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THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

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your power to save us all, but not one alone. I know what my people have resolved to do. There are weak, frightened women amongst them, but not one of them will fall into your hands alive. Whatever happens, I shall share their fate." Though her tone was quiet and free from all bravado, he knew that she was not boasting. He knew, too, that she was desperate.

"You cannot force me to kill you," he said sternly.

"I think it possible," she answered. She was breathing quickly, and her eyes were bright with a reckless, feverish excitement. But the hand that held the revolver pointed at the men behind him was steady—steadier than his own. Nehal Singh motioned back the two natives who had advanced at his order.

"You play a dangerous game," he said, "and, as before, your strength lies in my weakness—in my folly. But this time you cannot win. My word is given—to my people."

"I shall not plead with you," she returned steadily, "and you may be sure I shall not waver. I am not afraid to die. I had hoped to atone for all the wrong that has been done you with my love for you, Nehal. I had hoped that then you would turn away from this madness and become once more our friend. To this end I have not hesitated to trample on my dignity and pride. I have not spared myself. But you will not listen, you are determined to go on, and I"—she caught her breath sharply—"surely you can understand? I love you, and you have made yourself the enemy of my country. Death is the easiest, the kindest solution to it all."

Nehal Singh's brows knitted themselves in the anguish of a man who finds himself thwarted by his own nature. He tried not to believe her, and indeed, in all her words,

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THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

A Study in Social Values

BY

HORACE W. C. NEWTE

AUTHOR OF "CALICO JACK" "SPARROWS"
"THE LONELY LOVER" ETC.

POPULAR EDITION

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THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN



PART I JEANNIE'S YOUTH

CHAPTER I

EARLY DAYS

MANY years ago—thirty-four to be exact—those who daily journeyed to town by the Great Western Railway from a certain insignificant station one day saw the usual dismal preparations being made for the erection of a pair of villas upon a gracious patch of sward hard by the station.

It seemed but a short while before they were ready for occupation with “To Let” scrawled in white upon the windows, at the which those who had idly noticed the various stages of construction made trite but true remarks on the passage of time.

For weeks it seemed the houses would never let ; one early summer day, however, local curiosity was let loose at seeing furniture-vans disgorging their contents into one of the two houses ; this operation was superintended by a fresh-coloured, stoutish, middle-aged man ; he held a bright-eyed, happy, little girl, whose frock was getting too short for her, by the hand.

As the station platforms commanded the back garden of the new arrivals, the later of those who travelled down at the close of the working day could, during the ensuing summer months, observe their evening diversions.

When the train drew up at the station, a glimpse was caught of the fresh-coloured man, a wan woman, a little girl, a dog, and a servant in the kitchen, all enjoying some measure of repose after the burden of the day; directly, however, the passengers were walking the platform, and the train had steamed away, a sudden animation possessed the family gathering. The middle-aged man would excitedly throw a ball into the air before catching it; his wife would leave her chair and intently examine a plant; the servant would energetically handle an iron, while the little girl would play about the garden, the dog (his name was "Spot") barking at her heels.

All too soon, the new people ripened into old inhabitants, and with the passing of years the little girl grew surprisingly taller, while her white-faced, fading mother was rarely seen out of doors.

Then, to the grief of the little household, "Spot," the dog, died of old age; with many lamentations from little Jeannie Pilcher, his mistress, he was buried in a corner of the garden.

This was Jeannie's first sorrow; its poignancy fastened on her memory, effacing considerably recollections of cloudless days. Soon, however, a grief came into her life which made what she had believed an overwhelming trouble to be of no moment.

Her mother passed away; although Jeannie's eight years did not enable her to appreciate duly her loss, she suffered keenly by reason of the deep and abiding distress her father knew.

The home by the great iron way was given up and the little establishment moved into a small villa at Putney which belonged to the bereaved husband, where little Jeannie, with the assistance of a series of more or less

incompetent "working-housekeepers," was brought up by her father.

It was a long stretch from Putney to Hammersmith where the breadwinner took train to his work at Paddington; and till the bridge was "freed," the penny a day he paid for tolls was something of a consideration; but as Pilcher saved house rent, and when his villa was let he rarely got his rent (shady occupiers reading their landlord at a glance), he reckoned he was well in pocket by living such a long distance from his station.

His Christian name was Joseph, but Jeannie had never heard him addressed or spoken of by his friends as other than "Joe"; by tradesmen and menials as "Mr. Joe." To have had her daddie identified with Joseph would have surprised her, while if he had been spoken of as Mr. Pilcher she would have wondered who was meant.

"Joe" earned a hundred and seventy pounds a year as the chief of a department in the Great Western Railway at Paddington: sundry concessions in the way of a season ticket at a much reduced rate, and cheap coals and butter (these last being only granted to married men) were equivalent to an addition of about fifteen pounds to his yearly salary.

Also, the railway clerks ran a dining club where a solid midday meal could be obtained for eightpence.

By the rigid avoidance of the excellent dining-club beer, a self-denial shared by few of the members, he, by eating well and cheaply, calculated he added a further ten pounds to his income which, with what he saved in rent by living in a house of his own, was augmented, so he considered, to something approaching two hundred and twenty pounds a year.

Although Cockney born and bred, Joe had an abiding passion for fresh air. He loved his walk on the towpath (then a very different place to what it is now) twice a day in all weathers, and at all seasons of the year when going to and from the station.

On bad days in summer, and most days in winter, Joe wore gaiters ; one of Jeannie's early recollections is of lengthening days when it was light enough to walk along the towpath and meet her father on his return from work.

They kept a sharp look-out for each other, and when she caught sight of his stuggy, gaitered figure rounding a bend, she would wave her little arm, at which Joe would run in her direction as fast as his wind and increasing years would permit.

Joe's daily intercourse with nature had endowed him with the notion that he was an infallible weather prophet : he was hugely delighted when he was asked for a meteorological forecast, a weakness of which certain impecunious acquaintances were prone to take advantage : Joe found it hard to refuse a request for assistance on top of a desire that he should foretell the weather.

Although, so far back as Jeannie can remember, her father was always devoted to her, she recalls that, after the loss of her mother, Joe's love and tenderness waxed for his little girl.

When he was home, he hated her out of his sight ; if he could help it, he would never suffer her to go out of doors alone.

Should she fall asleep of an evening, she would wake to find his protecting arm about her, while her supper or some little delicacy awaited her : should she call out in the night, Joe, all concern, was by her side in a moment.

His first grey hairs appeared after a rather sharp attack of measles she caught at school.

Joe was indulgent as he was fond.

Jeannie had been brought up by her mother on a rather strict diet of evangelical theological food, any frivolity on Sundays in the nature of toys or playbooks being strictly forbidden.

As time went on, Joe's orthodoxy waned. If it were a very fine Sunday, Jeannie was not compelled to go to

church ; instead, she would accompany Joe on a walk. Of an afternoon, if she somewhat furtively looked through her picture-books, Joe invariably seemed asleep should he be in the room, or if he were not, and came in and discovered her, it appeared his mind was too occupied with other things to notice what she was at.

It is of Saturday afternoons that Jeannie has particularly happy memories. In those far-off days there were actually fish to be caught in the river between Hammersmith and Putney ; on most Saturday afternoons, when fishing was in season, a long line of anglers would be seen in the neighbourhood of the latter place of which Joe, invariably accompanied by Jeannie, who carried the bait can, was a patient unit.

For many weeks he caught scarcely anything, although he studied numerous fishing manuals and journals in order to obtain hints of likely baits ; when no sport was to be had, Jeannie would laughingly tell her father how he had caught all the fish.

Joe, however, would console himself by noting how his fellow-anglers were in no better case than himself ; their ill-luck did not seem to affect adversely their thirst, boys being continually dispatched to the nearest public-house for cans of beer or "shandygaff."

If it be true that every dog has his day, Joe was no exception. One afternoon, to the scarcely veiled envy of the other fishermen, he caught three fine flounders in quick succession, when Jeannie, for all her tender years, was touched by her father's self-conscious pride which he vainly tried to suppress.

He sent Jeannie to the nearest hedge for twigs ; when these were obtained, with hands trembling with excitement, he fastened the fish together by passing the wood through their gills, before feverishly resuming fishing.

For the rest of the day luck, having once visited him, was coy, but soon after six, Joe and Jeannie, the former proudly displaying his captures, might have been seen making a

triumphant progress along the long line of anglers, ostensibly to discover what luck they had had.

It was on this occasion that Jeannie, perhaps for the first time in her life, saw her father really angry.

A narrow backwater ran parallel to the river, and just here it separated "Barn Elms," now Ranelagh, from the ground that ascended sharply to the towpath. Presently the backwater broadened and deepened before turning sharply to the right, and running swiftly (when the tide was going out) under a beam-supported, wooden bridge into the Thames.

This evening, certain men had dammed this backwater ; as the tide went down, they managed to entrap a surprising quantity of fish, which sight excited Joe's ire. He trembled with anger, while his voice shook with indignation.

"Most unsportsmanlike. Really most unsportsmanlike," he kept on repeating, not only while they walked home, but for the best part of the evening.

His wrath was not allayed until the three flounders were served up piping hot for supper.

As Jeannie grew older, Joe tried to incline her mind in the direction of hobbies that had an educative bias.

To this end, John's *Flowers of the Field* was purchased and closely studied by "Joe" who, it must be confessed, had not the remotest approach to a scientific mind ; indeed, when it came to a question of discovering the specimens they found in their rambles, Jeannie was far sharper in the counting of the varying number of stamens and pistils by which their finds were identified.

When Jeannie thinks of these days, there comes to her mind a picture of Joe's honest face beaming with happiness, and with drops of perspiration on his forehead from carrying the tea-things, as he tramped at her side either on Barnes or Wimbledon Commons, or by the river, all places which differ vastly from their blighted picturesqueness of to-day.

Although wild flowers were scarce on Wimbledon

Common, there was the great windmill, the fascinating rifle butts and iron running deer, and sometimes red-coated soldiers.

After all said and done, it was the towpath by the Thames, particularly at high tide, which Jeannie loved most.

Here, on the riverside, the thick growth of willow bushes made perpetual wind music, and if she tired of watching the passing tugs and steamers, the latter with their bands playing popular melodies, there was always the steep declivity to descend, with Joe's trusty assistance, to the stream-like backwater which ran parallel to the river.

Here, in due season, was a profusion of meadowsweet, wild parsley, ragged-robin, and sometimes even strings of gilded honeysuckle ; in quiet places, the water was mantled with duckweed, while arrowhead shot up above the surface of the stream.

But as every rose has its thorn, so even this delightful walk had one decided drawback which was furnished by the soap works at Hammersmith ; this, particularly when the wind was blowing from the west, insistently and offensively reminded Joe and Jeannie of its existence.

When approaching and passing this place, father and daughter loftily ignored it ; so far as it was possible, they kept their eyes on the squat picturesqueness of the "Crabtree" on the farther side of the river.

Although the soap works interrupted the backwater, this was continued for some distance beyond ; later, when the study of "Pond Life" was added to Botany, this stretch of water, teeming with likely specimens, was frequently haunted by Joe and Jeannie, armed with nets and bait cans.

Here, little boys filled jam bottles with small, voracious fish, caught with a worm and a piece of cotton. They called their quarry "tiddlers," and although "Joe," proud of his new-found lore, repeatedly assured the urchins they were sticklebacks, he could not disabuse their mind of their original impression.

He would argue at length when, more likely than not, he would be interrupted by an expectant angler remarking :

“ Cheese it, guv’nor ; I’ve got a bite.”

But although they disregarded Joe’s admonitions, they were only too glad to avail themselves of his services should they chance to catch an eft, a creature they were shy of handling.

Vivid memories of boat-race days are associated with Jeannie’s recollections of the ever-changing river.

Before and on the great day, Joe developed into a rowing expert ; he would take every opportunity of watching the crews practise, and would have counted it a grievous deprivation if, by any mischance, he had missed the race. When the boats finally passed with the tugs and steamers in attendance, he would particularly cheer Oxford, doubtless because that town was served by the railway for which he worked.

Also, she recalls specimen-hunting excursions to the ponds on Barnes Common ; one in particular when, despite her warnings, Joe persisted in mistaking a “ boatman ” for a water-spider, and got sharply stung for his obstinacy ; a certain pond near the railway where an otherwise rare water-snail was found in considerable quantities, at the which Joe was so elated at their profusion that he carried home as many as father and daughter could carry, which had the result of occasioning open mutiny on the part of the then working-housekeeper.

When Jeannie’s mind inclines to winter recollections, she has memories of long evenings spent before the fire, when Joe read aloud ; failing that, they would both stare reflectively at the red-hot coals and listen to the ticking of the solemn, brass-faced, grandfather clock, which Joe methodically wound up on Sunday mornings immediately after breakfast.

Sometimes old friends of her father’s would look in and stay to supper.

One of these was a Mr. Coop, a rather coarse-looking, kindly man, who was seemingly bursting with vulgar laughter. He had not much to say for himself but, on the least provocation, or none at all, he would suddenly and explosively let off hilarious steam. He was by way of being well-to-do, being in business for himself as a manufacturer of invalid furniture ; he had a great affection for Jeannie, who could not help liking him ; he always brought her sweets.

On these occasions, they would play round games of cardstill Jeannie went to bed, after which the two friends, if no one else had looked in, would play cribbage.

Now and again, Joe would venture on one of his favourite anecdotes, which Jeannie very soon had by heart ; indeed, when her father, as not infrequently happened, lost his way and seemed in danger of forgetting the point, his daughter would give him a cue that would enable the story-teller to reach safely the journey's end.

But if Joe were not much of a hand at anecdotes, there was one thing he could do to perfection, this—keep an assembly of children in constant laughter.

He loved Jeannie to invite her school friends to the house when, with inimitable drollery, and a seemingly unlimited fund of comic resource, he would go down on all fours and imitate various animals to the life.

One more recollection, and the tale of Jeannie's memories is complete, so far as the purposes of this story are concerned.

It was spring-time, and she was immensely interested in the doings of a thrush family which nested in a willow by her favourite backwater.

She had often gone to watch the hen thrush sitting on her blue eggs, and had clapped her hands with delight when five nestlings persistently opened their flaming yellow bills for food.

It amused her immensely to see how the father and mother took turn and turn about in fetching worms, and

when the hen was away her mate would solemnly mount guard on the edge of the nest.

There came a Sunday morning, however, when the youngsters had learned to fly ; despite the cries of alarm raised by their anxious parents, they were intent on leaving the nest, at which Jeannie, who had brought her father to see how her friends were getting on, was greatly diverted by the older birds' distress.

" Isn't it funny, Joe ? " asked Jeannie of her father, whom she frequently called by his Christian name.

" D'ye think so ? "

" Don't you ? "

" I can't say I do. You see, dear, you're not old enough to understand, but, after all the trouble and care those birds have taken with their young, it seems a bit ungrateful for the little ones to be off without so much as a thought for those to whom they owe so much."

Jeannie stared at her father in wide-eyed surprise, first at differing from her on the matter, and secondly at the unusual length of his remarks, he being ordinarily a man of few words.

" But there ! It's the way of the world," he sighed.

" Joe ! "

" One of these days when you grow up, there'll be a man who wants to marry you, and then you won't have a thought for your poor old father."

Jeannie protested strongly that, whatever others might do, she would never, never be guilty of such hard-heartedness.

" I couldn't blame you, my dear, if you did," continued Joe. " It's the way of the world."

Jeannie was ever so positive that her heart would always cling to her loved father, but, for all her repeated assertions of lifelong attachment, Joe only shook his head and smiled sadly.

CHAPTER II

DISCOVERIES

ONE fine spring afternoon, Jeannie, now nearer seventeen than sixteen, walked from school under romantic circumstances with her dearest friend, Gertrude Stubbs.

They had twice reached Jeannie's home but, in the manner of schoolgirls, they had for the same number of times returned to where Gertrude lived, and now, followed at a discreet distance by a tall, good-looking young fellow, they were rather self-consciously proceeding in the direction of "Laurel" Villa, the name of Joe's house.

Until Jeannie was sixteen, she had attended a school of no account in rapidly growing Putney, but when she reached that age Joe, perhaps foolishly, but with the best intentions in the world, sent his tall daughter to Clarence College, "An Establishment for the Education of the Daughters of Gentlemen," as it was grandiloquently termed by its proprietor, situated in the Upper Richmond Road. Here, Jeannie's looks (she was undeniably a winsome girl) and her frank, unaffected manner made her many friends, of whom more anon: one of these had great influence in determining the course of her days.

"Is he still following?" asked romantically pretty Gertrude (her dark eyelashes were long and curled), with suppressed excitement, as the two girls passed the ripe picturesqueness of Fairfax House, which then decorated the High Street.

Jeannie half looked round and replied:

"Rather."

"I wonder if he means to speak to me to-day."

"Shall I go, dear?" suggested Jeannie.

"No, no: please, please don't," pleaded Gertrude as her grasp tightened on her friend's arm. "I don't know what I should do if you did."

"But if you love each other, you simply must get acquainted sooner or later," declared Jeannie, with the romantic wisdom of sixteen years.

"I know, dear; but—but——"

"How long is it since he's been following you about?"

"Three weeks, dearest. Mind, I only told you a very great secret—you're the only girl I trust." As a matter of fact, Jeannie was the fifth dear friend who had been honoured with a similar confidence from Miss Stubbs.

"And you say he walks up and down outside your house?"

"For hours, dear. And he's so good-looking. And yesterday, when I got home, a box of roses had come for me by post."

"How lovely. I suppose he sent them?"

"Of course."

"Do you love him?" asked Jeannie, after a moment's thought.

"Who could help it, dear? I can't do my lessons for thinking of him; and as for tea, I simply can't touch bread and butter unless there's plenty of jam."

Jeannie envied her friend from the bottom of her heart.

One of the two considerable discoveries she had made in the last two years had been the profound attraction which certain of the opposite sex exercised for her. At first, she had been frightened by this awakening, but use had made her accustomed to its manifestations; now that her friend was confessedly dominated by that mysterious, and wholly unknown, so far as she was concerned, obsession called love, her mind was focused on the subject to the temporary exclusion of the many things, mostly trivial, which ordinarily interested her.

The fact of her friend being in love called attention to

her own loveless state, and with her impulsive disposition she knew something akin to dismay at believing that no tall, good-looking young male would ever look on her as Gertrude was regarded by her unknown adorer.

Her extremity was short-lived.

In passing a plate-glass window of a recently opened draper's shop, she caught sight of her reflection.

When she saw her tall, trim figure, which was already gracefully developed, the cloud of curling fair hair which descended her back like a golden cascade, her neat ankles, and little feet, her spirits rose.

For the moment, she could hardly believe that such a personable young woman was indeed Jeannie Pilcher, and if in the face of such evidence she were still disposed to doubt her comeliness, she had only to recall, no difficult matter, the ill-concealed admiration which was always more or less expressed in the faces of the majority of the men she encountered when out and about.

As if this were not enough to cheer her drooping spirits, she remembered how that very morning Joe had told her she was the prettiest girl in Putney; this reminded her that her father would soon be home, and that he eagerly looked forward to his Jeannie giving him his tea.

She took a precipitate leave of Gertrude; for all that person's scarcely convincing trepidations at being left by herself, and with the interesting stranger but a few yards away, she scampered in the direction of home, when a glimpse of a clock in a shop told her she would just have time to see everything was all right before Joe's key would be heard in the latch.

She was within a hundred yards of her gate when she encountered two maiden ladies of her acquaintance; they were nearer forty than thirty, and both were dressed exactly alike: they made as if they would speak to Jeannie, who stopped and said:

"How are you? Can't stop a moment."

"We want you to come to tea on Saturday," said the

elder of the two sisters. "We've some quite *nice* people coming."

The "nice" was so emphasised that Jeannie looked at the speaker with inquiring eyes.

"People it would be well for you to know, dear," went on Miss Hitch. "One of them is connected on one side with the clergy, and on the other with a retired gentleman, who has just missed being made a knight."

"So you see how really *nice* they are," put in the other sister.

"I'll see what J—father's doing," hedged Jeannie, who, to tell the truth, was rather bored by the spinsters' company. "And thanks awfully. I must go now."

They would have delayed her with further descriptions of the other nice people who were expected, but Jeannie was too quick for them, and was some distance away before they realised she had gone.

If Jeannie had had more leisure just then, this partiality of the sisters for basking in the company of their betters (the Miss Hitches' father had been a small printer) would have awakened a train of thought which would have been connected with the other discovery she had made at the "Establishment for the Education of the Daughters of Gentlemen," in the Upper Richmond Road; but there was Joe's toast to be made, and in a way of which she had the secret; also, her hat had to be taken off, and the effect of a new ribbon to be tried in her hair for her father's approval—things which demanded her whole attention.

Joe welcomed her with his customary kiss, which was invariably followed, as now, by a long look of mingled admiration and affection. He was tired and hungry from his work and his walk, but before sitting down to tea, toast, and home-made cake, prepared by Jeannie's pretty fingers, he insisted on inquiring after her well-being since the morning.

They had hardly sat down to the simple meal when a propitiatory knock was heard at the front door.

"Who can that be?" Joe's face seemed to ask: he could not speak, his mouth being full of buttered toast.

"Old Rabbitt. Who else ever knocks like that?" replied Jeannie.

"Come about the clock!" exclaimed Joe, when his mouth was free of food.

"And, as usual, at tea-time," rejoined Jeannie.

By this time, Rose, the general servant, had answered the door (working-housekeepers had long since been discarded as extravagant and incompetent), but, seeing who the caller was, she did not trouble to announce him, but left him to shift for himself.

Very soon, the door was gently opened, and a fragile old man, who suffered from sore eyes, stood in the doorway with the tips of his fingers pressed together before his meagre body, which was inclined slightly forward.

"My duty to you, miss: my duty to you, sir," he began, with old-fashioned courtesy. "I thought as I was passing I would take the liberty of calling" (here he nervously coughed) "to see how the clock was progressing."

"Good evening," said Jeannie and Joe together, but with a greater and lesser inflection of welcome respectively in their voices: Jeannie hated to see her father's boundless good-nature taken advantage of.

"I venture to take an interest in any clock which I may happen to have repaired," declared Mr. Rabbitt. "And if you would give permission for the young person in the kitchen to give me a candle, I will see if anything is amiss with the works."

