watch. Paul had heard of the death-watch, and this,

of course, was it, and its token was, of course, of his own untimely end. He wept luxuriously.

By-and-by he got up, and crept on tiptoe past the door of the best bedroom, which stood a little open, and invited him inwards by the mysterious gleam on the ceiling and the thrilling shadows of the great four-poster with its dusky hangings—a family heirloom, hint of far-off family prosperity, big enough for a hearse and quite as gloomy to look at. A heavy, solid mahogany chest of drawers stood near the window, and Paul, aided by the gaslights glistening amongst the polished tinware in the shop opposite, went through every drawer. His hands lighted on something done up in tissue-paper—an oblong parcel. He investigated it, and it turned out to be a big sponge loaf. He had seen one like it before, and guessed that it came as a gift from the old-maid cousins at the farm. He pinched off a bit from one of the bottom corners, and nibbled it He had not known till then how hungry he was, and the cake was more than delicious. He pinched off more, and was frightened to find how much he had taken. Detection was sure, and who but he could be suspected? Nothing could save him now, and though he had never heard either proverb, he acted on both—'In for a penny, in for a pound,' and 'As well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb.' A voice and a footstep below startled him, and he fled guiltily. Now he was a thief, and then he was a beleaguered citizen, forced to make excursions by night, and live at risk of life on the provisions of the foe. He lay on the bed, and watched the lights on the ceiling until the cheesemonger's shop and the tinman's were closed; then he went to sleep, and in a while Dick came and awoke him.

'You'll get nothing to eat till you confess,' said

Dick, ‘and then you’ll get a licking.’

‘Then I shall die,’ said Paul. ‘I shan’t confess what I never done.’

He undressed and got into bed, and was more of a Christian martyr than he had ever been before. He slept fairly well, all things considered; but when in the morning his father’s deep, asthmatic cough sounded on the stairs, he felt as if his heart had slipped through his spine and had dropped upon the floor. He sat up in bed as his father entered the room.

‘Well, sir, are ye in any mind to tell the truth yet?’

‘I didn’t take it, father; I never seen it’ ‘Vary good; yell just stay there.’

Dick, with his hair staring from his head in all directions, pulled on his boots and trousers, and, gathering his other belongings in both arms, went off to make his toilet in the back-kitchen. The heavy day began for Paul, and when he had dressed he prowled disconsolately about his prison limits. In the ceiling of one of the back rooms there was a trap-door, and he began to wonder if he could open it There was a crippled three-legged table in the next apartment, and two old chairs, the rush bottoms of which had given way. He lugged these beneath the trap and mounted. He had two or three tumbles, and anything but a cat or a boy would have broken its neck several times over; but at last he succeeded in forcing the trap, and scrambled up. The joists of the roof and the rough inside of the slates were all he saw at first; but in a while he discerned a solid-looking shadow in the near distance, and made towards it. It proved to be a small table, and on it, covered thick with dust, were a broken jug, a broken cup, and a broken table-knife. What brought these things in so curious a place Paul

never knew; but there they were, and the spot in an instant was a robber's cave, and full of the most palpitating and delicious fears. He seized the broken table-knife as a weapon, and dashed back towards the trap-door. His movement towards the table must have taken him over some protected place—some region where a wall or beam made the lath-and-plaster flooring sound beneath his feet. But in his backward dash he missed this. The thin and fragile stuff gave way beneath him, and he came through with a tearing crash, and fell on the floor of the room beneath with a shock which snapped his teeth together and left him dizzy and half stunned. There was a big rent in the ceiling, and the floor was covered for a square yard or two with hairy plaster and fragments of wood.

Paul thought at first that he was broken all over, but, coming to gather himself together, found himself whole. He transferred the crippled table and the chairs to their original places, and stowed away the knife between the cords and the mattress of his bed. Then he listened dreadfully to discover if the noise of his fall had awakened any answering commotion below stairs. Growing easy on this point, he began to be aware that he was hungry again, and bethought him of the remnant of the sponge loaf. Nothing much worse than had already happened could befall him, and after brief temptation he kicked off his unlaced hobnails and stole downstairs. With some such vague idea of disguising crime as a thievish monkey might have had, he packed up a pair of neatly folded towels in the paper which had once held the loaf, and so retreated to his prison. All day long the familiar noises of the house, exaggerated into importance by his own loneliness, went on. Feet travelled here and there, voices called,

the tingling shop-bell rang. The little servant came to make the bed, and treated him with the disdain which befitted a convicted criminal. In a while she went away, and left him lonelier than before. Even disdain had something of human companionship in it.

And now, hunger's pangs having been fairly well appeased by the remnant of the sponge loaf, Paul had time to surrender himself to the thought of impending starvation. He convinced himself that a boy could die of starvation in two days. Morrow at noontide would see him stark and cold. He grew newly holy at this reflection, and forgave everybody afresh with flattering tears. It became a sort of essential that he should leave a memorial on the wall of the cell in which he was about to perish, and so he got out the broken knife from under the mattress, and carved a big cross in the papered plaster of the wall. It was less artistic in its outline than he could have hoped; but its symbolism, at least, was clear, and he wept and exulted as he worked at it.

The heavy day went by and the heavy night, and he began to be really hollow, and to believe with less than his original sense of comfort that his end was near. With the morning came his father with yesterday's question. Paul broke into wild tears and protests. He wasn't, wasn't, wasn't guilty.

'Vary good. Yell just stay there.'

Dick, touched by the agony of despair with which Paul threw himself upon the bed, advised surrender.

'What's a lickin'?' said Dick. 'Have it over.'

'Oh, Dick,' cried Paul, clipping at the air between them, 'plead for me!'

'Not me,' said Dick, who was less literary than Paul, and misunderstood the unfamiliar word

—‘bleed for yourself.’

And again the heavy day went on, and Paul wept and wept alone. But it happened that this was scouring day; and a sort of wooden fender which fenced in the foot of the eight-day clock being moved, the missing bit of silver was found behind it, and the martyr was released. There were no apologies; but Paul was told to clean himself, and was whispered by Dick that there was a tea-party that afternoon, and that he was to be allowed to be present at it.

Then fell misery. He knew why the sponge loaf had been saved, and though everybody was kind now, and seemed to feel in an unspeaking way that he had been ill-used, he foresaw the near future and trembled.

He had been made to black his Sunday boots, he had been washed with such desperate earnestness that his face and neck tingled, and he diffused an atmosphere of yellow soap as he walked. He was in his best clothes, which fitted him as a sausage is fitted by its skin; he was guillotined in a white collar with a serrated inside edge, and guilt filled every crevice of his soul.

‘Fanny Ann,’ said Mrs. Armstrong, putting the last finishing touches to the tea-table, ‘fetch the sponge loaf.’

A rollicking shout of laughter rose from the tent door, and went rolling down the gorge, and the dream was over for the time.

CHAPTER II

It was mid-July, and even at an altitude of four thousand feet the sun could scorch at noonday. The lonely man sat at his outlook, gazing down the valley. There was a faint haze abroad, a thickening of the air so apparently slight, and in itself so imperceptible, that he would not have noticed it but for the fact that it blotted out many familiar distant peaks, and narrowed his horizon to some four or five miles. He waited for the sun to pierce this impalpable fog, but waited in vain. The sun itself was red and angry in colour, and shrunk to half its common size. Even at noontide the eye could look on it for a second or two without being unbearably dazzled.

The shade in which he sat moved slowly eastward, and had almost deserted him, when his hand felt a sudden fierce pang of pain as if an insect had stung him. He moved hastily and examined the mark of what he took for a sting. It was round, small, and red, as if the end of a hot knitting-needle had been pressed upon the skin. Whilst he sat sucking at the place to draw the pain away, and looking round in search of the insect foe, the same quick burning pang struck him on the cheek. He moved hastily again, and stared and listened keenly. There was not a buzz of wings anywhere near at hand, and not an insect in sight. But as he looked and harkened he was enlightened. A great tear of resinous gum had caught and hardened in a fork of the branches, and the sun's rays falling on and through this were concentrated as if by a burning-glass. The fiery point had stung him.

He broke away the cause of mischief, and then looked about him with a new understanding. The

forest fires had begun, and it was the smoke which so closed in the view. He could detect now a faintly aromatic smell of burning, and wondered that he had not noticed it before.

There was not a breath of air stirring, and not a hint of flame in all the haze which on every side blotted out the far-off hills, and changed to a dull tint of smoke those which still loomed upon him. At night the moon hung in the starless sky like a globe of blood, and day by day the dimness of the air increased. The cloud took no form of cloud, and not a sound came through it except for the voice of the water, and the occasional roll and clangour of the trains. The distances in view grew briefer and more brief, and within a week of the date of his discovery the nearest peaks were obliterated, and the air had grown pungent with its charge of invisible burned atoms.

He sat in the midst of this narrowed and darkened world, this world of silence and solitude, as he sat in the middle of his own despairs. His life had fallen away to this—an aching heart in a world where no man came. Had it not been for pride, he could have wept for pity of himself. Had it not been for a sense of rebellion against fate and the world, he could have died of his own disdain. He had played the fool, but the world had taken an unjust advantage of his folly. He loathed himself and it.

Thus trebly banished—from friends, from the world, from Nature—he dreamed his dreams. The past came back again.

Paul was keeping shop. The door, rarely passed by the foot of a customer, stood open to invite the world at large. Armstrong came in with his spectacles resting on his shaggy brows. Paul, who had been

wool-gathering, went back to nominative, dative, and ablative. He hated the Eton Latin grammar as he had not learned to hate anything else in life.

'Any custom?' asked the father.

'Nobody,' said Paul.

'Paul, lad,' said Armstrong, after a lengthy pause. He cleared his throat, and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Yell reach your twalth birthday next week. It's time ye were doing something in the warld.' He pulled down his glasses and looked at the lad gravely. 'I've tauld Mester Reddy ye'll not be going back to school after the holidays. There's over-many mouths to keep, and over-many backs to clothe, lad. Ye'll have to buckle to, like the rest of us.'

'Yes, father,' said Paul. The prospect looked welcome, as almost any change does to a boy.

'What would ye like to be?' his father asked

'I dunno,' said Paul, rubbing his nose hard with the back of one freckled hand.

'Well, I'll thenk it over. Ye can get away to your plays now, but the serious purpose o' life's beginnin' for ye.'

Paul needed no further leave. He snatched his cap and was away up the High Street before anybody could find time to tell him that his neck was unwashed, his boots unblacked or unlaced, or his collar disarranged. These reminders were an unfailing grievance to him when they came, and they seemed to hail upon him all day long. With the thought that he was entering the world and beginning his career in earnest, he thrust his hands into his corduroy pockets, swaggering in his walk, and so absorbed that he forgot to touch the street lamp-posts for two or three hundred yards. He stood overcome by this discovery, retraced his steps almost

to the shop-door, in spite of his fear of being recalled, and then raced on his original way, laying a hand on each lamp-post as he passed it In this fashion he arrived at the gate of an unpretentious little house which had many reasons for looking glorious and palatial in his eyes. For one thing, it was a private house. No business of any sort was done there, and its inhabitants lived on their own money. Then it stood back from the road, behind iron railings, and had a gravel pathway leading to the front door, and a little bit of orderly garden with one drooping laburnum in it, which in its season hung clear gold blossoms over the roadway. There was a small coach-house beside the main building. It held no vehicle of any sort, but it was a coach-house all the same. Inside the house everything was neat and clean, and to Paul's mind luxurious. There were carpets in all the living-rooms and bedrooms. There was a piano, there were marble mantelpieces with gold-framed mirrors over them, one to each front-room, and the chambers which held these splendours were familiarly used, and not merely kept for show. Paul had the run of this house, for the orphan children of his mother's second cousin lived there, and the relationship was recognised.

He rang the bell, and a fresh-coloured, prettyish girl in a smart cap came to the door.

'Oh,' she said, 'it's you, is it! Come to see the young ladies, are you?' Paul nodded with his hands in his pockets.

'You're in pretty fettle!' said the girl. 'Look at your boots! Look at your hair! Look at the smut on your nose!'

Paul looked at his boots, tried to look at his hair, squinted downwards in search of the smut, and said:

‘Bother!’

‘All right,’ the girl responded. ‘You’ll find ‘em in the garden. They’ll be rare and proud to see you.’

Paul, somewhat shamefaced, took the familiar way into the garden, and stood rooted. A small striped tent of pink and white had been set up on the unshaven grass-plot, and five or six girls, all in white dresses, were seated near it round a tea-table. One, who had black hair and dark eyes, wore a crimson sash, and the rest had blue sashes with prodigious bows. Paul knew them all with one exception, but after the first glance he had eyes for the exception only. She was a lackadaisical young person of eighteen, with pale sandy ringlets and a cold-boiled-veal complexion; but he thought her a creature of another sphere, and his heart shivered with a strange, delicious sense of worship. He stood and stared, and his inward thoughts were poorly translated by his aspect, as happens with most people How long the dream held him he did not know, but the Vision turned, and he met the young person’s eye.

‘Who is that dirty boy? asked the Vision. ‘I suppose he wants to speak to you, Zillah.’

Zillah, who was the elder of the two orphan girls, turned, and blushed till she looked the colour of her sash. But she rose from her seat and came to Paul and whispered to him:

‘You mustn’t come here to-day, Paul We’ve got company. And goodness gracious, child, how untidy you are to be sure!’

Then shame fell like an avalanche, and Paul went altogether dizzy and silly under the shock of it How he got home he never knew, but an hour later he was in the back-kitchen, standing on a mat in his

stocking-feet, with his shirt-sleeves turned up to his elbows, and was polishing his boots until the leather grew hot beneath the brush. He washed himself in a frenzy of remorse and resolve, and scoured his hands with yellow soap, silver sand, and a stubbly scrubbing-brush until they tingled. Then he fell upon the family stock of hair-oil, which was kept in a medicine-bottle in the kitchen cupboard, and, except on Sundays, was held sacred to the girls. Then he put on a clean collar (which was a daring and outrageous defiance of authority, which allowed but two a week), and prepared to face consequences. The family brush and comb were kept in a small bag which hung on a nail beside the scratched and defaced old family looking-glass, and Paul was artistically at work upon his hair when his mother entered the kitchen. The excellent woman sat down to laugh, and Armstrong came in with his customary vague air of patient thinking.

'William,' said Mrs. Armstrong, 'look at our Paul. Niver tell me the hage of merricles is past Why, I believe he's fell in love!'

It was the perpetual astonishment of Paul's life that his mother always knew and understood the things he would not have her know and understand. Even now, at his tent-door, seeing all these dead hours so clearly that he forgot his present existence altogether, he thought of her half-malicious, wholly-humorous intuition with wonder. Why had she never understood the things he would have given so much to have her understand?

Armstrong smiled with a melancholy, tired sweetness.

'Larn to be tidy, lad,' he said. 'I like a self-respecting fellow that honours his own person.'

‘M’m,’ said Mrs. Armstrong. ‘You’ve got a five days’ beard on, William.’

He looked at her, stroking his own bristly chin.

‘Ay,’ he said. ‘This’ll be Thursday. Paul, just be getting me my razor and the brush and soap-box, there’s a good lad.’

Paul obeyed, and then betook himself to the timber-grove, where he sat rapt into meditations on the Vision. He had read whatever came within his reach, good, bad, or indifferent, and his conscious thoughts were always a patchwork of phrases. When he was put to mind the shop he read the penny weeklies. He was fresh from one of the works of J. F. Smith, the un-remembered prose laureate of the *London Journal*, who would have been reckoned a giant of invention if he had lived in these days, and a sentence from his latest chapter got into Paul’s head and went round and round: ‘There lay the fair, gifted, almost idolized girl.’ In Mr. Smith’s moving page the fair, gifted, almost idolized girl was dying, and Paul did not as yet know enough of the story-teller’s craft of that day to be sure that she would recover in the next chapter. She mixed herself with the lady of the sandy ringlets who had described him as a dirty boy, and the pathos of the situation lent an added anguish to his thoughts. How beautiful was the lady of the ringlets, how ethereal in aspect, how far removed, how worshipful, how adorable! How refined was her voice, how elegant her accent! She had spoken of him as a b’y, but that was a local fashion, and Paul knew no better. She was far and far away—a being of the skies, at once an aristocrat and an angel. He began to make verses about her, of course—ghastly, fustian stuff, at the recollection of which the Solitary shuddered, and then laughed. But from that day forward Paul had spasmodic rages of

personal cleanliness and adornment.

There was a jar of goose-oil always kept on the top of the baking-oven in the back-kitchen, and, learning that goose-oil was an unfailing specific for the growth of whiskers and moustache, he began to rub his lip and cheeks with this unguent Many a time when he was left alone he lit a candle, and getting his face between it and the mirror, tried to trace on the outline a fringe of hair. He found an occasional momentary satisfaction in burned cork, but the joy was futile, and impermanent.

He met the Vision in the street one day when he was carrying a parcel, and the shame of his menial employment, and the sense of the coarseness of his clothes made him long for the earth to open. The fact that the young person did not know him, or look at him, or think about him, made no difference. The young head was filled with absurd dreams. Sometimes he was a prince in disguise. He was being bred up to know nothing of his princedom, so that he might be splendidly and properly astonished when the revelation came. At other times he recognised his lowly origin, and went away into the boy's Somewhere—a noble country full of beneficent chances—and came back great and glorious, in gloves and patent-leather boots, and a hat and moustache, and conquered the Vision and married her. At other times he died, with his great heart unspoken, and was buried in the parish churchyard.

But whilst he was full of all manner of ambitions and yearnings, and dreams which nobody else in the wide world dreamed about, a family conclave was held to decide what Paul should be. One Simmons, a dapper, perky draper in the High Street, wanted a shop-boy, and Mrs. Armstrong was for asking the place for Paul There was not a grain of ambition in

the household, and the melancholy fact was that there was no money to bind Paul apprentice anywhere. But Paul would have none of the draper. He was cuffed in corners by the maternal hand, but he held his own. He would run away, he declared, he would drown himself, he would do anything rather than submit to that. So finally he was turned into the ramshackle old printing-office, where all his elder brothers had been before him, and learned to sort pie, and to roll at press, and to sweep the floors, and to blow old dusty type-cases clean. He wore a brown-paper apron tied about his waist with string, and lived so obscured in printer's ink, for which he seemed to have a natural affinity, that he hardly looked like a white boy at all.

He was still a liar, but he told his lies on paper now, and hid them. He told them in prose and verse —prose which was measled with 'Oh's,' and 'Alas's,' and full of great windblown phrases of bombast, like inflated bladders, each with one little parched pea of meaning to rattle inside it The verse was mainly such as might have been written by a moderately illiterate absurd old man who had found life a vanity, and had deserved his discovery.

There was one idle and worthless journeyman in the ramshackle office, and one only. He kept the place like a pigsty, and the floor was littered with boards on which unlocked formes of type fell about into confusion. Paul could pick his way through these blindfold, and many and many a night in the dark he raged out his verses, marching to and fro with the four big dim windows staring dully at him, wall-eyed with countless paper patches, seen as darker blots on the darkness.

One night he was there in hiding. He had played truant from Sunday-school and chapel, and had been

all day in the fields, hungry, but happy beyond all dreaming. And, oh! the Sundays! the dreary, bestial days, with Sunday-school at half-past nine and chapel at eleven, and Sunday-school at half-past two and chapel at half-past six and family prayers at nine, and bed at half-past nine, and books forbidden, and speech a crime, and whistling a felony. Paul had broken loose, and knew not what to look for, and cared little for the hour. For his head was full of verses, and his heart was full of the summer day, and for the first time in his life he had gone to Nature, and forgotten his thrice-thirty-times copied emotions, and had dared to speak in his own voice. The lines he had made that day were unutterably sacred and sweet to him. The dreaming Solitary, staring down the gorge, heard the boy's awestruck whisper, and, forgetting all the rest of the verses, remembered this one only:

'Why, all is happy! Not a worm that crawls,
Or grasshopper that chirps about the grass
Or beetle basking on the sunny walls,
Or mail-clad fly that skims the face of gl
The river wears in summer;—not a bird
That sings the tranquil glory of the field
Or single sight is seen or sound is heard,
But some new pleasure to my full soul yiel

Paul, standing there in the darkness, whispered this many times as if struck with awe by it, and indeed the boy wondered, and thought it an inspiration.

'That is poetry,' said Paul 'I am a poet—a poet—a poet!'

He fell on his knees, with his face on his hands in the open quoin drawer, feeling as if he had uttered a

blasphemy. How long he was there he never knew, but he was disturbed by the grating of a door below, and his father's voice called up the stairs:

'Paul! Where are ye?'

'Here, father,' Paul answered

A sob met his voice half-way, and Armstrong came stumbling up the stairs.

'What's the matter, lad?' he asked, in a tone between concern and impatience.

'Nothing,' said Paul.

'Why is't ye're here alaun?' his father demanded 'And whaur have ye been the livelong day? And what are ye cryin' for?

'Nothing,' said Paul again.

'Ye're not such a fule,' said Armstrong, 'as to be cryin' an' hidin' for naething, an' I'm not such a fule as to believe it.'

He paused, but Paul made no reply. The old man struck a lucifer match and lit the gas. The boy stood blinking in the light, his face stained with tears, his eyelids red and a little swollen. To the father's eye he looked sullen and defiant Of course he was neither, but he was entirely hopeless of being understood, and therefore helpless to explain.

'Noo, Paul,' said Armstrong, with a severity which he felt to be justified, 'I'm goin' to the bottom o' this business. Ye've absented yourself the haul day from the House o' God. Ye've not been seen since morning's light, and it's nigh-hand on midnight Whaur *have* ye been? Answer me that at once, sir.'

'In the Hoarstone Fields,' said Paul.

'And wha's been with ye, helping ye to desecrate God's day?'

'Nobody, father. I've been by myself all the while.'

‘And what’s been your work, my lad?’ There was silence, and the silence began to have a threat in it ‘I’m goin’ to the bottom o’ this affeer, Paul,’ said the father. He meant that honestly, but he was not taking the right way. ‘I’m not to be put off by ony lies or inventions. Ye’ve been alaun in the Hoarstone Fields all day? What took ye there? And hoo have ye passed the time? I’ll know!’ he added, after another long pause.

Perhaps there was nobody in the world who stood less chance of knowing, but how should Armstrong have guessed that? He was a just man, and as kind-hearted a father as might have been found within a hundred miles. If he could have known the truth, he would not only have been disarmed, but proud and glad. But Paul at this time had a holy terror of him. It grew to a close and reverent affection later on, and there was such a confidence between this pair as is not often found. But now? Paul would have suffered anything rather than tell the truth. It was not that he would not. He could not His tongue was fettered.

‘Noo, Paul,’ said Armstrong. ‘Let’s have a luik at this. Ye’re not supposin’ in your inmost mind that I’m in the least small degree likely to believe the yarn ye’ve tauld me. Ye’ve been in the lonely fields all day, doing naething and speaking to naebody. And for that ye’ve stayed away from your meals, an’ noo ye’re in hiding like a creminal? It hasn’t an air o’ pro-babeelity, Paul; it has *no* air o’ pro-babeelity. You see that?

Paul saw it—quite as clearly as his father. But how was it to be explained? Could Paul say, ‘My good sir, I am a boy of genius. I have been filled with the Divine afflatus, and have been driven into solitude by my own thoughts. I have been so held by dreams of beauty that I have forgotten everything’? Could

Paul offer that intolerable cheeky boast? And yet to offer to explain was to do that, and nothing less than that.

'Vary well,' said Armstrong. 'Ye'll go to your bed, and I'd advise ye to thenk the matter over. I'll gev ye till morning. But I'll have the truth, or I'll know the reason why.'

The gas went out under Armstrong's thumb and finger on the tap, and in the sudden darkness the gray, patient, reproachful face still burned in the boy's eyes.

'Father!' said Paul, and stretching out both hands, he caught hold of him by the sleeve.

'Well!' answered Armstrong sternly.

He thought it his duty to be stern, but the tone killed the rising impulse of courage in Paul's heart He could have stammered a hint of the truth then, and the darkness would have been friendly to him. A caress, a hand on head or shoulder, would have done the business, but caresses were not in fashion in the Armstrong household. There was another silence, and Armstrong said:

'I gev ye till morning, and then Paul, my lad, ye'll have yourself to thank for what may happen. I'll be at the bottom o' this matter, or I'll know the reason why. I'm no friend to the rod, but I'll not stand by open-eyed an' see you walkin' straight to the deevil without an effort to turn ye. An' I'll have naething less than a full confession. Ye may luik for a flogging if I don't get it, and a daily flogging till I do. For, my lad, if I flay your back, and break my heart to do it, I'll win at the truth.'

They went down the long dark garden together, and at the kitchen-door Armstrong paused.

'It's a sore thing,' he said, 'for a man to have to

misuse his ain flesh an' blood. But ye're not of an age to understand that. Remember, Paul, this is not my seeking; but I'll have the truth by foul means or fair. And it's just you to choose.'

Paul entered the kitchen, and his mother was for instant justice, as she saw it, but Armstrong intervened.

'This matter is in my hands,' he said.

He was a very quiet and yielding man in many things, but when he chose to speak in that way he made his word law.

Then came the lonely night. The wretched poet, a weedy lad who had overgrown his strength, lay in bed and cried in anguish. He topped his father by a head already, though he was but three months beyond his fifteenth birthday, and if he had chosen to fight he might perhaps have held his own. But a thought so impious never entered his mind. He was helpless, and he lay blubbering, undignified, with a breaking heart. He did not think much or often of the coming pain, but he brooded on the indignity and injustice until he writhed with yelps of wrath and hatred and agony of heart, and awoke Dick, who wanted to know what was the matter, and was roughly sympathetic for a time, until, finding he could make out nothing, he turned and went to sleep again.

There were black looks in the morning everywhere, for Paul was known to be in deep disgrace again. He swallowed a cup of the thin, washy coffee—its flavour of chicory and coarse brown sugar was nauseous on the palate of the man at the tent door—and then his father, pale as himself, rose amidst the affrighted boys and girls, and motioned him silently to the sitting-room. This was a

sort of family vault, with its scanty furniture in grave-clothes, and a smell of damp disuse about it always, even in summer-time.

'Are ye ready with the truth?' asked Armstrong. Paul looked at him like a dumb thing in a trap, but said never a word. 'Very well,' The gray man's hands shook and his voice, and his face was of the colour of gray paper. 'Go to the back-kitchen and strip.'

Paul, dry-eyed, gloomy, and desperate, walked before, and his father followed. The girls clung to each other. There had been no such scene as this in the house for years. The tawse had hung idle even for Paul for many and many a day. Armstrong took the instrument of justice from its hook, and laid it on the table He took off his coat, and rolled up his left shirt-sleeve. He was left-handed. The arm he bared was corded and puny. It shook as if he had the palsy. His wife had a sudden pity for him, and ran at him with a gush of tears.

'William,' she said, 'don't break your heart for the young vil'in; he isn't worth it Oh, God! I wish he was no child o' mine.'

She dropped into a chair and cried. Armstrong passed out of the kitchen. The girls listened, and Dick, chalky white, with his mouth open, as Paul had seen him on his way through. They heard the swish, swish, swish of the tawse, and not another sound but hard breathing for a full minute; then Paul began to groan, and then to shriek.

'Now,' panted Armstrong, 'shall I have the truth?'

There was no answer, and he fell to again; but Paul turned and caught his arm, and after an ineffectual struggle, the old man dropped the tawse and walked into the kitchen. Paul dressed and sat on the table, quivering all over. He sat there for hours,

and nobody approached him until at last the servant, with frightened eyes, came to make ready for dinner; then he got up and went to his old refuge in the lumber-room. One of his sisters brought him food after the family dinner-hour, but he refused it passionately.

'Oh, Paul,' she said, clinging to him till he shook her from his writhing shoulders, 'why don't you confess?'

'Confess what? snarled Paul. 'Confess I was born into a family of fools and nincompoops? That's all I've got to confess.'

He was left to himself all day, and at night he went un-chidden to the larder, and helped himself to bread and cheese. He took a jug to the pump, and coming back, ate his meal, standing amongst his people like an outlaw.

'Well, Paul,' said his father, 'are ye in the mind to make a clean breast of it?'

'No,' said Paul, 'I'm not.'

The defiance fell like a thunderbolt, and eyes changed with eyes all round the room in horror and amazement.

'We'll see in the morning,' Armstrong said.

'All right,' answered Paul; and so finished his meal, and took his cap from its hook behind the door.

'Where are you going?' cried his mother.

'That's my business,' said Paul, breaking into sudden passionate defiance. 'What am *I* flogged like a dog for? *You* don't know. There isn't one of you, from father down to George, who knows what I've been doing. I can't remember an hour's fair play from the day that I was born. Look here, father: you may take another turn at me to-morrow and next

day, you can come on every morning till I'm as old as you are, but you'll never get a word out of me. I've done no harm, and anybody with an ounce of justice in him would prove something before he served his own flesh and blood as you've served me.'

He was in a rage of tears again, and every word he spoke was tuned to the vulgar accent of his childhood. 'Father' was 'feyther' and 'born' was 'boorn.' He did not speak like a poet, or look like one to whose full soul all things yielded pleasure. These thoughts hit Paul, and he laughed loud and bitterly, and went his way into the street.

The upshot of it was that Paul was flogged no more. Armstrong sickened of the enterprise, and gave it up.

The lonely man was thinking of it all, seeing it all. Suddenly a voice seemed to speak to him, and the impression was so astonishingly vivid that before he knew he had answered it aloud. He started awake at the sound of his own voice, and his skin crisped from head to heel.

'There's no rancour, Paul, lad?' the voice had said, or seemed to say.

'Rancour?' he had answered, with a queer tender laugh. 'You dear old dad!'

For the first time the sense of an actual visitation rested with him, and continued real. He felt, he knew, or seemed to know, that his father's soul was near.

CHAPTER III

Paul was standing in a room in the old house in Church Vale, the room in which the fiddles hung around the wall in their bags of green baize. A sound of laughter drew him to the kitchen, and he had to make his way through a darkened narrow passage, with the up-and-down steps of which he was not familiar. At the turn of the passage he came upon a picture.

To the man at the tent door it was as clear as if the bodily eye yet rested upon it.

The kitchen floor was of cherry-red square bricks; the door was open to the June sunlight, framing its scrap of landscape, with the windlass of the well and the bucket overgrown with mosses and brimming with water crystal clear, and there were flowering plants in the window, with leaves and blossoms all translucent against the outer dazzle. The whole family was gathered there: Uncle Dan, with his six feet of yeoman manhood, bald and rufous-gray; Aunt Deborah, with her child's figure and the kind old face framed in the ringlets of her younger days; the girls and the boys, a houseful of them, ranging in years from six-and-twenty to four or five, and every face was puckered with laughter, and every hand and voice applauded. In their midst was a stranger to Paul, a girl of eighteen, who marched up and down the room with a half-flowered foxglove in her hand. She carried it like a sabre at the slope, and her step was a burlesque of the cavalry stride. She issued military orders to an imaginary contingent of troops, and her contralto voice rang like a bell. Her upper lip was corked in two dainty black lines of moustache, and on her tumbled and untidy curls she had

perched a shallow chip strawberry-pottle, which sat like a forage-cap.

'Carry—so! she sang out; and at that instant, discerning a stranger, she turned, with bent shoulders and a swift rustle of skirts, and skimmed into the back garden.

'Oh, you silly!' cried one of the girls; 'it's only Paul.'

She came back, and as she passed the old moss-grown bucket she bent to it and scooped up a palmiul of water, and washed away the moustache of burnt cork; then, with a coquettish lingering in her walk, she came in, patting her lips with her apron, her roguish head still decorated with the strawberry-pottle. Her eyes sparkled with an innocent baby devilry, but the rest of her face was as demure as a Quakeress's bonnet Her hair was of an extraordinary fineness and plenty, and as wayward as it was fine, so that with the shadow of the doorway round her, and the bright sunlight in every thread of it, it burned like a halo.

'Paul?' she said, pausing in front of him, and looking from a level right into his eyes, whilst her rosy little hands smoothed her apron. 'Is Paul a cousin, too?'

'Of course he is,' said the girl who had called her back; 'he's our first cousin, Paul is.'

'Is he,' she asked, with demure face and dancing eye—' is he—in a kissing relationship?'

'Try him, my wench,' said Paul's uncle.

She bunched her red lips for a kiss, like a child, and advanced her head. Paul's face was like a peony for colour, but he pouted his lips also, and bent to meet hers. When they had almost met, she drew her head back with a demure shake and a look of doubt

The kitchen rang with laughter at Paul's hangdog discomfiture. The innocent, wicked, tantalizing eye mocked him, and he was awhirl with shame; but he found in the midst of it a desperate courage, and, throwing one arm around her neck, he kissed her full on the lips with a loud rustic smack.

'Well,' she said, with a face of horrified rebuke, all but the eyes, which fairly danced with mirth and mischief, 'if that's Castle Barfield manners, I'd better go home again.'

'Quite right, Paul,' said Paul's uncle. 'Stand none o' their nonsense, lad.'

'Oh, but, uncle,' said she, 'you *would* think him milder to look at him—now, wouldn't ee?'

Paul knew the speech of the local gentry, he knew his father's Ayrshire accent, and his own yokel drawl; but this new cousin spoke an English altogether strange to his ears, and it sounded fairylike. He stared in foolish worship.

'You'd better know who you be,' said Paul's uncle, 'and shake hands. This is your grand-uncle's grand-niece, Paul. May Gold her name is. May, my darlin', this is Paul Armstrong.'

She held out her hand, and Paul took it shyly in his own. He had very rarely touched a hand which was not roughened more or less by labour. The warm, soft pressure tightened on his own hard palm for an instant only, but he tingled from head to foot as if he had touched something electric.

'Oh!'-she said, 'this is Uncle Armstrong's little boy? She was by two years his senior, and for a girl she was tall; but he was more than on a level with her so far as mere height went, and the phrase cut him at the heart. She took the strawberry-pottle from her head with both hands, as if it had been a crown, and

laid it on the kitchen dresser. ‘I’ve heard my father talk of his father five hundred times. My father thinks no end of Uncle Armstrong. He says that for a man of learning he never met anybody one half so sensible.’

Paul fell head over heels in love with the pretty cousin from Devonshire. That is to say, he fell in love with his own dreams about her, and they were sweet enough for any lad to fall in love with. She sang and she played, she brimmed over with accomplishment, which was all rustic enough, no doubt, but angel-fine to Paul, and exotic, and not like anything within his knowledge. She played and she sang that afternoon, and never again had Paul’s ears drunk in such tones of heaven.

He went home in an ecstasy of delight and anguish. How beautiful she was! what a grace enveloped her! Her very name was a ravishment—a name of spring and flowers and pure bright skies. May! He dared to whisper it, and he tingled from head to heel. His heart fondled it: May! May! May! and, with inexpressible vague, sweet longing, May! once more. Then her hair! then her voice! then the rosy softness of her hand! then, with hideous revulsion, from her perfections to himself! The gulf of shame! His boots were an epic of despair, his necktie was a tragedy. Then back to her with all the graces of the heavens upon her! Then back to himself again, and the deep damnation of the button which was missing from his waistcoat Paul was a poet, and should have had a soul above buttons; but before the phantom of that missing button his soul grovelled, until it sprang up once more to hover round her foot, her hand, her eyes, her voice, her name of May! May! May! and, with shudders of frostiest self-reproach and richest pleasure, round the memory of

that kiss!

In a week or two Paul had grown devoutly religious, and had no idea of the real why. The Church Vale cousins were ardent churchgoers, for the girls were at the time of life for ardour, and both the Vicar and his Curate were unmarried. Paul, whose proper place of Sabbath boredom was Ebenezer, was welcome as a proselyte, and had a seat in the family pew, and the rapture of walking homeward sometimes by the side of the feminine magnet.

So the dweller at the tent door sees himself at church, a pious varier from chapel. The July sunbeams are falling through stained glass; the roof-beams of the nondescript old building are half visible in shadow. The windows are open, and a warm, spiced wind flutters through in pleasantly successful disputation with odours of dry-rot and chilly earth and stone. The sheep are bleating amongst the mounded graves, and the curate is bleating at the lectern. A yearning peace is in Paul's heart, and the pretty distant cousin is near at hand, with a smell of dry lavender in her dress. The first twining of feeling and belief is here, the earliest of many of those juggleries of Nature which make a fool of reason. Oh, sweet hour! oh, happy world! oh, holy place, where she is! Oh, harmless, innocent calf-love! A jolly old throstle is singing away in the elm which overhangs the parson's gate. There is a disembodied skylark voice somewhere high up in the mare's-tail clouds which veil the earth from too much heat and brightness; and the young heart is unhardened and unspotted from the world.

And oh! oho! the elysium of the summer mornings, when Dick and Paul, and the cousins, male and female, rose at four and strayed with their Devonian

angel through lanes and fields as far as Beacon Hargate, gathering wild flowers and calling at the farm for milk. There are no more such flowers, there is no more such air, no more such merry sunshine; there is no such nectar any more as foamed in the shining pail.

On the way from Church Vale to Beacon Hargate there is a brook, which now runs ink and smells of evil, and in those days flowed so clear that you could count the parcel-coloured pebbles at the bottom, through water which was sometimes pellucid as diamond, and sometimes of a cairngorm colour. The arched pathway over it, with its weather-stained, square-cut timber guards at either side, was called June Bridge, and above and below the bridge, in curved hollows of the banks where the bed of the brook was earthy, water-lilies floated, sliding with the stream, and tugging back on their oozy anchorage. Paul found his goddess leaning on this bridge, watching the lilies, and began to hum whilst he was yet out of hearing,

'May, on June bridge, in July weather,' and to make a song in his head.

'Can ee swim, Paul?' asked his goddess.

'Oh yes,' said Paul, 'I can swim right enough. Want them lilies?' She nodded, smiling. 'I'll get 'em for you.'

He climbed the bridge, and dropped into the meadow.

'I'll wait for ee,' said May, and sauntered on out of sight.

Paul stripped and dived, came up with a shake of the head, and swam down-stream. He reached the water-lilies in a dozen strokes, laid a hand on the stalk of one in passing, and tugged at it. The stem

proved to be tougher than he had guessed, and he dropped his feet to find bottom. He was out of his depth, but he set both hands low and twisted at the stem. This took him under water, but he came up smiling triumph, threw his prize into the meadow, and paddled round the group on an outlook for the finest blooms. One in the very middle of the floating bed was fresh and flawless, and he swam for it. A number of cold weedy things were round his legs at once, and before he knew it he was thickly meshed. The slimy touch sent an unpleasant thrill through him, but he had no sense of fear as yet He wrenched off the bloom he had aimed for, and again he went under water. Then he found he could not rise, and a sudden spasm of terror shook him. He struggled madly, and the pulses in his head beat like bells. Just when the case seemed desperate, and he felt as if he must take breath or die, something gave way. He surged upward, and got one great gulp of air. His senses came back to him, and the terror died away. He threw himself upon his back and paddled, and, keeping his face above water thus, he tried artrully and slowly to extricate his legs from the net which held them. A minute went by, and he was bound as fast as ever. Instinct told him that another struggle meant ruin, and yet instinct bade him struggle. He set his teeth and paddled softly. How long could he last like this? he asked himself; and at that instant he seemed to find an answer. The attitude in which he floated was becoming rapidly more and more upright. There was a sinking weight upon his feet.

At this he shrieked for help, but he paddled softly and without hurry all the same. He listened as well as he could for the beating in his ears. The fields seemed deserted, but he called again. He closed his eyes and listened, paddling softly, with set teeth. He

was nearly upright in the water now, and the weight still dragged But there was yet an inch or two to spare, and he was resolved to make the most of his chances. He called for help again, and a voice answered him petulantly from the bank.

'You silly toad!' said the pretty cousin. 'What do you want to frighten me like that for?' 'I'm drowndin'!' Paul answered.

'Not you!' said the pretty cousin. She made a movement of disdain, and turned away; but Paul yelled at her with a fear so vivid that she turned again with a white face, and fell upon her knees. 'Oh, Paul,' she cried, 'are ee really drownin'?'

'Yes, I am,' said Paul doggedly. 'These blasted weeds is pullin' me down. Be quick! Tie that there lace thing to your parasawl, and shy it to me. Look slippy, or it'll be all up with me. Hold your end tight. Now, shy! Pull now! Gently—gently.'

He reached the bank, and gripped it with both hands. There was no need to say that he had had a fright. His wide eyes and the colour of his face said that.

'Can ee get out now?' she asked.

'No,' said Paul; 'I'm anchored.'

'I'll pull ee out,' said she, rising to her feet; and Paul thrust one hand towards her. She took him by the wrist, stuck both heels in the crisp turf, and pulled. Paul set an elbow on the brink, and strained upwards with all his might Something sucked out of the stream-bed, and the waters went muddy. 'You're coming!' cried May, and gave a haul which was meant to be victorious; but Paul still hung like a log.

'There's about a ton of it,' said Paul. 'It's tied like ropes.'

‘Gimme t’other hand,’ returned young Devon. ‘I’ll pull ee out if I dies for’t.’

Paul surrendered the other hand, and she pulled. There was another suck at the bottom of the stream, and Paul came up by a foot. She went backwards for a new vantage-ground, and pulled again, and Paul came to bank, clothed from the waist downward in water-lily leaf and weed, and lay face downwards helpless on the turf at her feet.

‘Now,’ she said tartly, ‘you’re not goin’ to faint, I hope!’ Paul said nothing. ‘Like a girl,’ she added, with disdain.

‘Not me,’ answered Paul, with his nose in the turf. ‘What have I got to feint for?’

He asked the question with feeble scorn, and fainted.

May Gold stooped to a basket which lay near her, and, taking from it a pair of garden scissors, knelt beside Paul, and began to snip his bonds. He woke to find her thus engaged, and a virginal sweet sense of shame filled him. Her fingers touched his skin at times, and he tingled with a soft fire.

‘Nobody’d think it from they grimy paws,’ said May Gold to herself; ‘but he’ve got a skin as fair as a maid’s.’

Paul heard the words, and shuddered exquisitely as she laid her soft warm hand on his shoulder, leaning over him, and slicing away at the withes in a business-like fashion.

‘I’ll finish that,’ he said tremulously.

‘La,’ she cried, ‘the child’s awake all the time! There’s the scissors; I’ll go and wait in the lane.’

Paul lay still for a moment listening to the rustle of her dress; and when it had gone out of hearing he

rolled over, and with a shaking hand began to free himself of the remnant of his bonds. He had not, so far, had time to think of the imminent peril from which he had escaped. He had been near death. Death! What a grip at the heartstrings! He had had his second of terror in the fact, but the fact was nothing like the looking back on it There was no urgent fear now to compel him to the restraint of cowardice, and at this instant he was coward from scalp to sole—from heart to skin coward. The peril escaped was a thousand times more horrible than the peril endured, and he quailed now that the danger was over.

All his thoughts and half his feelings had hurried for weeks past towards prayer. In his extremity he had not prayed or thought of praying. A cool, self-centred, self-preserving something in his mind had taught him to command all his own forces for one purpose. Would he have been damned if he had lost the power to pray before that cunning mentor of the flesh deserted him?

He dressed lingeringly and feebly, and when he had done so he went back to the tangle of water-weeds he had left on the river-bank. There were a dozen of the lovely waxlike blooms amongst them, uninjured. He snipped them away with the scissors, and, climbing the stile with heavy feet, surrendered them to May.

‘Oh,’ she said shrilly, ‘take ‘em away! I couldn’t bear to look at ‘em!’

‘Take ‘em,’ said Paul. ‘They jolly nigh cost me my life.’

Before he answered (or before she caught the meaning of his answer) she had flung them into the roadway; but at the instant when she understood him

she made a dart at them, gathered them all together in her hands, and sped to the brookside. There she lay at length upon the turf, and washed the blooms in the flowing water. Then she gathered long tough grasses, and looped them together until she had made a cord, with which she bound the waxen posy. Paul followed and sat near, languidly propped on one hand to watch her.

'Paul Armstrong,' said May, and he knew at once by this manner of address that she was going to be severe with him, 'I'd no idea you was so wicked.'

'Oh,' Paul answered defensively, 'I ain't wicked—not over and above.'

'You're a very wicked boy indeed,' she said. 'You was in danger of your life—there's no mistake about that, though at first I didn't believe you.'

'There's nothing wicked in that,' said Paul

'Ah 1' she cried, her little white teeth gripping one end of the grassy cord whilst she wound the other about the stems of the water-lilies, 'I can see you know what I mean. Using bad language in the very face of death and danger! I wonder you wasn't drowned for a judgment.'

'Oh, come,' Paul answered. 'I didn't use bad language.'

'Oh, yes, you did, though,' she retorted. 'And I'm not going to be friends with a boy as talks like that.'

'Not friends!' said Paul. 'Why, May?' He spoke in an accent of incredulous reproach.

'No,' she said. 'I'm properly shocked, I tell ee. I'm never going to be friends again.'

'If I thought that was goin' to be true,' said Paul, 'do you know what I'd do?'

'No, I don't,' she answered, 'and I don't want to.'

‘I’d hull myself into that brook this minute and never come out again.’

‘You’d do what? she asked.

To ‘hull’ is to hurl in the dialect Paul spoke in youth. The word was strange to her.

‘I’d throw myself into that brook this minute, and never come out again.’

‘Oh, you wicked boy!’ she cried, but her eyes sparkled with triumph. She quenched the sparkle. ‘It *is* true; and after that piece of wickedness, it’s truer than ever.’

Paul rose to his feet; his face was white, and his eyes stared as they had done when she had just rescued him.

‘Good-bye, May,’ he said.

‘Good-bye,’ she answered coolly.

‘You’re never goin’ to be friends any more, May?’

‘No,’ she said, but rose to her feet with a shriek, for Paul had taken two swift paces, and had plunged back into the brook, clothes and all. ‘Paul!’ she shrilled after him. ‘Paul! Don’t ee drown. Don’t ee now. Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t ee!’

Paul stood shoulder-deep in the stream, and she besought him from the bank with clasped hands and frightened eyes.

‘Goin’ to be friends,’ said Paul grimly.

‘Yes, yes, yes!’ she cried. ‘Come out, do, there’s a dear!’

Paul reached the bank in a stroke, and climbed back into the meadow. The instant he gained his feet she rushed at him and boxed his ears furiously. Paul laughed with pleasure. He had had his head punched by every fighting peer within a mile of home, and the soft little hands fell like a sort of fairy

snowflakes.

'Oh, you wicked, wicked, wicked boy!' she raged, stamping her foot at him. 'You can go in again as soon as ee want to. *I* won't be so fullish as to call ee out.'

'D'ye mean it?' asked Paul, suddenly grim again.

'No,' she said, fawning on him with her hands, but doing it at a distance for fear of his wet clothes. 'But, Paul, child, you'll catch your death. Run home.'

'I'm not a child,' said Paul. 'I'm within two years as old as you are, May. I say, May———'

'Oh, do run home!' she coaxed him. 'Do ee, now, Paul, for my sake.'

'I'm off,' said Paul. 'Ask me anything like that, and I'll walk into fire *or* water.'

'Why, Paul,' said the little Vanity, turning her face down, and looking up at him past her beautiful lashes and arched brows, 'whatever makes you talk like that?'

'Because it's the simple truth,' said Paul 'You try me, May.'

'But why is it the simple truth?' she asked.

'Because——' said Paul fiercely, and then stopped dead.

'Oh, that's no answer,' she said, with a little sway of her hips. She kept her eye upon him, but turned her head slightly aside. She might have practised glance and posture all her life and made them no more telling. But Paul's teeth were beginning to chatter, and she was alarmed. 'Don't stop to tell me now,' she said, and seeing that he was about to protest, she added swiftly: 'Come and tell me to-night, Paul, won't ee, now? And run home now, Paul, do, there's a dear. Run, and then you won't catch

cold—to please me, Paul.'

So Paul ran, and ran himself into a glow, and felt as if the fire of comfort in his heart would have warmed the Polar regions. Until time and experience taught him better, he always wanted a big word for even the least of themes.

'Man,' said old Armstrong once (but that was years later), 'ye'd borrow the lungs of Gargantua to sing the epic of a house-fly.'

'Yes, dad,' said Paul; 'that's a capital imitation of my style,' and they both chuckled affectionately.

But now his mind was a mere firework of interjections—squibs, bombs, and rockets of 'Oh!' and 'Ah!' and 'Now!' and 'She'll listen! and 'She'll despise me!' He was within a month of sixteen, and he was in receipt of sixpence a week as pocket-money, but the second fact was to be no more durable than the first. He could neither stay at sixteen nor at the sixpence. Time would take care of the one event, and Paul of the other. An immediate marriage, perhaps even an early marriage, was out of question. It might be necessary to wait for years. There was a fortune to be made, of course, and though it might come by some rare chance to-morrow, it might, on the other hand, take time.

'We've got to be practical,' said Paul.

Whether Paul were a greater ass than most imaginative boys of his years may be a question, but he was as serious about this matter as if he had been eight-and-twenty, and when he reached home he had been rejected and had died of it, and accepted and married many times over. He got into his working clothes after a thorough rub down, and, except for a touch of languor, was none the worse for his morning's adventure. Armstrong was out on business

for the day, and in the drowsy afternoon Paul laid an old press blanket on the office floor, took a ream of printing-paper for a pillow, and slept like a top. This made an end of languor, and when the hour of freedom struck, he ran down the weedy garden and raced upstairs to his attic-chamber, and there attired himself in his best. These were days when the cheapest of cheap dandies wore paper cuffs and collars, then newly discovered, and Paul made himself trim in this inexpensive fashion. He had spent half an hour at his ablutions before leaving the office, and walked towards his rendezvous all neat and shining.

May met him at the door with a finger on her lips and a pretty air of mystery.

'I've had to fib about ee. Uncle Dan saw you run past all wet this morning, and he asked. I had to tell him something. I said you fell in trying to reach them watter-lilies. I didn't want your own uncle to know your wickedness.'

There was not time for more, for Uncle Dan himself appeared at this moment.

'None the worse for your duckin', eh, Paul?'

'Not a bit.'

'We're goin' to have a bit of music, lad. Come in and sit down, if you've a mind to it.'

Paul half welcomed and half resented the putting off of the decisive moment He was in a dreadful nervous flutter, his hopes alternately flying like a flag in a high wind, and drooping in a sick abandonment of everything. And May was more ravishing than ever. She had stuck the stem of a rose in one little ear like a pen, and the full flower itself nestled drooping at her cheek. There was never anything in the world more demure than her face

and her manner, but the frolic eye betrayed her mood now and then, and Paul was half beside himself at every furtive smile she shot at him. A local tenor, the pride of the church choir, was there, and May and he sang duets together, amongst them 'Come where my love lies dreaming.' Paul's heart obeyed the call with a virgin coyness, and his thoughts stole into some dim-seen shadowed sanctuary, some place of silence where the feet fell soft, and a pale curtain gleamed, and where behind the curtain lay something so sacred that he dared not draw the veil, even in fancy. 'Her beauty beaming,' sang the local tenor. 'Her beauty beaming,' May's voice carolled. Heaven, how it beamed! The boy's emotion choked him. If shame had not lent him self-control, he would have broken into tears before them all.

The musical hour wore away, and the local tenor had a supper engagement, and must go. May slid from the room, and soon after her voice was heard calling 'Paul.'

Paul answered.

'Come here a minute,' she said. 'I want to speak to ee.'

Paul stumbled out, blind and stupid. She was standing at the open door with some gauzy white stuff loosely folded over her hair and drawn over her bosom. The July moon was at the full, and low in the heavens.

'Look at that,' she said, and Paul looked.

The four poplars clove the intense dark blue, but not so loftily as in his first remembrance of them. The street was quiet Not a sound disturbed the humming spicy silence of the summer night Paul turned from that sweet intoxication to her face. She

smiled at him, and his heart seemed to swoon. He did not know till later, but she suffered from some very slight tenderness of the eyes which made them shrink from too much light, and he had never seen her in her full beauty until this moment, when they seemed so large and deep that he could scarcely bear to look at them. She had a hat in her hand, and she held it out to him, still smiling, but so dreamily, so unlike herself, that he could but look and tremble and wonder. He took the hat mechanically, and saw that it was his own. He thought himself dismissed, and his heart changed from a soft ethereal fire to cold lead.

'Auntie!' she called—'Aunt Deb 'Me and Paul's goin' to take a bit of a walk. I've got to give him a lecture.'

Some affectionate assenting answer came, and May floated into the moonlight, across the street, and into a shady alley which lay between two high-hedged gardens; then into moonlight again, across another road, through a clinking turnstile, and into a broad field, where Paul had played many a game of cricket before and after working hours. From here the open country gleamed, mystic and strange; every hill and dale familiar, and all unlike themselves, as a friend's ghost might be unlike the living friend.

Her first words jarred his dream to pieces.

'You're a funny boy, Paul. After all that fullishness of yours this morning I met your brother Dick. He gave me something. I've got it here this minute. I want to know if it belongs to you—really. Dick says it's all your very own, but I don't more'n half believe him. I say you must have copied it out of some book. Now, di'n't ee?'

'I don't know,' said Paul huskily. 'What is it?'

'It's a piece of poetry,' she said. 'Can you make poetry?'

'I try sometimes,' said Paul.

It cost an effort to answer. He wanted her to know, and he shrank from her knowing.

'Did you make this?'

'What?'

'I'll tell it.'

She spoke the lines prettily, and put away her rustic accent, all but the music:

'"Down in the West dwells my lady Clare:
Blow, O balmy wind, from the West!
Bathe me in odours of her hair,
Bring me her thoughts ere she fell to rest!

'"Beam, O moon, through her casement bars;
Bathe in thy glory her glorious hair:
Keep guard over her, sentinel stars;
Watch her and keep her, all things fair!"'

'You didn't make that up out of your own head, did ee, Paul?

'Yes,' said Paul.

Here was his divinity reciting the lines with which she herself had inspired him.

'Now, couldn't ee make a piece of poetry about me?' she asked.

Paul's heart gave one great thump at his breast and stopped.

'That was about you,' he said.

'Why, you silly boy,' she said, 'you've got the name wrong. But oh, Paul, ain't ee beginning very young? Askin' for maids' thoughts afore they go to sleep!

Mine, too! You'll be a regular gallows young reprobate afore you're much older. That I'm sure of.'

There was a trembling wish deep down in his heart that she had left this unsaid, but how could he be so disloyal as to let it float to the surface? He drowned it deep, but it was there. She had misunderstood. She read him coarsely, not as the May of his dreams had read him.

'Now, you write something about me, will ee, Paul?—something in my own name. Will ee?' Paul made no answer for the moment, for the request fairly carried him off his balance. 'Will ee, now?' she asked, bringing her face in front of his.

'Yes, yes, yes,' he half sighed, half panted.

'Here's a stile,' she said, springing forward with a happy gurgle of a laugh. The laugh to Paul's ear was as musical as the sad chuckle of the nightingale, and as far from sorrow as its one rival is from mirth. There was *camaraderie* in it, sympathy, a touch even of something confidential. 'Now, well sit down here together, and you shall make it up.'

She perched on the stile as light as a perching bird, and drew her lithe figure on one side to make room for Paul. The stile was narrow, and there was barely room for two. Paul hesitated shyly, but she patted the seat in a pretty assumption of impatience, and he obeyed.

'Paul,' she said, sliding an arm behind him, and taking hold of the side-post. 'What was it ee wanted to tell this morning?'

'This morning?' said Paul stupidly. It is one thing to resolve to be courageous in battle. It may be another thing when the fight begins.

'Now, I'm sure you haven't forgot already,' she said. 'Here! You catch hold of the post on my side.

Then we shall be comfortable.' She swayed forward to make easier for him the movement she advised, and her whole figure from ankle to shoulder touched him lightly. He obeyed, and she swung back again, nestling into the curve of his arm. 'That's nice, isn't it? Now, what was ee going to tell?' Paul had not a word to say for himself. If he had ever had the audacity to picture anything in his own mind like this present truth, he would have thought it certain to be deliriously happy; but as a matter of fact he was miserable, and felt himself at the clumsiest disadvantage. 'You said,' she murmured, half reproachfully, you'd go through fire *or* water for me, Paul.'

'So I would,' said Paul.

'Why? she asked, nestling a little nearer. 'Why, Paul?'

'I would,' said he, rather sulkily than otherwise.

'Why?' She swayed forward again, and looked into his face. Her breath fanned his cheek. Her eyes were wide open and looked into his almost mournfully. 'Why?' Her glance hypnotized him. 'Why?'

'I love you,' he said, in a whisper.

'Do ee? she cooed. 'Oh, you silly Paul! What for?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'There never was anybody as lovely as you are.'

The words seemed to slide from him, apart from his will.

'Oh, you silly Paul Am I lovely?'

'Lovely? sighed Paul, and tangled his eyes in hers more and more.

'You'll make up that piece of poetry about me, won't ee, Paul?'

'Yes.'

The word was just audible, a breath, no more.

‘You dear!’ she said; and, leaning nearer and yet nearer to him, she laid her lips on his. They rested there for one thrilling instant, and then she drew back an inch or two only. ‘Make it up about that,’ she said, looking point blank into his eyes. Paul drooped his head and the lips met again, and fastened. A delicate fire burned him, and he curled his arm about her waist, and drew her to him. She yielded for one instant, and then slipped away with a panting laugh. ‘Oh, Paul?’ she said; ‘you really are too dreadful for anything! Fancy! A mere child like you. I should like to know what Mr. Filmer’d say if ever he knew I’d let ee do that.’

By one of those curious intuitions to which the mind is open at times of profound excitement, Paul knew what her answer would be, but he asked the question. At first his voice made no sound; but he cleared his throat and spoke dryly, and in a tone of commonplace:

‘Who is Mr. Filmer?’

‘Mr. Filmer’s the gentleman I’m going to be married to,’ said May. ‘He’s a very jealous temper, and I shouldn’t like him to know I’d been flirting, even with a child like you.’

It was all over.

CHAPTER IV

Paul survived. He left the church, and returned with a doubtful allegiance to Ebenezer. He joined the singing-class there, for his voice had suddenly grown harsh and deep, and he conceived himself to be a basso. The parish swarmed with vocal celebrities, and he would be one of them. He made his first visit to the class, and got there early.

Came in two young ladies in hoops, with pork-pie hats and hair done up in bags of chenille. The like figures may be seen in the drawings of John Leech, *circa* 1860. Each young lady had a curved nose. One nose curved inward at the bridge, and the other outward at the bridge, and if the curves had been set together they would have fitted with precision. Came in a lean lady with a purse mouth, rather open—looking like an empty voluntary-bag. Came in a stout lady, like a full voluntary-bag, the mouth close shut with a clasp. Came in a gentleman with shining rabbit teeth, smiling as if for a wager. Came in a gentleman with a deep bass voice consciously indicated in the carriage of his head—the voice garrotting him, as it were, rather high up in the collar. Came in a gentleman with heavy movable eyebrows, which looked too big for the limited playground a very small forehead afforded. Came in a small apoplectic man, bald and clean-shaven, and

red and angry in the face, like an ill-conditioned baby. Came in ladies and gentlemen who smirked and slid; ladies and gentlemen who loitered, and were sheepish when by hazard they caught an eye; ladies and gentlemen crammed to suffocation with a sense of their own importance; ladies and gentlemen miserably overwhelmed with a sense of the importance of other people.

Paul knew every one of them, and had known them from childhood; and somehow they were all transformed from commonplace, and dignified into a comedy which was at once sympathetic and exquisitely droll. His narrow world had widened; his neighbours had sprung alive. His heart was tickled with a genial laughter, and his mirth tasted sweet to him, like a mellow apple. He could have hugged the crowd for sheer delight.

The conductor of the singing-class weeded Paul out at the close of the first glee, and brought his musical ambitions to an end.

‘Theer are at least twelve notes in an ordinary singin’ voice,’ said the conductor, ‘and theer ought to be eight half-tones scattered in among ‘em, somewheer. You’ve got two notes at present, and one’s a squeak and t’other’s a grumble. I think you might find a more advantageous empl’yment for your time elsewheer.’

Paul submitted to this verdict with high good-humour. He retired to the far end of the schoolroom, and sat out ‘the practice’ with a growing sense of pleasure. He exulted in the possession of a new sense which made all these people lovable.

‘Now I’ve found this out,’ said Paul to himself, ‘I shall never be lonely any more. There’ll always be summat to think about—summat with a relish in it.’

He must needs, of course, try to get the relish on paper, and he wrote a great deal of boyish stuff in flagrant imitation of Dickens, and hid it, jackdaw-like, in such places as he could find. In the slattern old office where Paul was learning more or less to be a workman at his trade there was no such thing as a ceiling. Frayed mortar, with matted scraps of cow-hair in it, used to fall frequently into the type-cases whenever a high wind shook the crazy slates, and, to obviate this, some contriving person had nailed a number of sheets of brown paper to the rafters. Paul's hiding-place for his literary work was above these sheets of paper, and one day when old Armstrong stood by his side, a tintack gave way beneath the superincumbent weight, and the whole bundle of scraps in verse and prose fell at the author's feet Armstrong stooped for it, and Paul went red and white, and his legs shook beneath him. There was an upturned box by the side of the cracked and blistered old stove which warmed the room in winter, and Armstrong went to it and sat down to untie his bundle. The author had never had any confidences with anybody, and his father was one of the last people in the world to whom he would have dared to make appeal for advice or help. In his agitation he went on pecking at the case of type before him, and setting the stamps on end at random, inside out and upside down, and in any progression chance might order. The old man coughed, and Paul dropped his composing-stick into the space-box with a clatter, and spilt its contents there. Armstrong slipped the string which bound the roll of papers, and began to glance over his discovery. Paul felt as if the ramshackle building had been out at sea.

'M'm,' said Armstrong, with the merest dry tick of

a tone which seemed to express inquiry and surprise. Paul started as if an arrow had gone through him, and dropped his composing-stick a second time. ‘Ye’re very clumsy, there, my lad,’ said the old man. ‘What’s happening?’

Paul made no answer, and the father went back to his papers.

‘“Bilsby,”’ the old man hummed, half aloud, ‘“Bilsby is fat—fat with the comfortable fatness which has grown about him in the course of five-and-forty years of perfect self-approval. Bilsby is not great, or good, or magnanimous, or wise, or wealthy, or of long descent, or handsome, or admired; but he is happy. He gets up with Bilsby in the morning, has breakfast, dinner, tea and supper with him, and goes to bed with him at night. If Bilsby had a choice—and Bilsby hasn’t—he would make no change. He has himself to feed on—an immortal feast He sits at that eternal board, before that unfailing dish, which grows the more he ruminates upon it. Fat of the fat, sweet of the sweet is Bilsby to Bilsby’s palate. What will become of Bilsby when he dies? There can be no heaven for Bilsby, for he would have to hymn another glory there; There can be no fate of pain, for even if the Devil take him, there will still be Bilsby, and that fact alone would keep him happy.”

‘What’s all this rampant wickedness, y’ irreverent dog?’ asked Armstrong. ‘This is your writing, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Paul, feeling his throat harsh and constricted like a quill.

Armstrong said no more, but rolling up the bundle and sliding the knotted string once more about it, put it in his pocket and walked downstairs. Paul hardly dared to meet him at the mid-day dinner, but he put the best face he could upon the matter—a

very pale and disturbed face it was—and presented himself at table. Nothing was said. The gray man sat with his book propped up against the bread-basket, as usual, and ate without knowing what passed his lips. The meal over, he took his arm-chair by the kitchen fire, and lit his pipe, and read with the cat perched on his shoulder. Mrs. Armstrong went to mind the shop, the rest of the family dispersed to their various avocations, and Paul sat still, listening to the ticking of the clock, and awaiting the stroke of two to take him back to work. He felt as if it would be cowardice to go earlier, but he was unhappy, and would willingly have been elsewhere.

Suddenly Armstrong reached out his hand towards the table and set down his book. Then from the coat-pocket where Paul had plainly seen it bulging he drew the roll of manuscript.

'Paul,' said the old man, 'I've been readin' this farrago, and the less that's said about it the better. I obsairve that the main part of it's devoted to the exaggerated satire of your neighbours. That's a spirit I'm sorry to notice in ye, and I regret to see that ye're already looking sulky at rebuke. The vairse,' pursued Armstrong, 'is mainly sickly, whining, puling stuff, as far away from Nature and experience as it's easily possible to be. Now, I invite ye. Listen to this.'

He began to read with a fine disdain:

> '"*Come not when I am dead*
> *To drop thy foolish tears upon my grave.*"'

Paul averted his head, and set one hand before his face. Months ago, when May Gold's perfidy was a new thing, and the whole world was darkened, he had copied these lines from the Poet Laureate with

tears, and they had seemed to him a perfect expression of himself. The old man ground out the lines with increasing scorn, and Paul began to grin, and then to shake with suppressed laughter. Armstrong went on to the end unyieldingly.

'I'm not denying,' he said, a moment later, 'that I've found here and there a salt sprinkle o' common-sense. But *that*, my lad,' banging a hand on the manuscript page before him, 'is simply unadulterated rubbish. It's the silliest thing in the haul collection.'

Paul's reverence for his father's judgment in such matters was a tradition and a religion. 'Old Armstrong' was the parish pride as scholar and critic. The Rev. Roderic Murchison, who was a Master of Arts of Aberdeen, sat at the gray little man's feet like a pupil. Armstrong had none of the minister's Greek and Latin, but he was his master in English letters. In spite of this awful prescription of authority Paul spirted laughter.

'It's Tennyson!' he spluttered. 'It's the Poet Laureate!'

'Then,' said Armstrong, 'the Poet Laureate's a drivelling idiot, like his predecessor.'

'What?' Paul asked, underneath his breath. He had never listened to such blasphemy.

'In my day,' said Armstrong, 'a poet laid a table for men to eat and drink at. We'd Sir Walter's beef and bannocks, and puir young Byron's Athol brose. Wha calls this mingling o' skim milk an' treacle the wine o' the soul a poet ought to pour?

'Scott and Byron!' cried Paul, amazed out of all reverence. 'Why, there's more poetry in Tennyson's little finger than in both their bodies.'

'Hoots, man! hauld your silly tongue,' cried his father.

‘Have you read “In Memoriam”?’ cried Paul.

‘No,’ returned Armstrong curtly, ‘I have not.’

‘Then,’ Paul stormed, ‘what’s your opinion good for?’

The old man’s eyes flashed, and he made a motion as if to rise. He controlled himself, however, and reached out a hand to the hob for the clay he had relinquished a minute or two before.

‘The question’s fair,’ he said; ‘the question’s fair—pairfectly fair, Paul. I misliked the manner of it, but the question’s fair.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Paul.

He could have knelt to him.

‘They’ll be having Tennyson at the Institute Library?’ the old man asked. ‘I’ll walk over for him.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Paul, ‘but Tennyson ——’

‘Ay, ay!’ said Armstrong, ‘age fossilizes. It’s like enough the man has a word to say. I’ll look at him.’

He took his rusty old silk hat from its hook beside the eight-day clock, and went out quietly.

For the first minute in his life Paul truly loved him.

‘It would ha’served me right,’ he mourned, ‘if he’d ha’ knocked me down. It’s a lot better as it is, though; but it’s hard to bear.’

That afternoon, and for many a morning and afternoon for months, old Armstrong shuffled swiftly along the weedy garden, and took his seat on the upturned box beside the stove, and there studied his Tennyson and smoked his pipe. These were halcyon days for Paul, for the old man was not long obdurate, and began to halve the delight of his own reading.

‘Ay, ay!’ he said, by way of making his first

admission, '"in My Father's house are many mansions." This chap has the key to the organ-loft' Then, a little later: 'It's clean thinking, and a bonny music' Later still, with a long, slow sigh on the word: 'Eh!' and then, unconsciously: 'Deep waters, lad, deep waters.'

He read slowly, for the dialect was new, and he was bent on mastering it. His occasional difficulties seemed strange to the boy, but then, Paul had been suckled at this fountain, and could make no allowances for the prepossessions of age, and the distaste of an old palate for a new flavour. An occasional question startled him, the answer was so obvious and simple.

'"Or where the kneeling hamlet drains
The chalice of the grapes of God,"'

Armstrong read out 'D'ye find the meaning of that, Paul, lad,' he asked.

'Village church,' said Paul 'Holy Communion.'

'To be sure,' said the old man, 'to be sure. It's tight packed, but it's simple as A B C.'

There were questions Paul could not answer, and he and the old man puzzled them out together. They drew closer and closer. The boy dared to reveal his mind, and the father began to respect his opinion. By the time the warm weather was round again they were fast friends. They tramped up and down the path of the neglected garden arm-in-arm, and talked of literature and politics and the world at large. Paul had dreams, and sometimes he gave his father a glimpse of them. Armstrong preached humility.

'L'arn, my lad,' he would say, almost sternly, 'l'arn before ye try to teach.'

Paul had turned public instructor already, but that was his secret There was a sort of treason in it, for Armstrong's rival, a young and pushing tradesman, had started a weekly paper, and Paul was an anonymous contributor to its pages. This journal was called the *Barfield Advertiser, and Quarry-moor, Church Vale, and Heydon Hay Gazette*; but it was satirically known in the Armstrong household as the *Crusher*, and its leading articles (which were certainly rather turgid and pompous) were food for weekly mirth. But one day this was changed.

'Why, William,' cried Mrs. Armstrong, 'this fellow's turned quite sensible. You might ha' wrote this yourself. It's simply nayther more nor less than you was sayin' last Wednesday at this very table.'

Paul's coffee went the wrong way, and his cough caused a momentary diversion. But when Dick had vigorously thumped him on the back, and he had resumed his seat at table, Armstrong read the article aloud.

'Ay, ay!' he said at the close, 'it's certainly my own opinion, and vary cleanly put.'

Paul's coffee went the wrong way again, and again Dick thumped him on the back. When the paper had gone the round of the household the anonymous writer stole it, and carried it, neatly folded beneath his waistcoat, to the office. He knew it by heart already, but he read it insatiably over and over again. He was in print, and to be in print for the first time is to experience as fine a delirium as is to be found in love or liquor. The typed column ravished his senses, and the editorial 'we' looked imperial. He was 'we' in spite of shirt-sleeves and ink-smeared apron of herden. In those days the *Times* could uproot a Ministry, but its editor in his proudest hour

would have been a dwarf if he had measured himself by Paul's self-appreciation. Sweet are the uses of a boy's vanity, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb.

The dreamer in his mountain eyrie felt his heart warm with a sort of fatherly pity over these bumpkin raptures. The lad blows a bubble of foolery, and it glitters and floats and bursts, and who is the worse for it? The man carves folly in brass, and breaks his head on his own monument; or forges it in steel, and stabs his own heart with it. The vanities of youth are yeast in wholesome ale. The follies of later life are mildew in the cask. The lad who never tasted Paul's intoxication may make a worthy citizen, but he will never set the Thames afire.

Paul went on writing, and thundered from the editorial pulpit weekly. He gave the *Crusher* a policy. Castle Barfield was to be a borough at the next redistribution of seats. Its watchwords were 'Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform.' It was to uphold the traditions of Manchester in a curious blend with the philosophy, or the want of it, of Thomas Carlyle. It assailed the Vicar of All Saints' for the introduction of a surpliced choir, and it showed a bared arm and a clenched fist to Popery.

The Jovian wielder of the *Crusher's* lightnings got used to being discussed at the Saturday morning table, and encountered praise and blame there with an equal countenance. In his own unplummeted depths he was Scott before the discovery of the authorship of the Waverley series; he was Junius; he was S. G. O. And not a soul ever guessed at the truth, for just as Paul had resolved to reveal his identity and claim his fame the *Crusher* died.

Then for a long time he was voiceless, and, having

no paper balloon to float him, he went about in his own thoughts, quite like a common person. A year later, routing out the whole series of printed articles from one of his jackdaw hiding-places, he was inspired by an intense disdain, and burned them in the office stove.

All the time the world he lived in was the world he took least heed of. Until Ralston crossed him—Ralston, his man of men, and king, and deity—the only real creature was the gray old man who had begotten him. Father and son had grown to a curious sympathy, in which age never domineered because of age, or youth presumed because of youth. Armstrong the elder was a poet, though he had never printed a line; and he and Paul brought their verses to each other. They used to print at times the productions of the local bard, and their first bond of genial and equal laughter (which is one of the best bonds in life) came of their joint reading of one of his effusions. Paul had given it the dignity of type. Armstrong was his own proof-reader, and Paul read the MS. aloud, whilst his father, with balanced pen, ticked off the lines. They were headed 'Lines on a Walk I once took in the Country,' and they opened thus:

'It was upon a day in May When through the field I took my way, It was delightful for to see The sheep and lambs—they did agree.

'And as I went forth on that day I met a stile within my way, That stile which did give rest to me Again I may not no more see.

'As on my way I then did trod, The lark did roar his song to God.'

There they laughed, with tears, for this was not a jest of anybody's purposed making, but a pinch from

Nature's pepper-castor, and it tickled the lungs to madness.

'Paul, lad,' said Armstrong, coming to a sudden serious end of laughter, and wiping his eyes, 'it's not an ungentle heart that finds it delightful to see the fleecy, silly people o' the fields in harmony. And the reflection on the stile's a fine bit o' pathetics. "I've been happy there," says the poor ignorance; "and I may never see it more." It's the etairnal hauntin' thoct o' man in all ages. "We've no abiding city here." "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth." "Never, never more," says poor Poe's raven. Listen, m'n! Ye'll hear Shakespeare's immortal thunder. The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces dissolve with the great globe itself and all that it inherits. It's all there, Paul. It's in the hiccoughing throat of him. Puir felly! Well just put him into decent English, and see that naebody else shall laugh at him.'

So they trimmed the local bard, and made him sober, and even mildly sweet; and when, with their joint amendments, they sent the poem home, the bard refused to be edited, declined the parcel, and took his trade elsewhere.

But the tinkering of the poor verses brought Paul and his father finally together, and from that hour onward they were friends.

CHAPTER V

And now the mind of the Exile turned to the episode of Norah MacMulty—grotesque, pitiable, laughable.

Paul had pssed his seventeenth birthday, and reckoned himself a man. He was in love again, but tentatively. He had read 'Don Juan,' and had learned a thing or two. He conceived that he had rubbed off the first soft bloom of youth, and the idea, natural to his time of life, that he was aged and experienced had taken full hold of him.

He was not wholly certain that he adored the pretty girl at the bonnet-shop. He had never spoken to her, for one thing, and had only seen her from a distance, but she did well enough to moon about, and made an excellent peg to hang verses on.

He had been away on a lovely summer evening's ramble into the quiet of the country. He had been verse-making or verse-polishing, and was in a high state of mental exaltation when he reached the darkened main street of the town about ten o'clock. He turned the corner, and walked straight into the arms of a woman, who hugged him with a drunken ardour. Her breath was fiery with gin, and the coarsely-sweet scent of it filled him with an impulse of loathing.

'Let go,' said Paul

'Deed I'll not let go,' the woman answered, in a drunken voice. 'Ye're just sent here be Providence to see a poor lonely little craychure home.'

'Let go,' said Paul again; but she clung and laughed, and, in a sudden spasm of downright horror, he put out more strength than he guessed, and wrenched himself free. The woman tottered backwards, swayed for an instant, and then fell. The back of her head came into sharp contact with the

corner of the wall. She lay quite still, and Paul grew frightened. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘take my hand. Let me help you up.’ He had not expected her to answer, but her continued silence seemed dreadful. He kneeled to look closely into her face. She was quite young—not more than two or three and twenty at the outside—and she had a quantity of light auburn hair, which, though untidy, had a soft beauty of its own. Her eyes were closed, and her face was white. ‘Now, don’t lie there pretending to be killed,’ said Paul, in an unsteady voice. She made no movement, and he rose and looked about him in dismay.

There was not a creature in the street, and the public lamps were never lighted in the summer-time. A long way off the windows of a gin-shop cast a light upon the road, and nearer, on the opposite side, a red lamp burned. With a lingering glance of fear and pity at the recumbent figure, Paul sped towards the red lamp as fast as he could lift a leg. In his agitation he gave such a tug at the bell that it clanged like a fire-alarm. The doctor’s assistant, a dashing young gentleman whom Paul knew from afar, and who was remarkable to him chiefly for an expensive taste in clothing, came briskly to the door.

‘There’s a woman at the corner,’ said Paul, ‘badly hurt; I thought it best to let you know.’

The assistant snatched a hat from the hall table, and came out at once.

‘Where is she?’

Paul pointed, and they ran together. The assistant had the quicker turn of speed, and reached the corner first. He was kneeling beside the woman when Paul reached him.

‘Got a handkerchief?’ he asked

Paul lugged half a square yard of turkey-red cotton

from his pocket. ‘That’s the ticket,’ said the assistant. He folded the handkerchief.. ‘Now, hold her head up whilst I get this under it.’

Paul obeyed again, but the hair was all in a warm wet mesh of blood.

‘What are you shaking at?’ the assistant asked him. ‘You’re a pretty poor plucked un,’ he added, as he tied the bandage tight across the woman’s forehead.

‘I’m not used to it,’ said Paul, choking with nausea and pity.

‘That’s pretty evident,’ returned the other. ‘Now, get her shawl round her head whilst I hold her up. That’ll do. We must get her down to the surgery. Take her by her shoulders; there. Get your arms well under her. Heave ho! Wait a minute till I settle her dress and get a good hold of her knees. Upsy daisy; march!’

They went staggeringly, not because of the weight, but by reason of the giddiness which assailed Paul. He thought it had suddenly grown foggy, for there was a mist between him and all the dimly visible objects of the night There were coloured sparks in the mist by-and-by, and when once they had got their burden through the open hall and had laid it on a plain straight couch in the surgery, Paul was glad to sit down uninvited.

‘Take a sniff at that,’ said the assistant, pressing an un-stoppered bottle into his hand.

Paul obeyed him. The pungent ammonia brought the tears to his eyes and took his breath away, but it dispersed the fog and stilled the wheel which had been whirling in his head The assistant had taken off his coat and rolled up his shirtsleeves, and was going about his task with professional dexterity and coolness.

‘How did this happen?’ he asked.

He was Paul’s senior by three years at most, but he had as magisterial and assured a manner as if he had been fifty.

Paul told the story just as it happened.

‘Well,’ said the assistant, ‘this is a pretty grave old case, and so I tell you. You may find yourself in trouble over this.’

‘Find myself in trouble?’ said Paul. ‘Me?’

‘Yes,’ said the assistant; ‘you.’

‘You’ve got better work in hand than talkin’ rubbish,’ Paul retorted; ‘stick to it.’

‘Ah,’ said the budding surgeon, ‘well wait till the woman’s conscious, if ever she is, and see what sort of a tale she has to tell.’

‘It’s the simple truf he’s tould ye,’ said the patient, in a feeble voice. ‘What do ye be tryin’ to frighten him for?’

‘Oh, you’re coming round, are you? asked the assistant; ‘didn’t expect it. That’s a pretty nasty crack you’ve got.’

‘Twill take more than that to kill Norah MacMulty,’ said the young woman, struggling into a sitting posture, and beginning mechanically to arrange her disordered dress. ‘The MacMultys is a fine fightin’ famly, and it runs in the blood to take a cracked skull quite kindly. I’ll be takin’ a glass at the Grapes, and then I’ll be goin’ home, but not till I’ve thanked ye kindly. Has anybody seen me bonnut?’

‘I shan’t allow you to go to the Grapes to-night, my good woman,’ said the assistant. ‘Where do you live?’

She named her address, a wretched little row of tenement houses some ten score yards away.

‘What’s your trade?’

‘Me trade, is it?’ she answered, with a feeble, good-humoured laugh. ‘Tis not much of a trade, anyhow; I’m a street-walker.’

She made the statement wholly commonplace in tone, and gave it with as little reluctance or embarrassment as if she had laid claim to the most respectable calling in the world.

The assistant stared and laughed, but she caught Paul’s look of amazed horror.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘why wouldn’t I be? I’ll go to hell for it, av coorse, for that’s God’s will on all of us. Tis hard lines, too, for ‘tis none so fine a life when ye’ve tried ut. Thank ye kindly, both of yez. I’d pay ye for ut, but ye’d not be takin’ a poor girl’s last shillin’, I know, from the good-tempered purty face of ye.’

‘You’re sweetly welcome,’ said the assistant, busily washing his hands at the sink, and looking sideways at her. ‘You’re a queer fish, any way.’

‘’Tis a queer fish I am,’ she answered, ‘an’ by-an’-by they’ll have the cookin’ of me. Fried soul,’ she said, with a faint laugh. ‘Begobs! that’s funny; I never thought o’that before. Fried soul!’

‘How old are you?’ the assistant asked.

‘Faith,’ she said, ‘I’m just past two-an’-twinty. ‘Tis an agein’ life, an’ I look more; but ‘tis God’s truf I’m tellin’ ye.’

‘Very likely,’ said the assistant, towelling his hands.

‘I’ll go now,’ said Norah MacMulty. ‘I’m a trifle unsteady with the shakin’, but the drink’s out of me, worse luck! and I’ll be able to walk.’

‘No calling at the Grapes, mind you,’ said the assistant ‘You’d better look in at the infirmary about eleven o’clock to-morrow.’

‘I’ll do that,’ she answered. ‘Will ye be lendin’ me your shoulder as far as the dure, young man? I’ll be better in a minute.’

Paul did as she requested, but he crawled with repulsion beneath her hand. The touch inspired him with loathing. He had lived a sheltered life, and had never seen an open abandonment to shame. He wondered why God allowed the degraded thing to live, and his heart ached with pity at the same time. He led her to the door, and then across the road. The assistant sent a curt ‘Good-night’ after him. He answered it, and the door dosed.

‘Can you walk alone now?’ he asked.

‘I’ll try,’ she said, and made a staggering attempt at it.

Paul caught her, or she would have fallen.

‘Take my arm,’ he said to her, hardening his heart with an effort.

He blessed the darkness and the quiet of the street, but before they had gone a score of yards a door opened in a house he knew, and Armstrong came out of it.

In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred the old man would have gone by dreaming, but he was alert enough at odd moments, and this chanced to be one of them. He saw Paul arm-in-arm with a bandaged drunken woman, and as he recognised his son the pair reeled together.

‘Paul!’ he cried. ‘Good God!’

‘I’m glad it’s you, father,’ said Paul. ‘This poor creature fell at the corner yonder and cut her head terribly. I fetched young Marley to her from Dr. Hervey’s, and he has seen to her. She wants to get home.’

'I'll take the other side,' said Armstrong, and the three lurched slowly along in the dimness.

'Ye're good people,' Norah MacMulty said when they had brought her to her door.

A slattern woman answered Armstrong's knock, heard the news with no discernible emotion, and helped the arrival in as if she had been a sack of coals. Armstrong and Paul went home with few words. 'Don't be startled when you see me,' Paul said at the door. 'I helped to carry her to the doctor's, and she bled horribly.'

It was not meant for an exaggeration, but he was unused to such scenes, and the woman's language more than anything else had helped to scare him from his self-possession. The hour was late already, reckoning by his custom. He washed, and went upstairs, but not to bed. He threw the window open and let in the soft, heavy night-air. Strange thoughts made a jumble in his mind. From his attic he could see, over the roofs of the houses opposite, the outlines of the Quarrymore Hills, clearly defined in the light of the rising moon. Half way between him and them the air was dimly red with the glow of the unseen furnaces in the valley. He heard the loud roar of the invisible fires, and now and then the clank of iron. His thoughts were not on these things, but he was vaguely conscious of them.

He had taken his earliest look at the real tragedy of life. The peril of the woman's soul was the first thing to emerge clearly from the chaos of his thoughts. Her flippant, reckless acceptance of the certainty of her own damnation horrified him. Out of the streets, out of the bestial degradation of that life of shame and drink, into sheer hell? No chance? No hope? Surely Christ had died! But only for those who

owned Him, and called upon Him! No, no, and a thousand times no! It was not to be believed, not to be borne. It was hateful, horrible, monstrous. The poor degraded thing had punishment enough already. She was in hell already.

The bruised reed, the smoking flax! He fell upon his knees, and his soul seemed to melt in a flood of anguished pity. He wept passionately, with an incoherent clamour in his heart of 'God—God—God!'

The storm wore itself out, but he knelt there long, with his hands on the window-sill, and his face buried in them. He had been too agitated to find words, and now he was too tired and empty even to wish for them. His eyes were dry, and his lips were harsh and salt with his tears.

He looked up, and the whole night had changed. The moon rode high, and was nearly at the full. The skies were spangled with thousands on thousands of glittering stars. He thrust out his head and looked upward into the vast blue of the night Out from the stainless sky fell one warm, heavy drop full on his upturned forehead. To his worn thoughts it was like an angel's tear. He nestled beside the open window, and gazed from star to star, seeming idly to trace an intricate winding road of blue amongst them. Peace came back to him, an empty peace, no more than a mental languor. He slept at last, and awoke stiff and chill to find the light of morning creeping along a clouded east.

All that day one purpose was present to his mind. When the day's work was over and he was free, he dressed and walked into the street He roamed up and down it from end to end, and several times he diverged from it to pace the road in which Norah MacMulty lived, and to linger about the house into

which he had helped her. He had something to say to Norah MacMulty, but he caught no sight of her. He went home, and to bed. Next evening he paced the streets again. There was still no sign of her, but he encountered the assistant, who nodded to him in passing. Paul stopped him.

'I beg your pardon,' he said. 'Is there any news of that poor woman?'

'Yes,' said the assistant. 'She's in for a touch of erysipelas. They kept her at the Infirmary to-day. If they'd left her at large she'd have killed herself.'

'How?' said Paul.

'Drink,' returned the assistant, and went his own way.

So Paul ceased his wanderings for a while, and a fortnight had passed before he saw the woman again.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and he was off for his customary lonely ramble. Armstrong always went upstairs for a nap after Sunday's dinner, and Paul was left without companionship.

The woman was a mile away from her home, and was sitting on the lower steps of a stile by the side of the highway. She was tidily attired, and sober. Her recent illness had left a pensive look upon her face.

'You're better?' said Paul, stopping in front of her.

She looked up in some surprise.

'Oh,' she answered. '"Tis you? I'm better, thank ye kindly. There's not many cares to ask.'

'Do you remember,' Paul demanded, with a face whiter than her own, 'what you said at the doctor's the night you were hurt?'

'No,' she replied. 'What was it?'

'The doctor asked you what your trade was,' said Paul.

‘Yes,’ she said; ‘I mind it now.’

‘Did you mean it?’ Paul asked.

‘Ye’re a trifle over-young to turn parson,’ she responded. ‘Go your ways, child, and don’t be bothering.’

‘Don’t ask me to go yet,’ said Paul ‘I’ve something I want to say to you.’ His voice stuck in his throat, and she turned her glance towards him in a new surprise. ‘You said,’ he went on with difficulty, ‘that you were sure to go to hell.’

‘I’m that,’ she answered dryly, drawing her shawl about her shoulders.

‘Well,’ said Paul, ‘you shan’t. I’m not going to let you.’ She laughed oddly with a mere ejaculation, and stared along the road. ‘Do you ever think what hell is like?’ he asked.

‘Would I drink if I didn’t?’ she answered without looking at him.

‘You can’t put it away by drinking.’

‘I know that,’ she answered, with a sudden sullen fierceness. Then, ‘Ye mean well, I dare say, but ye’re wastin’ time. Go your ways.’

‘It’s no use asking,’ said Paul; ‘I can’t do it.’ She looked up at him again, and he hurried on, with a dry husk in his throat: ‘I can’t rest for thinking of it I can’t eat I can’t sleep. I can’t think of anything else.’

A slight spasm contorted her lips for a mere instant, but she looked down the road again, and answered drearily:

‘That’s a pity.’

There was a tone of tired scorn in her words, but this, as it were, was only on the surface. There was something else below, and the sense of it urged him on.

‘You have a good face,’ he said. ‘You were not meant——’

He checked himself.

‘Me poor boy,’ she answered, with another motion to arrange her shawl, ‘ye can’t tell me anything I don’t know.’

‘I can tell you something you’ve forgotten,’ said Paul. ‘I don’t care what you’ve done; you’re God’s child, and while there’s life there’s hope.’

‘Ye’re not a man yet,’ said Norah MacMulty; ‘but if ever ye mean to be one, hould your tongue an’ go.’

‘I don’t mind hurting you if I can do you any good by it.’ ‘Ye can do me no good, nor yourself neither. Here’s people coming along the road, and it’s ten to one they’ll know ye. Ye’ve no right to be seen talkin’ to the likes of me at your age.’

‘I don’t care for the people,’ he answered. ‘I don’t care for anything but what I’ve got to say.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘if you don’t care, I’m sure I don’t. ‘Tis no odds to me what anybody thinks.’

The people who approached were strangers, two men and two women of the working class. They passed the pair without notice, talking of their own affairs.

‘I’m only two days from the hospital,’ said the girl when they were out of hearing, ‘and me legs gives way underneath me. If ‘twas not for that, I’d not stay here. Go now; I’m tired of ye.’

‘Look here,’ said Paul, with the dry husk in his throat again, ‘you don’t like your life.’

‘Faith, then,’ she answered, ‘I do not.’

‘Then why not leave it?’

‘Ye’re talking like a child. How the divvle *can* I leave it?’

‘Leave it with me,’ said Paul.

That was what he had meant to say from the first, and now that he had spoken his word his difficulties seemed to fall away.

‘I can’t earn full wages yet, but I can get two-thirds anywhere. I can make eighteen shillings a week, and I can live on half of it. You can have the other half, and there will be no need, then—— You will find something to do in time—sewing, or ironing, or something—and then it will be easier for us both.’

‘Ye’re mad!’ said Norah MacMulty.

‘No,’ said Paul, ‘I’m not mad. I’m going to save your soul, Norah.’

She looked at him fixedly.

‘Ye mean it?’ she asked.

‘I mean it,’ he answered. ‘I mean it in God’s hearing.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I’m mightily obliged to ye.’

‘You’re coming, Norah?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Armstrong—Paul Armstrong.’

‘I’ll remember that,’ she said. ‘Good-bye to ye, Paul Armstrong.’

‘No,’ said Paul, ‘you will come to me. I shall go to look for work to-morrow, and as soon as I have found it I shall send for you, and you will come.’

‘D’ye want me to live with ye?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he answered with a strong shudder. She saw that clearly, and her colour changed. The swift distortion showed itself about her lips again. It passed away in an instant, but it left the mouth trembling. ‘I want you to be away somewhere where nobody can say a word against you. I want to see

you and talk to you sometimes, and know that you are going on prosperously.'

'I'm mightily obliged to ye,' she said again. 'Ye're a good little fool, but a fool you are.'

'I am not a fool for this, Norah. Nobody is a fool who tries to do God's work.'

'Anybody's a fool that tries to do God's work that way,' she answered.

'You say you are going to hell, Norah.'

'And so I am, but not for ruinin' a child that's got hysterics. I can face the divvle without havin' that on my conscience. And I'll tell ye somethin' that'll maybe turn out useful when ye grow older. Ye think because I folly a callin' that no decent woman can think of and because ye know that I drink, that I've no pride of me own. Ye're mistaken, Paul Armstrong. If ye were ten years older, and I me own woman, I'd set these in your face. D'ye mind me now?' She shook her hands before her for an instant, and withdrew them under her shawl again. 'Ye mean well, I think, but ye're just in-sultin' past bearin', an' so you are! Would I live on the 'arnin's of a child? Oh, Mary, Mary, Mother o' God!' 'she burst out, 'look down an' see how I'm trodden in the mud. Go away, go away; go away, I tell ye! I know what I am. Right well I know what I am. But d'ye think I'm that?

Black misery on your—— No. Ill not curse ye, for I believe ye meant well. But if ye're not gone, I've a scissors here, an' I'll do meself a mischief.'

The outburst overwhelmed him. The man of the world who could have stood unmoved against it would have needs been brave and cool. The torrent of her passion swept him like a straw.

'I beg your pardon,' he stammered; 'I beg your pardon with all my heart and soul.'

'Go!' she said.

He obeyed her, and the episode of Norah MacMulty came to a close.

'Paul,' said the Solitary, waking for a moment from the dream in which these old things acted themselves again before him, 'you were always a fool, but the folly of that time was better than to-day's.'

CHAPTER VI

Ralston was on the scene—Ralston in ripe middle age, massive and short of stature, with a square head and a billowy, sable-silvered head of hair; full lips, richly shadowed by his beard; an eye which twinkled like some bland star of humour at one minute and pierced like a gimlet at the next; a manner suavely dogged, jovially wilful, calmly hectoring, winning as the wiles of a child; a voice of husky sweetness, like a fog-bound clarion at times; a learning which, if it embraced nothing wholly, had squeezed some spot of vital juice out of well-nigh everything; wise, loquacious, masterful, *bon-vivant*; the most perfect talker of his day in England; half parson and half journalist; loyal to the bone; courageous to the bone; not an originating man, but original; a receiver, and, through his own personality, a transmitter of great thoughts to the masses; a fighting theologian; a fighting politician; a howling scoff to orthodoxy; a flying flag and peal of trumpet and tuck of drum to freedom everywhere. This was Ralston.

What should bring Paul from the inky apron, and the dusty type-cases, and the battered old founts of metal, and the worm-eaten old founts of wood, and the slattern bankrupt office into the society of such a man as this?

The Exile dreamed his dream, and a year was gone in a breath.

The Armstrong household was asleep. It was one o'clock—noon of the slumberous hours. Paul slipped downstairs in his stocking-feet, struck a match, lit the kitchen gas, and drew on his boots. Then back came the creaking bolts of the door which led to the garden. Out went the gas, and Paul, matchbox in hand, sped stealthily to the office, the summer dews falling and the weeds smelling sweet. The battered padlock on the staple of the door had been a pure pretence for years past. It locked and opened as well without the aid of a key as with it Paul lifted the outer edge of the door in both hands and swung it back cautiously, to avoid the shriek it gave when merely thrust open, and then lifted it to its former place. He mounted the stairs—there was not a nail in his boots which did not know each shred of fraying timber in them—thridded an unerring way through the outspread lumber on the floor to the stand at which he commonly worked, set the gas-bracket blazing there, and began to stack type as if for dear life, but without a copy. The clock at Trinity struck the hours half a mile away. The clock at Christ's followed a second or two later, nearer and clearer. Then a mile off, soft and mellow, but unheard unless the ear waited for them, the bells of the Old Church chimed. Three o'clock was sounding, and the summer dark was at its deepest, when Paul secured a first proof of the work on which he had been engaged, and hid away the forme in a hollow

beneath the stairs.

In this wise he stole two hours from sleep nightly for a month; and at the end of that time, lo! a printed poem, molten and cast, and re-molten and re-cast, chiselled and fined and polished, and all in Paul's brain-factory, without a guiding touch of pen or pencil—the work of a year.

The night after the completion of this task Ralston lectured for the Young Men's Christian Institute, and Paul was there. He was there right early, and secured a seat in the front row. The theme was 'In Memoriam.' Ralston talked and Paul listened. In five minutes Ralston was talking to Paul. Even now, in this strange review of the things that had helped or daunted him in all his days, the self-exiled Solitary, perched alone in his eyrie in the Rocky Mountains, encompassed by amorphous smoke-cloud, whilst the unseen river gnashed on its rocky teeth and howled —even now he felt the controlling magic of the voice and manner, even now he felt the triumph which sprang from the knowledge that this man chose him from the throng, played on him with splendid improvisations, made him the receptive and distributive instrument for his thoughts.

'I know,' said the living Paul Armstrong, looking back on the dead aspiring creature he had been. 'Not a self-accusing thought! Pure worship in the eyes. And the visage! not this battered mask, but the face of eighteen! Not an ounce of alcohol ever fired his blood from his cradle till now. A meagre table all his life through—enough and barely enough. Clean hands and a pure heart, and burning ardour in the eyes. *I* could talk to a lad like that. Eh, me!'

The lecture was over; the audience had drained away; the great man and the Secretary were closeted

for a minute; there was a chinking sound of gold. Ralston came out with a cheery 'Good-night,' and Paul was waiting at the head of the stairs.

'Mr. Ralston,' said Paul.

'Oho!' said Ralston in his sounding bass, hoarse like the deeper notes of a reed. 'My audience!'

'Will you read this, sir?'

Paul offered a paper-roll. The orator made a sideway skip out of the range of the tube, as if it had held an explosive. Paul's face fell woefully, and the great man laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

'Walk to the station,' he said, and rolled downstairs, Paul after him, and in seventh heaven. 'What have you there?' asked Ralston, as they reached the street. 'Prose? verse? print? manuscript? —what?'

'It's in type,' said Paul. 'It is a poem, sir.'

'What will you bet on that?' asked Ralston.

'I'll take odds, sir,' said Paul 'It's never even betting.'

'Ha!' The orator turned and stopped and looked at him. 'You are in my debt, young gentleman.'

'For years past, sir.'

'What? Eh?'

'For years past.'

'I never saw your face before to-night'

'No, sir. I walk in on Sunday nights to hear you, but I go to the back of the gallery.'

'You tramp twelve miles of a Sunday night to hear me?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Summer-time, eh?'

‘Any weather.’

‘Present the deadly tube. I’ll stand the charge.’ He thrust Paul’s poem into the pocket of a loose alpaca overcoat ‘I was saying that you were in my debt. You made me talk ten minutes longer than I ought to have done, and I’ve lost my train. There’s not another for forty minutes. Come and march the platform.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Paul Armstrong, sir.’

‘Armstrong? Armstrong? Father’s house here in the High Street? Printer and stationer? Ah! Old Bill Armstrong. Ayrshire Scotch. Anti-Corn Law. Villiers’ Committee. I know him. How do you get on together —eh?’

‘My father, sir? He’s the dearest friend I have in the world.’

‘That’s as it should be. Tell me about yourself. What are you?’

‘I work in the office.’

‘Compositor?’

‘Compositor and pressman.’

‘Many a nugget has come out of that pocket What do you read? Tennyson, I know. Whom else?’

‘Anything I can get, Mr. Ralston.9

‘Tell me. You’re eighteen at a guess. Tell me last year’s love and this year’s love, and I’ll prophesy.’

‘It was Hazlitt at the beginning of last year, sir. Then it was Hunt, and Lamb. Now it’s Thackeray.’

‘Keats anywhere?’

‘Oh! Keats?9 The tone was enough.

‘Favourite bit of Keats now?’

‘Oh, sir, you can’t have favourite bits of Keats.’

‘Come! *The* darling.’

‘“St Agnes,”’ said Paul; ‘Chapman’s Homer, “The Nightingale,” “Hyperion.”’

‘Oh! One love at a time.’

‘I can’t, sir.’

‘Wordsworth?’

‘That’s easier, Mr. Ralston. “The Intimations.”’ ‘Byron?’

‘Oh! “The Don”—miles and miles, sir.’ ‘Where’s Shakespeare—eh?’

‘In the bosom of God Almighty.’

So cheerily the talk had gone, so rapidly, he had no taint of shyness left. Here was the man of his worship since he had first dared to play the pious truant from chapel, the one man of the whole world he esteemed the greatest and the wisest. They had talked for three minutes and he was at home with his deity, and yet had lost no tremor of the adoring thrill.

‘Good!’ said Ralston. ‘Dickens?’ Paul’s answer was nothing more than an inarticulate gurgle of pleasure, neither a laugh nor an exclamation. ‘Carlyle?’ Paul was silent, and Ralston asked in a doubtful voice: ‘Not read Carlyle?’

‘I’d go,’ said Paul in a half whisper, ‘from here to Chelsea on my hands and knees to see him.’

‘The best of magnets won’t draw lead,’ said Ralston, and at the time Paul was puzzled by the phrase, but he blushed with pleasure when he recalled it later on. ‘And Browning?’

‘Ugh!’ said Paul.

‘Ah, well, that’s natural. But, mind you, Mr.

Armstrong, in a year or two you'll feel humiliated to think of your present position.'

They talked, marching up and down the platform, until the train came.

'You have been very kind, sir,' said Paul when at last the dreaded bell rang and the distant engine screamed.

'Have I?' asked Ralston. 'Remember it as a debt you'll owe to some aspiring youngster thirty years hence.'

The train came up before anything further was said. They shook hands and parted.

Then for days and weeks Paul waited for a letter, waylaying the postman every morning at the door. The letter came at last, brief and to the point:

'Have read your poem. A bright promise—not yet an achievement. Command of language more evident than individual thought. Be more yourself, but go on in hope. Let nothing discourage. Remember that personal character reveals itself in art Lofty conduct breeds the lofty ideal.'

The last phrase hit Paul hard. He was in search of the lofty ideal, and if lofty conduct would bring it, he meant to have it.

He was strolling on the next Saturday afternoon, with Ralston's letter in his pocket Saturday was a half-holiday, and he was free to do with it what he pleased. His feet took him by an unfrequented way, and in the course of an hour's devious ramble he found himself on the canal spoil-bank. The cutting was perhaps a hundred feet deep, and the artificial mounds were old enough to be covered by turf and gorse. They bore here and there a tree, and in any hollow of the hills, where the chimneys and furnace-fires were hidden, it needed no special gift of the

imagination to make a rolling prairie of the scene, or at least a grouse-peopled moor.

Paul sat down in such a hollow and read Ralston's letter for the thousandth time, and resolved anew on lofty conduct Suddenly he was aware of an approaching noise of voices, and in a little while a rabble of some twenty men and youths came charging down the slope to where he lounged in communion with his own fancies. The small crowd was noisy and excited, and Paul noticed some pallid, staring faces as it hurried by. The whole contingent, wrangling and cursing unintelligibly, came to a sudden halt in the bend of the hollow. Here a man in corduroys and a rabbit-skin waistcoat called in a stentorian voice for order, and the babel gradually died down.

'These are the draws,' said the man in the rabbit-skin waistcoat, waving a dirty scrap of paper in a dirtier hand—'these are the draws for the first encounter.'

He began to read a list of names. The first was answered in a tone of bullying jocundity. The second and the third name each elicited a growl At the call of the fourth name there was no response.

'Blades!' called the man in the rabbit-skin waistcoat—'Ikey Blades of Quanymoor!'

Everybody turned to stare at Paul.

'That's him,' said one. 'Course it is,' said another.

'Bin yo Ikey Blades from Quarrymoor?' asked the man with the list.

'No,' said Paul

The man cursed, devoting himself and Paul to unnameable penalties. He wound up by asking Paul what he was doing. He wrapped this simple inquiry

in a robe of blasphemies. ‘Nothing particular,’ Paul answered. ‘What’s the matter?’ ‘Tak’ it easy with him,’ said a burly, hoarse-voiced man. ‘Beest thee i’ the Major’s pay?’ ‘Major?’ asked Paul. ‘What Major?’ ‘Why—Major Fellowes!’

‘No,’ said Paul, laughing. ‘I’ve got no more to do with the police than thee hast. What is it, lads? A bit of a match, eh? Goo along. Need’st ha’ no fear o’ me.’

He had been fighting his way out of the local dialect for half a dozen years, but it was expedient not to forget it here.

‘I dunno about that,’ said the man with the waistcoat. ‘Who bist?’

‘Armstrong’s my naäm,’ said Paul. ‘I’ve lived i’ the Barfield Road all my life.’

‘Can ye put ‘em up?’ was the next query. ‘Why, yes,’ said Paul. ‘I can put ‘em up if I see rayson for it.’

‘All right We’ll tak’ yo on in place of Ikey Blades. This is the fust chap yo’n ha’ to tackle. Billy Tunks he is—comes from Virgin’s End.’

Billy Tunks (or Tonks, more probably) carried one of the pale and staring faces Paul had already noticed. He and Paul surveyed each other.

The man in the rabbit-skin waistcoat, having arranged preliminaries, explained to Paul. This was ‘a little bit of a friendly turn-up with the weepons of Natur’,’ intended to settle the disputed qualities of the youth of eight local parishes. Paul’s presence, it appeared, was entirely providential, for, with the exception of the seven candidates here in search of glory, there was nobody present who had not at one time or another ‘fowt’ for money.

‘I suppose,’ said Paul’s informant, ‘you’ve never fowt for money?’

‘No,’ Paul answered, ‘I’ve never fowt for money. Mek yourself easy on that score.’

‘Oh,’ said the other, ‘I wasn’t castin’ no suspicion. But it’s just a quiet bit o’ fun like for them as ain’t been blooded in a reg’lar way. It’s a bit o’ fun for the young uns. Billy an’ yov comes second.’

‘All right,’ said Paul.

He thought of Ralston’s letter, and laughed. Lofty conduct breeds the lofty ideal. What would Ralston say to this, he wondered? Not that the thing had a touch of barbarism to his mind. It was rough, of course, but it was inspiring, and he was used to it. He had seen a great deal of this peculiar sport, and had a warm liking for it. Being in it was better than looking on, but even looking on was pleasant.

‘Now, lads,’ said the master of the ceremonies, ‘get to your corners. An’, gentlemen-sports all, no shoutin’.’

The business of the afternoon began in earnest A brace of lads stood up, stripped to the waist They shook hands, and set to work. The men were mere clowns, but the exhibition was anything but clownish. In that part of the world, at least, the traditions of the game were kept alive, and there was plenty of sound scientific fighting to be seen. Paul knew enough to recognise it when he saw it, and he had not watched two minutes before he knew that in this instance he was hopelessly outclassed.

‘I’m in for a hiding,’ he said to himself. ‘A chap in search of the lofty ideal will have to make up his mind to a pretty good hiding, too. If you’re eating for honour, you mustn’t leave anything on the trencher.’ He watched the fight keenly, but he watched it with a heart that danced unevenly. ‘Yes,’ he thought; ‘I shall have to take a bellyful.’

The combat was brief and decisive.

‘Sivin an’ a quarter minutes of a round,’ said the master of the ceremonies; ‘an’ a pretty bit o’ fightin.’ Theed’st best get ready,’ turning to Paul. ‘The little un’s pumped. He’ll ask for a second helpin’, but that’ll finish him.’

The prophecy was realized, and Paul found himself in a brief space of time standing hand in hand with Master Tonks, and looking him squarely in the eye. The fist Paul held in his own was like a mason’s mallet, but its owner was of a clumsy and shambling build. Paul silently breathed the one word ‘tactics,’ and he and his opponent fell back from each other. He thought Master Tonk’s attitude curiously awkward, but he had no guess as to what lay behind it. He sparred for an opening. It looked all opening, and he wondered, and half dropped his hands.

‘Goo in!’ said somebody, in a jeering voice. ‘Goo in, one or t’other on ye!’

Paul went in, and Master Tonks went down. He was picked up, and knocked down again.

‘Why, what is it,’ asked Paul. ‘You’ve got no guard, lad.’

‘I told thee how it ud be,’ said one of the onlookers, addressing Master Tonks, as he sat upon the turf nursing his nose in the hollow of his arm. ‘Ye see, lads,’ he continued, ‘it’s like this: This is Turn Tunks, this is—Billy’s brother. They’m my nevews, the pair on ‘em. Billy’s laid up with a broken leg, and Turn’s come here to show for him for the honour o’ the family. I thought he knowed a bit about it, or I wouldn’t ha’ suffered him to come.’

So this part of the contest ended in fiasco, but the next combat and the next were spirited and skilful The four victors in the first bout drew straws for the

second. The winner of the first fight fell to Paul's share.

'Lofty conduct!' said Paul to himself, with a little rueful grin. 'I'm in for it, and I must make the best of it.'

He made the best of it for one fast five minutes, and all on a sudden he found himself looking at the sky, his opponent and the little crowd clean vanished. He was dreamy and quiet, and had no opinions about anything, and no interest in anything. Somebody picked him up and set him on somebody else's knee, where he was sponged and fanned. There was a faint suggestion in his mind to the effect that somebody, somewhere, had a shocking headache. Then he knew that one or two men were roughly helping him to dress. He himself mechanically aided this work, and by-and-by found himself watching a new encounter, aware by this time that the headache was his own. He handled nose, and upper-lip, and eye delicately, and came to the conclusion that he presented a picture to the gaze of man. Then, gradually pulling himself together, he watched the business of the day with tranquil interest.

Four had had it out with four, and then two with two; and now the survivors of the match were engaged for the final prize of honour. Each man had fought twice already, and they were both too tired to do much execution upon each other; but at last Paul's late antagonist won, and the simple game was over. The man in the rabbit-skin waistcoat thanked Paul for having preserved the symmetry of the day.

'Eight's a shapely little handful,' this authority said. 'It's the pick of the basket for a number, eight is. Sixteen's on-widdy, and it knocks a hole in a long summer's day. Four's a flash in the pan; but eight's a

pretty little number.' He added genially: 'We'm all very much obliged to you, young man.'

'Oh,' said Paul, 'I like to be neighbourly.'

The muscles of his face were stiffening, and his inclination to laugh cost him a twinge.

The man in the rabbit-skin waistcoat said his sentiment did him credit, and shook hands with him on the strength of it. The crowd went away as it had come, and left him where it found him. He was not going to walk home in broad daylight with such a visage as he carried. He paced about the trampled hollow to keep his blood in circulation, and in a little while the friendly darkness began to gather. Then he set out for home at leisure, choosing unlighted ways; and after a circuitous journey, climbed a gate and a garden wall or two, and landed at the office. There he made his toilet with the aid of a piece of yellow soap, a bucket of water, and a jack-towel, and then walked down the darkened garden to the house. He paced the paved yard on tiptoe, and peeping through the kitchen-window, saw his father seated alone at the fireside Armstrong looked up with his customary mild, abstracted gaze.

'Why, Paul, lad!' he cried. 'Who's handled ye like that?'

'There's no harm done, sir,' said Paul 'I've been putting a precept of Mr. Ralston's into effect in a way he never dreamt of.'

'Ye've been fighting,' said his father, with a voice of reproof. 'Unless ye've a vera guid reason for it, that's a blackgyard way of settling differences.'

'I'm like Othello, sir,' Paul answered: "Nought I did in hate, but all in honour." I had no difference with the gentleman who did this for me. We met and parted on the most excellent terms.'

But even when Paul had told his story, Armstrong was un-appeased, and declined to see any form of humour in it.

'It's just a wanton defacing of the Divine image,' he said, 'and a return upon the original beast.'

Paul was constrained to let the incident rest there, but he comforted himself by fighting the battle over again in fancy. In this wise he beat the champion of the afternoon hands down, and came off without a scar.

CHAPTER VII

Armstrong and Paul were keeping house alone, and were playing chess together. The big eight-day clock ticked, the cat purred noisily on Armstrong's shoulder, the clear burning fire made slight crisp sounds in the grate, and now and then slack fell from the bars. The two sat in silence, poring over the board. Paul made a move.

'That's vile play,' said Armstrong. 'Mate in four.'

'Go on, sir,' Paul answered.

'Chick,' said Armstrong.

'But you lose your castle.'

'Do I so? But I get a pawn for it, and chick again.'

'Yes,' said Paul, 'I see.' He turned down his king and sat absent-eyed.

'Ye're falling off, Paul,' said Armstrong, 'or else

your mind's not on the game.'

'To tell you the truth, sir,' Paul returned, sitting up with a sudden sprightliness, 'my mind's not on the game.'

'Where is it, lad?'

'Well, sir, it's in London.' 'London?'

'London, sir. I can't stop here all my days. I want to see the world.'

Armstrong rose to light his pipe at the gas. He dropped into his seat slowly, took the cat from his shoulder, and set it on his knees. The purr rose louder as he stroked lingeringly.

'Ay!' he said after a long pause; 'ay, ay!'

'I was afraid you wouldn't like it, sir,' said Paul 'I'm not misliking it, lad,' his father answered. 'I'm not misliking it What's your proposition, Paul?'

'I don't know, sir. I've formed no plans. I don't know how to go about things. I'm stifling here.'

'It's natural,' said Armstrong; 'I've stifled here for twenty years, lad. But then,' he added, with his own dry, wistful twinkle of a fleeting smile, 'I was born to stifle. What'll you do in the world, Paul, when ye get into it, if ye're out of it here?'

'I don't know, sir. I shall try to do something.'

'Ay!' said Armstrong again; 'ay, ay!'

His gray-blue eyes dreamed behind his grizzled brows, and Paul sat watching him. There was a touching something in the gray, bowed figure and the gray patience of his face. Paul seemed to see him alone, thus dreaming.

'I won't go, dad, unless you like.'

'It's best, Paul; it's best.'

A knock sounded at the front-door, and Paul

walked down the long narrow passage which lay alongside the sitting-room and the shop, and admitted the major part of the household. They had been to a tea-meeting and concert at Ebenezer, and they all trooped chattering into the big kitchen, bringing a smell of frost and night air in their raiment.

'Mary,' said Armstrong, at the first gap of silence, 'Paul is going to London.'

Paul's heart swelled at this unlooked-for acceptance of his plans, but the household stood in wonder.

'What's Paul got to go to London for?' asked Mrs. Armstrong.

'We've talked it over within the last few minutes,' returned Armstrong. 'The lad's coming to discretion. He wants to see the world. I'll find something for him to do there.'

'William,' said his wife, 'you're mad.'

Armstrong lit his pipe and said nothing, but the wife uplifted her voice and spoke.

'Yes,' she said, 'you've got your proper look on, as if you were half a million miles away, and me a insect, crawling about somewhere in another planet and not worthy of a thought I know your ways—I've got a right to know 'em after nine-and-thirty 'ears o' married life, I reckon. You've spoke your word, and you'll sooner die than go back on it. Another man 'ud give some sort of a why an' a wherefore. But you! You're Sir Horacle, you are. You've opened your lips, and other folks' talk is just no more than so many dogs a-chelpin'! What's our Paul want to go to London for? Answer me that, if you please, William Armstrong. If it was in me, William, to be a downright vulgar woman, I'd take the poker to you.'

Armstrong looked up with his swift, dry twinkle, and she laughed. She tried to make the laugh sound angry, but the effort was useless. Armstrong twinkled again, and she burst into a peal.

'Children,' she said, wiping her eyes with the fringe of her shawl, 'remember what I tell you. That's the best man in the world, but I hope to gracious goodness as none of you will ever grow up like him. He's enough to break the patience of a saint. If Job'd ha' lived with him, he'd ha' broke his head with one of his potsherds.'

Then the household laughed at large, for of late years this was the fashion—this, or something very like it—in which all combative disputes had ended. It had not always been so. In the earlier years, which Paul could well remember, before the gray little man had achieved his triumph of speechless mastery, there had been scenes which bordered on the terrible.

'And now,' said Mrs. Armstrong, 'what's our Paul to go to London for?'

'He'll finish learning his business there,' said Armstrong. 'In two or three years' time he ought to be able to come back and take charge of the place. There's the nucleus of a good trade here, if it had energy and knowledge brought to bear on it.'

There was an end of spoken opposition, and the fact that Paul was going to London was accepted. A month went by, and all arrangements were made. The Rev. Roderic Murchison had left Barfield, and had accepted a call from some congregation in the outskirts of the great city. He held a salaried post as well as Metropolitan secretary to his sect, and had become a person of importance. He was in association with a firm of printers who worked

mainly for the big Nonconformist bodies, and an odour of sanctity was supposed, by the Armstrong household at least, to rest upon the labours upon which Paul was about to enter in their office. Paul had examples of the office craftsmanship set before him. Technically they were excellent, but their literary form was not of the highest order. He learned that a hundred and odd workmen were engaged, and he pictured them as a set of square-toes whose talk would be guarded and pious and narrow, for in his innocence he imagined the men who translated good books into type were necessarily good, and the men who translated into type the goody-goody were of that spiritual complexion.

Paul and his father travelled up to London together on a Thursday. They found lodgings in Charterhouse Square at the house of a sprightly black-eyed lady, whose husband, long deceased, had been a Nonconformist minister. She was very smiling and gracious, and Paul thought her a charming woman, but he got out of her good books very early, and never knew how for years after.

'Oh yes, Mr. Armstrong,' she said at the Sunday dinner, 'anybody would know you were from the country.'

'How?' Paul asked.

'By your hair,' said the lady.

'Oh, well,' said Paul, 'I must get it cut London fashion.'

Mrs. Bryne bit her lips and flashed a look at him. The boarders tittered, but Paul sat unconscious. He knew that ignorant people misplaced their aspirates at times, but Mrs. Bryne was a lady, and wore silk dresses on week-days.

But he had sown a seed of misliking, and it had

opportunity to ripen. Armstrong the elder, with that wholesale want of worldly wisdom which distinguished him, had arranged that Paul should have a room in Mrs. Bryne's house, with breakfast and supper on week-days and whole board on Sundays, on terms which fitted accurately with his earnings. He gave Paul a pound for pocket-money, and went away without a thought as to what the lad was to do for his daily dinner. This admirable business arrangement bore fruit, of course.

At eight o'clock on a February morning Paul presented himself at the office. The day was foggy and bitter. The street-lamps were alight, and all the shops yet open were dull yellow with gas-lamps in the fog. He had to ask his way several times, and only one passenger in four or five took any notice of him, but he reached his destination as some neighbouring church clock boomed the hour out of the nowhere of the upper air. He announced himself by name to a man in a glass-case at the head of the stairs. The man gave him a surly side-way nod, and Paul, not understanding, waited for something more.

'Upstairs, ye fool!' said the man.

'It's a cold mornin',' said Paul. That nose o' yours looks a bit pinched with it. I've half a mind to warm it for you.'

'Well,' said the surly man, 'how often do you want to be spoken to?'

'Once is enough,' said Paul. 'Come outside and I'll gi' thee a lesson in manners.'

The surly man declined this invitation, and slid down the glass in front of him. Paul mounted wrathfully. He was more grieved at himself than at the other fellow, because he had made up his mind to be civil to everybody, and above all things to put

away the Barfield accent, which he could do quite easily when he thought about it.

In the great room he entered there were rows on rows of compositors' frames, all dimly illuminated by a single gas-jet, and the air was thick with fog. One prematurely sharp-looking small boy was performing a sort of rhythmic dance with a shrill whistle for accompaniment. He had a big can of water, which he swung like a censer as he danced. The can had a small hole pierced in the bottom, and the boy was laying the dust When the can had yielded its last drop he took up a big broom and swept the place rapidly, keeping up his shrill whistle meanwhile.

'Isn't it time somebody was here?' Paul asked at length.

'Manday's a saint's day,' said the boy. 'You a-comin' to work 'ere?' he asked. Paul nodded. 'You'll know better next taime. Why, even the "O." doesn't come before naine on a Manday.'

That was the fashionable Cockney dialect of the time. It is dead, as are the many fashions of Cockney speech which have followed it until now, and as the present accent will be in a year or two. It tickled Paul's ear, and to get more of it he beguiled the boy to talk.

'Who's the "O."?' he asked

'"O."?' said the boy sharply. 'Overseer.'

'Why are they late on Monday?'

'I suppose,' said the boy, 'they stop too late at church on Sanday. They are a pretty old ikey lot as works 'ere, and so I tell you.'

Paul began to revise his opinion as to the probable character of his associates. But perhaps the boy was purposely misleading him. He thought it worth while

to wait and see.

'What's your name?' he asked, by way of keeping the conversation going.

'Tom Ketling,' said the boy, 'but they calls me "Tat" for short, because I used to hang about outside Tattersall's and run errands. I picked up most of my education there. There ain't many of 'em as can teach me anything.' He broke off short in his confidences at the sound of a heavy shuffling footstep on the stairs. 'Oh, my!' he cried, 'this is a marble, and no error! How are you, Forty?'

'You here?' said the man thus hailed. 'Why, how you *are* reforming!' His voice had a deep chuckling husk in it, as if he had just finished an exhausting laugh, and his lungs still panted. His face and figure were vague in the fog and dimness of the place, but as he rolled and chuckled nearer Paul stared at him, not without reason. He was respectably attired at the first glance in a heavy overcoat of milled cloth, with facings of some sort of cheap imitation fur, and a silk-hat which, though creased in many places, was flatteringly oiled, and shone with a lustre to which its age bequeathed no right. He had a high collar which rose to the cheek-bone, and was severely starched, though yellow and serrated at the edges. His face was a flame of high colour, and his nose was a burlesque on the nose of Bardolph. It was not merely huge; it was portentous. It was of the size and shape of a well-grown winter pear, and it wagged as he walked, touching now one bloated cheek and now the other. It was garnished with many dark bosses, as if it were ornamented by round nails of a purple tone, and when once the owner had carried it fairly under the gas-jet it seemed as if it were the nose which shed such light as there was to struggle with the fog. 'You see it,' he cried, with the same short-

winded chuckle. ‘Everybody sees it Br-r-r-r-r-r-r!’ He shook his head rapidly from side to side, and the amazing nose tapped either cheek in turn with an actual audible sound like the faintest clapping of hands. Apart from this deformity and the sanguine colour of his face he was a jolly-looking fellow, and his brown eyes twinkled as if they had been transparent, with a flickering light behind them. ‘I got that,’ he said, rubbing die nose with the palm of one hand, ‘from my highly respectable grandfather. He was a great landowner, so I’m told, down Guildford way, and drank more port and brandy-punch than any man in England. This’—he fondled the nose again—‘this skipped a generation. My highly respectable father’s proboscis was pure Greek —Greek so pure, sir, that the late President of the Royal Academy has been known to follow him about London in a hansom-cab from dawn to dewy eve in the hope of catching its outline. Br-r-r-r-r-r-r!’ He wagged the monstrous feature again. He stopped short with a ludicrous solemnity. ‘Your highly respectable name is Armstrong?’ he said with a voice and attitude of courtesy. ‘I judged so. You are a turnover apprentice from the establishment of your highly respectable father in the country? Exactly. My highly respectable name is Warr, sir. I am sometimes known as Forty in recognition of a little feat of mine, in respect of which “let other lips,” et cetera. I suppose that I have never told you——’ He was in an attitude of extremest confidence, but he changed it with a flourish, ‘I was told, sir, to be here to meet you. It is mine to initiate you into the highly respectable mysteries. I suppose I never told you ‘— the air of confidence was back again—‘that I am the owner of an heirloom?’

‘I don’t remember that you ever did,’ Paul

answered.

‘An heirloom,’ the man with the nose exclaimed, ‘an heirloom which—in short, a highly respectable heirloom—a work of art. This is varnishing day. Would you like to see the work of art varnished? Then come with me.’ He laid aside the burlesque air, and said seriously: ‘There will be nothing done here for an hour.’

Paul followed him down the stairs and into the street, where the fog seemed thicker than before.

‘Is it often like this in the City?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said his companion; ‘I regret to say it isn’t We get very little open weather in the City at this time of year. As a rule, in February you find the City clouded.’

‘This is quite clouded enough for my taste,’ said Paul, coughing and weeping.

‘My dear sir,’ said Mr. Warr, ‘this is merely Italian! Ah! I forgot You are fresh from the country. You think this foggy! Well, perhaps it is not quite so bright as we get it some days. But a real fog in London is a very different thing from this. In ‘the great fog of January, ‘68, it happened very fortunately for me that the partner of my highly-respectable joys and sorrows had asked me to purchase a meat-axe. I hewed my way home by its aid, sir. When I reached London Bridge I was so fatigued that I was compelled to sit down, and to beguile the time I cut a portion of the fog in strips, and modelled the strips into a very handsome set of hat-pegs. They would have made a highly superior souvenir of an interesting occasion, but they were, unfortunately, stolen. By the way, if you happen to have sixpence about you I needn’t ask for credit for the varnish. I hate debt as I hate the devil. Thank

you, sir. This way.' He rolled into a gin-shop, and called for 'a quartern and two outs,' tendering Paul's coin in payment.

Paul declined any share in the liquor. He was watchful, and as full of interest as a child. The battered pewter counter, with little pools of dirty liquid in its hollows; the green-painted, flat-bellied barrels with bands of faded gilding; the moist and filthy sawdust on the floor, with last week's odours in it and a mere sprinkling of clean sawdust on top, offering its hint of the timber-stacks in the yard next door to home; the winking gas with the fog-halo round it; the shirt-sleeved barman; the female habitual drunkard here for a dram thus early, and holding her glass in both shaking palms as if she warmed her hands at it; the ceiling, cobwebbed and clouded with gas-smoke; the gaping door, like a dead jaw that would have dropped but for the straps that held it—all these things beat themselves in on his intelligence as if they would make an eternal pressure there. It was as if the place had a moral physiognomy of its own, and as if through countless details he absorbed an instinct as to its daily life.

'I suppose,' said Paul, 'you varnish that work of art pretty often?'

'As often as I can,' Mr. Warr responded. 'But the varnish is costly, my credit is nowhere worth a tinker's damn, and I live in a chronic impecuniosity.'

He varnished the work of art with a genuine relish, and, the process being over, he and Paul returned to the office, where signs of life were beginning to show themselves. The flare of some thirty or forty lighted gas-brackets made an inroad on the fog, and knots of men were laughing and talking. It very soon became clear to Paul's intelligence that the daily work and

conversation of his new companions were not in any marked degree ruled or moulded by the influence of that religious literature with which they helped to furnish the world. They were neither better nor worse than the average British workman; but they certainly cursed a good deal, and a stiffish breeze of indecency blew through all their speech.

In ten minutes every man was at his case, and silence reigned. The overseer—a dyspeptic, long-haired man, who looked like a dejected tragedian—interviewed the new-comer, supplied him with a certain amount of 'copy,' and left him to his devices. Mr. Warr worked by his side. That gentleman without the silk-hat came out bald, and without the fur-trimmed overcoat came out shabby, in a very threadbare old black rock. He wore a portentous pair of cuffs to match the antiquated collar, and these being slipped off and the coat-sleeves turned up for convenience in working, Paul wondered if any shirt or other under-garment kept them company. Any doubt he may have had on that point was dissipated early in the day, for Mr. Warr chancing to stoop with his head towards Paul, gave the young man a clear view of his bare back, between which and the world at large there was nothing but the threadbare coat.

About half-past twelve o'clock the small boy whom Paul had encountered on his arrival began to move about from man to man with a strip of paper. Each man looked at the paper and spoke a single word. Then the boy invariably pronounced a word which sounded like 'vedge,' and the man either shook his head or nodded. Paul wondered what this might mean, until his turn came, when he found a choice of viands written in a scrawling hand upon the scrap of paper:

'Boiled beef and carrots.

‘Boiled pork and pease-pudding.’

‘It’s sixpence-halfpenny if you have it here, sixpence if you go out for it.’

Paul made his choice, and the boy said ‘Vedge?’ in an accent of inquiry.

‘What’s “vedge”?’

The boy looked up in a momentary wonder, and then grinned knowingly, and shook his head.

‘What do you mean by “vedge”?’

‘Ah!’ said the boy, ‘you don’t get over me.’

‘I’m not trying to get over you. I want to know what you mean.’

‘Oh yes,’ said the boy; ‘of course you do! They don’t eat greens and taters where you come from! Oh dear no; not at all!’

‘That’s it, is it? Then, I take vedge.’

‘If s an extra penny, mind you. You pays on Saturday.’

The boy turned to Mr. Warr, who made his choice also.

A little later a voice said ‘Halt!’ and there was a clatter of composing-sticks laid smartly down on the cases. Almost at the same instant the small boy came in with a pyramid of plates with flat tin covers. ‘Beef and vedge,’ shrilled the boy, and, setting down his burden, charged out again, returning instantly with another cry of ‘Beef, no vedge.’ He was out and in again with a cry of ‘Pork and vedge,’ and out and in again with a cry of ‘Pork, no vedge.’ Then a shock-headed youth appeared with a basket foil of tin measures and a big can of black beer. He was met with an instant storm of chaff, and allusions of a Rabelaisian sort were made to one Mary for whom he would seem to have had a kindness. He departing,

the men set themselves to the serious business of dinner, and, the meal being over, they gathered into groups, and smoked and talked, whilst the small boy cleared away.

An aproned man in a very old skull cap of black silk, and a shabby frock-coat like Mr. Warr's, approached Paul and announced himself as 'the Father of the Chapel.' He welcomed the young man with a curious formal courtesy, and aired scraps of Latin with which Paul was familiar from many years of study of the specimen-books of the type-founders, who used to exhibit the most exquisite specimens of the printers' art in quotations from Cicero. Mr. Warr borrowed sixpence on the plea of sudden and severe internal pains, and went out to varnish the work of art. He returned with a moist eye, and in the course of the afternoon twice or thrice dipped his bulbous nose into the letter 'e' box, and snored for a minute at a time among the types.

Day followed day, and one day was like another. Saturday came, and Paul received his wages. He paid his first weekly bill at his boarding-house by aid of the remnant of the sovereign left for pocket-money. Next week saw him in debt. The third week saw him dinnerless. He knew the mistake his father had made, but it did not occur to him to take any active steps to remedy it Any lad of his years with a farthing's-worth of business faculty would have written home to explain his case, and would have gone into cheaper lodgings. Paul chose to do nothing, but to wander hungrily and vacantly through the city in the dinner-hour. He found no more varnish for the work of art, and his working comrade was less amiable than he had been. The week's end found him a little further in debt, in spite of abstention. His landlady, who thought he had been impertinent in that

unconscious matter of the aspirate, was not disposed to be friendly.

'I can tell by your looks,' she said, 'that you have been dissipating, and I know that you are wasting your money. I shall write and tell your father so.'

'Very well,' said Paul.

He was voracious at the supper-table, and that made the landlady no kinder to him. He ate like a wolf at every meal on Sunday, and his fellow-boarders chaffed him; but the lady of the house looked as if she would fain have poisoned him.

She asked Paul into her private sitting-room after supper, and he accepted her invitation.

'I shall expect a satisfactory settlement at the end of this week, Mr. Armstrong,' she said icily. 'Unless I get it from you I shall write to your home for it, and in any case I shall be obliged if you will leave.'

'Very well,' said Paul.

He thought all this rather unprosperous for a beginning of a free life, but he cared astonishingly little. If he had looked at the prospect, he might have begun to think it in a small way very serious. Recalling the time as he sat in his mountain eyrie, he found in it the first indication of his own irresponsibility, a knack of blinding himself to consequences.

Monday came, and he dined. It did not seem worth while to deny himself any further. Tuesday came, and in the middle of the morning's work a man rapped on his case with a composing-stick, and said aloud, 'I call a Chapel.' Mr. Warr turned on Paul, and told him he must go outside and wait until such time as the meeting thus summoned was over. He and three apprentices clustered on the landing. The doors were closed, and they waited for half an hour.

At the end of that time they were re-admitted, and Paul was solemnly escorted to the old man with the skull-cap.

'I have a question to ask you, Mr. Armstrong,' the old gentleman began. 'Were you properly indentured to this business.'

'No,' said Paul. 'I picked up what I know about it in my father's office.'

'You were never bound apprentice?'

'No.'

'Thank you, Mr. Armstrong, that will do.'

Paul went back to his case, and fell to work there, not caring to speculate much as to what had happened. The Father of the Chapel, accompanied by two or three of his companions, left the composing-room, were absent for some twenty minutes, and then filed solemnly back again. Shortly afterwards a clerk came in, with a pen behind his ear. He stood by Paul's side, and pronounced his name in a tone of question.

'Here,' said Paul, looking round at him.

'Just give your hands a bit of a rinse,' said the clerk, 'and put on your things and come down into the manager's office, will you?'

Paul nodded, and went off to the sink and the jack-towel, wondering a little. When in due time he presented himself before the manager he was at once enlightened.

'That is your week's money, Armstrong, and your services will not be required here further.'

'Why not?' Paul asked.

'No fault of yours,' the manager answered; 'but we find that you have not been regularly apprenticed to the trade. This is a Union house, and we are under

Union rules.' Paul took up the half-sovereign and the small mound of silver the manager pushed towards him, and dropped it into his pocket coin by coin. 'I don't know your circumstances,' the manager continued, 'but if you're in want of work, I can put you in the way of it at once. There's a non-Union house close by, where I happen to know they're short of hands. I have written the address in case you care to try there. You needn't make it known to any of our men that I sent you there. Good-morning.'

'I'm not going home,' said Paul to himself, as he walked into the street 'I'm not going home, whatever happens.'

He consulted the address he held in his hand, and walked towards it. His dinnerless wanderings of last week had taught him something of the intricacies of the City, if not much, and he chanced to know his way. The place he sought was high up at the top of a ramshackle old house in a narrow court, and a score of dispirited-looking men and youths were at work there. A tired dyspeptic, with a dusty patch of hair and rabbit teeth, approached him when he entered.

'Yes,' he said, when Paul had explained his business; 'you can start in at once, and if you're any good you're safe for a month or two. I hope you're a steady worker,' he went on despondingly, as if he were quite hopeless. 'They're not a dependable lot here—not a dependable lot at all.'

Paul took his place amongst the depressed little crowd at two o'clock that afternoon, and worked away among them until two o'clock on the following Saturday. A little before that hour it became evident that something was wrong. An excited little man ran into the dingy room, and began a whispered conversation with the tired dyspeptic.

‘But, my God!’ said the latter, in a tearful voice; ‘I *must* have it I’ve got my men to pay.’

At this everybody pricked an ear.

‘It’s all right, old man,’ said the other. ‘Here’s the cheque, and it’s as good as the Bank of England. But I’ve only just this minute got it. It’s after one o’clock, and it’s Saturday, and the Bank’s closed. What am I to do?

‘I don’t care what you do. Get somebody to cash it for you, I suppose. I’ve got to have the money. Here’s all the bills made out, and in ten minutes the men’ll be waiting.’

‘Well,’ said the man, I’ll try. It ain’t my fault, Johnny.’

He ran out as excitedly as he had entered, and the men stopped work by common consent, and struggled into their coats.

‘It’s bad enough,’ said one of them, ‘to work for two-thirds money even when you get it.’

Nobody else said anything. The dyspeptic foreman drew a case out of a rack near the wall, and sat down upon it. The rest hung about dispiritedly, and waited for what might transpire.

Two or three gathered round the imposing-surface.

‘Have a jeff?’ said one.

‘If you like,’ said another.

‘Come along,’ said a third, turning up the sleeves of his coat

Paul drew near, moved by curiosity.

One of the men picked up three em quadrats from a case near at hand. An em quadrat is an elongated cube of type-metal, on which three of the elongated surfaces are plain, whilst the fourth bears grooved marks which indicate the fount of type to which it

belongs. The cubes were used as dice. The men started with a halfpenny pool, and the first thrower cast three plain surfaces. He paid in three-halfpence. The second man threw with equal effect, and put in three-pence. The third man threw three nicked surfaces, and took the pool.

Two or three more of the men who were waiting for the messenger's return rose and drew near. Then others came, and, at last, all but Paul were playing. The rules were simple enough: Any man who turned up three blanks paid the whole of the pool. One nicked surface took a third, two nicked surfaces two-thirds, three nicked surfaces the whole. Somebody cleared the whole, and the game started afresh. Paul threw down a halfpenny and joined in. As last comer he was last to play. The first throw cleared the pool. It was renewed, and the next throw took fourpence. Twopence remained. Three blanks doubled it—fourpence. Three blanks doubled it again—eightpence. Again three blanks doubled it—sixteenpence. A throw of one by common consent took sixpence. Three blanks made the shilling two. Three more blanks made two shillings four. Three more made it eight, and three more sixteen. Faces began to pale and hands to tremble. A single took six shillings after a good deal of wrangling, and ten shillings were left Paul threw for the ten shillings and swept the pool In all his life he had never known such a sensation, though the money as yet was mainly of paper slips.

The cashier had negotiated his cheque somehow and somewhere, and was busy with the money. The men received their meagre wages, debts were paid, and the game went on. The stakes never again rose so high as at the first round in which Paul found himself engaged, but he still won heavily in

proportion to the game, and continued to win until the end. He was then the only winner, and one of the losers asked him to pay for drinks. Paul, with a certain feeling of splendour and magnanimity, threw down half a sovereign.

‘Take it out of that,’ he said.

One of the despoiled poor devils clutched it, and they all went off together, leaving Paul to struggle into his overcoat and follow, if he pleased.

‘You made a pretty good thing out of that,’ said the pockmarked cashier, swinging the key with which he waited to lock the door.

‘I’ll see,’ Paul answered.

He emptied his pockets on the imposing-surface, and counted the pile. He had some fifty shillings over and above the week’s wages.

‘You’ve been up their shirts to the tune of about six bob a man,’ said the cashier. ‘They’ll be sorry before the week’s out.’

The winner was not affected by any consideration of that sort. He pouched the money, and took his way with a farewell nod. He had tasted a novel excitement, and the thrill was still in his blood He walked rapidly through the winter air towards his lodgings, dressed there in his best, and sallied out again, making straight for the Cock tavern. What suggested the idea to him he never knew, but he meant to take a pint of port with Will Waterproof at that famous hostel, which then stood on its own classic ground. The old Cock was not a palatial house, but it was splendid to the raw country lad, and he was half afraid to enter. He strode in looking as mannish and as townlike as he could, and seated himself in one of the boxes alone. A waiter approached him, a rotund man, in gouty-looking

slippers, with a napkin across his arm. Was this, he wondered, the steward of the can, ‘a shade more plump than common ‘?

‘Give me a chop,’ said Paul, ‘and a pint of port’

‘Chop, sir,’ said the waiter; ‘yes, sir. And a pint of ____’

‘Port,’ said Paul, and, being ignorant of the ways of such places, pulled out a handful of silver and asked ‘How much?’

‘Bring the bill in due course, sir,’ said the water gravely, and moving away, called the order for the chop up the chimney, as it seemed to the visitor, and then rolled off stealthily in the gouty slippers in search of the port. He brought it in a small decanter, which he polished assiduously as he walked along. Paul thought it looked very little for a pint, but made no comment. The waiter poured out a glass and retired. The experimenter had tasted elderberry once, but he knew no more of wine. The draught had relish fiery new, and it seemed to warm him everywhere at once. His mind grew exquisitely bright, and his thoughts were astonishingly vivid. He began to improvise verses, and they came with an ease which was quite startling. They seemed to unroll themselves before him, to reveal themselves line by line as if they had been in existence long ago, and some spell had suddenly made them visible to his intelligence. It was a moment of singular triumph, and it lasted until the grave waiter laid his chop before him. He ate keenly, and finished his pint of port A sort of beatific indolence was upon him, and he had no wish to move, but he thought the waiter looked at him, and he was uncertain as to whether he had a right to stay. He summoned the man and paid him, and gave him sixpence for himself. Then

he walked into the street, but the exercise was not like walking. His step was quite firm and steady, but his whole frame felt light, as if he could have spurned the pavement with a foot, and have leaped the roadway at an easy bound. He thought of young Hotspur, and ‘methinks it were an easy leap to pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon.’ He walked erect with his chin in the air, and regarded the men and women who passed him with a strange sense of being able to understand them all. There seemed to be a story in every face, and he felt vaguely and yet positively that he could read it if he chose. He found himself for the first time in Oxford Street without knowing either by what route he had reached it or what was the name of the thoroughfare. The crowds, the lights, the movement and the din of traffic were in themselves an intoxication. It gave him a sense of strength to be alone among them. Then all his thoughts trembled into a sudden swimming laxity, and his mood changed to one of deep sadness. He set himself to analyse an inward dumb reproach which filled him—to ask a reason for it—to trace it to some source. It seemed to form itself definitely on a sudden, and his winnings began to gall him bitterly. He had never gambled before, and now he felt the passion of greed into which he had been betrayed disgusting. He was ashamed of having played at all, and still more ashamed of the callousness of triumph in which he had walked away with his gains. He had pitied his associates. He had seen the misery of their estate quite clearly. And yet he had stooped to profit by their folly, and slattern wives and dirty little neglected children would be cold and hungry because of him before a week was over. He would return the money on Monday, every penny. He might have to pinch himself for a week or two, but he

would do it.

His mood sank lower and lower, and self-reproach grew at once more insistent and more urgent He felt homesick, and the populous street was like a desert. All the people who had seemed so warmly near to him were aloof and cold. He would have welcomed any companionship. The ebbing forces of the wine left him comfortless.

In his complete ignorance and inexperience he supposed the pint of port to have had no effect on him. This up-and-down play of the emotions was not what he had read of as the result of wine on an unaccustomed drinker. His step was steady, his eye was clear, there was no confusion in his thoughts. It would be a perfectly safe thing to have another glass of wine and then go home. If he had been asked why he wished for more, he could not have given a reason. It was enough for the moment that he desired it.

He found himself outside a flaring house, with the words 'Wine Shades 'in a blaze of wind-fluttered gas above the door, and painted placards in the window: 'Wines from the Wood. Fine old Sherry, 10d., 8d., and 6d. per dock glass.' He had never tasted sherry. Sherry surely was the drink of many heroes. Shakespeare and Jonson drank it at the Mermaid. He entered the place, called for his wine—'Your best,' he said, as he threw his shilling on the counter—and sat down on a high stool to drink it. Before his glass was empty he had flashed back into high spirits again. He resumed his walk in a new exultation, and this time he knew enough to attribute it to the wine. What a superb boon it conferred upon the mind! How easy it seemed to soar out of sadness and loneliness into these exalted regions of friendship with all created things. He walked through the winter night with no

knowledge of the route he took and with no care. He could ask his way home at any time.

He came to the Metropolitan Music Hall in the Edgware Road, and suffered himself to be borne in by the crowd at the doors. The place and its like were strange to him. The performance seemed wholly contemptible and absurd. Men and women screamed with laughter and roared applause at jests which were either inane or hateful. A noisy man in a long-waisted overcoat, whose skirts swept the stage, a blonde wig, flying yellow whiskers, and a white hat at a raking angle, sang an idiotic song with patter interspersed between the verses. He described a visit received from Lord Off-his-Chump, Lady Off-her-Chump, and all the honourable Misses Off-their-Chumps. The witticisms convulsed Paul's neighbours and left him saturnine. He conceived a loathing and despite for the creature on the stage which he had never felt before for any living thing. The popular laughter and applause fed his personal hatred and disdain. He made an involuntary sound of contempt as the 'lion comique' went off.

'Ah!' said a voice beside him. 'You don't like that?' Paul turned and looked at the man who had accosted him. He was evidently a foreigner, and his complexion was so jaundiced that he was the colour of a guinea. What should have been the whites of his eyes were of a deep yellow. His nose had a hook, high up, right between the eyes, and his lofty forehead, narrowing to a peak, was ridged like a ploughed field. His hair and beard and moustache were all crisp and curling, and their blackness was faintly streaked with gray.

'You don't like that?' said the stranger again. 'No,' said Paul. I don't.'

‘The cruel thing about it,’ said the stranger, ‘is that other people do.’

‘Yes,’ said Paul; ‘that is the cruel thing about it.’

He had the suspicion of strangers which is natural to most rustic folk in London, and his manner was purposely dry.

‘It strikes me,’ said the yellow man, ‘that you and I are about the only sensible people here. Come and have a drink.’

‘Thank you,’ Paul returned, ‘I don’t drink with strangers.’

‘Oh, well,’ said the other, ‘that’s a wise thing, too. Have a cigar?’

‘I don’t smoke, thank you.’

‘And that again is a very sensible thing,’ said the stranger, laughing. ‘I am a slave to tobacco. Smoking has ceased to be a pleasure since it became a necessity.’

The man’s speech had a faintly foreign sound, but his English was faultless. The very slight peculiarity which marked it was rather a level flatness in the tone than an accent It suggested a time when it had cost him an effort to speak the language, though the time had long passed away. The good-nature with which he accepted Paul’s rebuff lulled the youngster’s suspicions, and lulled it the more completely that the man turned away with a smiling nod and made no further attempt to enter into conversation.

The lion comique was followed by a juggler, who appeared in the guise of a hotel waiter, and laid a table as if for breakfast. The table arranged, he began to perform the most extraordinary tricks with the things he had placed upon it Eggs, egg-cups, teapot,

cream-jug, sugar-basin, breakfast bacon, loaf, bread-trencher, table-napkins, plates, knives, forks, and spoons spouted in a fountain from his hands. They seemed to be thrown into the air at random, and the man darted hither and thither about the stage to catch them. Then he was back at the table again amidst a storm of crockeryware, cutlery, and provisions, and each article as it descended was caught with an astonishing dexterity and set in its proper place with a swift exactness which looked like magic. The artist had a perfect aplomb, and he put off the catching of each article till the last fraction of the inevitable second, so that he seemed secure in perfect triumph and yet on the edge of instant failure. The house howled with excited laughter and applause, and Paul roared as loud as any. He was as sober as a judge so far as balance of body and clearness of speech and thought were concerned, but the wine was in his blood. He stamped, clapped hands, and shouted until the performer left the stage, and had twice returned and bowed He felt that the applause would not cease until he ceased to lead it.

‘That’s better, eh?’ said the man at Paul’s side when the tumult was over.

‘Yes, by Jingo!’ said Paul ‘It *was* better. Look here, I’m afraid I was rather rude to you a little while ago. Come and have a drink with me.’

‘With all the pleasure in life,’ the stranger answered.

They rose and pushed their way to the bar together. The stranger would like a brandy-and-soda. Paul would take a brandy-and-soda. They talked, and Paul thought his chance-found companion a remarkably agreeable fellow. He seemed to have been everywhere. He spoke familiarly of many

European countries and of the United States. But somehow he faded away in a sort of mist, and Paul's last remembrance of him was that he was laughingly pulling at his arm and advising him to go home. He seemed to be blotted out suddenly in that very act.

The Exile flashed back from his memories to himself, and awoke with a faint, gasping cry, for his mind had led him to the hour of the lost innocence. There are thousands on thousands of men who have lived purer lives than he who would yet deride the shaft which struck him, and laugh to think of its poignant power to wound. For the pure soul in the frail body, for the high hope and the will of burned cord, for the passion which hurries the senses and has no power to blind the conscience, there is a lasting purgatory open. How many a time since that hour of loss he had groaned in the silence of the night to think of it, and had taken his pillow in his teeth! To live the purer for the shame which bit so deep and keen? Ah, no; to overlay it with new shames, to groan over in new vigils.

Easy for the callous good, who know neither sin nor virtue in extremes, who live somewhere about the level of a passable rectitude, and neither sink nor soar far from it—easy for them to dismiss this bitter truth for a mere sentimentalism; but there *is* a virginity of the soul which evil custom cannot deflower. Woe to him who knows it, the chaste in wish and the unchaste in act, the rogue who values honour, the poltroon who would fain be brave! Ah, the goat-hoofed Satyr dancing there, drunk and leering, goatish in odour, unwashed and foul! Is it I? Is it I? And the anguished angel who weeps to look upon him. Is it I? Woe, woe is me, for I am each and both of these!

Oh, goat-hoofed devil in man, and buffeted

aspirant soul! Oh, divine God-man, who art myself, and whom I with my own hands do hourly crucify, whom I do scourge and crown with thorns and spit upon!

Shall a man think thus but once only—shall he feed this burning iron in his breast but one sole time, and then go gaily afield in search of fresh agonies? Even so, and not once again only, but his lifetime through. This is why it is written that though you bray a fool in a mortar among bruised wheat with a pestle, yet will not his folly depart from him.

Bowed earthward, with garments that stink of rain-soaked dye drying in the sunshine, with swollen features and boots that suck at the flagstones, bristled and bloated and bleared, I go by you. Had I never a concupiscence for honour? Is there no Christ-half that walks within me towards the place of rottenness and dead men's bones?

Back to the vision again, not merely remembering, but living it all.

Sick nausea, rising faintly yet heavily on the senses, swimming upward, as it were, along with a half-drowned rebeginning of life and the cognizance of things; deep loathing, and eyes like new-cast musket-balls for heat and weight; a frowsy air; a mouth like burned leather lined with vile odours. Forget it all in a mere instinct of distaste. Sink down with the sick wave. Swim down the sick wave in floating circles. Sway here and swing there at the bottom of the whirlpool, and up again towards the light which heaves slowly on the eye as it used to do at the upward turn after a dive, when the sunlight shone through the yellow water of the lock. Then on a sudden—daylight; and then, like a bursting shell on the brain, the truth.

No use for the incredulous oath that the truth is false.

'My God! it isn't—it can't be!'

It can be—and it is. It *has* been, and no mere episode of an eternity will wipe it out or can undo it There is the dirty blind torn away from one corner of the roller; there is the peeling paper on the wall, and the wall leprous where the paper has fallen away from it. Here, under his cheek, is the yellow malodorous pillow.

The sick brain cannot think; the foul mouth seems to taste of his own soiled soul.

And the woman, when he turns his leaden head, lying there, flushed—a girl of the bestial-handsome sort, with a smear of wet black hair on her brow, and a sensuous mouth, spurting breath like the lips of a swimmer half under water.

Out of this—anywhere. Feverish haste in dressing. Robbed, too—penniless.

What does that matter?

It matters greatly, it would seem, for here is a hulking, pock-marked villain demanding money, and a shrieking, night-gowned virago hauling the fugitive back up the stairs with obscenities which match the place and himself and her.

Then a flash in the heart, as if Hell's flame of shame and Heaven's lightning of righteous wrath lit it together. The pock-marked rascal is lying quiet on the ruddled bricks at the foot of the stairs. The woman's Voice curses until the corner is turned. A door slams. He is hatless and unwashed and dishevelled, standing in the Blackfriars Road.

Never to be forgotten the taste of the morning river air; never to be forgotten the grain of the stone

on which his elbows leaned, or the tawny coil of the waters below him; never to be forgotten the purple dome and dark cross of Paul's, with its edge of gold on one side and the rosy east away and away beyond it.

His thoughts were the gasps of a devil's agony. He felt in gushes, like the welling of heart's blood. His soul clamoured 'Beast, beast, beast!' at him; 'how dare you foul my dwelling-place!'

A warm trickle on his left hand, which had some dim associations of physical pain, bade him look at it; there was a yellow splinter of tooth sticking there. He warmed to think he had struck home, and then chilled as he asked: 'Wasn't the poor devil at his proper trade?' He pulled out the jagged splinter, and bound the wound with his handkerchief.

To be twenty hours younger! To be only ten hours younger!

Ting, ting, clang, clang 'Ting, ting, dang, clang! Ting, ting, clang, clang! Ting, ting, clang, clang! The bells of the clock-tower at Westminster. He made a fool's rhyme to them:

'Down—In—my—home—'neath—-the—clear—sky —No—thing—they—know —and—naught—care—I.'

The big bell said 'Doom 'eight times.

'Doom' the big bell seemed to say a ninth time, sweet and far. The Dreamer started, awoke, and knew his surroundings again. The ninth sound was the deep call of an engine whistle, rolled on river and rock and forest, and mellowed on many miles of smoky air. He sat with his chin on his hands, his heart yet tingling.

'Was that how it happened, Paul?

In his soul the question sounded, not in his ear. He

answered the voice with a sighing ‘Yes,’ and then looked up and wondered.

‘Dad,’ he said aloud, ‘am I making confession? Do you follow these memories? Have I only to glass things in my mind for you to see them?’

He waited in a sudden awe. He would make no answer of his own; he would lend the aid of no obscure mechanism of the brain to any tricking of himself. No answer came, and he sat disheartened, staring at the one visible hill which peered like a shadow from the other shadows in the midst of which he dwelt.

A minute later he was ten years forward. He was seated in the smoking-room of the Victoria Hotel at Euston, and he and Ralston were alone. Ralston was talking.

‘The soul,’ he said, ‘makes experiments. It writes its notes on the body, and, having learned its own lesson, it throws the paper away. We lose to learn value. We shall know better next time. We have to sample our cargo, and we waste most of it, but we shall be refound for the next voayge. Bless God for an open-air penitence, but let us have no foul air of the cloister to turn repentance sour. So big a thing as the soul can afford to forgive so small a thing as the body.’

‘After divorce, perhaps,’ said Paul; and fell to his dream again.

CHAPTER VIII

The damp, river-scented earth slipped under his feet. The blare of a steam clarion, and the bang of a steam-driven drum, sounded, and the naphtha lamps of the merry-go-round and the circus gleamed through the fog. The infernal noise jigged on his brain-pan as if every flying crotchet and quaver stamped like the hoof of a little devil in the surface of his brain. The smell of the lamps was in his nostrils, and with it odours of tar and stables and orange-peel.

Six-and-thirty hours had gone by since he had turned his back on Blackfriars Bridge. It was more than fifty hours since he had tasted food, and he had spent two days and a night in the open in fog and rain. He had been hungry, but the pangs of hunger had passed, and he was conscious of little but a cold nausea. He drew towards the light and the music mechanically. In front of him, illuminated by flaring lamps (which sparkled, he thought, as an apple of Sodom might have done when newly cut), was a placard fixed in an iron frame, with clamps which pierced the turf. ‘One night only in Reading,’ said the placard. Until then he had not known his whereabouts.

There was no more custom for the merry-go-round, and its noisy organ ceased to play. He could hear the band within the circus now, the dull thud of hoofs on sawdusted earth, and the crack of a whip. A mirthless voice, with an intention of mirth in it, said, ‘Look out! Catch her! She’ll tumble!’ A laugh spouted up from the spectators within, and was half smothered by the canvas of the show. Not far from him was a slit in the canvas wall, with a pale yellow

spirit of light in it. A man came into the gleam.

'Now, where,' the man asked, in a voice of anger, 'is that boy?

The voice of some invisible person responded in an alternation between a hoarse bass and a shrill falsetto:

'Perchance he wanders with the paling moon, where Delos' tower awaits the lagging dawn, which fronts not yet her summit, or perchance——'

'Oh, go to 'ell!' said the voice that had first spoken. 'Where *is* that boy?'

'You might,' began the invisible person, in a cracked soprano, and concluded in a tone three octaves lower, 'have let me finish.'

'Let you finish!' said the other. 'Would you finish? *Can* you finish? He stood comically silhouetted—a balloon propped by two monstrous sausages and topped by a football. 'Billy,' he said, in a grave voice, after a minute's pause, 'where is that boy? Miriam can't do three turns. If Pauer isn't here in five minutes, the fat's in the fire.'

'Well,' said the falsetto voice, 'why don't you'—the hoarse basso carried on the phrase—'send somebody else?'

'Who am I to send? asked the man in view. 'I'd give five bob,' he added, 'to get him here.'

'Tell me where he is,' said Paul, 'and I'll get him for half the money, if I have to carry him.'

The man to whom he spoke turned round and stared at him.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'A hungry vagabond,' said Paul, 'willing to earn a meal.'

'Do you know the town?'

‘No; I’m a stranger.’

‘That,’ said the fat man, pointing, ‘leads to the gate. Turn to the right, run three hundred yards, and there’s a pub on the left. You can’t mistake it. Tell Herr Pauer he’s waited for. Sixpence if you’re smart.’

‘Shilling!’ said Paul, half on the run already. The fat man hung fire. ‘Shilling!’ said Paul again.

‘Shilling if he’s here in ten minutes,’ said the other.

Paul ran. The fatigue which had weighed upon his limbs seemed gone. Once free of the clogging and slippery mire which had been wrought out of the wet turf by many travelling feet, he raced along the firm high-road at his best speed. He made a leap into the entrance-hall of the house which had been indicated to him, and narrowly escaped collision with a man who was moving smartly towards the street.

‘Hillo!’ said the man, slipping nimbly on one side, and staring at him as he suddenly arrested himself.

‘Hillo!’ said Paul. He was face to face with the jaundiced man of Saturday. ‘Are you Herr Pauer?

He was guided to the question by the man’s attire. He was in some sort of circus uniform, and in act to button a huge shaggy overcoat above it.

‘That’s my name,’ said the other. ‘What brings you here?’

‘You’re wanted at the circus,’ Paul answered, flushing and turning pale again.

‘All right,’ said Herr Pauer, ‘I’m going there. But what is up with you, my young friend?’

‘Nothing much,’ Paul answered.

‘No?’ said Herr Pauer, buttoning himself from throat to toes, and looking at him with a glittering eye. ‘I should have thought quite differently. Come along with me.’

Paul hung back, but he remembered the earned shilling. There was a smell of cooking in the house, and he was suddenly ravenous at the mere thought of food. The two turned into the road together, and walked smartly side by side. They reached the circus, and Herr Pauer motioned to Paul to enter.

'Come in,' he said, seeing that the youngster lingered.

Paul obeyed again, and was ushered into a small turfy space boxed in with canvas. A few loose boards were laid upon the ground by way of flooring. There was a table at one side, on which lay a small circular shaving mirror, a comb, a stick of cosmetic, and two open pots of porcelain, the larger one containing chalk, and the smaller half-filled with rouge.

'Three minutes,' said the fat man, thrusting his head round the canvas partition; 'and short at that.'

'All right,' returned Herr Pauer.

He unbuttoned the overcoat, and let it slip to the ground, drew off a huge pair of rubber boots, and stood revealed in buckled pumps and stockings, silk breeches, a white waistcoat with gilt buttons, and a cut-away coat of light-blue cloth slashed with gold braid. He dipped his fingers in the powdered chalk, and rubbed his face, looking hard at Paul meanwhile, and growing ghastlier every second as the white obscured the yellow of his face. He stooped to the fallen overcoat, took an old hare's-foot from one of his pockets, and, dipping it in the rouge-pot, took the shaving-glass in hand, and, with many facial contortions, pursued his toilet, looking from his own reflection to Paul's face and back again with swift alternation. He pinched a bit of the cosmetic between thumb and finger, and dressed his eyelashes with it. Then he carefully drew an arched eyebrow,

and paused to look at Paul again. The single brow gave him a comically elfin look, and Paul grinned; Herr Pauer drew another eyebrow, touched up his moustache, obliterated the gray upon his temples, and combed and twisted moustache and hair to his own satisfaction. Then he sat down on the table, and looked once more at his companion. Paul looked back at him, but felt his very eyeballs redden. The band beyond the screen played louder and louder. Then there came a great roar of applause, and Herr Pauer, keeping an eye on Paul till the last instant, walked away.

The fat man entered a minute later.

'The governor says you are to go inside,' he said, 'and wait till his turn's over. Here's your bob, anyhow. A bargain's a bargain, ain't it?'