"Have some tea," said Joe genially.

"I—I think not, sir; thank you kindly all the same," faltered Mr. Rabbitt, as his eyes sought Jeannie.

For her part, she tried to harden her heart, but when she caught sight of the clockmender's almost transparent fingers, she relented, and said:

"You must have some tea."

"Thank you, miss, but——"

"I wish it," she declared, with a charming imperiousness which was irresistible, and particularly to a hungry old man.

Mr. Rabbitt took a seat at the table and wanted very little pressing to make a substantial meal. He only spoke when addressed, and then carefully picked his words, always preferring fine ones to those of everyday use.

Rabbitt's simple life was not devoid of pathos. For the best part of forty years he had worked for a clockmaker at Hammersmith until the death of his master had thrown him on the world. Too old to secure regular employment, he now supported a pathetically delicate-looking wife and a large family on what he could pick up as a jobbing watch and clock mender.

A large proportion of the cake he appeared to consume was surreptitiously conveyed to his pocket for the benefit of those at home.

When tea was over, Joe lit his pipe, while Mr. Rabbitt, having been provided with a lighted candle, mounted a chair by the tall grandfather, and after removing the top, assiduously proceeded to drop grease over the works.

That evening, Jeannie was unsettled; she should have practised the piano and her violin, on both of which instruments she had, to her father's ill-concealed pride, attained some proficiency, but, being unable to concentrate her mind on music, she roamed from room to room when, for all her instability, the reflection she occasionally caught of herself in a looking-glass was that of a light-hearted and perfectly happy young woman.

Presently, she was joined by Joe, who said:

"Isn't it your violin-lesson to-morrow, dear?"

"Mr. Styles has put me off till Thursday."

"Then you're free. Good!"

"Why, Joe?"

"I've asked three friends from the office down for the evening, and I naturally want them to see you."

"Joe!" laughed Jeannie protestingly, while she fell

to wondering what the three men would prove to be like.

"It's Mr. Ferrars and Mr. Bristow and Mr. Mew. I'm their 'Chief,' and although no entertaining of each other at each other's houses ever goes on, I thought I'd ask 'em down."

"Very well, Joe."

"I—I have to be a little firm with them sometimes. I don't want them to think I come the 'Chief' too much over them."

"Quite so, Joe," remarked Jeannie, who, for the life of her, could not imagine her father domineering over any one.

"What time will they be here?"

"The usual. And I thought we'd have a bit of something to eat about nine."

"Then it's a 'cruet' night!"

"That's so, Jeannie."

A "cruet" night was an occasion such as a birthday festival, or the entertaining of friends, when a magnificent, old, Sheffield-plated cruets, which had belonged to Jeannie's mother, was produced from the cupboard where it was carefully put away, to decorate the table with its dignified presence.

"I'll see everything's all right," declared Jeannie, who was not a little proud of her competence in such matters.

"Can't Rose? I want them to see as much of you as possible."

She looked at him in some surprise.

"It isn't every day they see a girl like my Jeannie," he continued.

"You mean that Joe?" she asked, after a few moments' silence.

"Why shouldn't I mean it?" he asked, in blank astonishment. Then, as she did not speak, he went on: "I'm very, very fond of my little sweetheart. And it's really the reason I asked them down. I wanted the men I've worked with for so many years to see what my home is

like—and that means you. Then, perhaps, they'll guess something of what you are to me."

"Is it—is it so very much, Joe?" Jeannie ventured to ask.

He did not appear to hear her, as he was apparently lost in thought: she was about to repeat her question, when he said:

"You're all I have. You've blessed my life. May God love you and keep you always."

She did not reply, being touched (so far as sixteen years can be moved) by the depths of love which inspired his words, the quite beautiful expression on his homely features.

She did not contemplate this last for long, as he somewhat precipitately left the room, blowing his nose as he went, ostensibly to enjoy what he called a "breather" which he usually took about this time; this consisted of standing just outside the front door and inhaling for some minutes great draughts of air.

It was nearer eight than seven when Mr. Rabbitt, having dripped the best part of the candle into the clock-works, got down from the chair on which he had been standing, put back the top of the venerable grandfather, and after listening attentively to the tick of the pendulum, exclaimed:

"I think it's 'ealthy now, sir."

"Wasn't it before?" asked Jeannie.

"Scarcely what it should be, miss. Ahem! One of the weights—ahem—dragged more than it should. But I've remedied that, miss."

"How much?" asked Joe.

"Well, sir—ahem—I thought perhaps ninepence or one-and-two—threepence. Ahem——" faltered Mr. Rabbitt.

Joc, to Jeannie's annoyance, paid the larger amount, and Mr. Rabbitt, after collecting his tools, again listened attentively to the beat of the clock before deprecatingly taking his departure.

"It's too bad," declared Jeannie. when alone with her father. "It keeps perfect time. He's made pounds and pounds out of that clock."

"Live and let live," rejoined Joe, whose face was beaming with happiness.

"I hate to see you taken advantage of," cried Jeannie passionately. "I know he's a poor old man and deserving of pity, but let him impose on some one else."

Later, when Jeannie mentioned her meeting with the two Miss Hitches, and their pressing invitation to meet nice people, Joe laughingly said :

"All that would have amused old Timothy Hitch if he were still alive. He was a red-hot radical printer and thought Jack as good as his master."

Jeannie was wondering at the sisters' social aspirations when Joe went on :

"They're not the only ones: not by a long chalk. Scores and scores can think of nothing else but their betters. As likely as not you'll soon enough find this out for yourself."

When Jeannie was in bed in her room overlooking the garden, she could not sleep.

At first, thoughts of Gertrude Stubbs' romance persisted in filling her mind; after a time, she was occupied with the fellow discovery to that she had made concerning the interest that certain of the other sex possessed for her, this, the arrant snobbery (she had not yet perceived its ferocity) which permeated and dominated the lives of most of the people with whom she came in contact.

Beyond having the contempt for the working classes peculiar to her position in the lower middle class, Jeannie had scarcely given a thought to the station in life she occupied: it was not until she attended the "Educational Establishment for the Daughters of Gentlemen" that the subject was forced upon her attention. There she had speedily discovered how the sixty odd pupils were divided

into a number of cliques, between each of which an almost unbridgable social gulf yawned.

The conditions of membership of these various coteries depended on the degrees of prosperity to which their respective parents had attained, the girls whose fathers kept horses having nothing to do with those whose domestic circumstances were less pretentious.

Great store was set on the occupations of the various fathers, those who employed labour, however insignificant in quality, such as stock-jobbers, were on a different social plane to those, such as Jeannie's father, who were in the service of others.

There were other tests of demarcation, such as the number of servants kept, the connection, however remote, with a title, but the above mentioned were the most insistent.

Jeannie would have come badly off for friends had it not been for her sunny, unaffected disposition which good-naturedly took the girls at their own estimation, and did not make enemies, as so many of the other pupils did, by loudly vaunting their own claims to social consideration.

In all the friendships she made, Jeannie soon found it expedient to conceal, so far as it was possible, Joe's occupation, the humble circumstances in which she lived.

It was not only the girls who contributed to Jeannie's education with regard to the absurdly microscopical distinctions which separate the strata composing the sum of British middle-class life : pious Miss Frood, the principal of the College, unwittingly had a hand in this enlightenment.

A Christian gentlewoman, if ever there were one, she more or less unconsciously paid tribute in the temple of Rimmon.

Whenever a mother brought a prospective pupil to the College, it was plain Miss Mason, "the daughter of dear Colonel Mason," to whom she was invariably introduced : should the parent catch sight of Jeannie's golden head,

and should she ask who was that rather pretty girl (no woman ever acknowledged Jeannie as very pretty), Miss Frood would reply with a suggestion of disparagement in her voice :

" Oh ! That's Jeannie Pilcher. I must really introduce you to dear Mabel Baverstock, whose father has that fine new house overlooking Barnes Common. And I must also tell you she has a brother at the University of Cambridge."

Unconsciously, Jeannie had been influenced by the atmosphere of Clarence College.

In common with most other healthy young Britons of her class, she was socially ambitious ; her inherent leanings had been stimulated by the talk and ways of her school-mates.

She made a point of cultivating the good opinion of the influential members of the superior sets ; she was careful with whom she made friends in her little home circle, subjecting candidates for this intimacy to a critical examination of their qualifications.

She was looking forward to having a " first and third " Wednesday of her own.

Involuntarily, Joe was impelled within the orbit of her social ambitions. Although she could not hide from herself how remote was her father from the considerations on which she and others set such store, she loved and honoured him for his simple, homespun nature, so far as it is possible for vaulting sixteen to appreciate such qualities.

She perceived how easily he might be taken advantage of by the unscrupulous, and as if to ease any qualms of conscience she may have known at disturbing the placid waters of his days, she told herself how her ambitions, besides assisting to protect him from himself, would, by enhancing her importance, enable her to be a source of even greater pride to her lovable father than she already was.

It was to achieve her ends that she urged him to drop the least presentable of his cronies. Coop was not discarded. Joe was firm on this, and Jeannie did not press the matter, as she had a genuine affection for the manufacturer of invalid furniture.

The possessor of the irrepressible laugh, being now married, did not call so frequently as had been his wont; when he came, he did not bring his wife, who was an imposing-looking, reputedly shrewish woman.

In addition to vetoing some of her father's friends, Jeannie insisted on his taking more care of his appearance, he being exasperatingly careless in this respect to very neat sixteen.

Jeannie bought his socks; high collars, which latter Joe suffered for her sake; and ties; she insisted on arranging the latter with her deft fingers.

To-night, as her thoughts lingered upon her social longings, she reflected how she was going to do her best for herself—and, of course, Joe.

Somehow, when she thought of her father (who, of course, was perfect, she rather suspiciously kept on telling herself), she feared how it might not prove easy to enlist him as an ally in her social campaign, he not having the suspicion of a stomach for such an enterprise.

Although she despaired of obtaining his voluntary assistance, she knew that, if she really made an effort, she could move him as she would.

All unconscious that, considering his honest nature, the course she had so light-heartedly marked out for herself would mean that she and her father must sooner or later take diverging ways, she fell into the sweet, refreshing sleep of healthy, happy sixteen.

CHAPTER III

A "CRUET" NIGHT

"DID he speak to you?" asked Jeannie of Gertrude, when the two friends were alone on the following day.

At first, Gertrude was reluctant to reply, but when Jeannie was about to speak of something else, the other said:

"We'd quite a long talk. I didn't get home till nearly seven."

"What did they say at home?"

"Oh! I had to say I stayed to have tea with Miss Frood."

"Gertrude!" exclaimed Jeannie, surprised at the other's audacity.

"I don't care; I don't care at all!" declared seventeen-year-old Gertrude passionately. "When two people love as we do, one has to do those things."

"Has he told you he loves you?"

Gertrude did not reply for a moment; when she did, she said:

"He's asked me to marry him, dear: and very soon."

A pang of envy involuntarily shot through Jeannie's heart.

"You'll have to tell your people, Gertrude," she said, as soon as she could trust herself to speak.

"I'll do nothing of the kind."

"Dear!"

"Eustace—his name is Eustace Scott—isn't it charming?—doesn't want them to know anything at all about it. It's all to be wonderful and romantic."

"Can he keep a wife?" asked practical Jeannie, whose

gradual initiation into the sordid realities of housekeeping had convinced her of the necessity of the simplest home having an economic foundation.

"He's money of his own. Not much, but enough to make a beginning. He fell in love with me at first sight, and he's not going to tell his people anything, either."

"Why not?"

"Eustace has tried so many things on their advice and they've always turned out wrong. Now he's going to rely entirely on himself."

"But be careful, dear; you know one has——"

But Gertrude would not suffer her friend's admonition; she cut her short by saying:

"Don't be silly. One can't make a mistake when one's in love."

"Don't you envy me?" asked Gertrude of Jeannie, as the latter was leaving her friend after being made to give repeated assurances of secrecy.

Jeannie would not admit how she would almost have given her pretty grey eyes to have been in Gertrude's shoes; the whole way home, she coveted her friend's romantic good fortune from the bottom of her heart.

When Jeannie caught her first glimpse of Joe's friends from the window of her room, to which she ascended on reaching home, a glance told her that, judged from the standpoint of Clarence College perceptions, two of them did not come up to the scratch: the third had a personal distinction which, for all his shabby clothes, was patent to the eye.

When she, presently, came down, they were standing at ease with their shoulders pressed forward by reason of their hands being thrust deeply into their trouser pockets.

Their backs were towards her, but when, at Joe's instigation, they turned to greet her, she was gratified by the astonished admiration their faces expressed.

Without further ado she was introduced by her father, who was obviously delighted at the effect of Jeannie's

charming presence upon his friends, first to Mr. Ferrars, the man of some distinction ; then, to Mr. Bristow and Mr. Mew, who, although physically unlike, had something indefinable in common.

Ferrars, who was tallish, stout and clean shaven, was a gentleman by birth, but no one knew anything of his history until he had been given a position of some importance in the railway by one of the directors. There had been trouble with his accounts, which had led to his being deposed from his high clerical estate, and given a position subordinate to Joe in the latter's office.

He had courteous quiet ways, and treated Jeannie with a deference that gladdened her heart and inclined her in his favour.

Bristow was a shaggy, dark man, the colour of whose hair enhanced the unhealthy pallor of his face, a consequence of his sedentary occupation : when not obsessed with clerical worries, he was by way of being genial ; he was possessed of that force, or weakness, of character which arises from an obstinate disposition.

Mr. Mew, who was irritatingly colourless, derived what little individuality he could boast by slavishly imitating the mannerisms, hobbies and idiosyncrasies of Mr. Bristow, his colleague at the office.

Joe afterwards told Jeannie that Mr. Mew never dreamed of taking snuff till Mr. Bristow set the example ; also, that at the railway dining club, no matter what Mr. Mew's predilections in the way of food, he would order and consume the same dishes and drink as his friend.

It was rumoured that since Mr. Bristow had taken unto himself a " young lady " Mr. Mew was moved to secure a similar complement to his life.

A rather awkward silence followed the introduction, it being evident that Jeannie had, vulgarly speaking, taken their breath away, but Ferrars was the first to recover himself, with the result that they were soon all talking at once, with Jeannie as a centre of attraction.

Even when seated at tea, Jeannie could perceive that the three guests were not yet reconciled to her unexpected charm and comeliness ; disposed to be annoyed at this slight upon her father, she went out of her way, with a thousand adorable prettinesses, to show her loving regard for him, conduct that further astonished the three railway clerks.

While tea was in progress, a gentle knock was heard at the front door, and Jeannie wondered if Mr. Rabbitt had had the temerity to call again about the clock.

"It's little Lillie Styles," said Joe, as he rose from his chair and went to the window. "I know the knock."

"Her father wants a weather forecast," said Jeannie, to add to the others : "Father's a famous weather prophet. All sorts of people send to know what's going to happen. They say he's better than a barometer."

"We always ask for a forecast before our Great Western excursion," declared Ferrars. "He was absolutely right last year when we went to Oxford for the day."

Meantime, Rose had answered the door ; she now entered with a note that was enclosed in a soiled envelope ; this she handed to Joe.

"It's from my daughter's music-master, if you will excuse me," explained Joe, with a suggestion of self-conscious pride in his voice. "Didn't Lillie want to know about the weather ?" he asked of Rose.

"No, sir."

"Sure ?"

"Quite sure."

Joe's face fell, while Jeannie talked volubly of anything and everything.

"I'll send an answer in the morning," Joe informed Rose, who promptly left the room.

Two minutes later, she returned, to say :

"Please, Mr. Styles wants to know what the weather will be to-morrow."

"Eh !" from a delighted Joe.

"She was told to ask, but forgot."

Joe went to the open window and attentively studied the sky: then, he appeared to think for some moments before having a further look at the clouds that were being coaxed across the sky by a westerly wind.

"Fine; fine on the whole," he said presently. "But the wind will get up towards evening and will probably bring some rain. But showers: merely showers."

Rose, whose lips had moved as she repeated to herself her master's words as he spoke, left the room, at which Joe returned to the dining-room mahogany, on which tea was set out.

When the rather solid meal was over, Joe suggested that, as his friends were tired after their walk from Hammersmith, they should sit and smoke in the garden; they responded with alacrity, and were about to leave the room, but when they saw how Jeannie, having one or two preparations connected with supper to make, was not accompanying them, they, to Joe's delight, as one man resumed their seats.

It being spring, the approaching holidays were discussed, at which Ferrars asked of Jeannie, "And where is charming Miss Pilcher going?"

"Very charming Miss Pilcher is being taken by her quite perfect daddy to Cromer," replied Jeannie, at which Joe was so touched by this compliment that he rapidly blinked his eyes.

"Not to a place on the Great Western?" asked a surprised Ferrars.

"Not this time. Joe thinks the east coast more bracing than the west."

"But the 'G.W.' gives us tickets for the west coast," put in practical Mr. Bristow.

"I've gone into that," said Joe. "I know some one in the Great Eastern who wants to go to Plymouth. We're going to do an exchange."

"Clever Joe!" laughed Jeannie.

"Where is Mr. Bristow going?" asked Joe.

"Penzance."

"And you?" he asked of Mr. Mew.

"Penzance," promptly replied Mr. Mew.

"Yes, I'm taking my young lady to Penzance," continued Mr. Bristow reflectively, a piece of information which caused Jeannie to prick up her ears.

"Your young lady?" she queried.

"We've arranged to go to the same boarding-house," Mr. Bristow informed her, quite as if it were the most natural thing in the world. While the respective merits of watering-places, landladies and boarding-houses were discussed, Jeannie wondered to what extent "Clarence College" would be shocked by the fact of Mr. Bristow spending his holiday under the same roof as his betrothed.

When she was, presently, alone, after the guests had reluctantly been shepherded into the garden, she was busy with superintending Rose's laying of the table for supper; then, she gave a final rub to the Sheffield-plated cruet, before reverently placing it on the table.

When a look had been given round the kitchen, and the cold meats were seen to be all ready for taking to the dining-room, she mixed a salad and arranged some flowers for the table: she was then free to join the others in the garden.

She found them comparing the works of their gold watches (Mr. Mew had saved up and bought a gold watch when he had discovered that Mr. Bristow possessed one), but they put them away when they saw Jeannie, and did their utmost to make themselves agreeable to their host's fair daughter.

Soon, Mr. Coop, who had also been asked, arrived, and was introduced to the railway clerks. Apparently there was an increased demand for invalid furniture, for Mr. Coop's appearance was redolent of prosperity. He brought a beautiful box of chocolates for Miss Jeannie,

as he now called her, and a fat case of good cigars which he proceeded to hand round : later, he let fall how he was looking out for a nice plot of ground on which to build " the wife " and himself a house.

An hour was pleasantly passed till supper was due, at which Joe and Jeannie faced each other at opposite ends of the table, while Mr. Coop sought every excuse for exploding with his customary laughter.

Soon, the substantial, homely food, the good beer, removed any constraint the guests may have known ; this was particularly the case with Mr. Bristow, who had not done himself so well for many a long day ; he lay back in his chair and surveyed the others with genial eyes, while he was imitated, at a distance, by Mr. Mew.

For a time, colleagues at the office were discussed, when Joe's criticisms were invariably charitable, while Mr. Bristow's somewhat caustic comments on his fellow-clerks' vagaries were always supported by an identical opinion on the part of Mr. Mew.

Then, the talk drifted to the subject of the pension to which the clerks employed by the railway were entitled on reaching the age of sixty ; by prolonging their term of service till sixty-five was reached, it meant an increased retiring allowance.

Joe was now fifty-seven ; he astonished his fellow-clerks by emphatically declaring how he would have had enough of work by the time he was sixty, and after he had reached that age was eagerly looking forward to passing his remaining days in a country cottage.

It was a matter he had often discussed with Jeannie, who was at one with her father on the matter.

To-night, his three friends vigorously criticised his intention, pointing out how most of the men who had retired at sixty invariably died from sheer weariness at having nothing to occupy their minds.

Jeannie, who had not found Mr. Bristow's and Mr. Mew's conversation particularly interesting, was ignored while

Joe's approaching retirement from work was rather hotly debated.

She felt herself neglected, and resented this indifference to her presence, particularly as two of the men could by no means approximate to Clarence College requirements.

She wished her father had not asked them down : she did not wish to see them again, and felt a little angry with Joe for having invited them to meet her.

To the surprise of the table, she took an early opportunity of saying "good-night" and, despite the protestations of Joe and his friends, of going upstairs to bed.

While undressing, it seemed from the laughter that reached her ears as if the conversation were less constrained than it had been when she was downstairs ; she wondered if Joe were telling any of his funny, if venerable stories, and, for all her chagrin, hoped he would not forget the various points, she being not at hand to prompt him in the not improbable event of his going astray.

When about to brush her profusion of hair, she remembered that her brushes had been washed on that day and were now drying in the bathroom. She fetched them ; in returning, she heard Joe's voice in the room downstairs.

"Have you ever heard this ? Mr. Kenny once had a dinner party, when the butler, in opening the sherry, left some of the cork in the bottle."

She knew the story well, but for all this acquaintance she listened attentively, hoping he would not falter by the way.

Joe continued in his kindly voice, which was now instinct with the enjoyment begotten of holding the attention of his audience.

"Mr. Kenny, in drinking the wine, got the piece of cork in his throat, at which one of the guests remarked, 'That's not the way for Cork.'"

Although the story was not done, Coop could no longer contain himself ; his laughter stabbed the air.

Joe went on :

" 'No, that's not the way for Cork,' declared another of the guests; 'it's the way to Kill Kenny.' "

Although Joe had told the story a score of times before, his laughter was conspicuous in the hilarity greeting its conclusion.

This instance of his simplicity touched Jeannie to the quick. She forgot her previous annoyance, while her heart went out to the unsophisticated man who found joy in simple things.

In a revulsion of love and devotion, she threw herself by her bedside, and prayed long and fervently for Joe's well-being and length of days; prayed for her own life to be so ordered that it would crown her father's remaining years with happiness.

Her appeal was punctuated by Coop's distant, explosive laughter.

CHAPTER IV

A CHANCE MEETING

ON a fine Saturday afternoon in July, Jeannie was busily engaged in preening herself at her dressing-table ; she was going out with Joe ; as she knew the pleasure it gave him to be seen in her company, she was anxious to look her best.

When, as not infrequently happened, she looked at her reflection, she was surprised, as well as gratified, at her increasing comeliness of person : an enchanting colour caressed her cheek, while her eyes were aglow with vivacity ; this was occasionally chastened by a provoking tenderness sweet to behold.

She was putting on a new pair of gloves (a great extravagance) when Joe's cheery voice was heard in the hall.

"Which way are we going, Joe ?" she asked of her father, after she had welcomed him with a kiss.

He did not answer for a few moments, being engaged in proudly appraising the fine appearance she made.

"I thought Richmond Park, dear, if it isn't too far."

"Not a bit. What were you staring at ?"

"My pretty Jeannie. I was wondering if she could really be my little girl."

"Why, Joe ?"

"Never mind," he replied, as he fell to brushing vigorously his hat and clothes.

"Ready ?" she asked, as she took a final look of herself in the glass of the hatstand.

"When I've put on a new tie I bought on the way home."

"Joe !" she protested, in surprise.

"I didn't intend wearing it till to-morrow, but since you're such a swell, it's the least I can do."

"Better let me put it on," said Jeannie, who was well aware that, whatever admirable qualities her father possessed, putting on a tie neatly was not one of them.

The tie being carefully adjusted by Jeannie's slim fingers, she lightly kissed her father on the forehead before setting out, when it almost brought a lump to her throat to perceive the abiding pride with which Joe escorted his daughter.

Not only would he furtively regard her, but would look annoyed should any one pass and not be attracted by the fair presence of his Jeannie.

"I've one or two things to order, Joe. You don't mind being kept waiting?"

"Not a bit. I'm out to enjoy myself."

"But you so love to get into the country."

"It's always beautiful where you are, Jeannie," he replied simply.

His honest tenderness reduced her to temporary silence.

"I've all sorts of messages for you," he said presently.

"Who from?"

"Mr. Ferrars Mr. Bristow, and Mr. Mew."

"Very nice of them. When am I to see them again?" she asked, with no particular enthusiasm.

"I scarcely know, unless we ask them down again."

"It's their turn to ask us back."

Joe shook his head.

"Won't they?" she asked, not at all sorry if no invitation were forthcoming.

"Well, dear, take Ferrars, for instance: he's married, and as he's a large family he's very poor. In the 'G.W.' there's very little of asking each other to their houses—the most they do in the way of hospitality is giving a few bulbs or a very occasional rose tree."

After a few moments' silence, Joe said:

"Speaking of entertaining, isn't it time you asked the

Miss Hitches in for the evening ? They've been very kind to you."

"If you wish it, Joe," replied Jeannie, none too enthusiastically.

"Wouldn't my Jeannie like to have them ?"

"Not particularly. They will keep on talking about 'nice' people. A little of it may be all very well, but one can have too much of a good thing."

He did not immediately reply, being lost in thought of which the burden was, apparently, the spinsters' and other people's social prepossessions, for he presently said :

"From what I've seen of life, it isn't what a man has or what he's born to that counts ; it's what he is in himself, as you yourself will find out sooner or later." For all that this opinion conflicted with the material ideals of Clarence College, the fact of them being enunciated by her father urged her to agree to his remarks, for all their flavour of triteness.

At infrequent intervals, Jeannie left her father to enter various shops where she was assiduously attended to if served by a man, indifferently should a woman be behind the counter, her youth and radiant comeliness being more than any true woman could readily forgive.

Jeannie, who, in common with the rest of her sex, was rarely in the same mind for two minutes together, was so touched by her father's simple delight in her company that, for the time being, social ambitions were forgotten.

She had only thought for him just now, at which she gave expression to something that had been on her mind before when similarly moved by considerations for Joe's welfare. It was after visiting a greengrocer's that Jeannie voiced her thoughts.

"There's something I want to say to you," she began.

"Fire away."

"Perhaps you won't like my saying it," she went on, as she thrust her arm confidentially in his.

"If it's unpleasant, be quick and get it over."

"It's scarcely that, but it's this. Can you afford to send me to 'Clarence College'?"

"If I couldn't, I shouldn't," said Joe bluntly, who was greatly touched by his daughter's solicitude for his pocket.

"But I know my Joe. He's just the man to deny himself for any one he loves."

"Well, dear, it's just this. And since you've asked, you may as well know. When you were growing up, I put by for this."

"Self-denial!"

"Scarcely that. I didn't want anything for myself, so I thought the best thing I could do was to do my best to make a lady of my Jeannie."

"I will leave whenever you wish. And there are so many things I could do at home if I had more time."

"In a house of your own, my dear."

"Joe!"

"If I know the world, it won't be very long before my Jeannie is snapped up."

"Who by, Joe?" asked Jeannie, with a gratified surprise.

"Hello!" said a voice at her elbow.

Jeannie turned, to discover Mabel Bavers⁴tock, a member of the most exclusive set at Clarence College.

"Hello!" replied Jeannie, as she wondered if she should introduce Joe to Mabel. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for my brother. He's ordering something in Huggins's."

"That reminds me, I've to order something too."

At that moment, a clean-shaven, large-featured young man, whose tall figure was clad in a Norfolk suit (such garments had not then fallen into disrepute), came from the shop and was about to join Mabel when his eyes encountered Jeannie's.

In spite of herself, she was fascinated by his gaze and, although wishing to avoid his glance, she was powerless: she helplessly regarded him.

Divining she was about to enter the shop, he made way for her ; with heightening colour, she passed before him when it was with a considerable effort she recalled what she had come to order.

She did not dare look out of the window, but when she reached the street a surprise awaited her : Mabel Baverstock, who was loitering near the door, approached her, to say :

" This is my brother, Edgar." Turning to her brother, she added : " This is Jeannie Pilcher."

Jeannie bowed while the beating of her heart was stimulated by the knowledge that Edgar's eyes were admiringly appraising her ; she was eager and yet loth to join her father, who was waiting a little distance away.

" How is Mabel's little school friend ? " he began.

All her customary assurance seemed to have deserted her, for she dropped her eyes and said :

" If you mean me, I'm quite well."

" Aren't you very lucky ? " he continued, with an easy confidence of manner.

" How ? "

" In not being kept in this afternoon ? "

" Yes, because then I should have missed going for a walk with my father."

The sincerity of her words rather surprised him.

" Your father ! " he repeated, as he looked about him. Very soon, his eye lighted upon Joe's honest face ; he genially nodded, at which the latter approached the little group.

" Good afternoon, sir ! " said Joe to Edgar, and with a glance that included Mabel. " I hope I see you well." At the same time, he put out his hand, which Edgar, who was rather surprised at this effusiveness, took.

They talked commonplace for a few moments during which, so far as it was possible within the limits of courtesy, Edgar's eyes sought Jeannie.

She had no idea how the colour, that unaccountably

persisted in painting her cheeks, added to her native attractiveness.

Then, after a shy farewell, she was again walking with her father, when she was striving to appreciate the alteration in her emotions which had occurred since her encounter with young Baverstock, who she rightly believed must be the brother who was, or had been, at Cambridge.

Before, she had been a carelessly self-possessed young woman ; now, her mind was in a turmoil, while she was a little fearful of determining the cause.

Of one thing she was certain ; this, that she would not presume to judge Edgar by Clarence College standards, he being altogether removed from these.

Her father's voice interrupted her thoughts.

" Nice-looking young fellow ? " he said presently.

" Isn't he ? "

" And unlike most nice-looking chaps, he seemed as if his head were screwed on the right way."

Jeannie was again able to agree.

" Did you notice how he was interested in you ? "

" He wasn't," blushed Jeannie.

" He hardly took his eyes off you," declared Joe, to add defiantly : " And why not ? "

They were each occupied with their several thoughts until they passed a large, newly erected, red-brick house standing in about three acres of grounds ; a semicircle of drive led to the front door, and upon the two gates " *Pyracantha* " was conspicuously painted.

" That's Mr. Baverstock's," said Jeannie, whose heart, for no particular reason, sank at noticing the prosperity it denoted.

" Indeed ! " said Joe, as he paused to regard complacently the house : he was congratulating himself that his careful savings enabled Jeannie to mix on equal terms with the daughters of men who kept up such fine establishments.

" Come on, Joe," admonished Jeannie almost irritably.

"But it's where your friends live."

"I know. Come on, or we shall never get to the park."

Hardly had they passed "*Pyracantha*" when they saw Coop busily engaged with two men who carried rolled-up tape-measures and a large ground plan: just now, they were intently examining the latter.

"He's looking out for a site; he wants to build," explained Joe. "But we won't wait."

"We won't," asserted Jeannie.

"Fancy thinking of building next door to your friends?"

They were about to turn into Clarence Lane when she perceived a little distance away, but going in a contrary direction, Gertrude Stubbs walking arm-in-arm with young Scott. They did not see Jeannie, who, in spite of herself, found herself envying the lovers for many minutes after she had lost sight of them.

The afternoon was destined to provide further adventure.

As father and daughter walked along shady Clarence Lane in the direction of Richmond Park, they saw ahead of them a square-shouldered young man who was wearing a shabby tweed suit and a "deer-stalker" cap; he carried a stick which he occasionally brandished.

They would not have caught him up had he not thrice stopped in order to do up his shoe-lace.

"Ah! Titterton!" said Joe, as they passed the young man. "I had an idea it was you."

"Good afternoon, sir," replied Titterton, as he lifted his deer-stalker. Then his eye fell on Jeannie, when she was conscious of the surprised admiration with which he regarded her.

Judged by his clothes, he was certainly not up to Clarence College standards, Jeannie reflected: otherwise, he had rather an impressive appearance; although an aquiline nose decorated a pale face, this latter defect was largely redeemed by a pair of finely shaped eyes of the colour known as hazel.

"Going to the park?" asked Joe.

"Yes, sir."

"We might all go together," suggested Joe, to add proudly :

"May I introduce my daughter?"

Titterton again raised the deer-stalker as he said :

"I should like to go with you, if Miss Pilcher does not object."

As Jeannie did not, they all walked abreast, at which Joe informed her how Mr. Titterton was a fellow-worker in the service of the Great Western Railway, a fact that Jeannie had already divined.

Although she was pleased at the deference with which Titterton treated her father, she would have liked him better had he shown more independence: if anything, she was grateful for the addition to their company, as since the two men found plenty to talk about, she was at liberty to luxuriate in thoughts that, save for the necessity of paying attention when a remark was addressed her, were free from molestation.

These were wholly concerned with Edgar Baverstock and were largely of an indeterminate nature: even as the ardent summer day seemed gladder and at the same time sadder on account of her having met him, so, also, she herself was both elated and depressed by reason of the same event.

She had never met a man who had so appealed to her before, and she could not deny that he had been greatly attracted by her: she had a considerable suspicion that he had asked his sister to introduce him to her.

In the manner of youth, she wove romantic fancies about Mabel's prepossessing brother, fancies in which he and she alone had any concern: but however persistently she built aerial castles, they were always dismally overshadowed by the walls of "Pyraecantha," Edgar's father's new house.

They passed the iron gate into the park, when the sudden expanse of undulating, gracious sward, intersected by a stream, inspired a longing for loneliness in Jeannie's

heart: such isolation being out of the question, she revelled, so far as it was possible, in her thoughts when, for all their romantic leanings, scraps of the two men's conversation insisted on intruding upon her imaginings.

The two men had got on to politics; it seemed that Titterton was by way of being a socialist and that Joe was vigorously assailing this economic belief.

"All nonsense, sir; all nonsense," Joe kept on repeating to Titterton, who replied with eloquent periods in which such words as "proletariat," "unearned increment," and "exploitation" frequently occurred.

Some minutes later, politics, as if by mutual consent, were suddenly dropped, at which Titterton said to Jeannie:

"I never see you at the 'G.W.' musical society."

"That's hardly surprising," said Jeannie. "I've never been."

"Your father can easily get tickets."

"Jeannie's music isn't neglected," declared Joe. "She has violin and piano lessons."

Titterton professed great interest.

"And if you care to come to tea some Saturday, you shall hear her play."

Titterton was deeply grateful for the opportunity of meeting Jeannie again, and in such privileged circumstances.

The conversation then turned to the subject of holidays when, after Joe explained how he was going to Cromer, Titterton said he had decided on Tenby.

"Why Tenby?" asked Jeannie.

"It's very fashionable," replied Titterton, at which she was hard put to it to repress a smile.

Apart from the intention of going to Tenby, Titterton frequently complained of his inability to do a variety of things owing to being hard up: more than once he spoke of the poor salaries railway clerks earned by their labours.

"See much of your father now?" asked Joe presently.

"No, thank goodness."

Jeannie stared in amazement.

"Titterton's father is scarcely what he might be," explained Joe.

"Spends all his money on himself. It's as much as I can do to make two ends meet," declared Titterton.

Presently, the conversation drifted to the perennial subject of the office, and then by easy stages to the dining club, of which institution Joe expressed hearty approval.

"It's all right as far as it goes," admitted Titterton.

"What's wrong with it?" asked Joe. "Tell me, and I'll get it put right. They've—ahem—they've recently elected me on the committee."

"There's nothing really wrong. But they scarcely give you a thick soup, a smelt, a cutlet, a bit of game, and an ice pudding," he remarked, at which suggestion of prodigality Jeannie pricked up her little ears.

"That they don't," declared Joe.

"Or a few oysters, a saddle of mutton, a savoury, and a dessert."

"You couldn't expect it," said Joe.

Once embarked on the subject of fine feeding, Titterton became eloquent. He talked at length of his preference for what he called "company" dinners, which apparently comprised four courses with appropriate wines.

For a poor man, he had a surprisingly intimate acquaintance with the higher flights of gastronomy; having started something on which he could specialise, he, for Jeannie's behoof, ran away with his subject: he was dismally unaware that she was depressed by his information on this particular matter; partly because her ignorance argued an approximation to social inferiority; otherwise on account of the fact that this lack widened the gulf that separated her from Edgar Baverstock and his like.

Presently, Joe commented with his natural good sense on Titterton's gastronomic talk.

"After all said and done, it's better to spend money

on food than to starve oneself and put what one saves on one's back."

"Speaking of clothes," remarked Titterton, as he glanced at his worn cottony tweeds, "I don't care how shabby I am so long as I know I've good togs at home."

"Supposing you hadn't?" suggested Jeannie.

"That doesn't bear thinking about," replied Titterton.

Soon after, the latter turned back after arranging to come to tea with the Pilchers on the following Saturday.

"What do you think of our friend?" asked Joe of Jeannie when they were alone.

"I was rather amused," replied Jeannie idly.

"Pity he's such a red-hot socialist."

"Is he?"

"Didn't you hear how I bowled him out?"

"You were sure to do that," she laughed.

Joe ignored the flippant remark, and said in all seriousness:

"But he'll grow out of it. When I was a young man, I believed in much the same sort of thing, but a few years' experience of the world will work wonders with him."

"He seems to know a lot about eating."

"Yes, poor fellow."

Jeannie glanced at her father, who said by way of explaining his pitying expression:

"His father, who has a little money of his own, spends everything on eating and drinking; he's a Freemason. Very occasionally he gives his son a good dinner."

"I understand," smiled Jeannie.

"The recollection often stands him in good stead. They say that sometimes, towards the end of the month, when he and his friends are very hard up and can't afford a midday meal, they tie a piece of string tightly about where their dinner should be, and walk round the park, when Titterton describes at length the fine dinner he's eaten."

Father and daughter spent a restful afternoon in the park when, for the first time in her life, the latter was

impatient of Joe's presence, his conversation interfering with the daydreams that persistently assailed her.

She was tired and fretful when she got back, and eager to go to bed, but when undressed, she was unable to go to sleep, thoughts, often inchoate, of Edgar Baverstock disturbing her mind and keeping her awake.

His appearance and charm of manner, together with the arrant and obvious prosperity of "Pyracantha," induced a humility that urged her to abase herself in her own eyes.

She was certain that Edgar had never given her a moment's thought after he had parted from her in the afternoon, and as she presently fell asleep, she convinced herself she would never see him again.

CHAPTER V

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

MRS. BAVERSTOCK Requests the Pleasure of
Mr. and Miss Pilcher's Company
at a Garden Party on Saturday,
29th July.

4.30-8.30.

R.S. ▽ P.

Jeannie read the above, which had just arrived by the three o'clock post, with trembling hands ; its coming put from her mind all thought of Mr. Titterton's visit, he being expected about four.

During the week that had elapsed since she had met Edgar Baverstock, she had often thought of him but, as day succeeded day, he less insistently occupied her mind, indeed, she was becoming reconciled to the unlikelihood of ever meeting him again when the arrival of the invitation told her how mistaken she had been : the probability of shortly seeing him set her heart a-beat, while she wondered if he had had anything to do with its dispatch.

Apart from her keen delight at the prospect of cultivating an acquaintance with the man who had made such an impression upon her, she derived an immense gratification from being asked to a garden party at " Pyracantha " : not only was there distinct promise of her social ambitions being furthered, but the fact of her being bidden told her that others, and those her superiors, considered she was eligible to move in the comparatively exalted circles to which she aspired.

"Anything for me?" asked Joe, who had not long been in.

Jeannie handed him the card, at which her father's face flushed with pleasure.

"I haven't sent you to Clarence College for nothing," he said. "You'll be quite a society lady before you've done."

"Of course, you'll come."

"Not me."

"Why not, Joe?"

"I never cared for that sort of thing."

"But you're asked, Joe."

"I can't help that. Mr. Joe Pilcher will regret he's otherwise engaged."

Although Jeannie was ashamed to confess it to herself, she was dimly aware that in the secret places of her heart she was glad Joe had no intention of going to the garden party: she would not admit he might be found wanting according to Clarence College ideals, but repeatedly told herself how Joe's tastes differed from those of the Baverstocks and their like.

Little else but the approaching party was talked of till a knock at the door announced the arrival of Titterton.

When he presently appeared, Jeannie could hardly believe the evidence of her eyes, so changed was the railway clerk's appearance.

He wore a black tail-coat, carefully creased, twill trousers, patent-leather boots, and a velveteen waistcoat, while an eyeglass affixed to a gold cord was screwed into his eye; his hands held a glossy tall hat, gloves, and a silver-mounted cane, but to Jeannie's sharp eyes the effect of these glories was marred by the fact of his shirt cuffs being horribly grubby. He was apparently conscious of this defect for he continually pushed them up his sleeves in order to conceal them.

He greeted Joe warmly, Jeannie timidly; if she had not been so taken up with the forthcoming garden party she,

with her woman's intuition, would have perceived how Titterton was more than a little enamoured of her, and that his fine raiment was an inevitable symptom of his infatuation.

"Isn't he a duke?" whispered Joe to Jeannie, when the visitor was carrying chairs into the garden so they could all sit out of doors and enjoy the sunshine of the gay summer afternoon.

"Poor duke!" smiled Jeannie, who thought Titterton was on firmer ground when clad in his shabby tweeds.

Somehow, conversation languished; at the best of times Joe was no talker, while Jeannie's thoughts were occupied with the prospect of again meeting Edgar; love had the effect of reducing Titterton to a moody silence.

By way of cheering the downcast railway clerk, Joe told him of the invitation to the garden party; also, of the financial status of the owner of "Pyracantha," but to his surprise the remedy had the effect of furthering the ailment from which Titterton suffered: he could only start on some subject, stop short and stare miserably at Jeannie, who, just now, was mentally going through her wardrobe in order to decide on what she should wear at the Bavestocks'.

If, during the morning, she had been told of the forthcoming party, she would have believed she only wanted an invitation to complete her happiness; now that she was bidden she found that once she was attuned to the pleasure of being asked, there was bitterness in the cup of her joy. This was caused by realising that she had not a sufficiently smart frock for her appearance at "Pyracantha." More than once she thought of asking Joe to buy her one but, with her lively appreciation of the value of money, she forbore to tax further his good-nature.

At five o'clock they went indoors, where a substantial tea was laid on the dining-room mahogany, Joe having hinted to Jeannie that as it was near the end of the month.

in which there were thirty-one days, Mr. Titterton might appreciate a solid meal.

At first, Titterton seemed to have no appetite, but after a few perfunctory mouthfuls he warmed to work, when his capacity for swallowing food surprised Jeannie and even Joe, familiar as was the latter with his junior's late-monthly hunger: two plates of bread and butter, a plate of radishes, three helpings of cold meat, and the greater part of a large home-made cake disappeared with amazing rapidity, when the incongruity between Titterton's fine clothes and his voracity was painfully apparent to his hostess. If she had not been obsessed by frocks and frills, she would have sympathised deeply with Titterton's extremity, but all she noticed was that the satisfying of his craving for food made him indifferent to the necessity of concealing his sorry cuffs.

When he was, at last, satisfied, it looked as if he were about to fall asleep, at which Joe asked him if he would like to hear Jeannie play.

Upon his saying he would be delighted, a move was made to the little drawing-room, where Jeannie performed on the piano before essaying to show what she could do on the violin.

Although ordinarily a fair performer, this evening she did herself scant justice, her mind now running on hats and shoes for the Baverstock party; but for all her faulty fingering, Titterton, under the influence of his passion (and the substantial tea), thought he had never listened to such ravishing music in his life, and as good as said so.

Otherwise, the rest of the evening was much of a failure owing to Titterton's silence, which was frequently punctuated with sighs.

Joe tried to cheer him by asking him to stay to supper but, divining how the invitation was not warmly seconded by Jeannie, Titterton, after many false starts, took his leave.

When Jeannie was bidding her father "good-night," he slipped a couple of sovereigns in her hand.

"What's that for, Joe?"

"The garden party, of course."

"But——"

"I want my Jeannie to go looking her best."

"But I can't take all that."

"You wouldn't hesitate if you knew the pleasure it gave me."

Jeannie reflected a moment during which she knew an acute remorse for having harboured a slight feeling of relief that her father was not going to the garden party. She was eager to atone; consequently, she said:

"I shall only take it on one condition."

"And that?"

"You change your mind and come."

Joe shook his head.

"But you must. I wish it, Joe. Your Jeannie."

"No; no," he declared. "Such places ain't for me. I shall get my pleasure in having a look at you before you go, and hearing all about it when you come back."

"We shall see. I usually get my way if I set my mind on it, and I have on this."