Paul accepted the proffered shilling, and slipped it into his pocket. Then he accompanied his guide, who pushed him through a labyrinth of props and stays, above which were ranged benches for the accommodation of the audience. They reached a spot from which they could see the whole space of the ring through a break between the benches. The fat man struck Paul as having somehow the look of keeping him in custody. But Herr Pauer appeared in the circle, and he forgot to think about that fancy. He wondered what his curiously-encountered chance-acquaintance was going to do. He had not long to wait, for two men in livery came on with a table, arranged in all respects as the conjurer's table had been arranged in the music-hall on Saturday night, and Herr Pauer proceeded to play precisely the tricks the conjurer had played. He was just as adroit and swift and' agile as the original, and the audience stamped and laughed and shouted.

‘Ah,’ the fat man breathed in Paul’s ear, ‘the governor hasn’t been away a month for nothing.’

Paul turned, but his custodian seemed unconscious of him. The performance reached an end amidst a hurricane of applause, and Herr Pauer came back several times to bow his acknowledgments. The fat man seemed to wake, and, with a hand on Paul’s shoulder, pushed him back amongst the props and stays until they reached the canvas room again. Somebody had placed a ragged cane-seated chair near the table, and Herr Pauer, who was already waiting, motioned his visitor into it. He seated himself on the table, with one trim leg swinging to and fro, and lit a cigar.

‘Now,’ he said, rolling a cloud of smoke from his lips, ‘what have you run away from?’

‘I haven’t run away from anything,’ said Paul.

‘Ah, well! we shall see about that. When I saw you on Saturday night you were flush of money. Now—so my man tells me—you call yourself a starving vagabond, and you run errands for a shilling. You are wet through, and you are mud all over. You have no hat, my young friend. You may just as well make a clean breast of it.’

‘I’ve nothing to make a clean breast of,’ Paul answered sullenly.

‘Oh yes, you have,’ said Herr Pauer. ‘You were very tipsy on Saturday night. Were you ever tipsy before?’

‘No,’ said Paul.

‘You had money,’ said Herr Pauer. ‘Was it your own?’

‘Yes.’

The answer was defiant and angry.

‘To do as you liked with? Didn’t you owe any of it?

‘I owed something.’

‘Got tipsy. Got cleared out. Hadn’t the pluck to go home. That about the size of it?’

‘Yes,’ said Paul, ‘that’s about the size of it.’

‘No hat,’ Herr Pauer went on comfortably. ‘Out all night. Sunday morning. Empty pockets. Religious landlady.’

‘How do you know?’ Paul asked.

‘You told me about the landlady. The rest is easy enough. What are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it.’

‘You are a shiftless young devil, I must say. Doesn’t it occur to you to think you *are* a shiftless young devil—eh?’

‘I think it does,’ said Paul with extreme inward bitterness, ‘now that you come to mention it.’

‘Come now,’ said Herr Pauer, shifting his seat on the table and turning to face the lad, ‘you shall not take that tone. I tell you you shall not take it, because it is a wrong and dangerous tone. You have done things that you are ashamed of. You shall have the goodness to be ashamed of them like a man, and not like a fool. Now, what are you going to do?’

‘I can earn a living,’ Paul answered. ‘I’ve got a trade between my fingers.’

‘What is it?’

‘I’m a compositor. I can do a man’s work, if I can only earn two-thirds of a man’s wages.’

‘That is all very well. But it’s not quite what I mean. You have a home?’

Paul laid his face in his hands and groaned. He was so ashamed at this that he had no courage to

undo his own act. He sat with his face still hidden.

‘You will go straight home to-morrow,’ said Herr Pauer, rising from the table. The culprit shook his head. ‘Tomorrow,’ Herr Pauer reiterated. The culprit shook his head again. ‘They will kill the fatted calf,’ said Herr Pauer.

‘Oh, no, they won’t,’ said Paul

His father might be moved to do it, but not the rest. Oh, no, not the rest. And on the whole he would rather not have the fatted calf. He would prefer any desolation to forgiveness. Forgiveness must be preceded by knowledge, and the thought of that was unendurable.

‘Do you reckon,’ asked Herr Pauer, ‘that you are ever going to see your folks again?’

Paul said nothing, and the circus proprietor moved back to his seat on the table. The circus band played close by, and at times the people cheered But in the little canvas box of a room there was silence for a long while Before it was broken the fat man came with a message.

‘Poor Gill’s no use to-night, governor; his ankle’s worse than ever.’

‘All right,’ said Herr Pauer. ‘I’ll take an extra turn. Tell me when I’m wanted.’

‘Saltanelli’s off in a minute’

‘I’ll follow.’

The fat man withdrew, and Herr Pauer, having carefully balanced the stump of his cigar on the edge of the table, went after him. Paul waited for half a minute, and then stole out The fat man faced him.

‘Where are you going to?’

‘What business is that of yours?’ Paul asked

‘Governor’s orders was you was to stop till he

came back again.'

'Suppose I refuse to stop?'

'You can make a row if you like,' the fat man said wheezingly; 'but the governor's orders is the governor's orders. The governor says, "Keep that young chap till I come back again." There's plenty here to do it.'

'Very well,' said Paul, noticing half-a-dozen loungers in the canvas passage.

He went back and took his former place The savage appetite he had felt half an hour earlier had gone, and the empty nausea was back again. He had not heart enough left to care for anything. When the owner of the tent returned he brought a black bottle in his hand, and one of the liveried men came in behind him with a jug and glasses.

'I take one between turns,' said Herr Pauer—'never more One is a pick-me-up. Anything more than one is wrong.' He poured a stiff dose of rum into either glass, and looking towards Paul, water-jug in hand, said, 'Say when.'

'None for me,' Paul answered. 'I never touched the cursed stuff till Saturday. I'll never touch it again.'

'Nonsense!' his companion answered, filling up the glass and pushing it towards him. 'Your teeth are chattering. Do you think because you have been a fool in one way that you have a right to be a fool in another?'

Paul sipped and shuddered, but in a second or two —no more—a faint sense of returning warmth stole through him. He sipped again, and the faint glow grew stronger. He took a pull which half emptied the tumbler, and the spirit made him cough and brought the tears to his eyes; but he felt his numbed limbs again. Pauer had relit the stump of his cigar and

taken his old place on the table.

'It's not any part of my usual life-business,' he said, 'to do what I am doing now, but I like odd things, and it is an odd thing that I should meet you here. Besides that, I have been a fool in my time, and a fellow-feeling makes us kind. I shall put you up to-night, because you're a decent young chap, and a greenhorn. You shall have your clothes dried and brushed, and you shall be made decent to look at; and you shall get a hat, and in the morning you shall go home.'

'You're very kind,' said Paul, 'but I'm not going to take your help on false pretences. I shan't go home.'

'I will chance that,' said Herr Pauer. 'Finish your drink and put that coat on. You're shivering again.'

Paul obeyed sleepily. Herr Pauer drew a penknife from his pocket and impaled the last inch of his cigar with it. He sat puffing there, and sat looking at his guest, or prisoner, and Paul looked at him drowsily in turn until Herr Pauer's head seemed to swell and fill the canvas box. The noise of the band came in gushes, as if his ears were now under water and now clear of it The head went on swelling, and the sound of the music grew fainter. He was deliciously warm, and he had a feeling of being lifted and gently balanced to and fro as if he were in a hammock. After this he forgot everything until he felt Pauer's hand on his shoulder, and started broad awake, with a clear sense that the spaces close at hand which had been so crammed with life a little while ago were all dark and deserted.

'Time to go,' said Pauer. 'No, never mind the coat.'

Paul was struggling out of it. 'I have another.' He held his arms abroad to show that he was already provided, and the lad rose to his feet 'Take this,' said

Pauer, fixing a rough unlined cap upon his head with both hands. ‘It will look less odd, and it’s better than nothing.’ He turned out the lamp to its last spark, and then with a puff of breath extinguished it altogether. ‘Tu m’attends, George?’ he called to somebody outside.

‘Che d’addends,’ said a voice at a little distance; and Paul, guided by Pauer’s hand upon his arm, groped his way towards it.

In the pale light outside the tent, the fog having cleared away, and a thin strip of moon hanging over the river, Paul dimly discerned a stout, broad-shouldered man of brief stature, who was half buried in a big fur overcoat An eyeglass shone faintly beneath the brim of his silk hat The three made their way across the slippery field, and on to the firm high-road. They reached the inn to which Paul had run as a messenger a little while ago, and Pauer led the way to an upstair room where supper was laid, and a bright fire was blazing on the hearth. The guest needed no second invitation to be seated, but he made a poor meal, in spite of the best intentions. His companions disregarded him for a time, and spoke in a language he did not understand. He tried to disconnect and isolate their words, but they all seemed to run together. He fancied that Pauer talked in one tongue and his friend in another, but he knew later that this was a mere question of accent. When Paul was growing sleepy again the man with the eyeglass spoke in English.

‘Ask him, then.’

‘My friend here,’ said Pauer, ‘Mr. George Darco, wants a smart, handy youngster. If you can give us a satisfactory account of how you came into your present condition, he will find you employment.’

Paul looked from one to the other, and both men regarded him seriously. He blushed furiously, and his eyes fell.

'I suppose,' said Pauer, 'that you don't remember much of what you said to me on Saturday night?

'I don't know,' Paul answered.

'Do you remember that I told you I was going with my show to Castle Barfield?

'No,' said Paul.

'Do you remember writing your father's address in my pocket-book, and telling me that he would do my printing for nothing if I told him I was a friend of yours?'

'No,' said Paul again. 'I didn't know I was so bad as that.'

'Do you remember a long screed you gave me about manly purity?'

'No,' said Paul once more. His voice would barely obey him.

'You went off in tow with that young woman. Do you remember that?'

'I know I did. I don't remember it.'

'She cleared you out, I suppose?' 'Yes.'

'And you were ashamed to go home? You hadn't money to pay your landlady?

'It wasn't that.'

'What was it, then?

'For God's sake don't ask me! I can't bear to think of it.

And then it all came out in an incoherent burst, through savagely choked tears. He had lost his honour. He was lowered in his own eyes. He would never be able to respect himself again. The two men

stared at all this, wondering what lay behind it, until on a sudden the enigma became clear to both of them. The man with the eyeglass laughed like a horse, whinnying and neighing in mirth unrestrainable. Paul blundered blindly at the door, but Pauer stepped nimbly and set his back against it.

'You young idiot!' he said in a friendly voice, which had a little quiver in it which was not inspired by merriment.

Mr. George Darco continued to laugh until he rolled from his chair to the floor. He rose gasping and weeping.

'Oh,' he said, 'vos there efer any think so vunny? Oh, somepoty holt me. I shall tie of it.'

He recovered slowly, and seeing how deeply his laughter wounded the object of it, he tried to look solemn, but broke out again. Pauer spoke sharply to him in the foreign tongue he had used before, and he subdued himself.

'Go back to your chair and sit down,' said Pauer, laying a hand on Paul's shoulder. 'Don't make mountains out of molehills.'

The lad allowed himself to be pushed into a seat

'It's all very well for you, you glass-eyed old reprobate,' said Pauer, speaking in English. 'I can understand the boy if you can't.'

'You!' gasped Darco, with a new spurt of laughter. 'You!'

'Yes,' said Pauer, 'I.' His tone was angry, and his friend, after a humorous glance at him, poured out a glass of beer and drank it, but said no more. 'Stay there till I come back, said Pauer a minute or so later. 'I'll be back in a jiffy.'

Darco made a renewed onslaught on the cold

boiled beef, as if he had been famishing. Paul sat still and stared at the fire. He was a compendium of shames, and whether he were more ashamed of his crime or his confession he could not tell. Pauer came back, accompanied by a man who looked like a hostler. The man carried a lighted candle and chewed thoughtfully at a straw.

'You'd better go to bed now,' said Pauer. 'This man will show you the way. When you're undressed, give him your clothes, and he'll have them dried and brushed for you by morning.'

Paul obeyed, and when he had handed over his clothes to the hostler's care he went to bed, and listened for awhile to the murmuring voices of Pauer and Darco, who were now immediately beneath him. His last resolve before he went to sleep was that in the morning he would go into the town and try to find work at his own trade; but he had begun to learn that he was born to drift, and he drifted. His clothes were brought to him clean and dry, and he turned the false cuffs and the collar he wore, so that he made himself in his own way sufficiently presentable, and just as he had finished dressing Pauer came into his room. There was a plentiful breakfast downstairs, and it was of a better quality than the aspect of the house might have seemed to warrant Paul did fall justice to it, and when the cloth was cleared Darco laid writing materials on the table. He said that his sight was failing, and that he had been advised to rest his eyes as much as possible. He would be obliged if Paul would write a letter for him from dictation. He dictated a lengthy business letter setting forth the terms on which he was willing to accept the management of a theatrical provincial tour, and when it was finished he asked Pauer to read it.

‘That’s all right,’ said Pauer. ‘Good legible fist. Well spelled. Punctuation and capitals all right.’

‘Ferry well,’ said Darco. ‘If the younk man wants a chop, I can give him one. Dwenty shillings a veek, and meals at the mittle of the tay.’

‘What is the work?’ Paul asked.

‘To be my brivate zecretary,’ said Darco, ‘and to dravel with me through the gountry.’

‘When am I to begin?’

‘Now,’ said Darco.

Paul sat down at the table, and his new employer dictated a great number of letters to him, all offering engagements to ladies and gentlemen, at salaries ranging from one pound to four pounds ten.

‘What’s all that for, George?’ asked Pauer, who was sitting idly smoking by the fire.

‘That is for Golding,’ Darco announced. ‘Younk Evans takes the management, but I haf the gontrol.’

‘Getting your hands pretty full, ain’t you, George?’

‘Ah!’ said Darco. ‘Vait till I get my London theatre. I should haf been in London lonk ako if it had not been for Barton. He gild the boots that lace the golden legs.’

‘What did he do?’ asked Pauer.

‘Gild the boots that lace the golden legs.’

‘Killed the goose that lays the golden eggs, do you mean?’

‘Man alife!’ ejaculated Darco. ‘I zaid zo.’

‘You said distinctly,’ said Pauer, ‘“gild the boots that lace the golden legs.”’

‘Ferry well,’ said Darco. ‘I zay zo. Vot *are* you talking apout?’

Pauer looked at his watch.

‘I must settle up and march, George,’ he said ‘If you carry that business through, let me know. I’m willing to join.’

He followed his circus, which, as Paul gathered, had made a start at five o’clock that morning, and Darco and his new secretary took train for London. The two had a second-class carriage to themselves.

‘You haf lodgings somevares—eh? Darco asked.

‘In Charterhouse Square,’ Paul answered.

‘That is too far away,’ said his employer. ‘I lif at Hamp-stead. You must get lotchings glose by me. You haf got no money?’

‘No money,’ said Paul.

‘That is a vife-bound node,’ said Darco. ‘Co to your lotchings and bay your pill. I shall stop it out of your zalery. Then you will gome to me at this attress.’ He gave minute directions about omnibuses green and red and yellow, and all these Paul stored away in his memory as well as he could. ‘Now, berhabs,’ said his employer, ‘you think I am a vool to gif you a vife-bound node. But if you are not honest I shall be rit of you jeaply, and I shall know at vonce.’

Paul fired a little at this.

‘If you don’t think I am to be trusted you had better not employ me.’

‘That is all right,’ said Darco. ‘I am Cheorge Dargo. I do things my own vay. Look here. Are you vond of imidading beobles?’

‘No,’ said Paul; ‘not that I know of.’

‘Don’t pegin on me,’ said Darco. ‘There is everypody thinks he gan imidade me. All the beobles in all my gombanies dry it on. But bevore you can imidade a man he must haf zome beguliaridies. Now, I hafen’t got any beguliaridies, and zo it’s no good

drying to imidade me.'

They parted at the London terminus. Paul made his way to Charterhouse Square, where he was received with marked disfavour. He paid his bill, packed his trunk—a small affair which he could shoulder easily—and set put for Darco's house. It was a little house, but it stood by itself in a very trim garden, and it was furnished in a style which made Paul gasp. He had been very poorly bred, and he had never had access to such a place in all his life before. The bevelled Venetian mirrors in their gilded frames, the rose-coloured blinds, the rich brocades and glittering gilding of the chairs, the Chinese dragons in porcelain, the very tongs and poker and fire-shovel of cut brass, astonished him. He thought that his employer must be a Croesus. This faith was confirmed when he was called into the library, where there was a wealth of books, nobly bound.

'That gollection,' said Darco, 'gost me two thousand bounds. I am still adding to it. Here is an original Bigvig, the Bigvig of Jarles Tickens, with all the green covers bound with it up. Here is "Ton Quigsotte," the first etition in Sbanish. Here is the "Dreacle Piple," berfect, from tidel page to the last line of Revelations. Here is efery blay-pill that has ever been issued at Her Majesty's Theatre from the time it vas opened until now.' He patted and fondled his treasure with a smiling pride and affection. 'They are not to be touched,' he said, 'on any bretext. Nopoty stobs in my house a minute who touches my books. I am Cheorge Dargo, ant ven I zay a thing I mean it' He pointed to a door. 'Through that,' he said, 'is a lafadory. You can vash your hands and gome and haf lunge.'

Paul obeyed, and at the luncheon-table was introduced to Mrs. Darco, a lean brunette, who by

way of establishing her own dignity was sulkily disdainful of the newcomer. He was glad to escape into the library, where Darco set him to work on more correspondence—an endless whirl of it, diversified with family skirmishes.

'Now, who the tevil has been mettling again with my babers? I haf dolt eferybody I will not haf my babers mettled.' Then a dash to the door, and an inquiry trumpeted up the stairway. 'Who the tevil has been mettling with my babers?'

Then a shrill inquiry from above.

'What's the matter, George?'

'Nothings. I know where I but it now. I will not haf my babers mettled.'

Then more dictation, the dictator waddling fiercely across the room and back again for ten minutes or so. Then a rush to the door, and a new call upstairs.

'Who the tevil—— Oh, it's all right I remember where

I put it.'

Then more dictation, and a third rush.

'Who the tevil——'

Then a hurricane of whirling skirts upon the stairs, and on a sudden Mrs. Darco, kneeling on the floor, wrestling both hands above her head, and shrieking. Mr. Darco darted and shook her as if she had been a doormat.

'Get ub! No volly—no volly!'

Mrs. Darco got up and walked soberly upstairs.

'It is klopulus hysteriga,' said Mr. Darco, with a startling calm. 'And that is the only way to dreat it But I will not haf my babers mettled.'

Then more dictation, until Paul's mind was crossed

by a sudden recollection.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ he said, diving his hand into his pocket. ‘I forgot to give you the change out of that five-pound note.’

‘Keep it,’ said Darco. ‘You will haf to look resbegdable if you stay here. You will haf to puy things.’

‘I don’t like to take it, sir, until I have earned it.’

‘Now,’ said Darco, ‘who do you subbose you are? If you want to stob here, you will do as you are dold to do. I am Cheorge Dargo. I do not sbeak to beobles dwice.’

‘Oh, very well, sir,’ said Paul, and went on writing from dictation.

‘Now,’ said Darco, ‘you haf got all the attresses at the foot of the ledders. Attress an envelope for each ledder, and leave them all oben for my signature. I am going to zleep for half an hour.’

He plunged into an armchair, closed his eyes, and in a minute he was snoring regularly and deeply. Paul performed his task, and sat idle for a time. At the end of the stipulated half-hour Darco ceased to snore, opened his eyes, yawned and stretched as if he longed to fall in pieces, and instantly fell to work again. He made Paul read aloud the whole afternoon’s correspondence, signed each sheet in a hand of clerk-like precision, but with a great deal more than clerk-like character in it, saw all the letters and envelopes stamped, rang the bell, and sent his correspondence to the post.

‘Ant now,’ he said, ‘I haf got to pekin my day’s work.’ Paul stared a little, but made no answer. ‘You had petter gome with me,’ said Darco. ‘It will help you to learn your business.’

Paul assisted his employer into the big fur coat, assumed his own and the shabby cap Pauer had given him, and went out at Darco's heels. A closed brougham waited in the street. They entered and were driven away.

It was nearing six o'clock by this time, and as they were driven downhill they came into a stratum of cold yellow fog, through which the gas-lamps stared with a bleared and drunken look. The vehicle rumbled along for some three-quarters of an hour, and pulled up in a shabby side-way strewn with cabbage-leaves and all manner of decaying vegetable offal Darco rolled out of the brougham, and plunged with a waddling swiftness into a narrow, ill-lit passage which smelt of escaping gas. Paul followed, and in half a minute found himself for the first time within the walls of a theatre and on the stage. The darkened auditorium loomed beyond the solitary T-bracket like a great sepulchre. A hundred people, more or less, were gathered on the stage.

'Act dwo!' roared Darco at the moment of his entrance. 'Glear for Act dwo.' People began to dribble into the outlying darkness. 'Do you hear?' he stormed, clapping his hands together. 'Glear for Act dwo. Look here, ladies and chentlemen, I am Cheorge Dargo. I do not zay to anypoty twice.'

From the moment when he gripped the idea that this was a rehearsal the place was a fairyland to Paul. Darco stormed round, correcting everybody, acted for everybody, and a little man, who was barricaded behind an enormous moustache, and seemed to be second in command, echoed the chief's commands plaintively:

'Oh I say, now, why don't you? You got that cross marked down last night.'

‘You’re Binda, are you?’ said Darco, addressing one pale and trembling young woman who had just tried an entrance. ‘Veil, now, look here. I don’t sbeak to beobles twice. Binda is a light, high-sbirited kirl She is all light and laughder and nonsense. See? She gums hob, skib, and chump. Like this.’

He waddled furiously to the wing and made the entrance. He was ludicrous, he was grotesque, but somehow he conveyed the idea he desired to convey. The girl tried again, but failed to satisfy him.

‘Vere do you garry your prains?’ he asked. ‘In your boods?’

The girl began to whimper, and the lieutenant took Darco by the sleeve.

‘Don’t worry her to-night, governor,’ he said. ‘She’s a good little sort, and her mother’s dying.’

‘Vy the tevil didn’t you zay zo? demanded the manager. ‘How am I to know? Gif her a zovereign,’ he whispered, ‘and ask her if she vants anything—bort-wine or chellies. *You* know.’ Then he turned, roaring: ‘Vere is Miss Lawrence’s understudy? Zing, if you please, Miss Clewes. I never sbeak to beobles twice. You may go home, Miss Lawrence. Dell Villips if you want anything, ant I’ll zee to it. Vy the tevil don’t beobles zay when there are things the madder at home? Now, Miss Clewes.’

The lieutenant was back at Paul’s elbow a minute later.

‘The governor’s a hot un,’ he said—‘he’s a fair hot un when he’s at work. But for a heart—well, I’m damned if gold’s in it with him!’

CHAPTER IX

In a month's time from this Paul's soul sat chuckling all day long. He lived with the quaintest set he had ever conceived, and there was no page of 'Nickleby' which was fuller of comedy than a day of his own life. He met Crummies, and actually heard him wonder how those things got into the papers. He met the Infant Phenomenon. With his own hands he had helped to adjust the immortal real pump and tubs. He was still in the days when there was a farce in an evening's performance to play the people in, and a solid five-act melodrama for the public's solid fare, and a farce to play the people out.

Darco travelled with his own company, majestically Astrachan-furred and splendid, but rarely clean-shaven. Nine days in ten an aggressive stubble on cheek and chin seemed to sprout from an inward sense of his own glorious import.

'I am Cheorge Dargo,' he said unfailingly to every provincial stage-manager he met 'I nefer sbeaks to beobles twice.'

His brutalities of demeanour earned for him the noisy hatred of scores of people. His hidden benefactions bought for him the silent blessings of some suffering unit in every town. He bullied by instinct in public. He blessed the suffering by instinct in private. He was cursed by ninety-nine in the

hundred, and the odd man adored him. Paul's heart fastened to the uncouth man, and he did him burningly eager service.

Paul was in clover, and had sense enough to know it.

'I regognise the zymptoms,' said Darco, when they had been on tour a week. 'I am not going to haf my insbirations in the tay-dime any longer. All my crate iteas will gome to me now for some dime in the night. You haf got to be near me, young Armstrong. You must sday vith me in the zame lotchings.'

This meant that Darco paid his whole expenses, and that his salary came to him each week intact. He began to save money and to develop at the same time an inexpensive dandyism. He took to brown velveteen and to patent leather boots. He bought a secondhand watch at a pawnbroker's, but disdained a chain. His father had inspired him with a horror of jewellery; for once, when he had spent the savings of a month upon a cheap scarf-pin, the elder Armstrong had wrathfully asked him what he meant by sticking that brass-headed nail in his chest, and had thrown the gewgaw into the fire. But the watch for the first week or two was a token of established manhood, and it was consulted a full hundred times a day, and was corrected by every public clock he passed.

His occupation was no sinecure, for Darco was running half-a-dozen companies, and kept up a fire of correspondence with each. He had dramas on the anvil, too, and dictated by the hour every day. Often he woke Paul in the dead of night, and routed him out of bed, and gave him notes of some prodigious idea which had just occurred to him.

Darco had an unfailing formula with his landladies: 'Prek-fasd for three, lunge for three,

tinner for three; petrooms and zidding-room for two,' He worked for three and ate for two.

'I am in many respegs,' he told Paul, 'a most remarkaple man. I am a boet, and a creat boet; but I haf no lankwage. My Vrench is Cherman, and my Cherman is Vrench, ant my Enklish is Alsatian. My normal demperadure is fever heat. I am a toctor; I am a zoldier. I haf peen a creat agdor in garagder bards—Alsatian garagder bards—in Vrance and in Chermany. I can write a blay, ant I can stage id, ant I can baint the scenery for id. I am Cheorge Dargo, ant vere I haf not been it is nod vorth vile to co; and vot I do not know apout a theatre it is not vorth vile to learn. Sdob vith me, and I will deach you your business.'

The company played a week within five miles of Castle Barfield, and Paul snatched an hour for home. There the brown velveteen and the patent leathers and the watch made a great impression, and the eight sovereigns Paul was able to jingle in his pockets and display to wondering eyes.

'There's danger in the life, lad,' said Armstrong wistfully. 'I know it, for I saw a heap of it in my youth. Keep a clean heart, Paul. High thinking goes with chaste and sober living. There's nothing blurs faith like our own misdeeds.'

Paul was thankful for the dusk which hid his flaming cheeks at this moment. His mother had taken away the candle, and the old man had chosen the instant's solitude for this one serious word.

'I'm not denying,' said Armstrong, 'that it is a good worldly position for a lad of your years, but what's it going to lead to, Paul, lad? What's the direction, I'm asking?

'I'm going to be a dramatist,' said Paul.

‘A play-actor!’ cried the mother, who was back again.

‘A play-writer,’ Paul corrected. ‘I’ve got the best tutor in the world.’

‘Do you mean to tell me,’ his mother asked, ‘that you think o’ making that a trade for a lifetime?’

‘Why not? asked Pau.

‘Why not, indeed!’ she cried, with an angry click of her knitting-needle. ‘Writing a parcel o’ rubbidge for fools to speak, and other fools to laugh at.’

‘It was Shakespeare’s trade, Mary,’ said Armstrong.

‘It’s a pretty far cry from our Paul to Shakespeare, I reckon,’ said the mother with sudden dryness.

‘I suppose it is,’ said Paul, laughing; ‘but there are degrees in every calling. Wait a bit I don’t mean that you shall be ashamed of me.’

Paul had been away from home for half a year, and absence had altered many things. The High Street of the town had grown mean and sordid to the eye. Shops which had once been palatial had lost all the glamour which childhood had given them and custom had preserved. The dusty, untidy shop at home had shrunk to less than half its original dimensions. Armstrong seemed changed more than anything or anybody else. He looked suddenly small and old and gray. He was not much over five-and-sixty, but he had always seemed old to Paul, even from the earliest recollections of infancy. But his age had been the age of dignity and authority, and now it was age without disguise, white-haired and withered, and bowed in uncomplaining patience.

But Paul felt that there was no such change anywhere as in himself. A certain complacency had stolen across the horror which had shaken him at the

first contemplation of his own fall. He had made a step towards manhood; he heard the talk of men—not the best, not the wisest, yet neither the worst nor the most stupid—and he knew now how lightly they valued that which he had once esteemed priceless. He had written in his note-book:

'To forgive is godlike. Be as God unto thyself.'

He had made a step towards manhood. He had thought it a hideous, irremediable plunge to ruin, and yet somehow he seemed to stand the higher for it. The episode was to be hateful for ever in memory. But it was to cloud life no longer—only to stand as a sign of warning, a danger-signal. Surely the net is spread in vain in the sight of any bird. The burned child dreads the fire. He did not as yet reckon that man is a moral Salamander, and accommodates himself to all temperatures of heat and asceticism. How should a raw lad of less than nineteen think in such a fashion? But he knew what he had not known; he had passed through the fire, and the smell of burning had left his raiment.

The Midland mother gave him a cold cheek to kiss when he went away, but the Scottish father embraced him with a trembling arm.

'Ye'll be remembering Sir Walter's last words to Lockhart,' he said. 'Be a good man, my dear.'

Paul pressed his smooth cheek against the soft white whiskers of his father's face, and held his right hand hard. There was a lump in his throat, and his good-bye had a husk in it. He went back to the society of men who had never thought manly chastity a virtue or the unchastity of men a crime. He went back armed in steel, and the armour lasted a full fortnight in its perfection. Then here and there a rivet came out, and by-and-by the whole suit fell to

pieces.

‘Id is gurious,’ said Darco, ‘that all the vunniest sdories in the vorlt should be vhat they gall imbrober. Look at Arisdophanes; look at Jaucer; look at the “Gontes Troladigues”; look at the “Tegameron.”’

‘Look at Pickwick,’ said Paul.

‘Vell!’ cried Darco, ‘look at Bigvig. Bigvig woult haf peen a creat teal vunnier if Tickens had lived at the dime of Zmollet.’

‘I don’t mind drinking out of a jug,’ said Paul, ‘but I like a clean jug. I’ve read Aristophanes—in translation. It’s like drinking wine out of a gold cup that has been washed in a sewer.’

‘Who says that?’ asked Darco.

‘I do,’ said Paul.

‘It is a ferry coot ebicram,’ said Darco. ‘I vill rememper id. But, mindt you, to be squeamish is not to be glean-minded.

If a sdory is vunny, I laugh. Vy not? If a man tells me a sdory that is only dirdy, I co someveres else. I am a goot man. For dwendy-three hours and fifty-eight minutes in a tay I am as bure-minded as a child; then, in the ott dwo minutes somepoty tells me a dirdy sdory. I laugh, and I go avay, and I think of my blays and my boedry and my pusiness. It is water on a duck’s pack.’

‘Dirty water,’ said Paul.

‘There is enough glean water in the tay’s rainfall to wash it off,’ Darco answered. ‘Did you efer read “The Orichinal”?

‘No,’ said Paul.

‘The man who wrote it vos so healthy that he nefer hat need to wash himself. His skin was too bure to

hold dirt.'

'Filthy beggar!' said Paul.

'I make it a baraple,' Darco declared. 'Id is true of the immordal soul. I am as bure-minded as a child, and I haf heardt den thousand fillainous sdories. Vot does it madder?'

The rivets of Paul's armour rotted, as the rivets of most men's armour rot, and he grew to tolerate what had been abominable. And that is the way of life, which is a series of declensions from high ideals, and is meant to be so because things must be lost before their worth can be known. The society in which he lived and moved was as rich as any in the world in the kind of narrative he had discussed with Darco. Little by little he got to take Darco's view. It is the view of ninety per cent, of men of the world. A naturally pure mind never learns to love nastiness, but it learns to tolerate it, for the sake of the wit which sometimes lives with it.

Darco was a man whom nobody ever saw for an instant under the influence of liquor, but then it was impossible to make him drunk. It seemed to Paul as if it were just as unlikely for him to become intoxicated by drinking as for a decanter to grow tipsy by having liquor poured into it. If he ate—as he did—twice as much as the average keen-set sportsman, he drank as much as the average hopeless drunkard, and no man could have guessed from his speech, or acts, or aspect that he was not a total abstainer. Paul, too, began to discover that he had a cast-iron pot of a head, and took an infantile pride in the fact; but this kind of vanity was not often indulged in, and he had no physical predisposition to it.

Darco made money by the handful, and spent it

with a lavish ostentation. Paul continued his habit of riding about in cabs and dining in hotels. It was a bad commercial training, but he was not at the time of life to think of that. The days and nights were full. There were both labour and enjoyment in them. Every week showed him a new town or city: classic Edinburgh, dirty Glasgow—cleaner nowadays—roaring Liverpool, rainy Manchester, smoke-clouded Birmingham and Sheffield, granite-built Aberdeen, jolly Dublin, with an unaccustomed twang in the whisky, after the Scottish progress; Belfast, Cork, Waterford. Everywhere character studies in shoals; dialect studies every day and all day long. Paul could train his tongue, before the twelve months' tour was over, to the speech of Exeter, or Norwich, or Brighton, or Newcastle, or Berwick, or Aberdeen, or Cork, or the black North. He set himself to the task conscientiously, and with a rich enjoyment. What a Gargantuan table was the world!

How lovable, laughable, hateful were the men who sat at it! What a feast of feeling was spread daily!

The tour came near to its end, and Darco was arranging a new series for half a dozen companies, so that work grew furious. A man might have commanded an army or ruled a great department of State with less expenditure of energy. There was no advertising or consulting of agencies, but everything was done by personal letter. There were reams and reams of letters; there were scores and scores of contracts with managers, and actors, and actresses, and upholsterers, and scene-painters, and printers, and bill-posters, and Darco one organized mass of effort at the centre of all the business hurly-burly, doing three men's work, and tearing into fibre the nerves of all men who came near him. He could be princely with it all in his own way.

‘You haf learned your pusiness, young Armstrong,’ he said to Paul when the rush was over. ‘I gan deach anypoty his pusiness if he is not a vool. I am Cheorge Dargo. You haf done your work gabidally, and you are vorth fife dimes vot I am baying you. But I alvays like the shady site of a pargain, and I shall only gif you four dimes.’

So at four times the original sum Paul’s salary was fixed, and he began to feel himself a man of consequence.

‘I am Mr. Darco’s private secretary,’ he was told to say to people with whom he was empowered to deal. ‘I am entirely in Mr. Darco’s confidence, and you may deal with me exactly as if Mr. Darco were here.’

At the beginning of the second year the great provincial cities had begun to take advantage of the Public Libraries Act, and here was a new joy for Paul. The Free Library was the first place he asked for in any big town, and at every spare hour he stuck his nose into a book, and kept it there until duty called him away again. Something in ‘Gil Bias’ about poverty in observation struck his fancy, and he cast about in his own mind asking where he could observe, not knowing yet that he was observing all things. He hit upon the landlady. A man who has fifty-two landladies in a year has surely a fertile field. He sorted and classified in the light of experience: the honeyed, the acidulated, and bibulous-godly (mostly Scottish), the bibulous-ungodly (mostly English), the slut with a clean outside to things, the painstaking sloven, the peculative (here one majestic sample), the reduced in circumstances, the confidential, the reserved, the frisky, the motherly, the step-motherly—a most excellent assembly for mirth and pity.

Mrs. Brace came back again. How many years was it since the memory of Mrs. Brace had touched the Exile's mind?

Darco did, in the main, his own marketing. He had sent home sausages for breakfast, seven in number. Six came to table.

'Vere is my other zausage,' cries Darco. 'There vere zeven. Now there are six. Vere is my other zausage?'

'Really you know, sir,' says Mrs. Brace. 'Sausages do shrink so in the cooking.'

Paul was under the table with a helpless yelp of pleasure, and Darco stormed like a beaten gong.

Come back again, in the brown sultry air, and the solitude, over that bridge of years departed, Mrs. Fuller. It was Mrs. Fuller's plan to convey a portion of the guests' clean linen from the chest of drawers into the hall, and to lay it on the table there pinned up in a neat newspaper parcel, and to say, 'If you please, gentlemen, the rest of your linning have come home, and, if you please, it's two and elevenpence halfpenny.' Oh, the days—the days when a jest like this could shake the ribs with mirth!

And Mistress MacAlister, painfully intoxicated at the dinner hour of 2 p.m., and the uncooked leg of young pork in the larder.

'D'ye thenk ah'm goin' to cuik till ye on the Sabba' Day? Ye'll no be findin' th' irreligious sort o' betches that'll do that for ye in Dundee, ah'm thenkin'.'

And the little soft-spoken lady from New Orleans, whose husband had been a General—in Del Oro—and an old friend of Darco's in his campaigning days. And the execution in the house. And Darco signing a cheque for twice the amount claimed, and blubbering like a great fat baby, and swearing to burn the cheque if she thanked him by another word.

Old Darco, the nerve-tearer, the inordinate pyramid of vanity, the tender, the generous, the loyal. Sweetest fruit in sourest rind! Sleep on, old Darco. God makes none gentler in heart, though He makes many more beloved.

And how men do, on all hands, unconsciously lay themselves out to delight the budding genial satirist! Here is Darco, wealthy and prosperous as he has never been before, launching out fearlessly, and bearing with him *the* splendour of the stage—the great Montgomery Bassett. Darco, in consultation with the glorious creature, the question being in which of his unrivalled and majestic assumptions he shall first appear:

'It doesn't matter, dear boy,' says Mr. Montgomery Bassett, in that noble voice, a voice rich as the king of all the wines of Burgundy—'it doesn't matter the toss up of a blind beggar's farthing. The people don't come to see the play, my boy; they come to see me. They'd come to see me if I played in Punch and Judy.'

And the late leading man, now dethroned, and put to second business:

'Bassett! Montgomery Bassett! I could act his head off, dear boy. He is the rottenest stick that ever stalked upon a stage. He can't get in front of that infernal Roman nose, sir. "Now," says Bassett, "I'm going to be pathetic;" and the Roman nose says, "I'll see you damned first." "And now," says Bassett, "we'll have a bit of comedy." "Oh no, you won't," says the nose. You might as well try to act behind a barn-door as to act behind that nose. Just fill me out a little tot of Scotch, darling laddie. I want to lose the taste of Bassett.'

And the leading lady and the *ingénue* who hung

together like twin cherries on one stalk, bathed in soft dews of tenderness, until Bassett praised the one and not the other, and the leading lady called the ingénue 'Chit' and the ingénue retorted 'Wrinkles!' And the reconciliation at the champagne supper which Darco gave when Bassett went away, when the tears they shed must have tasted of the wine.

Oh, the days—the days, long years before he set out on his Journey of Despair, when mirth had no malice, and tears were tributaries to pity!

'I have vound oudt,' said Darco, one day, 'that our paggage man is a pantit He is ropping eferypoty, and I have kiven him a fortnight's vages, and the bag to carry. That is my liddle chockular vay to say he has got the zack. I haf dele-graphed for a new man, and he will come from Lonton by the seven-thirty train. His name is Warr, and you will know him by his nose, which is pigger than your fist, and as hot to look at as the powels of the Phalarian Pull. It ought to be an acony to garry it, but he laughs pehint it in the distance. But I nodice it always zeems to make his eyes vater.'

Paul went to meet this phenomenon, and from the train Mr. Warr of the Nonconformist printing-office stepped out, carrying the work of art before him like an oriflamme.

'Mr. Warr, I believe?' said Paul.

'The same, sir,' said Mr. Warr, with a spinal inclination.

Paul's face was framed in a virginal fringe of brown beard, and he was dressed by a London theatrical tailor. Mr. Wan-had no memory of him.

'I am Mr. Darco's private secretary,' said Paul. 'That is the address of your lodgings, and when you have taken your traps there Mr. Darco will meet you

at the theatre.'

'I am at your disposal, sir,' said Mr. Warr.

He gathered up two newspaper parcels, each of which leaked ragged hosiery and soiled linen at either end, and pottered along the platform at Paul's side, subservient and timid. Paul spurted laughter and affected a cough to hide it.

'Here is the refreshment-room, Mr. Warr,' he said. 'May I ask if you care at this moment to administer a coating of varnish to the work of art?'

'Have I had the pleasure to encounter you before, sir?' asked Mr. Warr, peering at him sideways across that astonishing nose, with a brown eye bright with moisture. It was like an old cat looking out from the side of a fireplace.

'Come in and see,' said Paul.

Mr. Warr went in, and being offered a choice in varnishes, selected cold gin.

'My highly superior respects, sir. You either know me, or my fame has reached you.' He smiled a propitiatory smile. 'I do not recall you, sir.'

'I have varnished the work of art before to-day,' said Paul. 'Do you remember Bucklersbury?'

'I should do so,' Mr. Warr returned. 'I drudged there for eight long years, and had it not been for Mr. Darco's kindly memories of an old associate, I might have drudged there still. But two and fifty shillings per week, sir, with freedom and travel thrown in, are highly superior to thirty-six, with slavery superadded. But I do not recall your face and figure, sir.'

'My name is Armstrong,' said Paul. 'I worked beside you for a week or two.'

'The friend of my youth,' said Mr. Warr. 'Permit

me to shake hands. Rely upon me, Mr. Armstrong, not to be presumptuous. Rely upon me, sir. I shall respect bygones. Mr. Darco will tell you who I was and what I was when he first knew me. I was first low com., sir, at the Vic, upon my soul and honour, Mr. Armstrong. But the work of art, sir, so grew and prospered that at last the very gallery guyed me. I went for the varnish, Mr. Armstrong, in sheer despair. As God is my highly superior judge, sir, I never drank until I had a drunkard's nose. Then I made a jest of a deformity, and the joke carried me too far. This infernal feature is an unnatural legacy. It is from my maternal grandfather, who once owned the town of Guildford. I have heard my mother say that his cellars covered a quarter of an acre, and held nothing but port and brandy—packed, sir, seven feet deep. To-morrow, in Mr. Darco's presence, I sign the pledge till the end of the tour, as per our highly superior arrangement. I do not know, sir, whether behind that aspect of prosperity there lurks the probability of another fourpennyworth.'

'You mustn't get tipsy to meet Mr. Darco,' said Paul.

'There is no fear of that, sir,' Mr. Warr answered. 'That,' pointing to the empty glass, 'is my first to-day, and I as thirsty as I am hungry.'

'Eat, man, eat,' said Paul.

'May I, sir?' asked Mr. Warr.

'Your fill,' said Paul.

There were hard-boiled eggs and cold sausages on the marble-topped counter, and Mr. Warr fell to work among them, and mumbled gratitude with his mouth full. When he had half cleared the counter, Paul paid for the depredations, and Mr. Warr, who knew the town of old, picked up his leaking parcels

and made off for the address given him.

‘Veil,’ said Darco when Paul got back to him, ‘you haf seen him? Had he any package and luckage?’ Paul described Mr. Warr’s kit. ‘You must puy for him a jeap, useful bordmandeau, and jarge id to me. I shall sdop it out of his wages,’ which of course he never did.

Mr. Warr presented himself at Darco’s lodging next morning wrapped in a perfume of gin and cloves. He laid upon the table a wordy document in foolscap with a receipt stamp in one corner, and read it aloud in his own breathless chuckle. It set forth that whereas he, the undersigned William Treherne Macfarvel Warr, of the one part, late of, et cetera, had entered into an engagement with George Darco, Esq., et cetera, et cetera, of the other part, to such and such an effect of polysyllabic rigmarole, he, the aforesaid and undersigned, did seriously and truly covenant with the aforesaid George Darco, Esq., of et cetera, et cetera, all over again, not to drink or imbibe or partake of any form of alcoholic liquor, whether distilled or fermented, until such time as the agreement or engagement between the aforesaid and undersigned on the one part, and the aforesaid George Darco, Esq., of the other part, should end, cease, and determine. He signed this document with a great sprawling flourish, and Darco and Paul having appended their names to it also, Mr. Warr wrote the date of the transaction across the receipt stamp, and handed the paper to his employer with a solemn bow.

‘You haf peen zaying goot-bye to the dear greature,’ said Darco; ‘I can see that.’

‘In the words of Othello, sir,’ said Mr. Warr: ‘“I kissed her ere I killed her.”’ He smiled self-

consciously, but instantly grew grave again. ‘You know me, Mr. Darco. You have my highly superior word. I never go back on it, sir.’

Mr. Warr kept his word, but he grew insufferably self-righteous, and preached total abstinence to everybody, from Darco to the call-boy. He atoned for this unconsciously by the longing calculations he made.

‘I have consulted the almanac,’ he confided to Paul; ‘it is two hundred and seventy-one days to my next drink.’

After this he offered a figure almost daily: ‘Two seventy. A dry journey, Mr. Armstrong.’’Two fifty, sir, two fifty. The longest lane must turn, sir.’ Then, after a long spell of yearning: ‘Only two hundred now, sir. I should like to obliterate two hundred. But a Warr’s word is sacred.’

‘Now,’ said Paul one day, ‘why don’t you take advantage of this sober spell to cure yourself of the craving, in place of looking forward to the next outburst and counting the days between? Why don’t you make up your mind to have done with it altogether?

‘Sir,’ said Mr. Warr with intense solemnity, ‘if I thought I had tasted my last liquor, I’d cut my throat.’

‘If ever I find myself disposed to feel like that,’ Paul answered, ‘I will cut my own.’

‘Oh dear no, you won’t, sir,’ said Mr. Warr. ‘If ever you go that way at all, you’ll slide into it. You will always believe that you could drop it at any moment until you find you can’t. Then you’ll be reconciled, like the rest of us.’

Paul had little fear. His temptation, he told himself, did not lie in that direction.

CHAPTER X

Darco's work fell into routine for a time. The wheels of all his affairs went so smoothly that he and his assistant found many easy breathing-spaces. But Paul was of a mind just now to scorn delight and live laborious days. He confined himself for many hours of each day to his bedroom, and on the weekly railway journey with his chief he sat for the most part in a brown study, And made frequent entries in a big note-book.

'Vat are you doing?' Darco asked one day.

Paul blushed, and answered that he would rather wait a day or two before speaking.

'I shall ask your opinion in a week at the outside,' he added.

Darco went to sleep, a thing he seemed able to do whenever the fancy took him, and Paul made notes furiously all through the rest of the journey. His ideas affected him curiously, for at times his eyes would fill and he would blow his nose, and at other times he would chuckle richly to himself. He had got what he conceived to be a dramatic notion by the tip of the tail, and he was engaged in the manufacture of his first drama. In due time the result of his labours in his most clerk-like hand was passed over a breakfast-table to Darco, who winced, and looked like a shying horse at it.

‘Vot is id?’ he asked.

‘It is a play,’ said Paul, blushing and stammering. ‘I want to have your judgment on it.’

‘Dake it away!’ cried Darco; ‘dake it away. I am wriding blays myselluf, ant I will nod look at other beoble’s. No. Dake it away!’

Paul stared at him in confusion.

‘I do not vant to look at anypoty’s blays,’ said Darco. ‘I haf got alreaty all the tramatic iteas there ever haf been in the vorldt—all there efer will be. I do not vant notions that are olter than the hills brought to me, and then for beobles to say I haf zeen their pieces and gopied from them. I do not vant to gopy from anypoty. I am Cheorge Dargo.’

‘I’ll bet,’ said Paul rashly, ‘that you haven’t met this idea yet.’

‘My tear poy,’ Darco answered, ‘if you haf cot a new way of bantling an old itea you are ferry lucky. But there are no new iteas, and you may take my vort for it. If anypoty asks who told you that, say it was Cheorge Dargo.’

‘Let me read it to you,’ Paul urged. ‘It’s hardly likely that a youngster like myself is going to have the cheek to charge *you* with having stolen your ideas—now, is it?’ Darco smoothed a little. ‘You could tell me if there’s anything in it, or if I’m wasting time.’

‘Go on,’ said Darco, suddenly rising from the table and hurling himself into an arm-chair, so that the floor shuddered, and the windows of the room danced in their panes.

Paul sipped his tea, opened his manuscript and began to read. He read on until a loud snore reached his ears, and then looked up discouraged.

‘Vot’s the madder?’ Darco asked. ‘Go on; I am listening.’

Paul went on and Darco snored continuously, but whenever the reader looked up at him, he was wide awake and attentive. The landlady came in to clear the table and Darco drove her from the room as if she had come to steal her own properties. Then he flung himself anew into his arm-chair and snored until the reading came to a close. It had lasted two hours and a half, and Paul at times had been affected by his own humour and pathos. He waited with his eyes on the word ‘Curtain ‘at the bottom of the final page.

‘You think that is a blay?’ said Darco. ‘Vell, it is nod a blay. It is a chelly.’

‘I don’t quite think I know what you mean,’ Paul answered, horribly crestfallen.

‘I say vot I mean,’ Darco responded. ‘It is a chelly. It is a very goot chelly—in’ places. You might like it if you took it in a sboon out of a storypook, or a folume of boedry; but a blay is a very different greation.’

Then he fell to a mortally technical criticism of Paul’s work—a practical stage-manager’s criticism—and enlightened his hearer’s mind on many things. He said, ‘I am Cheorge Dargo, ant now you know,’ a little oftener than was necessary, but he laid bare all the weaknesses of plot and execution—all the improbabilities which Paul supposed himself cunningly to have effaced or bidden, and he showed him how fatally he had disguised his budding scoundrel in a robe of goodness throughout the whole of the first act.

‘But it’s life!’ cried Paul. ‘That’s what happens in life. You meet a man who seems made of honesty;

you trust him, and he picks your pocket.'

'Aha!' said Darco; 'but there is always somepoty who knows the druth apout him, ant efery memper of your autience must represend that somepoty. Now, I'll dell you. I vill make a sgeleton for you. We will pild your chelly into a gomedy, ant we will preathe into id the preath of life, and it shall valk apout.'

'You'll—you'll work with me?' Paul cried. 'Hurrah!'

Darco rang a peal at the bell, and the landlady, probably thinking the house on fire, scurried madly to answer the call.

'Half-bast elefen o'glock,' growled Darco accusingly, 'ant look at the preakfast-dable.'

'But you told me, sir——' began the gasping woman.

'Now don't sdant jattering there,' said Darco, 'I am koing to be busy. Glear avay!'

'I came to clear away at nine, sir.'

'Glear avay now,' said Darco; 'don't vaste my dime.'

'I'm sure I don't want to waste your time, Mr. Darco,' said the landlady, 'but you've given me such a turn, sir, I don't know where I am.'

Darco shook the room again by a new plunge into the armchair, and the trembling landlady cleared away.

'Now, dake nodes!' he roared, as she left the room.

'I shall be very glad to take notice, sir,' said the landlady.

'Nodes!' shouted Darco. 'Nodes. I am not dalking to you. I am dalking to my brivade zegredary.'

Paul seized a pencil, set a pile of paper before him on the table, and waited. Darco began to prowl about the room, setting chairs in place with great precision, arranging ornaments on the chimney-shelf, and settling pictures on the wall with methodical exactness, muttering meanwhile, 'Nodes. Dake nodes. I am dalking to my brivade zegredary. Nodes. Dake nodes.' Paul was familiar with his ways, and waited seriously.

'But this down,' said Darco, pacing and turning suddenly. 'No. Don't but that down. I don't vant that' He roamed off again, murmuring: 'No. Don't but it down. I don't vant it. I don't vant it. Nodes. Dake nodes.' Then with sudden loudness and decision: 'But this down.'

He began to talk. Paul tried to follow him on paper, but the task was hopeless. Darco talked with a choking incoherence and at a dreadful pace. It was as if a big-bellied bottle were turned upside down, and as if the bottle were sentient and strove to empty the whole of its contents at once through a narrow neck. At last a meaning began to declare itself—the merest intelligible germ of a meaning—but it grew and grew until Paul clapped his hands with a cry of triumph at it.

'That is what was wanted.'

'That is a bart of vat is vanted,' said Darco. 'Haf you cot it town?' Before Paul could answer he was off again in a new tangle, and fighting and tearing his way through it as madly as before. 'Now I am dired,' he said. 'I shall haf some lunge, and co to sleep.'

He caught at the bell-pull in passing, gave it a tug, and waddled off to his bedroom. The landlady came in with the tray and began to arrange the table.

‘I don’t know what you gentlemen have been doing sir,’ she said to Paul, ‘but I’m sure I was afraid there was going to be murder in the house. I never heard anybody go on so in my life. I don’t know how any young gentleman puts up with it.’

‘There is very little danger, I assure you,’ said Paul. ‘Mr. Darco and I have been talking business.’

‘Well,’ returned the landlady, ‘I suppose you know how to manage him. But I wouldn’t be his keeper not for love *or* money.’

‘I am Mr. Darco’s private secretary, ma’am,’ Paul answered gravely.

‘All I can say is,’ said the landlady, sighing, ‘I’m glad it’s Saturday.’

It happened that the company took a late train that night for a distant town, and Darco paid his bill before leaving for the theatre. He told the landlady that he had been extremely comfortable, and that he should have great pleasure in recommending her to his friends. When he had gone, the landlady told Paul that she was glad the gendeman had his lucy intervals.

But the comedy having been once rebegun on Darco’s lines, was written to an accompaniment of fears and tremblings. It terrified the servants and the women-folk at large of every house the collaborateurs lodged in. Slaveys, with clasped hands and faces pale beneath smudges of blacklead, shook in the hall or on the stairs and landing whilst Darco roared, and Paul at the end of a day’s work used sometimes to feel as if he had been badly beaten about the head. None the less, the work was finished, and put into rehearsal.

‘Ve vill dry it on the tog,’ said Darco, and Paul, who never dared to question him as to his meaning,

went puzzled for a while.

But Darco rarely said a thing once without repeating it many times, and at length Paul understood that the play was to be played ‘on the dog,’ which is theatrical English for the production of a new piece at an obscure house in the country. It was tried, but the dog never took to it with any great kindness. Darco swore it was the first comedy which had been produced since the days of Sheridan. He put it into the repertoire, and played it once a week, and whenever it was played it brought a guinea to Paul’s pocket. It is not every first effort in any work of art which does as much as this, however, and Paul had the good sense to see that he was fortunate, and looked hopefully to the future. He crept into the gallery when the piece was played in any town, and watched his neighbours, and listened to their comments on the action and to their talk between the acts. This taught him a great deal, for he saw how little the popular instinct varies in matters of emotion, and the verdict to which he listened was everywhere substantially the same.

There came an especially memorable afternoon when Mr. Warr in a four-wheeled fly drove to Darco’s lodgings, and announced the sudden sickness of the juvenile lead. Darco pounced on Paul as the sick man’s successor.

‘My dear sir,’ said Paul, ‘I never spoke a word in public in my life. I can’t do it.’

‘That’s all right, my poy,’ said Darco. ‘You’ve got to do it.’

There was no arguing the matter.

Mr. Warr was despatched in the fly to gather the members of the company. Darco thrust into Paul’s hands the part he had to study, and went off

tranquilly to his own room to sleep. Paul slaved for an hour, and seemed to have mastered nothing. Darco, having timed himself to sleep for one hour precisely, awoke to the minute, and bundled off his victim to the theatre. There such members of the company as Mr. Warr had succeeded in finding were already collected, and the scenes in which Paul was concerned were run through again and again until he began to have some idea of what was expected of him, and even some distant knowledge of the words. But the whole thing was like a nightmare, and whenever the thought of the coming night crossed his mind, it afflicted him with a half paralysis. Darco worried him incessantly, bubbling with unhelpful enthusiasm, roaring at him, pushing and hauling him hither and thither, so that at last he resigned himself to a stupor of despair. The leading lady intervened, and she and Darco talked together for a minute.

'Tam it!' he shouted. 'Do you think I want anypoty to deach me? I am Cheorge Dargo. I know my drade!'

But the leading lady stuck to him, and at last he went away.

'Now, my dear,' said Miss Belmont to Paul. 'I'll shepherd you. You're mostly with me, and so long as we're together you're safe. Darco's a darling when you know him, but he's enough to break a beginner's heart. Now, dears '—she appealed here to her whole public—'put your hearts into it, and help the young gentleman through.'

The rehearsal went on again, and the nightmare feeling wore away a little.

'You've got to give me a little bit of a chance here,' said Miss Belmont, with her pretty little gloved hand on Paul's shoulder. 'You see, it's your forgiveness melts me, and if you forgive me like chucking a

pennyworth of coppers at a beggar, I shan't be melted. Now, then: "Georgy"—say it like that, just a bit throaty and quivery—"I loved you so that I'd have laid down my life for you!" Try it like that. That's better. Now, give me your eyes, large and mournful, for just five ticks. Now turn, three steps up stage, hand to forehead. That's it, but not quite so woodeny. Turn. Eyes again. "Georgy!" Now one step down, both hands out Pause. That's it "You have broken a truer heart than you will easily find again. But I will say no more. Good-bye, Georgy. And for the sake of those old dreams which were once so sweet, and now are flown for ever, God bless you 'Oh, God bless you and forgive you!" No. Try and get it just a little bit more. Poor dear Bannister always cried when he came to that. I've seen the tears run down his face many a time. Just go back to "Georgy, I loved you sa" Yes, yes, yes, that's it; that's capital. Now, that lets me in. "Oh, Richard! Richard! Is it possible that you forgive me?" That's your cue for the chair, face in both hands. Now my long speech: "Richard," and so on, and so on. "Good-bye, then, dearest, truest, tenderest." Just a little shake of the shoulders here and there, as if you were sobbing to yourself, don't you see? "Good-bye, good-bye." No, don't get up yet. Count six very slowly after "Good-bye" the second time. Now rise, turn, arms out "Georgy! Can't you see?" Then down I rush, and—curtain. Now, just once more from "Georgy, I loved you so."'

The company clapped hands. Berry, the first comedian, poked Earlsford, the leading man, in the waistcoat.

'*You'll* have to look to your laurels in a year or two.'

'Now,' said Miss Belmont, 'you can't expect to

shine tonight. That wouldn't be reasonable, would it? But if you won't prevent the rest from shining you'll have done your duty nobly. Never you mind Darco: I'll keep him out of the house to-night. I'm the only woman in the profession who has the length of his foot I'd rather say the breadth of his heart, for that's where I always get at him. There'll be an explanation and an apology. You'd better read your part. The house won't mind it. Then put all you know into that last scene. Chuck the book a minute before the real business comes on, as if you'd made up your mind to go for the gloves. That'll fetch 'em. Well go over that bit again and again till you've got it They'll be just jumping with pleasure in front if you surprise 'em with a good touch at the finish, and they'll go away thinking how splendidly you'd have done it if you'd had half a chance. It's the trot up the avenue, don't you see?

Mr. Warr, who at a gesture had followed Darco from the theatre, appeared with a basket in his hand, and was followed by a man who bore a larger basket on his shoulder.

'The governor sends his highly superior compliments, ladies and gentlemen,' said Mr. Warr, 'and his polite request that you will be so very kind as to forget the dinner-hour. Sandwiches, ladies and gentlemen. Ham, beef, tongue, pâté de foie gras, potted shrimps, and cetera. Juice of the grape.' He pointed to the basket, which his attendant had already laid upon the stage. 'Fizzy, Pommery-Gréno, and no less, upon my sacred word of honour!' He groped in his pockets. 'Champagne-opener, to be carefully returned to bearer. Ah, sir,' he added feelingly to Paul, 'when I forswore the varnish, I little thought it would rise to this quality. And, ladies and gentlemen,' he continued aloud, 'I was to request

that you would unite in lending your highly superior aid to the neophyte.'

'Our compliments to the governor,' said the leading comedian, who had seized the nippers and was already hard at work. 'We bestow on him unanimously the order of the golden brick.'

Darco's health was toasted, and the company went to rehearsal again, each with a champagne-glass in one hand and a sandwich in the other, and worked banqueting. Paul drank a glass of wine, and the coming night looked less terrible.

'We've two hours clear,' said Miss Belmont 'Now see if we don't make something of you in that time.'

Paul began to take up his cue with spirit, as often as not without the book, and to take his proper places without prompting. They worked their way on again to the final scene.

'Now, don't be afraid to let go,' said Miss Belmont 'Let us have it as if the house was full.'

So Paul threw down his part as arranged, for by this time he knew the words of this one scene, and what with the wine and the growing sense of freedom, he did pretty well, and when he sat in the arm-chair with his face in his hands Miss Belmont no longer gabbled her lines, but spoke them with all the feeling and fervour of which she was mistress. And when she came to her 'Good-bye, good-bye,' Paul, who at all times was easily emotional, was crying softly. He rose with outspread arms and the tears on his face and his voice broke. The leading lady rushed at him and clipped him round the neck, and Paul clipped the leading lady in a perfectly innocent enthusiasm and strained her to his breast.

'You—little—devil!' she whispered, as she drew away from him and stabbed him with one wicked

flash of her blue eyes. ‘I’ll forgive you this time,’ she added half a minute later; ‘but it isn’t professional.’

‘Time for one more run through, ladies and gentlemen,’ said the stage-manager, and once more the task began.

Miss Belmont’s eyes plagued Paul most of the time, now with a look of serious affront, now with a sort of mocking challenge. Now, he was inclined to try that grip again to see how she would take it, and the mocking eyes invited him. Then he dared not so much as think of it, for the eyes looked severe offence at him. When the time came he was like a wooden doll handling a wooden doll.

‘Pooh!’ said Miss Belmont, pettishly drawing back from him. ‘That won’t do. Try again.’

They harked back to the beginning of the scene. The others had stolen away to their various dressing-rooms. Only the stage-manager was left, and he was engaged in talking with the leader of the orchestra, who had just come in with a fiddle-case beneath his arm peeping out from his shabby paletot The farewell speech came, and it was only breathed. She had always dearly, dearly loved him. She had lost him by her pride, her coquetry—her silly, silly, heartless coquetry. Her fingers touched him on the cheek soft as a snowflake, and lingered there whilst the cooing voice went on. Then came the ‘Good-bye’ again and the answering call. She paused and looked, and darted to him, and they clung together, she leaning back her head and tangling his eyes in hers.

‘You hold me like that,’ she breathed, ‘until the curtain falls,’

She released herself gradually from his embrace, and drew away. Paul’s pulses beat to a strange tune, and he was afraid to look at her.

'Ah!' she said, in a voice so commonplace that he jumped to hear it, 'the kind creatures have left us half a bottle. One glass, Mr. Armstrong, will do you good. You dress with Berry; hell help you with your make-up. Don't be nervous. You've got the book to prop you till the very end, and there you'll be as right as rain. Here's luck to your first appearance.'

Paul took the glass she held out to him, but his hand trembled so that he spilled one half its contents on the stage.

'How clumsy!' purred the leading lady. 'Here, take a full glass; there's more in the bottle. There; chink glasses. Luck for to-night.'

He drank mechanically, and the stinging wine threw him into a fit of coughing. Miss Belmont patted him laughingly on the back, and ran away to her own room. Paul took his part from the stage, and tumbled up a spiral iron staircase to the loft in which the leading comedian dressed.

'You'd better wear Bannister's togs, if they'll fit you,' said the comedian; 'if not, you'll want a dress-suit for the second act.'

The clothes fitted excellently, and Berry saw to the neophyte's make-up, painting and powdering him dexterously, and dressing the virginal beard and moustache with a dark cosmetic.

'You're funking it,' the comedian said cheerfully. 'That's all right, my boy; there never was a man worth his salt who didn't. Give me a new part, and I'm as nervous as a cat. But you're in luck in a way, for we've all been together so long in this that we could play it in our sleep. There isn't one of us that doesn't know the thing inside-out and upside-down and backwards.'

Paul crept down the spiral staircase, part in hand,

and listened whilst the local manager, who rather prided himself on his ability as an orator, deplored the serious and sudden indisposition of that established favourite, Mr. Bannister, and announced that Mr. Armstrong had ‘gallantly stepped into the breach,’ and would essay the part, literally at a moment’s notice. Paul would most certainly have ungallantly bolted out of the breach had that been possible; but the people cheered the local manager cordially, and he, stepping back into the gloom of the stage, found Paul shivering there, and tried to hearten him.

The night went by in a sort of fog, but Paul read his lines somehow, and made his crosses at the right places; and actors are eager to answer to any little courtesy from a manager, and Darco’s half-dozen of champagne was richly paid for by the *élan* with which everybody played. As to the neophyte, they fed and nursed him, and were in at the close of every speech of his with a spring and a rattle which made the audience half forget the artificiality of the scenes he clouded. Mr. Berry took as much whisky-and-water as was good for him, and perhaps a little more, and Paul in his nervous anxiety lent a helpful hand towards the emptying of the bottle. There was no buzz in the cast-iron head and no cloud in the eyes, but he was strung to a strange tension, and he was looking forward to that last act and the embrace which crowned it.

‘I shan’t take the book for this last scene,’ he whispered to the prompter; ‘but watch me, will you?’

The prompter nodded, and Paul passed on to the spot from which he was to make his entrance. There was Miss Belmont waiting also. She was in evening dress, with shining white arms and shoulders.

'Fit?' she asked laconically, buttoning a glove.

'Middling,' said Paul hoarsely.

She slid away from him through the painted doorway, and he heard her voice on the stage. There was a pause, and someone near him whispered:

'Mr. Armstrong, go on; they're waiting.'

He obeyed. The practised woman, cool as a cucumber, gave him his cue a second time, and continued to make the pause look rational He plunged into the scene, awkward and constrained, but resolute, and in some degree master of himself. It was his stage business to be awkward and constrained, but he fared not over well, for on the stage it is easy to go too close to nature. But at the very last he lost his nervous tremors, and in the one scene in which he had been coached so often he acquitted himself with credit.

'Can't you see?' he asked in the final line of his piece, and the leading lady was in his arms again.

'I can see,' she whispered. 'Kiss me, you silly boy!'

And Paul bent his lips to hers, and kissed her in a way which looked theatrically emotional to the house. The roller came down with a thud.

'Stay as you are,' she said; 'there is a call.'

The curtain rose again and fell again, and Paul held the leading lady in his arms. The embrace lasted little more than a minute, but it left Paul frantically in love—after a fashion.

This was bad in many ways, for the woman was eight years his senior and a most heartless coquette, and Paul's infatuation kept him from his own thoughts, which were just beginning to be of value to him.

The Dreamer in the mountains grieved wistfully as

the old times enacted themselves before him. ‘Love,’ says blackguard Iago, ‘is a lust of the blood and a permission of the will.’ Well, one-and-twenty made his dreams even out of such poor material. The westward train boomed past, invisible from first to last in the smoke-cloud.

CHAPTER XI

Miss Belmont, nine-and-twenty, fresh and fair, ignorant-clever (after the known feminine fashion), *rusée* to the finger-tips, with a dragon reputation for virtue and a resolute will to keep it, was dangerous to the peace of mind of masculine twenty-one. She made Paul her bondslave. She intoxicated him with a touch, and sobered him with a face of sudden marble. She played the matron and the sister with him, and drove him mad between whiles.

Here is one scene out of hundreds, all acted to the Solitary’s mind as if the past were back again.

Summer was dying. The woods were yet lusty but growing sombre. Level beams of parting sunlight flashing through the trees like white-hot wire. A Sunday picnic for the company, magnificently provided by Darco, had brought Paul and Miss Belmont together. The lady had led the way into this solitude with so much tact and skill that Paul took pride in his own generalship. They sat on a rustic bench together, and immediately before them was an opening in the trees. At a very little distance the

ground fell suddenly away, and in the valley wound a shining river with fold on fold of wooded lands beyond.

Paul was quivering to be nearer to her, but he had no courage to move. He looked at her, and her eyes seemed to be dreaming on the distant hills. He stole a timid hand towards her very slowly. She turned towards him with a soft smile, took the hand in her own, and held it, nestling her shoulders into the rustic woodwork and sending her dreamy gaze back to the hills again. Once or twice, as if unconsciously, she lifted the hand slightly and laid it down again caressingly.

Paul looked at her adoringly. It was like being in heaven, with a touch of vertigo.

'Claudia,' said Paul, in a whisper.

'Yes,' she answered. 'Don't speak louder than that. It suits the place to whisper. What are you thinking about?'

'You,' said Paul 'I think of nothing else.'

'You silly boy,' said Miss Belmont. 'Why should you think about me?'

'I can't help it I wake up to think of you. I think of you all day. I go to sleep thinking of you. I dream about you in the night-time.'

'Oh, you silly Paul!' Her lips smiled, but her eyes dreamed unchangingly on the landscape. 'Why do you think of me?'

'Because I love you,' said Paul.

The hand which held his own seemed to encourage him to draw nearer, and yet the sign, if there were any sign at all, was so faint that he was afraid to obey it She turned her head slowly to look at him. Her round soft chin stirred the lace at her shoulder

and was half hidden by it, and she sat placidly dreaming at his ardent eyes just as she had dreamed at the hills.

‘I think you do,’ she said sweetly; ‘but that is all nonsense. You are only a boy, and I am a middle-aged woman.’

‘Middle-aged!’ said Paul, with a fiery two-syllabled laugh of scorn at the idea.

‘A woman is middle-aged at five-and-twenty. Didn’t you know that, Paul? She took his hand within her own, and played with it ‘What a beautiful hand!’ she said. ‘But you don’t take care of it. You treat it carelessly. Now, I spend half an hour on my hands every day. Let me show you the difference,’ and she began to draw off her glove.

‘Let me,’ said Paul, and she surrendered the hand and he peeled the glove from it delicately, and held the white wonder in his own palm. He stooped and kissed it in an idiot rapture. ‘How happy you make me!’ he said, looking up with tears in his eyes. ‘How I love you!’

She stroked his cheek and his hair with the soft ungloved hand, smiling softly at him. He prisoned the hand again, and kissed it again.

‘You are a silly boy,’ she said; ‘a dear, nice, affectionate, silly boy!’ She released her hand and caressed his cheek again. ‘If you were older than you are I shouldn’t allow you to take these liberties, you know.’ Then she bent forward sideways a little, and allowed her hand to stray beyond his shoulder. ‘What makes you fancy that you love an old woman like me, Paul?

‘It’s no fancy,’ he said; ‘it’s life or death with me, Claudia.’

‘Poor boy,’ said Miss Belmont caressingly, and so

moved nearer to him and drew his head to her shoulder. ‘Am I kind to you, Paul?’

‘You are an angel,’ said Paul

‘Isn’t it rather cruel to be kind to you, Paul?’

He buried his hot face in the soft drapery of her shoulder, and gave a murmured ‘No; oh, no!’

‘You think you love me, but it’s only a boy’s fancy, Paul It will pass away. I suppose it’s happy whilst it lasts, when I am kind to you. But it can’t last long. I shall be sorry to part, for I like you very much.’

‘We mustn’t part,’ said Paul huskily. ‘Claudia, if you left me I should break my heart.’

‘No, no,’ she answered, drawing him a little nearer. ‘Hearts are not so easily broken.’

‘Easily!’ he said. ‘Do you think it’s easy, Claudia, to live as I do? I’m in heaven now, and I’d give my life to be with you for an hour like this. But when I’m away from you, when I see you in that beast Bannister’s arms, and remember the only time I ever kissed you—oh, why were you so kind then, and why are you so cold and cruel now?’

‘Cold? Cruel?’ She stroked his flushed cheek with her soft fingers. ‘I let you kiss me because I thought what a dear, nice handsome boy you were; but I should never have done it if I had thought that you would be so silly after it. If you were not so very silly I should like to kiss you, because it’s a woman’s way to kiss the people that she’s really fond of. But you *are* so foolish, Paul dear, that I dare not.’

‘I won’t be foolish,’ said Paul, lifting his head, and looking at her.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘will you give me your word of honour to stay here for five minutes after I am gone if I give you just one kiss, and not to beg me for

another, and not to try to get into the same carriage with me going home?'

'Don't ask me that,' he besought her.

'Ah, Paul,' she said tenderly, 'don't you think for a moment that I am a woman, and that this foolish world would talk about me, even with you, if I gave it only the shadow of a chance? Come; I must go now. Promise.'

'The kiss,' said Paul.

'The promise,' said Miss Belmont.

'Yes, I promise. If you asked me to leap over the rocks in front of us I'd do it.'

'Give me your hands, then. You won't try to keep me?'

'No, no, no.'

She kissed him warmly and lingeringly on the lips, and darted suddenly away. Paul rose to his feet and held out his arms towards her.

'Your promise,' she said. 'Your word of honour as a gentleman.' He dropped his hands. 'You shall be paid for that,' she whispered, with a face glowing like his own, and she returned to him and kissed him once more, holding his hands in hers. Then she left him swiftly and ran down the pathway, turning at the bend to waft a last kiss to him, and so was gone.

Paul mooned about in a miserable, aching ecstasy for a quarter of an hour or so, and then, finding by his watch that the supper-hour appointed by Darco was near at hand, he sauntered to the hotel. Miss Belmont was there before him, radiant and serene, and looking as unkissable as Diana. Paul would have approached her, but a mere motion of her fine eyebrows warned him off. He ate little, but he drank a good deal of wine, and was gay and moody by

turns as he was driven home. And far into the night in his own room he walked up and down and made verses and raved them in whispers to himself, because Darco slept in the next apartment, and was not at all the man to be wisely awakened by the voice of Love's young dream. He drew his curtains apart and opened his window on the scented night, and took the moon and stars into his confidence, and the kisses bit softly down into his heart like fire.

Other scenes there were in which the cunning damsel betrayed Paul into the belief that he was an ennobling and lofty influence in her life. She was rigid in her choice of topics for conversation, but she ornamented her speech now and then with an almost masculine embroidery, and once she caught Paul looking at her with a shocked and wounded air.

'I caught your look,' she said, as soon as she could speak to him alone. 'I know what it meant, and, oh! you made me hate myself. There isn't any real harm in it—I mean, it isn't wicked—but it isn't refined or womanly, and I'll 'never do it again—never, never, never, for my dear little Paul's sake. And Paul shall have a kiss for teaching Claudia a lesson. Naughty Claudia!'

And again one day at rehearsal Miss Belmont ordered a brandy-and-soda, and Paul's face clouded; and Claudia was penitent, and Paul got more kisses for helping naughty Claudia to forget these man-like habits.

The boy's infatuation chimed in with a growing liking for the stage, and he volunteered to work there with so much ardour that Darco was newly pleased with him, and gave him ample opportunity. So he saw more and more of Claudia, and made some progress in his new craft, and the foolish game of

love went on, until it brought about a crisis.

It was three o'clock on Friday afternoon, and Paul was at the theatre, seated in the manager's room, counting and putting into envelopes the weekly salaries of the company. He had just consigned the two crispest and cleanest of his small stock of five-pound notes and the brightest half-sovereign to an envelope bearing the name of Miss Claudia Belmont, when the lady herself tapped at the door and entered.

'I wanted to see you alone, Paul dear,' she said, 'and so I came over early. I have a piece of news for you. It is very sad news for me, but I am afraid you will not think it so.'

'If it grieves you it grieves me,' said Paul; 'you can't have a trouble that I don't share.'

'I am going away,' she said, walking to the window and looking out on a shabby back-yard which was full of rotting scenery and old stage-lumber of all sorts.

'Going away?' Paul repeated.

He was dazed and numbed, as if he had received a blow.

'Yes,' said Claudia. 'Mr. Darco and I have never hit it off very well together, and now I am going. I have a very good offer for London, and I leave at the end of next week.'

'But I can put things right with Mr. Darco,' said Paul; 'I know I can.'

'No,' she said, with a seeming gentle sadness; 'it's quite impossible. My position here has grown intolerable, and, besides that, everything is arranged; I have signed for London this afternoon.'

Paul said nothing for the time, for the intelligence

crushed him.

‘I was afraid that you would be hurt,’ she added, after a pause. ‘I am glad to see that you can take it more easily than I can.’

‘Claudia!’ said Paul miserably, and sat staring before him with a white face.

‘I did almost hope,’ she said, ‘that you would have cared a little.’

‘Can’t you see?’ he answered—’ oh, can’t you see?’

‘I don’t want play-acting, Paul,’ said Claudia, searching for her handkerchief, ‘After all we have been to each other I expected a little genuine feeling.’

‘Claudia,’ he burst out, ‘you mustn’t go; you mustn’t leave me. I should break my heart without you.’

‘I must go, Paul,’ said Claudia.

‘Then I will go,’ cried Paul; ‘I can’t part from you.’

‘How can you go, silly boy?’ she answered, suffering him to take her hand in his and place his arm about her waist; ‘you have nothing to do in London; you know nobody there. You have excellent prospects here with Darco.’

‘Where you go I go,’ said the young idiot stanchly. ‘I could not live apart from you. You’re the world to me, Claudia.’

He meant it, every word, and in his contradictory heat and flurry and despair he felt as if there were no words at his call which were strong enough to express him.

‘Oh,’ said Claudia, ‘it would be sweet to think you cared so much if I could only believe you.’

‘Believe me? cried Paul. ‘Oh, Claudia!’

And then he choked, and could say no more.

But Claudia, whose self-possession was less disturbed than his, heard a footstep on the staircase, and whispered an eager warning to him just in time. He shot back into his seat, and feigned to be busy with his accounts and his orderly little pile of money. Miss Belmont stooped at the table, and when Mr. Berry entered he found her initialling the pay-sheet. She looked up with a sweet smile, nodded a greeting to him, inspected the contents of the envelope, transferred them to her purse, and moved to the door; then she turned.

'Oh, Mr. Armstrong, would you mind taking the trouble to run down to my lodgings when you have got through with this? I have something very particular to ask you, if you don't mind. You know where I'm staying? Thank you *so* much. Good-afternoon.'

She was gone, and everything was gone. Paul made a mechanical effort to get through his business.

'I say, young Armstrong,' cried Mr. Berry, 'you're woolgathering; you've given me an extra fiver, or has old Darco found out what I'm worth at last?'

'My mistake,' said Paul; 'I don't know what I'm doing. I've got a beastly headache; I can't think or see.'

'Hair of the dog?' suggested Mr. Berry. 'Hi! Chips, old sonnie'—he was bawling down the staircase—' catch 'Oh, butter-fingers! There it is, just behind you. Half-a-crown. Just nip across, will you? Two Scotches and a split. Take a pull at your own tap while you're there, and look slippy. Armstrong, dear boy, you're looking very chalky. Don't overdo it, dear boy, whatever you do. In my youth I never did apply hot and rebellious liquors to the blood. I take

to ‘em very kindly now, but I never began till thirty. A man’s a seasoned cask at thirty.’

Paul let him talk, and was glad enough not to be further noticed. He sat with his head in his hands and stared at the table, and tried to realize what life would be without Claudia. It looked wholly vacant and intolerable.

‘Here you are,’ said Mr. Berry, releasing the soda-water with a pop, and foaming the contents of the bottle into the glasses.

Paul groaned and drank, and by-and-by felt a little better. He would see Claudia, would decide on some scheme of action, however desperate, which would prevent him from wholly losing sight of her. He would release himself from his engagement with Darco. That made him feel like a hound, for who had been so good to him as Darco? Who had taken him out of hunger and trouble but Darco? He recalled himself characterless, despairing; he contrasted his old lot with the present. The change was all of Darco’s working, and he had grown to love the man, and the man on his side had given proofs enough of liking. It looked like a black ingratitude to leave him. It was what it looked like—neither more nor less. But, then, Claudia, Claudia, Claudia! How could he live without Claudia?

He looked at things all round. He had a fixed position, which was so excellent that he could not hope to mend it for years to come if he left it now. He had a true friend whose friendship he might lose if he left him now. He had perhaps an open avenue to fame, and it would close if he retired from it, and might never open any more. All these things he counted clearly, and reckoned the world well lost for Claudia.