When she kissed her father's beaming face, she hastened upstairs and, sitting on her bed, thought of all the wonders the two sovereigns would buy. Of course, she would have to make the frock herself, but that was a small matter, she being handy with her needle; also, the work would be a labour of love inasmuch as she was eager to look her best before Edgar Baverstock.

Before she fell asleep, it was all planned out. It was to be a frock of soft white silk, while a piece of Honiton lace, which had belonged to her mother, would decorate the bodice; a white ostrich feather, also her mother's, would do, she thought, for the white straw hat she had in mind.

Against the happiness begotten in the breasts of students at Clarence College, who received an invitation to the

garden party, must be set the black despair which filled many hearts at finding their possessors had not been bidden. Many and elaborately feeble were the excuses given by the latter, the chief of these being that a recent death in the family made them ineligible for an invitation.

When it was known how Jeannie was one of the favoured, she was surprised to discover how many she had regarded as dear friends were suddenly converted into scarcely veiled enemies.

As if this were not enough to trouble her, there were fears that the weather would fail on the eventful afternoon (although Joe assured her that the prospects were most favourable); that her frock would not prove a success; that something would happen to prevent her going.

Several times she urged on Joe that she wanted him to accompany her, but, at last, he definitely replied to her persistence by showing her his rather scanty wardrobe, which contained nothing smart enough for a festive appearance at "Pyraantha."

"It isn't as if I were a rich man," explained Joe. "Then it wouldn't matter what I wore. But when we're as we are, some people are apt to think less of one if one isn't turned out quite up to the mark."

"Are some people really as bad as that?" asked Jeannie, in all innocence.

"It's a hard thing to say, but my experience tells me there are people like that," replied Joe, who was angry with himself at having divined something wanting in his fellow-men; he was disposed to ascribe the discovery to something amiss in his own nature.

Jeannie pondered on what her father told her, and added this information to the sum of her experiences of human nature among her acquaintances at Clarence College.

At last, although Jeannie thought the moment would never arrive, the time came when, ready dressed for the party, she, after countless consultations with her looking-glass, was ready to leave her room and show herself to

Joe who, in his shabby gardening things, was awaiting her below.

"I was right about the weather," he informed her, as she came downstairs.

"Will I do?" she asked, ignoring his remark, and shyly conscious she was looking her best.

Joe was so lost in admiration that he did not speak.

"Disappointed?" she exclaimed.

"No."

"Well——"

"I bet anything anybody likes that my Jeannie will be the prettiest girl there."

"Joe!"

"Not only the prettiest, but what is much more important, the best hearted. Now be off. I don't want you to miss a moment."

"I do wish you were coming, Joe."

"I'll come and fetch you. If I don't——"

"Well?" said Jeannie, as her father hesitated.

"Never mind," he replied shortly. "And don't forget I was right about the weather."

"Good-bye, Joe," she said softly.

"Good-bye and God bless you. I shall be with you in thought."

"While you're pulling up nasty weeds!"

"Flowers, Jeannie; the flower garden to-day. They'll speak of you if I'm inclined to forget you, which isn't likely."

As Jeannie walked towards "Pyracantha," she was surprised at the unusual attention she attracted. Memory of her father's loving-kindness, anticipations of meeting Edgar, nervousness at mixing in such exalted social circles, heightened the colour in her cheeks and lips, and gave to her gracious presence a pretty trepidation which was irresistible in its appealing tenderness.

Hardly had her hand tremblingly touched the brass knocker of her host's house, when a man in livery smartly

opened the door and conducted her across a flower-decorated hall to open glass doors at the farther end ; here, she gave her name to another man-servant, when it was announced to Mrs. Baverstock, who, with her husband and Mabel in attendance, was receiving her guests on the nearest lawn.

Although the two men-servants had considerably confused Jeannie, she was aware that her appearance caused a sudden cessation in the hum of conversation which had reached her ears as she was crossing the hall.

This surprise at the picture she made (she never dreamed it was a tribute to her glowing comeliness) further unnerved her ; she was only recalled to herself by the gentle greeting of her hostess, which was given as a band commenced to play.

Mrs. Baverstock was a delicate little woman, who looked so frail that it seemed quite dangerous for her to be out of doors, even on a fine summer's day. Otherwise, the nobility and tenderness of her nature seemed to crown her as with a halo : a deeply religious woman, she was one of the few who practise in their daily lives the principles of their belief.

She gave a thin hand, on which the blue veins protruded, to Jeannie as she said :

"I'm so glad you have come, dear ; but we are so sorry you have not brought your father."

Jeannie, while her hand was still held by Mrs. Baverstock, murmured how Joe had a previous engagement he could not possibly break. She hated herself for telling even a white lie to this sweet woman, and longed to take her in her arms and kiss her kindly face.

But there was no time for thinking of such sentimental indulgence.

Almost immediately, Jeannie, after smiling at Mabel, who, for all her finery, looked sulky, was introduced to the latter's father, when she was again taken aback by the contrast he presented to his wife.

At the first glance, he suggested to Jeannie, who had lately read *The Woman in White*, "Count Fosco": he had a distinct, if somewhat unpleasing, personality. Reuben Baverstock was tall, but scarcely appeared so by reason of his broad, strong shoulders; the increasing girth of the region below the chest.

He had a big untidy head (the black hair had not as yet changed colour) in which a big predatory nose with large nostrils, and a broad obstinate chin were conspicuous: although clean shaven, shaggy eyebrows were disposed to conceal mean, greedy eyes, set too close together to inspire confidence.

Before Jeannie had been talking to him two minutes, she realised that, although his thick lips often parted in a smile, never by any chance did his eyes follow their example.

Baverstock's father had made his pile in boots, retailed at an old-fashioned City boot shop; he had married the daughter of a successful restaurant proprietor, whose chops and steaks had been much esteemed by members of the London Stock Exchange in the forties and fifties.

The owner of "Pyraantha" was the sole result of this match, and with the money he inherited he should, with his keen business instincts, have been by way of being wealthy.

But Baverstock was a man of some ideals, strong fleshly appetites and, to him, a dangerous and unaccountable artistic strain which occasionally manifested itself in perverse ways.

He was passionately fond of the best music, and this was a beneficent leaning, as he had been known to do kind actions when under the influence of a recent symphony or concerto.

Where his temperament adversely affected him was in an unaccountable fury for speculation which occasionally possessed him. When under the influence of this mania, this ordinarily shrewd business head would plunge with

a recklessness that dismayed his friends and astonished his colleagues.

He had a passion, that he indulged in secret, for fair and frail women ; otherwise, he was the soul of courtesy to his gentle wife, and according to his lights was a good father to his three children : he was passionately eager that his two sons should make material successes of their lives.

He was a Stock Exchange jobber of the firm of Baverstock, Turk, & Creadle ; to the two latter Jeannie was soon introduced. Turk was a loutish, taciturn, commonish, self-made man, whose passion in life was to be taken for a sportsman, although he had meagre qualifications for this ambition.

While sport was possible, he spent many days at a Norfolk hotel, where the charge of twelve shillings a day included the rights of rough shooting over many acres, on condition that all rabbits and game shot were the property of the hotel proprietor, an almost unnecessary stipulation, so far as Turk was concerned.

Creadle was an insignificant little man, who essayed to atone for his physical shortcomings by an elaborate get-up, a pseudo dignity of manner and by the putting on of endless, what is vulgarly known as, ' side.' When speaking, he made use of elaborate gestures ; when listening, he kept his eyes on his toes with a contemptuous tolerance which often made those he was with itch to kick him.

He was rich, he and a sister inheriting a fortune from an uncle, which had originally been made in Lancashire from the profits of child-labour (an iniquity contemporaneous with the evangelical revival), and this wealth, together with his stupendous stock of natural vanity, urged him to esteem himself of much importance in the scheme of things.

When Turk was talking to Jeannie, he assumed what he conceived his best sportsman's manner ; Creadle, when

similarly occupied, thought what a lucky girl she was in being flattered by his attentions.

Jeannie, beyond making civil replies, gave little heed to the two men : she was wondering if, after all, Edgar were present, while at the same time she feared that Baverstock, who was watching her from under his shaggy eyebrows, was reading her inmost thoughts.

Then, Mabel approached her, and linking her arm in hers, said :

"Awful rot this."

"Mabel ! " protested Jeannie.

"I think it's awfully slow : don't you ? "

"No. How can it be slow ? "

Mabel shrugged her ample shoulders, she being short and stoutly built.

"Is Gertrude coming ? " asked Jeannie, while her eyes roamed through the gardens in the hope of discovering Edgar.

"She was asked, but refused. I can't make out what's coming over her."

Just then, some man beckoned to Mabel, at which the latter left Jeannie.

She was alone for a few moments, deeply conscious that most of the men were furtively regarding her, when a girl at Clarence College named Bessie Gibbs approached her, to say :

"My pater wants to know you. This is Jeannie Pilcher."

The next moment, she was confronted with quite the most objectionable old man she had ever met. Short, obese, and with thick unpleasant lips, Mr. Gibbs' eyes were greedily appraising her person.

"Shall we walk round the garden, dear Miss Pilcher ? " he asked.

Jeannie, who longed to escape from this objectionable old man, saw nothing for it but to acquiesce, although she hoped that Edgar might be discovered in their progress.

Much to her surprise, Mr. Gibbs deliberately conducted her to a secluded corner of the garden.

"Have you seen Mr. Edgar Baverstock?" asked Jeannie presently.

"Eh! No. I don't think he's here," replied Mr. Gibbs.

Jeannie's heart sank: she did not say any more until she discovered she was quite alone with Mr. Gibbs, who, suddenly, laid a hand upon her arm, at which she knew an instinctive sense of danger.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"I want you to see some lovely lilies, dear Miss Pilcher. It's only round this laurel hedge."

"I think I'd rather go back," she declared. The old man's grip had tightened on her arm, and she perceived how he was furtively looking about him as if to discover who was in sight.

She was debating in her mind if she should free her arm when, to her surprised delight, a breathless Edgar suddenly appeared before her.

"Here you are! I've been looking for you everywhere," he exclaimed, while his face darkened at perceiving who she was with.

Quick as thought, old Mr. Gibbs released his hold of Jeannie; with a lightning change of voice and manner, he lifted his arms as he unctuously cried:

"What a beautiful, heavenly day!"

CHAPTER VI

JEANNIE'S TRIUMPH

JEANNIE was sensible of nothing beyond the fact that Edgar, like the hero of a romantic novel, had appeared opportunely in order to rescue her from an unpleasant situation : gratitude shone in her eyes as she offered her little hand : he did not take it, at which she perceived he was glaring at Gibbs, who was making a dismal effort to stroll away airily and unconcernedly.

"I've a good mind to punch his wicked old head," remarked Edgar. "What did he say?"

"He's a horrid old man," declared Jeannie.

"He's known for it. He shouldn't have been asked, but he does a lot of business with the 'pater.'"

There was silence for a few moments, during which the playing of a waltz by the string band was borne to their ears ; at the same time, the scent of the lilies she had been brought to see intoxicated their nostrils with 'a languorous delight.

He had been about to express conventional regrets on account of Joe's previous engagement, but in the twinkling of an eye these were forgotten : he was possessed by a reckless admiration for the girl at his side.

"How's Miranda?" he asked.

Jeannie had been doing the *Tempest* that term, so she was able to reply :

"Miranda's quite well : how's Caliban?"

"Eh!"

"I shouldn't have said that," she cried impulsively.

"Why not?"

"Not after you got me away from that old man."

He made as if he would speak, but changed his mind ; although there was a silence between them, neither of them noticed it, both being enwrapped in delicious thought : it was as if they had been enthralled by a spell that isolated them from the rest of the world.

They were presently recalled to a practical present by Mabel, who suddenly appeared, to say :

"Here you are, Edgar. Mother wants you. Emmeline Creadle's asking for you."

Edgar made a gesture of impatience as he said :

"Tell her I'm coming."

"I'll say I haven't found you, if you like," suggested Mabel, at which Jeannie quickly said :

"We're coming now."

As if to make good her words, she set off in the direction of the house.

"There's no violent hurry," declared Mabel, disappearing as quickly as she had come, at which her friend waited for Edgar to catch her up.

"We shall see more of each other before the day is out," said Edgar.

"Shall we ?" exclaimed Jeannie, in a noncommittal voice.

"Don't you want to ?"

"I don't really know," confessed Jeannie artlessly : she was bewildered by the emotions that were begotten of Edgar's personality and companionship.

"If you don't want to talk to me again, don't hurry so."

"It's you who are hurrying," retorted Jeannie, who, thinking she had said too much, hastened to add : "Father's flowers are nothing like yours."

"He needn't grudge us ours," retorted Edgar quickly.

"Why not ?" asked Jeannie, in all innocence.

"One he possesses is beyond all price," declared Edgar, and in a manner that admitted no doubt as to his meaning.

Jeannie was minded to protest against the extravagant

nature of the compliment, also, against the fact of its being made, but she forbore, not only because her tongue seemed incapable of speech but because the man's words filled her unsophisticated heart with gladness.

They emerged from their seclusion and faced the batteries of curious eyes when, as if to protect Jeannie from their attack, Edgar conducted her to his mother, at which the latter's sweet eyes rested with an immense tenderness upon her son.

"Miss Creadle has been asking for you. She doesn't want you to miss the duologue."

"I've been looking after Miss Pilcher," said Edgar.

"That's what I imagined."

Then Jeannie was sensible that she was being gently but searchingly scrutinised by Mrs. Baverstock, who was doubtless anxious to discover if the physically attractive girl were worthy of her dearly loved son's attentions.

Apparently the result was satisfactory, for she smiled encouragingly at Jeannie, and presently remarked :

"I am so sorry your father was unable to come."

"I am sorry too. I should like you to meet him."

"There's plenty of time for that."

"Of course," put in Edgar.

A few moments later, Jeannie was introduced to Emmeline Creadle, who would not have been half a bad-looking girl if she had not been possessed of a profile and been conscious of the fact ; also, if she had not been so carelessly turned out. This last was owing to her being an enthusiastic amateur actress, which urged her to ape the untidiness of her professional sisters ; she had thrown on her expensive clothes and had done her luxuriant black hair anyhow ; her face was smothered in powder.

Jeannie's heart sank at the quickly made discovery that rich Miss Creadle was enamoured of Edgar. She had little time to indulge in gloomy thoughts for Miss Creadle went out of her way to be agreeable to her.

"Of course you have acted ?" she began.

Jeannie confessed how she had not.

"Not? How can you live? I should positively die if I did not act."

Jeannie shrugged her pretty shoulders. Miss Creadle continued with raised voice so that those about her could hear what she was saying :

"I'm doing *A Pair of Lunatics* and *The Happy Pair*, this afternoon. I wanted to do *Barbara*, but my pathos is so effective in *Barbara* I thought it a little too sad for a garden party. Of course you know *Barbara*!"

"I'm afraid I don't."

Miss Creadle stared in stagey surprise at Jeannie : presently, she turned the profile to her companion and went on :

"I am anxious to persuade Edgar to act. He says he has not time, but as he's a good memory, I'm sure he'd be a quick study and never 'fluff' his 'lines.' I'm convinced he has the makings of a splendid 'juvenile.'"

"'Juvenile'!" queried Jeannie, who wondered what Miss Creadle was driving at.

"A juvenile is an actor" (she emphasised the last syllable) "who plays young men on the stage. He'd be simply ideal as Philip in *In Honour Bound*."

Next, Miss Creadle ostentatiously produced a pocket diary which, crowded with many rehearsal dates and very occasional performing ones, was submitted to Jeannie for examination.

The latter was profoundly bored by the amateur actress's confidences : if not talking to Edgar or, perhaps, his mother she was eager to be looking about her and for a momentous reason.

Jeannie was eager to discover in what and in how much she differed from the well-to-do folk of Edgar's world : not only was she eager to learn, but to profit, if it were possible, should she discern where she was lacking.

Presently, when Edgar was about to give her some tea,

his intention was frustrated by Emmeline, who insisted on his accompanying her to the improvised theatre where her performances were to take place, but if Jeannie counted on being able to make her social observations just then, the fates had decided otherwise. Before Edgar followed in the wake of the triumphant profile, he introduced Jeannie to his elder brother, Bevill, who at once conducted her to the tent where tea was set out.

Reuben Baverstock's heir was a broad-shouldered heavy young man, whose eyebrows joined over his nose. He was a solicitor by profession, but his ponderous conversation was not concerned with the law but with elementary natural science. He got up his subject not so much with the idea of imparting knowledge, as of proving his superiority to those who suffered his information: needless to say he was an arrant bore.

He welcomed Jeannie's company, and with scarcely any preliminary started on the cause of morning and evening dew, when it must be confessed that Jeannie, while pretending attention, was furtively observing the others gathered in the tea tent.

This was not easy so far as most of the men were concerned, for whenever Jeannie looked at any of these she usually found they were more or less stealthily regarding her.

She had naturally quick apprehensions, and these had lately been stimulated by the social emulations of her companions at Clarence College; it was not very long before, despite Bevill Baverstock's droning (he had now got on to physical geography), she had come to a conclusion, not only with regard to those about her in the tent, but, also, the guests in the gardens, in which she presently walked with her companion.

Jeannie was elated to discover that, with the exception of Mrs. Baverstock, who was a gentlewoman, and, of course, Edgar, those present were an undistinguished lot; were it not for their fine clothes, and the assurance begotten of

middle-class pride of birth (no small asset in their opinion) and prosperous businesses, they would have appeared third rate.

Many of the men had predatory noses and loud ways, while the young women, for all that they were decorated with the bloom of youth, were, in essentials, the counterparts of their scarcely presentable mamas whom, with the passing of the years, they would be increasingly prone to resemble.

Jeannie truly believed that, but for the difference in worldly circumstances, her looks and natural refinement would, with the adventitious aids of money, enable her to outshine easily any of the women present.

As, with considerable unction, she hugged this conviction, she gradually became conscious of a feeling of discomfort, which she presently discovered was caused by the further scrutiny she was undergoing from the owner of "Pyraantha": it was as if he were coldly, dispassionately appraising her and calculating if her undoubted attractiveness were likely to be a factor of any importance in the course he had marked out for his boys.

If Jeannie were disposed to underrate the fascination of her personality, a more likely contingency than the contrary, Baverstock knew better: his own experience, so far as women were concerned, providing sufficient enlightenment as to the lengths some men will go to win the desire of their hearts. And if middle-age were susceptible, how much more was impressionable, untried youth, whose violent emotions were not chastened by experience and material considerations.

Whatever his thoughts, he gallantly approached Jeannie, and dismissing Bevill with a scarcely concealed contempt, he asked if he might inflict himself upon her for a very few minutes.

Upon her timidly acceding to his request, he went out of his way to be so agreeable (he had had a lifelong experience of every variety of female) that, in a very little while,

Jeannie forgot she had ever entertained any semblance of dislike for her companion.

"Do you want to see the acting?" he asked presently.

"Not very much."

"Neither do I. And that means I can have a longer talk with one of the most interesting women I have ever met," he declared.

Jeannie's confusion at being paid such an extravagant compliment enhanced her physical attractiveness, while she wondered at what she had done to obtain Edgar's father's regard.

"I'm sorry not to have met your father," he went on.

"I'm sorry too. He'd a previous engagement."

"Perhaps he doesn't get back till rather late."

"He's always home by two on Saturdays."

"Then he's in regular employment?"

"Y—yes," faltered Jeannie, who, since she had attended Clarence College, found it expedient to be reticent about her father's occupation.

"Good berth?"

"Fairly."

"City?"

"No."

"Lucky man. West End?"

"Not exactly."

Jeannie's last reply was spoken with a touch of asperity which told Baverstock how his fair companion had realised she was being "pumped": he quickly and adroitly changed the subject.

While a *Pair of Lunatics* was being played by the "profile" and an amateur actor who was employed by the day in Somerset House, Baverstock took Jeannie into a room where elaborate refreshments were set out; here, in a sudden excess of prodigality, he insisted on helping her to the best of everything.

Jeannie, on looking about her, was surprised to see the number of people who found champagne cup and *pâté de foie*

gras sandwiches more attractive than amateur acting ; indeed, she noticed one couple tucking in as if for dear life.

She was standing by a mountain of highly decorated "trifle," on which these two had their eyes ; presently, when Baverstock turned to say a few words to a bouncing wench of eighteen, who frequently relapsed into "baby" language, they advanced towards Jeannie before making an onslaught on the dish. While they attacked the "trifle," she was aware that they now and again intently regarded her ; a little later, she was certain she was the object of their loudly expressed remarks.

"Rather like Lady Jane Talboys," said the woman.

"More like her sister, I fancy," suggested the man.

"Lady Mary ! "

"Don't you think so ? "

"Perhaps."

"Anyway, she has the Downminster colouring," declared the man.

"And the carriage of her head."

"And the glorious hair."

Jeannie was made so uncomfortable by these remarks that she was relieved that the couple again assaulted the "trifle," which they did independently of each other.

When they were presently able to talk, the woman said :

"There's a gentleman here who's exactly like Colonel Sir Edward Blackenhorn."

"I saw him going into the 'Naval and Military' yesterday afternoon," replied the other.

"Why didn't you tell me ? "

"I forgot. Sorry."

Just then, Baverstock turned to Jeannie, and in so doing encountered the gaze of the couple who had been discussing her.

"Hullo, Reggie ! Hullo, Lucy ! " said Baverstock.

"Let me introduce you to Miss Pilcher, a college friend of

my daughter's." Turning to Jeannie, he added: "This is my niece, Mrs. Hibling, and her husband."

"So glad to meet you," gushed Mrs. Hibling, as she finished up her plate. "I was just saying to Reginald how much you resembled Lady Jane Talboys."

"Lady Mary," said her husband, as his eye roamed the tables in search of anything that might tickle his palate.

The discussion as to whom Jeannie most resembled in the world of fashion being resumed at some length, she had leisure in which to observe the Hiblings.

Reginald gave the impression of starting from a broad base and gradually sloping upwards; he had big and broad boots, the appearance of sturdy legs and large hips, but his narrow shoulders hopelessly "bottled," while his forehead almost came to a point: otherwise, he was dark with uncertain coloured, envious eyes.

The wife of his bosom was a strong-jawed, capable-eyed woman, who gave the impression of having a fine figure, an advantage that scrutiny dispelled; as if by way of counterbalancing her husband, inspection proved her to be top-heavy.

They had not long been married, and not being well off had taken a flat (in reality half a house) at the Chelsea end of Fulham, which latter had just begun to "develop."

The Hiblings made a great fuss of Jeannie, but she had more than a suspicion that their enthusiasm was largely due to a desire to cover further sorties against the refreshments.

Some minutes later, she was excitedly sought by Edgar, who said:

"What has become of you? I kept a place for you during the acting."

"I was with your father."

Edgar's face expressed surprise.

"Do you object?" she continued.

"Why should I? But let's take a walk round. All the men here are asking to be introduced to you."

"Please don't," she quickly pleaded.

"Why? Would you prefer being with me?"

She did not answer; he pressed for a reply, at which she said:

"Perhaps."

They walked the trim lawn, on a part of which croquet was being perfunctorily played; the well-kept gardens, now crowded with a gaily dressed throng, the male portion of which gazed admiringly, the women disdainfully at the tall, fair girl Edgar was escorting; indeed, if Jeannie had had any doubts of the alluring picture she made, the envious glances those of her own sex cast at her would have reassured her.

There was no mistaking the ardent nature of Edgar's attentions; words, glances, manner were all eloquent of the deep impression she had made upon him.

For her part, she was entranced by the devotion of the one man she had met who had ever stirred her emotions: this, and the unexpected social consideration she had received, filled her with an ecstatic happiness which seemed to possess visibly her being. It was as if she walked in a dream world which was scented with an exquisite fragrance of romance.

During the evening theatricals, and other entertainments, Edgar hardly ever left her side, and then only when compelled. At first, his father's opposition to his conduct expressed itself in asking him to do various things which took him temporarily from her side; but, at last, it was as if the elder Baverstock were willing for once to make a concession to Jeannie's appealing youth and comeliness, for he, presently, offered no objections to their being together.

When the sun went down, the gardens were gay with Japanese lanterns, at which the younger people were pressed to dance; it was then that Jeannie enjoyed an unlooked-for triumph.

All the dancing men crowded about her, eager to secure her for a partner.

This behaviour excited the indignation of the other young women, who, in vain, pointed out to their brothers how Jeannie's frock was probably home-made ; also, that the lace decorating her pretty shoulders was doubtless imitation.

But these young men, their emulation being excited, would not have cared if Jeannie had been turned out in sackcloth ; in the intervals between the dances, they eagerly competed for the honour of her hand.

She danced as often as she dared with Edgar, who, when not with her, stood by the " profile " when it was obvious to Jeannie as she passed him that he had eyes only for her.

At last, tired with happiness, she, still accompanied by Edgar, followed in the wake of the departing guests to thank her hostess for " the delightful time she had had "—words, so far as she was concerned, that were spoken in all sincerity.

" Who is going to see you home ? " asked Edgar.

" I expected father."

" But he hasn't come. I was asking just now."

" He said—I hardly remember—that something was arranged."

" Something is arranged."

Her shining eyes looked inquiringly into his.

" I am going to see you home," he informed her.

Then, as she did not speak, he asked :

" Do you mind ? "

" Not very much."

It was when they were outside the front door that she perceived a familiar tall hat which was just visible above the palings ; she was too excited to try and recall its owner, but when she and Edgar were outside the gate, she perceived it belonged to Titterton, who, dressed in his best as when he had come to tea, was forlornly waiting on the pavement.

Jeannie was minded to speak to him and introduce him

to Edgar, but when Titterton saw she was not alone, he slunk away to the farther side of the road.

A moment later, Titterton, his unhappy appearance was forgotten : she was fascinated by the man who walked at her side.

Although little was said, their silence was eloquent, and it seemed as if they had left "Pyracantha" but a very few seconds when Edgar stood with her outside her father's door.

She was quite unaware that she was dismally regarded from a distance by a wretchedly jealous Titterton.

CHAPTER VII

ONE OF MANY VISITS

ONE October evening, when there was a hint of coming winter in the air, Jeannie, Joe, and Edgar played dummy whist in the cosy dining-room of "Laurel" Villa; they were not the only occupants of the room, for away by the grandfather clock and standing on a chair was old Rabbitt: he held a candle with which he peered into the works the while he plentifully besprinkled them with grease.

This was by no means the first visit Edgar had paid the Pilchers, indeed, so frequent had they lately become that they were now looked for as a matter of course: he rarely came when Joe was absent, but should he call when the former was at work, he was invariably accompanied by his sister.

During what was left of the long evenings, Edgar would assist Joe in the little garden, and if there were a difference of horticultural opinion, Jeannie was invariably at hand to give a casting vote when, more often than not, she decided in the visitor's favour, although it must be confessed his knowledge of gardening could not for one moment compare with her father's.

Whist was the staple occupation of the evenings indoors; sometimes Coop would look in and take a hand, when he and Joe would easily beat Jeannie and Edgar, who were always partners on these occasions.

Of late, they had seen very little of Coop, who, to the elder Baverstock's indignation, had bought the plot of ground adjacent to "Pyracantha," and was now engaged

with a variety of plans preparatory to building himself a house.

Jeannie had now left Clarence College some months ; when not busy with household matters, she assiduously cultivated her violin and piano : it was as if she were determined to make herself worthy of her acquaintance with the Baverstocks and of her friendship with Edgar.

A week after the garden party, she had paid the inevitable formal call when, to her keen disappointment, she had been told that Mrs. Baverstock was not at home.

She had doubted the truth of this information, and dismally put it down to a desire on the part of the family to drop the acquaintance, until a letter had arrived from Mrs. Baverstock regretting how she had been out when Jeannie had called, and giving her the choice of two days on which she would be in.

It was with the exercise of considerable restraint that Jeannie had deferred her visit to the second of the two days, when she had been more than ever moved by the transparent goodness and loving-kindness of Edgar's frail-looking mother.

The two women were alone ; although Jeannie frequently offered to leave, she was pressed by Mrs. Baverstock to prolong her stay, which she was only too glad to do in the hope of seeing Edgar.

After tea, she had been conducted over the big, pretentious house ; when she had inspected the principal rooms, Mrs. Baverstock had said :

" Now, my dear, I like you so much that, if I may, I will show you my treasures."

She then produced a key, at which Jeannie expected that she was about to inspect a collection of valuables.

Her heart had warmed to the gentle woman when the latter had unlocked the door of a room that contained a headless rocking-horse and a number of dilapidated toys, the playthings of her sons' and daughter's childhood.

When Jeannie had been reluctantly about to take her

leave without having seen Edgar, Baverstock had arrived, but he would not let the caller depart without a bunch of flowers from the garden, which he had insisted on cutting himself: Jeannie, at his wish, had accompanied him to the various beds.

While his eyes rarely left Jeannie's person, on which they rested with ill-concealed admiration, he had adroitly turned the conversation to the subject of Edgar, when he had casually mentioned how his son was practically engaged to be married to rich Miss Creadle.

Jeannie had resolved to postpone all consideration of this news until she got home: she had thanked the stock-jobber for his roses, again kissed his wife (who had begged her to call again), and was walking disconsolately away when she heard some one running after her.

It proved to be Edgar, who, for all his reputed devotion to the "profile," had seemed more than delighted to see her, and had told her how he would have been home hours ago in expectation of her visit but for the fact of his having been compelled to look up an old Cambridge friend who was on the point of going abroad.

He had insisted upon accompanying Jeannie home, when he had been asked in by Joe; he had stayed to supper, and had needed no second invitation to call again.

His visits so elated her that, for the time being, social ambitions were forgotten. Neither Edgar nor Jeannie ever mentioned Miss Creadle.

"Seen anything of Gertrude Stubbs?" asked Edgar, after making the worst possible use of a magnificent hand of triumphs.

"Why?" asked Jeannie.

"Mabel was asking about her the other day."

"Sure it was Mabel?"

"Not quite," smiled Edgar.

"Gertrude Stubbs! Gertrude Stubbs!" mused Joe, as he shuffled the pack for the third time running.

"We used to walk home with each other from school," Jeannie reminded him.

"Ah yes! That quite pretty girl with the pretty wavy hair and the long, curled eyelashes."

"Joe always has an eye for the pretty girls," laughed Jeannie.

"Naturally with such a plain daughter," said Edgar solemnly, at which Joe laughed outright.

"Naturally. Has Mabel heard anything of Gertrude?" asked Jeannie.

"Nothing," replied Edgar. "Since she's taken up with that rum-looking chap she's always about with, we've seen nothing of her."

"Fancy wasting one's time on such an uninteresting thing as a man," said Jeannie.

"We're so jolly fascinating you can't leave us alone," retorted Edgar. "Isn't that so?" he asked of Joe.

"That is so, sir. And it's your turn to deal."

Jeannie looked with a charming defiance at Edgar while he served out the cards.

Further play was interrupted by a knock at the front door, at which Joe's and Jeannie's eyes asked of each other who the unexpected caller could be.

After the door was answered, Rose appeared, to say that Mr. Styles would like a few words with Mr. Pilcher.

Upon Joe's leaving the room, Edgar looked intently at Jeannie before glaring at old Rabbitt, who, oblivious of the other's anger, was still dropping grease on the clock works.

"Who's Styles?" asked Edgar.

"My violin-master."

"Lucky Styles," he murmured.

"He doesn't think himself lucky."

"Why?"

"Listen and you'll know."

Joe had not closed the door when he had left the room, consequently, they were able to overhear the conversation

in the passage that was generally dignified with the name of hall.

"Pardon this intrusion," said a soft, caressing voice. "But I ventured to wonder if I could trespass on your generosity for a trifling loan of five shillings."

Edgar made as if he would speak to Jeannie but was promptly told to "Ssh," at which they both saw that Rabbitt was, also, listening from his chair.

The chink of money was heard in the hall, followed by Styles saying :

"I thank you, sir."

"Good-night and welcome," exclaimed Joe.

"One moment ! Which would be the most convenient way for you to receive back the money ? "

"Any way will do."

"I like to be precise in these matters. Shall I send it by post-office order or money order ? "

"Whichever you please."

"Those methods are sometimes unsatisfactory. Perhaps, after all, I had better draw a cheque."

"Please yourself."

Mr. Styles seemed to consider for a moment before saying :

"After all, I think I'll send it by hand. I'll send it, without fail, on Thursday evening next : and my daughter Violet shall bring it."

"As you please."

"On reflecting, I think I'd better send Ethel ; she's more trustworthy. I am very much obliged to you. I hope Miss Pilcher is well."

"Quite, thank you," declared Joe.

"I think after all, sir, I won't send the money by Ethel," said Mr. Styles confidentially. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll wrap it up in paper, drop it in the letter-box, knock, and leave it for you to find."

"Very well ; very well," remarked Joe irritably ; he was longing to get back to his whist.

"What do you think the weather will be to-morrow?" asked the musician.

While a mollified Joe was giving his forecast, Jeannie said to Edgar:

"He's a large family, and is very poor."

"No reason why he should sponge on your father."

"Do you know any one who would help him?"

"See if he has any of his cards."

Jeannie stopped Mr. Styles as he was going out of the front door, and brought him into the dining-room; he was a dapper, dark little man, whose sly eyes were almond shaped.

Jeannie was about to explain how Edgar might help Mr. Styles to get pupils, when Mr. Rabbitt got down from his chair and approached the young mistress of the house, to say:

"My duty to you, miss. Have I your permission to convey the remains of the candle to the kitchen?"

"Certainly. But don't flirt with Rose."

"I don't think that's very likely, miss," declared a shocked Mr. Rabbitt.

"And don't forget your account," put in Joe.

"Thank you, sir; I will take the liberty of mentioning it before I go," said the clock repairer, as he left the room.

"If you have any cards, I'll give them to my friends," Edgar informed the musician, who replied:

"Thank you, sir. I've none on me, but I'll give Miss Pilcher some to give to you."

"Right. But let me give you a tip," suggested Edgar.

"By all means," said Mr. Styles, in his caressing, silky voice.

"We British ain't a musical nation, and it's no use thinking we are. The only way to get hold of the public is to make 'em believe you're foreign."

Mr. Styles fixed his sly eyes questioningly on Edgar, who continued:

"I know what I should do if I were you and wanted

pupils. I'd let my hair grow over my shoulders, call myself Signor Stiletto say, and give myself out to be an Italian."

"What next!" cried Jeannie, while in her heart she was thinking how clever Edgar was.

"And as one may as well do the thing thoroughly, I should, if you take on the idea, talk in broken English."

Jeannie looked at Mr. Styles in order to discover how he had taken this extravagant advice; to her considerable surprise, she saw that, with his eyes on his boots, he was intently listening to everything Edgar was saying.

Then, after thanking Edgar for his advice, he was moving towards the door when his eye fell on the clock-maker's tools.

"You employ Mr. Rabbitt?" he asked of Joe, and with a deprecatory inflection of voice.

"Have for years," replied the person addressed.

"Indeed! Indeed!" exclaimed the musician, with his eyes on the ground.

"Why shouldn't I?" asked Joe bluntly.

"Oh!—well—perhaps—but still it isn't for me to say anything against his skill. I wish you all good evening."

"Little sneak!" thought Jeannie, as the front door slammed on departing Mr. Styles.

"I wonder if he'll take my advice," mused Edgar.

"Shouldn't be surprised," replied Joe. "He listened with all his ears."

Five minutes later, Joe was asking of Rabbitt:

"How much?"

"Well, sir, I thought one-and-sixpence or two shillings."

When he had pocketed Joe's two shillings, he ventured to inquire.

"Was that a Mr. Styles?"

"The musician," replied Joe.

"Indeed, sir. I understood he was merely a piano-tooner."

"Haven't you heard of him as a teacher of music?" asked Jeannie.

"Perhaps I have, miss, but I can't say as I've heard him spoken of very 'ighly."

"I'm glad I was here when they came," said Edgar, when meagre Mr. Rabbitt had, as it were, faded from the room.

"Why, sir?" asked Joe.

"I shall always know where to come if ever I get stoney, which, so far as I can see, is very likely."

"Joe is like that," said Jeannie, as she kissed her father's forehead.

"Lucky Joe," murmured Edgar, at which Jeannie, for no reason at all, flushed to the tips of her ears.

Meantime, the game had been renewed, eagerly by Joe, perfunctorily by Jeannie and Edgar.

Presently, Edgar asked if he could take Miss Pilcher to a theatre.

"That's for Jeannie to decide," replied Joe, who noticed how her eyes had brightened at the suggestion. "And it was only last week that Titterton had some orders and wanted to take her."

"Titterton? Titterton?" queried Edgar.

"One of Jeannie's admirers."

"Why didn't you go?" he asked quickly.

"I had another engagement," she replied casually, the while she furtively, but none the less eagerly, watched him to see how he was affected by this piece of information, when she was deeply gratified at noticing that he was lost in uncomfortable thought.

A little later he said:

"Some one was asking after you the other day."

"Who?"

"A couple you met at the garden party: the Hiblings; they're cousins."

"I remember."

"Rum couple."

"Indeed!"

"You'd think so, too, if you saw much of them. Mad

on society. They know all the big people by sight. And they hang about Bond Street and Piccadilly in the season, and Buckingham Palace when there's a Drawing-Room, so they can see those they are able to recognise."

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Joe.

"I'll tell you more about 'em some day. I used to wonder and wonder at them, but now I give it up."

"Why do they do it?" asked Joe.

"That's just it! Why? If they got any fun out of it I could understand. But I believe they're eaten up with envy of those they can't mix with, and that's why they're sometimes so jolly miserable."

When Joe had easily won the rubber, he, according to custom, went and stood on the doorstep for a few minutes, in order to get a blow, a proceeding for which Jeannie and Edgar were profoundly grateful: as if moved by a common impulse, they drew their chairs before the fire.

There was a silence for some minutes, during which Jeannie seemed to be transported from her homely surroundings to a world of intoxicating isolation from the common cares of life, and one in which the very air she breathed was redolent of the quintessence of romance.

She was recalled to a recognition of workaday life by Edgar, who asked in rather a hard voice:

"Who's Titterton?"

"A friend."

"Are you going to marry him?"

"Marry him! Why should I?"

"Why shouldn't you?"

"He hasn't asked me."

"Would you, if he did?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The best of all reasons: I don't love him," said Jeannie simply.

There was a further silence which, so far as Jeannie

was concerned, was made sweet by reason of the other's apprehensions concerning Titterton.

As before, Edgar was the first to speak.

"I've no business to come here," he began.

"You've said that before," she said, in a low voice.

"The more I see of you, the more I realise how alluring and wonderful you are—you never look the same twice—and I've no business to keep seeing you as I do."

"Then why do you?"

"I can't help myself, Jeannie," he declared miserably.

"It—it can't be very difficult if you try hard," she hazarded.

"That's all you know."

"Are you weak-minded then?"

"I am where you're concerned."

A little later, he said:

"One thing I'm more than grateful for."

"And that?"

"Whatever I do, whether I come or whether I don't, it can't matter two pins to you."

Jeannie, who only needed a little pressure from Edgar to follow him to the ends of the world, was too agitated to reply: she involuntarily uttered a little sigh, and managed to disguise it by turning it into a cough.

For his part, he looked keenly at her before saying:

"In all these things, Jeannie, one wants to be one's own master, a thing I am not."

She looked straight before her into the fire; he went on.

"As you know, I'm reading for the Bar. And even if one succeeds, it's a great many years before one feels one's feet."

"So you've told me before," said Jeannie mechanically.

"I want to make my position clear," he declared plaintively, to add: "Of course, in a certain—what shall I say?—in a certain eventuality things might be different;

I might get on quickly, but that's not a thing I can think of when I'm with you."

Jeannie, who divined he was referring to rich Miss Creadle, held her peace. After a moment or two's thought, he continued :

"I often think the pater isn't so well off as he seems, and that all the money he spent on 'Pyracantha' was simply so much bluff."

"What makes you think that ?"

"He admires you awfully," he declared, before becoming aware of her question. "Eh ! He's always talking about getting hold of money if one can, but that may be because he's getting meaner in his old age."

It was not very long before he returned to the subject of his prospects.

"Of course, I know I could always go into the City," he went on. "But I'm not over keen on that."

"Of course not," assented Jeannie, who believed Edgar was cut out by nature and temperament for something much less prosaic than the course suggested.

"It isn't that I give myself airs and all that, but I've had the worst education in the world for that sort of thing. The 'pater,' as I've told you before, sent me to Cambridge, and I've more or less idled since I came 'down.' The sort of time I've had is the best education of one's five hundred a year of one's own."

"And yet I'm not altogether without hope," he said, a little later. "I ought to get on somehow, and do you know why ?"

Jeannie, who was quite of his opinion, looked at him with shyly inquiring eyes.

"I'm a good listener, pretty Jeannie, and don't you forget it, although I'm doing all the talking now."

"A good listener ?" she queried.

"Yes. And that's a wonderful asset as things go nowadays when every one is more or less of a talker. Take my brother, Bevill, for instance. He bores people to death

with his elementary science, but I know better. I listen. Listeners are very scarce nowadays, and that's why people like me."

Joe came in just then and prevented further confidential discussion.

A few minutes later, Rose entered to lay the supper, at which Jeannie, without making any bones about what she was going to do (her unaffected simplicity the more endeared her in Edgar's eyes), went out to cook the supper, which, to-night, happened to be veal cutlets.

She had hardly left the room when Edgar followed her to the kitchen, intent on giving a hand, at which Jeannie, after arranging her pretty person in a big white apron, insisted upon his doing likewise.

At supper, Joe was in high spirits: he spoke of his early days when he had been an ardent first nighter, particularly at a certain old theatre in the Strand which has been one of those devoted to throwing incense upon the so-called "sacred lamp of burlesque."

He recalled enthusiastically names that were now but memories, and fading ones at that; old songs; older jokes, the latter of which seemed mildewed with the passing of the years. These theatrical recollections so elated him that when the meal was over he ventured on his favourite story.

"A Mr. Kenny once had a dinner-party, when the butler in opening the sherry left some of the cork in the bottle," he began.

Jeannie listened attentively, devoutly hoping her father would not go astray.

"Mr. Kenny, in drinking the wine, got a piece of cork in his throat, at which one of the guests remarked, 'That's not the way for—the way for——'"

"Cork," prompted Jeannie.

"Thank you, Jeannie. I got it wrong. Mr. Kenny, in drinking the wine, got a piece of cork in his throat, at which one of the guests remarked, 'That's not the way

for Cork.' 'No. That's not the way for Cork,' declared another. 'It's the way to Kill Kenny.' "

Joe joined heartily in the laughter with which Edgar and Jeannie greeted the story, although it must be confessed that the latter wondered if her father's anecdote were not a trifle homely for the sophisticated Edgar.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVE AND HOKEY-POKEY

‘ I LOVE you, Jeannie. I know I’m poor, and oughtn’t to think you’d ever put up with that to live with me. But I love you, and can’t help asking you to marry me some day.”

The speaker was Mr. Titterton ; he had waylaid Jeannie on a November Saturday afternoon when on her way to take tea with the Miss Hitches in response to an invitation she could no longer neglect : the railway clerk was dressed in his best for the occasion.

For her part, she was so taken aback by this unexpected declaration that, for a considerable time, she was at a loss for words : he, mistaking her silence for tacit encouragement, went on :

“ You may as well know the worst, and then it can’t be said I’ve ever deceived you about my position. I’ve sixty pounds a year, and hope to get seventy in a couple of years, and I’ve small expectations from my father. I know it isn’t much, but lots of them in the ‘ G.W.’ are married on that, and get along somehow.” He paused for breath, while Jeannie was not insensible to a feeling of pride at receiving an offer, however unacceptable, of marriage.

With a growing agitation, which was perceptible in his voice, Titterton continued :

“ And I’m not so poor as I seem. When one’s married, the ‘ G.W.’ let you have butter and coals cheap and——” He stopped short. He had realised the incongruity of associating such sordid matters either with beautiful Jeannie or the ardour of his romantic passion.

They walked in silence, during which he screwed up his courage to say more, while Jeannie wondered how best to refuse her suitor without doing hurt to his feelings.

"I'd—I'd even emigrate to Canada if I thought you'd wait till I could make a home," he faltered.