The afternoon work was over, the pay-sheet initialled from top to bottom, the accounts made up and balanced, and the change and papers locked up in Darco's cash-box. He was free to go to Claudia.

A fly carried him in ten minutes to her door, and she herself admitted him.

'Come in, Paul,' she said 'I have been thinking, and I want to speak to you very, very seriously.' She led him into her sitting-room. 'Miss Pounceby is out for the day, so that we shall have time to talk together.' Miss Pounceby was the *ingénue*, and she and Claudia lived together. 'Sit down, dear, and let me see if I can't bring you to reason.'

'You can't persuade me to lose you, Claudia,' said Paul gloomily. 'It isn't to be done; it isn't to be thought about.'

'Silly boy!' said Claudia, seating herself beside him, and taking his hand in both of hers, 'you know I love you like a sister.'

'I don't want a sister's love,' said Paul. 'I want you to marry me.'

'Why, Paul,' she answered, 'the world would laugh at me. You are only just one-and-twenty; I am four years older. That is ages, you know, and it is ages on the wrong side.'

'Why should we care about the world?' Paul asked. 'What has the world to do with us so long as we can be happy?'

'But I don't love you in that way, Paul,' said Claudia. She leaned forward and sideways, and looked gravely in his eyes. 'I love you very much, dear Paul—very, very much indeed—and I shall be grieved to lose you.'

'I shan't lose you,' said Paul. 'I have made my

mind up.'

'You dear boy!' she said, and kissed him; but when he would have embraced her she drew back with a warning forefinger upraised. 'You must not presume upon my kindness, Paul; but I know that I can trust you. I should not have asked you to meet me here if I had not been sure of that.'

'Claudia,' cried Paul, rising and pacing about the room, 'have some pity. I am not a child; I am a man. I can't bear this. You must be everything or you must be nothing.'

'Nothing, Paul?' said Claudia, with grave, accusing eyes and wounded face and voice. 'Nothing?'

It was exquisite practice, and she was a hundred times a better actress off the boards than on. Paul could appreciate her art at its full value in later years, but just now he found earnestness enough for two, and would have broken his heart outright if he had known how she was playing with him.

'Nothing or all,' he said. 'You treat me like a child, Claudia, but I am a man, if I *am* only a little over one-and-twenty. I have a man's heart and a man's blood in my veins. No. Don't come near me yet; I want to be my own master.'

'Oh, Paul, dear!' said Claudia; 'you mustn't talk so I never thought you felt so deeply. How could I? Must it all be over, Paul? Are they all gone, dear—all the happy, peaceful, tranquil hours? Can't I give my little brother Paul a simple kiss without making such a tempest?'

'I have had no peaceful, tranquil hours,' cried Paul. 'Oh, Claudia! Claudia!'

'Kiss and be friends, Paul,' said Claudia, and Paul was lured back to his absurd paradise, and fed on kisses and caresses which were sometimes suffered to

reach the edge of ardour, and then skilfully chilled.

If feminine nine-and-twenty thinks it worth while to befool masculine one-and-twenty, and knows her business as well as Claudia knew it, the task is fairly easy. Claudia would not hear of Paul throwing away his prospects for so mad a purpose as to follow her to London. She covered her pretty ears with her ringed fingers when he talked of it, and positively refused to listen. But he must be rewarded for his devotion, too, and Claudia wished with all her heart that she could love Paul as he loved her. But it would be wicked to marry without a proper feeling for a husband, and Paul was her brother, her dear, dear younger brother, and to talk of marriage at their ages was such a folly. Wouldn't Paul always be her brother? And she laid her soft warm cheek against his and kissed his hand. What more could he ask for, silly boy? Wasn't that happiness enough for him if he really loved her? If he would be good, and promise never, never, never to be foolish again, and frighten Claudia with his anger—why *should* he want to frighten his poor Claudia?—they might always love each other, and be, oh, so happy!

The programme thus presented was actually admitted at last to be reasonable—for the time being—and Paul was sent away with the tenderest farewells and a profound belief—for the time being—that Claudia was an angel.

'Whatever you do, dear,' she had said at parting, with her sisterly arms about his neck, 'you must not dream of following me to London. I could not bear to think that you had imperilled your prospects for my sake.'

'I care for nothing in the world but you,' said Paul.

He played honest coin against counters.

‘It is sweet to hear you say so,’ said the sisterly Claudia, and she was so touched by his devotion that she allowed him to kiss her almost as wildly as he wished to do.

An hour or two later Paul was in Darco’s presence. He had a hang-dog look and felt ashamed, but he was resolute.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ he said, ‘but it has become absolutely necessary that I should go to London.’

‘Oh!’ said Darco, ‘is there anythings the madder? Ven do you want to co and for how lonk?’

‘I must go at the end of next week,’ Paul answered, not daring to look at him, ‘and I must go for good.’

‘I am baying you goot vages,’ said Darco. ‘You vill not get as goot vages. Vot is the madder?’

‘It is no question of wages, sir,’ returned Paul ‘I had not thought of looking for another situation even, though I shall have to do so, of course. But it is absolutely essential that I should be in London. I hope you won’t think that I am acting ungratefully. I feel as if I were, but it will be easy for you to fill my place, and I shall always remember how kind and generous you have been to me.’

‘Now, loog you here,’ said Darco; ‘there is somethings the madder. I can see it in your vace. You dell me vod it is, and I will but it straight for you. I can see that somethings is the madder. I am not a fool. I am Cheorge Dargo. Now dell me.’

‘I can’t explain,’ said Paul. ‘I can only tell you that I have to go to London. I must go.’

‘You vait there a liddle bid,’ returned Darco. ‘I am going to think.’ He rolled away, and Paul hoped he might think to little purpose, but in half an hour he was back again. His eyes snapped, but he was as cold

as an iceberg. ‘Ven do you vant to co?’ he asked abruptly.

‘As soon as you can spare me,’ Paul answered.

‘I can sbare you now,’ said Darco. ‘You are a pick-headed younk itiot, ant you can co at once. There is your zalary for next week. Goot-efening to you.’

He went out, banging the door behind him, and Paul was left alone feeling strangely mean and foolish. It seemed that Darco had come to an explanation of his movement, and Paul did not care to think that he had found the real reason for it The real reason was a sacred thing whilst it was hidden away in his own breast; but, held out to the inspection of others, it had a gawky, unfledged sort of look. It lost dignity. The dove that cooed in his bosom was a live bird; but once under Darco’s eyes, and it was a moulted rag—a thing dead and despicable.

He had to face Darco again, and he had little taste for the meeting.

‘I haf found oudt vat you are coing to London for,’ said Darco. ‘You are a tarn fool. I haf never seen such a tarn fool in all my tays ant years—nefer: nefer since I gave up peing a tarn fool myself. You can vork; you haf got prains; you haf cot a gareer in front of you; you are one-ant-dwenty. My Cott! you are one-and-dwenty; ant you haf prains, ant intustry, ant jances, and you juck them all into the gudder for liddle Jarlie Prown.’

‘Who is Jarlie Prown?’ asked Paul.

‘Jarlie Prown is Glautia Pelmond,’ said Darco. ‘She has kebt her initials. C stands for Glautia, just as veil as it stands for Jarlie; and P stands both for Prown and Pelmond. She has ruint as many men as she has does and vingers. It is no pusiness of mine. Co your

vays, you silly itiot 'Id is your dime of life to be an itiot, and it is my dime of life to laugh at you.'

'I have never heard a man breathe a word till now against Miss Belmont's virtue,' cried Paul.

'Firtue?' cried Darco, with a snorting laugh; 'what is firtue? Let me dell you this: Your Miss Glautia Pelmond is a volubtuous ice-woman; ant that is the most tangerous of all the taughters of the horse-leedge. Ant zo, my younk donkey, goot-night ant goot-bye. I am Cheorge Dargo, ant I nefer forgive an incratitude.'

This contemptuous parting wounded Paul to the quick, and the strange statements about Claudia maddened him. In one respect, at least, Darco, in his treatment of women, was chivalry incarnate; he would speak no scandal—no, nor listen to it. Paul tossed and tumbled throughout the night—a prey to shame and passion and cold doubt. Darco, who had so well deserved his gratitude, had accused him of the contrary—the one vice of all others which had seemed most repugnant to his nature. Darco was right, and Paul was bitten by shame. Then his mind flew to Claudia, and he thought how tender she had been that afternoon, how confiding, how warm, yet how delicately reticent in conduct Then he flamed and held his arms out in the darkness, and swore to be constant to that lovely creature, that maddening, dazzling, priceless idol, for ever. Then, like a stinging douche to a man in ardent heat of blood, came Darco's saying. Darco was a true man, and to think of him as a scandalmonger was mere folly. He had quarrelled with Claudia, to be sure, and there was a loophole out of which a hopeful doubt might pass. And yet to think so was an insult, for Darco was the last man in the world to take a revenge so base. But Darco honestly and mistakenly disliked her. That was

another matter. He was a headstrong man, impetuous, prone to leap to conclusions—a very walking heap of favourable and unfavourable prejudice. Thus, neither Claudia nor Darco was dethroned. The headlong, stammering, vivid man had made a mistake—the fat, unwieldy, diamond-hearted creature, all crusted with slag and scoria. Paul could have cried to know that Darco dreamed him ungrateful.

'Who knows him as I do?' he thought. 'People laugh at his boasting, and run away from his blundering thunder; but the man has the heart of an angel.'

He thought of all those underground benefactions in which he himself had acted as almoner—the bank-notes to poverty, the Sandeman's port and the evaporated turtle-soup to sickness. And the pity of it that such a man should so misjudge his Claudia! 'Voluptuous ice-woman.' He could fathom the meaning of the phrase, but the wave it would fain have spouted over his Claudia left her angel raiment dry. Neither one nor the other of the far-parted spumings of the wave touched her. Was that ice when her lips were so tenderly laid on his, and their hearts beat close together? Was that voluptuous when she held him to a brother's part, and soothed his passions into slumber with quiet talk of sweet and sober things? And yet in Darco's face, to one who knew him as well as Paul did, there had been a mournful look when he had spoken of the most dangerous of all the daughters of the horse-leech. Out with the thought—out with it 'trample it down! Poor, dear old Darco had been abused. Claudia was spotless as the snow, soft as the dawn, sweet, sweet and sweeter than the honey or the honeycomb. Thus round the clock of the dark hours ran Paul's

thoughts, with never a definite hour to strike.

He packed his portmanteaux before leaving his room next morning, and even in that simple act he found reproaches. He was carrying away from Darco's service a far different kit to that he had brought into it. The three or four coarse homemade shirts, and the rough and scanty supply of underclothing, were exchanged for linen and silks and woollen stuffs of the finest. There were trees for his boots; there was a dandy dressing-case; there were many things of the mere existence and use of which he had not known two years ago. They were all mementoes of Darco's generosity. Surely no man had ever found so open-handed an employer. But, for all these reflections, Paul could not surrender Claudia.

He heard the clatter of the breakfast apparatus, and smelt the odours of coffee and the savoury meats the soul of which Darco loved; but he dared not face the man to whom he felt he had behaved so badly.

'Are you gomink in to pregfast?' Darco trumpeted.

Paul entered and took his seat, and swallowed a cup of coffee; but he had no heart to eat.

Darco took his prodigious breakfast in cold gloom, and Paul was as sure of his bitter resentment as of his own useless regret for having wounded him. It was a trying hour for both of them.

'I am going out now,' said Darco, 'ant you will pe gone before I am pack again. Shake hants.' You are going to be very zorry before I see you again.'

Paul took the proffered hand, and was nine-tenths inclined to beg himself back again into Darco's friendship; but he could not bring himself to speak, and in a second or two Darco was in the street, and the opportunity had gone. But Paul had his

marching-orders, at least, and, calling a fly, he saw his luggage set upon it, drove to the railway-station, deposited all his belongings in the cloak-room, and then started to give Claudia his news. Claudia sent out word that he might call again in an hour, and, glancing disconsolately at the window of her sitting-room as he walked away, he saw Miss Pounceby giggling behind the curtains with her head in a bush of curlpapers. He paced the streets until the hour had gone by, and then returned.

'What brings you here so early?' Claudia asked.

She looked ravishingly fresh and pretty to Paul's fancy.

'I told Darco,' Paul answered, 'that I was going to London, and that I wanted to leave at the end of next week. He was hurt and angry, and he said that, if I had made up my mind about it, I had better go at once.'

'You have behaved very foolishly, Paul,' said Claudia—' very foolishly indeed.'

'I did it for your sake, Claudia.'

'For my sake?' said Claudia, raising her eyebrows. 'Why, my dear child, how am I supposed to profit by it?' The question took his breath away. 'I certainly never asked you, or advised you to do anything so very silly. You have very likely ruined your whole career. At least, you have thrown away such a position as you won't see again for years to come. How many people do you think there are in the world who will give you the salary Darco gave you, or treat you as he treated you? Oh, you needn't look at me in that way, Paul, as if I were responsible. It is none of my doing, and I wash my hands of it.'

'But, Claudia,' cried Paul, 'I told you what I was going to do.'

‘You certainly told me some nonsense of the kind,’ she answered, ‘and I remember the very words I used. I told you that you must not dream of following me to London. I said—I remember my very words distinctly—that I could not bear to think of your imperilling your prospects.’

‘Claudia,’ said Paul, ‘I thought you would be glad.’

‘Why should I be glad to see you making a fool of yourself?’ Claudia asked disdainfully. ‘I thought you had more sense.’

‘I shall find work in London,’ Paul said rather helplessly. ‘I have saved more than fifty pounds.’

Possibly the sisterly lady had thought Paul very much poorer than he was, and had been in fear that he might in some way become a burden to her. The fancy did not touch Paul at the time, but he remembered afterwards how swiftly the acerbity of her manner faded.

‘Well,’ she answered, ‘you are sillier than I thought you were; but it’s of no use crying over spilt milk. You must make the best of things.’

‘I shan’t care for anything,’ said Paul, rallying a little, ‘so long as I’m not parted from you, Claudia.’

‘That’s all very well, Paul dear,’ returned Claudia, ‘but this is a practical world, and the people who live in it have got to be practical too.’ She pinched his cheek as she said this, and laughed at him in quite the old delicious way. ‘What makes you so absurdly romantic, Paul?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Paul, ‘that I’m more romantic than other people. I’m not the only man who ever fell in love, and I’m sure nobody ever had a better excuse than I have.’

‘Upon my word!’ cried the lady, ‘you have a very

nice way of saying things. Do you know, Paul, if you go on like this, you'll begin to be dangerous—in a year or two.'

'I don't belong to the dangerous classes,' Paul answered. 'I'm much likelier to suffer myself than to make you suffer.'

'Oh, I'm not talking about me,' said Claudia. 'I'm thinking of the other ladies.'

'There are no other ladies,' Paul declared. 'There never will be any other ladies. There is only one lady in the whole world for me.'

'Now, seriously, Paul, how long do you think this ridiculous infatuation for me is going to last?'

'For ever!' cried Paul boldly. 'For ever and ever. And it isnt an infatuation, Claudia. It's a perfectly reasonable thing to fall in love with you. Why, you can't walk down the street without half a dozen men doing it I know how they turn round to look at you.'

'Oh, you outrageous little flatterer! Wherever did you learn to tell such fascinating fibs?'

'They're not fibs, Claudia. You know it as well as I do And I'll tell you something. You ask me why I love you. I'm a judge of character.'

'Oh, you dreadful boy! You're not going to judge my character, I hope!'

'I did that long ago,' said Paul, 'and that is why I fell in love with you. No,' he broke off, blushing and stammering, 'that is not why I fell in love; but that is why I never wanted to climb out again.'

'Well,' said Claudia gaily, 'if you didn't fall in love with my character, I'm sure I don't know what else there is.'

'You,' said Paul rapturously. 'Your beauty, Claudia. Don't you ever look in the glass?'

‘How do you think I am to do my hair?’ she asked, laughing. ‘But seriously, now, Paul, you don’t think I’m a beauty? You never told me that before.’

‘Claudia,’ he said, reproaching her, ‘I’ve told you a thousand times.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Claudia, ‘in fun. But now, without nonsense—really? Am I pretty?’

‘No; you’re not pretty, Claudia. Pretty’s commonplace. You are lovely. I think you are the most beautiful woman in the world.’

‘You darling boy! There’s a kiss for that. No, no, no, Paul. Only a very little one. But I’m not so silly as to believe you, Paul.’

‘Claudia,’ said Paul—they had reached by this time to the brotherly and sisterly attitude, and sat on the couch together, with the sisterly arm round Paul’s neck—’ I was bitterly sorry to leave old Darco, and to let him think that I was ungrateful. I know how much he has done for me.’

‘I am sure I am not sorry to leave Darco,’ she said. ‘Grumpy, frumpy, stumpy, dumpy old German! I hate him!’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Paul. ‘There’s as kind a heart under old Darco’s waistcoat as you’ll find in the whole wide world.’

‘Never mind Darco, Paul dear. He’s not a favourite theme of mine.’

‘I wish you hadn’t had to leave him, all the same, because then I shouldn’t have had to leave him. Where shall you live in London, Claudia?’

‘I’m going to stay with a Mrs. Walpole, a widow lady, a friend of mine who takes in a few boarders.’

‘Might I stay there, too?

‘You? Oh, you improper boy! Of course not.’

‘Don’t say that, Claudia. I’ve given up everything only to be near you. That’s all I ask for, Claudia. It’s all I want in the world.’

‘My dear Paul,’ said Claudia, ‘you must not dream of such a thing. It would be most unwise. Why, good gracious, child, you’d compromise me every hour!’

‘Indeed, indeed I wouldn’t,’ Paul declared. ‘I would rather die than do it Oh, Claudia! you don’t know how I love you. You don’t know what it will be to me to be with you. You can’t guess how miserably unhappy I shall be if I am away from you.’

‘Very well, Paul,’ said Claudia rather frigidly; ‘but you must not blame me if you lose my friendship by presuming on it. I have no fear of being able to take care of my own reputation, and I want you to understand that I will do it. And now you may kiss me, and then we will talk business.’ Paul availed himself of the permission with alacrity until Claudia slid gently away. ‘That is enough, and more than enough. I won’t have you making any more declamatory love-scenes, you dreadful boy! No, not another. No; not the least little one in the world. You will keep to that side of the table and I shall sit on this. Now, reach me my writing-desk. I am going to give you a letter of introduction to Walton, my new manager. I shall tell him how clever you are, and that you are ambitious and want to get to London. You’ll get nothing like such a salary as Darco gave you—not more than half at the outside. You’ll live in a poky little garret at the top of a smoky London house, and you’ll pay thirty shillings a week for board and lodging, and the rest will go in washing and ‘bus fares. You’re making a very bad exchange, I can tell you, even if Walton will have anything to say to you.’ ‘I don’t care if I’m to be near you, Claudia.’

‘But you’re not going to enjoy the liberties I allow you here. You must understand that, Paul.’

‘I shall see you,’ said Paul ‘I shall be near you.’

‘Very well. Now, I’ll write the letter. And when it is written you will take the very first train to town and give it into Walton’s hands to-night.’

‘But I am going on with you to Cardiff,’ Paul cried.

‘Indeed,’ said Claudia, ‘you will do nothing of the kind. I am not so absurd as to allow it I am not going to be compromised in that way in my last week with the company.’ Paul stared at her with a face so disconsolate that she laughed; but she put on a tender seriousness a moment later. ‘Do you call that love, Paul? Ah, no! Few men—very few—ever so much as learn the meaning of the word. It is pure selfishness. You don’t think of poor Claudia. You would let her reputation be torn to rags and tatters, but what would that amount to if only you could gratify your own wishes?’

‘I’ll go, Claudia,’ cried Paul. ‘I’ll go to London. Great Heaven ‘what a selfish, unreasonable beast I am ‘Forgive me, Claudia. I did not think.’

‘Now you are my own dear Paul again. But you mustn’t expect me to find *all* the wisdom.’

She wrote her letter, and Paul watched the white hand skimming over the paper. When it was written she read it out to him. It was really an excellent letter of introduction, business-like and cordial. Paul received it with devout thanksgiving. Then Claudia gave him the address of the boarding-house to which she herself was bound, and looked up his train in the time-table.

‘You must start in half an hour,’ she said. ‘Oh, Paul dear! Paul! I wonder if, in spite of all your protestations, you are so sorry to part as I am.’

‘Claudia!’ said Paul, and ran to the open arms.

He was abjectly in love and abjectly submissive, and Claudia had never been so kind. But when at last she told him ‘You must go,’ he strained her in his arms so wildly that he fairly frightened her. Then, terrified in his own turn, he released her, and covered her hand with tears and kisses of contrition.

‘Go,’ she said pantingly—‘go, at once!’

He looked with remorse at her pale face and questioning eyes, and lurched towards the table on which he had laid his hat.

‘Paul,’ said Claudia, ‘it would have been better for you if you had never met me.’

‘No,’ he answered, looking back at her. ‘I shall never think that, whatever happens.’

‘You will think it often,’ she said. ‘But go now, dear, for pity’s sake.’

He went out into the street with his wet face, and for a minute or more did not know why people stared at him. Then he came to his senses a little, and found himself walking away from the station instead of towards it He retraced his steps, caught his train, and travelled up to London, his pulses beating ‘Claudia’ all the way.

CHAPTER XII

Claudia’s introduction served so well that Paul was allowed to show what he was made of in rehearsal at

the Mirror Theatre, with a prospective salary of fifty shillings a week. He had been a personage of late, and Darco had delegated to him a good deal of his own authority. He was not a personage any longer, and he was not altogether happy in his fall from dignity. But Claudia was coming. He and Claudia would be in the same house together, and playing at the same theatre. He would see her at breakfast, at luncheon, at dinner; he would escort her from the theatre and home again. That would be happiness enough to atone for anything.

This prophecy was not quite realized. Claudia chose to breakfast in her own room, and she was a woman of many friends, and lunched out and dined out so often that Paul hardly saw anything of her. The Sundays would have been Elysian days, but ladies and gentlemen of fashionable aspect drove to the house in handsome equipages, and spirited Miss Belmont away to revels at Richmond and elsewhere in which Paul had no part. He moved sadly about the house, in the streets, with no heart for study, or for the writing of the new comedy on which his mind had been set so warmly only a few weeks before. His old companions were travelling about the country, meeting old friends and making new ones, and he wished himself back amongst them many a time. He could have written to Claudia, and have looked forward to the time when he could have met her again on equal terms. They were not equals any longer. Miss Belmont was starred in big type, and was leading lady, at a biggish salary; for her first real chance had come to her, and she had charmed the town. Paul was a walking gentleman with a part of fifty lines, and not a solitary critic named his name.

Sometimes, but very rarely, Claudia shone upon him. On fine evenings, and on those sparse occasions

when she and Paul dined at the same table, she would walk to the theatre and accept his escort Then, for a brief half-hour, life was worth the living again. But there was one nightly hour of torment. His work was over early, for he had nothing to do after the opening of the third act of the piece then playing. He would dress and wait in his room, and wonder whether that idiot, that dolt and fool incomparable, Captain the Honourable John MacMadden, was waiting at the stage-door. Captain MacMadden belonged to the Household Brigade, and was a bachelor of five-and-thirty. He parted his hair in the middle, and wore a moustache and weeping whiskers of the jettiest, shiny black. He smiled constantly, to show a set of dazzling white teeth. In his own mind Paul loaded this exquisite with savage satire. He was a tailor's dummy carrying about a barber's dummy, and the barber's dummy was finished with a dentist's advertisement He carried a very thin umbrella—the mere ghost of an umbrella—he was gloved and booted with the fineness of a lady, and he was always delicately perfumed. He was reported to be wealthy, abominably wealthy, and three nights a week or more he would present himself at the theatre, and take Miss Belmont out to supper. But so discreet was that lady, and so careful of her good report, that Captain MacMadden never came without a guardian dragon in the person of another young lady of the theatres, who was accompanied by a gentleman who was in all points tailored and barbered and gloved and booted like Captain MacMadden himself.

Paul would wonder if the splendid warrior were below until he could endure himself no longer. Then he would descend and hang about the stage-door, to find his enemy or not to find him, as the case might

be, but in either event to eat his heart in jealousy and impatience. When he found him he burned to insult him by asking him what tailor he advertised, or by addressing him as the Housemaid's Terror or the Nursegirl's Blight. He ground tegmenta of 'Maud' between his teeth as he looked at him. 'His essences turn the live air sick,' and 'that oiled and curled Assyrian bull, smelling of musk and of insolence.' And it happened one night that Captain MacMadden, arriving late, and in a mighty hurry and flutter lest he should have missed the lady, tapped Paul upon the shoulder, and said:

'My boy, can you tell me if Miss Belmont has left the theatre?'

Paul, who was at that instant bending all the force of his mind upon Captain MacMadden, and punching his head in visioned combat, turned on him with a passionate 'Damn your impertinence, sir!' which set the startled gentleman agape with wonder. At this instant Claudia pushed through the swinging door which led from the stage to the corridor, and she ran in between the belligerent Paul and the object of his rage.

'What is this?' she asked.

'This gentleman,' said Paul, 'is sadly in want of a lesson in good-breeding. I shall be happy to offer him one.'

'Upon my word,' returned Captain MacMadden mildly, 'you're devilish peppery. Hadn't the slightest intention to affront anybody, upon my word. Nothing further from thoughts. Can't say moah.'

'Mr. Armstrong,' said Claudia, 'I have never seen you display this ill-bred brutality before. I had not expected you to show it in my presence to my friend.'

Paul felt for the instant that he had been brutal and ill-bred. Claudia judged him so, and whatever Claudia said must needs be just But when she had swept by him to the waiting brougham and the fashionable escort had followed her, he stood in a choking rage, and felt like Cain. A thick drizzle was falling, and he swung out into the night, glad of the wet coolness in his flaming face, and the wet wind that fanned him. The streets were heavily mired and the drizzle grew to a fast downpour. He turned up his coat-collar and ploughed along, growing more and more resolutely angry, and more and more resolved to fight his case out with Claudia. The house in which they lived was dark when he reached it, except for a single gas-jet in the hall at which guests bound bedward lit their candles. He walked into the dining-room and sat down to wait, with nothing but the winking jet on the wall and his own thoughts for company. The fire in the grate had died, and its cooling ashes made a crisp, faint noise from time to time. The clock on the mantelpiece ticked irritatingly, and sounded the quarters at intervals which seemed curiously irregular. At times one quarter seemed to follow close on another's heels, and the next seemed to lag for hours. Paul was soaked to the skin, and had violent fits of shivering, but he would not leave his post lest he should miss Claudia.

Cabs rolled by, and every one brought Claudia to his fancy, but scores of them passed without pause. One o'clock sounded and no Claudia. Two o'clock, and no Claudia. Then the rumble of a lonely hansom, a slippery stoppage of a horse's feet, and Claudia's voice crying, 'Two doors higher up.' Then a renewed motion, a pause, the scrape of a latchkey at the lock, and Paul was on his feet, candlestick in hand.

‘Mayn’t I come in?’ asked the hateful voice of Captain MacMadden. ‘On’y a moment, upon my word.’

‘Certainly not,’ Claudia answered curtly. ‘Good-night.’

‘You’ll think of what I asked you?’

‘Indeed,’ said Claudia, in a voice of scorn, ‘I will do nothing of the kind. I have never been so insulted in my life, and I shall be obliged if you will put an end to your attentions.’

The heart of the involuntary listener glowed within him, but Captain MacMadden’s drawl broke in and chilled him horribly.

‘Well, look here, Claudia, damn it all! Will you marry me? I’ll go that far, if nothing else will do for you. I will, upon my word.’

‘You may ask me that question in a week’s time,’ said Claudia. ‘At present I have no more to say to you than just “Good-night.”’

The door closed and there was a silence. Claudia laughed quietly to herself, and rustled towards the gas-jet. Paul stepped out and intercepted her, the unlit candle in his hand, his hair disordered, and his face stained with the dye the rain had soaked from his hat His teeth were chattering noisily and rapidly, and he and Claudia faced each other. Paul lit his candle mechanically, and set it on the hall table, below the jet, which blinked with a faint intermittent hum.

‘Are you spying upon me, Mr. Armstrong? asked Claudia, with a touch of the manner of the stage.

‘Not I,’ Paul answered bluntly; ‘I waited up to speak to you. Are you going to marry that grinning nincompoop?’

‘You presume,’ said Claudia, with yet more of the manner of the stage. ‘You presume abominably. Allow me to pass, sir.’

‘The man has offered you a life of shame,’ said Paul. ‘You mean to listen to him after that? She looked at him scornfully and defiantly. ‘Well,’ he said, shivering strangely from head to foot, ‘you’re not the woman I took you for. It’s good-bye to Claudia.’

He stood aside for her to pass. She lit her candle and swept by him. He heard her door close, and the key turn in the lock. He stood shuddering in the hall, the chance-held candle dropping grease upon the oil-cloth. He gave one big dry sob and mounted to his garret-room. There was no sleep for him, and he did not undress. The candle burned down in its socket, the light flared up and died, and the nauseous stink of wick and tallow filled the room. His mind was strangely vacant, but even in the darkness and the silence he found a thousand things in which to take a leaden interest: as the swaying of the window-curtains where a slight draught caught them; the faintly-seen progress of the rain-drops down the window-pane; the wet glints of light where the street gas-lamp dimly irradiated the windows and the houses on the opposite side of the way; a ticking insect in the wall-paper; sounds of night traffic in the great thoroughfare a quarter of a mile off; the squashing tramp of a policeman on his rounds; the moaning voices of wind and rain; the very beating of his own pulses in his head; the very stupor of his own intelligence.

It was still raining when the dismal dawn crept up, and he was chilled to the marrow. He rose stupidly from the chair in which he had passed the night, and began to change his dress, stiffly and with difficulty.

During the greater part of the night he had been sitting in a drooping posture, and he found without trouble or interest that he could not change it. There was an aching weight upon his loins, but he had no interest in that either. He sat in his room all day. The chambermaid came to the door and tapped, and receiving no answer, entered. She stared to see him sitting at the window and the bed undisturbed, but she went away again. Somehow the day crawled on, and as the darkness fell he crept downstairs, and crawled, an aching stoop, to the theatre. He was an hour before the time, but by hazard he met the manager at the stage-door.

'Why, great God, Armstrong! what's the matter?'

'I got wet last night,' Paul answered, in a voice which startled him and pained his throat.

He had not spoken a word since he had said good-bye to Claudia.

'You've no right to be out like this,' said the manager brusquely; 'it's suicide. You're no good here, you know,' he added, in a kinder voice. 'Here, you, Collins; call a cab, and help Mr. Armstrong into it.'

'Can you do without me?' Paul asked, in that strange voice.

'Do without you? Yes. I've a man at hand that will swallow your lines and biz in half an hour. Get a fire in your bedroom; have a good stiff glass of rum as hot as you can drink it. Get somebody to make you cayenne pills—cayenne-pepper and bread-crumbs. Take three or four, and have 'em hot. Why, man alive, you've got an ague!'

The cab was brought, and Paul was helped into it and driven home. He could not lift his hand above his head to pay the fare, and the cabman descended

grumblingly to take it; but seeing how his fare's feet fumbled at the steps, got down a second time to help him to the door. Paul walked into the dining-room, hat in hand, and bent The boarders were at dessert, and Claudia for once was with them.

'No beggars allowed in this bar,' said one of the professional boarders jocularly, thinking the entrance a bit of playful masquerade.

'I'm not very well,' said Paul, with a frog-like roop. 'I've been down to the theatre, and Walton has sent me home again. I'm afraid I can't quite manage to get upstairs.'

He did not look at Claudia, but he was conscious of her gaze, and he knew somehow that there was fright in her eyes.

Two of the boarders engineered him to his room, and one undressed him whilst the other ran for rum and cayenne-pepper. They were all theatrical folk in the house, and kindly in case of trouble, as their tribe is always. Paul was put to bed, and had extra blankets heaped upon him, and a fire was lit in the grate. He was dosed with hot rum-and-water and the cayenne pills, and was then left, first to grow maudlin, and next to fall into a sleep which was full of monstrous dreams. At one time he lay in a great cleft between two hills, and stones rolled down upon him, causing him dull pain; then the stones formed themselves into a fence—a kind of rough arch on which other stones battered without ceasing till he was walled in thickly. At another time he had to climb up an endless hill, with hot chains about his loins and knees.

Somebody came into his room with a candle, and the light awoke him. It was one of his fellow-boarders back from the theatre, with news that it

was nearly midnight. He forced more hot rum on the patient, and sat with him until he was sound asleep. The liquor did its work, and he slept without dreams until daylight. He strove to rise and dress, but the task was beyond him, and there was nothing left but to lie and stare at the ceiling, and to say to himself over and over again, without a touch of interest or feeling: 'It's good-bye to Claudia.' The landlady came to see him, and found him burning and shivering, and complaining of the bitter cold. She went away, and came back again with a doctor, who told him cheerfully that he was in for rheumatic fever, big or little, as sure as a gun.

'But he's young, ma'am,' said the doctor—'he's young, and we shall pull him through.'

'Can he be moved?' asked the landlady.

'Moved? No, possibly not for weeks.'

'Have you any money, Mr. Armstrong?' said the landlady, 'or shall I write to your friends?'

'There's fifty-one pounds in my dressing-bag,' croaked Paul. 'When you've buried me and paid your bill, send the balance to my father.'

'Buried you?' said the doctor. 'You don't suppose you're going to peg out, do you?'

'I hope so,' said Paul.

'Oh,' said the doctor, casting a shrewd, good-humoured eye at him, 'you feel like that, do you? But you've got me to reckon with, and the British Pharmacopoeia. When did you eat last?

'Day before yesterday.'

'All right, young man; I'll fettle you, and if you think you're going to slip your cable, you're mightily in error.'

'Well,' said Paul, 'it doesn't matter to me one way

or the other.'

The time went on, and a day later he was light-headed, and babbled, as he learned afterwards, of Claudia. Sometimes he upbraided her savagely, and sometimes he made tragic love to her. He had intervals of complete sanity, in which the thought of her was like an inward fire; then he had a five weeks' spell of madness, and awoke from it free from pain, but a mere crate of bones which felt heavier than lead. He remembered some of his own delusions clearly, but lost count of whole weeks of time, and had yet to learn how long he had lain there. When he awoke he knew that somebody was in the room, and made an effort to turn his head. That failed, but the somebody heard the faint rustle he made, and the first face his eyes looked at was the face of Darco.

'Ah!' said Darco, 'you haf got your prains pack again. You know me, eh?'

Paul tried to nod, but succeeded only in closing his eyes in sign of assent.

'I am a bid of a dogtor,' said Darco; 'led me veel your bulse. Goot—goot, ant your demberadure is normal. It is now begome your business to ead and trink.' He waddled across the room, and came back with a tin of jelly and a spoon, and fed the invalid 'That is enough,' he said, after the fifth spoonful. 'Liddle and often; that is the came to blay.'

Paul was too weak to wonder at anything, or he would have wondered at Darco's presence; but Nature was too wise to let him waste his forces on any such unprofitable exercise as thinking, and sent him to sleep again. When he awoke he was ravenously hungry, and in a day or two he began to abuse the nurse who tended him for stinting his victuals. But the nurse was a good-humoured old

campaigner.

‘Why, bless your heart, Mr. Armstrong,’ she said, when in an interval of contrition Paul apologised, ‘it do me good to hear you swear that hearty! Most gentlemen does it when they’re picking up a bit.’

There was in his mind barely a thought of Claudia; the one fever seemed to have burned the other out of him.

‘The heart,’ said the doctor—‘the heart’s the thing we’re always afraid of in rheumatic fever, and the heart’s as sound as a nut.’

Paul stretched feebly, and thought he had his jest wholly to himself; but the doctor undeceived him.

‘It wasn’t always so, my young friend.’

Paul blushed like fire.

‘Have I been babbling? he asked guiltily.

‘A bit,’ said the doctor; ‘enough to justify those gloomy hopes of yours.’

Paul hung his head in a transient shame, and murmured that he was sorry.

‘Pooh, pooh!’ cried the doctor; ‘you’re all right now. You can bear to hear a little bit of news about the lady?’

‘Yes,’ said Paul, ‘anything.’

‘She’s married,’ said the doctor—‘married to the Honourable Captain MacMadden, and has left the stage.’

‘Did she ever come to see me?’ Paul asked.

‘No,’ said the doctor.

The passion of the youth went to join the calf-love of the boy, and the man accomplished looked on them both with a half-humorous wonder. He was learning his world, he thought. It would not be easy

to fool him in that way again.

He sat propped up with pillows in an arm-chair now, and could hold a book; but the lubricant at his joints had all been licked up by the fever, and it was slow to come back again, so that he had hideous twinges when he moved. He had plenty of society now that he was fit for it, for the fellow-boarders were idle during the day, and spared time to sit and talk with him.

'You recognised old Darco when you saw him, didn't you?' one of them asked.

'Oh yes,' said Paul, 'I knew him. What brought him here? I behaved very badly toold Darco.'

'Well, to tell you the truth,' said the other, 'he said so. "Ant I nefer forgive an incradidude," says he, and proved it by paying the doctor's bill.'

Every man in the profession had a more or less plausible imitation of old Darco's 'leedle beguliaridies.' He was as well known as the Strand, and loved and hated as few men are.

'I treated Darco very badly,' said Paul. 'I can't rest under that sort of obligation to him. How much did he pay?'

'You'd better ask the doctor.'

Paul asked the doctor next time he saw him, but elicited nothing.

'But I can't allow it,' Paul cried; 'I can't endure it I behaved abominably to Darco; I behaved like a beast and a fool. I'd take his scorn and hatred if he thought I was worth either; but I can't accept his benefits after the way in which I served him. I left the kindest friend I ever had, the man who took me out of the gutter—and that's God's truth, doctor; and I left him to follow that——'

He ground his teeth hard on the word he was fain to use.

'Steady!' said the doctor—' steady!'

'That Ignis Fatuus,' groaned Paul. 'Is that mild enough for you?'

The doctor knew everything. There was no further shame in making a clean breast of it.

'It's better than what you were going to say,' the doctor answered, 'whatever it was. I hate vulgarity as the devil hates virtue. It's a pretty sex; I know something about it You seem to have lighted upon a pretty sample.'

Just at this instant there came a tap at the door, and the voice of the maid was heard saying, 'This is the room, sir.' The door opened, and in walked Armstrong the elder.

'Dad!' cried Paul

His father held his hand and looked at him.

'I've been sore troubled by your silence, lad,' he said. 'I've had hard work to find ye. Ye might have written.'

'I was coming to see you,' said Paul, 'so soon as I could travel. When will that be, doctor?'

'In a fortnight's time, perhaps,' the doctor answered—'not much earlier.'

The doctor went his way, and the father and son were together.

'You're out of Darco's service, I understand?' said Armstrong. 'He wrote kindly about ye, but he said you'd parted. Why did you leave him, Paul?'

Paul was penitent and feeble of body, and his father was his dearest. Bit by bit he told his story, or as much of it as he could be told.

‘Man,’ said Armstrong, ‘ye’re beginning airly.’

CHAPTER XIII

The Dreamer dreamed, and the dream showed the old ramshackle, bankrupt printing-office at Castle Barfield again. Paul was back there. The thing had happened with a strange in-evitableness. He had gone home and had suffered a relapse, and had again recovered, and all his savings were expended. There had come a rush of work with which the solitary journeyman and his boy could not cope. Paul had gone to their assistance, and, the unusual flow of work continuing, he had stayed there. He made many applications by letter for other employment, and answered many advertisements, but nothing happened to deliver him. His heart galled him daily, for he had seen something of the world, and had tasted a first-night triumph as part-author of a play, and had mixed on equal terms with people who were very far away from his present sphere. The county election, which had brought the increase of business, was over and done with. Paul succeeded the journeyman, who went his way and found employment elsewhere.

In the dim local yokel mind Paul was a failure, and he knew it. He had gone away, and his brothers and sisters had magnified his successes, and he was back again, a refugee, as it were, from a world which he had apparently misused. He was taciturn and

gloomy, and, to the fancy of those who held themselves his equals and superiors, was disposed to give himself airs. Two years with Darco had made him something of an epicure. He had grown to hate soiled hands and coarse clothes, and the trivial talk of people who only lived for trifles. He suffered doubly, therefore, as one who had failed, and as one who took the airs which belong only to success. Life was not happy for a while.

The 'stand-by' of Armstrong's poor business was the printing of a certain coarse label from stereotype plates, and, when there was nothing else to be done, this would be taken in hand for unbroken days together. It was an operation as purely mechanical as any in the world, and the thoughts of the worker had time and chance to roam anywhere. Paul made hundreds of verses. The clean sheet set home to the pins, frisket and tympan down, the turn of the drum-handle, the pull of the bar, the backward turn of the drum, frisket and tympan up, and the printed sheet laid on the ordered pile-day in, day out, ten hours a day, the same things done and done again. Hands growing into horn; muscles swelling like a blacksmith's. A healthy life enough, with a rough, plain diet, and yet a purgatory in its way, with prospect and horizon bound.

In a year or more they widened, for Paul had set up for himself something of a study in the old lumber-room, where on a broken table, with an upturned box for a chair, and a candle stuck in a gingerbeer-bottle, he wrote down the verses he had hammered out during the day, and he began stealthily to send these here and there to magazine editors, who sometimes sent them back and sometimes printed them, but never seemed to dream of payment, until at last one offered him two guineas

for a long Christmas story in rhyme, and he began to see a hope of escape from the treadmill round. He set to work on a blank-verse play, and spent the greater part of a year on it, and was prepared to find himself enthroned with Shakespeare. He put his drama into type, a page at a time, pulling but a single impression of each page, and distributing the type jealously before he went to bed, and jealously hiding his pages. And when it was all complete, and his brows were familiar with the touch of laurel, he sent the great work to a London manager, and never heard word of it afterwards, good, bad, or indifferent He waited for months in sick hope and sick despair, and then wrote asking for a judgment. He waited more months, and no answer came. He wrote for the return of his work, humbly, then impatiently, and finally with wrathful insult No answer ever came. The muse seemed as vile a jade as Claudia. But he had his tattered and stained old manuscript, interlined and entangled so that no creature but, himself could read it, and he put it all in type once more, and sent his printed copy to an eminent firm of publishers, who, after considering the matter for six months, offered to take the risk of publication for a hundred pounds, on which he burned his manuscript in the cracked office stove, and left the printed copy of it in the publishers' hands to do as they pleased with it.

He turned to prose and wrote short stories, and sent them broadcast They came back, and he sent them out again. He made a list of magazines and a list of the stories, and each one went the rounds. One stuck and brought proof-sheets, and in due time a ten-pound note. He poured in all the rest on the one discerning editor, who had already refused one half of them. In a month the man of discernment offered

ten shillings per page for the lot. Paul accepted, and in another month was back in London, resolute to try a new backfall with the world.

He found lodgings far away in the northern district, apprised the one discerning editor of his whereabouts, and sat down to wait and work for glory. And, oh! how kind again on a sudden seemed the Fates who for four years had been so harsh with him. Scarce had he been settled a week when there came a letter addressed to Paul Armstrong, Esq., care of Messrs. Blank and Blank, reporting that the editor of a certain magazine had read with much pleasure a tale from Mr. Armstrong's pen, and would be happy to receive from him one of the same length. Paul danced and sang, and then plunged into labour, wrote his story, received his proof-sheet and his cheque, and with the letter a request that he would submit anything he might have in the way of a three-volume story. He was assured that it would receive instant attention.

'I'm five-and-twenty,' said Paul, 'and the world is at my feet'

But books are not to be written in a day, though they may be commissioned in an instant, and the financial stock was small, seeing how big an enterprise was to be started on it, and somehow the story would not form. What ghostly wrestling of the spirit with vague shadows which would take no shape! what sleepless tossings there were!—what fruitless rambles in the darkened streets! what hurried walks to Hampstead Heath! and what slow prowlings there amongst the gone! And, then, how the Concept came suddenly from nowhere, without a warning, without an effort, and stood up serene and strong, and bursting through and through with passion as if it had been alive and fully grown for

years. Then to pen and ink and paper, not yet a weariness to soul and flesh! as they were to be in after days, the virgin page an invitation, the ink-pot a magic fountain, the very feel of the pen between thumb and finger a pleasure. There was no thought in those fresh days of stinting labour or of making rules for it—so many hours for work and so many hours for recreation, and such and such hours for meals. The book—the book was everything. He went to sleep with his people. He awoke to them. He lived all day with them. He found them more real than the living. Life was one vivid rage of emotion, of laughter, and of tears. His own pathetics and his own humours were the sweetest things he had ever known, and he cried at the one and laughed at the other more than the most sentimental of readers ever laughed and cried over any book that was ever written. And it was at this time that he wrote certain verses in which he set forth his beliefs in art. The lonely man in his eyrie in the Rockies, reviewing the bygone time, murmured what he could recall of these:

'"A land of fire and a land of frost
Build!" said the Lord of the Soul;
"And lay me an ocean from coast to coast,
And let it be awful with many a ghost
Of galleons laden with gold, and lost
In the smothering surge's roll.

'"And make me a myriad rounded stars
To spangle my firmament,
Sweet like Hesper, glad with the balm
Of a ceaseless, passionless, changeless calm
And hot like Sirius, and red like Mars
With a god-like discontent.

'"And frame in the land of fire," he said,
"Frame me a soul like thine:
Swift as the snail's soft horn to feel,
Yet hard and keen as the tempered steel,
And be there a fire in heart and head
Demoniac and divine."'

The rest of the words had no duelling in his memory, though he was sure they had been made and written; but they were meant to say that all labour conceived and executed in a land of fire should be remodelled in the land of frost at the risk of being cast away in its passage from one to the other. This in plain English meant the union of hot zeal and cold diligence, which is a worthy recipe for any worker in any craft It served Paul's turn for six prodigious weeks, from the rising of the sun until long after the going down of the same. The book was done in a quarter of the time he had apportioned to it. For six weeks the forces of every waking minute had strained fiercely forward to one purpose, and at seven o'clock on an autumn Friday he wrote the words 'The End,' and, looking up, saw the sunlight in dazzling strips between the green painted laths of the blind, and found that his lamp was pale. He drew up the blind and opened the window, and the sweet air bathed his head. There was a deep sadness in his heart, and when he arose and by chance saw his face in the glass it was the face of a ghost If the halest of young men will live in alternations of frost and fire for six weeks on end, he must expect to pay for it.

Paul paid dearly in lassitude, and broken sleep, and loss of appetite, and afterwards in six weeks of idle waiting in poverty, for there was no work or power of thought left in him for the time. He pawned the dressing-case old Darco had given him and the dress-suit which he had not worn for four years, and

he had his meals, such as they were, at a cabman's restaurant, and his last penny went, and tobacco famine set in; and his landlord, who was a maudlin man with a cultured turn for drink, would come in at night to his sitting-room and cry, and say that the water-rates were going to cut the supply; and the butcher had said, 'No more credit after Saturday.'

And whilst he was thus agreeably engaged on one occasion a knock came to the door, and a slattern slavey came in with a plate in her hand, and on the plate a wet and flabby oblong something crusted with dirt and slime.

'I can't quite make it out, sir,' said the slavey, 'but I think as this is a letter, and it hasn't been opened, sir, and I fancy it's addressed to you.'

And within the slimy envelope was a soaked letter, in which the ink had so run as to leave it scarcely legible, and being diligently pored upon, the letter was found to indicate that the recipient of the story had read it with great charm and interest, and was willing to purchase the serial rights of the same for the sum of £250, £150 on the author's signature to terms, and £100 on the day of the publication of the first number.

'It's 'ard for a poor working man to be kep' out of his money like this, sir,' the landlord moaned.

'Damn you!' said Paul. 'Listen to this.' He read the letter, and with a start reverted to the date: 'September 27th, and this is October 27th! I haven't tasted food these three days, or had a pinch of tobacco, and this has been waiting for me—this—this —for a whole month! Explain, you execrable! or, as sure as the brother of the sun reigns over the Heavenly Empire, I will brain you with the poker. Shell out, you villain!—shell out, to your last

halfpenny! ‘Ard for a poor working man to be kep’ out of his money, is it? Somebody in this infernal house has kept me waiting and half starving for a month, whilst I have two hundred and fifty pounds to my credit. What are you worth, you hoary inebriate? Speak, or die!’

‘Seven and eight,’ said the landlord, ‘and a bogus thrip-penny.’

‘Give me five shillings!’ cried Paul, snatching up the poker, and the landlord pottered out the money.

Away tore Paul to the house round the corner. There were sausages there frizzling in a metal-pan with a little row of blue gas-jets below it. There was brandy there; there was beer. There was tobacco of a sort, and there was an admirable whisky, not the diluted vitriol common to the outlying London house before the passing of the Adulteration Act, but honest whisky, mellow and old.

Paul, full of meat, and singing to himself behind his pipe, walked homeward with a flask of that good liquor in his pocket, and there behind was the landlord clinging to the railings at the bottom of the area-steps and maundering to a policeman.

‘Five shillings—‘storted by threats. Tha’s the man,’ said the landlord.

‘Come in, officer, and have a drink,’ said Paul, and the officer, after an upward and downward look along the street, marched into the house. Paul gave him a drink instantly, and whilst the landlord hiccuped ‘’Started by threats ‘he explained the situation. ‘Of course, I made him shell out,’ said Paul. ‘Wouldn’t you?

‘Well, I’m a guardian of the peace, myself, sir,’ said the officer; ‘but it wouldn’t ha’ been more than five bob and costs if you’d ha’ dressed him down.

Speaking as a man of uniform, as I may say, I should ha' thought that cheap at the money.'

''Storted by threats,' said the landlord.

'Take another,' cried Paul, 'and go to bed. You'll be paid in the morning, and you can stick up "To Let" as soon as you like. I'm off to the Continent.'

There was still a cab fare in Paul's pocket when he awoke and dressed in the morning, and he booked away to the publisher's office and received his cheque. Then away to the bank, and away from the bank with fifteen ten-pound notes of the Bank of England. Then a breakfast at a restaurant, and a pint of champagne to drink his own health in—the first wine tasted for nearly five years. Next to 'my uncle's' to redeem the dressing-bag and the dress-suit, and next home to stagger the landlord with that pile of wealth. Then to pack, singing; to drive back to town; to lunch late after the purchase of a suit of reach-me-downs, new hat, boots, gloves, and paletot; and last, away to the Continental train for a first look at Paris. And all the while it was richly comic to himself to feel how he exulted, and to say within doors demurely to the shopman, to the waiter, the ticket clerk, the porter: 'I am an author, sir, an accepted author, with the first fruits of my first book in my pocket I am on the way to Paris and distinction.' The four years of lost prospect and horizon looked nothing, less than nothing. But the Channel waters were rough, and he was chilled by the solemn gentlemen who sat battened down with basins in their laps, turning green and yellow in the sickly light; and the railway journey beyond was cold and uncomfortable, and Paris in the gray fog of a late October morning was less gay than he had expected. What little he knew of the language seemed to be recognised by the natives of the land, but what they

had to say to him was as rapid as the clatter of a running boy's hoop-stick on a row of railings, and as intelligible. An English-speaking tout seized him, and he was grateful to be decoyed into a dirty hotel on the other side of the river, where people understood him more or less when he asked a question. Here he entered himself in the guest-book, and under the head of 'Profession 'wrote the world 'Literature 'with great pride. He ate his cutlets and chipped potatoes at breakfast with an unwonted relish, in spite of a revolting table-cloth, encrusted with mustard and spilt sauces, and blue with wine-stains, over which salt had been spilled to restore the whiteness of the fabric in case it should ever have the good chance to be washed. The yard of bread was a novelty. The distempered houses opposite—pink and green and blue—were novelties. The jalousied windows gave the street a delicious foreign look. The little cavalry officer who came clanking in with his baggy trousers and his spurs and dangling sword, almost as long as its wearer, was a delight. Paul went to the window to look at the middle-aged *bonne* who went by in her Alsatian cap and flying coloured ribbons.

At five-and-twenty a night of wearisome and broken sleep makes small difference to the spirits, and when he had washed as well as he could by the aid of a cream-jug full of water and a saucer, and a towel handkerchief, and without the aid of soap, he dressed, and sallied out with the intent to lose himself in Paris. There is nothing so exhilarating as the first sight of a foreign city, and Paul wandered on and on, past the Palace of Justice and over the bridge, and, turning to the left, made along the Rue de Rivoli, passed the far-stretching façade of the Louvre, and so went on till he reached the Place de la Concorde. There, staring into the basin of one of

the fountains, as if he had been waiting for Paul to come to him, was Darco, fur-coated and silk-hatted as of yore, and looking neither older nor younger by a day than when they had parted.

'Darco!' said Paul, with his heart in his mouth. 'How glad I am! You dear old Darco!'

Darco stared a moment, for the young man's beard and moustache were fully grown, and they disguised him.

'Oh!' he said at last. 'Id is Armstronk. How do you do?' He held out his hand somewhat laxly, but Paul took it in both his and wrung it fervently.

'I can't tell you how glad I am to see you. I can't tell you how bitterly sorry I've been for the brutal way in which I paid you for all your kindness. Try and forgive me, old chap. Do now. It wasn't ingratitude, Darco, though it looked like it It was a boy's infatuation for a woman.'

'I dold you,' said Darco—' I rememper as if it was yesterday. I said: "You are a tarn fool, and you will be zorry."'

'I *have* been sorry this five years or nearly,' said Paul, still clinging to his hand. 'Make it up, old chap, and come and have lunch somewhere.'

'Zo pe id,' said Darco, stolid as an ox. 'Do you vant a virst-glass restaurant, or a second-glass, or vat?'

'The best in Paris!' cried Paul gaily, though he had to blow his nose and to cry 'Hem!' to clear his throat, the sight, of old Darco touched his heart so.

'Gome along, then,' said Darco, and rolled off sturdily like a barrel on barrels in the direction of the Boulevards. 'Rue Gasdilione,' he said, playing guide as he walked along. 'Blace Fendôme. Golumn Fendôme. Rue de la Baix. You haf not been in Baris

until now?

'I got here this morning,' Paul answered.

'I am here four tays,' said Darco. 'I shall be here four tays longer. I am puying a gomedy, ant a blay in five agds.'

'Buying?' said Paul 'I thought the one recognised custom was to steal'

'That's a vool's game,' Darco declared. 'If you sdeal, and if what you sdeal is worth sdealing, anypoty can sdeal from you. If you burchase it, it is yours, and nopoty can take it away. Honesty is the best policy. And, pesides that, I am Cheorge Dargo. I know my way apout.'

Paul could have hugged him for sheer joy at hearing the familiar brag again: 'I am Cheorge Dargo.' The old countersign was like music.

'Where are we going?' asked Paul.

'Ve are koink,' said Darco, 'to the Hareng d'Or, where they haf a dry champagne, and where they can give you such a preakfast as you cannot get in the world. Ant I shall have a Cloria with a zeventy-year-old Gogniag in it. Ant the Blat de chour is a Navarin de mouton. I saw that as I passed the house two hours aco. I shall haf two boitions, mind you.'

'Twenty!' cried Paul.

'No,' said Darco. 'I could not ead twenty.'

They reached the restaurant, one of those jolly little houses which are all down now—short as is the time since that in which they flourished—where the host knew almost all his guests, and luxury went hand in hand with a sort of camaraderie which cannot breathe in our new palaces. The chef was a treasure, but as yet no American millionaires strove to coax him across the Atlantic. There were no better

wines in the world, there was no better coffee, and, by way of a wonder, there were no better cigars. Darco shook hands with the host, and broke out at him in a brash of Alsatian French, which to Paul's ears was like a rolling of drums. He caught his own name in the torrent of noise, and distinguished the words 'un homme lidéraire, cheune, gomme fous foyez, mais déjà pien tisdangué.' The host bowed, and Paul bowed, and blushed a little, and Darco ordered a déjeûner at the host's discretion, stipulating only for his own double portion of the Navarin de mouton. So there came oysters, with a cobwebbed bottle of old hock in a cradle, and an unknown delicate fish with burnt butter, and then the Navarin with champagne in an ice-pail, and fruit, and delicate foreign cheeses, and coffee which is a dream to the man whose unjaded palate first tries it in perfection. The seventy-years-old cognac was there also, and Paul's head was humming ever so little before the feast was over.

'And the dopacco?' said Darco lazily—' eh?'

'The true believer smokes it in Paradise,' said Paul; and Darco translated the saying to the host, who bowed and smiled.

'How did you know that I was *un homme littéraire?*' asked Paul, stumbling at the unaccustomed words.

'I haf seen your name to half a tozen short stories,' said Darco. 'It was no mere gomparison of names to me. I know your sdyle. It has changed. It has changed for the petter, but I know id. You gannot deceive me apout a sdyle. I am Cheorge Dargo. I know my way anywhere.' They smoked and sipped their coffee in a splendid contentment 'Vat prings you to Baris?' Darco asked lazily.

'I sold a book yesterday,' said Paul—'my first I had

worked hard; I thought I deserved a little holiday—I have got to learn my world. And I was beastly hungry the day before yesterday.'

'I have been there,' returned Darco. 'There was an English Duke—he is dead now—I did a liddle service in Puda Besth. He vanted to bay me. I said "I am Cheorge Dargo. I do not take money excebt in the way of business." Ven I was ruint in the United States I game back to England, and I hat not one benny. I galled on the Duke. He was at bregfasd. He got ub, ant he took me py the shoulders begause he was glad to see me, and he said, "My tear Dargo, you are wet"; and I said: "You would be wet if you had slept in the rain in St Chames's Bank."'

'You've had hard times, old Darco?'

'I have had a million dollars. I haf had nothings. Once I sdole a loaf. I gave the paker ten dollars the week after and dold him vat I had done.' He puffed idly and sipped his Gloria. 'I am Cheorge Dargo,' he murmured nosily. 'There is nothings I haf not been. There is nothings I have not seen.

There is nothings worth doing that I have not done.' He smoked and sipped again. 'But I haf not got a liderary sdyle. You haf a liderary sdyle. Come again with me to write blays. We will both great fortunes make.'

'Shake hands on that,' said Paul vehemently; and Darco shook hands with phlegm.

'It is a pargain,' he said. 'See me in five hours' time—Hotel Meurice, Rue de Rivoli I will write it for you. And now I must go apout my work. I am encaged in ten minutes.'

Paul paid the bill, slipped Darco's address into his waistcoat pocket, shook hands with him at the door, and walked away, unconscious, to his life's undoing.

CHAPTER XIV

The voice of the river spoke from the great gorge in accents of exultation and despair, and the voice was a part of the primeval silence, as it had been from the moment when the Solitary had first listened to it. The impalpable, formless brown fog was about him Its acrid scent of burning was in his nostrils. And, all the same, he was in Paris, in the Rue de Quenailles, where he had lived so long, and where he had begun the real troubles of his lifetime.

He saw and heard as if he had been there. The street was lined on either side with picturesque houses of an ancient date, the fronts of which were parcel-coloured, blue, pink, buff, white, green, all worn into a varied grayish harmony by years of exposure to the weather. The cobbled roadway was drenched in sunlight, and the green jalousies on the sunny side of the street had their own effect on the physiognomy of the thoroughfare.

Paul made his way towards his hotel, foreboding nothing, but full of youth and high spirits, and somewhat unfairly inspired by wine, considering the hour of the day. He was aware of this, and his one desire was to reach his own cool and shadowed chamber, and there sleep himself back into a sober possession of his faculties. Had any person suggested to him that he was tipsy, he would have had a right

to repel the accusation with scorn. He walked without hesitation or uncertainty; he saw quite clearly and thought quite clearly. He had taken a glass more champagne than was entirely good for him, and that was all. Had the thing happened after dinner, he would simply have put on the brake for the rest of the evening, and would have carried his load with ease. As it was, nothing but a nap was needed to bring him back to a comfortable afternoon sensation. He told himself this as he strolled homeward, tasting his cigar in an occasional whiff, but using it mainly as a sort of fairy baton with which to beat time to the spirit ditties of no tune which filled his harmless mind.

On the side of the street on which he walked he saw the figure of a girl, but he took no especial notice of her until he was almost in the act of passing. Then he noticed that she was tall and lithe, and that she had fine brown eyes and hair. There was nothing in the slightest degree compulsive or imperative about her. She was just a girl, and there was an end of it He might have passed her a thousand times without a second thought, or without a thought at all, but that unhappy extra glass of wine was in his blood, and he must needs accost her—more, perhaps, to show off his French than for any other reason. His attitude towards women had hitherto been chivalrous and shy, and he was aware of the overcoming of a difficulty which had frequently given him some concern when he flourished off his hat and asked, with a smiling insolence:

‘Why are you wandering here, I pray?’

The girl looked at him innocently enough, with a gaze quite free from anger, coquetry, or embarrassment. It might have been a common thing

in her experience to be thus accosted by a stranger.

'I am waiting for my sister,' she responded simply.

Did she suppose she would have to wait long? asked Paul. The girl did not know. Would she wait under shelter from the sun? She shrugged her shoulders, and inclined her head on one shoulder with lifted eyebrows.

'Come along,' said the vacuous idiot 'Let us have a glass of wine together.'

The girl smiled sedately, and they went off together.

The extraordinary part of this business was not that a young man who had lunched a little too freely should make a fool of himself, but that the girl was a good girl, of average breeding, and, as Paul lived to convince himself, in spite of all the unhappiness she brought him, had never entered upon anything remotely resembling such an adventure as the present in all her life. But the readiness of her acquiescence misled him, and in the little hard-trodden wjne-garden in which they sipped a sugary champagne together, in a trellised alcove like a relic of old Vauxhall, he grew amorous, and told her that her eyes were like beryls, and that their whites were like porcelain. The lonely man in the brown smoke-fog, with the roar of the river in his ears, as unregarded as the roar of traffic in a city, recalled it all, and laughed as he threw his hands abroad, and fell into a frowning thoughtfulness as he allowed them to drop laxly between his knees. The girl had eyes, to be sure—two of them—and they were brown, with a touch of beryl in the brown, and, conceivably, they had a soul behind them, of one sort or another, but she had as much personality as a jelly-fish. She was neither pleased nor affronted by

the vacuous ass's compliments, and when he praised her hair and her complexion, she accepted it as placidly as if she had been a waxen lady in a barber's window.

It may have been that this very aloofness of stupidity appealed to him as a thing to conquer, but, anyway, he got an arm about her waist, and went on praising her with ridiculous emphasis. She allowed him to squeeze, and she allowed him to praise, and when he pressed her glass upon her she sipped at it with reasonable relish and set it down again. When they had been sitting in the arbour for a quarter of an hour or so she became loquacious. She said it was a fine day, but that she had feared in the morning that it would rain. It was a much finer day than the Thursday of last week had been, for then it had rained in the afternoon, and since she had been beguiled from home by the treacherous pretence of the day without an umbrella she had had a feather spoiled—a feather 'que m'a coûté cinq francs, m'sieu!' Paul answered that she was a little angel, and she told him a parcel of nothings which under fair and reasonable conditions would have bored his head off. But it is a notable thing that when a youth is beginning to learn a foreign language—and Paul was only now entering upon a colloquial familiarity with French—he has so much satisfaction in understanding what is said to him that a very stupid conversation can interest him. It is not what is said which pleases, but the fact that he can follow it, and this, with a man who is not easily susceptible of boredom, will last him well into the knowledge of a novel tongue. He gathered from the confidences exchanged that the young lady lived at home with papa and mamma and her sister; that papa was engaged in a big drapery establishment, and came

home late at night; that mamma was a suburban modiste, and was also away from home all day; that her sister and herself did some kind of fancy work at home—his French was not complete enough to enable him to understand accurately what it was—and that she always made holiday on a Thursday afternoon.

Now, Paul had never played the conquering dog until now. He had so far been the victim of the sex, and in his own small way had suffered scorn and beguilement enough. What with the luncheon and the sticky champagne, he began to feel mighty and vainglorious, and he took the airs which he supposed to be appropriate to the situation. He praised the lady, therefore, with a humorous appreciation of the manner in which she accepted flatteries which were passed, so to say, upon a shovel, and he tasted with a gratified palate his own fine flavour as a man of the world.

That was the silly beginning of it, and the lonely man, recalling it all as if he had been back in the midst of it again, asked himself with that tired scorn of his own career and nature which had become a part of him, if any creature with as much brain as earwax had ever before been so easily beckoned to the devil.

'Millions, I suppose,' he said half aloud, in answer to his own mental query—'millions.'

And so went on with his dream.

Of the variety of fools there is literally no end, but for the king of fool who is predestined to come a cropper in the field of life, and to spill other people in his own downfall, there is no rival for the Quixote. The man who is over-anxious to pay in the market of morals is the man who goes bankrupt You may be a

good deal of a scoundrel and retain your own esteem and that of the world, but you must not palter with your own offences. The world resents a half-virtue, and the world is right It is the half-virtue which breeds hypocrisy and self-deception, and these are the most despicable of human vices. Courage is at the root of manhood, and even the courage which dares to do wrong and have done with it is better than the cowardice which patches vice with virtue until it can no longer discern the colour of either.

Here, for instance, began a liaison of the vulgarest and simplest kind, for which a man of any wisdom would have repented in due course whilst he would have compounded with it, and would have parted from it, and, whilst counting it amongst the sins and follies of his youth, would have left it behind him.

Paul and the girl parted innocently that night, but made an appointment to meet again on the morrow. He had no stomach for the encounter, but he would not break his word, and so, for the sake of a punctilio, he wrecked himself. He and Annette went to the Mabille together, and in his character of man of the world he made love to her with as fine a relish as if he had sat down to bread-and-water after dinner; then, in order not to be quite a blackguard, he met her again, and, to save himself from his own conscience, again, and at last the compound of vanity, weakness, and virtue landed him with her in London, where they set up housekeeping together.

For a time this was great, with its twang of Rue Monsieur le Prince and Murger and the old Bohemia, and Paul was convinced that he had done a noble thing in not deserting the little woman. In a flaccid sort of a way she seemed to love him, and in that respect, since his own mind was by no means urgent, he was satisfied. He was faithful to the tie, and

flaunted his own magnanimity.

But his true mistress was his work, and this he loved with an increasing ardour. How devotedly he laboured he never knew until long afterwards, when what had once been a passion of delight and a necessity of nature degenerated into a stale drudgery practised for the sake of mere money. But, oh! the sweetness of brain-toil whilst the heart was fresh and whilst it still seemed worth while to preach some kind of gospel to mankind! To pace the streets and read the faces of people as they went by, to weave a thousand stories in a day around the destinies of strangers, to sit far into the night fed with rich and glowing fancies, to express them with conscious power, to work with living vigour for the love of work alone!

These were rich days, and if the domestic intercourse were poverty-stricken there was the bachelor intercourse at the clubs to make up for it, and even amongst his married friends Annette was an ignorable quantity unless he took to waving her like a flag of virtue.

There was Fortescue, a man of medium fame, but of real genius, whose delightful home was always open to him. Mrs. Fortescue probably knew all about Paul's eccentric menage, but she had been an opera-singer in her day, had known a good many open secrets of the kind, and was a woman of the world. It was not her business to pry into that kind of secret, and she liked the young fellow for many reasons. Considering what a fool he was, he had grown to an astonishing charm of manner. The lonely man smoking his idle pipe at his tent door in the cañon looked back at him across such a distance of time and fate that his inspection of the youth was almost impersonal. The lad passed for a piece of naïve

nature, and not altogether unjustly. He was eager and ardent, and absurdly tender-hearted. He loved all his friends, and he had a crowd of them. ‘Because,’ as Balzac says, ‘he had known a time when a sou’sworth of fried potatoes would have been a luxury,’ he threw about his money with a lordly liberality. A simple ballad, if sung with any approach to art, would bring tears into his eyes. He had all the virtues which came easy to him, and, leaving Annette out of question for the moment, he was without vices. He had rubbed against the world long enough to have grown polished. Nobody questioned his origin or upbringing. His talk was brilliant, if it bore no searching analysis, and he had his circle of listeners wherever he went. He was a born raconteur, and had proved himself in that particular, and his increasing acquaintance with the stage and the professors of its trifling art helped him in this direction.

Fortescue’s house was his one haunt apart from the clubs, the one civilized and civilizing home he knew with intimacy, and one night there over a cigarette and a whisky-and-soda he turned his jejune philosophy of life upon his host.

‘I confess,’ he said, ‘that I have no great opinion of the marriage tie. Let there be a loyal association between man and woman, let each recognise the responsibilities which belong to it, and where’s the fear of any priestly ban or the need of any priestly blessing?’

‘My dear Armstrong,’ said Fortescue, who was very much his senior, and a man of a rather starched propriety by nature, ‘I would beg you, if you permit me, to avoid that theme. The marriage tie to me means a full half of the whole sanctity of life. To my mind, the man who derides it is, so far as his derision

carries him, an ass.'

'Oh,' cried Paul, laughing, 'I like a straight hitter.'

Fortescue shifted the theme with some adroitness, but the talk grew stiff and formal. The younger man felt the disapproval of the elder, and was ill at ease under it. He rather shied at the house from that time forward, and, since an awkwardness of that kind grows easily and rapidly, his visits dwindled into rarity, until they ceased by automatic process.

It was years before he found a home again.

'Along with many noble and admirable qualities the English people have one defect, which is recognised in the satires of every neighbouring nation, but is never acknowledged by themselves.' Thus Paul Armstrong at his tent door, with the voice of the torrent to emphasize the waste silence of his dwelling-place, and the fog to clear his mental vision by shutting out from his perception all extraneous things; not thinking in these words, or thinking in words at all, but dunking thus: 'Propriety is a British legend and a British lie.'

He was back in the old chambers, which were in one of the smaller Inns of Court, and was looking at the stale mirth and madness of the bygone days. Eight out of ten of the men he remembered had settled down, and two of the ten, to make an average, had gone to the devil The two were mainly of the better sort—fellows who stuck to an absurd responsibility, and let it ruin them. The eight were the good citizens who had had the wit to cut responsibility adrift. That was life as he knew it, as the boys of his day who studied divinity or medicine, or who read for the Bar, or who worked in painting or at journalism or letters, all knew it. Clerics, lawyers, painters, authors, men on 'Change, all

married and settled and respected, admirable citizens by the dozen and the score, and where are Lorna, and Clara, and Kate, and Caroline, and Fanny? Heaven knows—possibly. The knack of prosperity, surely, is to bury your indiscretions.

Oh, bitter, bitter, bitter to have loaded life with such a burden, not to have had the courage of a hundred others, and to have left the poor responsibility to sink or swim, to have compounded between vice or virtue instead of making a clean bargain with one or the other like the rest of the world, to have permitted a foolish pity to look like a resolute manhood to his eyes, to have throttled his own soul for a scruple!

He stages his own soul, and this is what he sees and hears and knows.

Annette is ailing, is seriously ill indeed, and he has taken her into the country. He has rented a cottage, in the front of which there is a great level common reaching for a mile or two on either side, and covered with golden gorse. In front of the cottage and across the common is a coppice, all browns and purples and yellows and siennas, and beyond that, as seen from the upper windows of the cottage, the land fades into misty autumnal blues, to join a whitened horizon which seems to shun the meeting, until for very weariness it can postpone it no longer—a bell-tent of sky, as it were, with a lifted edge, and beyond the skirts of the nearer sky another. Annette is lying in bed, and Paul is looking out of the window; he will see the landscape in that way always. He has known it under broad summer sunshine, in springtide freshness, under winter snow, obscured in sheeting rain, in moonlight, starlight, dawn, sunset; but whenever his thoughts go backwards to the place he is looking out of the window on that particular

aspect of the scene, and Annette is behind him, propped in her bed with pillows.

'Paul!' He turns.

'Come to me a moment. Sit down beside me. Take my hand'

He lays down the empty pipe he has been twirling in his fingers, and obeys her.

'Paul!'

'Yes, dear.'

'I cannot talk much,' she says, in her pretty foreign accent

It has been the one ambition of her mind during these three or four years to speak English like an Englishwoman, and she has very nearly succeeded, only there is still a rhythm left which is charming to hear.

'I shall not be with you long.'

'What?' says Paul. 'Nonsense, sweetheart! that's a mere sick fancy. Chase it away.'

'It is no fancy,' says Annette—'no fancy at all. I heard the doctor this morning. They did not think I could hear, and he was talking with the housekeeper. He said he feared the worst. You know what that means, Paul.'

What should he say? A man of ardent blood and active brain does not live with a jelly-fish for sole home society for a year or two without a certain weariness, yet his manhood scorned him for it, and even if passion had never been alive at all there was tenderness and the camaraderie which comes of close association. He kissed her, and he lied in kissing her, but it was not a wicked or an evil lie.

'My dear,' he said, 'this is all fancy. You will be well and strong again in a month or two. I have

talked to the doctor, and I can assure you he has no sort of fear about you. Look here, now. Darco is coming down to-morrow, and we shall revise our play. Within a week it shall be finished, and then we will have you packed carefully in cotton-wool and will carry you back to Paris. Or if you think it will be too cold in Paris we will take train to Nice, and pass the winter there.'

'No,' she said, 'I shall spend my winter here, and it will be my last.' Her eyebrows had a pathetic lift, and her gaze was on the sky, beyond the curtains and the window-panes. 'Paul! Paul dear! Do one thing for me.' She turned her frightened appealing brown eyes upon him, and stole her hand softly and timidly into his.

'Yes, dear,' he answered. 'Anything that is in my power—anything.'

She had never seemed so human.

'I shall not live to plague you,' said Annette. 'You are strong and brave and clever, and you have ambitions, you big boy, and I have been a weight about your neck.'

'No, no, no!' he cried.

'Oh yes,' she answered mournfully. 'I know it I have seen it all along. But all that will soon be over. Only there is one thing, Paul.'

She stretched out her arms to him, and he bent his head so that she might embrace him. He had always fought in his own heart for the fiction that he loved her, and sometimes he had won in that difficult conflict; now he was sure of it, and he put his arms about her. Was he to lose her just as she revealed herself in this sweet way?

'Paul,' she asked him, 'are you sorry that I am going? Shall you grieve—a little?'

‘You mustn’t talk so, dear,’ said Paul; ‘you break my heart.’

He spoke with a genuine vehemence. He was astonished at the strength of his own feeling.

‘Then,’ she said, ‘do this one little thing for me. Whisper. Let me whisper. Can you hear me like that?

‘Yes, sweetheart, yes. What is it?’

‘Make me an honest woman before I die,’ said Annette, in a voice that barely reached him. ‘I was brought up to be a good girl, and I have suffered—oh Paul, dear, I have suffered! Promise me.’

Here were depths he had not looked for or suspected, and he thought within himself how blind he had been; how much he had misread her; how like a doll he had treated her. His whole heart smote him with self-scorn, with pity, with remorse.

‘You are not dying, dear Annette,’ he said; ‘you will live, and we shall love each other a thousand times better than we have ever done before, because this fear of yours has broken the ice between us.’

‘No, Paul,’ she answered. Her arms fell languidly on the counterpane. ‘I shall not live, but promise me that. Let me die happy. Tu sais, chéri, que ma mère est morte. Je voudrais encontrer ma mère au ciel, comme fille honnête, ne c’est pas? Ah! pour l’amour de Dieu, Paul!’

‘My darling,’ he answered, ‘I’ll do it! I’ll do anything. But don’t talk nonsense about dying. We shall have many a happy year together yet.’

It was his facile, ardent way to think of himself as brokenhearted if he lost her, and he had never seen her in such a mood as this before, or anything approaching to it It was no pretence for the moment that he loved her. He felt for the first time that their

two hearts were near. And though he had been loyal to her, and through times good, bad and indifferent had brought her of his best, and had done what he could in a cool, husbandly sort of way to make her happy, he knew his moral debt to her, and was sore about it, and had been sore about it often. It had never been in his mind for an instant to evade his burden, even when he had felt the weight of it most heavily, and he was willing and even eager to offer this small and laggard reparation.

'We have lived here much more than the statutory time,' he said. 'I will go and see the district registrar at once, and we will be married at the earliest possible minute. That will only be a legal union, dear, but if you care for anything further we can be married in a church when you get strong enough.'

'Thank you, Paul,' she answered. 'You *are* good to me.'

'Poor, sweet little woman!' he answered, for now he was touched deeply by his own remorse. 'There, you are happy now?

'So happy, Paul! So happy!'

He kissed her and left her there, and loading up his pipe, set out at a brisk pace across the common in the direction of the little township in which the registrar was to be found. Half an hour's walk brought him there, and the functionary was at home. Paul explained his errand and its urgency. A special fee obviated publicity, and he paid it. Money smoothes all kinds of roads, and in arrangements for marriage it will almost abolish time.

Arrangements concluded, the coming bridegroom hastened home, his heart warm with resolve and tender with a new-born affection. It was curious, he thought, that he should so have misunderstood a

woman with whom he had been so long in the closest intercourse. That placid, yielding way of hers, that habit of mind which he had regarded in his mannish fashion as being altogether gelatinous and invertebrate—how ill he had construed it all. What a depth of feeling lay concealed beneath it! 'Je voudrais encontrer ma mère au ciel, comme fille honnête.' Ah! the poor creature, who had yielded too easily to his embraces and his flatteries, whom he had led astray with professions of love and admiration which had never been real—what amends were too large to repay her? And the promised amend seemed little enough, for he had not contemplated life away from Annette. His association with her had isolated him in a certain degree, but if good women were out of his life, and he missed them sometimes rather sadly, good fellows were plentiful, married and single, and the length of time for which his liaison had lasted had lent it a kind of respectability. Possibly, after all, even if Annette had not been about to release him, marriage would have been the best solution of a difficulty. He wondered now why he had never thought of it earlier. Simply because a trustful girl in her innocence and ignorance had permitted herself to repose her whole future on one who might have played the scoundrel with her, he had been content to forget his duty. Well, he would atone.

The ceremony, when it came, was of the simplest, and had a bald and business air about it which was discomfiting to a man who felt that he was giving rein to a noble sentiment The registrar, as he pocketed his fee, and shook hands in congratulation, assured him it was efficacious. It took place, of course, in Annette's bedroom, but it was done with so much delicacy that not even the landlady

suspected it. The registrar and his assistant passed to her mind as medical men called to the bedside of the patient.

Paul sat for half an hour after they had gone with Annette's hand in his, and then, seeing that she had fallen asleep, softly withdrew himself. He strolled to the common, and there, wading through gorse, he found the doctor who had attended her from the time of their arrival.

'Well, Mr. Armstrong,' said the medico cheerfully, 'how's the patient?'

'Better, I think,' said Paul. 'But, doctor, tell me—what made you take so gloomy a view a week ago? Don't you think she'll mend?'

'Mend, my dear sir? said the doctor. 'Of course she'll mend. You'll have her on her feet again in a week or two. She's never been in danger for a moment.'

'But didn't you say a week ago——'

'That she *was* in danger?'

'Yes. That she was in danger.'

'I give you my word, Mr. Armstrong, that the idea never crossed my mind. I've never had a touch of anxiety from the first. I'd like you to give me a game at chess to-night, if you're not otherwise engaged. I'm just going across to have a look at Mrs. Armstrong now. But it's a mere matter of form, I assure you. Good morning.'

'Why didn't I ask that question earlier?' said Paul to himself. But he scarcely knew as yet in what direction his thoughts were pointing.

CHAPTER XV

Paul Armstrong—the real Paul Armstrong who dreamed these dreams of memory—sat day by day in his mountain solitude surrounded by the smoke-fog which obliterated all but the nearer objects from his view. He could faintly distinguish the bluff on the other side of the cañon. It was like a pale, flat, and barely perceptible stain on grayish-brown paper. The mountains were all abolished, but their ghostly voices lived. Here and there the slumbering heat upon their flanks would provoke a snow-slide, and the long-drawn roar and rumble of it would go rolling and echoing apparently in a dozen regions all at once, so that it would be impossible to tell from what direction the original sound proceeded. Two voices of the solitude were ceaseless—the reverberating roar of the river and the chatter of the mountain brook which ran to meet it; but in ears long accustomed to them they seemed to weave a silence of their own. Twice a day, at least, his sole reminders of the living, pulsing outer world went by. Sometimes as the panting train rushed east or west, its reminder of the world from which he had parted brought a bitter pang with it.

He found but little occupation for his hands, and, apart from his memories, little for his mind. He read and reread his father's dying words until he knew them by rote, and could read them with shut eyes as he lay in his blanket in the wakeful hours of night. He would not admit to himself that he had a real belief in their message, and yet it was always with

him in a fainter or a stronger fashion, and it made a part of life.

It was not merely that he had little to do and little to think about apart from his memories, that he dwelt so constantly upon them. He thought often that there was something within himself which led him gently yet inexorably to these contemplations, and it happened more than once that while he was in the very act of thinking thus his dream came upon him as if a spell had been cast upon his mind Forgotten emotions lived again; facial expressions of people he had known; tones of voices not remarkable, and not much remarked, came back. It was like a curiously vivid dream; but it had all happened, and he was living it over again.

Bring what intellectual denial he would to the problem his father's letter had set before his mind, his nerves at least accepted it, and he had a settled consciousness that he was not alone. He fought against this as a mere superstitious folly. He was often angry with himself for ever stooping to discuss it in his own mind. He had long ago resolved that the man dies as the beast dies, and that there is no more a bourne of new life for the one than for the other. And now all manner of doubts began to pester him. No more for the one than for the other? Why not for all? Why not one unending cycle of experience? Why not the passing of one growing intelligence through every form of life? The Eastern sages dreamed so.

He would sit there at his tent door buried deep in his thoughts, and often, without his being able to trace the faintest sign of any action in his own mental mechanism, his father's voice would wake him with an interjection of, 'Exactly!' or 'That's the point, Paul!' There was no sound, and yet the voice was there, and the old familiar Ayrshire accent

seemed to mark it as strongly as it had done in his father's lifetime. It was all very well to deride it as a mere delusion; it was easy to put it on one side for a moment and to stand over it in an intelligent superiority, tracking it to its sources in some obscure action of nerve and brain. But howsoever often he might eject belief from his mind, it came back with a clinging, gentle insistence which would not be denied; and little by little, though sorely against his will, he began to have a sence of it. A verse of 'In Memoriam 'was often in his mind:

'How pure in heart, and sound in head,
With what divine affections bold,
Should be the man whose heart would hold
An hour's communion with the dead.'

He began at last to think that his own unfitness for such a communion helped him to his disbelief in its possibility, and from that hour the feeling of his father's nearness weighed more and more upon him.

Sitting at his tent door hour on hour, feeling himself, with the passage of each day, more completely isolated from the world, he seemed forced to a clear appreciation of the inner truth of his own retrospect; and, so far as any exercise of will was concerned, he found it a record of folly and weakness. There had been hours of high good fortune there, but they had been barely of his seeking, and of his own actual making not at all. Folly and weakness had stung him many and many a time, but it was not until he had reached the last recorded effort of memory that they had laid a weight upon his shoulders. Now he knew that he had tied a millstone about his neck; that he had permanently denied to himself all the sweet and

vivifying influences of the higher social life. Sometimes detached from him, as though it watched from outside and waited for further confessions from his memory, and sometimes seeming an intimate part of him, as if it were a constituent of that desolate ache which filled and possessed his soul, there was always there the image of the gray old father, wistful, sagacious, patient—no ghost, but veritably a haunting thought, and at last, in spite of all contention, as real to him as his own hands. Yet when he went back to his dreams his obsession vanished, and it was only in the pauses of his vision that it returned.

Here were the dreams again.

He had come to understand quite clearly that a trick had been played upon him, but he was not constantly unhappy in its contemplation, or altogether resentful at it Annette improved in health with a startling rapidity, and he had the doctor's assurance on that head.

'Mrs. Armstrong is as sound as a roach, sir, and will probably outlive either of us.'

'That is well,' said Paul, and he set himself to bear the burden he had gathered.

At this time he found the greatest happiness in work, and alike with Darco, and for his own hand, he laboured unceasingly. Money came fast—more money than he had ever hoped for. Fame came also, in a fashion, and many genial societies were open to him. But Annette was not a person to be defrauded of anything she conceived to be a right, and he soon found upon how slight a thread domestic content might hang. Invitations to Mr. Paul Armstrong were plentiful, but of Mrs. Paul Armstrong his world had no knowledge outside the jolly bachelor contingent

which overflowed house and table upon Sundays. When these single invitations came Annette invariably retired to her bedroom, and, having locked herself in there, refused to hold any sort of intercourse with Paul.

'My dear,' he would say to soothe her, 'I am not going without you; but I can't force people to invite you, and we must just make the best of things.'

So he grew to be something of a hermit; and all on a sudden he resolved to cut himself adrift from England, and to live abroad. Before his wanderings were over, he was destined to know Europe pretty thoroughly; but at this time his knowledge of it was limited to Paris, and here and there a bit of Northern France. He would break new ground. Antwerp would do as well as any other city for a starting-place, and within a day or two of the hour at which the fancy first occurred to him he was ready to start He crossed by the *Baron Osy*, took rooms in a hotel on the Groen Plate, and lived and worked there for a month or two under the dropping music of the cathedral chimes. The outfit of a man of letters is the simplest in the world. With a ream of writing-paper, a pint of ink, and sixpennyworth of pens, he is professionally provisioned for half a year. Paul had no need to be in personal touch either with publisher or stage-manager, and he knew his absence from England to be unmarked and unregretted. Annette and he seemed to get on well enough together. There was no real communion between them. Paul was all on fire about his work, and she had no more comprehension of his thoughts than a canary-bird would have had. But it was not possible for a man of his temperament to live constantly under the same roof, and to sit daily at the same table with anybody, male or female, without developing some kind of

camaraderie. Mrs. Armstrong seemed to like the life fairly well, and to find a pleasure in the fleeting society of the birds of passage who went and came. She had dresses to her heart's content, and in her pretty gelid way enjoyed a good deal of popularity; but by-and-by, as summer again drew near, she wearied of her surroundings, and incited Paul to move. The work on which he had been engaged was finished and disposed of; there were a good many loose hundreds at the bank, and more were coming. He was ready for a holiday, and for Annette's sake was willing to persuade himself that he was in need of one. So in May weather they set off to make a round of the old Flemish country—Ghent, and Bruges, and Aix, and Mechlin. Thence they slid on to Namur, working slowly towards Switzerland in Paul's fancy, but stopping by mere hazard at Janenne, and being by a very simple accident enticed some four or five miles from the main line of their route to Montcourtois. They had been drawn aside in the first place to visit the famous grottoes of Janenne, and the jolly old *doyen* of Montcourtois was their fellow-passenger in the brake which conveyed them to the station. The old priest was a man of learning, and in his day he had travelled, and had known the world. Paul and he fell into animated converse, and struck up an immediate liking for each other. It turned out, curiously enough, that, though the old gentleman had lived for twenty years within half a dozen miles of the wonderful grottoes, he had never been prompted to visit them until now. He was on the way to wipe out his reproach, and by the time the sight-seeing was over Paul found himself so fascinated by his simplicity, his bonhomie, and the charming, varied stream of his talk, that he must needs invite the old gentleman to dinner at the Hotel

of the Three Friends, where preparations for his own reception for the night had been made. The old priest accepted the invitation at once, and early evening found them the only occupants of a great salon in which a hundred people might have dined with case. A brass lamp, suspended by chains from the ceiling, illumined their corner of the' centre table, and at the far end of the room a big stove bloomed red-hot all round like a magnified cherry. These preparations were scarcely needed, for the air was balmy, the windows were open, and the sky was yet full of the evening light of early summer. The voice of a stream not far away ran on with a ceaseless, light-hearted babble, and through the open windows the one street of the village was visible until it swerved away to the left There are a thousand villages like Montcour-tois; but it was the first of its genus Paul had known, and he found a quiet charm in it The Hotel of the Three Friends stood in the Place Publique, dominated by a brand-new town-hall; but all the rest of the place was quaint and old-fashioned. All the houses were distempered in various colours, and all their architects had worked after the decrees of the destinies, so that the street-line itself was full of gable-ends, and the edifices faced in as many directions as was possible. A sturdy, thick-set village girl, neat as a new pin, with cheeks hard and red, and shining like hard red apples, brought in the soup —a *soupe à la bonne femme*, and admirable of its kind —brought in a dish of fresh-caught trout excellently fried; followed this with veal cutlets; with a tart, and a local cheese which, though it had no fame beyond its own borders, was a surprise for an epicure. With the fish came a dusty, cobwebbed bottle in a cradle, and at the sight of it the *doyen* lifted his eyebrows, and faintly smacked his lips. Paul, in ordering

dinner, had asked the square-built Flemish waitress:

'You have Burgundy?

'But yes, sir,' the girl had answered, 'and of the best.'

'Bring me a bottle of your best,' Paul had said, and had thought no more of the matter.

But when the venerable cleric so twinkled at the sight of the dusty flagon in the threadbare bid wicker cradle, he was tempted to ask if they had anything very special before them.

'My dear sir,' returned the *doyen*, 'it is a wine for an Emperor, and if I may be permitted to tell you so, its appearance is attributable to my presence here.'

It was a noble vintage, and the *doyen* grew eloquent over it.

'It is here in the Ardennes,' he said, 'that you find the best Burgundy of the world. We have no vineyards of our own, though, if tradition can be trusted, they grew a good grape here hundreds of years ago; but we have cellarage, and here beneath our feet is a vault cut out of the living rock, the temperature of which does not vary one degree Reaumur on the hottest day in summer and the coldest night in winter. That is the right harbour for such a craft as this to sail into.' He touched the bottle affectionately with the tips of his beautifully-trimmed white fingers. 'You must not take me for a wine-bibber,' he said smilingly, 'but all gifts of God are good, and this is the best that Heaven affords in this direction.'

Paul rang the bell no great time later, and called for a second bottle. The *doyen* protested, but with a discernible faintheartedness. He talked of vintages as the twilight fell and the lamp beamed more brightly on the snowy napery. Well, he had travelled, he had

seen the world, he had been young. Of all wines in the world for him Johannesberg. One bottle, one truly imperial bottle, he remembered.

'It was a physician of Paris, the most eminent, who travelled for his pleasure, and whose acquaintance I made in Rome. It is very long ago. The Holy Father was suffering agonies, and he endured them like a hero. But everybody feared that he was dying, and our Roman doctors could make nothing of the case at all. It occurred to somebody to speak to His Holiness of the doctor Gaston. The physicians in attendance were glad to invite him, and by a very simple and almost painless operation he removed the seat of trouble, and in a week His Holiness was himself again. His Holiness was full of gratitude, and would gladly have paid any fee the doctor had chosen to name. But he would have no fee at all. He was not a good son of the Church, but he was an excellent Christian all the same, and it was his pride to have restored so valuable a life. Gaston told me the whole story. "My child," said the Pope, "some souvenir of your own skill and kindness you shall accept from me; I insist upon it." Then the good doctor hardened his heart, and he said: "I am for these many years a collector of wines, and I have in Paris my little cellar, which is without its rival for its size. But there is one treasure which I cannot buy, nor beg, nor steal. It is the Imperial Johannes-berg. It goes alone to the crowned heads of Europe and to your Holiness. Rothschild cannot buy it with his millions. If I may beg but a bottle——" And His Holiness laughed, and "My good son," he said, "you shall have a dozen." And Papa was better than his word, for he sent thirteen. Gaston,' continued the ancient priest, laying a hand on the listener's sleeve, 'had six friends in Rome, of whom I was one. He resolved that the

thirteenth bottle should be expended, and that he would store the rest We assembled—ah! my son, we assembled. There were little glasses of fair water handed round and cubes of bread like dice, and we sipped and nibbled, that our palates might be clean. Then the bottle was brought in with the tray of glasses, the right Rhine wine-glasses of pale green, with the vine-leaves and grape-bunches about the stem. And the bottle was opened, and—— You know your Scott? Do you remember how the bottle of claret "parfumèd ze apartment"? Oh, it was so when that cork was drawn! Odours of flowers and old memories! It was nectar when we came to taste it It was of the kingliest, the most imperial.'

Paul filled the priest's glass again and replenished his own, but the old man rose laughingly from the table.

'I am something of a poet,' he said, 'in my imaginations, but I do not carry my fancies into practice. No more wine to-night.'

Paul pressed him, but the old gentleman was firm. He yielded to the temptation of coffee and a cigar, and the two went on talking of trifles for half an hour. Annette had long since risen from the table, and had strolled to the far end of the room beyond the glowing stove. She had thrown open a French window there, and had stood for some time looking out upon the night when she called for Paul.

'Come here; I want to speak to you.'

Paul excused himself, and obeyed the summons. Beyond the French window lay a little alcove, about which a barren but full-leaved vine was trailed. The sky was still filled with a diffuse light, and the May moon, pale as yet, was rising like a silver canoe above the edge of a hill a mile away.

‘Paul,’ said Annette, ‘I want to stay here. There’s a sort of peace about the place, and I should like to be here for a little while.’

‘Well, dear,’ he answered, ‘there are worse places in the world.’

‘No,’ she whispered, drawing him down to her; ‘I want to tell you something.’ With her arm about his neck, she breathed into his ear: ‘There are only two of us, Paul; you must look out for a third.’

He turned her face to his, and he saw that her eyes were moist and that her face was pale. The momentous thing had been prettily said, as if only a touch of fun and a touch of commonplace could make the sacredness of it bearable to either. In that second he forgot everything. Indifference melted, vanished, and he took her in his arms with a feeling he had never known before. How long they stood there he could not have told, but the voice of the priest awoke him from his thoughts.

‘I am afraid, Monsieur Armstrong,’ said the *doyen*, ‘that I delay my departure too long.’

‘Go to bed, darlipg,’ Paul whispered. ‘Good-night. I’ll make your excuses. You mustn’t show up before strangers with a face like that.’

He pressed his lips to hers, took both hands ardently in his own for a second, and walked hastily back into the *salle à manger*. The *doyen* stood with his beaver on the table before him, and his white hands smoothing the folds of his soutane.

‘I beg your pardon,’ cried Paul, ‘but my wife called me away. She is suffering from some slight indisposition, and we have made up our minds to rest here for a little while.’

‘Indisposition!’ cried the priest; ‘I am sorry to hear that. But in one respect you are fortunate. Here in

this *infecte* little village—you would barely believe it, but 'tis true—we have the king of all European doctors. Shall I bring him to you?'

'Are you indeed so fortunate? Paul asked laughingly. 'Bring him by all means.'

'There is nothing pressing about the case? the *doyen* asked.

'Nothing pressing,' Paul responded.

'The morrow will do, then?'

'The morrow will do admirably.'

The old priest withdrew with a cordial hand-shake, and Paul lit a cigar and sat down to look at the newly-revealed position of affairs. The alliance between Annette and himself had been of the most trivial sort, and he had condemned himself for it a thousand times. But now a new feeling took possession of him, and she had grown suddenly sacred in his eyes. The burden which had sometimes galled him had grown welcome in a single instant.

The doctor came next day, a rotund man of benevolent aspect, with little smiling slits of eyes slightly turned up at the outer end, like a Chinaman's. He was familiarly known in the village as Le Chinois. But it did not take Paul long to learn that, in spite of the nickname, he was idolized by every inhabitant of the district for miles round. He was a man of private income, and all his professional earnings were spent upon his poor. In a fortnight Paul and he were thick as thieves. Le Chinois had travelled extensively, and appeared to be on terms of intimacy with the literature of every European people. He had not the faintest idea of the pronunciation of the English language, but he wrote it currently and with some approach to elegance, and his knowledge of English letters put Paul to shame.

With all his learning and his philosophic agnosticism, he was as simple-hearted as a child. Annette took the greatest fancy to him and welcomed his visits, and played round him with a sprightliness her husband had never before observed in her. ‘She is changing,’ he thought, ‘and changing for the better.’ The new conditions seemed as if they brought new life and developed a novel character. But he noticed that her outbursts of gaiety were followed invariably by deep depression. She would sit in the garden in the dusk of the early summer evenings alone, and if her solitude were intruded upon would wave him away without a word. It irritated her at such times even to be looked at, and Paul, deeply anxious for the time being to fall in with her every whim, would betake himself to the little café opposite, and chat there with the simple village folk. Sometimes M. le Prince, a scion of one of the noblest houses of Europe, who lived in retirement on an income of some three hundred sterling per annum, would drop in and sip his little glass of orgeat, and chatter with the peasants about crops and weather. Sometimes the doctor would spend a spare half-hour there in the evening, and sometimes the venerable *doyen* himself, though he never actually entered the house except upon a pastoral visit, would take a seat outside and drink his after-dinner coffee amongst the members of his flock.

Always after these quiet dissipations when Paul went home he found Annette asleep, and in a very little while each day became like another, and a routine was established. Annette was invariably a little fatigued in the morning, but brightened as the day went on. She was vivacious in the afternoon; by dinner-time she was in feverish high spirits. After dinner she became depressed and moody. Paul,

observing these symptoms with tender interest, attributed them all to her condition, and assumed that they were natural.

But one evening in mid-June an incident happened which for a time gave him genuine concern. Since he had resolved to settle in the village for some time, he had rented a small office in the hotel, which he had transformed into a study, and there he spent most of his waking time at work. On this particular day he had gone to his den immediately after luncheon, and had grown so absorbed in his labours that the dinner-bell had sounded unheard. He was aroused from his work by the apple-cheeked maid, and was told that dinner was already served. He dashed upstairs two steps at a time, laved his hands and face, and descended to the dining-room. Annette was not there. He inquired for her, and learned that she had gone out an hour or two before and had not yet returned. This caused him no anxiety, for she had made some acquaintances in the place, and had one or two houses at which she was accustomed to visit But when the meal was over and there was still no sign of her, he began to be vaguely inquiet, and, taking up his hat, he walked out into the tranquil brightness of the summer evening, and called from house to house to ask after her. But Madame Bulot had not seen her, nor had Madame Gerard, nor had the doctor, nor had little Mademoiselle Coquelin, the dressmaker. Madame Armstrong had been observed on the road which led to the Bois de Falaise some four hours ago, and that was the latest news of her. The vague inquiet began to deepen into serious misgiving. Paul walked rapidly to the Terre de Falaise, scoured the broad carriage-drive which had been cut through the wood, beat up one or two favourite little haunts of Annette's, and found no

trace of her. He returned to the hotel, only to learn that she had not been seen. A terror of a thousand imagined accidents took hold of him, and he flew to the gendarmerie with intent to organize a search. But while he was discussing ways and means with the Juge d'Instruction, who had been hastily sent for from next door, a stable-keeper from the hotel ran up to inform him that Madame had been found, that she had been evidently dreadfully frightened, and was in hysterics. When he reached the hotel, breathless, he found a group of startled people in the corridor, and from the bedroom he could hear Annette's voice shrieking that they were dancing in the wood, and that their bones were white. He pushed eagerly through the knot of listeners, and made his way into the bedroom. The doctor was there, and warned him away at once.

'You can do no good here,' he said; 'you will only distress yourself.'

'There is no danger?' he asked, panting after his homeward run.

'There is not the slightest atom of danger,' said the doctor.

CHAPTER XVI

Here, in the wakeful night, high up in the monstrous hills, with this everlasting torrent raging in his ears, and the camp-fire out of doors there

flaring, flickering, glowing, dying down—here in the fog of the forest fires and the solitude of the mountains, it is so easy to see things as they truly were. A shrug, a smile, a word, a silence, the lift of an eyebrow—things which had no apparent meaning a dozen years ago, which were either unnoticed or forgotten in an instant—are alive with monitions now. Not to have seen! Not to have guessed 'It looks incredible. A mule might have begun to read the riddle.

Paul read nothing.

And now, looking back from this smoky eyrie through all the intervening years, it seems as if the tragedy of a life might have been averted, as if a little weight, a little prescience, a little care, might have made the sum of life work out to a far other total.

There has been no star visible in the heavens, nor any glimpse of a moon for four nights. The sun is the dimmest red ball in the daytime, a danger-signal lantern, seen through dirty glass. There is a yeast at work in the Solitary's mind It is as if the material universe being cut away from him—save just this solid remnant of it in which he lounges—there were space found for something not belonging to it to draw near him.

Over and over again the lonely man had read his father's last letter, and now in the hot, oppressive midnight it repeated itself in his mind:

'At my father's death a change began to work in my opinions. I had convinced myself that this life was all that man enjoyed or suffered, but I began to be conscious that I was under tutelage. I began—at first faintly and with much doubting—to think that my father's spirit and my own were in communion. I

knew that he had loved me fondly, and to me he had always seemed a pattern of what is admirable in man. Now he seemed greater, wiser, milder. I grew to believe that he had survived the grave, and that he had found permission to be my guide and guardian. The creed which slowly grew up in my mind and heart, and is now fixed there, was simply this: that as a great Emperor rules his many provinces, God rules the universe, employing many officers—intelligences of loftiest estate, then intelligences less lofty; less lofty still beneath these, and at the last the humbler servants, who are still as gods to us, but within our reach, and His messengers and agents. Then God seemed no longer utterly remote and impossible to belief, and I believed. And whether this be true or false, I know one thing: this faith has made me a better man than I should have been without it. My beloved father, wise and kind, has seemed to lead me by the hand. I have not dared in the knowledge of his sleepless love to do many things to which I have been tempted. I have learned from him to know—if I know anything—that life from its lowest form is a striving upward through uncounted and innumerable grades, and that in each grade something is learned that fits us for the next, or something lost which has to be won back again after a great purgation of pain and repentance.

'It is three days since I began to write, and I am so weak that I can barely hold the pen. Send this to Paul He has gone far wrong. He will come back again to the right. I have asked that I may guide him, and my prayer has been granted. From the hour at which I quit this flesh until he joins me my work is appointed me, and I shall not leave him. Good-bye, dear child Be at peace, for all will yet be well.

'When Paul sees these last words of mine, he will

know that I am with him.'

Thus, word for word, he went over it all again, for the hundredth time or more, and on a sudden his soul seemed to flow from him in a great longing. He rose unconsciously, and stepped beyond the doorway of his tent, and stretched his arms wide to the night.

'Be with me! oh! be with me, and let me know and feel that you are here.' If it be madness to believe so, I will not care!'

But that thought froze him. What right had he to welcome madness? Of what avail was it to crown a wasted life with such a folly?

'You believed it, dear old dad?' he said. 'But how shall I? Can I dodge myself? Can I slink by a side-road out of sight of my own intelligence?'

He stood long with dejected head and drooping hands, and then groping his way back to his couch, lay down again.

And his dreams came back to him.

He was suddenly afire over a new idea for a comedy, and from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same he slaved at it and exulted in it day by day. He made long tramps into the country and lost himself continuously. Pretty generally he awoke from his fancies to find himself ravenously hungry, and without so much as a hint of an orient in his mind. But almost any village or hamlet was good for bread, of a sort, and for trustworthy eggs and new milk; and his necessities brought him into contact with the Walloon language, in which—or something very like it—Froissart wrote his chronicles. He picked up nuggets in the way of character—clean gold—and whether he were wandering with his own thoughts or struggling through the medium of this new tongue towards a

knowledge of rustic Belgian life, or pruning and digging about his imaginations in his workshop, he was happy as a man need be.

Annette and he saw less and less of each other, but that was a circumstance to which he resigned himself with ease. They had taken two rooms at the corner of their corridor to begin with, a large room and a smaller one, and there was no need to move from their original quarters. The smaller chamber was used as a dressing-room. Paul's circular tub was there, and the trunks with which the pair travelled, and coats and dresses were hung about the walls. But it was Annette's whim one day in Paul's absence to have a bed set up in this second apartment, and that same night, rising late from work, he found himself locked from his wife's room. He had not been consulted as to this arrangement, and it struck a little cold upon him, but thinking that he would talk it over in the morning, he betook himself to sleep. Next day Annette complained of headache, and the pallor of her face and the heaviness of her eyes were a sufficing certificate to suffering.

'I was very, very ill last night,' she said pleadingly, 'and I wanted to be alone. Oh! I can't tell you how much I wanted to be alone.'

Paul took her hand in his, and smoothed it between his own. The skin was harsh and dry, and the little hand felt almost like a hot coal.

'My dear,' he said anxiously, 'you are quite in a high fever. I shall run away for Laurent instantly.'

'Why will you pester me?' she asked, with a weary little spurt of temper. 'I have no more need for a doctor than you have. I understand my own condition perfectly, and I want to go to sleep.'

'But, my dear,' said Paul, 'these symptoms seem to

be increasing, and you really ought to have advice. Laurent is an able man; you can trust him, I am sure.'

'Oh! she cried, 'your voice rasps me in the very middle of my brain. 'Go away and let me sleep, for pity's sake.'

'Let me make you a cup of tea,' he said, subduing his voice to a whisper. 'I have a whole packet of that lovely stuff I bought before we left London.'

'Pray go,' she answered him.

There was nothing for it but to obey, and he went from the room a little disconsolate.

'This,' he said to himself as he walked down to the *salle à manger*' is what the poor things have to go through. Love and marriage are not all beer and skittles for either party, but they are pitiable for the woman.' Even now there was no deep attachment in his mind towards Annette, and he blamed himself for his want of feeling. 'I owe her everything,' he thought—'everything that I can bring her. I suppose she loved me when she came to me. God knows!'

He was sorry for her, but he upbraided himself for the thought that he would have been just as sorry for any other woman who suffered in the same way, if only her trouble were brought near enough for him to be aware of it. He had bound himself down to a life without love, but there was an exquisite disloyalty in the mere admission of that thought.

He was too disturbed to care for breakfast, and after drinking a cup of coffee he lit his pipe and strolled in search of the doctor. The good old Chinois was munching his pistolet, and sipping at a great bowl of hot milk just tinctured with coffee, and his man was already at the door with the queer old buggy and the queer old horse familiar to the country-side over a circuit of half a dozen leagues

from its centre.

'I have come,' said Paul, 'to talk to you about Mrs. Armstrong. I don't like the look of things at all.'

'Ha!' said Laurent 'Tell me, what do you observe?'

'I notice,' Paul answered, 'a dreadful variableness of mood, a feverish exaltation, followed by a serious depression, an increasing desire to be alone, a sort of nervous resentment of any inquiry as to her state of health. That, I think, is about all. I dare say that everything I may have noticed may be attributable to her present condition, and that in my inexperience of such things I may be unduly nervous; but I wish you'd make an opportunity of seeing her casually in the course of the day. For Heaven's sake, doctor,' he added with a laugh, 'don't let her guess that I sent you. The one thing she most resents is having the mere suggestion offered that she should see a doctor.'

Laurent rubbed his close-cropped silver head with one hand, and with the other wrung a few drops of liquid from his huge moustache, looking up at Paul meanwhile with a crafty benevolence in his eye, like a supernaturally wise old parrot.

'Ah yes!' he hummed in a deep nasal tone, which Paul knew well already as being characteristic of him when he had to reason out a problem as he talked. 'Monsieur Armstrong, the man who has half-confidences with his physician is in serious error.'

'I don't understand,' said Paul.

'You know of nothing,' said Laurent, 'which would help to explain these symptoms apart from the fact that madame believes herself to be about to become a mother?'

'Nothing else,' Paul answered in some astonishment, 'Unless——'

Laurent, holding up his bowl in both hands, echoed:

'Sinon?——'

'Well,' said Paul, 'I'm afraid that I may have been a little neglectful lately. I have a piece of work in hand which occupies me a great deal. I may, perhaps, be too absorbed in it.'

'That, of course, is perhaps possible,' said Laurent 'I will contrive to see her in the course of the day, and you may trust an old doctor's *savoir faire*. She shall not guess that you sent me.'

Immediately upon this the doctor's servant rapped at the door to say that all was ready, and Paul took his leave. He went immediately to his study, and there the embers of last night's fire, being fanned ever so little, began to glow again, and he became absorbed in his work, insomuch that when the bell rang for déjeûner at noon he was amazed to notice how quickly time had flown. When he got to table Annette was in her place, still looking a trifle pale and heavy-eyed, but evidently much relieved since he had last seen her.

'I want you to do me a little favour, Paul,' she said

'Yes,' he answered gaily.

'I want what you call—what is your word for it? Oh yes, I know—I want what you call a pick-me-up. Will you share a pint of wine with me? I want a glass —just one glass of champagne. I quite long for it.'

'Why, yes,' said Paul, 'that is a simple matter enough,' and he gave the order for the wine.

Annette drank the greater part of it, and began to glow and sparkle. The colour came back to her cheeks and the light to her eyes. She was unusually bright and animated, and chattered all manner of

good-humoured nonsense with the juge de paix and the garde-champêtre.

‘That is your medicine, my dear,’ said Paul, in a half-whisper, tapping the bottle with a finger-nail. ‘I shall prescribe it for you daily.’

She made a little face at him and laughed. ‘I don’t like the stuff,’ she said, ‘very often, but I longed for it this morning; and, oh! I am better for it.’

They were as much at home in the Hotel of the Three Friends by this time as if they had lived there all their lives. There was no stranger present at the meal, and it was not at all a surprising thing when Annette floated away to the piano at the further end of the room and began to tinkle at the keys there. She was by no means an accomplished musician, but she played a few little airs with a sort of spontaneity and grace, and she had a sweet, thin, bird-like voice, a clear and liquid note, which was perhaps her greatest charm. She searched among the music upon the top of the piano, flicking the untidy scattered leaves until she found a song she knew.

‘Music, messieurs,’ she said, ‘is an aid to digestion; I will make a sandwich of sentiment for you—cheese on the one side, dessert on the other, and love in the middle.’

The garde and the juge and the local huissier and the bachelor chemist all beat the hafts of their knives on the table in applause, and she sang, with a vivacity and archness Paul had never before observed in her, a snatch of cheap Belgian sentimentalism:

‘Toux les deux, la main dans la main,
Nous poursuivions notre chemin,
Sous la céleste voûte;

Les doux échos mystérieux
Répéter nos baisers joyeux
Tout le long—tout le long de la route.'

And whilst she was warbling the door of the salle opened and in walked Laurent.

'Pardon, madame,' he cried; 'do not permit me to interrupt you.'

But Annette had already risen from the piano, and had closed the lid of the instrument.

'My sister has gone to Janenne,' he explained, 'and I am left breakfastless. You hungry rascals have not eaten everything, I hope?'

The Flemish maid would lay an instant cover for Monsieur Laurent, and room was made for him at the table with something like enthusiasm. He began to talk vivaciously scraps of local news gathered on his morning rounds among his patients, and from time to time he turned to Paul to explain some rustic allusion or phrase. He made himself charming, and since he did not explain that he had purposely dismissed his sister for the day in order to find an excuse for his visit to the hotel, Annette had no present suspicion of him. They had a little playful badinage together, and Laurent, turning mock-sentimental, lamented his celibacy so quaintly that she broke into peals of silvery laughter over him. Paul was pleased with her, and half inclined to be proud of her for the first time in his life, though he had a nervous fear lest her gaiety should topple over like an unskilled artist on the slack wire.

By-and-by Laurent set about his meal in a business-like fashion, and Paul strolled quietly from the room. The others, juge and garde and huissier and chemist, chief of gendarmerie, and all the rest of the regular frequenters of the table, were called away

by their own avocations. Paul, sitting with his study-door ajar, looking as if prepared to be absorbed in labour at any moment, watched them as they went out by ones and twos, and knew that at last Laurent and Annette were together. The heat of summer noon was in the air. The *place* was empty, and there was everywhere a humming silence through which his ear discerned now and then the deeper hum of Laurent's voice. Not a word was audible, or would have been even had Paul cared to play the eavesdropper, but one might have thought that the doctor was preaching a sermon.

'He's a wise old man, is Laurent,' said Paul to himself, 'and, for a bachelor, he seems to have an uncommon good knowledge of women. That comes out of a doctor's practice, I dare say.'

The heat of the day, the single glass of wine he had taken, and the hearty meal he had eaten after his morning fast, all combined to make him drowsy, and he had fallen into a half-slumber in which he saw hazily the creatures of his fancy moving behind the footlights, when the door of the dining-room opened, and he heard Laurent's words of farewell:

'Croyez moi, Madame Armstrong, c'est une affaire assez grave. Mais courage, courage! Et—bon jour—et bonne espérance.'

Then the door closed, and the doctor's sturdy feet in their thick-soled boots went echoing along the parquet, clattered for a moment on the pavement outside, and were lost to hearing.

Paul woke with a numbness at the heart. The affair was serious; but courage, and good hope! That sounded grave. He rose from his chair, the pipe between his lips still sending up a spiral of blue smoke. He was asking himself whether he should go

in to the next apartment either to comfort or to question, when the door of the *salle à manger* again opened, and Annette stole into his room. She pushed the door wide and stood framed for an instant against the shadow of the corridor. She was dressed in some filmy white stuff, with a great blue bow at the throat and a bow of scarlet in her hair. She had an odd taste in contrasts, but the Parisian touch was always evident in what she wore, and if her scheme of personal adornment were sometimes quaint, it was always artistic. Paul noticed then, and remembered always, a strange pathos in her look. She seemed for the moment curiously childlike. Her face had once more lost its colour, and her eyes, which were thick with tears, were like those of a child grown frightened in loneliness, and searching doubtfully and almost in terror for the homeward way.

She put out her hands towards him with a gesture of appeal. It seemed as if she asked his pardon, though why that should be he could not guess, and as he made a hasty movement towards her she entered the room suddenly, and thrust the door vehemently behind her so that the corridor rang with the echo of the sound.

'Paul,' she said, 'Paul!' and sinking on her knees before him, she threw her arms round him and began to cry bitterly.

He tried to raise her, but her arms clung tightly, and he could do nothing but stand there awkwardly and smooth her hair with foolish, half-articulate expressions of sympathy. She cried as if broken-hearted for a time, and when at last his caressing fingers raised her face towards his own, her chin and throat were wet with tears, and her eyes were still brimming. He coaxed her with much difficulty to an arm-chair, and when he had seated her there he

knelt beside her with an arm about her waist.

'What is it, little woman?' he asked. 'Dear little woman, what is it?'

He had striven in vain with his disengaged hand to draw away the interlaced fingers she had knitted across her eyes, but at this appeal she cast her arms abroad and looked at him with a swift intentness through her tears.

'You mean it?' she asked with an eager fierceness in her eyes and voice.

'Mean it?' he answered. 'What, the dear little woman? Of course I mean it.'

'Paul,' she said, 'if you will only love me, if you will only strive with me, I will love and worship you all my days.'

'What can I do?' he asked. 'Tell me, and I will do it'

'Oh!' she cried, beating the air with her hands, 'these moods, these follies! they are my own fault I am dividing myself from you. I am breaking my own heart; I am miserable for no reason. Help me, Paul, help me! Be at least my friend!'

He was not a man to whom such an appeal could be made in vain, and his heart acquitted him of any falsehood when he assured her that he loved her, and would yield her any earthly service in his power.

'But, sweetheart,' he said, 'tell me how I am to help you. Don't think that there is any reproach in what I say, but often when I wish to be near you you banish me, and I have to go, because all my thought is not to harass you. I heard what Laurent said just now——'

Her face hardened into an expression of inquiry. Her black brows shot down level, over her brown

eyes, and the eyes gloomed at him with a threat in them.

'You heard?' she said.

'Yes,' he responded caressingly, 'I heard his parting words, "l'affaire est assez grave—mais courage, et bonne espérance."'

'Is that all you heard?' she demanded, bending the level challenge of her brows still lower, and snaking away her form from his embrace as if she feared it.

'I heard no more,' said Paul.

'Ah, well!' she answered in a sudden lassitude. She fell back into the arm-chair with closed eyes, and suffered her hands to fall laxly on either side of her knees. 'You will find me a changed girl, Paul. I am going to have done with my moods, and I am going to follow—I am going to follow—what is it I am going to follow? M. Laurent knows. Oh yes, it is the goddess of hygiene! I am to bathe, and I am to drive, and I am to walk, and I am to be equably cheerful, and I am to give up my black coffee and my strong tea and my eau des Carmes, and I am never to drink wine until dinner-time, and then only two glasses—two little glasses of claret or burgundy—and then I am to be quite an angel of good temper, and everybody is to adore me. That is the verdict of M. Laurent. Do you think, Paul, I shall be charming when I have done all these things?'

'You would be charming, little sweetheart,' said Paul, 'whether you did them or no. It is not a question of charm, but of health, dear, and Laurent is a very sage old gentleman indeed, and you may follow his counsel with perfect certainty. I can't help owning,' he went on, 'that I've been a little nervous lately about the fluctuation of your spirits, and I'm glad he happened to drop in and have a talk with

you.'

She flashed from languor into a mood of vivid irony. Her lips curled, her eyes opened wide with a dancing beryl-coloured flame behind them, and her eyebrows arched in a sublime disdain.

'You didn't send him?' she asked

'I?' said Paul, with a guilty stammer—' I—send him?'

'Now, before you lie,' said Annette, with a tragic gesture of the hand, 'hear me. The window of our dressing-room happens—just happens, by God's providence to confute a fool—to command a view of Dr. Laurent's door. I saw you go in; I could even hear you knock. Do you think you can deceive me? Pah!'

She rose, evaded his arm, swept from the room in a kind of torrential rage, banged the door behind her, and was gone.

He was so amazed at it all—the swift interchange of penitence to self-abasement, languor, challenge, suspicion, wrath, and accusation—that he stood dumfounded, not knowing what to think. He heard the flying feet and swirling skirts as Annette raced upstairs. In the drowsy stillness of the afternoon he heard the door of her bedroom close with a decisive click, and then the sharp shooting of the bolt and the shrieking of the key as it turned in its unaccustomed wards. Still standing there in wonderment, he listened to her footsteps overhead as she dashed through the dressing-room, and an instant later came the slamming and the locking of a second door.

He sat down, reached mechanically for his pipe, beat out the ashes from it on the level tiles of the hearth, and mechanically filled and lit it. He searched his mind for a clue to the whole extraordinary business of the last half-hour, and

could find but one: the anxieties of coming maternity, and possibly the change of frame which women suffer at such times, had unhinged Annette, and had disturbed her mind and nerves from their ordinary balance. He longed for an interview with Laurent, but he dared not seek it. He would have sent a messenger to him, but he also might be watched by those keen and too observant eyes.

As he sat and thought things over he gradually gathered courage, and at length he began to discern a touch of comedy in that which had so much disturbed him. It was a very tender and touching comedy, but it was comedy all the same—a bird-soul of light and laughter hovering over a lake of tears. The *dear* little woman! He had thought her unimpressionable, even a little stupid, and he saw now how much he had wronged her. She was full of emotions he had never suspected, and could not even now analyze. Her very waywardness, the strange caprices of feeling which had so astonished him as they chased each other, began to look charming in the new light his thoughts cast upon them.

'Thus it is,' said Paul to himself, 'we come into the world casting our shadows before us, and making laughter and trouble of all sorts for our makers before we are born.'

It was obviously the mother's lot to suffer much. It was obviously the man's business to be very patient, very tender. He began to think himself exceeding good and wise. He was learning to appreciate a new feature in human nature, something which had its element of unpleasantness if not rightly seen and understood, but, being so seen and understood, a very beautiful and tender thing indeed. There was a sacred shyness in his thoughts, but overriding this a triumphant tender understanding of the humours of

the situation which tickled him most delicately. It would be easy to be patient now that he understood so well, and he resolved upon patience comfortably.

He sat so absorbed in his own fancies and feelings that he was unaware of the rumble of a carriage and the 'clicking of horses' hoofs over the cobbles of the *place*, but he knew of these things a moment later when the broad-beamed Evariste rapped at his study-door, and announced two gentlemen to see him. Straight upon her heels came Darco in a silk hat of splendid lustre, and a nobly frogged overcoat with costly astrachan at cuffs and collar, as though, instead of being the sweltering day it was, it had been mid-winter. Behind him came Pauer, in tweeds and a white waistcoat, his face gold colour with his ancient jaundice, and his eyes a pale saffron. They were both in the best of good humours, and Darco stood on tiptoe to take Paul by the shoulders.

'Ve have done id!' he cried in a voice of triumph. 'Ve have done id this time, ant no mistake!'

'What have you done?' asked Paul.

'Vot have we done, Pauer—eh? Vot haf we done?' cried Darco. 'Tell him and have done with it,' said Pauer.

'Ve have bought the Goncreve,' said Darco, with a glowing air of triumph.

'Bought the what?' asked Paul.

'The Congreve Theatre,' Pauer explained.

'Ah!' said Paul.

'That is vot I am zayink,' cried Darco. 'Ve haf bought the Goncreve. It is in the handts of the decorators now. Ve shall oben in the first week of Sebtemper, ant ve are coing for the gloves. Ve are coing to oben with a gomedy. Do you hear? A

gomedy. Ant you ant I are coing to write that gomedy. Do you understandt?' He slipped out of his overcoat, and threw it into the arm-chair in the corner. Then he banged the lustrous hat upon the table, and snatching up a pen, thrust it into Paul's hand. 'Ve are coing to wride that gomedy, ant ve are coing to begin at vonce—eh?'

'Why, certainly,' said Paul. 'Have you got an idea to work on?'

'My poy,' said Darco, 'I am primming with iteas. I am itching all ofer with iteas, as if I were living in a bag of vleas. I am Cheorge Dargo. Ven you find Cheorge Dargo without iteas you may co to the nearest ghemist ant ask for poison. Take your ben ant sit down, ant I will show you if I haf iteas or no.'

CHAPTER XVII

The work thus abruptly begun lasted for weeks, and Darco's enthusiasm drove Paul before it as if it had been a hurricane. Pauer lounged for a day or two, and then betook his golden visage and saffron eyes to London, leaving the pair to their labours. Paul and Darco worked on an average twelve hours a day, and it happened occasionally that a group of terrified *commis voyageurs* would assemble in the passage outside the study anticipating murder, whilst Darco, in Alsatian English, declaimed the passion of his heroine. There were deep wells of laughter here and there in the course of that dramatic pilgrimage.

‘Now, vat I want,’ said Darco, ‘is just this: It is Binda’s endrance. She is a leedle vat you would call distraught, not mat, but ankrished. She is very pretty, she is very bale. She stands at the door, and Raoul does not see her. She is there for vive zeconds to a tick, not more, not less—vive zeconds; write it down. Enter Binda, pause, unobserved, vive zeconds. Have you got it down? She is priddy, she is bale, a leedle touch of colour under the eyes; she is tressed in vite, some filmy kind of stuff, with a plue bow at the throat and a bit of scarlet ribbon, or red flower, or zomethings, in her hair. And zo she stands at the door and she looks at Raoul, and he toes not know she is there, ant vor just those vive zeconds there is no music, not a note, and then—— Look here, I am Cheorge Dargo; I can write a blay, and stage a blay, and baint the zeenery for a blay, and I can gompose the music for a blay, and I can berform on every damned inztrument in the orghestra. And this is vod Binda does: Bale and bretty, do you zee? at the door for vive zilent zeconds, and then with all her zoul one great appeal, she crosses to Raoul at his desk petween zecond and third O.P., ant she coes like this.’

The fat, brief-statured man waddled in his enthusiasm from Binda’s imaginary entering-place towards Paul with an allure of comedy-pathos so piercing in its effect that the amanuensis cast both hands in the air with a shriek of helpless mirth, and, losing his balance, wallowed on the floor amidst untidy heaps of books, newspapers, and manuscript.

‘Vod is the madder?’ Darco cried, rushing towards Paul, and leaning over him with instant solicitude.

Darco’s collaborateur was smitten with a sudden shame and repentance.

‘A kind of spasm,’ he said breathlessly—‘a pain just here.’

Darco helped him to his feet.

‘You are too emotional, tear poy,’ he said; ‘you are too easily vorked upon. I will rink the pell for a prandy-ant-zoda, ant you shall lie town vor a leettle while.’

It was the thick-set Evariste who brought the syphon bottle and the small carafe of brandy and the tumblers, and it was she who caught Paul on her broad Flemish bosom when the drink, which he had accepted soberly, went the wrong way, and with a wild snort into his tumbler he fell backwards.

‘Le bauvre cheune homme à dombé zupidement malade.’

The poor young man was horribly afraid at first of having irredeemably hurt Darco’s feelings, but that excellent enthusiast had not even the beginning of an idea that it was possible for anyone to laugh at him unless he chose of purpose aforethought to be laughable. Thus the episode passed lightly enough, but Paul was continually in danger of a reversion to it whenever the distraught heroine appeared upon the scene.

He saw but little of Annette during the weeks of labour to which Darco’s new enterprise enforced him. She slept alone, and was rarely accessible before the mid-day breakfast or later than the dinner-hour. Laurent visited her almost daily, and she seemed to submit to his attentions with a better grace than she had shown at first; but she was still subject to those rapid and violent alternations of mood which had already perplexed and alarmed her husband. She had apparently conceived an aversion to being seen abroad, and it was with the greatest

difficulty that she could be persuaded to take an occasional carriage drive.

'I shall venture to advise you,' said Laurent to Paul 'You tell me that your work is almost finished, and that in a day or two you are setting out for London.'

'Yes,' said Paul.

'You will do well to take Mrs. Armstrong with you,' Laurent said. 'She is in need of change and distraction. This quiet, dead-alive existence is not good for her. You must insist upon her shaking herself free of the habits of seclusion into which she is falling. I should urge you very strongly to find some good creature of her own sex who would be a companion to her. She is living too much alone; she has too few interests.'

'Well, of course,' Paul answered, 'that is very largely my fault; but the press of work is over now, and I shall be able to give more time and care to her.'

'You will find it advisable,' said Laurent, with a certain meaning in his face and voice which Paul at the moment could not fathom.

Something occurred to put an end to their conversation, and it was not resumed before Paul's departure with Darco for London. When it came to the point Annette flatly refused to go to England. She averred that she was not strong enough to travel, that she was altogether better and happier where she was than she hoped to be elsewhere.

'You will be back in a month's time,' she urged. 'You will be busy all the while you are away. The theatre will claim you day and night, and I should be moping in some great hotel without a soul to speak to. I am quite at home amongst the people here, and they are used to me and to my ways.'

Paul urged Laurent's suggestion upon her, and she received it with an unexpected anger.

'What? A companion? And may I ask you why?'

'For no other earthly reason than that you should have a friend at hand—somebody who might on occasion be useful to you.'

'Oh no,' said Annette, tossing her head, and then looking askance at him, with half-veiled eyes: 'you would like to have me watched and spied upon, and to have a report of my conduct sent to you, as if I were a prisoner or a maniac.'

'My dear child,' said Paul, in sheer amazement, 'what extraordinary dream is this? What has put so strange a fancy in your mind?'

'Tell me,' cried Annette, suddenly whirling round upon him, 'what is it you suspect? What intrigue? What plot? What secret?'

'Come, come,' he said, 'there is no plot—no secret But you know that you are not quite yourself of late, and it is not right or kind to leave you here in your present delicate health without some responsible person to look after you.'

'Has M. Laurent been poisoning your mind against me?' she demanded, with a curious slowness. She advanced a foot as she spoke, and moved forward towards him with a something between fear and anger in her eyes.

'My dear child,' he answered, 'what strange illusions are you nursing? Intrigues and plots, and watching and reports! Don't believe in any such nonsense, I implore you.'

'What has Laurent been telling you about me? I insist—I *will* know.'

'Laurent has been telling me that he thinks you are

likely to find a change beneficial, and that you ought not to be left here alone.'

'Why not?' she asked, with a flash of rage. 'Why am I incapable of taking care of myself?'

'You are not strong or well,' said Paul. 'You are not quite mistress of your own emotions.'

'Ah!' she cried, 'now we are to have the accusation. I am going mad! Is that it? You would like to get rid of me on that ground? Do I understand at last?'

Paul would have been blind if he had failed to see that beneath the air of scorn she strove to wear there was some real terror in her mind, and he did his best to soothe it.

'All these things are the merest fancies,' he began.

'Oh yes,' she broke in. 'Delusions! That is step number one. We suffer from delusions.'

'If you believe in anything of the sort that you suggest, you are mistaken. If you wish to be happy, you must banish all that nonsense from your mind. It *is* pure nonsense, dearest. Why should Laurent try to poison my mind? He likes you very well. He takes a warm interest in you, to the best of my belief. But you are really very fanciful and strange to-day, and you have been giving yourself up far too much to solitude for two months past. It is your duty to yourself and me to accept Laurent's advice. You must not be left here alone. You may choose your own companion. She shall be entirely at your orders. You shall engage her yourself; you shall pay her salary; she shall be at your own control.'

'I know,' she answered, tapping her foot upon the floor. 'I know. The truth is, you never really cared for me, and now you have grown tired. You want to be rid of me.'

‘Now, that,’ said Paul, ‘is not only nonsense, it is very wicked nonsense, and I will not permit it The whole matter lies with yourself. If you continue to nurse those wrong and foolish thoughts, you will make it necessary for me to insist upon your obedience. If you will behave like a sensible creature, I may feel justified in yielding to your wish, and leaving you behind. But if I have any more of these absurd suspicions I shall not venture to leave you here.’

He spoke with a purposed sternness, but with something of a heartache, too. There was no escape in his own mind from the belief that the whole change which had of late revealed itself in Annette was due to the fact of approaching maternity, and he had a man’s natural pity for her sufferings. He bore her fancies with patience, but he thought it best for her that he should feign some anger at them.

The plan seemed to act for the time being at least, for after a moment’s incertitude, in which she seemed to battle with herself, she turned her humid brown eyes upon him, and said softly:

‘I am very foolishly suspicious sometimes, Paul. I know—oh, I know that I am not the girl I used to be. Bear with me, dear. I shall be different by-and-by.’

‘I am sure of that,’ he answered, and she approaching him with an appealing languor in her eyes, and in the carriage of her whole figure, he took her into his arms, and for a minute or two she cried quietly upon his shoulder. He patted and caressed her, and she looked up with a quivering face.

‘I will never think or say those things again. I know how wrong they are, but, Paul, they come into my mind, and I cannot resist them sometimes. But I will—I will in future. You shall never hear them any

more. But I want you to believe me, dearest, in just this one little thing. It will be the best and kindest thing that you can do for me to leave me here alone whilst you are away in London. I am not without friends here, when I can find the courage and the strength to see them. M. Laurent will look after me. You will write to me every day, won't you? I shall not be lonely. But the idea of having a stranger about me, fussing and inquiring, is horrible. I can't bear it.'

'Very well, dear,' said Paul, greatly relieved at the turn things had taken, 'you shall have your way. But you must remember, dear '—he spoke as soothingly as he could—' it is my duty to see that you are cared for properly, and I must not leave you to yourself unless I am quite assured beforehand that you are certain to be bright and brave when I am gone.'He placed his hand beneath her chin, and coaxed her eyes to meet his own. 'You won't nourish these distressing fancies any more, will you?'

'No,' she answered, clinging to him; 'they are all gone. They are all done with. You will be kind and good to me, Paul—I know you will. It isn't a very great favour for a grown-up woman to ask to be allowed to take care of herself, is it, Paul, darling?'

'That must depend,' he answered gaily, 'whether the grown-up woman is well enough and strong enough for the task.'

'Ah, well,' said Annette with an equal brightness, 'you shall see.'

There were still two days' work to be done at the comedy, and Darco was resolute not to leave for London until all was finished. The first two acts were already in rehearsal at the Congreve, and Pauer, who was one of those old stagers of the profession who know their business upside down and inside out, was

in superintendence until Darco should arrive to mould the whole production to his own exigent fancy.

The change in Annette was remarkable. She had evidently made up her mind for a struggle with herself, and she kept her inequalities of mood in astonishing control, all things considered. She became interested in the work in hand, and took some trifle of needlework to the study for the final reading of the piece between Darco and her husband Paul, with the manuscript before him, acted the whole comedy as brilliantly as an arm-chair rendering could go, and Darco with notebook and pencil listened in keenly attentive silence, note-taking here and there.

'Id is a gread vork,' he announced solemnly when it was all over. 'Id is peautifully written, and that is your affair, younk Armstronk. But the goncebtion is clorious, ant that is my affair. Vot? Not? I am Cheorge Dargo, and I know my trade.'

They were both up at four o'clock next morning to catch the mail to Calais, and Paul was able to leave Annette without severe misgiving. Laurent had promised to look after her, and the improvement in her own hopes appeared so manifest that he felt safe about her, except for those slight inevitable uneasinesses which occur at such a time. But he was only to be away for a month at the outside, and he had Laurent's assurance that he might make his mind easy. Annette herself rose to see Paul away, in spite of his remonstrances. She nestled by him whilst he stood to drink his coffee in the gray dawn of the morning, in the great, empty, echoing *salle à manger*, with Darco rolling about the house like an exaggerated football impelled by unseen influences, and roaring tempestuous orders like a ship's captain

in a squall.

Never in his life had Paul felt so wholly tender as he did then towards Annette. He had begun to read so many new meanings into her of late. She seemed no longer the molluscous little creature he had once thought her, but a woman, capable of much suffering, of some determination, of real affection. He was leaving her at the very time at which she most needed his guardianship and care, and at the hour, too, when she seemed first really to confide in him and cling to him. His eyes were moist when he held her in a last embrace, and ran into the street in answer to Darco's final call. His collaborateur was already seated in the voiture, glossy silk hat, astrachan cuffs and collar, gold-rimmed eyeglass, and all The *cocker's* whip cracked stormily, and the fat Flemish horse started off at a pace of four miles an hour.

'Mark my vorts,' said Darco, as they rolled along the country road towards the station at which they were to intercept the northward travelling Malle des Indes, 'you are dravelling to vame ant vorchune.'

'Well,' said Paul, 'that's pleasant to know, isn't it, old Darco?'

'It is very bleasant,' returned Darco. 'You ant I are an iteal gouple. We fit each other like the two halves of a pear. I am a boet. Do you hear me, younk Armstronk? I am a boet I am a berson of imachination. I can invent. I can gontrive. There is nopoty in the vorlt who can gonstruct a blot like me. But I gannot egspress myself. Now, you gan egspress me; that is your desdiny. You will egspress Cheorge Dargo. You will descend to future aitches as the dranslader of Cheorge Dargo.'

'It is a happy lot, old chap,' said Paul, 'and I am so

proud of it that I am going to sleep.'

'Lacy tewle!' said Darco, 'give me the script. I haf been thinking of somethings.'

How Darco worked, stormed, domineered in the ensuing month, nobody outside the limits of the Congreve knew. He appalled the timid and maddened the courageous. He was up all night for half a week together, seeming to live with a teaspoon in one hand and a tin of some nutritive meat essence in the other, and always administering doses to himself as if he were a patient in danger of imminent exhaustion.

Mr. Warr was here, under solemn articles not once to varnish the work of art until the run of the piece was over.

'A dreadful circumstance, truly, Mr. Armstrong,' he complained. 'I am deprived of the consolation of one device which has hitherto upheld me at such times of trial. The piece might run, sir, for a year; it might even run for two. There is no looking forward to a definite date of relief, sir. It is like being imprisoned at Her Majesty's pleasure. A painful prospect, Mr. Armstrong—-a period of unassuaged incertitude, sir.' Daroo burst down upon him like a stormy wind.

'Don't stand jattering there. Co ant do somethings.'

'I have nothing at this moment which calls for my attention, I do assure you, Mr. Darco.'

'Then find somethings. There is always blenty for efery-boty to do about a theadre.'

Mr. Warr drifted before the storm, and found a harbour in the painting-room, whence he was blasted five minutes later half shipwrecked and wholly demoralized. But Darco was a general who could spare his forces, and three days before the play was announced for production he addressed his army:

‘Laties and chentlemen, I nefer pelieve in worrying peoples. You haf all done noply. Tomorrow there will be no call. Next day at eleven sharp, eferything as at the broduction. Then it will debend upon yourselves whether you are galled upon to rehearse again or no.’

With this all engaged dispersed well pleased, and Darco announced his intention of dining and going to bed. He ordered dinner for two, and ate his double portion through seven courses, after which he went tranquilly home to his hotel and slept the clock round.

The rehearsal next day was so completely satisfactory that he was content to leave it on its merits, and on the following evening the first production of the new management at the Congreve went with a roar of triumph. There was no mistaking the verdict of the house, and the Press was as emphatic as the first night’s audience.

‘Vod did I dell you?’ Darco asked. ‘Vame and vorchune are at your veed. It vos a luggy day for us to meet. Vot? Not? I am Cheorge Darga!’

Paul was tired, excited, and elated all at once. He had promised to start for Belgium so soon as the verdict of the public was made clear, but he could afford to snatch the journey down to Castle Barfield, and to get a glimpse of the old father. He slept on the journey, and took the last five miles by cab. Armstrong was in his accustomed place amongst the dusty and neglected stock when Paul broke in upon him, somewhat grayer than ever, a little more bent, perhaps, but with just the old look of wise patience in his face, the shaggy eyebrows fringing just the old quiet twinkle in his eyes. He declined to express the least atom of surprise.

‘It’s you, Paul, is it?’ he asked tranquilly, rising to shake hands. ‘You’ve had a grand success, I’m learning. I read the notice in the *Times*.’

‘The play’s all right,’ said Paul. ‘And how’s all here?’

‘Oh,’ said his father, ‘we have our dwallin’ in the middle parts of fortune. We’re neither uplifted nor cast down. Come in, lad. Well all be glad to see ye.’

The old place was exactly as it always had been in his memory, and yet it was all shrunken and narrowed, and had grown meaner and more poverty-stricken than it had used to seem.

He settled down in his old place by the fireside, lit his pipe, listened to the local annals, and prepared to be questioned with respect to his own prospects and affairs.

‘You’ll be growing pretty well to do, Paul?’ said Armstrong.

‘Well, yes,’ said Paul, feeling at a pocket-book which lay at the right side of his tweed coat. ‘I’m getting pretty well-to-do.’

‘Yell be getting married one of these fine days?’ his father asked, twinkling dryly at him.

‘Well, the fact is, sir,’ Paul answered in some embarrassment, ‘I am married.’

‘Holy Paul!’ said Armstrong, and dropped his pipe upon the patchwork rug. Paul stooped for it to cover his own confusion.

‘Yes,’ he said hurriedly, ‘I am married. And I felt such a beast for not having written to tell you all about it that I made up my mind to be my own messenger. The truth is it was all rather hurried, and unexpected—in a way. There had been an attachment for some time, but there was no

immediate thought of marriage, and Annette—that is my wife's name—Annette fell ill, and was not expected to recover, and it was really, to both our minds, a sort of death-bed ceremony, and now she is quite recovered.'

There was such a sense of awkwardness upon him that he boggled the simple story altogether. There was no amazement in his mind at all when his father spoke next. He could have foretold his words.

'Man, 'said Armstrong, 'had ye led the gyirl astray?'

He had never meant to lie about the matter, but at this point-blank thrust he lied.

'My dear old dad!' he said, 'what *are* you thinking of?'

'I beg your pardon, Paul,' said Armstrong—'I beg your pardon.'

They seemed at once to have a gulf between them, though the simple, honest elder, who had probably never lied in the whole course of his life, did not perceive it. Before Paul it gaped unbridgable.

'She's a dear, good little creature,' Paul boggled along, with a disastrous facility of words which had no guidance. 'She's French by descent, but she speaks very good English—very fair English. I taught her. I'll bring her down to see you. We're living in Belgium at present, at a little place called Montcourtois, a charming little place. She likes the quiet of it, and it's very favourable for work. If one lives in town there are so many calls upon one's time. You can't get really settled down to the development of an idea, you know.'

'Ay,' said Armstrong, 'I can imagine that. But, Paul, lad, I could have wished ye'd written.'

‘Don’t make it harder than it is, sir,’ Paul appealed. ‘I ought to have written. I’m very sorry that I didn’t, and I’ve come down purposely to explain it all.’

‘Well,’ said his father, ‘better late than never. What kind is she like, lad?’

‘Well,’ said Paul, ‘you can’t expect a man to describe the girl he’s in love with so as to satisfy anybody else She’s slight and not very tall; she has brown hair and brown eyes; she has a very pretty voice, and very dainty ways.’

‘Ay, ay, lad!’ said Armstrong; ‘but her soul—her intelligence?’

‘She’s bright and clever,’ Paul cried, rather protestingly. ‘She takes a keen interest in my work. We’re dearly attached to each other, and I am looking forward to a happy life.’

‘What like are her people?’ Armstrong asked.

‘Well, I don’t know a great deal about her people. She’s an orphan. She has an elder sister, and an aunt and an uncle or two.’

‘She’ll be a Catholic, will she?’

‘No,’ said Paul; ‘her family is Huguenot. I think I should rather have shrunk from marrying a Catholic. There’s a sort of prejudice of which it isn’t easy to free the mind.’

He was sinking clean out of sight of his own esteem; but it was his sole business for the time being to save his father as far as possible, and he had grown reckless of himself.

‘She shall come to see you,’ he went on, ‘and you wont be able to help making friends with her. I’ve to be back in Montcourtois to-morrow night, or she’ll be worrying her life out. That means I must catch the one o’clock express for town, and that, again, means

that I've only four hours to spend at home this time.'

'Ye'll have a glass of whisky, Paul?'

'I will, sir,' Paul answered, 'with all the pleasure in life.'

So Armstrong went to the cupboard and brought out a bottle and the sugar basin, and set the kettle on the fire, and then sat down and loaded up his pipe in silence.

'There's much I'd like to say, Paul,' he began at length.

There was nothing in the act which could have moved a stranger to anything but a smile at the oddity of it, but it touched Paul almost to tears when the gray old man lugged out of his coat-tail pocket a whole newspaper, and having pinched from it a most economical fragment, singed his fingers at the bars in the act of lighting it. He had laughed at that little quaintness a hundred times as a lad, and it was somehow the first thing that had come home to him as a real reminder to be in want of reformation.'

They grew more at ease. Armstrong took up the subject he had broken a few minutes earlier.

'I don't guess,' he said, 'whether you're believe these thoughts for yourself, but there's a gap between you and me, Paul. Ye've had grave troubles.

'I have, sir,' said Paul.

'I've known it,' said his father. 'I've thoughts in my mind when ye're away: "Paul's blythe," or I thenk of ye, lad; I sit here in the auld arm-chair and think of ye, and eh, man, I'm just as certain of myself as if I were aware of every fact in your existence. Promise me this. I'm wearing we meet this last time for ever, and I want ye to keep the auld feelings from time to time. Write a little more regularly, about ye. Take me

into confidence when ye're gone.

Paul promised, and all the estrangement seemed to melt away. This was to be their last meeting, both or them guessed it, and when at last it grew to the time Paul must go, the father went down the long hall the front-door. Paul fumbled for the pocket-book in the darkness of the passage found a piece of paper, and kissed the old man at parting he thrust this into his hand.

Arrived at the station nearest to Montcourtois; then the voiture from the hotel with the grinning Victor on the box, and Laurent waiting.

'No bad news' asked Paul.

'Things are not quite what they might be or what they should be,' Laurent answered. 'But get in, and we will talk as we drive. Do you remember,' he asked, whilst Victor filled the night with the noise of a fusillade of whip-crackings—'do you remember that I told, you some time ago that a man should have no secrets from his physician?

'Yes,' said Paul. 'Well?'

'Have you had any secrets from me in respect to Madame Armstrong?'

'No; nothing that I can think of. I don't quite see what you are driving at.'

'Do you remember,' Laurent asked, 'the evening on which you first called me to attend her—the night on which she cried out that they were dancing in the wood, and that their bones were white? Do you remember?'

'Good God!' cried Paul; 'do I remember?'

'Did you ever diagnose that case? the doctor asked.

'No. Do you mean to say that her mind is affected, that——

‘You never guessed?’ asked Laurent, leaning across to him and grasping him by the arm—‘you never guessed? Upon your life and honour?’

‘Guessed? Guessed what?’

‘Now,’ said Laurent, ‘I am going to hurt you, and I cannot help it. I am sorry, but it must be.’

‘Speak out, man!’ gasped Paul—‘speak out!’

‘That,’ said Laurent, ‘was delirium tremens.’

They had three miles to travel, and not another word was spoken on the road; but as they passed the doctor’s house a voice called out to him, and the driver pulled up.

‘Stay with me a moment, Mr. Armstrong,’ said Laurent ‘I will but give this man an ordonnance for the pharmacien, and I will be with you. Drive home, Victor!’

The carriage rattled off; the doctor, the messenger, and Paul stood at the kerb for a minute or so. The carriage rumbled into the distance; a window was heard to open and to dose. Laurent took Paul’s arm, and they walked together without a word until they came in front of the window of the room which Paul had used as a study. The blind was up, a lamp was lit, and the whole room was visible from the roadway.

‘Mon Dieu!’ said Laurent in a whisper.

Annette was there in her nightdress, looking from side to side like a hunted creature. A decanter stood upon the table. She approached it crouching, seized it with one hand, took a tumbler in the other, and three times poured and three times drank as if the draught were water; then she glided away and closed the door behind her.

CHAPTER XVIII

For any and every episode of his life save this, Paul, when he chose to think about it, could make a fairly expressive picture in his mind, and could bring back something of the emotion of the time. Here he could remember only that Laurent clutched him by the arm, and that he turned on Laurent with something of the vague appeal for aid which might be imagined in the mind of a frightened child. He saw that a thousand signs which he should have recognised had escaped him, and in the flush of real apprehension which followed this thought he seemed to himself to have been almost wilfully blind to the truth. There were so many things which might have guided him, and he had taken warning by none of them.

'I beg your pardon, old chap,' he said to Laurent, speaking unconsciously in English, 'but I'm a little bit upset. You would not mind lending me your arm inside?'

'Assuredly not,' cried Laurent, still supporting him; and the two men entered the hotel together.

The Solitary still remembered how his clumsy footsteps seemed to fumble at the stone stairs, and the very pressure of Laurent's arm upon his own shoulder was still a living sensation with him; yet for the actual moment thought and sensation alike seemed to have been abolished. Laurent, when the study had once been reached, helped Paul into a

chair, and stood over him with a look of friendly solicitude.

‘A little stimulant, I think,’ he said at last, in a tone of commonplace, and set a hand on the decanter which Annette had so recently laid down.

‘Not that, Laurent!’ cried Paul, with a gesture the other was swift to interpret.

The doctor left the room with a meaningless, friendly tap on Paul’s shoulder, and came back a few instants later with a bottle of brandy.

‘I insist,’ he said commandingly, in answer to Paul’s rejecting wave of the hand.

When Laurent insisted there were few people who said him nay, and Paul took the potion which was poured out for him.

He could remember it all, from this point onward, as if he had been a mere disinterested spectator of the scene. He could see his own figure straightening itself mechanically in the chair in which it sat. He could see himself mechanically throwing one leg over another, and assuming an attitude of indifference and ease. He could see himself distinctly in the act of knocking out the ashes of his pipe upon the grate; in the refilling and lighting of it; in the numberless little gestures which seemed to indicate an entire possession of himself And all the while something was booming in his mind as if the word ‘lost ‘were only half articulated there—a scarcely uttered word that carried doom with it.

‘I do not know,’ said Laurent, speaking, for a man of his experience and authority, rather brokenly—‘I do not know whether it was my duty to have spoken earlier. I have not known you very long; but we have learned to like each other, and I would have done you the service to tell you what I knew a month or

two ago if I could have found the courage. But I will ask you to believe that I was much perplexed, and that I could not resolve in my own mind whether or not you knew already. It would have seemed a cruel thing to intrude upon such a secret.'

'Yes,' said Paul, breaking silence for the first time since he had entered the house, 'I understand that' He pulled gravely at his pipe, and sipped again at the glass Laurent had poured out for him. 'What's going to be done?' he asked; and then, with a sudden petulance, 'What have I got to do?'

'In a patient so young,' said Laurent, 'unless there is some hereditary taint to combat, there should be no impossibility in establishing a cure. What of Madame Armstrong's heredity?' What did Paul know of Madame Armstrong's heredity? Save for a casual glimpse of her sister, who had seemed to him as commonplace as candle-light, he had no knowledge of any person of her name or family. He sat silent, not knowing how to express his ignorance without compromising Annette and himself. But Laurent pressed him.

'Do you know of anything,' he asked, 'which should make the task of cure difficult?' And, being thus pressed, there seemed nothing for it but for Paul to say that he knew nothing. 'Then,' said Laurent, 'we must not despair. I have already spoken to your wife, and have pointed out to her the very serious nature of her danger, and she has promised me amendment. With what result,' he added, throwing his arms abroad, 'you see.'

'You think it a serious danger? Paul asked him.

'My God!' ejaculated Laurent—'serious! But an instant, my dear Armstrong. We are not thinking of a male inebriate; we are thinking of a woman—a

question so different that there is barely any comparison to be made.'

'Is that so? said Paul, in a voice of little interest, though he felt for the moment as if his heart were breaking.

'That is so,' returned Laurent, with emphasis; 'and I can assure you that, if you desire to effect a cure here, you must betake yourself—and betake yourself at once—to heroic measures. Your wife must be placed, without delay, in competent hands, and no restraint must be placed upon those who undertake to treat her.'

'Very well,' said Paul dully, 'I understand all that We'll have another talk in the morning, if you don't mind.'

Laurent forbore to speak further just then, but he kept Paul in silent company for an hour, and was more useful in that way than he could have been if he had poured out the gathered knowledge of an encyclopaedia upon him. He gave that dumb sense of sympathy which, in hours of deep distress, is so very much more potent than the spoken word. Paul at last rose and shook him by the hand.

'Good-night,' he said, 'and thank you.'

Laurent accepted his dismissal, returned the grip, took up his hat and moved away. It would appear that he had not gone far, for when an instant later Paul poured out a second or third glass of cognac for himself, there came a tap upon the study window, and Laurent's face was visible there dose to one of the lower panes. Paul threw the window open and looked out at him.

'You have something to say?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Laurent, with a grave and tender face, 'I have this one thing to say: Do not follow that

sorrowful example.'

'Oh,' said Paul, 'have no fear there; my temptation does not lie in that direction.'

'My dear young friend,' said Laurent, 'no man until he is tempted knows in what direction his temptation lies.'

They shook hands again through the open window and then parted definitely for the night.

Paul sat long in the silence, not thinking of anything in particular or conscious of any particular emotion. The café on the opposite side of the *place* had long since closed. When Laurent's footsteps had faded out of hearing there was no sound abroad for which it was not necessary to listen, except when a distant dog barked now and then, or the slow rumble of a far-off train came once into hearing and disappeared in the valley with which the railway clove the low hills beyond Janenne. The dark air of night flowed in through the open window, cool and sweet, bringing with it the familiar odours of the pine plantations in which the countryside abounded. Paul smoked pipe after pipe, and he knew very well that if anybody had been there to look at him, he would have seemed unmoved, and yet he seemed to himself more than once to be playing the mountebank with his own trouble, as when, for instance, the lines came into his mind:

> *'Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,*
> *That grief has shaken into frost'*

But all the while there was a slow anguish rising within him or around him. It seemed to reach his breast quite suddenly and almost to stop the beating of his heart. Then it ebbed away again, and he found

himself crooning unemotionally, ‘For years—a measureless ill—for ever, for ever!’ The pain came back, and once more ebbed away. What was it? he asked in the self-torturing way which besets the analyst of his own nature. Self-pity, he answered. Self-pity, pure and simple. He, Paul Armstrong, furnished with heart and brains and social powers, with fortune at hand, and fame to be had for the beckoning, had slid into this sickening quagmire thus early in his life’s pilgrimage, and had come to an arrest there.

Then, out of this profound despondency he arose to a sudden resolution. This was not a matter to be despaired of. It was a thing to fight against, an ill not to be endured, but to be cured. Laurent would help, but the main share of the conflict must fall upon himself. Almost for the first time in his life he was conscious of a clear and definite call to manhood. He was entered for a real strife with Fate—a fight to a finish. Well, he would not shrink from it He set himself to ask what weapons he could use. Patience, tact, determination, sleepless vigilance—they all seemed as if they were to be had for the asking. He resolved upon them all, and so, having closed the window and put out the lamp, he walked heavily up to bed.

Annette’s doors were locked, both that which gave upon the corridor and that which communicated with his own little room. He could but remember how often they had been closed before, and what varying reasons he had been forced to seek and find for her isolation of herself. That riddle was read now. There would be a stormy scene in the morning when he came to tell Annette that he had solved it, and thinking of how he should face it, and of what means were the likeliest to lead to ultimate victory, he lost

something of the sickness of his pain. He undressed and lay down in the dark, but there was no sleep for him until long after the window-blind had grown amber-tinted with the gleam of the level sun upon it.

When he awoke his watch told him that it was near ten o'clock. He rang for his bath, dressed, breakfasted, met the people of the house, and answered their friendly inquiries as to his journey all pretty much as if nothing had occurred to change the whole horizon of his life. He made no inquiries as to Annette, and no news came to him with regard to her.

It was near noonday when Laurent came into his study, very grave and gray, and looking as if he, too, had had a night of severe trouble. Paul read the sympathy in his face, and rose to meet him. The two shook hands, and from that moment there was a real friendship between them. 'You have seen her? Laurent asked.

'Not yet,' said Paul

'You have thought over what I was compelled to tell you—what you saw?'

'Yes; I have thought it all over.

'And your conclusions?'

'To ask the aid of your experience, and to abide by your advice.'

'Thank you,' said Laurent gravely. 'I, too, have been thinking, and perhaps, in my judgment, it may be better that I should first see her alone. In my capacity of physician I can speak impersonally.'

'I am in your hands,' Paul answered, 'and I shall accede to whatever you think is best.'

'Well,' returned Laurent, with a gray smile, 'I do not commonly advocate eavesdropping, but I think

perhaps it may be as well for you to hear our talk together. It will guide you as to what you may say or do hereafter. I will send up my name now, and when I am admitted you may follow to your own small room. Is that espionage? I do not very greatly care myself, for I shall warn her from the first that I shall faithfully report every spoken word so far as I can remember it.'

'I will come,' said Paul. 'I have the right And the more I know the better I can use it.'

Laurent twirled the milled button of the call-bell which stood upon the desk.

'My respects to Madame Armstrong,' he said, when the landlady's middle-aged daughter came in and smoothed her apron as a sign of respect to Monsieur le Médecin. 'I am a few moments late, but I am here to keep my appointment.'

Out went Mademoiselle Adèle, and her slippered footsteps faded up the staircase. There was a sound of knocking, a conversation inaudible to the two who strained their ears to listen, and then mademoiselle was back again.

Madame was *malade—bien malade*—would beg Monsieur le Médecin to excuse her.

'Then I will try,' said Laurent 'I have your authority?'

'Absolutely,' said Paul, and the doctor went creaking up the stairs in his heavy, country-made boots.

Paul sat alone again and listened with his heart in his ears.

A series of raps sounded upon the door above, at first quiet and persuasive, and then increasing in intensity. There came a faint sound of protesting

inquiry, and in answer:

'Dr. Laurent, s'il vous plait, madame.'

There was another protest, and Laurent spoke again:

'But I am here by appointment, madame, and I cannot afford to waste my time.'

And just here a curious and rather embarrassing thing happened, for the doctor, laying a nervous hand upon the door, found it suddenly opened to him with no symptom of resistance.

'A thousand pardons!' he exclaimed. 'Pray tell me when you are ready.'

Annette was at the door like a wild cat, but the square-built toe of Laurent's foot was between it and the jamb. Paul raced up the stairs in his stocking-feet, his boots in his hand. This was not a time for delicacies of sentiment He wished to save Annette. He wished even more to save himself from the misery of a lifelong degradation. He darted into his own room whilst Laurent was still standing like a statue at the door of the adjoining chamber, but reached it barely in time, for on a sudden the door of Annette's apartment was thrown open, and a voice of imperious sarcasm demanded to know to what Madame Armstrong was indebted for this unexpected honour.

'It will be well,' said Laurent in his professional tone, 'for Madame Armstrong to return to bed.'

He turned the key in the door, and at this Annette sent out shriek on shriek, until the whole corridor seemed to shrill with the outcry.

'Madame,' said Laurent in his deep nasal voice, when the clamour died down for a moment, 'your husband is in the house. He is within hearing. I have

his entire authority to speak to you, and I am intent to use it I am here to tell you that you have abused his absence and his confidence, and that on his arrival at Janenne last night I told him the result of my observations during the last four or five weeks.'

Paul, boots in hand, sat on the edge of his own bed, and heard a kind of gasping noise. Then for a moment there was silence until Laurent spoke again.

'If you will permit, madame,' he said, 'this interview may go smoothly. If you choose to be angry, that is your affair. I am authorized by your husband, as your physician, to speak plain truths to you. You need not trouble to deny me, but I see you have already been drinking.'

'How dare you!' she flashed out, and Paul heard the stamp of her little naked foot upon the fox-skin rug which lay beside their bed.

'Madame,' said Laurent, 'there is no question of daring or not daring. I have told your husband everything, and he is sitting in the next room at this moment, and hears every word we speak.'

'Paul!' she cried, 'Paul is here? Why hasn't he been to see me? Why has he no word for me?'

'Madame,' said Laurent sternly, 'I bid you cease these theatrical pretences. Your unhappy husband saw you last night when you three times seized the decanter which had been left for him.'

She gasped: 'You liar!'

'That is all very well, madame,' responded Laurent, 'but my eyes are mine, and I have known the truth for months past. Why do you venture on a hope so vain? Now, I will tell you plainly, Madame Armstrong, you are going on the way to hell. You are to be stopped, and you shall be stopped. Pray make no mistake as to the authority that is to be exerted. It

shall be exerted as mildly as you permit. It shall be exerted as inexorably as the necessities of the case demand I have told you already many times into what a pitfall you were descending, but until last night I never dared to warn your husband. He knows the truth now, knows it all, and he leaves you in my hands. You have not heeded advice or beseeching, and—I say it, believe me, with deep reluctance—we must draw a cordon about you, and protect you from yourself. Pray understand, madame, it is a protective cordon only, and your own action may relax it at any time; but your actions will be watched, as it is my duty to tell you, to the extremest scruple.'

'What do you mean to do? Paul heard her ask in a husky, panting voice, which made him figure in his own mind a hunted creature almost run to ground.

'Nothing more,' Laurent replied, 'nothing more, madame, believe me—nothing more than is dictated by the necessities of the case. You have an ordonnance dating from Paris.

I have instructed the pharmacien that he is no longer to respect it.'