"Don't say any more," said Jeannie, at which Titterton looked at her with dull, despairing eyes. "Don't say any more," she continued, and then as she saw how he was still about to speak: "Please, please don't. It's all impossible."

He stopped short, and looked so abjectly miserable that she was moved to soften the blow she was compelled to give his hopes.

"If you're not in a hurry, you might go a little way with me," she began: it gave her a vague pleasure to notice how the hint of the briefest reprieve to the sentence of despair she had passed upon him sufficed to raise ridiculously his spirits.

He talked excitedly, disconnectedly, of men who, inspired by such a love as he had for Jeannie, had achieved great things in face of insuperable obstacles: of how he had loved her from the first moment he had caught sight of her when with her father in Clarence Lane.

Presently, they turned into the road in which the Miss Hitches lived. Jeannie was thinking it time to tell him as gently as possible how she could not accept his offer because she did not love him, when she saw Edgar approaching.

She stopped dead; the colour heightened in her cheeks; her gaze was held helplessly by the man who was advancing.

Titterton noticed her confusion; with the intuition of the man in love, he perceived a deeper reason for her embarrassment than appeared on the surface: he looked miserably from Jeannie to Edgar, and furtively lifted his hat before slinking shamefacedly away.

"Who's the duke?" asked Edgar, as he reached Jeannie

"A friend."

"Do I know him by name?"

"Mr. Titterton."

He said nothing; his face clouded, at which she asked:

"Do you know any one in this road?"

"Not a soul."

"How is it I met you?"

"Didn't you tell me you were going to look up two old girls who live here this afternoon?"

"And if I did!"

"Well——"

"Well——"

"Here I am."

"You wanted to see me?" she asked, after a pause.

"Badly."

"If—if you've anything to ask me, don't stand here or it will be noticed. I'll walk on a little way."

"That's very sweet of pretty Jeannie."

"Well——" she said, as they turned into a larger thoroughfare.

"Don't be in such a hurry. If I ask you what I want, you'll either say 'yes' or 'no' and then I shall lose you."

"You'll soon lose me in any case. I'm expected at my friends'."

"I was going to ask you if I could ask your father if I might take you to a theatre this evening."

Jeannie's heart leapt.

"Why have you decided to ask me so suddenly?"

"I've wanted to for ages, but didn't because——"

"Yes?"

"Many reasons."

She was about to question him with regard to these, when they perceived Mr. Styles come from a house a little farther along the road, and walk in the direction in which they were going.

"There's little Styles," said Edgar.

"Signor Styletto, please," corrected Jeannie.

She spoke truly. To the astonishment of the neighbour-

hood, Styles had taken Edgar's advice : not only had he Italianised his name but, so far as it was possible, he had altered his appearance so as to be in keeping with his professed nationality ; long hair fell over his collar, while a twirly moustache decorated his swarthy face. Nor was this all. His two grown-up daughters, doubtless with a view to securing local notoriety, eagerly supported their father in the part he was playing : they wore large earrings, did their hair in what they believed was a Latin fashion, and dressed in crude, garish colours, while they spoke in broken Cockney English. They were an indifferent imitation of the blowsy Italian women who play piano-organs in the street or tell fortunes with the assistance of caged birds.

Although "Styletto's" appearance was greeted by irreverent boys with shouts of "hokey-pokey," he did not mind in the least : he had what is known as "caught on," and was so well-to-do that he had repaid Joe the many small sums he had borrowed.

When Jeannie had told her friend how deeply "Styletto" was in his debt, it was decided that Joe should be asked if there were any objection to his daughter's going to a theatre on that evening ; also, that Edgar was to return in an hour and wait near the Miss Hitches' till Jeannie should be free.

Even when this was settled, they did not immediately separate ; as if possessed by mutual forces of attraction, they continued to speak of anything and everything for quite a long time.

When Jeannie at last got to the Miss Hitches', she found a substantial tea awaiting her in the dining-room ; although she was plied with questions respecting her health, her father's, her infrequent visits, it was as much as she could do to make coherent replies, so excited was she by reason of Titterton's proposal ; her unexpected meeting with Edgar ; the possibility of her accompanying him to a theatre.

The Miss Hitches' appearance and surroundings were, also, so alien to the romantic complexion of her emotions that she was not a little jarred by the petty, albeit genteel, atmosphere of her hostesses.

Laura and Elsie Hitch so resembled each other that it was difficult to distinguish them; as if to assist the possibility of confusion, they dressed exactly alike. They were tall, thin, angular, middle-aged, and each had little snub noses which, from perpetual rubbing, owing to endless colds, were red and shiny.

It was only after comparing them in varying circumstances that it was possible to discover how Laura's bones were a trifle less insistent than Elsie's; but so far as their dispositions were concerned, they seemed to be cast in those immutable moulds in which a pair of sisters has been fashioned since the world began, and of which Martha and Mary in Holy Writ are the best-known examples.

Although they were both simple, nervous, credulous, kindly, superstitious women, Laura was fussy and the harder minded, while Elsie stood for the joy of life, so far as such a phase of existence can apply to those whose days were as constrained as those of the two spinsters.

They never walked under a ladder, and avoided the beginning of any enterprise upon a Friday; indeed, so far as this day of the week was concerned, it was rumoured that, should it fall on the thirteenth of the month, they would pass the day in bed for fear of evil befalling them.

The one startling adventure of their lives was when away on a holiday they had been frightened by cows.

Their personality, if such a word can apply to such unassuming females, was reflected in the tasteless formality of the room. Jeannie had not been seated three minutes, when she saw Laura glancing nervously at her boots.

"It's rather muddy out, is it not, dear?" she asked.

"It is a bit," replied Jeannie carelessly.

"Are your feet wet?" asked Elsie.

"I don't think so."

"If they are, dear, take them off and wear a pair of my slippers while they dry."

"Don't bother. I'm all right," declared Jeannie, while she thought the minutes that must elapse before she again saw Edgar would never pass.

While her sister had been talking, Laura had obtained a folded newspaper from a side table; she now placed it on the floor beside Jeannie.

"I think you would be wise, dear, to put your feet on this. And it will keep them warm."

Jeannie thanked her friend for the attention, but immediately after she had done so it occurred to her that Laura Hitch had been more actuated by a desire to save her carpet than to minister to her guest's comfort.

Jeannie, contrary to habit, made an indifferent meal; when her mind was not dwelling on the day's eventful happenings, she had an idea that the sisters were narrowly watching her, and this suspicion made her self-conscious.

Very soon, her intuitions, which her excited condition had sharpened, told her how her hostesses were clumsily piloting the conversation in the direction of the Baverstock family.

Once the meal was interrupted by Laura getting up and picking a hairpin, a morsel of paper, and a tiny bit of ribbon from the floor, saying as she did so:

"Excuse me, dear, but these are little bits of Elsie." A reference on Laura's part to the house Mr. Coop was building on the plot of ground adjacent to "Pyracantha" was followed by Elsie remarking:

"I suppose, dear, you can see the preparations from Mr. Baverstock's garden."

"It's such a long time since I've been in it," retorted Jeannie as she strived not to blush.

"Indeed! Is that so?" asked Laura. "Ahem! We understood——"

Jeannie changed the subject with such abruptness that the spinsters, fearing they had been too precipitate, made

mention of a, to them, adventurous excursion to Whiteley's, which led to Elsie's remarking how Mr. Whiteley, in describing himself as the "Universal Provider," was as good as his word: she followed this assertion with a rambling story of his even getting a customer, who doubted his ability to obtain anything that might be wanted, a white elephant from distant Burmah.

Then, by way of entertaining Jeannie, a search was made for a mislaid letter from a friend, which described how she went over a biscuit factory at Reading where, wonder of wonders, the privileged visitors could help themselves to as many newly made biscuits as they could tackle.

The letter was discovered in a small writing-case; when it was handed to Jeannie, it was inadvertently accompanied by the prospectus of an advertising "bucket shop."

Directly Elsie caught sight of the letter, she almost snatched it from Jeannie, and put it out of sight.

Then, the subject of Gertrude Stubbs and her handsome admirer was timorously broached by Laura, and more by way of serving as a warning to Jeannie than providing a means of conversation, at least, so the latter thought.

She retorted that Gertrude Stubbs, as well as any other sensible girl, could be trusted not to make a fool of herself, but this time the two sisters were not so easily diverted from their purpose: they insisted at length on the advisability of young ladies consulting their parents on all matters pertaining to the bestowal of their affections.

Jeannie attempted to talk of something else, but although kindly Elsie faltered, Laura showed unusual determination in sticking to the subject on which she had embarked; this persistence exhausted Jeannie's obstinacy; she let her two friends chatter as they listed, while she thought of Edgar and of how soon she would be able to join him.

When she, presently, got on to her feet, her hostesses begged her to prolong her stay; seeing she was determined,

they parted from her with many little tenderesses, they being really fond of the unaffected girl.

She found Edgar impatiently kicking his heels at the end of the road in which the Miss Hitches lived ; by the glad expression of his face, she divined how her father had consented to her going to the theatre, an impression Edgar speedily confirmed, telling her, at the same time, how she was to please herself as to whether or not she dressed.

At seven o'clock that evening, Edgar called for Jeannie, who, arrayed in her one simple evening frock, excitedly awaited him. She took a hurried leave of Joe, and in a very few moments was walking in the direction of the station when, to her surprise, Edgar hailed a passing hansom. She protested, but before she could say very much, she was seated by Edgar and speeding in the direction of London.

" Why did you object to a hansom ? " he asked.

" The extravagance ! " she exclaimed.

" Extravagance ! "

" Dreadful ! "

He looked at her in surprise before saying :

" Then Jeannie could make a poor man's wife after all."

She dropped her eyes, at which he asked :

" Wouldn't she ? "

" Who am I that I should expect to marry any one else ? "

" Jeannie is so rare and charming that she could marry whom she pleased," he cried. " Aren't you aware of that ? "

" It wouldn't make any difference to Jeannie if any one, as you call it, did want to marry her."

" Why not ? "

" Because——"

" Well——" he exclaimed impatiently, as she hesitated.

" Because it's a matter on which Jeannie intends to please herself."

Her admission surprised him : he seemed as if he were about to address her ardently ; then, with much of an effort, he appeared to control himself before speaking in the manner of one who wishes to change an inconvenient subject.

" How did you get on this afternoon ? " he asked.

It was some moments before she was able to fix her mind on the more recent events of the day : even then, she was undecided as to which he was referring.

" When ? " she inquired.

" Those friends you went to tea with ! "

She made disconnected references to her call, but made a point of mentioning the " bucket shop " prospectus which had been inadvertently revealed.

" Good heavens ! " cried Edgar. " They're the sort of fools those sharks prey on. You'd better warn them, and as soon as possible."

" They mightn't like it."

" They'd like it still less if they lost everything they've got."

" Is that possible ? "

" Dear innocent Jeannie ! Those chaps who circularise spinsters and curates know how keen many of 'em are on a bit of a flutter in order to add to their incomes. They appeal, and only too successfully, to the greed that's in all of us, more or less."

" I'm not greedy," declared Jeannie, who was now thoroughly enjoying her unaccustomed ride in a hansom.

" I know you're not, and do you know why ? " he asked, with a return to his former ardent manner.

" Tell me."

" Because you're perfect."

" I'm afraid I'm very far from perfect," she sighed.

" What makes you say that ? "

" If I were, I shouldn't be enjoying this dreadful dissipation so much."

He smiled, at which she cried :

"Now you're laughing at me."

He thought for a moment before declaring gravely :

"It's all much, much too serious to laugh at."

She glanced at him with a timid apprehension, at which, as if once more desirous of changing an inconvenient subject, he said :

"There's been rather a bother at home."

"Oh!" exclaimed Jeannie, as the lights in the gay street through which they were now speeding seemed to dim.

"It's with Mabel," he went on.

Jeannie was convinced her eyes had played her some trick, for the street suddenly presented its normal bright appearance.

"I don't know whether it's because father has rather spoiled her, or what, but she's very headstrong."

"Indeed!" remarked Jeannie, who was striving to be interested in her old school-friend's behaviour.

"Sometimes it seems as if nothing pleases her, and it worries the mater awfully."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right when I'm at home, because if I speak to her she's keen on pleasing me, indeed, I believe she'd do anything in the world for me; but when I'm away, she becomes unbearable."

A few minutes later, they arrived at the entrance to one of London's fashionable playhouses when, to Jeannie's surprise, they were shown into a box near the stage on the first tier.

On the few occasions on which Jeannie had been to the theatre before, she had been accompanied by Joe and, after a weary wait outside the doors, they had struggled into the pit: after the performance, they had gone home in a bus, the means of locomotion by which they had journeyed to the playhouse.

To-night, the comfort in which she had come, the luxurious privacy of a box, the obsequious attendants,

the privileged position she occupied in the eyes of the less fortunate playgoers, perhaps, above all, Edgar's company, together with the distinguished figure he cut in evening-dress, bewildered her.

But not for long. She possessed an amazing facility for adapting herself to her surroundings ; after a time, she succeeded in believing how her lot had always been cast in such pleasant ways, and that she had never by any chance been a unit in the serried ranks of the commonplace pit.

She greatly enjoyed the play ; the ices and chocolates with which Edgar stuffed her : while she was impatient with him on account of his paying more attention to her than to the stage, she appreciated him the more on account of his sophisticated indifference to the performance.

When, at last, they came out into the crowded Strand, they had some difficulty in securing a cab ; when, tired from excitement, she was seated in the hansom an attendant had secured, and had driven a little way, she shivered slightly from cold.

In a moment Edgar, who had been sitting rigidly beside her, the more carefully arranged her cloak, and in so doing passed his arm about her waist.

Physical contact with Edgar had the effect of suddenly reducing Jeannie to helplessness ; she leaned her golden head upon his shoulder ; he, nothing loth, tightly gripped her with his arm, the while he sternly looked before him into the night.

Thus they travelled home, she in a world of slightly weary but none the less ecstatic enchantment, he silently, apparently intently, regarding the night.

Edgar stopped the cab a few minutes' walk from "Laurel Villa," in order to have "a little longer with pretty Jeannie," as he declared, at which, although it was in the nature of a shock to discover herself in familiar Putney, Jeannie resolved to ignore this fact for so long as it was possible.

Wholly engrossed in each other, they walked reluctantly in the direction of Jeannie's home, when Edgar's presence enabled her to maintain the luxurious illusions in which she had wantoned during the evening.

Suddenly, and without warning, these were dispelled by the fact of her perceiving her father's face peering anxiously in the direction in which he expected his daughter : the awakening gave her something in the nature of a shock ; in spite of herself, she found herself staring at him with coldly inquiring eyes.

" Ah ! Here you are ! " he exclaimed, with an indifferent assumption of surprise, while his face expressed the immense relief he knew.

" Here I am ! " declared Jeannie irritably ; she resented her father's intrusion into her dream world.

" I've just been to post a letter," he remarked, by way of explaining his presence in the street at that late hour. " I hope you've both enjoyed yourselves."

When Edgar had taken his leave, and Jeannie was indoors with her father, she replied to his questions respecting the evening with none too gracious monosyllables.

After she had got into bed, mingled with the more rapturous memories of the evening, were vague regrets for her coldness to her father, at which she endeavoured to excuse herself for her behaviour by reflecting that Joe's unnecessary anxiety for her safe return had made her look small in Edgar's eyes.

CHAPTER IX

NEW YEAR'S EVE

ON the last day of the year, Jeannie came upon her father, who was in animated conversation with the two Miss Hitches in the High Street, at seven in the evening : she wondered what had taken the two sisters out of doors at that, for them, late hour.

She was about to speak to her friends when Joe, apparently in some heat, took a hasty leave of them and motioned Jeannie to accompany him in the direction of home.

"What is it, father?" she asked, as she glanced back at the two sisters, who were excitedly putting their heads together.

"Too bad! Too bad! I'm so angry I can hardly speak."

"Joe!" exclaimed an astonished Jeannie.

"There are some women who ought to know better; they seem to let the wind blow their tongues."

"Did they say anything about me?" asked Jeannie anxiously.

"About you! I should just like to hear them. You, indeed!"

"Who then?"

"Your old friend, Gertrude Stubbs."

"Oh!"

"They actually say—but I've no business to repeat it."

"What do they say?"

"You're bound to hear it sooner or later, so I may as

well tell you now and put you on your guard. They told me that Gertrude Stubbs has actually left her home to run away with some young scamp who's been paying her attention."

"Perhaps they are married," suggested Jeannie.

"That they didn't tell me. But it stands to reason that no well-brought-up young lady would, nowadays, go off and get married, or do anything of that sort without consulting her parents."

Jeannie kept her counsel. Joe continued :

"And for the Miss Hitches to go about spreading such scandalous reports for which they've no authority is shameful. I as good as told them so. I could have banged their two heads together."

As they walked home, Joe said more to the same effect, while Jeannie nervously fingered a letter she had received that morning from her old school-friend.

It was as follows :

" 33 BEAMISH ROAD, FULHAM ROAD,
SOUTH KENSINGTON, S.W.,
31st December 1889.

" MY DEAREST JEANNIE,—I wonder what you will say when you get this and learn the *wonderful* news I have for you. What will you say, dearest Jeannie, when I tell you I'm no longer Gertrude Stubbs, but am now *Gertrude Scott* ! I have been *married* nearly a week, and it's all wonderfully romantic, and please don't tell a soul what I am telling you or where I am writing from until I give you permission. Write, dear, and give me your sacred word of honour you will do what I ask.

" Now, dear, you will wonder how it was I went away and got married like this instead of in the usual way. Of course I don't deny I missed the wedding dress and the bridesmaids and all the other lovely things, but it is all *lovely* and *romantic* as it is, and then Eustace wouldn't have it.

"I told him how in time my people could be brought round, but he *simply wouldn't hear of it*. You may not believe what I'm going to tell you now, dear, but if I never speak another word it's the *absolute truth*.

"My secret marriage was all Eustace's doing. He actually stood outside my window one night with a *loaded revolver* to his *head* and *swore* that, if I didn't promise to run away with him, he'd *blow his brains out*. What could I do, dearest Jeannie, loving him as I do? If I had not done as he had wished, I should have been guilty of *murder*, dear.

"And what of the future, dear? Eustace is making up his mind to start working really hard as soon as he can realise I am indeed his for life: he says he thinks a few weeks' work will make him pass for the 'Indian Civil,' in which the *pay* and *prospects* are *splendid*. Fancy my going to India! And I am sure he will work hard soon, for he *worships the ground I walk on*; and I am sure he will 'pass,' as he's so wonderfully clever; a *genius*, I think.

"And oh! dearest Jeannie, if I could only express the happiness that is mine at loving and being loved! And to think, whatever trials we have, love is going to gladden our days and bind our hearts in loving union for all time!

"If you would like to come and see us, I will let you know when we shall be in.—Ever your *loving friend*,

"GERTRUDE SCOTT."

In the days before Jeannie had met Edgar, Joe's single-hearted faith in the complete propriety of well-brought-up young women would have touched her heart. But a considerable quantity of water with regard to her one-time loving appreciation of Joe had flowed under the bridge during the last six months.

She had been prepossessed in Edgar's favour from the first, and since acquaintance had ripened into intimate

friendship, her disposition, together with her outlook on life, had undergone a change.

Her old girlish light-heartedness had disappeared ; its place had been taken by a despondency that was altogether alien to her years. She had no longer any heart for her household duties, performing them but perfunctorily at best, and when Joe came home from his day's work, as likely as not she would take the earliest opportunity of seeking her room, where she would either mope or indulge in protracted flights of romantic fancy. It was only when Edgar was expected that a feverish excitement was substituted for her former listlessness.

Such was her self-absorption at the new factor which had come into her life that, for the most part, she was blind to Joe's concern at the alteration that had taken place in his once gladsome Jeannie ; with the egotistic concentration of youth on its own affairs, she regarded anything other than her intimacy with Edgar as of no moment whatsoever.

Nor was this all.

Jeannie had quite succeeded in convincing herself that her economic and, therefore, social inferiority to the Baverstocks was the one obstacle that prevented Edgar from beseeching her to be his wife ; with the inconsequence of feminine youth, she, in the secret places of her heart, blamed her father for this state of things, and he being so dependent on her for his happiness, she visited her resentment on the one person who would patiently suffer her resentment.

Alarmed at her extremity, he would give her homely advice, at which he, all unconsciously, got on her nerves, making her peevish and irritable : she had not the remotest idea, her imagination being absolutely wanting where anything other than Edgar was concerned, how deeply her behaviour wounded that simple, loving heart.

There were exceptions, however, to her perversity.

Sometimes the world would seem hopelessly grey, and Joe and his love for her the one bright spot in a miserable existence, at which, if he were in the house, she would, as likely as not, throw her arms about him and passionately protest her unalterable devotion, and would, if he had suffered her to proceed, have confessed how undutiful and ungrateful she had been to the best and kindest of fathers.

Perhaps it was incidents such as these which enabled him to suffer patiently the waywardness she too often exhibited.

She gave much time to the reading of romantic fiction, and devoured those works in which a difference of station proved no ultimate obstacle to the union of the lovers.

The Lady of Lyons, a play performed by a local amateur society, which she witnessed in Edgar's company, greatly impressed her. She bought a copy of Bulwer Lytton's drama, and frequently read the scenes between Pauline and Claude Melnotte: the line, "Love lays the shepherd's crook beside the sceptre," stuck in her mind.

Its message, however, brought her small comfort.

Ignorant as she was of the gross materialism which obtained in the eighteenth century, she believed that such times were wholly moved by romantic considerations, and that latter-day conditions would never permit a scion of the house of Baverstock to wed one in the position of Jeannie Pilcher.

As she walked home with her father on this last evening of the year, her heart was bitter with discontent. She had seen nothing of Edgar for eight days, although he had sent her a sumptuous Christmas card, and in a letter accompanying it had asked if he might make her a present of a dog.

She had consulted Joe with regard to this offering, and had been deeply disappointed when he was much against her accepting it, urging that he had made such a friend of

the dog they had had in the old days, that he did not care to repeat the experience of the grief he had suffered at its decease.

"I'm sorry to oppose you in anything that affects your happiness, Jeannie," he had said. "But dogs become so much a part of one's life that when they go it's almost like losing one's own flesh and blood."

Jeannie had surrendered to her father's wishes and the dog had been very regretfully declined.