Annette whined at this like a child robbed of a toy.

'I have forbidden him this morning,' Laurent pursued, 'to supply you, without my special direction, with any drug whatever, and I have given him particular orders about the eau'des Carmes. I am now about to tell the hotel people that you are under my care and treatment, and that you will be allowed only a measured quantity of wine per diem.'

'You mean to expose me to them?' Annette asked

'I do not propose to expose madame to anybody,' Laurent responded, 'but if madame chooses to expose herself——'

The listener could imagine the shrug of the broad

shoulders and the outward cast of the persuasive hands.

'Voyons, madame,' pursued the doctor, 'we wish nothing but your good, but that we are determined to accomplish. I have nothing to add to what I have said already, and perhaps it is time that you should see your husband.'

Paul hastily thrust his feet into his slippers, and awaited the opening of the door.

'He is there,' said Laurent; 'he has probably listened to every word we have spoken.'

Paul sat trembling on the bed-edge. The imminent interview disturbed him strangely, and set all manner of conflicting tides flowing in heart and brain. He was part coward and part hero; ready to face everything and to run away from everything. His pity for Annette was pity, and no more; his sympathy for Paul Armstrong amounted to a passion. He strove to bring himself to what he conceived to be a more fitting mood, but whilst he struggled with himself the inner door of the room in which he sat was suddenly torn open, and Annette stood before him. He could not have believed, without that actual visual revelation, that such a wreck could have been achieved in so small a space of time. Whatever of spirituality, whatever of youthful foolish *espièglerie* the face had held, had vanished. The visage was like a mask—and a mask of death. There was a splash of purplish crimson beneath either eyelid, but for the rest the face was of the yellow of a week-old bone; the eyelids were puffy, and the lips were lax. The whole face quivered like a shaken jelly as she looked at him.

'Paul,' she said—' Paul, Paul!'

And with that she cast herself upon his breast in a

very storm of tears.

For a moment he stood helpless and confused, and then a sudden flux of pity came upon him, and he held her steadily and firmly in answer to the hysteric grip with which her arms encircled him, now tightening and now relaxing. She fawned upon him piteously from the very beginning of this embrace, and at the last she fell, both knees thudding upon the carpet, and abased her head between his ankles, crying bitterly the while. And at this whatever manhood was within the man fled for the time being, and he, kneeling to raise her from her self-abasement, also lifted up his voice and wept bitterly.

Before things had quite reached this melancholy pass Laurent had stolen from the room, and had closed both doors behind him, so that husband and wife were alone.

'Dearest,' said Paul, 'what can I do to help you?'

The word was not wholly sincere, but it held more than the average ounce of sincerity to the ton which keeps human speech a possibility. At least his desire was to help her, if it were only a way of helping himself. But the whole thing was so miserable that to analyze emotions at such a moment was surely to mount the very Appenines of folly. Annette cried and cried, with her yet young and supple figure clinging to him, and, in spite of the debauched, melancholy face, what could he do but stroke her hair and kiss her cheek, and promise kindness and encouragement? Most of the time he was inwardly murmuring, 'Poor devil!' and was assuring himself that he had taken up a most hopeless handful; but the whole wretched tangle of feeling was too intricate to be unravelled by so much as a straight inch. What could he do? He asked the question

despairingly; he asked it in genuine pity of Annette; he asked it in a yet more genuine pity of himself. The man who deals professionally with the emotions of other people cannot preserve the simplicity of his own; it would be out of nature to believe it.

There was a reconciliation of a sort, but it could hardly be very real at first, and to give it any aspect of permanence time was necessary.

Laurent and Paul concocted a plan of campaign. It was essential in the doctor's opinion to avoid as far as possible all open evidence of watchfulness, and yet to know very accurately what was being done. Innumerable attempts were made to break the cordon of guardianship which was drawn around Annette. She feigned, of course, as people in her position always feign, to acquiesce entirely in the means which were adopted to guard her from herself, but there were eternal skirmishes between the outlying posts of the two armies which came in a very short time to be established. In that newfound prosperity of his Paul had grown absolutely careless about money, and he had not the faintest idea as to the extent of his wife's supplies. That she had enough, for the time being, to corrupt quite a small regiment was speedily made manifest, and a silent contest, in which the victor acknowledged victory no more than the vanquished admitted defeat, set in. How wide the ramifications of this strange war might be Paul could not guess, but on occasion some circumstance would reveal that they had reached unexpected distances. It was a perfectly understood thing in the hotel itself that no supplies of wine or of more potent liquor were to be supplied at Madame Armstrong's order. The village pharmacien sold nothing to her without Laurent's consent, but there were ways and means of one sort or another by

which she contrived to procure her poison, and at such times the old signs were always perceptible: the passion for solitude, the tricksy, changing spirit which varied from extravagant mirth to unreasonable anger. Laurent watched the contest with a sleepless loyalty, and Annette, finding herself foiled by him a thousand times oftener than by the less vigilant Paul, grew to hate him. But in spite of all the unfortunate creature could do to accelerate her own ruin, she grew slowly back to health, and to something more than her original personal attractiveness. For a kind of experience was marked upon her, and the indefinable yet universally recognised expression which betokens this was present in her looks. When watchfulness prevailed over the strange craft which was brought into conflict with it, Annette knew how to be charming, even to the man who suffered so much at her hands; but when the contrabandists succeeded in running in their supplies there were hours of horror—scenes in which rage and accusation were succeeded by storms of tears and tempestuous self-reproach. On one such occasion Paul sat in his study, for the moment oblivious of the world. His dissipation and his best relief from the cares which beset him was labour, and he laboured hard. It was his fashion at this time to stand at his desk—a rude thing built for him by the village carpenter—and in the pauses which came in between his actual spells of writing, to stride about his limited territory, enacting the scenes he was striving to portray, and shaping his sentences in such an impassioned undertone as an actor will employ in the study of a part. He was at the limit of his walk from the window, thus engaged, when the door was violently and without warning broken open in such fashion that its edge struck him on the face.

Here was Annette, blazing with some newly-discovered injury, and Paul at once recognised the ancient and too-well-remembered symptoms. The contrabandists had got through again, and this time with a vengeance. When he could gather his scattered wits—the blow in itself had been a shrewd thing—he found that he was being stormily assailed in respect of an amour with the cook of the Hotel of the Three Friends, a highly respectable person of fifty summers and a waist of sixty inches in circumference. He closed the door, and, mopping his injured nose, invited Annette to a seat.

'Talk lower, dear,' he asked her. 'It shall be perfectly understood between us that I deserve all your reproaches, but don't give the poor, dear old cook away, or, if you must assail her, speak in English.'

'That is your ring,' said Annette. She drew her wedding-ring from her finger and cast it to the floor. 'I have done with you for ever; you are a traitor and a villain.'

Paul stooped for the ring as it rolled to his feet, and bestowed it in his pocket.

'You and Laurent,' cried Annette, 'have conspired to kill me. Oh, I know you both! but if there is justice in earth or heaven, I will have it Do not think because I am a woman and alone that I can find no protector. I am not so helpless as you fancy.'

'I am very busy, dear,' Paul answered in a cold desperation, 'and we might discuss these important questions at another moment.'

'Oh,' cried Annette, 'anything to avoid the truth!'

'Yes,' said Paul, with the first flush of anger he had permitted himself, 'anything to avoid the truth—anything, or almost anything; but if you stay here

one other moment I will avoid the truth no longer.'

He cast the door wide open, and Annette with an amazing submissiveness passed through it.

It was long past mid-autumn by this time, and was indeed fast drawing on towards winter, so that in the little study a fire was lit in the earlier hours of the day to air the room. It had been lighted that morning, and the first true nip of winter was in the air. Paul sat alone with his head between his hands until a violent shiver aroused him from his thoughts. The air was growing dark as well as chilly; a pale yellow light gleamed already from the windows of the Café de la Régence across the *place*, and the outlook was as chilly as the air, as comfortless as the thoughts which filled his mind.

'Hands up,' said Paul to himself; 'hands up and sink down into the waste waters, and have done with it.'

Of what act of desperation he would have been guilty in this mood he could never have told, but at this instant the door was opened very softly, and Annette was back again. She had been somewhat dishevelled at her last appearance, and carelessly attired. She had now, to all seeming, called in the aid of the solitary coiffeur of the village, and her pretty brown locks were done up in lustrous coils. She was attired in a charming little dressing-gown of pale-blue, with lace at the wrists and throat, and her complexion had been somewhat rudely brightened by a touch of red upon the cheeks. She closed the door softly behind her, and advanced with pleading hands.

'Paul dear,' she said, 'I do not know if ever you can forgive me, but I think you would, perhaps, if you knew the real truth about me. Oh, Paul, Paul, Paul, I

am afraid—I am afraid that I am going mad! I have no self-control. I say cruel and wicked things without believing them, and I cannot help it There is a devil in my soul who tempts me. What is a poor little girl like me to do against the devil? Won't you help me, Paul dear? Give me back my ring; I never meant to throw it away. There is nothing I value so much in the world. Give it back to me, Paul. There; put it on my finger. God bless you for ever, you dearest, dearest, kindest, patient dear! And now, Paul, take me in your arms as you used to do. Kiss me, and tell me that you love me. I'm only a little creature, Paul, when everything's said and done; I'm five feet three, English measure, and how can *I* be expected to fight a devil! Kiss me, kiss me again, Paul.'

She thrust him back with rage, tore the ring once more from her finger, and cast it again upon the floor. Then, with an air of comedy disdain, 'It is really too cheap a thing to fool a fool like you.' And so, with a shrill peal of stagey laughter, she curtseyed low to him and glided from the room.

He stood with clenched hands for a single instant, and—how he never knew—came to a sudden calm. He took up his hat from the desk on which he had thrown it on entering the room, and sauntered out to the front of the hotel in a complete vacancy of thought and emotion; and as he lounged there, thinking of nothing and caring for nothing, there was woven into the woof of life the next thread of his destiny, for who should drive up to the main door of the Three Friends, with her maid and her luggage, and all the airs and impertinences of a person of fashion, but La Femme Incomprise.

CHAPTER XIX

And who should be La Femme Incomprise but Madame la Baronne de Wyeth, a lady more or less known to fame in two continents, but whom the unwitting Paul had not yet so much as heard of in the whole course of his life. He was conscious in the chill and gloom of the November evening of a lively and slender figure, which danced as if upon springs for a mere instant as it alighted from the carriage, of an accompanying rich rustle of silk, the exhalation of a fine perfume, the glance of a dark eye towards him as he raised his hat and stood aside from the doorway, and then the first encounter was over and was dismissed from mind.

There was no Annette at dinner, but he had not expected her, and was glad to know that she was in hiding. But when, after an hour or two's aimless ramble under the shadow of the Terre de Falaise, he returned to the hotel and entered the *salle à manger*, he found there a certain unwonted sense of warmth and brightness. Not only was the stove blooming cherry-red at the far end of the apartment, but the little-used fireplace was aglow with blazing pine-logs, and two extra lamps were set upon the table. He noted these things with that particularity a man spends upon detail at those times of subdued and profound emotion when he seems incapable of

noting anything, and took his seat carelessly at the table in his accustomed place. The juge, and the garde, and the bachelor chemist, and the chief of the gendarmerie, and all the rest of the customary convives, dribbled in one by one, and exchanged the customary salutations. Time was when they had been immensely interesting as types of mankind more or less rural or townish, but to-night he was weary of them, and would very willingly have been alone. The half-seen vision of two hours ago had passed completely from his mind, and the broad-beamed, apple-cheeked Evariste had already served the soup when Madame la Baronne de Wyeth rustled into the room with an aspect so commanding and stately that all the Belgian gentlemen rose to their feet and bowed as she took her seat at table. Paul rose and bowed with the rest, and the lady, with an easy and graceful inclination from left to right, offered to him a kind of specialized salute as she sat down immediately opposite to him. She was full between the glow of the two extra lamps, and at a first glance, by dint of bright eyes, sparkling teeth, a high complexion, and a Parisian half-toilet, she looked as if she might have been a beauty. She was barely that, as a second glance discovered, but she had an undoubted charm of grace and manner, and Paul, whose native origin and customs of life had led him far from the scene of fine ladyhood, was greatly impressed by her. So were the rest of the diners for that matter, and the customary rough banter of the table was hushed in the presence of this new arrival. The men conversed in whispers when they spoke at all, and in the intervals between the courses they crumbled their bread upon the tablecloth in a manifest embarrassment. Not a word was exchanged between Paul and his vis-à-vis until, towards the

close of the meal, the lady's attendant brought to her a small tray of silver with a fine little flacon of transparent Venetian ware, and a liqueur-glass upon it She had drunk nothing but water throughout the repast, but she now poured out a spoonful of some amber-coloured and highly aromatic liqueur, and, leaning slightly across the table, said, with a marked American-English accent:

'May I trouble you for a single small lump of sugar, Mr. Armstrong?'

She held out the liqueur-glass towards him, and Paul, in answer to an imperious little nod of the head, which seemed to indicate that he was obeying orders correctly, dropped a square nodule of sugar into it, and looked up with a questioning aspect.

'My name appears to be known to you, madam?' he said.

'My dear sir,' she purred back again in what he learned to recognise later on as the true Bostonian tone, 'your name is known to everybody—or, at least, to everyone who is worth knowing. Haven't we all been going wild in London and New York about your last comedy, and isn't your portrait in the photographers' windows everywhere?'

Paul was young, and therefore, if not vain, at least accessible to the assaults of vanity, and he blushed to the ears with pleasure. He had not noticed until the moment when the lady set her thickly-jewelled hand upon it that a little silver bell was placed at her side. She touched it, and her maid entered, and at a murmured aside retired, returning in a moment with a filigree card-case.

'That is my name,' said the lady; 'you may not have heard it before.'

There was so complete a certainty of recognition in

her voice and manner that Paul, though a very poor courtier indeed, bowed as he read the card, and murmured that everybody knew the name of Madame la Baronne de Wyeth.

This, as it turned out, was destined to embarrass him a little; but Madame was graciously communicative, and he was not long in learning that she was the authoress of a volume of poems which bore the title ‘Le Cour Soupir.’ She would be proud and delighted, she told him, to have his judgment alike on the original work and its rendition in French, which was also the labour of her own hands.

‘You see, Mr. Armstrong,’ she said, ‘I was born in Paris, though of American parentage, and I have lived there nearly all my life, so that I am really and truly quite bilingual. French and English are exactly one and the same to me, so far as facility of expression goes; and I did not care to entrust the expression of my most intimate and sacred thoughts into a stranger’s hands. To appeal to the readers of French and English is to appeal to the whole world of intellect. Perhaps that is not a very modest desire; but it is mine, Mr. Armstrong, as I think it must be that of all those who are conscious of great thoughts. By the way,’ she asked, with a comprehensive glance around the table, ‘do any of these gentlemen speak English?’

‘Not a word,’ Paul answered.

‘If you are quite sure of that, Mr. Armstrong,’ said the lady, ‘we can pursue our talk in peace; but there is nothing so disconcerting as to dread an eavesdropper when one is exchanging confidences.’

Paul had not, so far, begun to exchange confidences, and he rather wondered in his own bourgeois mind if this fascinating lady were offering

him a challenge to a flirtation. It might very well have appeared, so thought the Exile who recalled these things with so clear an after-light upon them, that the lady had that object, and no other; but for the moment there was a natural embarrassment in thinking so.

'You have written verse, Mr. Armstrong?' asked the Baroness.

'Reams,' Paul answered, with a laugh, though he was not entirely at his ease.

'Oh,' said the lady, 'you must show me some of it; you must show it to me all. I am sure, from your prose, that you have the true singing gift; and when one can both think and sing, one is a poet, you know, Mr. Armstrong.'

'I have nothing to show,' Paul answered; 'I have burnt all my poor stuff long and long ago.'

'And you write no longer?' she asked—'you write verse no more? Oh, but that is wicked—it is criminal to have the gift and not to use it 'But then, of course, one knows how much depends upon congeniality of surrounding and society. There have been times when I have thought that my own poor little pipe was silenced for ever. It is so easy to lose heart; it is sometimes so very difficult to retain one's courage and animation. Do the gentlemen remain here, by-the-by, to smoke, Mr. Armstrong?'

There was a something odd in the way in which she used his name—a something not at all easy to be defined—and it influenced Paul strangely every time she spoke it. It was not altogether unlike a caress, if one could associate an idea of that sort with the manner and meaning of a great lady with whom one had not exchanged a word until within the last half-hour. Paul knew not what to make of the grand

dame; but she fluttered and flattered him prodigiously, and in his excitement the troubles which had seemed so chokingly bitter so brief a time ago were all for the moment forgotten.

‘They sit about the table for an hour or two after dinner,’ Paul responded, in answer to her last question.

‘I notice,’ said the lady, ‘that there is a fire in the salon next door. If you are not too wedded to your tobacco, I shall be grateful for your society.’

‘Oh, madam!’ cried Paul, ‘I am honoured beyond measure.’

And so, when the Baroness had sipped her small liqueur and rose, with a queenly little inclination to the company, Paul rose also, and having opened the door for her, followed her lead into the next apartment, a spacious room, very dimly lighted, and as bare as if it had been made ready for a ball. Here the Baroness established her seat upon a settee, and Paul was encouraged to bring a chair into her neighbourhood, and was there held in discourse. And though he might in the review of later experiences have arrived at the conclusion that Madame la Baronne was a somewhat heartless and not particularly brainy little fribble, he was never able to forget or deny a certain charm of manner which he had not elsewhere encountered, and which had in it a seductive warmth and gentleness. Before he fairly knew it, he was talking with something of the ease and intimacy of an old friend. He had been so sore-hearted of late and so removed from all feminine companionship, that this unexpected, unlooked-for intercourse with a woman of culture and of such undoubted airs of refinement soothed like a poultice. It was water to the thirsty, bread to the hungry

heart; it was fire and shelter to the houseless wanderer. Madame drew him into little confidences, all sufficiently simple, harmless, and discreet They related mainly to his methods of work, to his acquaintance with brother men of letters, to incidents of youthful life, to the early hopes and failures of his career.

'How profoundly interesting!' Madame purred from time to time. 'Oh, you men of the people, Mr. Armstrong, you men of the people, how you do surpass and captivate us all when you just happen to have brains!'

The 'man of the people 'was certainly making no concealment of his origin, as he certainly never made any parade of it; but he did not quite like this, and perhaps his face revealed as much, for the Baroness hastened with great agility to quit the theme. She began to offer to Paul some little insight into her own history. It would be a prudery, she said, to pretend to be sensitive about it any longer—the whole world knew the sordid and melancholy truth; and this sounded like a prelude to a much fuller explanation than she was for the moment disposed to make, and it helped Paul to understand the hints in which she chose to set forward the fact that she was a person of a lonely heart, that her husband pursued his affairs in Wall Street and elsewhere without her greatly concerning herself as to what those affairs might be, and apparently leaving her much to her own devices. He learned to think afterwards that these confidences, coming upon so very brief an acquaintance, were barely indicative of that exquisite delicacy of soul for which the lady gave herself credit, but it did not occur to him to think so for one moment at the time. The two extra lamps upon the dinner-table had probably been placed there at her

own request, but it was beyond dispute that she showed to far greater advantage in the subdued light in which she now sat Time had had no great opportunity of ravishing her good looks as yet, but a certain boldness and bluntness of feature which denied her complete right to beauty was lost here, and her complexion was subdued, so that to the eye of her companion she looked bewitching, and everybody knows how far easier it is to condone a breach of taste in a beautiful woman than in a plain one. But now as the talk went on and grew momentarily more intimate, Paul was made to see that he was in the presence of a suffering heart, that he was speaking with one who had never been able to come into contact with another soul. 'We live apart from each other, all of us, Mr. Armstrong,' she said. 'It is only the artist, only the thinker and dreamer, who cares to grieve over it all; but there is something appalling in the thought that no one soul really touches another. You shake your head,' she said. 'Forgive me, but you are young, and you are not yet disillusionized.'

'I have a right to be in some things,' Paul said to himself; but he made no verbal answer.

'No,' she went on in a tone of tender regret in the pretty purring American voice, which of itself was like the touch of a soft hand. 'We are born to isolation. As one grows older——'

Paul laughed at that outright It was his first laugh for quite a lengthy space of time, and he enjoyed it.

'Oh,' said the lady, taking the implied compliment quite seriously, 'I am not a centenarian, but I am two-and-thirty, Mr. Armstrong, and in the course of two-and-thirty years one may do a very considerable amount of living. I say it advisedly, as one grows

older the recognition of that isolation of which I have spoken grows more and more complete. It beats one down into despair at times; but then one is here for other things than despair: one is here for duty; one is here to suffer, and to gather strength by suffering; that is the whole secret of our destiny. It is simple enough, and yet how long it takes to learn the lesson truly!'

Beyond this no great progress was made on that first evening, but it appeared that the lady had come to stay for at least a little time. It is probable that she had not often found so very responsive an instrument to play upon, for Paul Armstrong's one lifelong weakness was that any woman of average intelligence, who chose to take the trouble, could sound him through every note of his gamut, and the Baroness de Wyeth seemed to find a lively satisfaction in the exercise of her own power in that direction.

There was no further sign of Annette that evening, and it was not until the Baroness had retired that Paul began again seriously to remember her. It would at any moment, since his discovery of the lure by which she had beguiled him into marriage, have seemed a mere ridiculous prudery of conscience to hide from himself that he had thrown the better part of his life away; but he had meant to do his duty as it seemed to lie plain and straight before him, and he meant it still, increasingly difficult as it appeared. But all the talk of the lonely soul, of the eternal isolation of the spirit, in which man was doomed to live, all the tinsel sentimentalisms of which the talk of the bilingual poetess had mainly consisted, afforded perhaps as poor a pabulum as he could anywhere have found. There was he, with that sore-stricken heart of his, so sore-stricken, indeed, that it

was well-nigh numbed, and here for the first time in his life he had met a woman of more than common surface breeding, of high family—for the Baroness de Wyeth was guilty of no mere vulgar brag in claiming so much for herself—of more than ordinary attractiveness in person, and of far more than common faculty in the direction of a dangerous, sympathetic semi-humbug. Was it any wonder if, when he lay down that night, he contrasted the hours of the evening with those of the afternoon, or if he recalled the fact that at the very turning of the road which had led him to fortune and to fame he had thrown away all that could make them really worth the having?

Annette was sleeping off the fumes of brandy and the insane hysteria which went along with them. The dainty lady from whom he had just parted was going to her repose with her own beautiful, sad thoughts in a refinement of surrounding which he could only fancy. His thoughts followed her to her chamber until it seemed to him that he was in some sort guilty of a profanation, and with that touch of self-chiding the born sex-worshipper must needs flash into a mood of adoration. A more thoroughpaced small coquette than La Femme Incomprise never breathed, yet she must needs be a holy angel for the time being to Paul Armstrong, because she had fine eyes and teeth, and could talk with some eloquence about heart-sorrows she had never known. And he, he who lay there with his career like a stream which is poisoned at its source, might, had he guided his own destinies with anything but the judgment of a fool, have found himself just such a companion as he had but now parted from, and have known in her a life-long comrade, an undying solace and inspiration. Oh, fool! and fool! and fool! through all the wretched,

lonely hours of night—fool! and fool! and again fool unutterable!

Annette, on the morrow, was repentant and pitiable. The contrabandist supplies had been of a very limited nature, and now they were over she suffered a more than common misery of reaction from excess. For a while she was sullen, and sulked in her own chamber; but when her headache had worn itself out, she began to creep listlessly about the hotel Paul and the Baroness had spent a second evening *tête-à-tête* and Paul's first judgment of the sympathetic nature of her character had been admirably confirmed.

Husband and wife had had but one interview with each other since the latest outbreak, and this had not tended to improve their relations or to sweeten the temper of either one or die other. Paul had not mentioned the existence of his wife to the Baroness until he had learned of the lady's intention to make a stay of some length in Montcourtois. Then he had said to himself dismally: She will think I have hidden something from her unless I mention Annette; and he had named her in a mere instinct of self-protection.

'My wife,' he had said simply, 'would be very happy and honoured to meet you, but she is confined to her room by a slight indisposition which I hope will pass away in a little time.'

'I shall hope, then, to make her acquaintance to-morrow,' said the Baroness, and thereupon they got back to transcendentalisms and soul solitude, and made up their minds how sweet a thing it would be if only it were possible for any one human creature to know and thoroughly understand another. With this unfailing battle-horse ready to prance into the arena under the Baroness's poetic spur, they were

never in danger of being gravelled for lack of matter, but found each other's society mutually and beautifully stimulative to the heart and mind. After Paul's short and unhappy interview with Annette, the Baroness requested the pleasure of his society upon a drive she proposed to take. He acceding with great willingness, they rolled away together, and Madame confided to Paul the purpose of her visit to these solitudes at a so inclement season of the year. It was her intent to study the ancient Walloon tongue upon its own ground, and to put her studies to some literary effect by an elaborate comparison of the language spoken by the peasantry of the present day with that of the earliest of the French *jongleurs* and chroniclers.

'So you see, Mr. Armstrong,' she said sweetly, 'that if you are resolved upon keeping your artistic quiet here throughout the greater part of the winter, you and I will have some opportunity of becoming known to each other.'

Paul did not dare to say how warm a welcome he accorded to this suggestion, but it was dangerously sweet to him, and he had self-understanding enough to recognise that fact. But he was in no mood to struggle against whatever Fate might bring. He was not coxcomb enough to conceive himself likely to be dangerous to a witty and experienced woman of the world, and as to what might happen to himself he did not care. He was desolate enough to be desperate, and if in two short days he had learned to believe that the final loss of the new interest he had found would be among the gravest of troubles, he had learned also as a part of that lesson that the society would be strangely sweet to him whilst it lasted. On Paul's side there was no thought of a flirtation, and on the side of the Baroness there was

not much thought of anything else, so that they got on most famously together, for it is always richer sport in a case of this kind to have one of the parties concerned in earnest Paul took all the soulful shop, on the strength of which the lady had patrolled Europe and the United States on a sort of sentimental journey, to be as serious as the Evangels, and the discussion of it made the drive an undiluted pleasure to him.

But when the carriage returned to the hotel and passed Paul's study at a walking pace, he caught sight of Annette at the window, and her face seemed to him to offer some promise of a scene. She certainly bent a look of surprised anger upon her husband and the strange, richly-dressed lady with whom he was seated, but he waved his hand to her as he went by and made up a mind to trust to the chapter of chances. As it turned out, Annette was not inclined to be disagreeable, and hearing of the lady's rank, and being casually informed that she was the wife of the great American-Belgian millionaire, she became resolved to be gracious, and made a careful toilet in preparation for dinner. She and the Baroness met at table, and Annette did not shine by contrast with the newcomer. The poor thing probably knew it, and when Paul and Madame talked together of books she had never seen or heard of, and of people whose names were strange to her, she could scarcely have been altogether happy. Her husband led her into the conversation now and then, but there was nothing for it but for her to dwindle out again, and when the meal was over she made a real or pretended excuse of headache to retire. Paul was disposed to be grateful to her for what he felt to be a genuine forbearance, and he would have given some sign to this effect had Annette afforded him an

opportunity. But she kept herself sedulously apart from him, and it was only at the table that they met at all. Things pursued this course until the approach of Christmas, and then an incident happened which brought about, or at least very much helped to bring about, disaster.

When two people of opposite sexes are constantly in each other's society and their main topic of conversation—however hashed, ragouted, rissoled and spiced—is the loneliness of the Ego, certain little familiarities are likely to ensue which, though they may be of the most platonic order in the world, are not likely to be made a subject of outspoken confidence between a husband and a wife, or a married lady and her husband. Thus, when Madame la Baronne and Paul were quite alone it was 'Gertrude' on the one side, and it was 'Paul' upon the other, and the lady, being the elder, and a little more the elder than she cared to say, would occasionally venture upon 'Paul dear,' with an air so matronly that the most censorious of observers could have found no cavil with the manner of it. It came about in due time, let Laurent's watch-dogs do what they would, that the contrabandists once more succeeded in running their cargo into the Hotel of the Three Friends. It was a very small one, but it was large enough to serve its turn.

Annette had not appeared all day, and Paul's summons at her chamber-door had elicited no response. He and the Baroness had dined together and had talked in the way now grown customary to them, being neither more nor less affectionate towards each other than common, and they were now together in the public salon, and, as fate would have it, they were alone. The Baroness dropped something with a metallic sound upon the floor, and

uttered a little cry of dismay.

‘Oh, my bracelet!’ she exclaimed; ‘my favourite, my precious bracelet! It is broken, and I would not have had anything happen to it for the world!’

Paul ran to lift it from the floor, and assured himself by examination that it was not broken. The hasp by which it was fastened had come open, whether as the result of accident or design may not be known. Ladies have ways of saving a platonic converse from mere dulness, and this may have been one of them, or may not. But Paul, having shown to demonstration that the ornament was undamaged, the Baroness held out a very prettily-rounded, plump, white arm, and Paul, trembling a little at the slight contact the task involved, proceeded rather clumsily to fix the bracelet in its place. He looked up, and the lady’s eyes were fixed upon his face with an expression of grave and serene tenderness. His own eyes were humid, and he looked back at her as an earth-bound soul might look towards paradise. And on a sudden, before a sound of warning had been heard by either of them, their two hands were struck violently apart, and Annette stood between them, her eyes flaming with rage and the spirit of temporary insanity last imported by the domestic smugglers.

CHAPTER XX

[Note: The print copy had a missing page here.]

‘No man knows the sex. Women are like Tennyson’s description of the law—a wilderness of single instances; but except for those surprising examples which are detected for us only by the talisman of a great love, there is a family likeness amongst them. The woman is the tougher-fibred creature, and there is excellent good reason why she should be so. She suffers as no man ever suffers, and she could not bear her pangs—she would go mad under them—if she were half as sensitive to suffering as the less-tried male; and on the moral side the lady is a pachyderm and the average workman an un-shelled polype in comparison. I invoke,’ he cried, striding the little grassy platform on which his feet had worn a pathway between his tent-door and the chattering runnel—‘I invoke the unnumbered squads and battalions and armies of shame which are known, and always have been known, to every town and city which has ever dared to call itself civilized since history began. From Lais in her jewelled litter to Cora in her English landau in the Bois, and on to the shabbiest small slut who flaunts her raddle and her broken feather in the slums of London, the same story is told and the same moral preached. Where is an equal army of men to be found to invite the contumely of their own sex? A woman’s virtue is her continence, and a man’s virtues are truthfulness and courage. There is an unspeakably great army of the one sex which makes a show and a lure of its penal uniform. Find me anywhere a band of men who flaunt themselves in an equal denial of the virtues proper to man, who parade themselves as cowards and liars, and strive to make a living by the parade of their own desertion from the manly principle. The tender sensibility of the generic woman is a fraud, and I should know that better than most men,

because I so long believed in it and had so many rude awakenings from faith. But, oh I now and again —happy the man who learns it early!—there is a woman to be found so strong and delicate, so tender yet courageous, so much beyond the best that men ever find in men, that there is nothing for us but to abase our souls in gratitude and worship and wonder. We—we have genius of a hundred sorts, and still genius is rare; we invent, we construct, we drag new sciences, patient fact by fact, from the regions of darkness; we think great thoughts and speak great words—there is no limit set to the passion of our intellectual greed, no limit to the conquering march of eternal achievement; and when all is said and done there never lived a woman who had true genius for anything but love and goodness. There in that glorious small specialized field they shine, and they shine the brighter and more splendid because of their contrast with a sordid, heartless, stupid, and greedy sex. And there,' he said, kneeling to stir the slumbering embers of his camp-fire—'there, shining in that little shining field, are you, Madge, brightest amongst the brightest and saddest among the saddest, and here am I who wrecked your life for you with such admirable good intent'

The rage flamed out. He took his seat upon his camp-stool, and shredded tobacco for his pipe, staring with vacant eyes into the smoke-fog which everywhere imprisoned his gaze, and in a minute he was back at his dreams again, and the past once more unrolled itself before him.

He was back in Montcourtois, marching the cobbled pavement of the *place* in front of the Hotel of the Three Friends, hatless and just half conscious of the touch of the wintry air on his cheek. The Baroness was newly rankling under an insult now so

many years of age; and Annette, clearly visible at moments between the slits of the Venetian blinds, was still pacing the lamplit salon. The whole thing happened in his mind again precisely as it had happened in fact so very long ago.

A sudden remembrance and a sudden impulse moved him almost in the same instant. When the bracelet had fallen from her arm, the Baroness had cried out to the effect that it was her most valued treasure, and Paul suddenly called to mind the fact that it still lay on the floor of the salon. Annette might observe it at any moment, and might choose to wreak her supposed offence upon it; and, thinking thus, he hastened back to the apartment, prepared for any storm that might assail him. But Annette, who, in the inexplicable changes of mood which affected her at such times as these, was marching gaily up and down the room singing ‘Tout le long de la route ‘to a swinging rhythm, chose to disregard him. He saw the precious ornament lying where it had fallen, possessed himself of it, and passed out at the further door. For any sign she gave Annette may not have seen him, and Paul had time, as he crossed the corridor to his study, to remark upon a form of alcoholism which allowed its victim unembarrassed speech in combination with a steady gait and an entire irresponsibility of thought. The manifestation was comparatively new to him, and he had spent some thought upon it It was so foreign to the popular idea of drunkenness that it accounted to him for his long-continued blindness to the truth.

He was tarred with the literary brush, which is to say that he was eternally bent upon the examination of all human symptoms, whether they displayed themselves in himself or in another. He had made it the business of his life to analyze those symptoms,

though he was but as yet a chemist's apprentice, wandering and wondering through the vast laboratory of the world. Yet, apprentice as he was, he had learned enough of the secret of his own craft to know that the professional analyst of emotion quickens perception at the expense of sensation. The man who is always pulling emotion to pieces as a part of the day's work grows to a philosophic indifference about it, as a vivisector becomes dead to a sense of pain. Yet neither the anatomist of the living soul nor the anatomist of the living body becomes insensible in any appreciable degree to the exigence of his own pains, and the memories of a thousand triumphant operations will not hinder the start and outcry of the greatest of surgeons if you stick an unexpected pin into any part of his anatomy.

Paul had laid his hand upon the handle of the door of the study, and with his disengaged hand was fumbling in his pocket for a match, when he heard a tripping footstep on the stairs behind him, and he was hailed by the Baroness's Parisian maid. Madame la Baronne, so the maid explained, had let fall a valuable ornament in the salon; had Mr. Armstrong seen it, and, if not, would he give orders that it should be sought for and returned? Paul felt the precious object in his pocket.

'I do not know Madame's arrangements,' he said, 'but I have the bracelet, and, if it were possible for her to receive me, I should like to hand it to her personally.'

'Oh, but yes,' said the maid. Madame la Baronne had her little suite of rooms, and was quite in position to receive. M. Armstrong's desire should be named to her, and the maid would bring an answer.

She fluttered upstairs with swashing petticoats and

a flutter of ribbons, and Paul waited in the corridor below. On the waxed floor of the salon Annette's feet still moved to a rhythmic, half-dancing walk, and her bird-like voice soared to—

'Tons les deux, la main dans la main,
Nous poursuivions notre chemin,
Sous la celeste voûte.'

'Under the celestial vault,' said Paul; 'and bent on the discovery of what infernal regions?'

The maid came back, pruning herself with coquettish graces, to answer that Madame la Baronne would have pleasure in receiving M. Armstrong in five minutes, and, having delivered her message, rustled rapidly upstairs again. She paused at the turning of the stair, and leaned over to say:

'Numéro quinze, the fifth door to the right of monsieur.'

'Thank you,' Paul answered, and, turning into the darkened study, struck a light and consulted his watch. It was ten minutes past nine, and he sat still to await the quarter hour. There was a clattering of pots and pans in the distant kitchen, and Annette was still singing and walking in the near apartment An occasional murmur of voices, a click of billiard-balls, and even the faint noise made by the shuffle of a set of dominoes in the café over the road reached his ears, but save for these slight signs of life the world seemed asleep. Annette suddenly ceased to sing in the middle of a bar. He heard her open the door of the salon. She passed the little corridor in silence, and ascended the stair. He heard the key turn, first in the lock of one door and then in that of another. He consulted his watch once more by the flickering light of a lucifer match. He was within a

minute of the appointed time, and he began to ask himself with a fluttering heart what he was to say, and how he was to bear himself in the coming interview. Upstairs outraged purity and dignity were waiting for him, and he himself, innocent as he had meant to be, was yet in a sense the author of the outrage. The minute crawled. It ticked its final second out at last, and he arose holding the bracelet in his hand. He mounted the stair, knocked at the door the maid had indicated to him, and was bidden to enter. The Baroness was seated in a sea-green dressing-gown ornamented by many pretty devices in lace of priceless fabric, which had taken a coffee tint by reason of its age. A book was lying on her knees, and she was toying with an ivory paper-knife which had its haft in a silver embossed rhinoceros tooth. She nodded Paul to a chair which had evidently been placed for him.

'I see,' she said, 'that you have found my bracelet'

He handed it to her without a word. She purred a 'Thank you,' and tested its clasp about her arm.

'Sit down, Mr. Armstrong,' she said.

Paul was still voiceless, but he echoed the coldly courteous Mr. Armstrong 'in his mind with some dismay.

'I do not see,' said the Baroness de Wyeth, 'how it is possible to pass over the incident of to-night in silence. Perhaps we may speak one explanatory word about it and let it go. What have you to tell me, Mr. Armstrong?'

'Well——'

Paul balanced appealing hands in front of him, waved them, suffered them to fall at his sides, and said no more.

'You must be conscious,' said the Baroness, tapping

the book which lay before her with her paper-knife, ‘that it was by accident that the incident which is only known to ourselves did not happen in public. In a measure I have compromised myself, and, if you will permit me to say so, I am not a woman who is accustomed to be compromised. Your wife objects—a little unconventionally perhaps—to our association. I am a woman of the world, and I know very well what construction might be placed on such an episode. We can both see clearly that such a thing might happen again at any instant under circumstances less favourable to my reputation, and I cannot afford to risk the renewing of it I am seriously afraid that I shall have in future to deny myself the privileges of a very pleasant friendship.’

‘Your will shall be my law,’ said Paul ‘I have no excuse to urge, and have certainly no complaint to make of your decision. I shall go at your command, Gertrude——’

She waved the paper-knife against him with a gesture which seemed to protest against that one dear familiarity.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he cried; ‘the name escaped me. I shall not have the chance to use it often after this, and you may let it pass. I am going, but I must tell you this: I have not been very fortunate in my choice of friends amongst women, or in the choice which has been thrust upon me, and so long as I live I shall remember——’ He paused, and waited for a while until he regained the mastery of himself. Then he went on steadily, with a level voice almost as if he were a schoolboy reading from a lesson-book: ‘I shall remember as long as I live the beautiful thoughts with which you have inspired me, your kindness, your friendship—and, and——’

He never knew how it happened—men of his temperament never do know—but he was on his knees before her, and the words burst from him with a sob.

'And—you!'

She smiled upon him from the maternal height of the coquette who is a year or two older than the man she coquets with.

The tears were in his eyes and on his cheeks, and glistened in the virgin beard. She stooped forward and laid a hand upon his head.

'Do you care so much to leave me, Paul?' she asked.

A man of the world would have known the studied quaver in the voice—the throaty, stagey sweetness of it. What was to be expected of a yokel of genius who had been rushed through a hundred towns or so in everlasting association with De Vavasours and Montmorencys—rushed through London and through Paris under much the same inauspicious petticoat influences, and had hardly ever met a real live lady in his life on terms of intimacy until now? And Madame la Baronne de Wyèth had told him enough and had shown him enough in the way of correspondence with distinguished people of both hemispheres to let him know that she could play the part of *grand dame* at discretion anywhere. That was possibly the preponderant influence in his mind. Had he himself been a gentleman by extraction, had he been able to meet this exquisite and delicate creature of old dreams and modern conditions on any terms of equality, he would not have abased himself in spirit as he did. The woman was regnant The woman is always regnant, whether she be queen or dairymaid, but the barrier between himself and her

was built of the old hurdles of low birth and iron fortune. Here anyway in his heart rang the knell ‘Good-bye,’ the farewell, farewell, farewell which every poet worth his salt has heard not once but many times, and, in the middle of the dirge the bell rang so remorselessly, came the exquisite chrysm of a fondling hand upon his head.

It dwelt there scarcely for a moment, and if every nerve had not been vibrant with feeling, the touch was so light that it might almost have passed unnoticed. As things happened it was like a torch touching a torch as yet unlighted, and the young man flamed. He caught the caressing hand as it left his hair, and kissed it.

Ah! the weeping tears and the melancholy Touchstone humour that smiled wryly to see them, each as big as a pea.

The Baroness surrendered her hand, and Paul kissed it with that passion which inspires a pilgrim at the shrine, and the odd something superadded which has made fools of men since Eve plucked her first girdle of fig-leaves. He wept above the hand, and he fondled the hand, and he kissed it with protesting murmurs of undying affection and esteem, and whilst this storm was in danger of playing itself out, and the unsuing suitor was likely to make an end of the business and go, the disengaged hand of the Baroness stole out and took him maternally by the chin, under the rain-soaked beard.

‘Paul dear,’ said the Baroness, ‘I did not think that you would have felt our parting like this. We can’t help it, we literary people—we must quote, we must express the profoundest feelings of our souls in the words of other people. What’s the Shakespearian line? “I hold it good that we shake hands and part”,

Good-bye, Paul.'

He was on his feet again, and they were hand in hand. Her left hand was on his right shoulder. Their eyes met and lingered on each other.

'We're saying good-bye, Paul,' purred the Baroness in a voice of tenderest cadence. 'You see the need for it, don't you, you dear boy? Perhaps we may see each other later on, but it *is* good-bye now, for the time being. It must be so. You see that, don't you, Paul dear?

'Oh yes,' he said, 'I see it. Who could fail to see it? You shall have my thanks when I can offer them for having asked no explanation, no apology.'

'Paul,' said the Baroness, and the left hand on his right shoulder drew him a little nearer to her. Once, a year or two before, he had been up in the Yorkshire dales, and had strolled along by the side of the Wharfe on a day when the river ran beryl-brown or sapphire clear as it glanced over pebbly shallow or rocky depth. There was the beryl glint in her eye—the darling brown with the liquid light playing upon it. He looked now. The woodlands were about him; the river murmured near. The damnable artistic gift which made use of all accomplished experience helped him to obey the impulse of the slow, persuasive hand. The beryl light in the eyes invited him, and the faint droop of languishing eyelid did the rest 'Paul dear,' she whispered, 'it is good-bye. You may kiss me just this once and go. Kiss me, Paul dear, as you would kiss your mother's ghost, and go.'

He stooped and kissed her, reverently and lingeringly, upon the forehead.

'Good-bye,' he said—'good-bye.'

Then, with an electric amazement, her lips were on his for a single instant, and she strained him near

to her.

'Now, go,' she said, withdrawing herself before he had found time to answer her embrace. 'Go, and farewell!'

He was in the upper corridor almost before he knew it, in the confusion of his nerves. The key snapped quickly in the lock, and he was alone. He groped his way along the darkened passage until he reached the head of the stairs, and there he recovered some consciousness of fact. He drooped slowly down into his study, and sat there in the dark and cold for hours, swearing fealty to contradictory deities of passion and of friendship.

CHAPTER XXI

That year winter had advanced with a delaying foot thus far across the Belgian Ardennes, but this was the hour chosen by the icy king for the beginning of his real siege of that region. Whilst Paul sat in his study in the dark, the cold gathered about him tenser and more tense until he was fain to seek the warmer shelter of his own room. There across the gleaming darkness of the window-panes he could discern great broad snowflakes loitering down one after the other as if intent on no business in the world, and yet in spite of their seeming want of purpose they had covered the earth six inches deep before daybreak.

He awoke in the morning to look out upon a world of virgin white:—street, and roofs, and far-spread trees and fields all dazzling in their winter cloak beneath a sky of cloudless blue, white towards the horizon where it could catch the lustre of the up-beating brightness of the snow. In the dark cold mornings of the year the hotel people had fallen into a habit of bringing up his coffee and pistolet to his bedroom. He had been willing enough to acquiesce in the custom; but as he sat sipping and munching in dressing-gown and slippers, with a travelling-rug about his knees, and revolving the events of last night in his mind, he heard a noise in the stables, and, thrusting the window open, looked out into the cold, still, clear air. Victor, the shock-headed driver, was leading out a pair of flea-bitten grays already accoutred for a journey, part of their harness dragging through the as yet untrodden snow.

'Holla!' he called—'Victor!' The man looked up, knuckling at his forehead. 'Are they shooting to-day?' Paul asked. 'It ought to be a good day for the trackers.'

'No, monsieur,' Victor answered; 'it is Madame la Baronne who departs. She takes the express to Verviers at half-past nine. Monsieur will excuse; I am afraid of being late already.'

From the moment at which he had heard the horses moving down below, he had anticipated this without wholly knowing to what he had looked forward. He thrust aside with his foot the ice-cold tub in which it was his custom to rejoice—as befitted an Englishman of his years—and, hastily sponging his face and hands, made a hurried toilet, listening meanwhile for any sound which might bring definite tidings to his mind. When he descended the carriage was still at the main entrance to the hotel, and Victor

was pulling on to his chapped hands a huge pair of sheepskin gloves, the wool worn inside.

‘We have but thirty-five minutes,’ the driver grumbled, ‘and two miles to go, and all uphill.’

‘Is that a very awful task?’ Paul asked, for the mere sake of saying something.

He was intent on retaining his name, and on saying farewell in such a fashion that his manner should cast no reflection on the dear departing divinity. Mademoiselle Adèle was already at the door, wiping her hands upon her apron. Madame Alexis, the cook, was ranged up alongside, and beyond her was the apple-cheeked Flamande maid One of the male hangers-on of the establishment came stumbling down the staircase with a great travelling-trunk upon his shoulders, and arranged his burden alongside the driver’s seat. Then down tripped the Baroness’s maid, carrying a dressing-bag in one hand and a despatch-box in the other. Then followed a nondescript female who charred about the house and did scullery-work, and sometimes, in a borrowed dress, served at table. She came enveloped in rugs and furs, and at every note of preparation for departure Paul’s heart beat faster. At last he could bear to look for the last figure in the procession no longer, for he was bent on an aspect of entire nonchalance, and the desolation of an actual farewell struck more and more on his spirit as he waited.

At last the expected frou-frou, and the soft footfall of the beautifully-shod feet, warned him of the Baroness’s coming.

She paused in the hall to say a gracious word here and there, and to press something of evidently unexpected value into the hands of the attendant trio, for they all curtseyed low, and said, as if

awestricken, ‘Réellement, Madame la Baronne est trop bonne,’ as if their strings had been mechanically pulled, and they had been trained to speak the words in unison.

Paul dared not turn his head, but the gracious little figure paused in passing him. Madame la Baronne was richly befurred and so thickly veiled that he could discern nothing, or little, apart from the sparkling brightness of her eyes. She sprinkled her adieux around her in French to an accompaniment of thanks and curtsies, but she spoke to Paul in English.

‘I am going to Venders,’ she said, ‘and I am afraid my studies will be a little broken. In the meantime I will write to you and give you an address, and I shall be glad if you will answer me.’

She held out her hand, and Paul held it for a mere instant, no longer—he was careful of that—than the occasion would have demanded had but the merest friendly acquaintance existed between them. He dared not trust himself to speak, but he raised his hat and pressed the hand, and the pressure was returned. Then the Baroness entered the carriage, Victor cracked his whip impatiently, and the slow Flemish horses bowled away, their hoof-beats silenced by the snow. They had reached the corner, and in another instant would have been out of sight, when Paul gave an artificial start, as if he had suddenly called to mind something of importance, and dashed after the retreating carriage. He overtook it easily enough, and, laying a hand upon it, ran alongside.

‘This is not good-bye?’ he said. ‘Tell me that this is not good-bye.’

‘I hope it is not good-bye,’ she answered. ‘But go now, dear heart, I beg you; you know why I am going.’

The ‘dear heart’ thrilled him through and through.

‘You will write?’ he asked.

‘I will write to-night,’ she said, ‘but you must leave me now.’

He fell from the carriage side, and the vehicle went on its leisurely course, leaving him standing in the snow and staring after it; but recollecting himself in a moment, he turned and plodded slowly back to the hotel, with as unconcerned and commonplace a look as he could summon at short notice.

Annette had one of her old spells of secrecy, and was hidden all day long. He was glad to miss her and to be left alone with his own thoughts. He could not realize himself and he could not realize the Baroness; her promised letter would, however, tell him something. It might enable him at once to find his orient.

He passed through a strange day—a day of resentment and of tenderness, a day of despair and of hope. He could not work or plan, and reading was impossible, and to-morrow morning looked absurdly distant Yet it came at last, after an almost sleepless night, in the course of which he heard Annette moving and the occasional clink of glass. He could see a light gleaming underneath her door half a dozen times, and these reminders of her came to him always with a dull ache of wretchedness, yet he fell asleep at last and overslept himself, so that he escaped the final hours of waiting. The promised letter was to hand, and he tore its envelope open with trembling fingers, not knowing what to expect within.

‘My very dear Friend’ (it began),

‘All day I have thought of you; I do not know what feeling has been strongest in my mind. I make no

secret of the esteem I have for you, or of the sorrow I have felt at being forced to end the pleasantest friendship I have ever known. I should not say to end it, for such a companionship of spirit as we have experienced can never be ended, but we must close the first chapter of the book, and the rest will not make such happy reading. I have felt my heart ache more than once in the contemplation of your unhappiness, for though you have never spoken of it, I knew without the episode of last night—I have known almost from the first—how profoundly you have suffered and will continue to suffer. Ah, my dear friend, it is only those who have suffered in that way who can truly sympathize with you. To have found a completer isolation in the search for companionship—that is the tragedy of many souls. It is yours, and I know it and feel it, because it is mine also.

'I am weary with my journey, and I am so sad and lonely that I have scarce the heart to write; but promise me just this one thing: Give me half an hour of your thoughts each day, and let me know what part of the day you choose, so that I may think of you at the same time. Do you believe that any actual communion of the mind is possible in such conditions? I should like to believe it. How pure, how spiritual, how exquisite a friendship might exist if it were only so!'

Exactly. And what a quagmire a properly experienced lady may lead a man into if she so wills! This particular experiment suggested by the Baroness is singularly successful in the enslaving of the eager, and it has the great merit of permitting the willing horse to do all the work. The lover can moon and rhapsodise at a safe distance, and it makes not a pennyworth of difference to him whether the

mistress moons and rhapsodises also, or whether she is engaged in a flirtation through another telepathic line, or whether she has a score of different lines converging upon her all at once.

Paul, of course, most willingly accorded the lady the daily half-hour demanded. He became persuaded in a very little while that the soul of Gertrude met his midway, and when she sent him a description of her little boudoir, so that he might the better realize her in her own surroundings, he used to float away to Verviers in vision, and sit by Gertrude in fancy, and hold Gertrude's hand, and express to Gertrude all his ardours of friendship and esteem—for, of course, it never got beyond that, or was ever to be permitted to get beyond it—and Gertrude used to give him vow for vow, all in the range of the highest moral feeling. It is possible that there are people who might imbibe this sort of mental liquor and come to no damage by it, but Paul found it remarkably heady. At first he thought the draught stimulative, but in a while he began to know that it was enervating. He began to rebel at himself.

'I am throwing away my manhood for a dream,' he said.

For Gertrude, whose letters were fairly frequent and most sisterly tender, would hear nothing of Paul's petition that he might be allowed to visit her —would not even listen to any suggestion that they might ever meet again in any approach to the happy seclusion and privacy of the first sweet days.

But Paul Armstrong was feeble in rebellion against himself, and he was here caught firmly in the toils of the first passion of his manhood. The May Gold episode and the Claudie Belmont episode had long been things to laugh at. Marriage had turned out an

unredeemed tragedy, which had never had even the poor excuse of a passing infatuation behind it He had never loved Annette, and she was fast growing into a terror and an aversion. And now all this tomfoolery of telepathic communion, this wilful brooding over an absent woman, this summoning of her features to mind, this recalling of her tones, this yearning in which his own soul seemed to beat its mortal bars in the strife to draw her spirit near, made a clean end of the platonic theory so far as he was concerned. The Baroness, at her end of the spirit-wire, appears to have been less potently disturbed. Perhaps she took less pains to disturb herself; possibly she took none whatever.

It came at last on Paul's side to amount to something very like a possession. Night and day his thoughts hovered about her. He would not admit to his mind one dishonouring thought of her.

'Charlotte was a married woman, and a moral n
And for all the wealth of Indies would do not

And Gertrude was a married woman also, and Paul —who had not too rigidly obeyed the precepts of morality in his day—was bent on honour in this instance. He wrote reams of letters, all of which might have been printed without harm to anybody; but by-and-by his passion began to carry him off his feet, as passion has carried stronger men than he, and the fever of his pulses got into his ink, and he began to make love, but with a dreadful guardedness and a deadly fear lest he should offend the susceptibilities of this creature of the skies. She rebuked him by implication and in a parable. She had had a mournful letter from a friend in Boston, an old and valued correspondent, a lady whose

domestic relations were of the saddest sort, who had long believed herself to have established a pure and tender friendship with a person of the opposite sex, and who had now been shocked and horrified beyond measure by a proposal of elopement How rare a genuine friendship between men and women seemed to be! How happy was she in the security she enjoyed in the solidity of his character, in that delicacy of mind and heart which permitted the most delightful intimacies of thought without danger. He wrote back fiercely that he was unworthy of the confidence she reposed in him, that he loved her passionately, adoringly, and without any dream of hope.

'I will not soil my worship of you by even asking for your forgiveness,' so he wrote. 'I have told you what I had to tell. There is no longer any power in me to hide it And now I know that it is good-bye indeed. In the sorrow and the loneliness which are rightly mine—since I earned them with much foolish painstaking—I shall never cease to love you, but I shall not presume to write to you again.'

'My poor Paul,' she wrote back to him, 'what madness!

And how great a cruelty to snatch from me the solace of your friendship 'Forget the madness, dearest friend. Undo the cruelty. Let us bury the memory of this outburst, let us go back to the past. Alas! did ever man or woman return to the past? But we must not part in this way. You must write to me at times. You must let me know of your artistic hopes. You must give me news of your career.'

He was amazed to find that he was answered at all, and even in his misery he joyed to find himself reprieved from the sentence his own conscience had

passed upon him. He was still free to write, and he wrote almost every day, though he sent off his budget only once a week. He did not make love in the sense of seeking to persuade his goddess to descend to him, but he made no further disguise of himself, and he was not again reproved.

This all led to a long space of infertility, and it was stretched still further by the departure of the Baroness to Paris. There, she wrote Paul, she would be much in society, and if he should find himself in the gay city at any time during her stay, she could introduce him to charming and useful people. But she was very round in her warnings to him.

'You must not come,' she told him, 'unless you are absolutely sure that there is no danger of making me absurd in the eyes of my friends. Dearly as I esteem you, I should never forgive you that. You have been so very outspoken of late, and I have permitted you to write your heart so freely, that I should be guilty of the foolishest affectation if I were silent on this one matter. We cannot control our affections. It is not given to us to love and dislike at discretion, but we can control our language and our conduct, and I must exact your promise ere you meet me. And I will tell you this once, and I will never breathe it any more: Had we met under happier conditions, had we both been free to choose, I know that I could have loved you. I am thus candid with you because I wish you to know how entirely I rely upon your discretion and respect. We may have happiness denied us, and to choose it now would be to suffer miserably, but we have each a personal esteem to guard. Ah, Paul! be kind to me. Do not make it hard to see you again.'

If all this were written, as Paul came most devoutly to believe in later days, with the single-minded desire to enslave him yet more completely, it

was truly heartless, but that was certainly the end it gained. It seemed to him the most pathetic and womanly of effusions, for what woman would write that she could have loved a man in happier conditions unless she did truly love him? She suffered as he suffered. Without her warrant it would have been coxcombical to believe it But the belief made her altogether sacred in his eyes, and he vowed a thousand times that no word or tone of his should ever offend that angel delicacy and tenderness. A curious part of this maniac experience was his estimate of himself as it proceeded. He was in a mood entirely heroical. The Baron de Wyeth, who was making money to supply the most whimsical needs of the absent Gertrude, never entered into his head. It did not offer itself on any single occasion to his intelligence to think that there was anything to be reprehended in this sterile dalliance.

As for Annette, she had grown to be impossible. She resented the guardianship exercised over her with an increasing fierceness. When she could smuggle her contraband through the enemy's lines, she locked herself in her room, and remained there until the supply was exhausted She would emerge blotched, pale, and haggard, and companionship between herself and her husband was out of question.

At the time at which the letter just cited reached Paul Annette's cunning had been unequal to the war for at least a fortnight, and her constitution was still youthful and strong enough to enable her to return to something of her earlier aspect after a few days of abstinence.

'I have business which will take me to Paris in a little while,' her husband told her.

'Very well,' she said indifferently.

'Do you prefer to come with me, or to stay here?' he asked.

'To go with you?' she demanded. 'Under what conditions?'

'Under the conditions I have always offered,' he returned: 'that you are accompanied by a female companion of my choice.'

'I shall stay here,' Annette said curtly.

'As you will.'

He was relieved by her decision, not merely because the last thread of comradeship between them was broken, but because he dreaded the exposure of the cupboard skeleton, which was always putting out a ghastly head at him. In a great city like Paris there might arise an occasion of escape from control at any moment, and Heaven alone knew what *esclandre* might ensue upon a single escapade.

He made his preparations for departure. Laurent promised his most careful supervision of affairs, and Paul left him with plenary powers. There were no adieux to make, for Annette declined to see him. He travelled to Brussels, and thence to Paris, going away with a relief which was made the more complete by the latest intelligence the doctor had brought him: there was to be no child of Annette's and his. That hope or fear—and he had barely known which to think it—was over.

At Montcourtois Madame la Baronne de Wyeth had been content to live in extreme simplicity, and her account of her own surroundings at Veryiers did not express any dose approach to luxury; but in Paris she occupied apartments of great splendour, had a considerable entourage about her, and entertained a limited number of charming people, who were all

more or less celebrated. Her music was as fine as anything that could be got in Paris, for she knew all the great singers and instrumentalists, and though the season was about at an end, there was still enough genius in the basket to pick and choose from.

It was with a wildly beating heart that Paul alighted at her door, and as he stood awaiting her in the luxuriously furnished salon which was the centrepiece of her apartments, his knees trembled with agitation. He was there to meet for the first time the woman he loved. That was strange and yet true. When he had last seen her he had not yet grown to love her, or, if he had, he had granted himself no knowledge of it. But now he loved, and he had confessed his love, and what was potentially a return avowal had been made by her. And they were to meet just as friends. There was to be no word spoken of all the passion which thrilled and filled his heart and tingled through his veins.

She came at last in a gentle silken rustle, dressed already for the reception of the guests who were expected to arrive an hour later. She had accorded him this one *tête-à-tête*—this and no other. She was transfigured in his eyes, and did indeed show to her best advantage in full toilette. The lucent rosy whiteness of arms and shoulders seemed to dazzle him.

He extended both hands to her, and she came forward with her lithe gait and a smile of great sweetness, and took them in her own.

‘Gertrude!’ he whispered, and she answered with the one word ‘Paul!’ and had his life depended upon it, he could not have spoken further at that instant.

‘I am very glad to see you, Paul,’ she said, ‘very glad indeed.’ She released one of his hands, and by

the other led him to a causeuse near one of the splendidly curtained windows. ‘But what has happened to you? she asked. ‘My poor Paul, you are ill! You are not yourself at all. There are brown circles round your eyes, and your cheeks have fallen in, and you are growing positively gray at the temples.’

‘I am not ill,’ Paul answered, trying to smile. ‘I have had a somewhat trying experience of late, and I am here to forget it.’

‘May I know of it?’ she asked

‘No,’ said Paul; ‘the topic is forbidden.’

She laughed gaily and blushed a little.

‘Now, that is very clever, and very wicked of you,’ she purred. ‘That topic is not to be approached even elliptically. But really and truly, my poor Paul, you are not well, and I shall see that you take proper care of yourself. You will take a glass of wine at once.’

‘No,’ he said, waving a hand against her as she made a motion to rise.

‘You used not to contradict my orders,’ she told him, ‘and you shall not do it now. I can give you a really excellent glass of champagne—not a lady’s champagne, be it understood, a man’s wine—a connoisseur’s.’

He made no further protest, and she rang a small silver bell near her hand. A grave serving-man appeared in answer to this summons, received his mistress’s order, and glided away again.

‘I have all your news?’ the Baroness asked, turning to her guest again.

‘All,’ he answered—’ all there is to tell.’

He had known perfectly well at one time that she was not strictly a beautiful woman. He had been able

to analyze her, to admit very fine eyes and teeth, and a clear, if somewhat florid, glow of complexion. He had granted, further, fine hair, and very beautiful hands and arms. But he wondered at himself, and could have laughed at his own blindness. The power of analysis had gone out of him because he was in love. She was merely a soft, dazzling splendour in aspect now, and every look and tone and attitude was a witchery and a wonder.

'I have not seen you in evening dress before to-night, Paul,' she said. 'I like you in evening dress. It is a great test of a man's distinction. It is cruel to all but the few. It is distinctly not cruel to you.'

'I am proud to be approved of,' he answered, trying to speak lightly.

The grave serving-man brought in the wine, which proved worthy of the hostess's praise. Paul was grateful for it, for it helped to steady his shaken nerve. He felt pretty much as he imagined a man might feel who was learning to stand under fire.

'It was kind of you,' he said, 'to give me this one hour to myself. I shall try to learn my lesson in it I want to assure you how much I have laid your injunction to heart, and to promise you that from this time forth you shall be implicitly obeyed. When I wrote that wild letter to you at Venders I had not the faintest hope of your forgiveness. I need not tell you how I thank you for it, how I shall strive to show my gratitude. But, indeed, you are my Anthea, Gertrude, and may command me anything.'

'Another man would not have found forgiveness, Paul,' she answered, turning away her head, and looking downward. 'I do not deny to you now that I was deeply amazed, and, at first, humiliated. Then for a time I was angry, and I had to ask myself of

what indiscretion I had been guilty to lay me open to the receipt of such a letter from my dearest friend. But we women are weak creatures where the affections are concerned, and I felt that I could not afford to lose you, Paul. You will not make it necessary for me to lose you?'

'No,' he declared. 'No spoken word of mine shall hurt you. God knows what you have been to me since first I met you.' She raised her hand against him and looked up with a glance of appeal. 'Oh, surely I may say this!' he urged. 'I have been through dark days, Gertrude. I am young, and reputation and fortune are calling to me, and I have put a millstone about my neck, and but for your friendship I should have broken my heart.'

'Paul,' she said, 'my poor boy! My poor, dear boy! I think I would give my life if I could comfort you.'

'You do comfort me,' he answered. 'You are the one comfort I have. I shall learn in time to think of you as if you were a saint in heaven.'

'Oh!' she purred, 'you dear, simple-souled enthusiast! Don't you know yet—haven't you found it out, that simple truth?—that when a man has relegated a living woman to the position of a saint in heaven he has ceased to care about her? I am not going to turn *you* into a sanctified figure.'

'I should scarcely look for that,' said Paul, with a momentary gleam of humour.

'I am going to keep you for a living, large-brained, human-hearted friend, and I hope that if we do not see too much of each other, we may both grow content with that arrangement.'

She spoke with a smiling vivacity, but she set a delicate little trifle of lace and cambric to her eyes, and then looked up and smiled again.

‘You do not wish,’ he asked, ‘that we should see much of each other?’ His face was very gloomy.

‘I mean,’ she said gently, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and looking into his mournful eyes, ‘that we should be discreet I do not mean that at all as regards the opinion of others, for there I can trust myself and you without a fear. I mean with respect to ourselves. It will not be well for your own happiness that we should meet often as we are meeting now.’

She rose, and moved away from him a little, standing with the fingers of her hands interlaced, and the palms downward. This is a very pleasing sort of attitude when adopted by the right kind of person. Taken in conjunction with a pensive, sidelong droop of the head, it will yield an expression of gently sorrowing coy confidence when employed by a competent artist.

‘You will promise me,’ said the Baroness, with a voice not wholly steady, ‘that you will never repeat to me what I am going to tell you.’

‘You may command me anything,’ Paul answered. ‘I promise.’

‘It will not be well,’ she went on, repeating the words she had spoken so little a while before, ‘for your own happiness that we should meet often as we are meeting now. Nor will it be well for mine, Paul. That is why I have hesitated so long before I have dared to permit you to see me—before I have dared to permit myself to see you. I am strong enough now to trust myself, and I put faith, too, in your friendship and your chivalry. You will not add to my unhappiness?’

Paul also had left his seat. He stood almost at her shoulder. He was near enough to have taken her in

his arms.

'Gertrude,' he murmured, 'if anything could add to what I feel for you, this would do it. You shall have my tenderest adoration, my constant obedience.'

She turned her head slowly, as if she did it almost against her will. She raised her eyes and looked at him with a strange steadfastness. She spoke in a soft, half-whisper.

'This is our good-bye to love. We have met and we have spoken, and we part again. In half an hour we shall meet as friends, and never, never, never again as we part now.'

She faced round upon him. Her fingers unlaced themselves and she stood with both arms open to him. For one burning instant he held her.

'Your promise!' she whispered, in a frightened voice. 'Your promise, Paul! Your promise!'

He suffered her to escape, and she drew herself away lingeringly, with the same strange steadfast glance.

'Good-bye, my lover. Good-bye, my king. I shall never meet him again. I shall come back to meet my friend.'

The words were but breathed so as to reach the ear, and she turned and walked droopingly from the room. So might a bruised lily have been borne away.

As for Paul, he had half an hour before the earliest guest was expected to arrive, and he tried hard to compose himself. It was heavy work, for he was constantly rolling down the hill of endeavour with exclamations of wonder and worship. What a woman! What a pearl among women! What candour! What courage! What tenderness! What purity! What beauty! He was at the height of felicity and the depth

of misery with such rapid alternations that he lost the sense of difference, and could not tell one from the other. But when the half-hour of waiting had almost vanished he drank another glass of the wine his *déesse* had commanded for him, and was at least prepared to face the world with a pretence of self-possession.

The guests began to arrive. There were but six more, and all were masculine. The Baroness made a radiant entrance to greet them. She made Paul known to each of them in turn, and all were men of mark. He heard everywhere a name which had been long familiar to him, but the latest comer of all, whom he had not found time to notice, was familiar in something more than name. For it was Ralston—Ralston the great, who had been the god of his boyhood—Ralston with his big gray head worn on one shoulder or another, with the look of fighting wisdom in his face, quite as of old.

'Mr. Ralston,' said the hostess, 'you must know my young friend Mr. Armstrong. We saw his comedy together, you remember.'

Ralston remembered, and seemed to remember more than the name.

'We have met before this?' he asked.

'Once,' Paul replied.

'Castle Barfield?'

'Exactly.'

'If you'd rather shelve that——'

'Certainly not—between ourselves.'

The hostess took the escort of the eminent diplomatist who was the *doyen* of the party. The men followed as it pleased them. Ralston and Paul went last.

‘I am a prophet,’ said Ralston, subduing that richly hoarse voice of his. ‘I told you you would do, and you have done.’

CHAPTER XXII

The evening was memorable to Paul for many reasons. There was not a great deal of the talk to carry away with one; but if it had not the solid brilliance of the diamond, it had the cheaper glitter of the sharded glass epigram which sparkles and cuts —an admirable substitute on most occasions, though it has the disadvantage of leaving dangerous fragments for people to tread upon. The conversation was carried on exclusively in French, and, though Paul’s ears were quick enough to keep abreast of it, his tongue was not, and he was a silent listener for the most part Ralston, having pathetically bidden farewell to ease and English, seemed as much at home as any person at table; but he told Paul, as they walked home together, that he hated to speak a foreign language.

‘Give me the old familiar tool that one has handled since babyhood. See how it adjusts itself to the hand! how one can carve with it! with how much comfort and dexterity! English, besides that, is the only language in the world. The things that are not to be said in English are not worth thinking—if they are speakable at all; and some things are not. Look up yonder!’ They were in the Place Vendôme. His

upward gesture sent Paul's eyes to the sky, which was sown thick with stars. 'Do you care for a talk across a whisky-and-soda and a cigar?' asked Ralston. 'I am here in the Rue Castiglione. Come to my room. I have the right nectar. I bring it with me when I come to Paris, and let them charge for corkage.'

When the guests had scattered, Paul had looked for one more private word with Gertrude; but she had left him no excuse to linger. She had said her 'Good-bye, Paul,' with an almost icy sweetness. He wanted to get away into solitude to think about her, and was half inclined to excuse himself from Ralston.

'Dear little, queer little body, our hostess, eh? Have you known her long?'

'Not very long,' Paul answered 'But she and you seemed to have quite ancient memories.'

If Ralston would talk about Gertrude, he would be glad to sit with him till morning light.

'Oh, I?' said Ralston—'I have known her from her childhood. If she makes any secret of her affairs, I mustn't babble, though. Do you know the Baron?'

'Not personally.'

'Ah, well—— This way in. I am no higher than the first-floor, and we needn't trouble the man at the lift. Here's the room. And now that I'm on my own territory, let me say how glad I am to have lighted upon you again. I've often wondered what you were making of yourself. "Paul Armstrong" is individual enough, and when I saw the name on the play-bill, I recalled it, and wondered if it meant you. Whisky, soda, cigars. Now we are provided for.'

Paul made himself look as disengaged and easy as possible.

'You asked me if I knew the Baron. What kind of man is he? A strange sort of fellow, rather—one-and-thirty—to be indifferent to such a woman: brilliant, amiable, charming.'

He spoke with no enthusiasm. He wanted to talk about Gertrude, but he did not mean to betray his own concerns.

'The Baron's a very decent fellow; but he has a rather muddy German accent, and he can't understand the lady's verses. There's nothing worse than that in it. She elects to travel; he elects to stay at home. There's no sort of scandal or impropriety. She's a dear little woman, and a good little woman, and she has the French-American *pschutt*, as the idiot word goes now. She's a bit of a sentimentalist, and an exquisite flirt, but the most genuine little creature, too. If she wouldn't flirt, she'd be too good for this world.'

'Flirt!' cried Paul, in so much horror that Ralston laughed aloud.

'I have taken advantage of my demi-semi-clerical dignity,' he said, 'to preach many sermons to her on that particular. Mind you, she's a most estimable woman; and, as you said just now, brilliant and amiable and charming. But she flirts—she flirts with me; and, if I were not entrenched behind the fortress of threescore years, she'd enslave me as she enslaves everybody else. There's an Isolation of the Soul which is very effective at short range. Do you happen to have met it yet?'

Was Ralston warning him of set purpose? Had he observed anything—any little subtle thing—which had told him how the land lay? Was he conceivably speaking as the husbands friend? Was his speech accidental or designed? Whatever it might be, and it

was certainly enough to discomfit the listener greatly, it was not enough to shake his faith in Gertrude. When he found time to think about it, he marvelled that so shrewd a man as Ralston should have formed so mistaken an estimate of a character so sincere and transparent.

If ever a woman had laid the pure recesses of her heart and soul open to the inspection of a human eye, Gertrude had done so. He was confident that he knew her, and it seemed to him that no two hearts had ever lived together in an intimacy at once so chaste and fiery. Gertrude a flirt? The tenderness she had shown him that night a pretence? The thing was so incredible and ridiculous that it was not worth while to bother one's brains with it for even the fraction of a minute. He had found his soul's partner —the twin Half of the Pear—and he was more than content with his discovery.

Whether Ralston meant much or little, whether, indeed, he virtually meant nothing or anything, Paul could not guess; but he was uneasy beneath the humorous gravity of the elder's eye, and he changed the theme. They had a good hour together, and shook hands and parted with a mutual liking, and at the instant at which he reached the street Paul was free to take up his station at his end of the telepathic wire and to call Gertrude to the other. He walked miles and miles whilst engaged in this wholesome and reasonable enterprise, and at length, without in the least knowing how he had got there, found himself, dog-tired, in a strange quarter of the city. He rambled on until he met a gendarme, who put him upon his way, and within ten minutes of this encounter he awoke with a start to the fact that he was pacing the pavement of the thoroughfare in which he had first seen Annette. The interregnum of

fatigue which had come in between his passionate dreams and this reminder of the sordid realities of his lot went for nothing. The dream and the truth flashed together like the electric opposites in clouds and awoke a rare thunderstorm within doors. But by the time he had got to his hotel this was over, and he crawled wearily upstairs to a fireless room, the air of which struck chill and lonely. The apartment in itself was well enough, and not many years before he would have thought it palatial in its stateliness and luxury; but he would have given a thousand pounds at that instant if he could have translated himself to the old kitchen hearth at home and into the sight of the old familiar faces. He had taken a little champagne before dinner, a moderate allowance of wine in the course of the meal, and two rather liberal tumblers of whisky-and-soda with Ralston. This was not the direction in which he was accustomed to approach excess, but he remembered gladly that he had a carafe of brandy in the room. He was chill and tired, and in that contradictory condition of discomfort in which a man is at once painfully sleepy and distressfully wide awake. He poured a quantity of spirit into a tumbler, filled the glass to the brim with water, undressed, blew out his candles, and went to bed, and the demons of a sleepless night came to him and tormented him. The opening line of Tennyson's 'Love and Duty' got into his brain and ticked there: 'Of love that never found its earthly close, what sequel?' It recurred with a damnable iteration. He tried all the devices for wooing slumber he had ever heard of. He assembled an innumerable flock of sheep, for he had the knack of making pictures in his mind, and he set them one by one to leap through a gap in a hedge, counting them as they went by. He had not counted a dozen when the

words were back again: ‘Of love that never found its earthly close, what sequel?’

He repeated the experiment scores of times, but it was always interrupted by the same query. He set an unending line of soldiers on the march, all as like each other as peas in the same pod. He resolutely denuded his mind of thought; he repeated the multiplication table. It was all of no service; the question came back remorselessly, and at last he set himself to face it. It was dismal enough to look at To think of the world without Gertrude was to conceive a barren waste in which it was worth no man’s while to dwell. To anticipate a life-long continuance of the experiences and emotions of the past three months was scarcely to invite a more cheerful prospect To hint, even in his own thoughts, at any attempt to draw her from her own height of purity was a profanation. The quarters and the hours chimed, until the gray spring dawn crept through the interstices of the blinds, and fatigue grew more leaden than ever. But the devil of insomnia was unconquerable. He relit his candles, found a book, and tried to read; but that was as hopeless as the rest.

He had no claim to call upon Gertrude again until he learned that it was her goodwill and pleasure he should do so; but he was not forbidden to write, and there at least was an occupation to which he could bend his mind. He dressed and sat down, dull and haggard, to the task. He wrote page on page, feeling as though he dipped his pen in his own heart’s blood; but when he came to read what he had written, it was no more what he had meant it to be than a Hortus Siccus is a living garden, or a mummy a live Prometheus. He wrote at last: ‘I cannot bear this banishment in nearness, and if I am not to see you I

must go away. I have had a night of fever, and have not slept I dare not trust myself to write, but for pity's sake let me have an answer by the messenger who brings this.'

He fixed in his mind ten o'clock as the earliest possible hour at which he could venture to have the note delivered, and until then he must needs have patience. When he went to place his missive in the hands of the concierge, with instructions for the time of its delivery, the servants had only just begun to stir about the house. He had come down great-coated and gloved, as if for an early walk, but the walk was no more than a pretext to allay some remotely imaginable suspicion on the part of the concierge.

'Imust leave this with you now,' he said, 'because it must be delivered at ten o'clock precisely, and I shall probably not be able to return till later. The messenger will wait for an answer.'

The man promised that his instructions should be obeyed, and he walked into the streets feeling quite aimless and forlorn, and with the fatigues of the night still heavy on him. He had not gone far when he found a fiacre, and bade the man drive to the Bois and back, and fill up two hours with the journey. Now, the chill morning air and the bright light falling on tired eyes began to work upon him, and in a little while he was peacefully asleep. The cocher awoke him at the door of his hotel. He looked at his watch, and it was ten o'clock to the minute. His heart turned a somersault as he thought that this was the hour at which Gertrude would receive his letter. Breakfast was out of question, but by this time either the Bodega or the English bar would be open, and he needed a stimulant of some sort before he could face an interview if such a favour were to be accorded him. It would be unreasonable to expect that the

messenger would return in less than half an hour, and he spent that time in the society of a glass of well-watered absinthe and the English newspapers of yesterday. He read industriously, but the only printed words which reached his consciousness were those of the theatrical advertisement which told him that the joint work of Messrs. George Darco and Paul Armstrong was still being played nightly to crowded houses. That did not interest him in the least, and the news of Parliament and the police courts might as well have been written in Sanscrit for all the impression it made upon him.

He endured his own impatience resolutely for the stated time, and then walked back to the hotel. His messenger had not yet returned, but there in the vestibule was Ralston, in his brigandish sombrero and his black velvet jacket, looking so fit and wholesome that Paul envied him.

'I have just met two of the boys,' said Ralston, 'and we are going to breakfast at the Poule d'Or at twelve o'clock. Will you make one of us? I can promise you good talk, and honest fare, and wholesome wine.'

'I should like it,' Paul answered awkwardly; 'but the fact is, I can't tell whether I am free to go. I dare say I shall be able to give you an answer in an hour, if that will do?'

'We must make it do,' said Ralston, and at that instant Paul's messenger returned, and handed to him a large envelope of faint saffron tone.

It bore an armorial device on one side in gold and scarlet, and on the other a superscription in a handwriting which had been so trained to affectation that it was recognisable at a glance to anyone who had once seen it.

'You will excuse me,' said Paul; 'I may have to

answer this at once.'

He stepped a little on one side and broke the envelope open with the certainty in his mind that Ralston had noticed his eagerness and saw how his fingers trembled. The thick embossed notepaper held three words only, or, rather, two words and an initial: 'Breakfast, noon.—G.' His face flushed with triumph, and he turned impulsively on Ralston.

'I find,' he said, with a vivacity in strong contrast with his previous manner, 'that I can't come to-day, but I hope you'll give me another chance. Supposing you and your friends are at liberty for this evening, will you bring them to dine with me? I can trust the Poule d'Or; I know it of old.'

'Good,' said Ralston. 'If they are at liberty, we'll be there. What time shall we say? Seven?'

'Seven,' Paul answered brightly.

But a new confusion fell upon him. Not a muscle of Ralston's swarthy clear-cut face or the full-bearded lips moved, but there was a dancing little demon of not more than half-malicious humour in his eyes.

'Seven,' Paul repeated. 'You'll excuse me now? You won't think my haste unfriendly?'

'My dear fellow!' cried Ralston, the fun rioting in his eyes by this time, though his features were as still as those of a graven image.

'Well,' said Paul, with a desperate, fruitless effort to recover himself, 'until seven.'

Ralston shook hands and went his way, and Paul raced upstairs two steps at a time and burst into the room he had left less than three hours ago in a mood so cheerless and despondent He kissed the letter and clapped it to his heart, and strolled up and down exulting. He was not to be dismissed; he was not to

be sent into the desert, after all.

And, then, what about Ralston? It was really a most unpleasant, a most unlucky, chance which had brought him there at that particular instant. There was no blinking the fact that Ralston had enjoyed Paul's discomfiture, and his talk of the previous night came back to mind—the fun he had made of the Isolated Soul; his good-humoured allowance for the one foible in the character of a lady whom he had known from childhood, and for whom he professed both affection and esteem. It matters not how impossible a suggestion of this kind may seem to a lover's mind. His rejection of it with a natural scorn is of no manner of consequence except inasmuch as it confirms his loyalty. The suggestion will stick and will worry, and it will stick the longer and worry the more because it will make the sufferer suspicious of himself. 'Trust me not at all, or all in all,' is a native motto for the man of candid soul, and for him an implanted mistrust will not touch his mistress, though it may anguish him with a sense of his own unworthiness.

But—for the time, at least—these things were no more than mere trickeries of self-torment for Paul's mind, and he was on fire to meet the mid-day. He got out his handsomest morning raiment and brushed it with his own hands, and made a second toilet lest there should be a speck on cuff or collar after the morning's drive, and then he promenaded the streets at a snail's pace to kill the hour which intervened between himself and heaven.

Heaven was a trifle chilly when, after all this patient waiting, he reached its portals. Gertrude was like frozen honey. She met him in an exquisite morning confection of the latest Parisian design—a something, to the uninstructed male eye, between a

peignoir and a tea-gown, but of costly simplicity, and of colours cunningly suited to match Madame's complexion in the daylight. The table was exquisitely appointed, but to Paul's dismay the couverts laid upon it were as for apart as the length of the table would permit. He looked so comically discomfited at this discovery, and his face so easily expressed his disappointment, that Gertrude laughed and relented.

'Well, M. Paul,' she said, still laughing, 'I will make a side-dish of you,' and with her own pretty hands she re-arranged the table, assigning him a position with great demureness in the exact centre of it.

Paul would have made at least an effort to break through the crust of sweet ice which enveloped her this morning but for the presence of a piquante small brunette of a waiting-maid, who stood on guard, as it were, over a service-table at the end of the apartment.

'My maid,' said Gertrude, 'neither speaks nor understands a word of any language but her own, but I can assure you that she has eyes, and can use them. She invariably attends me at breakfast, and to send her away would be——'

She paused.

'What would it be? said Paul. 'Surely Madame la Baronne de Wyeth has the right to choose what form of service she pleases at her own table?'

'Madame la Baronne,' replied the lady, with a slight curtsey, 'has chosen.'

'But surely, Gertrude——' Paul began.

She stopped him with a significant gesture of the hand.

'Not my Christian name this morning, if you please. And remember,' she added, 'my little watch-

dog there has eyes, as I have already told you, and though she knows nothing of English, I should guess her to be a very fair judge of tone. Come now, you stupid boy,' she continued in a voice so level and cool that no one who did not understand her words could have guessed their purport, 'I will make a bargain with you. If you will be kind to me, I will be kind to you. If I receive here a distinguished and handsome young Englishman all alone—if in order to receive him I make a marked alteration in my household appointments—— Come, now, is it worth while to go on with that?'

'No,' said Paul, calling his stage practice to his aid, and following her lead,' it is not worth while; but,' he added with a ceremonious bow, 'I shall not break my heart if I must needs go on with Madame la Baronne. The right which you have given me to use a dearer name is so precious to me '—he drew out his watch and pretended to compare it with the fairy pendule on the mantel-shelf—'is so precious,' he continued, 'that I cannot resign it, and if I am absolutely driven to it in self-defence, I shall have to invent a dearer name.'

'Now, that, M. Paul,' said Madame, with her tone and face of chill sweetness, 'is excellently well done, except for the one little circumstance that you do not disguise your ardour. I read in your eyes,' she said as calmly as if she were announcing a trifle of news she had read in the morning's papers, 'all the fervour of your mind, and I do not wish to read it there—that is to say, I do not wish my little maid to read it there.'

'Well,' said Paul, 'I will try. If you will let me say what I want to say, I will keep a straight face over it.'

'Within measure,' said the lady, with a passing touch of gaiety—'within measure.'

‘Most things have their measure,’ Paul answered, ‘until you come to the crucial matters of the heart, and they go beyond measure.’

The maid broke in at this point to ask if Madame la Baronne would be served.

‘At once,’ said the mistress, and waved Paul to his place. He bowed and took it. The maid served a number of elegant kickshaws, and the grave serving-man who had superintended the dinner-table on the previous evening entered with a bottle of hock in a cradle and stealthily withdrew.

‘You gave me but little time,’ said Gertrude, ‘to prepare for you, but I think you will find that we have done very well. Try that hock, M. Paul.’

Paul looked down his nose, and in a dry-at-dust voice recited the first verse of old Ben’s immortal lyric. His voice quavered a little on the last lines—

‘But might I of Jove’s nectar sip, I would not change from thine!’ and Gertrude broke in with a laugh and an airy little wave of her hand.

‘Now, my dear M. Paul,’ she said, ‘you are really and truly admirable. That is quite perfect, and if you will promise me, upon your sacred word of honour as a man, not to betray me by a word or a look, I will tell you something I never told you before. I have never admired you so much, or loved you so dearly, as I do at this hour. You must believe me,’ she continued, pushing her plate away and beckoning the maid with a slight backward gesture of the head, ‘I hate this tone of persiflage, but what is there left for us if we would be blamelessly alone, and yet speak our hearts to each other?’

‘Madame,’ said Paul, ‘I find it a masterstroke of genius.’ Their tones were ice on both sides, but their words were fire. The maid most probably thought

her mistress bored, and the guest a dullard. She had seemed at first interested in the new arrival, but she lapsed now into an attitude of indifference, and the dangerous pretence went on. In this intoxicating whirl of passion, when interchange of vows was offered under the necessity of constant watchfulness and self-guardianship, the meal was not an important matter.

'But,' said Gertrude, 'my dear Paul, you must really do justice to my table; the pretence must be absolute.'

'I will try to make it so,' he answered; but the luxurious meal had no more relish for him than if it had been desert sand. He struggled with it manfully, however, and contrived to keep astride his end of the see-saw of pretence.

Who are the best and who the worst of women? Did any man ever venture to impugn the fair fame of Madame la Baronne de Wyeth? Yet, had the devil a better ally anywhere than this delicate little purring white-breasted epicure in the varying flavours of the ruined soul? Oh, the devil is, of course, a symbol! Let the phrase pass.

But the Paul Armstrong of ten years later, perched in his fog-bound eyrie, staring along the unseen gorge? He tells himself that had she been what he believed her, he might have been elsewhere than where he finds himself. There had been but a surface ash upon the seeming ruin of a life. There was something still to build upon, but she must needs destroy what was left. There was wholesome blood in the veins of the man who aspired to rebuild, and it was she who poisoned its fount.

'"Queen bee of the honey asps,"' quoth Paul of the eyrie: and he was back in Paris.

He was back at Gertrude's table, the worshipped, the immaculate Gertrude of those days.

They had reached the end of the repast, and coffee was served in little cups of eggshell china encased in filigree gold.

'A gift from the Khedive,' she said, indicating these. 'Sardou was with me when I was in Alexandria.' She laughed, and what with her eyes, to which a single glass of the rare hock had given an added sparkle, and what with her faultless teeth, she fairly dazzled on her companion. 'Yes, that is the creature's absurd name. Sardou is the solemn personage who has been waiting upon us all the morning, and his godfathers and godmothers had the impertinence to baptize him in the name of Victor. I was telling you that Sardou was with me in Alexandria when the Khedive was so gracious as to offer me this little souvenir, and I implored his Highness that he might be permitted to make a study in coffee in the palace kitchen. He made it, and the result is adorable. *Inter alia*,' she said in the same tone, 'you, too, are adorable this morning, and now I think I may snatch a longed-for moment and tell you so in earnest. Juliette, bring me a letter you will find upon my toilet-table, and call Sardou.'

Juliette tripped out like a stage soubrette, demurely pert from crown to sole. Possibly—just possibly—she guessed; probably she guessed nothing. The suggestion was no more than a suggestion in the mind of the watcher of all these bygone scenes.

Paul rose, but Gertrude waved him back.

'Not yet,' she whispered, 'not yet.'

He sat down again, his senses all awhirl with the aching desire he had to hold her in his arms.

'You must not allow Sardou's masterpiece to grow

cold,' said Gertrude; and Juliette came tripping back again, with the grave man at her heels. 'You will take this to the post,' said Madame la Baronne, indicating the letter on the salver the maid carried. 'You will see it registered personally, and bring me the receipt.'

The grave man bowed, and retired, letter in hand.

'You like your coffee, Mr. Armstrong? And, oh, Juliette, bring to me that last little portfolio of watercolour drawings. You know where you will find them?'

'But, yes, Madame la Baronne, but they were locked in the escritoire.'

'You will find the key,' said the Baroness, sipping her coffee, 'in my purse. Make haste, for M. Armstrong has but a moment to spare.'

Juliette ran with a swirl of petticoats upstairs. Gertrude followed the footsteps with alert ear and eye. Ear and eye alike seemed to listen. She rose to her feet and stretched her arms with an imploring gesture.

'Does this make amends to you?' she murmured. 'To me it atones for all'

'No, no; be careful Mind my hair, you silly darling —mind my hair! Shall you be content to wait for this just now and then? Oh, Paul, Paul, Paul! how hard it is! Go now—go. Quickly! Sip your coffee, Paul, and try to look as little unnatural as you can. She is quicker than I fancied. I've always a cigar to offer a departing breakfast guest. Juliette, the cigars.'

Juliette laid down the small portfolio she carried, and pricked away a third time.

'You love me?' he said hoarsely.

The sound of his own voice was in his ears, after

everything that had happened.

'I adore you!' she responded. 'You know it all now. But duty calls you one way and me another. And oh, Paul, "of love that never found its earthly close, what sequel?"'

'The very words,' he cried, 'that ticked in my brain all night'

'You must look at the portfolio,' she murmured. 'Est tu content de moi?

'Je t'aime!' and with fumbling fingers he untied the strings of the portfolio.

And now was Paul Armstrong the tame cat of Madame la Baronne de Wyeth, and earned his title well in many cities, from St Petersburg to Cadiz, and from London to Cairo.

CHAPTER XXIII

It would appear that in the course of time Gertrude grew a little tired of Paul's ceaseless devotion. It is quite likely that she sometimes found him in the way, and she was deprived of her best conversational theme. It was of no use to try to revive the legend of the Isolated Soul any longer, because of the frequent and earnest confession which had been made of the final discovery of a spiritual rapport absolute and complete. Paul and his angel had lived on terms of so much intimacy that they had earned the right to be acidulous with each other upon occasion. Her

pruderies and her abandonments of prudery afforded between them an atmosphere as unwholesome as it was easily possible for a man of fervent temperament to live in. Work of the hard and healthful sort was practically abandoned. There was a good deal of verse-turning done, and an anonymous volume of sonnets entitled ‘Dialogues of the Soul’ made a momentary splash on the surface of the literary deep, and then sank like a pebble to the bottom. The book distilled a faint odour of eroticism, a scent of the epicene; but the degenerates, sniffing it, thought poorly of it because of its want of downright rancidity, and the people of whom crowds are made misliked it for a better reason. Paul, with a diminishing exchequer, found himself aware of the first flat literary failure of his lifetime.

The exchequer failed rapidly, and there were several contributory reasons. In the first place, the Baroness had any amount of money to spend, and it was essential that anyone who aspired to follow her about the capitals of Europe on equal terms should live at a high rate. Then, Annette had proclaimed her rights of freedom, and had escaped from Laurent and his forces, and had run up bills in Paris, and in London, and elsewhere. The most successful of comedies will pass out of vogue. To be idle, to be extravagant in one’s own person, and to be milked perpetually by the extravagance of another—could better ways to ruin be discovered?

The two had their first real tiff at Naples on a Christmas Eve. Gertrude had set up a sheep-dog in the person of one Mrs. Diedrich, a sour and sallow remnant of New England fashion and beauty, a lady who both on her husband’s side and her own claimed all the splendours of Knickerbocker descent. The husband was dead, the fortune—except for a meagre

bone or two with little meat thereon—was eaten all away. Mrs. Diedrich and the sympathetic Gertrude's mother had been friends. There was nothing more natural or more befitting than that the wealthy Baroness de Wyeth should find an asylum for this superannuated slave of fortune, though Paul knew perfectly well that she was no more than a buckler against scandal at the first. But reasonable as he was compelled to admit such a precaution to be, he was not very long in discovering that the impoverished lady was a buckler against himself, and that she was used to prevent that old familiar laying of heads together, and the old familiar communion of hearts, in which, by dint of careful manoeuvring, a bare sixty seconds might sometimes he snatched for a solitude of two.

There should have been a drive that afternoon—Gertrude and Paul, with Mrs. Diedrich to play gooseberry—and Mrs. Diedrich had fallen ill. Paul presented himself at the appointed hour, and no Gertrude was there to meet him. Instead of the Presence a note couched in the chilliest terms:

'Dear Friend,

'Mrs. Diedrich is shockingly unwell to-day, and I cannot leave her. Profoundest regrets for a lost pleasure.

'Sincerely, 'G. de W.'

'My luck!' said Paul bitterly to himself; for he had been more than once disappointed of late. But he found grace enough to express his sorrow, send his compliments and good wishes, and to withdraw. He went strolling about in unknown ways, with all manner of unpleasant things to think of. He not only made his momentary disappointment the greatest of them all, but strove to make it so. And yet the others

would intrude. Here was a letter from Darco expressing grave disappointment with the end of the second act of their latest piece. Darco coughing up his stammering gutturals as a speaker of English was one man, and Darco with a pen in his hand was another.

‘It crumbles,’ wrote the critic, ‘at the very instant at which it should triumph. It is vague, unconvincing, wrong. You leave me unanswered for six whole weeks, and at the end you send me this incoherent sandheap, when your promises had given me the right to expect a solid piece of well-worked marble. I do not know whether you are well or ill, whether you desire to continue the work or no. All of which I am certain is that the piece is wanted for March, and that we cannot work together at this distance. I will meet you where you like—Paris, Brussels, Vienna, London, Hong Kong. It is all one to me so long as I get you back to work in time. But, for whatever reason, this second act is so written that it will not do. And I cannot wait I am a poet, but I am a poet without a language. If you will not be my interpreter, I must find another. Is friendship friendship, or is business business? In the name of both I ask you to meet me and to work with me.’

Look at it how he would, and distort his own perspective as he might, Darco’s angry and outspoken appeal was larger than anything his duty to Gertrude might ask of him. But, to tell the whole truth, his sense of duty was his curse, because the sense itself had grown distorted. Because of some rooted infirmity of character, he must needs be true to the ideal which least merited truth. He saw this fact throughout his career. He had bowed at foolish shrines. Gertrude—oh yes, Gertrude was impeccable. But just as he was wasting the heart of ardent

manhood now, he had wasted the heart of youth and the heart of boyhood The career was all of a piece. Born to be fooled, whether by a village coquette, or his own loftiest, or his own lowest, or by practised *femme de feu* and *femme de glace* in one—always born to be fooled, frustrated, enticed to the throwing away of real passion and of real power.

And over and above all these, arrange them in what imaginary perspective he might choose, the sordid side of things, the bills—bills from lodging-house keepers of the better sort, from hotels, from milliners, and from modistes—and the shrinking exchequer, which barely, when all claims were satisfied, would leave him so much as two hundred and fifty pounds.

What had his year and a half of dalliance brought him? A dream of pleasure, a desert ache of hunger, an occasional delirious spur to appetite. Now, what in the name of common-sense is the good of it all? And is Gertrude any better, after all, than an innocent Delilah, trapping no Samson, but a fool unmuscled, who has no strength to break the weakest of her withes? Innocent Delilah! He never profaned her in his thought.

But in this mood—with his conscience, literary-artistic and simply human, entirely endorsing old Darco's reproof of his work and his evasions; with a financial crevasse at his feet, and Annette chopping away his standing-place, and his own extravagances melting his foothold like butter in the sun; with a barren future staring him in the face—he was disposed alike to remorse and penitence.

The city in which he rambled was strange to him, and, according to his fashion when absorbed in thought, he took any turning which suggested itself,

and lost himself in a labyrinth of byways. He had done the same kind of thing in a hundred towns and cities without any result worth mentioning, but just for once he was destined to find a purpose wrapped up in the folds of this simple habit.

He was plodding along miserably enough, and did not know whether he were at Naples or the North Pole, when a familiar voice awoke him from his bitter reveries, and he looked about him to discover that he was between a high wall and & hedge of aloes on a strip of grass which had no pathway on it, and apparently led nowhere. He had a vague idea that he had set out in this direction upon a footpath more or less distinct, and making a *volte-face*, he saw that the path had come to a termination at a door in the high wall a wicket's length behind him.

The voice he had heard was the voice of Gertrude, and the words it had spoken were: 'Ah! but my dear friend, that inevitable, that unceasing isolation of the mind!'

A swift pang of jealousy ran through him, and he listened with an almost fierce anxiety. There was nothing in his nature to induce him to play the eavesdropper, but he could not have refrained from listening just then had it been to save his soul. Some deep undetermined murmur of a voice in answer seemed to reach his ears, but they were drumming so to the startled music of his heart that his sense failed to record it. He went back swiftly and stealthily to the spot at which the pathway terminated, and there he found an old green-painted door in a small archway in the wall. It half drooped upon its rusty hinges, and across the gap it left between its own rim and the postern, he had view enough to tell him whither his rambling footsteps had led him. He was looking at the terraced gardens in the rear of the

Baroness's hotel, and whilst he looked Gertrude herself floated into sight. Some trifle of a lace mantilla was thrown over her head, and in her right hand she balanced a parasol daintily between thumb and finger. Her companion was a man apparently of middle age, frock-coated, silk-hatted, booted and gloved as if for Rotten Row. He bore himself with an air of distinction, and the looker-on saw the gloved hand caress a big moustache of sweeping silver. The owner of the moustache was bending over the Baroness with an unmistakable air of gallant attention, and Paul's blood boiled within him. He had no real sense of the impulse which moved him, and no calculation as to what might happen; but he pushed the door aside, and, entering the garden, walked along the gravelled main path which led to the hotel. He made a feint of holding his head straight, and of looking neither to left nor right, but he watched Gertrude and her companion with a keen sidelong glance. His brisk footstep set a pebble rolling in the pathway, and a second later he heard his own name called. A low-growing orange-tree, all lustrous with globes of green and gold and shiny leafage, had intercepted his view of the pair for just the instant which intervened between the sound and the call.

'Mr. Armstrong,' said Gertrude's voice, 'Mr. Armstrong!' He turned in a pretence of amazement, and, hat in hand, crossed a small space of turf.

'I had just sent round to you,' said the smiling little lady, 'at your hotel.' She transferred the parasol to her left hand, and held out the right in an almost effusive greeting. 'I suppose you have not been back yet?'

'No,' Paul answered. 'I have been walking and had lost myself, until I recognised the garden through the

open door yonder. Then I made sure of myself again, and thought I might secure a short-cut home.'

'How fortunate!' said Gertrude, smiling; 'and how curious, too!' she added. 'At the very moment at which I caught sight of you your name was in my mind. Are you a believer in the Aura, Colonel Brunton—the something which envelops personality and diffuses itself in such a manner that you recognise a friend's presence before you are made aware of it by sight or hearing? Don't you recognise the reality of those things? But, oh, I forgot! You gentlemen are, I am afraid, strangers to each other. This is Colonel Brunton, our great traveller in the Himalayas and Thibet, and this is Mr. Paul Armstrong, the author of I dare not say how many charming books and comedies—Mr. Darco's collaborateur.'

'Whose work,' said Colonel Brunton in a voice typically American, but profoundly deep, 'I have, bafore my trip to Asia, seen performed with a splendid eclaw both in London and New York. I am proud to meet you, Mr. Armstrong.'

He was a rugged man, brown as a sun-burned brick, with a cascading moustache of silver, jet-black eyebrows, and eyes which danced defiance at his gray hairs and wrinkles. Paul could do no less than accept the hearty hand he offered, and Gertrude set herself to soothe him.

'You know,' she said, laying her finger-tips upon his arm, 'you are a very inattentive cavalier, Mr. Armstrong. Poor Mrs. Diedrich was taken ill so suddenly and alarmingly that I had time to do no more than just to scribble that little hasty note to you. You might at least have paused to make inquiry.'

‘That would never have done,’ said Paul ‘One does not inquire into a lady’s decision at any moment.’

He spoke with a capital assumption of gaiety, but to the keen instinct of that experienced trifler with hearts it was an assumption only, and Gertrude turned the question with the easy skill of a woman of the world.

‘Those geological researches now,’ she said, with a charming air of mocking schoolgirl ignorance about such matters. ‘Do you really mean to tell me that right away in the Himalayas you found the same little protozoic blot in the same limestone that you find in our own Andes? Has that little creature really built the mountains of the world? Why, it is the story of the Coral Islands over again; but on what an enormous scale, ‘Dear me, what creatures of a day we are!’

Colonel Brunton, who, as it appeared, was a member of many learned societies, and a most indefatigable besieger of the world’s inaccessible places, turned out to be a man of so much simplicity, sincerity, and charm, and Gertrude drew him to his best so skilfully, that it was not easy to be sulky for a long time together in his society. It was Paul’s cue to disguise himself as far as possible, and this delightful American helped him greatly. He could barely think of the man as a rival; he was so very upright, downright complimentary.

‘Why, Lord!’ he said once in the course of that afternoon’s talk, ‘when you were in short frocks, and I was over head and ears in love with you——’

The Baroness snatched a fan which girdled her, and tapped him with it reprovingly.

‘Well,’ he said, twinkling, ‘when all is said and done, habit is the conqueror. I got into that habit

when you were a baby: twenty years ago, I'll swear, though it's not legitimate, I know, to guess a lady's age. I've found a new habit since—a Satanic habit—of going to and fro about the earth, and roaming up and down on it, but I have never forgotten the old one.'

The Baroness laughed and made fun of this proclamation, which was accompanied by certain old-fashioned bows and flourishes of deportment.

'But now,' she said, 'I must really run away and look after my patient, and must leave you, gentlemen, to console each other for my loss. I left Mrs. Diedrich asleep, and could just afford to snatch half an hour for so old a friend as you, Colonel If you care to come back and have tea with me at six, I shall be glad to meet you, if I may dare run away again. But if I *should* be compelled to send down my excuses, you will understand.'

She had already started a movement towards the hotel, and the two men sauntered along with her, one on either side. She left them in the flower-perfumed dimness of the shaded hall, and the whole business of the afternoon had by this time so explained and reconciled itself to Paul's mind that he would have been a brute to fret about it longer.

'I say,' said the Colonel, 'I have been for three years outside civilization, and I should like a John Collins. I came here last night by the Messagerie Maritime. They are good people, and they cook as well as anybody can be expected to cook outside the United States, but their ideas of drink are curiously simple. Can you be my guide, Mr. Armstrong?'

'Need I guide you farther?' asked Paul 'I should fancy that your materials are to be found here in an absurd plenty, and if you have a skilful hand——'

'Sir,' said the Colonel, with a burlesque flourish, interrupting him, 'there is not a man from Marble Head to the Golden Gate who can make a John Collins to compare with mine.'

Paul knew the house, and led his new acquaintance to a shady veranda where a polyglot waiter chipped his ice to his fancy, found him lemon, pounded sugar, fresh mint, square-faced Hollands, and syphon-water, and left the Colonel compounding in a high state of content.

'This is like home,' he said, 'bar the celestial straw, the use of which these blahsted Continentals have not learned. This is quite like home. Three years I have been roughing it, up hill and down dale, camp and field Seen a little bit o'fightin' on the Burmah side 'long of your British troops.

Mr. Armstrong; better boys I do *not* want to meet And here's to them and you, sir. But, Lord!'—he caressed his tumbler with a lean brown hand, and looked contemplatively into space—'I must smoke. Try a Burmese cigarette, sir. Lord 'I land here last night after three years. I just break my journey on the way to London, and I run against the little girl that broke my heart when I was fifteen years of age, and broke it again when I was one-and-twenty, and would just go on breaking it for the mere fun of the thing for the next million years, if she and me could only live as long.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Paul, in a cold insolence which made him hot to think of a thousand times later, 'have you been drinking?'

'Well, I guess,' said Mr. Brunton, and, leaning back in his deck-chair, drew a great volume of smoke into his lungs, expelled it in a cloud, and laughed; 'after a three years' drought, the man who is not game to

drink deserves to go dry. But, by Heaven, sir, to strike up against that mighty little flirt after a space of fifteen years—to come across it all again by accident! Look here! I land out of the *Grande Marie de Luxembourg* at Naples, with no more idea of revivin' old times than of escapin' into the next century, and who's the first person that I meet but little Gertie, and what's the first word that I hear but the isolation of the soul!'

Paul sat in a chill, tense agony.

'I was,' said the Colonel, growing more and more clearly articulate in accordance with his needs, 'about as full up as any Christian need be when I landed, and I was going to bed like a clean Christian gentleman. Then I ran up against Gertie. I have been Turkish bathed, I have been sluiced and washed and shaved and perfumed, and I can stand and talk straight. What do you say? What would you have said about me amongst the oranges and lemons in the garden there?' He sat up in a momentary fierceness. 'Am I intoxicated, or, at least, was I till I turned the lock-gate winch and set the waters foaming? No, sir, but in that profoundly philosophic observation of life your works declare you will have observed the state in which a man becomes drunk-sober.

He brims over after that stage. That I allow. He brims over, sir—he brims over, sir. If it is of any humorous value to you to make observations of the present case, *I* am brimming over, sir.'

The clean-cut, travel-hardened, sun-stained man was slipping from his original place in Paul's mind, like a statue built in clay too soft to support its own weight. He slipped at the chin, at the mouth, at the base of the nostril, at the eyebrow, and yet, in spite

of these deflections from the original, he appeared to recover himself with an extraordinary swiftness at moments, and to be again the alert, adventurous creature of the woods and wilds his extraordinary career proclaimed him.

It was in a moment of supreme sobriety that he touched Paul's arm and said:

'I'll tell you all about little Gertie right away.'

CHAPTER XXIV

The Colonel's capacity for the holding of liquid substances looked abnormal even to a man of Paul's experience.

'Thirst is now assuaged,' he said solemnly at the end of his third deep tumbler, 'and a man may begin to enjoy himself. There ought to be a boy here who can make a cocktail.'

He kept the boy fairly busy, and he talked. He had recovered himself curiously, and there was now no more than a hint of coming intoxication in his eye and in his voice. It seemed as if he had arrived at a settled stage, and was able to make a longish stay there.

'You're pretty thick with our little friend, ain't you?' he asked, rolling round in his seat.

'If you are speaking of the lady who left us a little while ago——'

'Why, certainly,' said the Colonel.

‘I have the honour of her friendship,’ said Paul with an icy air.

The Colonel was no longer smoking, but he chewed the end of his cigar with a lazy appetite, and he smiled.

‘Funny little devil she is,’ he said contemplatively. ‘Women are odd, however you take ‘em; but she’s odder than odd. By God, sir, she’s odder than Dick’s hat-band! I suppose she wants me to believe that she’s forgotten how I bowled her out years ago. Soul! Heart ‘It was before she got married. She made me believe that I was the only man she ever came across who had either. There were twenty-three of us met in New York City, and we had a dinner on the strength of it. I was that mad, sir, at the time, I drummed up the whole contingent. I believe that evening left some of us a little sore, but it cured us, and little Gertie had three-and-twenty play-fellows the fewer next morning. And I’m damned if she didn’t open fire on me again in the first half-hour after all these years. It’s funny, ain’t it?’

‘I am afraid I must bid you good-afternoon, sir,’ said Paul. ‘And if you will permit a stranger to intrude in your affairs, I would suggest that you should make that cocktail your last.’

‘Wha-at?’ asked the Colonel, placidly smiling, and eating his cigar. ‘Should we have made it four-and-twenty if you had been in Noo Yawk City at the time of that banquet.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ Paul answered stiffly. ‘I don’t care to continue this conversation, and I will take the liberty to end it.’

‘I say,’ said the Colonel, ‘wait there. I never began a quarrel in my life, Mr. Armstrong, but I have ended —lemme see——’ He began to count upon his fingers

with an inward look. ‘I have ended eight,’ he said.

‘Do you wish to quarrel now?’ Paul demanded.

‘Why, no, sir, no,’ said the Colonel; ‘I am a man of peace. But when you presoom, sir, to dictate what a man shall drink, and when you presoom to object to the theme upon which he chooses to converse—why, don’t you see?’

‘No,’ said Paul, ‘I do not see. If you choose to renew this conversation to-morrow, that is my hotel, and I shall be pleased to meet you there at any hour before noon.’

‘Now,’ the Colonel answered, taking him by the sleeve in alcoholic friendship, ‘you are becoming shirty, and your tone is warlike. And that, Mr. Armstrong, is unreasonable. Perhaps you know now that I am an old traveller. I’m a little bit of an explorer, sir, and I have never objected to being guided over a bit of country that I didn’t know, if I happened to meet a man that knew it Now, that’s enough said, Mr. Armstrong. If you find my conversation distasteful, just damn my eyes and go. But don’t you let me hear you. You can curse outside to your heart’s content, and, you see, that needn’t breed a quarrel.’

‘Very well,’ said Paul. The Solemn drunken man made him laugh in spite of his own anger and bewildered misery of mind. ‘Whatever cursing I may have to do shall be done outside.’

‘Good,’ the Colonel answered, and having by this time eaten his cigar to its burned ash, he ejected the remnant and permitted Paul to escape.

As he came out upon the mild widespread sunshine of the street at the close of the afternoon, he seemed to realize himself for the first time in his whole life. He did not trouble himself to curse the

Colonel, but he cursed Paul Armstrong soundly, and, striding rapidly towards his hotel, resolved on instant action. He mounted to his own room, and there he wrote a letter.

'I must see you,' it ran, 'and I must see you to-day. I must catch to-morrow's train for London, and I cannot guess when I may be able to return. I have neglected both work and business too long, and I must shake myself awake. On the whole, perhaps the kindest and best thing you could do for me would be to send me away for good and all. I have lived in a fool's dream too long.'

There was much more, but this was the gist of it, and the writer sealed and despatched it, not daring to tempt himself to a new effort by reading it over. The answer reached him in an hour:

'What is it, my poor friend, which has so disturbed you as to prompt you to the writing of such a letter as I have just received? I had thought myself safe in counting upon your esteem. If you are really called to London by affairs of urgency, I must not keep you, and, of course, I should be hurt if you went without telling me good-bye. It happens that I have engaged to dine at table-d'hôte tonight with passing friends, but I shall be free at ten o'clock. Ask for me then.'

Paul had been conscious and jealous of a good many small rivalries since he and the Baroness had first set up that platonic communion of soul in which they had now lived so long, but on the whole he had to confess that Gertrude had acted with complete discretion in these matters, and he had been repeatedly forced to admit to himself that he had been unable to find any real ground for his tremors. He had never once felt himself in actual danger of being deposed from his position of high priest in that

ridiculous temple. When a man is in love with a woman, he cannot be expected to judge her actions or her meaning wisely, and the Baroness's platonics, with the little flashes of earthly fire in amongst them here and there, had always seemed to him to indicate a nature throbbing with fervour which was held in restraint only by a delicacy of equal charm and beauty, and a lofty moral sense. But he was easily open to the influence of other men's opinions, and he had never been able to think of Ralston's smile without an inward twinge which had sometimes amounted to an actual tenor. Suppose he were merely being played with by a heartless woman, who found it minister to her vanity to have him perpetually dangling at her heels in public and burning incense in private before her day by day? Suppose he were throwing away the best and freshest years of his manhood in the pursuit of such a mocking shadow? These, of course, were a sort of lover's blasphemies against his idol, and he resented them with all his heart and soul, exactly as any other worshipper would resent the insinuations of the devil against the powers and perfections of his deity. His resentment could not lead him to oblivion, and his memory of Ralston's humorous and mischievous enjoyment was with him often. And now came this American man, this boozing Colonel, with none of Ralston's reticence, and apparently with none of his respect for the character of a lady whom he had known long and well, and the coarser accusation travelled on the same lines as the other, and only differed from it in going a good deal further.

'I will know to-night,' Paul said to himself savagely a hundred times in the course of that afternoon and evening, and when at length the slow hours had rolled themselves on to the time of his appointment,

he presented himself in the vestibule of the Baroness's hotel in a condition of tragic resolve.

Gertrude was there in the very act of saying farewell to her *passagère* American friends, and he thought to himself, with as much of anger as admiration, that he had never seen her look altogether so charming as she did at that instant. The vivacity of colouring which commonly distinguished her was softened, and the unaccustomed pallor of her face lent a tender softness to her whole aspect. Her eyes, too, had lost something of their brilliance, and seemed faintly humid. He could have sworn that she had been crying, but when she turned to meet him after the departure of her friends, there was a gentle sparkle of welcome in her face, and she held out her beautiful jewelled little hand with a charming frankness.

'I am so glad you are here,' she said, 'and I was so much afraid that those dear tiresome people were going to overstay their time, and that I should have to keep you waiting.'

She had a hooded opera-cloak thrown over her left arm, and she held this out to him, and turned away so that he might adjust it about her shoulders.

'It is a lovely night,' she said, 'like a night in our Indian summer in dear old Massachusetts. Let us talk in the garden, Paul.'

He walked by her side, still half saturnine, but in part conquered already by the soft seduction of her voice and face. He did not speak a word until they reached the garden terrace, and then only in answer to her question:

'You must really go, Paul?'

'Yes,' he answered gloomily, 'I must really go.'

For the season of the year it was a wonderful night

even for Naples. The air was like balm, and was loaded with the scent of flowers. Lights twinkled here and there about the garden, and the moon shone broad and bright almost at the zenith, half drowning the lustre of the stars in the haze of light it spread. Scattered about the gardens were a dozen parties, more or less, all chattering gaily, and here and there disposed to frolic Their presence jarred on Paul, but there was no removing it He allowed Gertrude to lead the way, and she; strolling in pensive silence, brought him to a shaded avenue on the western side of the garden, where a gentleman and lady were promenading slowly arm-in-arm away from them. Gertrude laid a hand upon his arm, and stood still until the couple in front had strayed out of hearing, and then resumed her pensive march.

'How came you, Paul,' she asked, looking suddenly up to him, 'to write so strange a letter?'

'I had to write it,' Paul answered in a constricted voice, in which a certain note of anger sounded. It disturbed him to find that his resolve was melting away from him, and he felt that he must needs harden his heart if be were but partly to fulfil his purpose. 'What is there in the letter,' he asked therefore, 'which you find strange?

'You have never told me,' she responded, 'one word of your purpose until this afternoon, and you are leaving me tomorrow. Is not that a little strange, Paul?'

Her voice trembled and almost broke upon his name.

'I knew nothing of it myself until yesterday,' he answered 'I have had letters of the most urgent importance, and must answer them in person.'

'How long do you expect to be away,' she asked.

‘The one wise thing,’ he answered, ‘I could do would be to stay away altogether.’

‘Ah, Paul,’ she half whispered, wreathing her arm through his, ‘there is your “fool’s dream” again. What do you mean by the “fool’s dream”? Haven’t we been happy for a time?’

‘Is it happiness,’ Paul asked, ‘to pay for a week’s emptiness and longing with one minute of delirium? Is it a happy thing to be so set on one unattainable hope as to be able, dreaming or waking, to think of nothing else? A man is not to be made happy by the life I live.’

‘Paul,’ she whispered, ‘what more can you ask than I have given you?’

‘Everything,’ he answered.

She drew her arm away lingeringly. He let it go, and for a minute they walked in silence side by side. They reached the avenue, and turned back again.

‘Can you tell me anything,’ she asked after this pause—‘do you care to tell me anything about your business in England.’

‘That’s simple enough,’ he answered. ‘I am within some few months of poverty, and I must get to work again. I have had a tremendous letter from old Darco, slanging me for breach of faith, and for having sent him a piece of intolerably bad work. I have deserved every word he has to say, and now I must make amends to him.’

‘You have not been fortunate in your work lately?’ she asked.

‘I have not been fortunate,’ he answered; ‘I have been so far from fortunate that’ I have been writing like an untrained schoolboy. I could have done better before I was fifteen.’

‘But why is that? she asked. ‘Your mind should only just now be ripening. Your time is all your own.’

‘There is not one minute of my time my own,’ he answered in a smouldering wrathfulness.

‘Why not?’ she questioned.

‘Come,’ said Paul, ‘isn’t that just a little disingenuous? Don’t you know why not? Here am I,’ he went on, ‘as I do most solemnly believe, as madly in love as ever man was in the history of the world; petted, encouraged, and caressed, and ignored, and repulsed, until in the insane weakness of my own nature I have let all manhood ooze out of me. I am unlike Hamlet, my dear Gertrude. I am both to be fretted and played upon.’

‘Played upon?’ she said reproachfully.

‘Played upon,’ he repeated with what sounded like a weighty deliberation.

Gertrude began to cry, and set a dainty handkerchief to her eyes, but she said nothing, and Paul’s only resource was to go on talking, to keep himself in sight of his own injuries.

‘You and I made a bargain, Gertrude: we were to be friends, and no more than friends. You have known all along how much it cost me to keep within those limits; and have you helped me? I put that to your conscience.’

‘Helped you?’ she asked, pausing once more in her walk, and looking up at him in an innocent bewilderment.

‘Helped me,’ he repeated stonily. ‘The words are plain enough.’

There was a garden-seat near at hand. She hastened to it, and sinking down upon it, seemed to surrender herself to tears. He moved moodily after

her, and stood looking down at the pathway, tracing haphazard figures on its moss-grown surface with the cane he carried.

‘I understand you now,’ sobbed Gertrude. ‘I have a right to reproach myself because my own undisciplined heart has gone beyond control sometimes; but does it lie in your province, Paul, to blame me for that? Have I not an equal right,’ she went on, ‘to tell you that you have not helped me in the daily struggle I have had to make? You are unjust, you are ungenerous. I could never have believed it of you.’

‘I can foresee nothing,’ Paul said, ‘but misery.’

‘Nor can I,’ she answered. She rose and faced him, and in the patch of moonlight in which she stood he could see that her tears at least were real. ‘What you have to say to me, in effect,’ she said, with an air of sudden quiet dignity, but with a quiver in her voice, ‘is just this: that I am a heartless coquette, and have never cared for you; that I have wilfully lured you on to your own unhappiness. If you really think that, Paul, if it means anything more than a mere passing gust of temper, we had better say good-bye at once. I have at least an equal right to bring the same charge against you, but I should disdain to harbour such a thought about you. There are many ways in which you may be cruel to a woman, Paul, and be forgiven, but you must not wound her pride in that way. That is the cruellest stab of all. The blade is poisoned, dear, and the wound will rankle for a lifetime.’

‘Tell me,’ he said, with his eyes blazing upon her, and the guarded voice in which he spoke shaking —‘tell me that you have really cared for me; tell me, on your conscience and your honour, that you have not deliberately led me to this madness.’

‘You can ask me that? she said. ‘You can insult me so?’

‘I ask it,’ he responded.

‘If my conduct has not shown it clearly,’ said Gertrude, ‘it is quite in vain to protest. I have given you better proof than words.’

‘There is only one proof,’ Paul answered. ‘Are you strong enough to brave the world with me?’

‘No, no,’ she whispered; ‘you must not ask me that I am not afraid of the world, but I am afraid of my own conscience.’

‘Do you think,’ he asked passionately, ‘that love could not sanctify a union such as ours? Be my Georges Sand, and I will be your De Musset; be my Stella, and I will be your Swift.’

‘You choose your instances unfortunately, Mr. Armstrong,’ Gertrude answered. ‘Georges and Alfred lived to write vile and bitter books about each other, and Stella broke her heart under the despotism of a brute. I do not care for such a prospect.’

The ‘Mr. Armstrong ‘lashed him like an actual whip, and under the sting of it he barely followed the meaning of what came after. He was so staggered that he could only repeat the words:

‘Mr. Armstrong.’

‘You force me to my defence,’ she answered gently. ‘I am a woman, Paul; but I have my code of honour.’

‘Im Gott’s und Teufel’s namen,’ he groaned, ‘what is it? You give me lips and arms; you have sworn you love me. What is loyalty?’

She drew herself to her full height:

‘I do not pretend to define loyalty,’ she said; ‘but I know it when I see it. It may be less definite than insult; but the last, at least, is clearly outlined. I have

been mistaken, and I will correct my error now. Good-bye, Mr. Armstrong.'

'Good-bye,' said Paul.

She lingered for a mere instant as if in expectation of some further adieu, but he had none to offer. He saw no more clearly now into the truth than he had done at the beginning of the interview, but he had in a measure hardened himself by the spoken definition of his own attitude, and, partly because he could not as yet retreat from it, he permitted her to go without another word She floated away in the alternate soft splendour of the moon and the deep shadow of the overhanging boughs, and he watched her gloomily until her figure disappeared at the end of the avenue. He stood for a minute or two with a vacant mind, digging his walking-cane into the dry, friable earth at his feet, and scoring the thin, scum-like growth of moss upon it with unmeaning lines. Then he lit a cigar, and, avoiding the crowded vestibule, skirted the dark western wall of the hotel, and so walked homeward. The thing was done now, and, whether it were rightly done or wrongly he cared very little for the moment He stood at one of those pauses of emotion in which the mind is able logically to balance pros and cons without the intervention of any gust of feeling. If Gertrude were really what she professed to be, he had acted with great cruelty. If she were not what she professed to be, he had acted with great wisdom for the first time in his life so far as the woman as protagonist was concerned He looked at the probabilities on both sides with a cynical coolness which would have been impossible to him at any earlier stage in his career. He had met but two men who had known the Baroness de Wyeth well, and they had both looked upon her from pretty much the same standpoint. Ralston's view was the

more genial, but even in his opinion she was a born flirt, a creature who loved to tyre her chariot-wheels with hearts; and in the view of the coarser mind she was a coquette mere and simple—a Queen Rabesqurat, who kept a sackful of the human eyes which had turned to her in adoration. Then, in spite of momentary indifference, his nerves tingled and his blood sparkled at the memory of that rare and fleeting instant at which she had seemed to surrender herself to his embraces, and to make him immortal with a kiss. All the same, he could look on that fine second's immortality with a cold indifference when the thrill was over. Granted the very lowest scale for passion, could the thing be real? Could he, for example, have stayed the torrent of his own blood in full course? He laughed to think of it, and a line and a half of his favourite poet sang in his brain:

'And thy passions matched with mine Are as moonlight unto sunlight, and as water unto wine.'

On the whole he began to conceive that he had done rightly, and in that half-belief, which drew slowly towards conviction, he went to bed and slept in a stolidity which surprised him later. The fact was that he was less resolved than tired.

Whilst he was at his deepest sleep a thundering summons at his door aroused him. A dream which came between the first prelude to this orchestral drumming and his awaking had advised him of a fainter disturbance, but by the time he was fairly awake the knocking had grown so exigent that it bade fair to raise the house.

'Come in I' he cried, and suddenly remembering that he had locked the door before getting into bed, he scrambled out in the darkness and turned back

the key. ‘What the devil is the matter here?’ he asked, and the night porter of the hotel handed him a letter.

‘I was told, sir,’ he said, in indifferent French, ‘to deliver this at once, but the messenger is gone, and there is no answer called for.’

There was light enough in the corridor to read by, and Paul recognised Gertrude’s superscription.

‘Thank you,’ he answered. ‘Light the gas for me in my room, and that will do.’

The man obeyed, bowed himself out, and went his way, closing the door behind him.

The letter Paul held in his hand was bulky, and when he had broken the envelope open he found that it held no fewer than seven sheets of Gertrude’s crested paper. They were all covered in a hasty and sprawling hand, and on the first page was a scrawled date and a ‘Sir’ which had been written with so much energy that the upward sweeping course of the pen had bespattered the whole white surface with inky dots of greater or less magnitude.

‘I had thought you my friend,’ the epistle began; ‘you have professed to be something more, and, as ‘have heard you say, the greater should include the less.’

There the writing suddenly changed in character, and the letter went on, as it were, in calmer and more measured cali-graphic accents.

‘How could you treat me so, knowing my friendship and even my foolish fondness? Was it not cruel to urge me as you did? I will confess to you what I have striven in vain to disguise. Had we met in earlier days, had I known you before I was bound in honour to the course I am compelled to run until my footsteps lead me to my grave, I might have been

a happy woman. But a woman may love, and may yet place her honour before everything. I shall not care if, when I am dead and gone, you choose to boast that you won a woman's heart, and I will not even put you on your honour now to keep this silly secret; but you shall not go from me without my assurance of this one fact. When I married, marriage was to me a sacrament, and if it were not for that ——— But no more of this, dear Paul Dear, dear, and dearest Paul! I hardly know how I am writing, but the anguish you have caused me is unspeakable, and I am not guarded in my words. A woman's heart may err, and her principle of honour may yet be strong. I bid you good-bye with an aching heart, and I wish you all good fortune. It would seem that our stars are in opposition to each other, and fighting against each other in their courses. I agree with you in thinking that we are best apart, but I shall watch your career with a more than sisterly devotion, and my heart tells me that I shall have the right to acclaim your future.'

The letter said much more than this so far as the mere extension of the same sentiments might appear to be concerned, but in effect this was all until the final paragraph was reached.

'I have adhered to duty,' this ran, 'and I will. Nothing—neither the thought of your suffering nor of my own—shall draw me from it, but I recognise none the less the kindred soul I should have met had I been fortunate—as I am far from being. Write this in your private memoirs of me: "She loved too well, yet wisely," and think sometimes that it is possible for a woman to feel sometimes like a man, and to think I "could not love thee, dear, so well, loved I not honour more."

'I shall not add another word to this,' Gertrude

concluded, ‘except to say, I wish you all prosperity, all happiness. But just this remember always, that if I were a mischievous influence in your life, I meant it far otherwise, and I am always your devoted friend and well-wisher.

‘G. DEW.’

For some reason or another by no means clear to himself the letter moved Paul less than it seemed to him that it should have done. He read it sitting in his pyjamas on the bedside, kicking his bare heels against the valance, and when he had done with it he tossed it on to the centre table, on which his manuscripts, now too rarely looked at, lay scattered, and said rather grimly:

‘Footlights.’

Then he mused awhile, half desiring to confirm the word, and half recalling it. He had made many desperate efforts to be loyal in his thoughts, but he was less disposed to struggle in that direction than he had been. His mind strayed back to Ralston, and to the bibulous explorer. Memory went further than either of them, and carried him back to the days when he had broken his career in two for the sake of Miss Belmont, old Darco’s Middle Jarley Prown.’ He had played the flat traitor to Darco once already for the sake of one woman, and now, as he began to see, he was once more using him very ill for the sake of another. He sat kicking his heels against the valance of the bed, and thinking. May Gold, Norah MacMulty, the dreadful hour of the lost innocence, Claudia, Annette, Gertrude—what an incredible list of follies for one man to have committed! He grew intensely bitter and self-disdainful.

There was no answer for the letter of the heart-wounded Gertrude. He was not quite sure whether

he were a mere insensate brute or no, but he packed, and took the homeward train without a word of farewell. If Gertrude's friendship were a real thing, he was a beast unspeakable. If it were a selfish sentimental sham—why, then—anything. He began to taste life with a very nausea of weariness.

But when London was reached, and the physical fatigue of travel shaken off, and the tornado of Darco's energies had engulfed him as of old, he found himself another man. Darco was terrible at their earliest interview.

'Led me haf a look at you,' he said, dragging Paul to his study-window. 'What haf you peen doing with yourseluf? I have known an Armstrong for some years who was rather a glever vellow. Vot? Ant now I gome agross an Armstrong who is a plithering impecile. Eh?'

'Now, my dear Darco,' Paul answered, 'I dare say that your criticism of the stuff I sent you is quite just I haven't, indeed, the remotest doubt about it But I have been out of health and worried, and now I am here for work. You shall have the best I can give you.'

'I shall speag to you,' said Darco, 'with an egsdreme blain-ness. I haf not forgotten our first parting. You did not dreat me well.'

'I know I didn't,' Paul said.

'Ant now,' continued Darco, refusing to be mollified all at once, 'you haf wasted months of valuable dime, ant you ant I are both the poorer by hundrets ant hundrets of pounts. I will haf your bromise, your sacred wort of honour, before I will gollaborate again, that you will no more blay with me these farces. I like you, yourself, Armstrong. I am very font of you. I haf a very creat atmiration for

your worg. But you haf not been reliaple. You haf no right to resent what I am sayink.'

'I have some excuses, of which I can't talk,' said Paul; 'but I don't resent what you are saying. I am very sorry to have kept you waiting. I promise you that you shall have all my time and all my best energies for this one spell of work in any case. After that——'

'Veil,' said Darco, 'afder that?

'Heaven knows!' Paul answered. 'Don't say any more just now, Darco. Let us go to work.'

Darco looked at him for a second or two, and began then to stump about the room.

'Goot! he said suddenly; 'let us go to work.'

To work they went. Whatever else might be said for Darco, it was at least impossible to brood in his society. The man's tireless enthusiasm did one of two things for everybody with whom he encountered. It repelled either through terror or distaste, or it inspired a sentiment which corresponded with itself. He frightened timid people; he made the pugnacious angry and resentful. But here and there he kindled a fire.

Paul's love for work had gone to sleep very soundly, but Darco's storming awoke it, and in a day or two the new remedy had got hold of him, and he came back to a moderately healthy state of mind. He wrote to Gertrude, and she responded, and a peace was patched between them, but it was not easy on either side to climb back to the old existence of confidence, and Paul at least was shaken in allegiance. Nor was this all, for he had begun to have some apprehension of his own character, and to take soundings of those emotional shallows which had always seemed to him so profound. When a man has

once learned to distrust his own raptures they do not rise easily.

He took up his quarters with Darco, and they worked all day together, and, on occasion, far into the night, for they were entered on a race against time, and an extended run of the piece which then held the stage at Darco's theatre meant loss. Act by act was put in rehearsal as it left the writers' hands, and the final scenes were written in the theatre itself, and the parts copied in one of the dressing-rooms. For the last fortnight of the work there was time to think of nothing else, and when the very tag was written there was labour enough left to satisfy even Darco.

No better medicine for Paul's malady could have been prescribed than he found in this ceaseless mental occupation. It shook him out of his useless moonings, and brought his mind back to its old healthy elasticity, and when at last the decisive night came, and the play went with a roar from start to finish, he went to bed to sleep the clock round, and awoke to triumph.

Out of an idea which had cropped up in the course of work, and had been abandoned as being too heavy to be employed as a mere episode, the indefatigable Darco had already constructed a new plot, and was fain to begin at once upon its development. But Paul insisted upon at least a fortnight's holiday, and carried his point. There was no further fear of financial embarrassment for many months to come. Annette's liabilities were paid. A lawyer was engaged to make settled arrangements with her, and for awhile there was a clear prospect and free air to breathe. Then came the new work, carried on at a less fiery pressure than the old, but yet pursued with diligence. It lasted six months, and was not likely to

be in demand for another half-year. Gertrude was back in Paris, and thither went Paul, prepared to study the platonic theory in a more philosophical spirit than he had hitherto displayed. She was charming. She could not easily cease to be charm ing, but she maddened no longer, and if she had had a heart at all, her lover's extreme placidity might have piqued her into love. It could not do that, but it served to introduce upon the scene an episode of some humour.

Madame la Baronne de Wyeth could not exist without an adorer. It was an agreeable thing enough to have two at a time, and would have been agreeable to have had a dozen had the creatures been manageable. Mr. Ricardo P. Janes, of Boston, Massachusetts, was a young man of excellent family connections, and in enjoyment of liberal means. He was a very handsome boy of four- or five-and-twenty, and having a taste for art and the Muses in general, he was studying in the atelier of a famous French painter. He took life seriously, and wrote nice verses. He was simple and enthusiastic, pure-minded and romantic, and altogether eligible as a candidate for a place in the list of Gertrude's soulful friends. When Paul reached Paris he had an immediate introduction to this young gentleman, and conceived a real liking for him. There was hardly an escape from the recognition of the fact that Mr. Janes, in his serious, romantic way, was in love with Gertrude, but it was evident that he had been held well in hand, and that with him the platonic path had strict barriers, beyond which he did not even aspire to pass. He made Paul his confidant when the two came to intimacy, as they very easily did; and from his simple talk the elder learned again a great deal of what he had learned already from Gertrude—how,

for instance, there was a certain isolation of the soul from which it was impossible to escape even in the closest and most genuine friendship, and how the Individual was never truly apprehended by any other Individual, but was doomed to go its way in eternal solitude towards its goal. Mr. Janes, despite his romanticisms and enthusiasms, was in the main a sensible young man, and he would not have said these things had he known or guessed that their ground of inspiration would be recognised by his companion. But Gertrude's ideas had seemed to him —they would appear to have seemed so to many for a time—to hold a most true and beautiful though sad philosophy, and he was of that time of life when such thoughts are full of serious interest and charm. Had Mr. Janes appeared nine months earlier under the same conditions, Paul would probably have conceived a fiery hatred for him, but now he felt a kind of superiority to him, which was in part cynical, and in part affectionate, and in part self-disdainful. He had gone thrilling at all this for years on end, because it came from the lips of a pretty and engaging woman, with whom it was no more than a canting shibboleth. Of course it helped to disillusionize him, and he began even to see that Gertrude was not as beautiful as he had once believed her to be. This is almost a fatal symptom in the history of love's decay, unless the perception be attended, as it is in happy cases, by the perception of new beauties whose presence more than atones for the absence of the old. And Paul did not find new beauties. Gertrude was simply a pretty woman now, and a pretty woman is a very different creature from an angel whose effulgence so dazzles that it blinds the eyes. It was pleasant enough to philander with her, to touch the skirts of topics which had once

been dangerous, but were dangerous no longer, but the glamour was gone, and young Mr. Janes had done as much to banish it in a single fortnight as Ralston and the bibulous explorer and the nine months of diligent labour all put together.

It happened that the Baroness herself planned a little pleasure trip, which resulted in the closing of this chapter of Paul Armstrong's life. It placed him incidentally in a position of extreme awkwardness, and he was never able to decide whether he had acted well or ill in it. The point may be reckoned a fine one.

Gertrude had made accidental acquaintance with a charming old house in the neighbourhood of Fontainebleau, a country château of the old-world sort, which was for sale, with all its furniture, its plate and its pictures, and a rather exceptionally good library. Failing a sale, it was provisionally for hire, and she, having, always, practically unlimited funds at her disposal, was inclined to take it and to spend some half-year in retirement, within easy reach of the capital and her friends, whilst she added the last touches to a volume of poems on which she had been engaged from time to time for some three or four years past She was in negotiation for the place, and just by way of experiment she had thought it a charming idea to give a little—a very little—house-party there. There were to be only five people—Gertrude's own Knickerbocker sheepdog, then one Comtesse de Cassault, Gertrude herself, and Mr. Janes and Paul. The servants of the departed family were available for a day; a chef and one or two kitchen assistants might be sent down from Paris. The party would assemble in time for luncheon, would spend the afternoon in a country excursion, would return to dinner, and so Pariswards

by a special train. It was a pretty programme, and would cost M. le Baron de Wyeth a pretty penny, but the last consideration was Gertrude's affair alone. The Comtesse de Cassault was a beautiful person, a flirt of the demurest kind. The Knickerbocker was virtually nobody. In effect it was a *partie carrée* and bade fair to be enjoyable.

It was the very loveliest of October days, and Paul began his adventures by a little accident to the voiture which should have borne him to the station. It was no very great matter, but he found himself entangled with the horses of an omnibus, and though he escaped personal injury, apart from an inconsiderable bruise or two, he had to make an awkward jump for safety, and, falling, split the knees of his trousers, and plastered his shirt-cuffs with the mud which an overnight shower had left behind. This petty disaster involved a return home, and the loss of his train. He despatched a wire and made inquiries. The quickest way of arriving at his destination appeared to be to book by train to a point some ten miles from it, and then to secure a conveyance of some sort to get the rest of the distance. He was turned out at a lonely rural station with no vehicle for hire within miles. Very good, he would make the best of a small misfortune, and would walk. He got directed by a stupid peasant, and set off in the wrong direction. When he had walked some two miles out of his way, he made further inquiries and retraced his steps. The roads were a little heavy, the sun was hot, and Paul of late had taken but little physical exercise. When, after three hours hard walking, he reached the retired chateau which was the scene of the day's festivity, luncheon had been over two hours before, and Gertrude and her party were away for a drive. But Mr. Armstrong

was expected and was welcomed, and when he had a little repaired the ravages the journey had made upon his aspect, he was provided with a pleasant little repast and a bottle of excellent Moselle. The room in which he took this meal was on the ground-floor, and was an extension from the original building. It stood a few feet above a sloping lawn, and it had wide French windows on either side of it A balcony travelled round it on three sides, and on that which faced the sun heavy velvet curtains had been drawn. A full light which brought no dazzle with it came in from the windows opposite.

When Paul had finished his meal, which he ate with great relish after the unaccustomed exercise of the day, he explored the balcony, and finding on the sunny side one of those long American cane-chairs which, when furnished with cushions, offer so agreeable a lounge, he sat down there and smoked a cigar. A while ago the small contretemps which had delayed him would have caused him profound trouble, or, at least, he would have made himself think so; but he took the matter quite easily now, and occupied himself in rehearsing the history he would have to tell on his hostess's return. The day was exquisitely mild, the temperature perfect, now that he was no longer in hasty effort; he had eaten heartily, had half emptied the bottle of excellent Moselle, and he was very tired. Before he had begun to realize fairly the fact that he was drowsy, he had fallen asleep.

When he awoke there were voices in the room he had quitted some two hours before. The sun had gone down behind the trees in the blue distance, and he was just a trifle stiff and chilly. He was barely conscious of these things, when the voice of young Mr. Janes startled him broad awake.

‘It is dangerous,’ said Mr. Janes; ‘it is seriously dangerous.’

‘Silly boy!’ said Gertrude, in a voice half mocking and half caressing. ‘How can an old woman like me be dangerous to the peace of a child like you?’

‘It is not dangerous to you, Gertrude,’ said Mr. Janes, with a tremor which bespoke him very much in earnest ‘I know your purity, and I reverence it. I know that I have done wrong in speaking as I have done, but I could not help it I must go.’

‘No, Ricardo,’ said Gertrude, ‘you must not go. You must only put this foolish fancy by—it is only a foolish fancy—and there will be no need to disturb a friendship which has been so sweet, so valuable, to both of us.’

By this time it occurred suddenly to Paul that he had perhaps heard enough, but he had hitherto been held so entirely by surprise that he had not had time to think that this conversation was not intended for his ears. He arose, and began to creep stealthily away, when he saw that the curtains through which he had passed from the room were partly open as he had left them. And whilst he stood irresolute, wondering how he should escape, and trying to devise some means of declaring his presence, the talk went on.

‘Oh, damn it all!’ he said to himself desperately. ‘It isn’t my fault. I know that line of country pretty well, and I have been so often introduced to it that I am hardly an intruder on it. I can’t get away without being seen, and that will be awkward for everybody. And I can’t stay here and listen to this rot.’

But the talk went on, and what with the absurd misery of his own position and the well-known lines the conversation followed, he was fairly aflame with

embarrassment and self-disdain. Exactly what this gifted and amiable young ass of a Bostonian was doing, and saying, and thinking, and feeling, he had been doing, saying, thinking, feeling a year ago. And Gertrude was playing with young Mr. Janes exactly as she had played with young Mr. Armstrong. Mr. Janes took a good deal of coaxing—more than Paul had done—but the trained coquette was equal to the task, and she brought him to the climax just as she had brought his predecessor. And there was the one little embrace granted, and there was a rustle of skirts, and the click of a door-latch, and Gertrude's voice said, 'You will stay *now* Ricardo?' and Ricardo groaned. Then the door was closed, and there was silence. Then Ricardo groaned again, and Paul heard his disordered footsteps as he paced the room. The unwilling listener returned to the cane-chair and stretched himself upon it with great stealth, and feigned sleep in case of contingencies. But after five dreary minutes young Mr. Janes withdrew, and the way of escape was open.

Paul made his way to the drawing-room, and found there the Knickerbocker lady and the demure Countess, with whom he had already a slight but agreeable acquaintance. He had had time to recover his self-possession, and though he wished himself a hundred miles away, he did his best to set the kite of conversation flying. He was making an attempt in his somewhat halting French to tell the story of his delay when Gertrude entered, and he told the tale to her, leaving her to translate it. His narrative was so vivacious that she trilled with laughter at it, and broke in upon it with a rapid paraphrase in French here and there, so that she and the Countess and the historian were all laughing heartily together when Mr. Janes came in with a sombre countenance, and

made so funereal an effort to join in the mirth that Paul was fiercely tickled. And whilst he made a comedy of the morning's accident for her amusement, he was thinking all the while, 'You heartless, cruel, dangerous little jade!' and thinking it, too, with a real savagery of hatred. 'How many have you betrayed,' he asked in his heart 'To how many hungers of passion deliberately awakened have you offered that heart of stone?'

The Baroness knew him mainly on the sentimental side, but that evening he launched out as a raconteur, and was gay and brilliant. Even Mr. Janes was awakened to sporadic laughter at the dinner-table, where they sat by preconcerted arrangement without the formality of evening-dress, and fared admirably from the *hors d'oeuvres* to the coffee—a flawless meal. And dinner being over, they drove away under a noble moon to the railway-station, and bowled back to Paris.

Paul, still with an air of gaiety, begged Gertrude to accord him ten minutes on the following day.

'I have something to tell you,' he said, 'in which I am sure you will take the warmest interest. May I trespass on your time for just ten minutes in the morning? I got a curious little bit of intelligence to-day which will carry me, I fancy, to the United States.'

'The United States? cried Gertrude. 'I can send you to the nicest people there. But shall you be long away?'

'I shall be able to tell you that to-morrow,' Paul answered. 'May I?

'Certainly,' she replied graciously. 'Shall we all breakfast together at twelve?'

'I am sorry,' said Paul, 'but for me that is

impossible. But if I may see you at a quarter to the hour——'

'Certainly,' she said again.

'Thank you,' he said, and turning away somewhat abruptly, as he thought afterwards, he began to talk to the irresponsive Janes, who sat, as it were, in fog.

'You come with me?' said Paul to the young Bostonian when the terminus was reached, and the final adieux had been said amongst the rest.

'Well, no,' said Mr. Janes. 'I am a little out of sorts for some reason or another, and I think that I'll go home.'

'Well, then,' said Paul, 'I go with you. It's all the same; but I have something to say to you. It won't keep, Janes, and whether you and I like it or no, it has to be spoken.'

'Oh,' said Janes, 'that sounds serious!'

'Come to the Rue Castiglione with me,' Paul answered, 'and I will tell you exactly how serious it is.'

'Very well,' the younger man answered, and Paul having chartered a fiacre, they drove home together.

Arrived at his hotel, Paul ordered, and his guest refused, a whisky-and-soda, and the two sat down at a table in Paul's bedroom.

'Mr. Janes,' he began, 'I hope very sincerely that what am about to say will not wound you—much. It is sure to hurt you a little at first, but it is meant in friendship. Let me begin by telling you that for some three years of my life, more or less, I made an unexampled ass of myself about a certain lady. And now let me confess that I was put into a beastly corner this afternoon, and could not help overhearing a conversation in which the lady held a

part. That conversation was identical in result, and almost identical in terms, with one in which I took part about a year and a half ago.'

Young Mr. Janes set his elbows on the table, and rested his face upon his hands. He was silent for a long time, but at last he said:

'I cannot judge of the delicacy or otherwise of your statement, Mr. Armstrong, but I leave Paris to-morrow morning, and I shall not return. I should have gone, sir, without this revelation from you, and I am sorry that you have made it.'

'I am not,' said Paul stanchly. 'Nor do I think that you will be in a little time. I wasted three years, Mr. Janes, in worship at that empty shrine, and when I had most accidentally and most unwittingly surprised another worshipper——'

'Don't mock at it, for God's sake!' said young Mr. Janes. 'I'm going home. Good-night. I think you were right to tell me. I think I should have done the same. You're going——' He paused there, and looked up with a white face. 'You're going to see her in the morning?'

'On that one errand,' Paul answered.

'Well,' said Mr. Janes, 'good-bye, Armstrong.'

He offered his hand, and Paul took it warmly. Janes went dejectedly away.

At ten minutes before the strike of noon next day Paul and Gertrude met for the last time. She came gaily towards him with both hands outstretched in welcome, but her face changed as he stood before her with no recognition of her proffered salute.

'What is the matter?' she asked.

'I am here to tell you, Gertrude,' he responded. 'I told you a part of my adventures of yesterday, but I

did not tell you all. When my walk was finished I had luncheon, and after luncheon I lay down on a chair upon the veranda and fell asleep there. I awoke at the moment when Mr. Janes was telling you that it was dangerous. I had not the courage to break in upon a conversation so intimate, and—may I say it? —so familiar. I could not get away without a risk of being seen, and so I stayed where I was.'

She had gone white to the lips, and she was trembling, but she faced him.

'Oh,' she said, 'I had thought you a little worthier than that! An eavesdropper!'

'An eavesdropper!' Paul answered. 'That is understood; but not a willing one. You have wasted a good part of my life, but of that I have no right to complain. But I do lament a little that you should have taken away my last illusion. I had learned a little of your adorable sex, Gertrude, before I met you, and nothing in my experience had taught me to think well of it. But I believed I had found in you a proof of the monstrous falsity of the belief into which I was being thrust. Well, you see, you confirm that belief. I shall go to my grave now in the certainty that one-half the world is made to wheedle and befool the other half, and that every woman is born to treason as the sparks fly upward. You lied to me, Gertrude, and I believed you. You lured me on deliberately, with a cold cruelty for which there is no name. I shall never hate you as well as I have loved you, for I have a rather poor capacity in that way. You found a man with a bruised heart, and for your own wicked pleasure you set to work to torture him. There is no use in words, and I have said all I came to say.'

That was the end of that episode, and a minute

later he was striding along the street. In three days he was aboard ship at Havre, and the disconsolate Janes was one of his fellow-voyagers.

CHAPTER XXV

If a philosopher were set to describe the best and the worst of life, he would certainly have a considerable choice before him. But amongst the best he would have to set down love, and amongst the worst he would have to set down love's disillusion. The curse of age is indifference. With the increase of the years you come to a time when nothing matters. Anything which helps hearty youth this way is harmful. In ninety cases in a hundred age is a crime against the hopes of the world, and nothing ages like cynicism. This is the beginning of senile decay. And what is a man to do who has lavished his heart, and has always found that the woman has played counters of affectation against the sincere gold of his soul? Obviously he turns cynic, despising himself and his too cheap emotions; and to cheapen one's own emotions is to play the very devil. It was written from of old that a house divided against itself cannot stand, and a man who has learned to loathe one half of his own nature is not stable. Even that he has a perfect right to do it does not help him.

May Gold had fooled Paul Armstrong. Claudia Belmont had carried on the game. So had Annette, and so had Gertrude. It was a wise man who wrote that the net is spread in vain in the sight of any bird, but he wrote nonsense, all the same. The capturing

net is the one to which we are most accustomed.

So with a heart filled with distrust, and misliking half the world, Paul travelled across the Atlantic, and sauntered about the United States. The money question was settled for the time being, if not definitely, and for a year or two he would have no occasion to think of ways and means. He got away into the prairies and the mountains, camped out, shooting and hunting, learned to sit a horse, learned to handle a gun, to build a tent, and to cook.

Then he went back into civilization, and travelled on to San Francisco, and the western parts of Canada. And one day at Victoria, having nothing better before him, he wandered on board a vessel which in four-and-twenty hours from that time was bound to sail for Japan. He took lunch with the proprietors and officers of this boat, and, almost before he knew it, had booked his passage for Yokohama. Why not see the world?

There were ladies aboard, and they flirted with the stranger because he was young and already famous, and more than average good-looking. They flirted demurely, and they flirted fiercely, and they flirted in all the ways which are known to women; but for once in feminine experience they met a man who was proof against all their charms, charmed they never so wisely. To be dangerous to man's peace of mind a woman must inspire belief, and in Paul's heart belief was dead.

The ship went on to New Zealand, her port of call Dunedin. Why not New Zealand? Why not see the world? More flirts aboard, and more flirtations, but still the hitherto so susceptible heart unmoved. The next port of call Hobart Town, then Melbourne. Still, why not see the world? More flirts and more

flirtations, as if there were nothing but the rustle of a petticoat which is worth taking notice of on the surface of the planet. But observe that the young man is spoiled, at least for the time being.

Possum and kangaroo shooting make good sport. Rabbits swarm in literal millions. We grow very handy with the gun, very handy at building a shelter of any sort, or at cooking a dinner.

Then back to New Zealand, and here the beginning of a new life.

New Year's Eve, as it happens, and the exile's mind not unnaturally filled with thoughts of home. And tucked away in the further corner of the dining-room of the Grand Hotel the familiar figure of an English comedian! who, when Paul last saw him, was playing in a piece written far himself and Darco.

'Hillo, Paul! Can't I get into any blooming corner of the world but some old pal is bound to root me out?' 'How's trade?' said Paul. 'Going strong?' 'Bad, dear boy,' the comedian answered. 'Bad as bad can be. Do me a turn, old fellow. Write me a play. I've brought out three, and they're all rotten failures. Ask the press, and they'll tell you I'm coining money. Ask me, and I'll tell you I'm dropping it by the barrelful. Been here long—eh?'

Paul was at the theatre again that night, for the first time since he had left England, two years ago. Two years ago! Such a distance had been placed between him and Gertrude—between him and Annette!

A dreary farce in three acts greeted him, and ambitions awoke anew. The cheery comedian asked:

'Why not try it on the dog? Give us a bit of human nature, dear child. Run it round these far outlying provinces. No harm to you if you make a failure;

loads of minted money if you make a hit. What I always say, dear boy: minimize the risk of failure—eh?'

Paul took fire. He knew his man, and could fit him like a glove.

'Where are you in ten weeks' time?' he asked 'Ten weeks? said the comedian. 'Auckland.' 'Good!' said Paul. 'We meet in Auckland.' 'Right you are,' said the comedian; and then they parted, and never met again for years.

But the talk set Paul at work again, and he laboured like a Trojan on the shores of Lake Te Anau, with heath and sky and mountains for his comrades and inspirers, and when his play was finished he went back to civilization to discover that his comedian was well on his way to England. That mattered little enough. He sent a copy of the piece to Darco, and wandered hither and thither about the southern island until by hazard he tumbled against a new fate in the person of a new comedian.

'And you don't happen to have a play in your pocket, Mr. Armstrong? said he, in the first hour of their acquaintanceship.

'As it happens,' said Paul, 'I have. You may read it this afternoon.'

There was a business chaffer, and the affair was virtually settled. Paul was to read the play to the company of the travelling comedian on the morrow.

He presented himself at the theatre at the appointed hour, and the manager kept him waiting for a minute or two whilst he harangued the baggage-man.

'You'll know her by this portrait: she's small; she's very ordinary-looking; she wears her hair in a topknot, with a hat stuck over it about so high'—he

held his arms abroad. ‘Excuse me, Mr. Armstrong, we are all ready for you with the exception of a lady who will be here in half an hour. I wired for her a week ago to Australia The boat was signalled two hours since. Since we must wait, you won’t mind my utilizing the half-hour?’

‘Pray go on,’ said Paul; and, seating himself upon a rolled-up bale of carpet, surrendered his mind to ennui.

In due time the lady for whose help the company waited appeared. The play was read, the characters were apportioned, and the date of the first production was fixed Paul took no special note of the new arrival, and, indeed, she did not seem specially notable. She was little more than a child, with a child’s stature but a woman’s figure. She had brown eyes and brown hair, and she wore a dress of brown velvet. She was strange to the crowd about her, so it seemed; for she was introduced to every member of it, and she scrutinized everybody with a childlike mixture of frankness and reticence.

‘Like a little brown mouse,’ said Paul to himself, ‘peeping out of her cranny at an assemblage of cats, without quite knowing the cat’s proclivity.’

Beyond this she was Miss Madge Hampton, an amateur of some small private means, and he thought no more about her. Rehearsal in an insignificant part displayed her as capable and willing to be taught.

The company never stayed more than a week in any one town, and for a considerable part of the time went bushwhacking from place to place, taking one-night stands! and crawling by sleepy railways amongst some of the most exquisite scenery of the land. Paul had nothing better to do—had, indeed,

nothing else to do—and found a pleasure in this revival of old experiences. It reminded him of the ancient days with Darco, which now looked so far away, and he surrendered himself, as he had always done, to the interests of the moment and the hour. A fair proportion of the working day was spent in travel, and sometimes, as they crossed the exquisite plain of flowering green, with the snowcapped mountains in the distance, the ladies of the company would cry out at sight of some especial bank of wild flowers, and the conductor would stop the leisurely train to let them go out and cull bouquets. At some such excursions Paul assisted, and, whether by hazard or goodwill, he found himself oftener by the side of Miss Madge Hampton than elsewhere. He had himself been born to the inheritance of a most inordinate mouthful of provincial accent, and since he had studied and learned to speak almost every dialect known to the little islands which are the centre of our Empire, his ear had grown nice and critical. The ladies and gentlemen of the company, with the exception of the famous and admirable comedian who led them, were all of colonial education, and they all spoke with the accent the existence of which our colonial brethren and sisters so strenuously deny. It was, of course, the language of fashion, as they knew it, but it was, as it still is, perilously near the English of Mile End, and the ear of the Englishman, grown critical through many studies, used to ache at it. The leader of the troupe talked the English of the stage, which, after all, is perhaps not quite the English of the cultured Englishman, but was not altogether intolerable. But, by some accident, Miss Hampton had no trace of the accent which disfigured the speech of her companions, and this little fact of itself accounted for

something in the very gradual intimacy which grew up between herself and Paul.

The train was sauntering along in its customary easy-going fashion, when it came to a halt at the signal of a man in corduroy trousers, a flannel shirt which had once been scarlet, and a felt hat of no colour. The signaller sat upon a fence and wanted a chat with the driver, who was quite willing, in the course of his leisurely progress, to spare him half an hour or so.

'If you ladies,' said the conductor, 'would like to stretch yourselves, there's any amount of flowers to be got here, and there's time to waste. There's no run back except on a Saturday, and an hour or two in the time of arrival won't make no difference.'

So the ladies got down and went flower-hunting, whilst the driver and the stoker and the guard sat on the fence together and talked politics and the latest mail from England.

Paul went out with the rest, and the party chanced upon a marshy piece of land where a species of purple iris grew in great profusion. There was a cry of delight at the sunlit patch of colour, and everybody charged down upon it, with the result that half of the travellers were bogged to the knees, and there was a good deal of pully-hauley business gone through before the last adventuress was extricated. Miss Madge Hampton fell to Paul's share by accident of mere neighbourhood, and she stretched out her little brown-kid-gloved hand to him with an air of timid appeal. He pulled stanchly, but the ground gave way beneath him, and before he knew it she was in his arms. There was a laugh all round, and a blush on both sides, but the lady was on firm earth again, and in a minute or two the drawling call of

the conductor brought the party back to the train. The journey was renewed, and the incident forgotten by everybody save the dramatist, who sat coiled in his corner, with his eyes fixed upon a book which he might as well have held upside-down. The women of the company, five in number, were chattering like a nest of starlings, shrilling high against the slow rumble of the wheels. Miss Hampton alone was silent amongst them. Their talk was of matrimony, and the leading lady sparkled out with an engaging inquiry which embraced the whole carriageful.

'And what about Miss Hampton?'

'Oh,' said the little brown lady demurely, 'I shall die an old maid!'

It was at this instant that a singular and yet accustomed pang assailed the dramatist's heart. He ought to have known it well enough, in all conscience, for he had already had an opportunity of studying it four times over. May Gold had taught it, and Claudia had taught it, and Annette for a fleeting instant, and Gertrude through a heavy year or two. He looked at the smiling little face before him, and it took a new sweetness in his eyes. If he had had his absolute will at that moment, he would have taken its owner in his arms, and have cried 'No!' to her protestation. But, then, it is difficult to do these things in the presence of a whole carriageful of people who make a profession of comedy, and he restrained himself, wondering a little why such an impulse should have assailed him. Yet from that time forward he began to watch and to listen for the monitions of his own heart, which of itself is a dangerous thing for any susceptible young man to do, and he began to find charms in Miss Hampton which were quite separate from the exceptional delicacy of her English speech. He knew very well

that he had no right to fall in love with any woman; he was bound to Annette; he was tied to her so long as she should live. But being newly awakened to a sense of the weakness which had pursued him through his life so far, he became afraid, and watched his own emotions with a jealous care.

The man who is born to fall in love will do it, whatever happens; but there are, of course, ways and ways of doing it, and this particular way of keeping guard over the emotions is perhaps as swift as any.

He held the figure at arm's length, as it were, and critically surveyed it. Why, he asked himself repeatedly, should this simple little personality appeal to him so strongly? To say the most and the least of it, it was feminine, and he had made up his mind about the sex when he had quitted Gertrude. He had honestly despaired of finding a woman who was not either a coquette or a fool, and he had taught himself to use the whole sex after the manner of his conception; and now the cynic feeling into which he had conspired with circumstance to school himself was breaking up again, and, with all his knowledge of the world, he felt himself helpless.

There never was a tale of this sort which came to a definite end without the aid of circumstances which were not planned by either party to the coming contract. It befell that the only married woman of the corps, who travelled with a child of seven, took cold, and had to be left behind. The child, playing, neglected, about the hotel, sustained some injury in the lift which plied between the upper and the lower stories. The company was only twenty miles away, and Paul, learning the news, bought grapes and jellies for the younger invalid and wines for the elder, and chartered a carriage to the town where they were staying. Half a mile before him was a

hooded vehicle, which kept its relative place, more or less, throughout the journey. It was full in sight until the outlying streets of the town were reached, and it came into view again when he arrived at his destination—drawn up before the hotel door, and empty. A moment's interview with the manageress gave him the right to mount the stairs, and, when he tapped at the door of the room in which the invalids reposed, a voice he had not expected to hear bade him come in. There was Miss Hampton, of whom he had been thinking a good deal too much of late, sitting with the child upon her knees, and holding a grape above his lips. The child pouted for it, and he and the mother and the visitor were all laughing together.

'I beg your pardon,' said the intruder clumsily; 'I had expected to find you alone. I have driven over with these little odds and ends in the way of medical comforts for the boy.'

He stood confused, and laid his burden on the table which stood in the centre of the room.

'Didn't you guess,' laughed the little mother from the couch on which she lay, 'that Miss Hampton would be here before you?'

'No,' said Paul. 'If I had guessed, I should not have intruded. You'll take these things for the little fellow, won't you?'

'You're not going yet, Mr. Armstrong?' said the lady on the couch. 'You and Miss Hampton will have a nice little ride back together.'

'I should not dream,' said Paul, 'of intruding on Miss Hampton, and I must go back at once.'