As if Edgar's prolonged absence were not enough to vex her, Gertrude's letter, detailing her romantic marriage, her glowing happiness, awoke a raging envy of which she, in her normal moments, would never have believed herself to be capable. Several times Joe addressed remarks to her when declaiming against the Miss Hitches' love of scandal, but such were her prepossessions that she answered him either with monosyllables or absently.

When they got inside the house, Jeannie looked anxiously to see if a letter had come in her absence: not finding one she half expected from Edgar to explain his prolonged absence, her torments sensibly increased.

"What about to-night?" said Joe presently.

"What about it?" asked Jeannie, none too graciously.

"Are you going to the watch-night service?"

"I had thought of going. And you?"

"I'm too old for that sort of thing."

"I shall soon be too," sighed Jeannie.

Joe laughed outright, a proceeding that somewhat cheered his daughter.

"You'd better come, dear," she suggested.

"Not to-night. And there'll be so many people going that you'll be all right alone," declared Joe, his face brightening at Jeannie's endearment.

Observing this, she sat before the fire and gazed for some minutes at the glowing coals, at which there was silence between them.

She was feeling low, and out of sorts; it was as much

as she could do to restrain her tears. Then Joe commenced to fuss about her, arranging the curtains to exclude possible draughts, and bringing a cushion for her back, a footstool for her feet.

Her present condition of mind was such that the least thing caused it to be elated or depressed, consequently Joe's attentions inclined her heart to him.

She looked in his direction, to perceive he was anxiously watching her with troubled eyes.

She was sensible of, and minded to confess her forwardness where he was concerned, but was restrained by pride: then, as if to conciliate her self-reproaches, she compromised between the two contending emotions and said :

"I'm afraid I haven't been quite the same to you lately."

"What makes you say that?"

"It's the last day of the year, a day one thinks of things."

"We won't say anything about that."

"Next year I will try to be different."

"That's all right, Jeannie," said Joe, who knew from recent experience the value of such assertions. Jeannie went on :

"Life isn't always so simple as it seems."

I know that, dear. One must take the bitter with the sweet."

Jeannie sighed.

"Things always come right in the end," he assured her, with his simple optimism.

"I wonder!" she murmured.

"Even if they don't, nothing's gained by worrying."

Jeannie's pretty head nodded a tentative consent although her heart refused to be comforted.

"And, after all, Jeannie, there is a Providence that shapes our ends."

Jeannie was disposed to retort that Providence was

seemingly at fault when regulating social inequalities, but, not wishing to wound her father's beliefs, she forbore.

"And as you won't be in bed till very late, hadn't you better rest a bit?" asked Joe, who was wholly unconscious of his sudden transition from the abstract to the essentially practical.

"What about supper?"

"That can wait till quite late."

It wanted but a few minutes to eleven when Jeannie, Prayer Book in hand, was about to set out for the watch-night service; although quite ready, she waited; knowing Joe as she did, she believed he had something in his mind to which he hesitated to give expression. She stood facing him in the little hall, and was moved at perceiving how he had aged of late.

"Good-night, Joe," she said impulsively. "And a happy New Year."

Much to her surprise, he did not reply, at which she asked:

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Yes, dear. But there's something I want to say." His seriousness was such that she apprehensively asked:

"What is it?"

"It's to do with what I said when you were sitting before the fire."

Jeannie, from sheer nervousness, looked at her watch, a birthday present from Joe.

"I won't keep you a moment, but it's this. From what I can see of life, even if one gets much of what one wants, it's far from being all plain-sailing. When things seem at their fairest, there's often a bitter disappointment waiting round the corner, and at the best, for the most fortunate of us, it's a rough-and-tumble journey. I know when one's young one laughs at the croakings of parents. I did myself, but I'm wiser now; and I'm telling you this because I don't want you to expect too much."

Jeannie's romantic sensibilities were jarred by her father's prosaic warnings, but his evident sincerity prevented her from questioning his assertion. Instead, she kissed him and asked :

"Are you happy, Joe?"

"Of c—course, dear. I've you, and I'm retiring in two years."

"A happy New Year, Joe."

"The same to you, my Jeannie. And God bless and keep you always."

The door closed on Jeannie, and very soon she was a unit in a stragglng stream of men and women, which was flowing in the direction of the parish church.

Most of those she passed were looking forward to enjoying a little emotional dissipation, but she could not help noticing how the obviously serious-minded, who seemed as if they were overweighted with contrition for the misdeeds of the past and with the making of noble resolutions for the coming year, were blameless citizens who did not have in them to commit grievous sin.

When she reached the church, she was minded to walk a few steps farther in order to get a glimpse of the river ; she found it racing in the direction of the sea, and indifferently lit by a three-quarter moon which, as if sick and in need of succour, appeared to be lying on its back.

The feeble illumination of the moon, the hurrying dark waters, held her to where she stood ; it was only when she was conscious of the rawness of the night that she turned in the direction of the church.

Even when she reached the porch, she did not go in, but was moved to return and take another look at the river and the moon, the latter's morbid glamour apparently appealing to an emotion of self-pity which just now possessed her.

When she got back, all the colour had gone out of the moon, when, such was its wan appearance, that it seemed on the eve of dissolution, at which she fell to comparing its extremity with her own blighted existence : with the

unbalanced and extravagant apprehensions of lovesick youth, she believed that life had nothing further to offer her beyond its present bitterness, which last was almost beyond human endurance.

When sitting in the church, and waiting for the service to commence, she endeavoured to attune her thoughts to the solemn nature of the occasion ; try as she might, she found herself envying pretty Gertrude's romantic marriage.

Suddenly, she was possessed by a great fear and a vague delight ; although she had not turned her head, she was certain that Edgar had entered, and had taken a seat behind her.

Henceforth, all possibility of reverently attending to the service was at an end ; she did not once look round to confirm her conviction with regard to Edgar's presence, but for all this self-restraint her mind was a welter of emotion concerning what his coming to the church portended, he being anything but a religious-minded man. Now and again, she was taken out of herself by the antics of the man in the pulpit, who, being theatrically minded, and owing to the illness of the vicar, having taken his place at the last moment, was out to make the most of his opportunities.

With loud voice and exaggerated gestures, he impressed on his hearers the truly solemn nature of the service at which he was officiating.

It wanted but a few minutes to twelve when the parson, after working on the emotions of his congregation with the hysterical fervour of a revivalist, enjoined silent prayer until the midnight hour should strike ; watch in hand, he waited to announce its coming.

For all the deathlike stillness which obtained in the church, it was useless for Jeannie to attempt to give her mind to anything other than the cause of Edgar's attendance at the service.

Her trepidations were interrupted by the awesome voice of the man in the pulpit, who said :

"The sands of the old year have run out : listen, my brethren, to its knell."

Although all present pricked up their ears, not a sound was heard, at which the clergyman, nothing daunted, after waiting a few moments, looked again at his watch before saying :

"Lo, the hour is about to strike."

His watch, however, must have been fast, for the silence obstinately persisted ; it was as much as Jeannie could do to repress a smile.

After waiting the best part of a minute, he repeated the previous statement, but, upon its proving equally false, and the clock failing to strike, he thought it expedient to say :

"Let us pray."

Hardly had the congregation followed his behest, when the clock struck the hour.

When Jeannie left the church, she looked neither to the right nor left, while a mixture of fear, pride, and resentment at Edgar having neglected her for so long urged her to go out by a side door ; detaching herself from those who were streaming in the direction of the town, she again walked to the bridge.

When she was where she had stood before, she found the moon had sunk behind a bank of dark cloud, when, for all this disappearance, it lit other clouds, big and white, which were bellying purposefully across the sky, as if belated for their destination.

Below, black water poured through the arches as if bound on some dark errand, and a little way farther was obscured by mist that hovered on the surface as if to conceal its fell intent

The driving clouds, the dismal, uncanny river, the rawness of the night air, all infected Jeannie with a sense of impotence against forces compared to which any resolution of her own would be as naught ; she was eager for the shelter and comfort of home, and was about to

hasten thither, when her heart seemed to stop beating. The next moment, an all too familiar voice said :

"How's little Jeannie?"

She turned, to see Edgar ardently regarding her.

As if in protest against his recent disregard of her existence, she made as if to avoid him; in spite of herself, she was rooted to where she stood.

"How's little Jeannie?" he repeated.

Her sense of personal impotence was suddenly forgotten; in resentment of the way in which she had been slighted, she was moved to angry speech, but all she said was :

"I'm not little Jeannie."

"I know you're not; I know you are not," he cried vehemently. "You're tall and straight and strong and beautiful—everything you should be."

She looked at him with frightened eyes, while she trembled in every limb. He went on: "I know you want to leave me, but before you go you must hear what I have to say, and here better than anywhere where the world, but for you and I, seems out of its mind."

She was urged to glance at sky and river and mis, but the purpose in his eyes compelled her whole attention.

"Don't speak," he continued. "I want your New Year's message to me to be, 'I love you.'"

Her breast was sadly troubled, at which he said :

"I've tried to keep away—but we'll say no more of that. It was impossible. And now I want your New Year message to be, 'I love you,' because that is mine to you. 'I love you, beautiful Jeannie,' and nothing in the world is going to keep you from me."

As she did not speak, he looked at her with an immense inquiry; it was not innocent of fear.

Then, as if in spite of himself, he put out his arms, at which, after hesitating the merest fraction of a second, Jeannie helplessly surrendered to their embrace.

Thus they stood on the bridge, a morsel of rapturous content in a disorderly, unkempt world, when, for all their contemptuous disregard of the incongruous elements about them, the lovers were as much the sport of inexorable law as wind and cloud and river.

CHAPTER X

THE SHEPHERD'S CROOK

ON a cloudless June morning, Jeannie stood pensively on the cliffs that stretch from Broadstairs in the direction of Ramsgate.

Behind her, as far as she could see, should she care to look, was a spread of yellow corn, while here and there were blood-red poppies seemingly craning their heads in order to get a glimpse of a faultlessly calm sea, which climbed the horizon till it was at one with the blue of the sky.

She had come with Joe for a fortnight's stay at Broadstairs, her father having taken his yearly holiday earlier than usual, Jeannie not being in her usual health.

They were staying at "Hazeldene," a largish boarding-house in Broadstairs, where, for the inclusive charge of eleven shillings a day, father and daughter were lodged and fed. They had gone to a boarding-house in preference to lodgings, so that Jeannie should be spared the worries of housekeeping; also, Joe thought that new faces and young society would do her good.

Although they had been at Broadstairs a week, Jeannie did not seem wonderfully better for the change; neither did she care to consort with the maidens and young men staying at "Hazeldene," although they were eager, particularly the latter, to cultivate her acquaintance.

That morning, Joe had urged Jeannie to accompany him upon a sea trip; she had ignored the suggestion, and had sought the cliffs' remoteness in order to nurse her love-thoughts in solitude.

Since the evening when Edgar had declared his love, it had been quite understood that they were engaged to be married, but, so far as she could see at present, the chances of their being anything other than lovers were slight.

Edgar had given Jeannie a magnificent engagement ring, which she only wore in secret; he had implored her to keep the betrothal even from her father, as, if its existence were noised abroad, it would seriously compromise him with his family, and put an end to the possibility of his being called to the Bar and obtaining a practice on which to keep a wife.

Jeannie had fallen in with Edgar's wishes, indeed, she could have done nothing else, loving him as she did.

In the days before he had declared his passion, he had possessed her heart, but as she had despaired of being loved in return, she had restrained herself, so far as it was possible, from immersing herself in the depths which yawned about her.

In those days, although carried off her feet, she had believed in the possibility of being able to fight ultimately her way back to land.

Now it was altogether another matter

Edgar's kisses, endearments, and ardent protestations (he was a perfect lover), above all, the conviction that she was loved for herself alone, had carried her into deep water from which escape was unthinkable: she neither knew nor cared what happened so long as she was sure of his love.

Occasionally, when she ventured to appraise the emotion that possessed her so completely, she was dumbfounded by the nature of the fire that Edgar had lighted in her being.

She recalled the years when her heart had been innocent of passion, and wondered if the Jeannie she had known were indeed the same girl who had wholeheartedly abandoned herself to the ecstasy of loving.

In common with most other young women, she had

thought considerably of love and had looked upon it as an amiable infatuation for one of the opposite sex. Never, in the wildest flights of romantic imagination, had she dreamed that love would reduce her to such a pitiful extremity.

Small wonder was it that her agitations affected her health, inasmuch as they deprived her of sleep and frequently gave her a distaste for food: neither was it a matter for surprise that she preferred her own company to that of others: over and beyond the fact that solitude enabled her to think her thoughts without fear of interruption, her passion seemed to detach her, and make her a thing apart, from her species, whose idle chatter and trivial preoccupations caused them to appear beings of another and inferior world.

Jeannie, who had been dreamily and vainly endeavouring to recall the parting expression of her beloved's face, turned in the direction in which she believed London to be, and sighed deeply and often.

Presently, she sank on the grass, and for the fifteenth time read a long and very tender letter which the morning's post had brought from Putney.

Although she lingered over the endearments, these did not hold her attention just now so much as certain guarded phrases which reinforced apprehensions she had known before she left home for the sea, apprehensions concerning the pressure Reuben Baverstock was bringing to bear on Edgar with regard to his marrying rich Miss Creadle.

Jeannie was not so disturbed by the suggestion of such a fell happening as might be supposed, she being not only sure of Edgar's constancy but convinced he could never marry where he did not love.

Jeannie was particularly sure of her ground with regard to Edgar's fidelity, for the reason she dared not, for one moment, let her mind dwell on the dire possibility of his breaking faith.

Such an event would be of such dire moment that she preferred to regard it as altogether inconceivable.

After a while, she put all unpleasant thoughts from her mind, and abandoned herself completely to her tender fancies, when there were but two people in her world, they—Edgar and herself.

She had often indulged in a like surrendering, but now that she had left Putney and was alone with nature, sun and sky and sea, together with the poppy-starred cornfields, seemed united in a glorious conspiracy to stimulate the ardour of her imaginings.

The fiery June day, the calm magnificence of the sea, the gorgeous blue with which the sky was hung, all urged how ridiculously petty and worthy of disregard were the gods of the everyday world to which well-brought-up young women, particularly those who had completed their education at Clarence College, constantly bowed down, and all the time the corn was whispering so caressingly that her eyes, with an effort, avoided a sight of the scarlet-lipped poppies.

Such was the ecstasy possessing her, that, several times, she believed Edgar was on the point of appearing along the cliff path, he having been moved by a like passion for herself to come and seek her out.

When she presently realised the futility of her longings, in an access of despair, she tore at the grasses with her hands.

Truly love had wrought a change in Jeannie Pilcher.

It wanted some twenty minutes to one when Jeannie reached the outskirts of Broadstairs on her way back to midday dinner at "Hazeldene": it was not very long before she passed the children's open-air mission service which, now nearing its end, was conducted by an evil-looking parody of an ecclesiastic; his appearance and voice respectively offended Jeannie's sight and hearing.

She overtook various people who, moved by a common

purpose, were one and all converging on lodging-houses and hotels ; a couple of hundred yards from " Hazeldene," she came upon Joe, who was anxiously awaiting her. He eagerly scanned her before saying :

" I knew the Broadstairs air would do you good."

" Am I looking better ? "

" Ever so much. Quite your old self again."

Jeannie smiled a trifle sadly.

" I've a letter from Mr. Bristow," he went on.

" Mr. Bristow ! "

" Don't you remember his coming to tea with Mr. Mew and Mr. Ferrars ? "

Jeannie lazily nodded.

" He wishes to be remembered to you."

" Indeed ! "

" And he tells me Titterton's father is dead."

Jeannie remembered Titterton.

" I'm sorry," she remarked carelessly.

Her father glanced at her before saying :

" His father was very selfish, so it's really a good thing for him as he's now rather better off."

" I'm glad," declared Jeannie, with no particular sincerity.

" I think he was very fond of you," went on Joe.

" Was he ? "

" And I was thinking, only this morning, you met him the same afternoon as you were introduced to young Mr. Baverstock."

Jeannie flushed in spite of herself, and made a bee-line for " Hazeldene."

" This eminently select boarding-establishment," to quote from its prospectus, was a large, double-fronted house, the hall of which, where unoccupied by a formidable hatstand, was now filled by men and women of all ages, who, with varying degrees of patience, were hungrily awaiting the ringing of the dinner bell : conspicuous in the throng was a good-looking, fresh-coloured, ready-

tongued young man, Baldwin by name, an auctioneer's clerk by occupation, who was by common consent the wit of the house. Quite six of the younger spinsters spending an all too brief holiday at "Hazeldene" were in love with him, but with the malignant irony that ever shadows the affairs of the heart, Mr. Baldwin had only eyes for Jeannie, who all but ignored his existence.

Directly he set eyes on her, he brought off a practical joke he had planned for her behoof; this, the ringing of the dinner bell some minutes before the meal was ready, causing the hungry holiday-makers to troop into the dining-room and take their places at table.

Baldwin anxiously watched Jeannie's face to see if she rewarded his ingenuity with even the ghost of a smile, but was disappointed, while the six more or less amorous virgins, who thought him the gayest of gay dogs, giggled and gave him many admiring glances.

At something after one, Mrs. Needle, the proprietress of Hazeldene, made her eagerly awaited appearance, when the meats and vegetables were brought in by the servants, assisted by Leopold, the German boy-waiter, who, in return for his services, received food of sorts, a bed in the scullery, and any tips that were going.

Mrs. Needle was by way of being a personality, even if one pitched in a minor key.

After many years' endeavour to please the varying and often highly contrasted dispositions of her "guests," St. Paul's maxim of being "all things to all men" had become such a habit of her nature that it was somehow reflected in her appearance and disposition.

She seemed neither short, nor tall, nor fat, nor particularly thin; neither did she appear exactly young nor particularly ancient looking. She could keep up a conversation with all and sundry at table (and by encouraging talk incidentally lessen the consumption of food) in a non-committal manner which amounted to genius, inasmuch as she gave every person to whom she addressed her remarks

ness ; when the organ stopped suddenly, it was as if she had received an unexpected blow.

A few moments later, it played again, this time one of Leslie Stuart's appealing melodies. She greedily listened, when all the emotion of which she was capable seemed to gather in her throat.

She was on the point of bursting into tears when Mrs. Needle sat tentatively beside her, and said :

" Beautiful weather, Miss Pilcher."

" Is— isn't it ? " almost sobbed Jeannie.

" Visitors to ' Hazeldene ' have usually little to complain of in that respect."

Jeannie was silent, at which Mrs. Needle asked :

" Have you seen the view from the North Foreland ? "

" Not yet."

" ' Hazeldene ' always recommends it to visitors."

More was said on subjects of strictly local interest, but as Mrs. Needle did nearly all the talking, Jeannie vaguely assenting to everything advanced, the latter soon repented of her unsociability, and said :

" What a lot of different people you must see in the year."

" Naturally," smiled Mrs. Needle.

Jeannie looked at her inquiringly.

" Once ladies and gentlemen visit ' Hazeldene,' they are never happy until they come again," explained Mrs. Needle.

" I meant different kinds of people."

" Of course ' Hazeldene ' has many contrasted dispositions. What else is to be expected from the many who come here ? "

" And some people are rather difficult ! " suggested Jeannie.

" ' Hazeldene ' doesn't find them so," declared Mrs. Needle, without turning a hair. " Whatever may be their original dispositions, they're always quite satisfied after a little talk with ' Hazeldene.' "

Half an hour later, Jeannie was seated with Joe on a seat overlooking the sea. They had been followed by Baldwin, who, failing encouragement from Jeannie to accompany her, was reduced to self-consciously passing her at intervals of some minutes, a proceeding he occasionally varied by mimicking the peculiarities of any he might follow among the holiday-makers who lent themselves to caricature.

His admiring "young ladies," who were never very far away, unanimously voted his performance "killing," but if Jeannie had had any appreciation of his antics, it would have been dispelled by a sight to which Joe called her attention.

Nine torpedo boat destroyers in lines of three abreast were steaming menacingly in the direction of the North Sea. They were not going at any particular speed, and were seemingly within a stone's throw of the land, but their wicked-looking hulls, and the disciplined might (over and above their being a concrete reminder of Britain's lordship of the sea) they suggested, awoke the loudly expressed admiration of Joe, which communicated itself to Jeannie, who was also thrilled by the spectacle.

Joe was a patriot to the finger-tips, with an unquenchable enthusiasm for the heroic past and appealing present of the senior service; he had an immense fund of contempt for those who decried their country's greatness.

Small wonder was it that he watched the destroyers till they were specks on the horizon, an occupation in which he was imitated by his daughter.

The next morning, Jeannie was greatly distressed at having no news of Edgar; he had arranged to write every day; not receiving a letter, she almost worried herself into a fever with her lover-like apprehensions of something tragically terrible having overtaken him.

The day was so overpoweringly warm, and Jeannie so obsessed with fears for the loved one, that she resolved

to cool her body and occupy her mind by bathing in the sea.

The salt water soothed her; when, after a prolonged stay in the sea, she found she was some distance from her machine, she strode in its direction.

As she was proceeding thither with head erect, she was suddenly aware that Edgar was devouring her with his eyes from the parade.

She stood stockstill, while her heart beat wildly, painfully; it was only when he raised his straw hat that she realised the scantiness of her attire.

In the twinkling of an eye she flushed to the tips of her little ears; the next moment, she had dropped her head, and was running like a deer to her bathing-machine.

Eager to look her best, distressed at being so unexpectedly discovered in bathing kit, it was a considerable time before she ventured forth, to discover her lover impatiently, almost angrily, awaiting her.

When he saw her, however, she was overjoyed to see the delight which was at once expressed in his face.

"My beautiful Jeannie!" he said. "My beautiful, wonderful Jeannie," he murmured.

She was unable to speak, and ached to throw her arms about his neck; in order not to be guilty of such a flagrant impropriety, she looked seaward.

"I'd no idea you were so beautiful," he went on. "And I almost wish you weren't."

She threw a questioning little glance in his direction.

"It makes me love you," he said, as if in reply, to add as she did not speak: "Are you angry with me?"

"Why should I be?" she said, as her eyes sought the ground.

"For coming so unexpectedly."

She laughed happily.

"Now I know you're not. But you might tell me so."

"You wish me to?" she asked, with gathering confidence.