He had no business in front of him, but he dreaded himself, and he was afraid of a *tête-à-tête* with the plain little woman with the brown eyes.

‘But,’ said mamma, lifting her head from the arm of the sofa, and casting upon him the look of *ingenue* archness which was almost her sole fortune on the boards, ‘Miss Hampton’s horse has cast a shoe, and the shoeing-smith is miles away. Did you ride or drive, Mr. Armstrong? I’m sure you couldn’t have ridden with all those nice things you’ve been so kind to bring me. You must have driven, and you must drive Miss Hampton home again. Isn’t it kind of her to have come over to see me from such a distance ‘Just look and see: I’m actually smothered in wine and grapes and jelly and flowers. And wasn’t it kind of you, too, Mr. Armstrong, to think of me just at the same moment! And wasn’t it kind of Miss Hampton’s horse to cast a shoe so that you would be obliged to go back together, whether you meant it or no?’

Miss Hampton was bending over the boy, and her face was hidden; but one blushing cheek gave warranty for the rest, and it was evident to Paul that she was as embarrassed as himself. She spoke icily: ‘Mr. Armstrong was not aware that I was coming here. I must go at once. I have no doubt the landlord will be able to find me another driver.’

‘Now, why on earth,’ asked the little actress from her sofa, ‘should two people who know each other as well as you do take two carriages to drive along the self-same road? Now, when you come to think of it, isn’t that absurd! And such a chance for a spoon, too, all along that quiet road!’

‘Good-afternoon, dear,’ said Miss Hampton, setting down the child, and offering an Arctic kiss to the reclining lady; ‘I must go.’

With that she swept from the room with an air of dignity and confusion, and Paul shook hands with the invalid and followed her.

CHAPTER XXVI

There are just as many different ways of falling in love as there are characters and temperaments, and even the same man—unless he be a fellow of no originality—will not fall in love twice in the same fashion. As to the wisdom or righteousness or the mere everyday question of plain honour involved in the permission which Paul Armstrong gave himself to fall in love at all, under the conditions in which he stood, there seemed room for no illusion. He should by this time have been something of a man of the world, and might reasonably be supposed to be acting with his eyes open to consequences. He had his compunctions by the hundred, his hoverings by the way, and turnings back from it. But many delicate signs which would have been invisible to him had he been less interested persuaded him that love lay ready for him, and after all the follies of his slaveries here and there, he persuaded himself that if he could but accept it, it was of a kind to atone for all that had gone before. And why, he asked himself, if this were true, should he stand for ever in loneliness? It was in him to be constant if only truth were met with truth. He could have been faithful to Claudia. He could have been faithful to Annette. He could have been faithful to Gertrude. And though no man whose sense of the humour of life does not leave him wholly blind to the comedy of his own

existence could fail to see the bitter jest that lay here against himself, he urged the point seriously. He *had* been true in each case until faith had grown into blind folly, and bare respect for an old idol had become impossible. The one crime of his life had been acted against himself. He had believed Annette, and in the mere feebleness of acquiescence he had hung a weight about his neck which he was doomed to carry as long as her life should last.

And now, had he the right to redress the wrong he had inflicted upon himself? Feeble always, always a drifter, a good deal of a coward in his way of shrinking from avoidable pain, but never deliberately cruel or selfish. And now, was he to do a deliberately cruel and selfish thing? Or was as much mischief as might well be done wrought already?

For months had gone by, and the drifting policy had brought him plainly to the question, Was this quiet, sweet little girl in love with him? No blame to her if it were so. He had signalled her from the first for attention and companionship, and she knew nothing of his history. She had no guess as to the fatal bond which held him. Every day he knew her better. Her mind and heart opened out before him like twin flowers, full of purity and sweet odour.

She was courage incarnate, and her hatred of cruelty was a passion. A hulking blackguard of a teamster was cruelly flogging an overladen horse one day, and Madge, at the risk of her life, was in amongst the traffic of the street in a flash, and stood between the beast and his dumb victim voiceless and pale with rage, her little figure at its height and her eyes blazing. Paul’s chance presence and the neighbourhood of a policeman were probably answerable for the peaceful solution of this episode, for the girl had snatched the whip from the bully’s

hand, and he was in an attitude which threatened violence when Paul intervened.

'My dear child!' said Paul in a tone of remonstrance as he conducted her from the scene.

'Oh,' she broke in, with her little teeth clenched, 'I couldn't bear it!'

He saw the folly of reproof and held his tongue, and when they came in sight of the theatre she ran indoors and escaped him.

He had fallen into a habit of walking home with her when the night's work was over, and saying good-bye to her at the door of her lodgings. This fact made her mightily unpopular with the ladies of the company, who saw no reason why she should be thus distinguished, and the snubs she took disposed him to be more attentive to her.

They drifted closer, but no confidences were exchanged between them.

The company made for Australia, and there were six days of travel aboard a well-found steamer, and this gave more than ample time for the position to solidify. There were long promenades on deck by moonlight and starlight, and the two found a perch in the bows out of the way of all observation and regard, and there exchanged all manner of confidences. The girl's simple life unrolled itself—its hopes, its ambitions! its home affections. She talked of her reading, of her music, of all the little intimacies of home-life. Before the brief voyage was over he seemed, to his own apprehension, to know his companion more completely than he had ever known man or woman, and he was hourly more and more in love with her. He was feather-headed and irresponsible enough to be happy in the circumstances for hours at a time, but when he was

alone, and his heart was no longer flattered by the worship she so innocently offered, the skeleton he carried about with him came out of its cupboard and seemed to mop and mow before him in derision. He was bound hand and foot to his fate, and the bonds were not to be severed There was Annette in far-away London and Paris dragging out a miserable and ignominious life, which was likely to last as long as his own, and he could see no hope of freedom. With every passing day he felt more clearly that he was bent upon an inexcusable wrong, and yet, so strangely fashioned is the conscience of a man who is without the power of will, all his self-reproaches did but add to the tenderness and fervour of his desire.

The steamer reached its destination late upon a Saturday, and Sunday was a holiday. Paul and Madge spent the day together, wandering on a long stretch of sandy coast which lay between the port and the bright green waters of the sea; and all the time there was a growing sense of inevitability in his mind. He knew that he was going to ask for happiness, and that he was prepared to pay his self-respect and manhood for it. The talk was of trifles in the morning until they strolled home to luncheon; it was of trifles again in the afternoon until they strolled home to dinner, and it was of trifles still when they set out in the yellow sunset to saunter once more in a scene which had already grown strangely memorable and familiar. There were no sunset clouds, but the pageant of the dying day had a sort of sullen and pathetic beauty. The blazing sun dropped behind the far-off sea-line, and a great band of saffron rimmed the whole horizon, fading into palest green as it spread upward, and this in turn melted into a blue which at the zenith looked unfathomable. A full moon, which had until now

been invisible, looked down from the very centre of the sky. There was none of the lingering twilight of more temperate climates. The change from broad daylight, in which every outline and detail of the landscape was accented strongly, to the dim, mystic and diffused radiance of the moon and stars was like an episode in a transformation-scene at the theatre. A mere ten minutes had sufficed to change the whole character and sentiment of the scene. It was like walking out of one world into another, and a rude chorus of voices, accompanied by the sounds of a banjo and a concertina, came from some body of merrymakers beyond a distant island in the bay. It moved away farther and farther into the distance until the harshness was softened to an almost spiritual melody, and after awhile it reached the ear only at uncertain intervals.

They came to a place at which they had rested in the afternoon. Some high tide of long ago had deposited here a great wreath of wrack, a hundred yards inland, and piled up in places to a height of some twelve feet. There were scores of cushiony resting-places here like great luxurious arm-chairs, and the wrack when disturbed by a touch gave out dry and stinging odours of sea-salt and iodine.

Paul, with a mere motion of the hand to his companion, threw himself into one of the hollows, and she took a seat at a little distance from him. He lay, the brim of his hat sheltering his eyes from the moonlight, and stared at the spangled vault above him, where the stars seemed to hang from threads of gold and silver as if they were upheld by an actual tangible roof. He knew that his hour had come, but he obeyed the impulse which controlled him with an infinite self-accusation.

‘Madge,’ he said, rolling over where he lay and

stretching out his hand towards her. It fell upon her own, and she made no motion to evade him. It was the first caress he had ever offered her, and her tacit acceptance of it hurried him into passion. ‘Madge,’ he said again; ‘dear little Madge!’

She glanced at him for an instant only, and in the moonlight her eyes glinted with sudden tears.

‘I have no right,’ he said, ‘to speak to you like this. I have had no right to claim your companionship as I have done since we first began to know each other.’

She was quite silent; but under his light caress he felt her hand tremble, and she glanced at him once more and looked away again.

‘I have not had a happy life,’ he went on, ‘but that ought to dispose me to do what I can to keep unhappiness out of the lives of other people. If I tell you that I am very conscious of having deceived you, of having left you in the dark about myself in respect to things you have a right to know, what shall you say to me? What will you think of me?’

Again she turned to look at him, and this time her glance rested on him, but still she made no answer.

Paul withdrew his hand, sat upright, and began mechanically to charge his pipe and to smoke.

‘I met an utterly worthless woman many years ago,’ he began, after a long pause, ‘and I threw my life away upon her. We were married, and she is still alive. She is likely to live for many years to come; and, indeed, there is no probability of escape from her. It is not likely that she and I will ever see each other any more; but I am legally bound to her so long as she shall live. I ought to have told you this months ago.’

He rose and began to pace up and down the sands before her. He looked up at her from time to time,

and her eyes followed him as he moved. Not a sound escaped her lips, but her fast-flowing tears glittered on her cheeks like rain.

'I should have told you,' he cried, writhing between self-accusation and self-excuse, 'but I had not the courage to put an end to a time which has been so lull of sweetness, so full of a mad kind of hope which I should never have admitted to my heart I know,' he went on, pausing desperately before her, 'what must be in your mind. I know that you are asking how I dared to draw you on to such a friendship as ours has been through an acted lie, and how I have dared at last to tell the truth I have postponed so long. You have a right to be wounded; you have a right to be angry. You will do yourself the merest justice if you teach yourself to despise and hate me; and if you tell me to go away at once and darken your life no further, I will do it But let me say just this one thing: whatever my cowardly silence may seem to prove, I have never had a thought of you that has not been full of the profoundest respect and reverence. You know now the truth about me, and you know that in spite of it I have made love to you for months past. I can't tell what a high-minded and pure-hearted woman may feel in such a case. I can't guess if such a woman could find it in her nature to accept the lifelong worship and affection of a man who is circumstanced as I am, if she could find the courage and self-sacrifice to join her destinies with a broken life like mine. Oh, if it were possible!' he cried, 'and oh, if it were possible that I could nourish such a hope in fancy, and not know in my inmost heart that only a scoundrel could be guilty of it! There, Madge, it is all said now. It had to be said, but I shall never forgive myself for having said it.'

The accusations he brought against himself were just as real as the passion and despair which urged him on.

The Solitary, in his smoke-clouded mountain eyrie, surveyed all this, as he had surveyed the varied experiences of life which had passed before it in clear vision through his mind, and still the passion and despair and the self-accusing, self-excusing thoughts were as real to him as they had been at the moment he recalled. He accepted that reality as a proof, scarcely needed, of the already established shallowness of his own nature—a brawling stream always ready to rave round any little impediment in its path; a mere miniature of the torrent, with no resolute strength or purpose in it, but full of a fussy vivacity and self-importance which he could most heartily and bitterly despise. All his life long the same futile story repeated: the same headlong impetuosity, the same want of steadfast force, the same absence of control. And yet, even in the depth of self-reproach, he could not deny to himself some hint of purpose which had an honest meaning in his mind, and, looking back, he saw that he had found an entrance to a purer and better life than he had known before. Had he been worthy of the trust he asked for, he would have blamed himself less for asking. Tears were hot and harsh in his throat as the scene unrolled itself before him.

Paul Armstrong—the Paul Armstrong of those irrevocable bygone years—was striking up and down the sand, and the girl was still weeping without a sound, when the Exile's thought flew back to them. It was as if a curtain had descended for an instant only, and had risen again to reveal the same actors in the same scene.

'I had better leave you now, Madge,' said Paul,

half maddened by the sight of the uncomplaining grief he had awakened. ‘I will watch you home as soon as you care to go, but I won’t intrude upon you any longer.’

The slight figure rose from its seat upon the wrack, and stood before him with downcast and averted head, but he could still see the tears falling like diamond-drops in the clear moonlight. He turned irresolutely away, but he had made only a single step before he was vividly back again with an impulsive and imploring hand upon her shoulder.

‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘that you forgive me. Tell me that you will be able to think of me when I am gone with something—some feeling that will not be all contempt. You won’t always despise me, will you, Madge?’

‘I shall never despise you,’ she answered, in a voice she could barely control; ‘I shall always remember this time.’

‘And you don’t hate me for having spoken?’

She looked up at him with a strange smile, which was so tender and so full of pity that he caught his breath at the sight of it.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I shall never hate you. I must be as truthful as you have been. I must tell you that I had heard something of what you have told me before we left New Zealand. I didn’t know if it were true, and I did not even wish to ask.’

He stood still with that unconscious hand upon her shoulder, and his heart gave a leap as he asked:

‘You knew I loved you, Madge—you knew I loved you?’

‘I was quite sure of that,’ she answered ‘I have believed it for a long time.’

‘Madge,’ he said, ‘are you strong enough—are you brave enough—can you put such faith in me? Can you believe that I will lay a life’s unfailing devotion at your feet—that the very fact that there can be no legal tie between us will make me always all the truer to you? I swear to you that if you trust yourself to me, my whole life shall be one act of gratitude for your faith and courage, and that no act or word of mine shall ever cause you to regret the compact.’

Her tears had ceased to fall, and when she next looked at him her face was grave, and looked in the moonlight as pale as snow.

‘If I were alone,’ she answered, ‘you should have my answer now, but I have others to consider.’

‘Oh, who,’ he cried, ‘can come between us?’

‘Let us go home,’ she answered simply and bravely. ‘I must have time to think. Please say no more to me to-night.’ She moved away, and Paul, taking his place beside her, walked in silence ‘There is no one,’ she said, when they had traversed a hundred yards or more, ‘who has a right to dictate what my life shall be; but I have never done anything without my mother’s knowledge and consent, and I never shall.’

Paul had passed from despair almost to certainty, but this chilled him suddenly.

‘Ah,’ he said, with a gasping breath, ‘is there any mother in the world who would consent to such a scheme?’

‘You must write to me,’ she answered, ‘such a letter as I can send to her. I will write, too, and I will ask her not to answer until she has seen us both.’

‘That rings a death-knell,’ said Paul ‘I have no hope of consent in such a case.’

‘I can’t tell,’ she answered simply, ‘but there is no other way.’

‘And yet you love me, Madge?’ said Paul. She made no answer, and he drew nearer to her, and put an arm about her shoulder. ‘You love me, little Madge?’ he urged her.

She gave a sigh of acquiescence, a half-breathed ‘Yes.’

‘And you could deny your own heart and mine? You could let me go away alone, and live alone yourself, with an empty heartache?’

Her answer came, like an echo of a former tone, just the same half-breathed token of assent. There was a quiet resolution in it, for all it was so softly spoken, which bound him to silence for a time.

There was more strength of resolution, more power and purpose, expressed thus simply than he had ever been conscious of himself, and he recognised that fact quite clearly.

They walked from this time forth in silence, until at the outskirts of the town they reached the small and retired hotel at which the girl had taken lodgings, and there they parted formally enough.

‘You will write?’ she asked, holding out her hand to him in token of dismissal.

‘I will write,’ he answered, taking her hand, and bowing over it.

There were some Sabbath loiterers in the street, and it was necessary that the two should part undemonstratively.

Paul, as he walked to his own more pretentious hostel, recognised the fact that for good or evil he had shot his bolt There was nothing at that hour of which he was more certain than that his present

destiny and the destiny of Madge lay in the hands of a woman he had never seen, and he did not even attempt to disguise from himself the overwhelming probability against an affirmative answer to his hopes. He was very miserably certain that he had no right to hope, and that accusing conscience of his which never permitted him to stray without rebuke, and yet had never been worth a farthing to him in his whole career, worried him without ceasing. But he knew enough of himself already to have learned that the fault of character which had wrecked him was half made up of reluctance to add pain to pain. It is not always the wholly selfish wrongdoer who is answerable for the greater sorrows of life. It is assuredly not he who suffers in his own person; but, worse than that, the tender-hearted, conscience-worried man of feeble will is always afraid of causing a slight grief by retracing a mistaken step, and so goes on inevitably to the creation of troubles which appal him when he comes to contemplate them in after-hours. And to have a full theoretical knowledge of this fact enforced by years of experience is to be gifted with no safeguard. ‘To be weak’—there is no wiser saying among the utterances of the wise—‘to be weak is to be miserable.’ To be a fool and to know it is the extreme of misery, and this extreme does not fall to the lot of those who are extremest in folly.

What Paul wrote that night is barely worth chronicling, and may be fairly constructed by anyone who has so far pursued his story. But the Exile, sitting over the embers of the fire at which he had cooked his coarse mid-day meal, threw himself backward on the trodden grass, and, groping behind the flap of the tent, dragged his brown canvas bag towards him, and having made a search among its contents, found a heap of stained, crumpled and

disordered papers, one of which he smoothed out upon his knee and read. It had been given to him in that first unspeakably tranquil and happy year which Madge and he had spent together in Europe. It was the first blotted draft of the letter to her mother with which she had accompanied his own, and it ran thus:

'My darling Mother,

'I am putting this into a separate envelope, and on the envelope I am writing to ask you to read Mr. Armstrong's letter to me before you read my own. He has explained everything there, and now I must make my appeal to you. I have promised that I will do nothing without your consent, and I am not very hopeful that I shall secure it. You know that I am not light-minded, or in the habit of saying what I do not mean, and I shall only tell you this: I love him with my whole heart and mind, and if you decide that we are to part I shall accept your decision, but I shall never know a happy day again. Paul is not only a great man but a good one.'

(The reader had faced this blow so often that he was ready for it, but he had no guard against it, and it struck home so heavily that he groaned aloud.)

'I know now, partly from what I have lately learned from other people, partly from what he told me last night, but mainly from the letter you have read, the story of his life, and I know how profoundly unhappy it has been. I want to comfort and sustain him, and I am not afraid to face all the difficulties which lie before me. I can hear a clear call to duty, and I am sure that his love and mine will strengthen me to do it. You have never known me to be frivolous or foolish in my thoughts about such things as these, and until we can all three meet together, you must have patience with me. It would

be wrong and cruel on my side to throw everything upon you, and I shall not ask you to make yourself responsible for what you may think my wrong-doing. There are a hundred thousand things in my heart which I cannot say, and amongst them all there is the dreadful fear that I may have lost your respect. But you ought to know the truth, and the whole truth. I have not lost my own, and I cannot believe that I shall ever have the right to be ashamed.'

There was much more than this. There were half-articulate expressions of affection and fear of an agony of regret for a possible severance. And through it all there beamed like a star, steadfast and unobscured in tempest, the loyal heart, the uncountable soul which, in whatsoever error, knows love and fealty as its only guides.

CHAPTER XXVII

By far the greater part of the theoretical wisdom of the world comes to us in the shape of legacies bequeathed by fools. A fool is not a person without knowledge or understanding—that is an ignoramus. The true fool—the only fool worthy of a wise man's contemplation—is the man who knows and understands, and habitually refrains from acting according to knowledge and understanding. It is the record of the follies of such people which has built up the world's wisdom. From that record we have learned amongst many other things that the fool of

understanding has one eternal refuge from himself which he seeks with a full knowledge of the fact that the shelter it affords is illusory, and that the path by which it leads him can only conduct him to greater dangers than those from which he is striving to escape. It is too late to go back now, quoth the fool; the business must be gone through to the end. Thus if this brief diagnosis be of any value, the root of folly is to be found in the decay of will. Few men had reason to hold this belief more firmly than Paul Armstrong, and yet even now, when whatever was best in his own nature was more seriously engaged than it had ever been before, he went on to the consummation of a most undoubted and most cruel wrong, on the poor pretence that every stage he passed towards it made the passage of the next stage inevitable.

If ever it had seemed clear to him that it was too late to retire it seemed clearer now, and indeed he had so involved himself that it became to him alike and equally criminal to retreat or to advance. But by-and-by a solace for his miseries brought a solution of perplexity. Since he had taken so tremendous a responsibility upon himself, since there was now no escape from it without an act of brutality at the mere thought of which his heart revolted, there grew up within him such a resolve and such a sense of protective tenderness as had been hitherto impossible for him. Poor little Madge was to be victimized, but the *via dolorosa* which she would tread unendingly should at least be strewn with flowers, and the victim herself should be beautifully garlanded. His life should be one act of worship in return for her self-sacrifice. His devotion should offer such a challenge to the censure of the world that all reproach should shrink away ashamed. There never

had been so complete an atonement as he would offer.

The nauseous pill of self-reproach was so thickly sugared and gilded by this inspiration that in a while he was not only able to take it without making wry faces, but with an actual sense of relish and self-approval. This was naturally a good deal dashed by the coming interview with Madge's mother, about whose unknown personality there began to cluster some self-contradictory ideas. That lady would be a most unnatural mother if she rejected the proposal he had to lay before her, and a most unnatural mother if she accepted it. In his reflections, according to his mood, he saw either horn of this dilemma so clearly that the other vanished from his mind, but it always assumed its proper reality again, and made its companion altogether visionary.

When at last the fatal hour for the interview arrived, he went to the rendezvous in a pitiable state of hope and fear. He had always his whole life through carried all his eggs in one basket, and had been incapable of undertaking more than one emotional enterprise at a time. To lose Madge now would be to lose everything, and his former experiences of the healing powers of time—which were possibly numerous and striking enough—were of no value to him. Obeying the directions he had received, he chartered a cab, and after a half-hour's tumultuous journey found himself alighting before a pretty villa in Prahran, with a well-ordered garden in front of it full of English shrubs and flowers, amidst which were interspersed a number of sub-tropic plants and trees. He was shown with no delay into a shaded room, where he had some difficulty in making out the figure of a gray-haired lady who sat in an arm-chair to receive him, and who did not rise

at his entrance. Madge was standing near her, and as the dazzling effect of the bright sunshine of the streets passed from his eyes he saw the sign of many tears in the two faces before him.

There was an embarrassing silence, which lasted for a full half-minute, and Paul stood there conscious of the mother's scrutiny, and feeling like a criminal in the dock. The girl herself was the first who found courage and self-control to speak.

'Mother dear,' she said in an uncertain voice, 'this is Mr. Armstrong.'

The elder lady nodded, and with a slight gesture of the hand motioned the visitor to a chair. Paul obeyed the gesture, and waited in silence.

'You will understand,' the lady of the house began, 'how wretchedly sorry I am to see you.' Paul bowed an assent to this, and could but acknowledge that the unpromising exordium was natural. 'My daughter has never had a secret from me in her life until within the last few months. She has written of you in her letters from time to time, but never led me to fancy that you were making love to her. I believe you are a married man, Mr. Armstrong?'

'I am married,' Paul responded in a voice so strangled and unlike his own that it positively startled him.

'I cannot help knowing,' said Mrs. Hampton, 'that I have made a very serious mistake in giving way to my daughter's desire to go upon the stage. But I trusted her so completely that I had no fear at all of what has happened. You must know, Mr. Armstrong, that you have misbehaved yourself most cruelly.'

'I have said so to myself a thousand times,' said Paul, 'and I have no defence to offer now.'

'You have done a wicked and a cruel thing,'

pursued the mother. ‘You have brought my daughter into opposition with me for the first time in her life, and you have filled her head with ideas which can only lead to suffering and disgrace.’

‘Forgive me, Mrs. Hampton,’ Paul said. ‘I have acted precipitously and wrongly, and I am much to blame; but I have never striven for an instant to confuse Miss Hampton’s mind. If I have won her love, I have done it half unconsciously, and it began in friendship and esteem. I ought, I know now, to have told her of that miserable tie which binds me; but at first I did not think it necessary to speak a word about that. A man would have to be a rare coxcomb,’ he went on, ‘to think it needful that he should make public proclamation of a fact like that. My life has been ruined for years past, and I did not care to talk about it I did not dream of harm until harm was done.’

‘I can only say, Mr. Armstrong,’ the mother answered, ‘that there can be no discussion about this matter, and that I rely upon my daughter to do justice to herself. She will learn in a little while to know that you have done her a very serious wrong, and that will help her to live her trouble down.’

‘Madam,’ cried Paul, rising to his feet, and speaking with an impassioned swiftness, ‘I beseech you to listen to me for one minute only; if I try to justify myself in some small degree, you will understand my purpose. At an age when life is opening for most men I had tied myself to a hopeless burden. I found myself shut out from every chance of happiness; such a thing as home I dared not even dream of. The law can afford me no relief from the snare into which I have fallen; I am excluded from everything that makes life bright to other men. My experiences of woman’s friendship have not been

happy, and I had come to the belief that I was condemned to go through life without companionship. I met your daughter; we found that our minds came together in whatever was best in both of us. I declare that I never spoke one word of love to her until the night on which she made me promise to write the letter which she sent to you. I must not—dare not—speak of scruples on your side. They are no scruples; they are stern and cruel facts which can only be surmounted by great courage. But they have been surmounted by others, and we believe—Madge and I both believe—that we have the courage and the constancy to face them. Madge tells me that without your consent our case is hopeless. I know how unlikely it is that it should be given; but if it should be given—if by any chance you should be brought to change your present mind —I promise you by everything that men hold sacred that I will honour and treasure her and cherish her as my true wife in the sight of God and men, and that the tie on my side will be not less binding, but beyond measure more sacred because her claim appeals only to honour and manhood, and is not enforced by law. I plead for myself, Mrs. Hampton, and you will tell me with perfect justice that you are not called upon in the remotest degree to consult my wishes or to sympathize with any grief I may have brought upon myself. But there is another side to the question, and your daughter will tell you if I am right in thinking it a million times stronger than my own. You have known her and have loved her tenderly all her life. I have known her for little more than half a year; but I am sure of this: her affections are not lightly engaged or easily cast away.'

She had raised her hand against him more than once as if to interrupt him, but he had not checked

the impetuous torrent of his speech until he had poured out all he had to say. Now, with a forlorn outward gesture of the hands, and a lax dropping of them to either side, he stood awaiting judgment.

Madge broke silence for the second time.

'There is no need for Mr. Armstrong to stay longer now. You and I must talk together, mother; and I will write to him to-night.'

Her face was of a striking pallor, except where the salt of tears had scalded it; but she spoke with an entire possession of herself, and Paul wondered at her steadfastness and courage.

'There is one thing more,' he said: 'if you can be brought to sanction this union, sanctify it by coming with us both to Europe. Live with us, and help me to secure Madge's happiness. Your presence there would silence every wicked tongue, and if we made no secret of the truth, but dared the world together, we should find, I know, that it would deal kindly with us.'

He stood for a moment, and, receiving no reply, bowed and walked blindly towards a door which communicated with another room. Madge called to him, 'This way,' and went out into the hall before him.

'Is this to be our last parting, I wonder?' he asked hoarsely.

She shook her head with a weary lifting of the fine arched brows as if to say she could find no answer, and then withdrew without word or sign, leaving him to quit the house unattended.

He fumbled half blindly until he found his hat and cane, and then he had to fumble for the door, for the whole place was heavily shadowed from the blazing sun outside, and his eyesight and his hands were

each less serviceable to him than usual. At first the broad sunshine fell upon his eyes like a sudden vivid heat upon a wound, and in his agitation and half-blindness he found himself walking away from the quarter of the city to which he had meant to direct his steps. Correcting this error in a minute or two, he turned and made for his hotel with a mind so shaken and vacant that he seemed to have no thoughts at all. A man who has been passionately in love three times before he has begun to verge upon middle age may easily be thought too inflammable a subject to be deserving of much pity, but a man may be keenly in sympathy with himself without enlisting the sympathy of other people, and Paul was here as always heroically and tragically in earnest. Without seeking apologies for him too far afield, there is a kind of nature which burns intensely within itself, and will break out into violence of smoke and flame with the intrusion of any new emotional material, just as there is a nature not more intense which will burn equably and clearly whatever new supply of fuel may be heaped upon it.

There is no need to dwell upon the time of waiting, the miserable loiterings in bedroom, corridor and entrance-hall, the aimless perusal of newspapers which conveyed no meaning to the mind, the taking up and laying down of petty occupations, and all the other signs and tokens of suspense. Time and the hour wear out the roughest day, and as Paul lingered over the dessert of a barely tasted dinner, a note reached him in Madge's handwriting. It contained these words only:

'There is no change. I dare not hope, and I dare not despair. I may have news for you to-morrow, but what it may be I must not guess.

'M.'

This was cold comfort, but he had not expected more, and he strolled away in sheer vacuity of heart and thought to the principal theatre of the city, where just then a bright comic opera was running. The lights, the gay music, the brilliantly-dressed crowd upon the stage, made no impression on his mind, and his saturnine and gloomy face was in such contrast to the loud hilarity of the audience that he felt himself a blot upon the house, and at the first fall of the curtain withdrew into the streets, where he wandered listlessly until midnight He was fatigued, and slept heavily for some hours, but he was awake again long before the household was astir, and suffered all the weariness and chagrin which assailed the unoccupied mind in hours of suspense and doubt. Another brief note reached him by the first post.

'Mother has spoken a great deal to-night of my brother George, who, as you know, is already in London. I do not know what to think of this, and I can scarcely dare to fancy what I should so much like to believe. I shall not write again until I have something definite to tell you, but whether we ever meet again or no, you shall see my whole heart for once. I love you, and I know that I shall always love you. Is it unwomanly—is it too bold to tell you this so soon? Will you think that I am too easily persuaded about myself? I hope not. But whatever happens, even if I never see you or hear your voice again, I shall not change or forget anything that has happened in all this beautiful and dreadful time.

'All yours, and always yours,

'Madge.'

This had been brought to him as he sat dressed in his bedroom, wondering if any message would reach him, and he had locked his door to be alone with

Fate before he had broken the seal of the wax, which bore a dove with an olive-branch, and the motto *Esperez*. He read the tender message with its proclamation of unshakable fidelity thrice over, and then rising, began to pace up and down the room. A cry of self-accusation rose to his lips.

'My God!' he asked himself, 'what have I done? What *have* I done?'

There was no room for doubt in all his mind. There are some truths which manifest themselves so clearly to the heart that they are not to be resisted. He had found fidelity at last after all his foolish researches. It had seemed to him the priceless jewel of the world, and he had been willing to barter all his life for it. It was here at last, and he was so far beggared that he had no price to offer in payment for it which was worth a thousandth part its value. He was bankrupt and had sought to buy this treasure, and must now needs go through life as a swindler. Even if his hopes were granted, what had he to pay? He knew at this moment as clearly as if he had even then been enlightened by the events of later years that there were scores of women who would draw their skirts away in a real disdain of an association of which they were not worthy. And he knew also that if his own hopes failed him he had spoiled the one life in the whole world he would fain have done his best to gladden.

The next pause lasted long. Day after day went by and no message came. It is not more than justice to chronicle the fact that Paul Armstrong did grow for once in his life to feel more for another than for himself, and if he suffered anguish, as he did, it was on Madge's account much rather than his own. The cry her confession had wrung from him was always in his mind: 'What have I done? My God, what *have* I

done?'

These days were a stern discipline, but they came to an end at last. A note reached him at the end of a week in which Mrs. Hampton presented her compliments to Mr. Armstrong, with a request that he would call that afternoon at five o'clock. This, of course, conveyed no certainty to him in either one direction or another, but it awoke an extraordinary tumult in his mind, and he found himself in the neighbourhood of the Prahran villa a full hour before the time appointed. He sauntered in the broiling heat and blinding light until he lost himself repeatedly in strange places and rang at the doors of strange houses to inquire his way back again, quite frenzied by the fear of missing his appointment In effect, he arrived at the instant, and was ushered into the room he had already visited. Mrs. Hampton sat there, looking very pale and stern, he thought, and she rose upon his entrance and offered him her hand. It seemed to him that this cost her a considerable effort, and she resumed her seat without a word. Madge was there also, but she exchanged no greeting with Paul, and did not even meet his glance. The hostess touched a bell upon the table which stood near her, and after a silent pause a trim parlourmaid brought in a tray upon which was set out the materials for afternoon tea. Mrs. Hampton began to busy herself about the tray, and Madge handed a cup of tea to Paul.

'I may tell you, Mr. Armstrong,' said Madge's mother, 'that, if you think it worth while to call it winning, you have won. You have very nearly broken an old woman's heart in doing it, and you may break a girl's heart into the bargain before you have done. But my son George is in London, and I have made up my mind to let Madge go home and

join him there. Her sister will go with her and will be her companion on the voyage, and I shall follow so soon as I can dispose of my interests in this country. I am uprooting my household and leaving all my friends; and I am doing it, Mr. Armstrong, for a man of whom I know next to nothing. I am almost certain that I am not acting wisely, and I am not quite sure that I am not acting wickedly. I know out of my own experience of the world that marriage can make a woman miserable if it were blessed by all the parsons living, but you are taking a responsibility a great deal bigger than that of any husband, and I am taking such a responsibility as no mother ought to take. And now, Madge,' she said, 'I want to speak to Mr. Armstrong in private for one minute. Come back when I call you.'

Madge stole obediently away, and when the door had closed behind her, Mrs. Hampton leaned forward and spoke in a half-whisper, with her hand stretched out before the listener like a hovering bird.

'I have my child's promise,' she said, 'and I know that I can trust to it But I must have your undertaking that you will place her safely in her brother's hands, and that you will treat her with as much respect as if she were engaged to be married to you.'

'Madam,' Paul broke out, 'I pledge myself absolutely. I could hold no pledge so sacred.'

'I shall follow,' said Mrs. Hampton, 'within two or three months. My child will have had another half-year in which to know you and to understand your intentions towards her. I have no fear of her; but if you violate your promise in the slightest, you will act like a scoundrel, and I have Madge's undertaking that she will be candid with me. There is no more to

be said now until we meet in England. I may tell you just this, Mr. Armstrong: we two have spent every night since I first saw you in each other's arms in tears. I am giving you a proof that I think well of you on very slender grounds. If you are in the least worthy my good opinion, you will think sometimes of what I have just told you.'

He stooped and kissed her hand, and when she drew it away there was a single tear upon it.

'I had rather get the wrench over,' she said, 'and have done with it. It will seem quite natural that I should go home and join my family in London, and I shall explain nothing beyond that.' She rose and opened the door and called her daughter by name. 'It is all over,' she said, when Madge returned. 'I have but one hope, and that is that you may never live to blame your mother's weakness. I should have done for your father what you are doing if there had been any need for it, and I should have done it in the face of all the world. And now I want to be alone a little to—to'—her voice faltered suddenly, and her eyes brimmed with tears—'to say my prayers, and, if I have done wrong, to beg God's forgiveness. Go out into the garden, children, and leave me here.'

So into the wide garden, cooled with the shade of English fruit-trees—peach and pear and plum and apple—the two wandered, far too disturbed by happiness as yet to be content But in Paul's heart a new well of tenderness began to open—a spring of tenderness and yearning which seemed to overflow every cranny of his nature. To pay for this, to scrape up from the bankrupt remnants of life something by way of thanks-offering, to devote himself heart and soul and mind and body to that one aim, to discipline himself to a lofty and unresting ambition for that one aim's sake, to win a fortune, to win a

solid renown in which his love should shine reflected and sit enshrined—all this was with him in one confused conglomerate of gratitude and hope and love.

'No woman,' he said, 'ever showed a greater trust I shall never be worthy of it, but it shall be the one endless study of my life to be less unworthy.'

He took her, unresisting, to his arms. Their lips met for the first time, and two souls seemed to tremble into one.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Paul knew that Madge and he were to have a travelling companion on the voyage, and that the companion was to be Madge's sister, but he did not meet her until he stepped aboard the steamer bound for Tilbury Docks from Adelaide. Her name was Phyllis, but for some reason or no reason her own small world had elected to call her Bill, and to that name only she gave willing answer, unless she were flattered from the memory of short frocks by being addressed as Miss Hampton. She was a child of astonishing beauty, with eyes like stars and the face of a young angel, and people who did not know her received an impression of sanctity and innocence when they beheld her. A complete knowledge of her character revealed her as an incorrigible imp, utterly without a sense of danger under any circumstances her experience had so far led her to encounter, and,

apart from that, a compound—a furious compound on either side—of jealousy and affection. It would, perhaps, be more just to say affection and jealousy, for Bill's heart was hot with love for those for whom she cared at all, and her jealousy was but the natural product of her affection. It was not until the boat reached Colombo that Bill condescended to accept a solitary advance from Paul. Until then she resented every minute he spent in her sister's society and every word he addressed to her, but once enlisted she became a sort of lovers' watch-dog, and held all intruders at bay.

The steamer was lying for four-and-twenty hours in the harbour at Colombo, and everybody who was at liberty was delighted to snatch a day ashore. Paul and Madge and Bill made the customary globe-trotter's round They lunched at the hotel at Point de Galles, saw the usual conjurers and snake-charmers, drove to the usual Buddhist temple, dined in town, and went aboard again. Bill, who had hitherto proved an unmitigated nuisance, behaved with a fine discretion throughout the day, and it was only half an hour after her appointed bedtime that she pointedly made Paul aware of her existence. He was lounging in a deck-chair and smoking a cigar when the young lady took a place at his side.

'Look here,' she said, with the boyish off-handedness which belonged to her. 'I want you and me to be friends.'

'Why not?' said Paul. 'I'm agreeable if you are.'

'Have I been good to-day?' the imp asked, laying her head upon his shoulder, and turning up those starlike, unfathomable eyes of hers.

'You have behaved like an angel for temper,' Paul responded, 'and like an elderly diplomatist for

discretion.'

'You are satisfied?' said Bill, rolling her golden curls in her Tam-o'-Shanter cap.

'I am not merely satisfied, William,' Paul responded. 'Words fail me to express my gratitude.'

'Don't you begin to chaff me,' said Bill. 'If you do, I shan't make the bargain I was going to.'

'I assure you,' said Paul, 'that I was never more serious in my life. I swear it by the most sacred of man's possessions—gold. This is an English sovereign.'

'For me?' asked Bill, her lambent eyes regarding him as if no thought of greed or bribery could touch the angel's soul which shone through them.

'For you,' said Paul.

'Right oh!' Bill replied, biting at the coin with her milk-white teeth, and then bestowing it in her pocket. 'Now, if you'll promise never to leave Madge alone about one thing, I'll be as good—as good—you can't guess anything as good as I'll be.'

'There's no such thing as a one-sided bargain,' said Paul, 'and you must let me know what you expect from me in answer to this astonishing confession.'

'Don't you chaff me,' said Bill, still rolling her golden head upon his shoulder, and beaming on him with those eyes of innocence. 'I might be having a sweetheart of my own one of these days. Don't you think that's likely?'

'I don't mind betting,' Paul answered, 'that you'll have fifty—'

Bill sat up straight in her deck-chair, clasped her hands with a vivid gesture, and looked skyward with a glance pure as the heavens themselves.

'What a lark!' she breathed—' oh, what a lark!

Fifty? Do you think they'd all come together?' she asked with a sudden eagerness, as if her life depended on the answer.

'Say, five at a time,' said Paul—'ten per annum; that will give you five years to deal with them, beginning, we will say, about two years from now.'

'But that's where I want to come in,' said Bill 'I want to begin at once.'

'There is no need to be in a hurry,' Paul answered. 'There is plenty of time before you.'

'Oh yes,' said Bill thoughtfully. 'But, then, you see, I don't want to waste any of it. Now, I just want to tell you what I want you to do for me. I want you to din it into Madge's ears, morning, noon, and night, that it's time that I should do my hair up and wear long frocks.'

'And if I undertake that mission?' Paul asked

'We're friends,' cried Bill, rising and holding out her hand 'You'll see,' she added, 'I can be just as nice as I have been nasty.'

From this time forward the voyage was like a happy dream. Suez and Naples and Gibraltar were full of interest and wonder to the untravelled Madge, and the Mediterranean was smooth as a pond through all the lovely days and nights of the European spring. The Bay of Biscay so far belied its stormy reputation that there was scarcely a heave upon its surface, and at last the shores of England came in sight, sacred and beautiful to the eyes of a girl born and bred in the Colonies. Then came Tilbury, and at Tilbury brother George was waiting to bid his sisters welcome.

Paul was happy and content enough to be in the mood to like anybody and everybody, and an inward suggestion that he was not favourably impressed

with brother George presented itself only to be discounted and ignominiously turned out of doors at once. As Tennyson has said, ‘It is not true that second thoughts are best, but first and third, which are a riper first.’ Brother George was undeniably good-looking after his fashion. He was well set up and a little over the middle height. He was very perfectly groomed, and had very fine, regular, white teeth which he was a little too fond of showing in a rather mechanical smile. His eyes were rather too closely set either for beauty or for character, and his manner was a trifle over-suave.

Bill, who had been promoted after her own desires, fell upon him like an avalanche, and being at first unrecognised in her aspect of grown-up young lady, embarrassed brother George considerably. But there was such a laugh at this as set all four in high spirits, and there were so many questions and answers that the time of waiting for the train passed in a flash.

The quartette lunched together at a restaurant in town, and brother George carried off his sisters to the apartments he had secured for them in the house in which he lodged. But before he went a little episode, which was afterwards renewed in various forms until it grew monotonous, occurred. Brother George naturally played the host at the restaurant, and spread a generous and delicate feast, but on the presentation of the bill was struck through with chagrin at the discovery that he had lost his purse. That he had brought it from home was beyond cavil in his mind, for had he not paid his cab-fare and the other expenses from it? It was an awkward beginning of an acquaintance, as he allowed with an embarrassed smile, but if Mr. Armstrong would be his banker for a day—— Mr. Armstrong was happy enough to be willing to be any man’s banker at that

moment, and brother George borrowed a ten-pound note with many expressions of regret and obligation. He forgot this little transaction so completely, that it was not so much as mentioned for a year or two; but brother George gave clear proof later on that he was not the man to leave unworked any social patch which at the first stroke of the hoe would yield so promising a little harvest, and first and last quite a handsome income in a small way accrued to brother George at the expense of brother George's sister's lover.

It is not when a man is happy, and the errors of his life have not yet yielded their inevitable crop of suffering, that conscience bestirs itself. Things went smoothly with Paul Armstrong. His plays prospered and yielded rich returns. A volume of verses gave him something more than the reputation of the average minor poet There was no more popular man at his clubs than he, and, if he had cared for it, he might have been something of a social lion. As it was, he met many notable people on terms of intimacy, and reckoned himself as rich in friendships as any man alive; and, when the six months' probation was over, he and Madge went quietly away together to spend in Paris a honeymoon which had not been consecrated by any rite of the Church, and entered upon a wedded life which was not even sanctioned by the registrar. Madge became informally Mrs. Paul Armstrong, and, under that style and title, was introduced to a dozen of Paul's intimates who were in no doubt as to the facts of the case, and to hundreds of other people who accepted the pretence without a thought of inquiry. The whole family lived together—Madge and her mother, Bill and brother George—and things went smoothly for two or three prosperous and happy years. In mere

prosperity and happiness there is little to record, but the heart of the Exile in the mountains yearned over that vanished time in a bitter and unavailing regret. How sweet it had been! With how tender a gradation the first passion of delight in possession had softened into friendship, and the calm love of happily wedded people, and the delicious intimate camaraderie which springs of the unbroken companionship of board and bed, and the sharing of every little confidence of life!

The past was obliterated; it was wiped out as cleanly as if it had been written on a slate, and a wet sponge had been passed over it. Practically it was forgotten, but the obliterated record sprang to light again with an unlooked-for, dreadful swiftness.

Bill by this time had developed into Miss Hampton, and was a grown-up young lady in real earnest, with lovers by the dozen. She and Paul were chums, and she had no secrets from him. Her face alone was bright enough to have made sunshine in any house; but it happened one day that Paul, returning from rehearsal, found it blank with astonishment and pain. She had evidently been waiting and listening for him; for at the instant at which his latch-key clicked in the lock, she threw the hall-door open, and, as he entered, closed it silently, almost stealthily, behind him. Then, with her hand upon his shoulder, she led him to his study—the plainly furnished little workshop which looked out on the trim suburban garden. This was the room in which he had spent the richest and most prosperous hours of the only tranquil years he had known, and it was here that he was fated to meet the death-blow to his happiness.

'What is the matter?' he asked—'what has happened? Where is Madge?'

‘She is in her own room,’ Phyllis answered, her eyes wide with terror, and her pretty Australian roses all vanished from her cheeks. ‘Mother and she have locked themselves in together, and Madge is crying her heart out Oh, Paul, Paul,’ she cried, clasping her hands, ‘what have you done?’

With that she broke into sudden weeping, and Paul stood amazed, with a chill terror, as yet unrecognised, clutching at his heart.

‘What have I done?’ he echoed—’ what *have* I done, dear?’

‘Done!’ she flashed at him, drawing her hands away from her streaming eyes, and throwing them passionately apart ‘Oh, Paul, we have all loved you so, and honoured you so, and now——’

She cast herself into an arm-chair with a reckless abandonment, and cried bitterly. The chill hand at Paul’s heart grew icy, but even yet he did not recognise his fear.

‘For mercy’s sake, Bill, tell me!’

She flashed to her feet in a second, and looked at him from head to foot with a burning scorn.

‘Never call me by that name again,’ she said, through her clenched white teeth. ‘You ask me what you have done? You have ruined Madge’s life and broken her heart, and mine,’ she cried, striking her clenched hand upon her breast—‘and mine!’

She went raging up and down the room like a lovely fury, her hair disordered, her eyes flashing, and her cheeks new-crimsoned with anger.

‘Tell me—tell me,’ he besought her, ‘what has happened.’

‘This has happened,’ she answered, with a sudden tense quiet: ‘your wife has been here—your wife, an

overdressed, painted French trull, so drunk that she could barely stand.'

'Good God!' said Paul. He laid his hand upon a bookshelf, and stood swaying there as if he were about to fall. 'What brought her here?' he gasped.

'You don't deny it?' said the girl, speaking with the same tense quiet as before.

'No, no,' said Paul, 'I don't deny it What brought her here?'

'She came to assert her rights,' said Phyllis, with a biting indignation. 'She came to warn us that she was setting the law in motion, and that she would drag Madge's name—you hear? Madge's name—through the mud of the Divorce Court; and only this morning I loved you, and respected you, and believed in you.'

'I must see Madge,' said Paul.

'You shall not!' she cried, flashing to the door, and setting her back against it.

But the door was opened from without, and Madge was here. Paul opened his arms to her, and she laid her pale face against his breast.

'I have feared it always,' she said, 'and it has come at last. My poor, poor Paul 'how you must have suffered!'

'Your poor, poor Paul,' said Phyllis, in a voice of bitterest disdain, 'is a very fitting object for your pity. My personal recommendation is that your poor Paul should drown himself.'

'You don't understand, dear,' Madge answered her —' you don't understand. Paul has done me no wrong. We did not take you into our confidence, because you were too young; but there has been no disguise among the rest of us. I knew of this before Paul and I resolved to spend our lives together.

Mother knew it; George knew it; you know it now, dear. Will it part us, Bill?'

The girl's face changed from angry scorn to pure bewilderment, and then again to pity.

'Come here, Madge,' she cried, opening her arms wide, and speaking with a sobbing voice; 'come here.'

She hugged her sister fiercely, and cried over her.

'I can understand,' she said—'I can understand.' She repeated the words again and again. 'It isn't a pretty thing to have to face; but it's your trouble, darling, and we must stick together. As for me,' she added, with a new outbreak of tears, which a laugh made half hysteric, 'I shall stick like wax.'

Annette's threat was no *brutum fulmen*, as the society newspapers soon began to show. Paragraphs appeared here and there indicating that the unprosperous matrimonial affairs of a popular playwright would shortly excite the interest of the public; and one day Paul, driving along the Strand, and finding his cab momentarily arrested by a block in the traffic, was frozen to the marrow by the sight of a newspaper placard which by way of sole contents bore the words, 'Who is the real Mrs. Armstrong? Divorce proceedings instituted against a famous playwright.'

At first his thought was: 'Some enemy has done this;' but he knew the journal and most of the influential members of its staff, and he could not guess that he counted an enemy among them. He had dined with the editor a week before at the same club-table, and had found him not less cordial than he had ever been before.

'I suppose the man is justified,' Paul thought when the power of reflection returned to him. 'The whole

story is on its way to the public ears, and neither he nor any other man can stop it It's his business to be first in the field with it if he can.'

He turned his cab homeward, for he had no heart to face the people he had meant to meet, and on his way, just to gratify the natural instinct of self-torture, he bought a copy of the journal, and read there that Messrs. Berry and Smythe, the well-known firm of solicitors in Lincoln's Inn, had that day filed a petition for divorce against Mr. Paul Armstrong, the well-known dramatist, and that remarkable revelations were expected.

For these past few years home had seemed Paradise. He had never for any fraction of an instant wavered in his love, and use and wont had helped to set a seal of sanctity upon it With the passage of the months and years, with the growth of many intimate acquaintanceships, and not a few closer and dearer ties about him, home had grown to be as sacred to him as if the union on which it was founded had been blessed by all the priests of all the churches. No purer and more tranquil spirit of affectionate loyalty had breathed in any home in England, and now the balm of his soul was vitriol, and that which had been the bread of life to him was steeped in gall and wormwood. The very honest purpose of his life, his constant and sober pursuit of a worthy fame, recoiled upon him here as if it had been in itself a crime. Not to have striven, to have been content with a dull obscurity of fortune, to have wasted his days in idleness and his nights in foolish revel, would have seemed a happier course to him. And as it was the better part of life which chastised him most cruelly, so it was the best and worthiest affection he had ever known which turned upon him with a cup of poison in its hand and bade him drink it to the dregs. Life

and the world are so made that only the most desolate can suffer by themselves. If by any trick of magic he could have borne his chastisement alone, he would have accepted it with something like a scorn of fate.

He had discharged his cab within a hundred yards of home, and had read the stinging paragraph beneath a lamp-post almost at his own doorstep. He entered the house noiselessly, and from Madge's music-room there floated down to him the sound of Chopin's great Funeral March. She played this and some other favourites of her own as few musicians play them, for music had been the one delight of her life, and but for the fleeting theatrical ambition, and for Paul, she might have become famous as an executant He stood in the hall to listen as the alternate wail and triumph filled and thrilled the air, and thinking that she was alone, he strolled silently to his dressing-room, and then in smoking-jacket and slippers went to join her. Except for the glow of the fire the room was in darkness, and a voice which came out of the darkness startled him.

'I had prepared myself to wait for hours,' said the voice; and Ralston emerged from a shadowed corner with an outstretched hand—Ralston, with his big sagacious head, all unexpectedly silver-white, and moustache and beard of snow, but with the same old hand-grip, and the same half-dictatorial, half-affectionate tone. Madge struck a resolving chord, rose, and with a kiss and a whispered 'I know the news,' slipped from the room before he could make an effort to detain her.

'Can we have a light on things?' said Ralston, in that hoarsely musical growl of his. He struck a match as he spoke, and lit the gas, and then marched sturdily to the door and closed it. 'You know me—

you, Paul Armstrong,' he said, turning to face the master of the house. 'I have spent a fighting life, but I have never known a downright murderous fit till now. Have you seen this?'

'Yes,' said Paul,' I've seen it.'

The journal Ralston haled from his pocket and held towards him was a fellow to that he had just thrown away in the street.

'The carrion-hunting hound!' cried Ralston; 'I read this, and I came straight here. I knew there was no hiding it from your wife. I say "your wife," and I hold by the word until faith and friendship are as dead as last year's leaves. She had to see it, Armstrong, and it was better that a friend should bring it to her. Now, mind you, we who know her rally round. We may be only two or three, but we are a fighting colony. I am by way of being a cleric, but I don't always cut my linguistic coat to suit my cloth, and my word at this hour is, Damn the bestial ecclesiastical bigotry which seeks to tie the bodies of men and women together when their souls are sundered! Here is a man reported within this last fortnight as having been arrested the day after his marriage at a registrar's office, and as having been since then condemned to penal servitude for life. Is that fact a relief to the woman who was his victim? Not a bit of it Let her contract a new marriage, and the law will indict her for bigamy. She must live in loneliness, or be classed with harlots. Here is a man I know, an outlying parishioner of mine, whose wife is hopelessly and incurably insane. Is there any release from the marriage-bond for him? Not a chance of it. There are a hundred thousand people of this country, men and women, so saturated and demoralized with drink that only an overwhelming Christian pity could bear to touch 'em with a barge-pole—husbands

intolerable to wives, wives intolerable to husbands, live corpses with corruption distilling at each pore—and this filthy marriage law, which is the last relic of Christianity's worst barbarism, binds quick and wholesome flesh to stinking death, and bids them fester together in the legal pit. I set one honest man's curse upon that shameless and abominable creed, and I would not take my hand away from my seal though I went to the stake for setting it there.'

He broke into a stormy laugh, and clapped Paul boisterously upon the shoulder.

'And now,' he said, with a sudden change of voice and manner, 'that we have got rid of the froth of passion, let me offer you one cup of the sound wine of reason. Fight this business through, Paul Armstrong. Don't give way by half a barleycorn. The story, as it tells against you, will be made known. The truth, as your friends know it, must come out as well. If I had time to read up for the bar, and pass my examinations, I would ask nothing better than to be your counsel. Face the music, Armstrong, and you may help the cause of justice. It is time that this union of quick and dead were done with, and that the ecclesiastic fetish rag which makes its wickedness respectable were burned.'

CHAPTER XXIX

There were the usual legal delays, and public interest in the case would have slumbered had it not

been for the newspapers. But a steady-going England, on whose John Bull qualities of reticence and solidity we have been prone to pride ourselves, does occasionally betray a quicker and more curious spirit than it commonly desires to be credited with, and there is no pole to stir it from its hybernating sleep which reaches so far and punches the fat ribs so soundly as the pole of scandal. The press was in one of its occasional Jedburgh justice moods, and was ready to afford impartial trial when it had hanged its victim, and not before.

Paul Armstrong was adjudged a Lothario of the wickeder sort, a purposed betrayer of hearts and destinies. 'If, as the complainant in this melancholy case avers,' or 'If, as the depositions already filed would appear to indicate,' the defendant was an unlimited rascal; and if that were so, he *was* an unlimited rascal, and there an end. A thousand men file past the bar of official and unofficial justice without much comment They are branded, more or less justly, in accord with their deserts, and having been first ignored, are altogether forgotten. But every here and there, for some scarcely notable peculiarity, a man or woman is fairly hunted down by the moral pack, mangled and branded, as it were, on a noble moral speculation, and left to quiver for the remnant of his lifetime.

In these days Paul Armstrong pondered much and often over the saying of the man who had been his master in the arts of fiction and the drama: 'Men reserve their bitterest repentances for their best actions.' If only he had played the man of the world towards Annette instead of playing the Quixote, how different a position he would have held towards the moral pack! To marry your mistress under no compulsion, but merely in the desire to relieve the

last sufferings of a parting soul, to sacrifice a year or two of pulsing ambitions to this act of charity, had not in itself appeared an act of wickedness. Nor had it seemed wholly intolerable from his own point of view that, after a struggle prolonged beyond the needs of decency, he should have run away from the contaminations which belonged inevitably to a life spent in the society of an incurable dipsomaniac. Nor could he as yet blame himself overmuch if he had at last yielded to the claims of that domesticity which offered him involuntary shelter: the invitations of a home of love and confidence; an atmosphere in which no cloud hovered which could not be puffed away in a cloud of tobacco smoke, or shattered into nothing by the clear breath of a single friendly laugh. It was not quite an honest view of the case—no man surveying his own circumstances is ever entirely honest—but to himself the question was convincing, Who would not have hastened from that hell to find this heaven?

Ralston at least stood undauntedly by him, and inveighed with anger against what he proclaimed to be an unnatural law.

‘Do you know Constantinople?’ he asked one evening as the two sat together.

‘Yes,’ Paul answered; ‘I know it tourist fashion. I stayed a week there once.’

‘You remember the tribes of yellow dogs who make night hideous?’ Ralston questioned. ‘They hunt in packs, and eat any raffle of the streets which may be thrown to ‘em. I’ve seen ‘em wolfing cardboard boxes that have been swept out of the drapers’ shops in the early morning, the poor hungry devils! They’d fall across any intruder from another parish and crunch him hide and bones. But they never attack

one another, and there's no record of one yellow dog who tried to eat another yellow dog who belonged to the same gang. There's a mighty difference between the canine and the human, eh? You're one of our breed, Armstrong—yellow dog of the yellow dog quill-driving tribe—and your comrades haven't the gentlemanly instinct of the Constantinople cur. They get round you and worry you,' he declaimed, rising, and striding about the room, with an occasional double-handed clutch at the lapels of his coat, his one gesture of rage—'they worry you for their twopenny-halfpenny mouthful of lineage, and they'd gnaw their own mothers out of their coffins for the same reward.'

'As bad as that?' asked Paul, with a dreary little laugh.

'As bad as that, sir!' Ralston declared wrathfully, though he too laughed a moment at his own vehemence.

But the fighting Ralston was on fire with his theme, and returned to it often.

'You had a namesake once,' he said, 'who was an Apostle. He talked with a centurion, who told him, "With a great price I obtained this freedom." With a great price! I wonder if it were like the price we pay for what we call the freedom of the press. I fought for that in my own day, fought and suffered, and paid in coin and heart's blood, and I have asked myself since if I am glad or sorry that I won. Are we the better for having bred this vulture crowd?'

The hot heart of the advocate warmed the cold heart of the sufferer from time to time, but neither long nor often. The coals of anger will not burn freely on any honest hearth when the conscience of the owner compels him to turn down the damper

every other minute.

The cause in the Law Courts lingered, and the seasons changed Paul's friendships stopped away—not by ones or twos, but in battalions. Poor little Madge could go nowhere, and ceased to wish to go anywhere, to find herself brushing against offended skirts whose owners drew them away from pollution.

'In all my foolish life,' Paul told Ralston, 'I have known one thoroughly good woman.'

'Lucky bargee!' said Ralston. 'Not one man in a million has your chance.'

'One woman,' Paul went on, 'as pure as a daisy, who could surrender her whole life for the sake of love—a creature who never spoke an unkind word or thought an unkind thought of any living sister, or dead one, for that matter.'

He choked. He could go no further for the time.

'I know her,' said Ralston—'I know her.'

'And women,' said Paul, 'who are not worthy to unlace her shoes cold-shoulder her, and look at her with contempt. I dare cry the history of two or three on the housetops.'

'And if you dared—what good?' Ralston asked.

'There is no God,' cried Paul; 'there is no justice in the world.'

'There is a God,' said Ralston, 'and there is very little justice. Who are we that we should cry out for justice? We are here to learn. And look here, Paul Armstrong: the biggest and hardest lesson set us is to learn long views.'

'Long views?' said Paul, staring at him.

'Long views,' Ralston repeated steadily. 'I know what I'm talking about We are learners, and learners in the lowest class. That's nonsense,' he corrected

himself, ‘and I hate exaggeration, though I am guilty of it a hundred times a day. But we are learners, and, whether our class is high or low makes little difference to the fact that there is much to learn. The man who is the stronger and the better for his trouble is the scholar who goes to the top of the class. Look ahead, man, and ask whether Paul Armstrong is to be a firmer or a flabbier small element in God’s great universe for what is now befalling him. Your own action has chosen you to be a sort of martyr in a big cause. We are on the fringe of the sex-fight, so far; but before our children are grown men and women, the battle will be in full swing. We have got to settle this question of the sanctity of marriage. What a certain kind of animal calls “free love” is of the beast and bestial; but a reasoned and loyal love between man and woman is a beautiful and noble thing, and it is not the less beautiful and noble because it has not been sanctified by the payment of seven-and-sixpence to the Inland Revenue. You have a principle to fight for, and you have Madge to fight for. By the God I worship,’ he cried, in sudden wrath, ‘I would fight for the principle against death itself, and for a woman like Madge I would die at a slow fire.’

‘But, Ralston,’ Paul besought him—‘Ralston, you don’t understand. You find animation there; but it is there my weakness lies. Do you think I care for myself?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Ralston. ‘If you hadn’t cared for yourself you would never have brought a child like Madge into such an evil as this.’

‘That’s true enough,’ said Paul; ‘that’s truth itself.’

He laid his elbows on the table, and leaned his head disconsolately upon his hands. His companion

shook him by the shoulder in the rough amity which men use with one another.

‘Look here, Armstrong: willy-nilly, you’re the champion of a great cause, and you have the sweetest woman in the world to fight for. Don’t flaunt the flag insolently—in the present temper of the public that will never do—but stand by it all the same. So far as you’re concerned, Armstrong, it’s a selfish accident that turns you Squire of Dames; but you’re in the tourney now, and you’ve got to behave respectably.’

‘If you mean by behaving respectably that I’ve got to hold by Madge, and live all this down if I can, and do my best to flutter through life on a broken wing, I am with you.’

‘I mean that, and more than that,’ said Ralston. ‘Turn your next play on this theme; turn your next book on it. Never mind the odium of seeming to fight a selfish battle; you’re past that now. Your story is that the man mires his feet in the ordinary manner, that he makes a fool of himself in the usual fashion; that the saving woman comes to him pure and clean, and does her healthful, beautiful work for him at such a cost as you know of. Whether her life is tragedy modified or tragedy unalloyed rests with the story-teller; but you’re there to champion that innocence.’

‘You recoiled from a little tube of manuscript once,’ said Paul, ‘as if it had held a poisonous explosive. Do you remember? Ralston laughed and nodded. ‘If you’re bolder now, I’ll show you something.’

‘I am bolder now,’ said Ralston; and Paul, leaving him for a moment, raced upstairs, and, having made a brief search in his study, returned with a big sheaf

of type-written matter in his hand.

'There is my case,' he said. 'Old Darco calls it madness to challenge such a truth in such a fashion. Weldon will take the piece and play it. He will produce it anonymously by preference, but as I choose. I choose to have my fling at the world, and to take it without disguise. Tell me when you have read it.'

'I am your man,' cried Ralston, catching at the paper.

'I don't know whether I have done well or ill in doing it,' said Paul. 'I suppose there never was a writer who didn't hawk the secret of his soul about the streets—if he had a secret and a soul.'

'More of this hereafter,' Ralston said, and bore away the manuscript that night.

There had been little need to spur Paul to courage on this matter. The wiser thing might have been to counsel him to moderation. He had set his back to his corner already.

But just hereabouts a small thing happened which had, as small things will, an undue influence upon his mind. There was loose on Fleet Street at this time an extraordinary devil of a man of genius whose appropriate real name was Wild-blood.

He had dropped that too characteristic patronymic, and had renamed himself, with a touch of mocking cynicism which only those who knew him understood, Wilder. What scholarship was possible for six- or seven-and-twenty was his. That he was more or less crazed with much learning and more drink was generally understood of him. Men of small originality and some memory said of Wilder that he could knock a slang song into Greek iambics in five minutes. His most fervent admirers were,

perhaps, poor judges of Greek iambics. Fleet Street may at one time have been familiar with that kind of thing, but is not nowadays. But Wilder's reputation soared on higher voices than those of the journalistic crowd, and he was, beyond dispute, a person of genius—one of those odd distorted bundles of broken nerve who help to establish the theory that fine thinking, a noble vocabulary, deep scholarship, and foolish living are neighbours and hard to separate.

With this very queer fish Paul had established a certain intimacy. The man, as a matter of course, was periodically hard up, and he had come to the stage when it was here five shillings and there half a crown as a charge for the charm of his society with the most casual of acquaintances. He made his breakfast on a salt-spoonful of cayenne and a glass of brandy, and he passed from intellectual godhood to a hiccuping imbecility in a breath. At from four to five in the afternoon he carried his lofty head and a prematurely pimpled countenance into some unwatched obscurity. He habitually emerged from this hiding-place within an hour of midnight, and thence his flight was an owl's.

The social chill which surrounded Paul's household had grown arctic, and Madge, Mrs. Hampton, and Phyllis had all been bundled away to Ostend, in a sunken identity. The house in which the cause of disturbance had so long been unreasonably happy was closed. The servants had been dismissed, and a commissionaire and his wife lived in the basement. Paul had taken lodgings at a Fleet Street hostelry, and thither in the dead of night came Wilder and other night-birds, to the much disturbance of the porter at the grille. It chanced one night that Wilder came with a declaration that he had found his soul's salvation through beer. His stream of life should

flow, so he declared, through Burton-on-Trent. He was done with noxious liquids, and proposed to bathe his spirit clear in the vats of Bass and Allsopp. Wilder was-not outside the sphere of reformation, and Guinness would share with the others the credit of his uprising. He drank a tankard or two of each and either as an evidence of good faith, and he left an hour after midnight, more sober than Paul had ever known him at such a time. He had talked a heap of brilliant sense and nonsense, and had borrowed two half crowns. Paul went to bed almost regretting the loss of even this mad companionship, and tossed, half-dozing, on a shifting sea of troubles. Suddenly, when he had lost all consciousness of time and place, there came a thundering summons at his door, and in answer to his startled call there came in a huge policeman in a greatcoat and a helmet, and behind him a quaking waiter with a candle in a glass funnel. The officer appealed to a piece of paper he carried in his hand.

'Paul Armstrong,' he read, with a brogue as wide as the ocean. 'Is that you?'

'That is my name,' said Paul.

'Then ye're wanted,' said the official.

'Wanted? Where?'

'At Bow Street,' the official answered stolidly.

Paul rolled round to consult his watch. It indicated three o'clock within a minute or so.

'What on earth am I wanted at Bow Street for?' he asked in great bewilderment.

'Party of the name of Wilder,' said the officer, referring once more to his paper. 'Says you're his first cousin, and that you'll bail him out.'

'Wilder? First cousin?' His mind was fogged with

broken sleep. ‘Oh, that fellow! What has he been doing?’

The man in uniform consulted his paper again, and read out:

‘Dhrunk and dishortherly.’

‘And he had the cheek to send you here and to say that I’m his first cousin?’

‘Yes, sorr.’

‘Well,’ said Paul, with a brief laugh, ‘I don’t know that I’ve anything better to do. Wait downstairs whilst I dress, and have a cab ready if you can find one. Give the officer a drink, waiter.’

In a weary fashion he was tickled by this incident; and when he had made a hasty toilette he descended, and was driven to Bow Street, where, after a spell of waiting, he was introduced to his ‘first cousin’ in a corridor.

‘What’s all this, Wilder?’ he asked.

‘It’s this, me man,’ said Wilder. ‘I took a fancy to declaim a favourite little bit of Euripides in Endell Street, and a uniformed ass came along and ran me in. And being penniless as I am——’

‘Penniless!’ said Paul ‘You had five shillings to my certain knowledge.’

‘Oh, I had,’ said Wilder, ‘but I met some poor devil that was harder up than I am—at least, he said so—and I bestowed it on him with my blessing.’

‘We know your name, Mr. Armstrong,’ said the officer who had the man of genius in his charge, ‘and if you’ll be surety that the gentleman will be here at ten o’clock this morning, he can go.’

‘You want my word for that only?’

‘That will be enough, sir.’

‘Very well; he shall be here.’

‘He shall be here,’ said Wilder, ‘and the idiot who brought him here shall have a lesson.’

‘You take my tip, sir,’ said the officer. ‘You was pretty fairly full, and you was very noisy, and you cracked on pretty awful. Talk of eloquence,’ said the officer, interrupting himself to turn to Paul. ‘I’ve heard a thing or two in my time—it comes here, you know, sir, in the way of business—but I’ve never met anybody as could hold a candle to this gentleman.’

Wilder smiled, and pulled up a dirty apology for a collar with an air of self-applause.

‘But what I want to advise is this, sir,’ said the officer genially: ‘Say nothing, and it’s five bob and costs, and there’s an end of it; make a song about it, and it’s forty shillings or a month, and it gets into all the papers. For this is a shop, sir, where the more you say the more you pay. And that’s the truth about justice in a general way throughout the land, and so you’ll find, sir, if you’ll take the trouble to look into it. The more you say the more you pay. That’s the fruit of thirty years’ experience, sir, and you’ll find it pretty sound Say nothing, and a little thing blows over. Make a talk about it, and it lasts, as you might say, for ever. The more you say, the more you pay.’

Paul was not greatly inclined to idle superstition as a general thing, but the thrice-repeated saying stuck to him. The fancy came into his mind that he had been aroused thus oddly in the middle of the night on purpose that he might hear it, and have it dinned into his mind by force of repetition. There was no reason under heaven why he should have attended the insolent call of Mr. Wilder, and he had not even been conscious of a kindly impulse towards the man. There was a sort of providential finger laid upon his

own sense here. Of course, he denied the belief, but it was active with him none the less. It was so active that he resigned all the preparations he had contemplated for his own defence, and absented himself from London.

During his absence the case of Armstrong against Armstrong was heard in the Divorce Court. A Boanerges of a Queen's Counsel was entrusted with Annette's side of it. He made a speech, and that speech was reported in a hundred journals. Had it been true, the unlucky Paul would have been a comrade for the devil, but there was no defence, and it passed as true. Paul read the speech, and came tearing back express to London in a tumult of rage and resentment. He was a day behind the fair, and could do nothing. The world seemed to ring of him, and he had abandoned all means of redress. He was publicly shunned, and shunned for ever.

So fruitful may be the smallest accident of life that this chance episode with the drunken Wilder and the foolish resolve to which it led seemed to have darkened Paul's skies for good and all. He might have beaten Boanerges on every point save one, and have come out of the fight with but one wound in place of a hundred, and that very far from fatal Now he felt stabbed to death, and seemed to bleed at every pore.

The manager who was under contract with him to produce the comedy the first manuscript of which he had placed in Ralston's hands, called to see him, and advised strongly against production—at all events, for the present The suffering fool was furious, and would listen to no reason.

'I put three thousand pounds behind it,' he cried. 'I give you that as a guarantee. The play is a good play,

and the public will listen to it, slander or no slander.'

Playgoers remember the first nightof 'Myra'—the yells, howls, whistles, cat-calls which made the whole three acts a pantomime in dumb show. The moral tiger was awake.

The play ran in spite of all and everything, and ran at the author's cost It came to a sudden end in the middle of a week, when the author's last cheque was returned with an official 'N. S.' marked upon it The lately prosperous dramatist was ruined.

Thus the man and his memories are growing nearer and nearer to each other, and very soon they must meet. There is yet but a year to traverse before the Dreamer and the Dream stand face to lace with actual Fact and Time. It is a year of frustrated hope and barren effort, of surrenders and shames. It is a year of anonymity for one thing, for his name is worse than worthless to him, and he hides it. There is a book yet extant, written in a black gall which is made fluent to the pen by a distillation of wormwood, and this is Paul Armstrong's latest expression of his views of the world, which, if the book were true, one would take as a vast and daily injustice, in which there is no saving grace of any sort whatever. Ralston alone knew in what fiery haste this bitter volume was gathered out of the desert of the writer's soul. It served one purpose, since it provided Madge with at least a staff of silver with which to beat the wolf from the door. The wild beast bayed and threatened, but it never actually crossed the threshold. The discredited man kept himself alive by scraps of anonymous journalism, until a half-chance suggestion of fortune bore him away to the United States as a member of a theatrical company of no great merit, which clung together through desperately failing fortunes for a month or

two, and then, dissolving, left him stranded.

He floated, a pseudonymous unit, acting, writing, lecturing. Somehow or other the weekly two or three pounds reached Madge, and the wolf still howled outside her door and found no entrance.

When the spiritual anatomy of a man is displaced and the gall-bladder takes on the function of the heart, it is far from being well with him at the moment, and in these days it was very far from being well with Paul Armstrong. Yet the jaundiced fit served its turn, and even whilst its anguish burned and nauseated, he began to ask one wholesome question: 'For whose shortcoming, for whose wrong-doing, for whose virtues turned vicious, and whose vices tuned to airs of virtue, do I thus suffer?' The answer was at first confused and loud. Annette's name was noisy in it Claudia's sounded there. So did Gertrude's. And of course the poor writhing worm must needs arraign Fate, Destiny, the Maker of the Earth, whatever It or He might be. But these voices stilled, because, when all was said and done, the man was not wholly a fool, and out of his heart came the wounding answer to his question: 'You, Paul Armstrong—you and none other! Neither this false friend, nor that fraudulent lover, nor any Destiny whatsoever, but just Paul Armstrong, to whom this bundle of sensibilities was entrusted for safe-carriage, and who in bearing his parcel here and there has spilled its contents with great recklessness, and with devilish consequence to himself.' And this voice grew into the tolling of a great Despair, for there was nothing to be done with this Paul Armstrong in the way of reparation or amendment, and there was no way of being rid of him save by suicide, and a doubt of the efficacy of that cure was heavy on him. To endure the unendurable, this was

his burthen; to be yoked through time with this dolt and fool. Wretchedest of miserable fates, to loathe one's own soul, to find the most despicable of creatures enclosed within one's own skin. To play Siamese twin to a pustulous convict were a trifle beside this. To be your own black beast; to loathe your own soul; with a full heart to despise your own understanding—this is to start upon Despair's Last Journey in one sense or another, to find either the gulf or the gates of hope. For the alternative is eternal, and it will yet be known to all men—if not here, then elsewhere—that the way to the heights of spiritual wealth lies through the valley of spiritual bankruptcy, and that a man's follies are as contributory to his soul's salvation as his loftiest aspirations and his most ardent struggles. Ralston spoke wisely when he said, 'We lose to learn value.' We shall carry our cargo more carefully next time for having once shipwrecked it. The gates of hope are a better goal to aim for than the gulf, because the mariner saves time and suffering by passing through them, but the lesson is that no shipwreck is final.

Was it, in truth, the father's voice, the authentic voice of William Armstrong, Paul's physical begetter, which preached this gospel through the lonely days and waking nights? The Exile could not tell, yet he believed, and the faith grew within him, that God's inexorable justice and infinite mercy are one and the same, that the human spirit which has not sinned knows no virtue, that the flower of the soul's hope strikes its root in the soil of the soul's despair.

This learned, all is learned. The great trust and the great distrust alike are mastered. Courage and Humbleness have kissed each other, and the man steers between, safe in their companionship whatever seas may roar.

The faith grew, but it was not clear, nor destined to be clear, until the divine hour of its true dawning was appointed, and that hour was not long delayed.

Paul Armstrong had tracked memory from its earliest dawn till now. The pictured image of himself he had so long followed in fancy drew closer, until he and it merged into each other, and the shade and he were one.

He had listened all day for the accustomed clangour of the trains, and had heard nothing. The brown-red smoke-fog had grown denser and more dense, and now it stung throat and eyes with its acrid and pungent atoms. The air was thick and hot, and objects only a score of yards away were but just visible. The runnel at the tent-door had barely a voice of its own. Paul guessed rightly that its course lay through a tract of forest fire, and that the greater part of its volume had evaporated in the heat. The river in the gorge plunged and thundered. The night came down, and a blind glare of dull red seemed to show itself above, revealing nothing else. For the first time since the forest fires had begun to smoulder, the dead air took a sense of motion. It stirred with a long, sluggish heave, and brought with it a dreadful heat, and a noise altogether disproportionate to the pace at which it moved—the sound of a mighty tempest. It breathed fitfully, heavily, and as if with labour; but at every breath it blew a fervent heat along, and at every breath there rose the same threatening roar of sound. There was something massive and ponderous in this strange noise. It was as if a sea in unmeasured storm were billowing nearer and nearer. And surely that red glow was brightening. The trunks of giant trees were silhouetted on it.

Then with one slow heave, beginning like a sigh,

but gathering in pace, the wind awoke, and in one minute it blew a hurricane. And with it came a voice —the voice of league on league of smouldering forest leaping into a roar of flame. The air burned with a sudden crimson. The monstrous noise of the torrent was drowned, and went unheard. The wind, with a sudden access of its force, was sucked along the valley by the amazing indraught of the fire, and it raged past him with such violence as to bring him to his knees. The smoke, which had hung without form through so many days, was ripped and twisted and dragged and beaten into a thousand writhing and tormented shapes. They went hurling down the wind as if that unspeakable voice of the parent fire had called them, and there were nothing for it but this mad answer to the appeal.

It seemed impossible that the roaring noise should augment itself, and yet it grew and grew and grew— Niagara twenty-fold, Niagara fifty-fold, Niagara a hundred-fold. The eye discerned more and more as the wind cleared the air, and at last the panorama stood revealed in horrid splendour. On either side the canon the lower hills were all aflame. They tossed aloft pyramids of brightness; they burned dull-red in sheltered hollows; they flared fantastically on open heights; they brightened and darkened with mile-long undulations, and swift shudderings from blind black to blinding white, and then from that supreme of light to black again. These changes were wrought with dazzling swiftness. A flame which writhed over many acres flapped like the loosened end of a sail and vanished in the twinkling of an eye, and before the watcher could have cried out that it was gone, flaunted itself again at the sky, which overhung it like an inverted bowl of red-hot copper.

The fire displayed a myriad inequalities in the

landscape which were unseen in open day. It scaled ridge after ridge, and each in turn stood out against the blackness of the mountain on which an instant before it had seemed to nestle closely. It charged each acclivity with appalling strength, but there were times when the assaulting line wavered,-and retired as if the walls of darkness held a living force which had at times the power to beat it down. Then with a rush the height was carried; hell's victorious banner floated over one more conquered citadel, and the roar of triumph deepened.

At times the fire seemed to carve the darkness like a knife wielded swiftly by some invisible giant hand. At times, catching the face of some lofty wooded cliff, it soared up like a rocket and left a trailing line which faded wholly as if the night had been triumphant there and had won back a portion of its invaded ground.

For hours there did not seem a moment at which the watcher's life was worth purchase at a pin's fee, but the wind flawed madly here and there, and as if by constantly recurring miracle he stood safe. Tarred on by the wind, the fire climbed from sunset to near dawn. It climbed until it reached the feet of the eternal snows. Then one insulted mountain loosed an avalanche, and then another and another, until the incredible cones of fire were ridged with black.

Paul Armstrong threw himself upon the ground and slept when the fires were miles and miles away. He awoke after many hours with an aching sense of light upon his eyes. The sun was high already, and the skies were clear. The valley and the mountains lay before him bare and black, with many spirals of dove-coloured smoke rising thinly here and there. And the man thought within himself:

‘After great mischief, peace. In a single year the fire-weed will have made this waste a fairy-land. The time will come when there will be left no token of this desolation. Nature endures no lasting loss, and is the soul less vital?’

And he believed the things it was ordained that he should believe, and he bowed his head in prayer with tears of penitence and self-abasement.

‘What is left to me?’ he asked.

His father’s voice spoke inwardly in answer, apart from his will, outside his will, as it had spoken from the first.

‘Duty!’ said the voice. ‘Bid the fire-flowers blossom in the wasted spaces of your own soul.’

His tears gripped him at the throat with art almost intolerable anguish, and with such a passion as no man can experience twice in life he renounced his own despair.

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