"I wish my Jeannie to tell me."

She did not speak for a moment, and he was about to press his request, when she said in a voice instinct with passion:

"I love you; I love you. I wanted you all the day, and you never came. I wanted you all—but you've come, and I love you."

"My Jeannie!"

"Perhaps I shouldn't tell you. But I can't help it. I love you, and nothing can ever alter it. It would be dishonest to say otherwise."

Her passion seemed to hypnotise him, for he stood as one enthralled. When he presently spoke, he said:

"That settles it."

"Settles what?"

"Never mind; but a none too strong-willed person is determined on one thing."

"Something to eat? I'm getting hungry myself."

"I'm going now, so you won't have long to wait."

"Edgar!" she cried, as she involuntarily put out her hands towards him.

"But I'll make quite an important little appointment for you in two days' time."

"What do you mean?"

"Meet me at the station by the train that gets into Broadstairs at 12.15. And wear your prettiest hat."

She questioned him for quite a long time as to what he meant by this mysterious appointment, but all she could get from him was:

"Little Jeannie will know all in good time, and if she's ever sorry, it's her fault for looking so charming when she came out of the water, and for saying the beautiful things she said just now."

It being one o'clock, and Jeannie being due at "Hazel-dene" for midday dinner, he would not suffer her even to

walk so far as the hotel, where he purposed having something to eat before returning immediately to town.

"Good-bye, little mermaid, and Thursday at 12.15," he told her, when he was at last able to tear himself away.

"Don't go," she pleaded. "If you do, you may never come back."

"That's what I'm after," he essayed to say laughingly, but the imminence of their parting caused his voice to harden.

"You don't mean that!" she cried.

"My sweetheart!" he said tenderly.

"You shouldn't say such things, even in joke. They hurt me."

The forgiveness he sought was speedily obtained, at which he said:

"If I'm to be back on Thursday, I must go now, but I'd give the world to kiss my Goldy Locks' red lips."

She did not reply, and averted her eyes.

"Wouldn't you like to be kissed?" he asked.

She appeared to hesitate before looking him in the face and slowly and repeatedly nodding her head.

When he was able to leave her, in defiance of the exigent proprieties of Broadstairs, she watched him until she could no longer see him.

Two days later, Jeannie waited in her prettiest hat, and in considerable trepidation for what would befall if Edgar came at the time appointed.

She knew an agony of suspense from the time the train was due until its arrival some minutes late, when, almost before she knew what had happened, she had been warmly welcomed by Edgar and introduced to a tall, eye-glassed, plain, distinguished-looking man who accompanied him; his name was Mountjoy.

Without giving Jeannie the least explanation of what he was at, he bundled her and his friend into a cab, and

gave a hasty direction to the driver before joining the others inside.

Jeannie had a confused impression of Edgar's wearing rather smarter clothes than usual, of Mountjoy's clever talk of any and everything, the while he narrowly appraised her, when the cab drew up before a church.

Jeannie looked at Edgar with apprehensive eyes, at which he said :

" Little Jeannie must do everything she's told, as this is my day out."

For all his lightly spoken words, Jeannie could see he was trembling with excitement.

It was only when she was well in the church that she could bring herself to realise that she was about to be joined for all time to the man of her choice.

Even when certain legal preliminaries with regard to the Special Licence had been settled in the vestry, and she and Edgar were standing before the altar with Mountjoy and the female pew-opener in attendance, it was as much as she could do to attend to what was toward : it seemed as if her heart must burst with the torrent of happiness which invaded it.

As one in a dream, she listened to the words that made them man and wife, a dream from which she feared to awaken at any moment, and discover the old obstacles between her desire and herself.

But the service persisted, the ring was put on her finger, and very soon she was signing her name in the register and receiving the congratulations of Mountjoy and the parson, at which she told herself how she was indeed living in a world of delicious reality.

Presently, husband and wife came out of the ill-lit church together (Mountjoy was settling up in the vestry), when the brilliant sunlight blinded their eyes, and enveloping them in its glory seemed to cut them off from the humdrum, workaday world.

They were silent, while Jeannie endeavoured to realise

how lavishly she had been blessed. Then, she glanced at her husband with a shy adoration, at which he said, as if speaking to himself:

"It's a duty I owed my love. I could do nothing else."

The words jarred her proud happiness.

"I don't want any man's charity," she retorted. The words were out of her mouth before she knew what she had said; she would have given much to recall them.

"I love you the more for your saying that, little Jeannie," he assured her, to add exultantly a moment or two later: "I've married the one woman in the world for me."

"Forgive me for what I said," she pleaded.

"There's no time for forgiveness. You're young and beautiful. I love you."

"Yes, my own dear, but——"

"But what, little Jeannie?"

"Won't this get you into trouble with——"

"All that be hanged," he interrupted. "I've thrown my cap over the—the—whatever it is. You're my beautiful Jeannie, now. Just think of it! And you love me, and I love you. I'm going to live."

CHAPTER XI

BAVERSTOCK MAKES A CALL

IN the days when Jeannie had built aerial love castles on the cliffs at Broadstairs, she devoutly believed that marriage with Edgar was the one thing needed to raise a cup of bliss to her lips which could never be emptied.

Now this desire was hers, she discovered that there were yet a considerable number of things she wanted in order to perfect her happiness.

Not that she did not enjoy many crowded moments of rapture on the few occasions she could contrive to be alone with her husband, but her enforced separations from him, and the fact of his seemingly being no nearer to providing her with a home and acknowledging their marriage to the world than he had been when he had wedded her four months back, were a constant source of tribulation to her.

As if this were not enough to distress her, there was the necessity of keeping the fact of her being a wife from Joe, and the attrition it produced on her affection for him.

This deception troubled her conscience; it was only loyalty to Edgar which prevented her from confessing her secret. But the concealment of her marriage, instead of increasing her regard for her father, had a contrary effect; with the perversity of feminine human nature, she visited on Joe much of the annoyance she felt for herself on account of her duplicity.

There were many exceptions to the trend of this behaviour, but on the whole the conviction that she was

in the wrong made her constantly believe that Joe suspected how matters stood, with the result that she would construe his most innocent remarks into subtle and irritating efforts to obtain the truth.

Also, Edgar's occasionally prolonged absences engendered accesses of hysterical despair when she told herself that her husband did not wish the marriage to be divulged as he was ashamed of the stock from which his wife had sprung. When possessed by this obsession she, to Joe's dismay, was sullen and fretful.

Over and above these prepossessions, Jeannie feared Joe's honest wrath when he discovered, as he inevitably must, how he had been deceived.

If Joe had been anything other than his unsuspecting, homespun self, he would have divined the state of affairs from Jeannie's eager welcome of Edgar when he called ; the atmosphere of love with which the two were surrounded ; the change in Jeannie's appearance.

Marriage had produced the inevitable alteration in her looks and figure, for while the latter had exquisitely developed, the expression of her face had awakened to such purpose that those who had eyes to see could perceive how she had fulfilled the natural destiny of comely womanhood.

Apart from her preoccupations, Jeannie had not the suspicion of an interest in life which was not identified with her husband ; wifehood had deepened and stimulated her love until it possessed her utterly ; indeed, her abject surrender of soul and body at his bidding had brought home to her, as nothing else could, how her happiness was at the mercy of his merest whim.

This afternoon, she walked in the direction of the Miss Hitches, to whom she was paying a long-deferred call, with her mind both elated and depressed.

She was aglow in expectation of a visit from Edgar in the evening, but was troubled by reason of quarrels with his father, of which he had made mention in the letter announcing his coming : too well was she aware that

these disagreements were caused by Reuben Baverstock's anger at his son's persistent attentions to Jeannie.

She knew well enough that, sooner or later, the marriage must be discovered by Baverstock, at which she trembled with apprehensions for her husband and his prospects at the Bar. So far as she was concerned, she would cheerfully suffer poverty, starvation, the worst the fates could send in her beloved's company, and account it high honour; but she could not be certain that the delicately nurtured Edgar's love would not be affected at being compelled to endure privations for her sake.

These thoughts troubled her, not only on the way to her two spinster friends, but when she was in their presence; she absently replied to their many inquiries respecting her own and her father's health.

When, with something of an effort, she forced herself to forget her worries for the time being, and devote her attention to her kindly hostesses, she noticed that a more elaborate tea than usual was provided; also, that the room was gay with knick-knacks and flowers, indulgences she had not noticed on her last visit.

A plate of hot muffins was handed to her; Jeannie, who had now more than recovered her appetite, was about to take off her gloves when she remembered that she had forgotten to remove the wedding ring, which delighted her eye when alone, from her finger.

In her trepidation, she helped herself to the greasy food with her gloved hands.

"Why don't you take off your gloves, dear?" asked Laura Hitch quickly.

"Thanks, I will directly."

"You'll ruin your gloves, dear," put in Elsie.

Jeannie put down her plate and nervously took off her right glove.

"Take them both off, dear," suggested Laura.

"I'm all right as I am," replied Jeannie, as she fell to devouring the muffins on her plate.

After desultory conversation on the sisters' part about the veriest trivialities, the elder sister asked :

"Have you heard any more, dear, of your friend, Gertrude Stubbs, who ran away and got married to a Mr. Scott ? "

"Not after the one letter I had."

"Of course you didn't reply to it," said Laura.

"Why shouldn't I ? "

"After her doing such a very dreadful thing ! They might not have been married for quite twenty-four hours after they ran away ! "

Jeannie, whose guilty conscience made sure the sisters were suspiciously eyeing her gloved hand, more or less adroitly changed the subject.

Presently, they spoke of good works. They hinted how, with the blessing of Providence, they had more than enough for their needs, and asked Jeannie's advice as to the best means of alleviating some of the world's distress of which, though ignorant, they had read much.

It must be confessed, however, that Jeannie's suggestions were neither very practical nor particularly sincere. Most of the time they were talking, she was hugging her romantic secret to her heart and pitying the two women because their lines had never been visited by the magic of love.

Jeannie had left her kindly friends, and was hurrying in the direction of the house her Edgar was to visit in the evening, when it occurred to her that on a previous visit to the Miss Hitches she had discovered an advertisement from a firm of "outside" Stock Exchange brokers. She had mentioned the matter to Edgar when on their way to the theatre, and she had not failed to convey to the two sisters the emphatic warning he had given respecting the danger of two unsophisticated women, or any one else for that matter, having financial dealings with such people.

For the best part of ten seconds, Jeannie wondered if her friends had ignored her advice ; also, if their increased

prosperity were due to fortunate speculations : the matter was forthwith forgotten in her tender apprehensions of her husband's coming.

She gave her father tea in the highest spirits, when, if she had not been preoccupied with the question of frocks and frills in which to look her best before her beloved, she might have been touched at noticing how pathetically Joe responded to her smiles and pretty ways : wrinkles were smoothed from a face that was alight with happiness ; he looked less grey than his wont ; it was as if years were lifted from his life.

Later, when she went singing upstairs to make her toilet, she had not been before her glass five minutes (and disposed to reproach herself for her extravagance in lighting two candles with which to dress) when she was so possessed by emotion at the thought of the furtive kisses she might exchange with her husband that she felt sick and faint, and had to rest on the bed before she recovered.

She was, presently, trying the effect of ribbons in her hair, and had decided on one of crimson, when she heard a knock at the door. Her heart leapt, but realising the next moment how the furtive knock she had heard was altogether different from Edgar's assertive summons, she went to the landing to learn who it was.

When the door was opened by the servant, she heard the clock mender ask for her father ; her elation was such that, regardless of her usual objections to Rabbitt's imposing on Joe, she called down to tell him to see if anything were wrong with the clock.

Twenty minutes later, she welcomed her husband, when she was disturbed at noticing a preoccupation that he was doing his utmost to conceal by a make-believe light-heartedness.

Jeannie ached for a chance of questioning him with regard to what was toward, but no opportunity being forthcoming just then, she was compelled to possess her

soul in patience. It may have been merely her fancy, but she had something of a suspicion that Joe was not so complacent with regard to her being alone with Edgar as he had been formerly, he rarely leaving them together more than he could help.

As long as the October light lasted, they all strolled in the little garden, husband and wife taking every opportunity of furtively holding each other's hands when they thought that neither Joe nor the inquisitive eyes of neighbours could see what they were at.

Presently, they came into the cosy dining-room where Rabbitt, lighted candle in hand, was tinkering with the clock, the while he dropped grease on the works.

The air being chilly, Joe lit the fire, at which Edgar and Jeannie made much ado of getting it up by holding a sheet of newspaper before the grate, this providing further opportunities for the meeting of hands.

When the fire burned brightly, father, daughter, and Edgar sat before it, the two men smoking—Joe a pipe, the other cigarettes.

Very soon Edgar's forced gaiety gave out, and Joe not being at the best of times much of a talker, the conversation would have flagged had not Jeannie made desperate efforts to keep things going: she had an intuitive dread of Edgar being bored in her company.

She spoke of anything and everything that came into her head. Presently, she made mention to Edgar of her having taken tea with the Miss Hitches.

"What did they talk about?" asked Joe.

"The usual."

"Scandal?"

"They still asked about Gertrude Scott, if that's what you mean."

"Too bad; too bad," explained Joe. "Even if your school-friend did do wrong, it's no reason why these hen-headed women should do little else but cackle about it."

"How did Gertrude do wrong?" asked Edgar.

"In running away as she did," replied Joe.

"But they got married."

"Maybe, but without their parents' approval," declared Joe severely, at which Jeannie felt cheap.

"Why do you speak so hardly of her?" asked Edgar.

"There may have been reasons, such as——"

"What reasons could there be?" interrupted Joe, with unusual warmth. "And what can a child of that age know about choosing a husband? And even if she's eager to marry a man, she's no business to take the matter entirely in her hands without saying a word to her parents."

Edgar's and Jeannie's eyes involuntarily met. Joe went on:

"There are cases, I know, when young people are miserable without each other. I say nothing about that: love is love, and there's no getting away from it. But just think of the lying and avoiding of the truth, and the subterfuges to meet, and all that kind of thing that went on before she took it into her head to get married."

Jeannie, if only for her own sake, attempted some defence.

"When she wrote to me, she was very happy."

"But she never answered your letter asking if you could go and see her."

"She's probably so happy she doesn't want to be bothered with any one else."

"Even if she is, I don't see your point, Jeannie."

"You won't let me finish, Joe. What I was going to say was that, if she's so very happy, her parents cannot, after all, complain very much, as that is what any father or mother would want more than anything else in the world."

"All very well, but as I look at it from the parents' point of view, there's something more to be said," declared Joe emphatically. "More likely than not, particularly as Gertrude was a pretty and charming girl——"

"Joe always has an eye for the girls," interrupted Jeannie inconsequently.

"I know a nice girl when I see one, but that is beside the point just now. What I say is this. That, most likely, Gertrude's parents, as fathers and mothers do all the world over, denied themselves in a thousand and one ways for their child, to say nothing of the love and care they lavished on her, and their endless anxieties on her account. And I say it's positively shameful for a daughter to marry secretly like that, and run the risk of breaking her parents' hearts, as Gertrude did."

He paused for breath, to ask, after a moment or two, of Edgar :

"What do you say, sir ?"

"I'm—I'm disposed to agree with you," replied Edgar feebly, while Jeannie knew an acute searching of heart on account of conduct identical to that which Joe had censured.

"Now let's talk of something pleasant," said Joe genially.

For the life of her, impressionable Jeannie could not respond to the invitation ; she sat moodily looking into the fire ; more than once she was within an ace of confessing the truth to Joe.

Divining Jeannie's preoccupation, Edgar pulled himself together, and talked to Joe of gardening and such-like things, which he believed would interest him. Also, he spoke to Joe of the possibility of his retiring in his forthcoming sixty-first year, and of where he proposed living when this happy consummation arrived, a subject that always mightily moved Pilcher.

To-night, he waxed almost eloquent on picturing the joys that might be his when the railway had no further call upon his time : he mentioned how Jeannie and he had often talked over the matter, but ended with a suggestion of despondency by saying :

"Perhaps it will never be."

"Why on earth not?" asked Edgar.

"Although it's a thing I've looked forward to, and worked for all my life, I fear it's too good to be true."

"I don't see why!" declared Edgar.

"So many things can happen to prevent it. But we won't say any more about that to-night. We're depressing Jeannie."

As the minutes passed, and the time approached for Joe to take what he called a "breather" at the front door, Jeannie anxiously watched Rabbitt to see if he would soon be done; unless he was out of the way when her father left the room there would be no opportunity either for endearments or learning what was troubling Edgar.

To-night, to Jeannie's infinite annoyance, Rabbitt did not seem to be making any progress: beyond dropping grease into the clock works, he appeared to be more interested in the little gathering in the room than eager to get on with his examination of the clock.

She also perceived how Edgar was possessed by a like apprehension, for he glared at Rabbitt as if he would gladly wring his neck.

At last, Joe got up and said he would take a few minutes at the front door, but when he left the room Rabbitt made as if he would follow him, faltered and stood staring at the lovers, candle in hand.

"Haven't you finished?" asked Jeannie impatiently.

"Scarcely, miss."

"Come another time. I—I don't like the idea of your being out so late."

"It's of no consequence, miss. My good lady is not expecting me for an hour." He aspirated the aitch.

Jeannie would have despaired had not Rabbitt, doubtless stimulated by her words, assiduously examined the clock works, at which husband and wife were able to converse in whispers.

"Curse that old fool!" began Edgar.

" Ssh ! "

" I'd like to throttle him."

Jeannie smiled. He went on :

" I believe he admires you, and sticks here on purpose. How is it he's here to-night ? "

" He called, and I asked him in."

" I see. You didn't want me to kiss you," he remarked, to add as she did not speak : " Is that it ? "

" If you like," she replied impatiently : she was eager to learn what was troubling his mind.

" Is my sweet angry ? " he asked, with an immense concern.

She told him how she was worried on his account, and it was only with coaxing that she could get out of him how things had come to a crisis with his father, who was threatening the sternest of measures unless Edgar fell in with his matrimonial designs.

" What is to be done ? " she asked despairingly.

" What can be done ? "

" It's bound to come out. And there's, also, father."

Edgar shrugged his shoulders.

" If you could only get something to do," she said.

" Eh ! "

" Then it wouldn't matter what any one said."

" What do you mean by my getting something to do ? "

" What is usually meant by that, dearest ? "

" Does my Jeannie mean I should take some sort of a job ? "

" Anything would be better than these dreadful separations. You can never know what I suffer when you're away."

" But you don't really want me to take—well, anything I could get ? "

" It would be better than nothing."

Edgar's face fell ; his eyes grew hard. His wife watched him apprehensively, while she was aware of a sinking of spirit. She was about to ask him how she

had offended him, when he laughed outright, before saying :

" I'm a regular Baverstock."

She looked at him with questioning eyes.

" Through and through. I'm a chip of the old block," he continued.

" Dear ! "

" What I mean is this. I've always rather despised my father's lot, and now I see I'm just the same as they, and all owing to what you asked of me."

" My suggesting your getting something to do ? " she asked timidly.

" That's it, little Jeannie. And I'm a thoroughgoing Baverstock, because I should think I'd had a big setback on the social ladder if I worked for any one else instead of for myself."

" Really ! " said Jeannie absently.

" Really and truly. I suppose I should be ashamed to confess it ; I am. But I shouldn't know myself if I had to be a clerk or anything of that sort."

Perhaps it was as well that Rabbitt got off his chair just then, and deferentially approached the fireplace, while Jeannie, for all her passion for her husband, was not a little jarred by his admissions ; her pride was wounded at his reluctance to take anything that offered in order to provide a home : also, his remarks seemed an unnecessary reflection on her father's occupation.

" What is it ? " asked Edgar of the clock mender.

" With the lady's permission, I should like a word with Mr. Pilcher."

" That's all right. How much ? " asked Edgar quickly.

" Nothing to-night, sir."

" Eh ! " exclaimed a surprised Edgar.

" There's nothing amiss with the works to-night, sir. The tick's most 'ealthy ; really most 'ealthy. But I should like a word with Mr. Pilcher on a matter of business."

"Tell me and get it over," suggested Edgar.

"Thank you, sir. To tell you the truth, I got a little backward with the rent, sir. And—and" (here Mr. Rabbitt's voice became deferential and gentle, as if by way of apologising for intruding such a vulgar matter on polite society) "they've 'put in,' sir."

"They've what?"

"'Put in,' sir: 'put in.' That is to say" (here his voice was hushed to a whisper) "there's a party in possession."

"That's all right. How much?"

"Well, sir, there's two weeks' rent and costs. Eleven shillings in all, sir," declared Mr. Rabbitt, as he handed two pieces of soiled blue paper to Jeannie, who, in glancing at these, perceived it was an inventory of the clock mender's furniture. It comprised three Windsor chairs, one kitchen table, and a sofa; the lot was valued at eleven shillings.

Edgar made Rabbitt's watery eyes glisten with delight by giving him some loose silver; a few moments later, when Jeannie had dismissed him to the kitchen with the candle, and two shillings from her own pocket, husband and wife were alone.

"At last!" said Edgar, under his breath.

Jeannie remained motionless, at which he exclaimed:

"My sweet!"

Although he placed his arm about her, she was still unresponsive to his caress.

"Your father will be back directly," he went on. Then, as she still kept silent, and moodily stared into the fire, he asked with increased ardour:

"Is my dearest angry?"

She merely shook her head, at which, with a wealth of endearment, he sought to discover what was amiss.

At first, Jeannie had been coy because she was troubled by her husband's point of view with regard to getting any employment that offered, and it is notorious that worry is the enemy to the various manifestations of love; also, as

has been stated, she was annoyed at the reflection he had made on Joe's means of livelihood.

Very soon, however, she was finding excuses for Edgar, telling herself that, in being different from every one else, she could not expect him to behave as might an ordinary man in the same circumstances.

Also, his ardent protestations fired her young blood, and made music in her ears: she was on the point of surrendering to his embraces, when Joe slammed the front door before returning to the room.

Half an hour later, Rabbitt had long since gone, and after Joe had delivered himself of his forecast of to-morrow's weather, sausages and mashed potatoes, cooked by Jeannie, were served up hot for supper.

-As if by way of atoning for her previous coldness, Jeannie was prettily playful and, when opportunity offered, tenderly affectionate to Edgar.

Presently, she produced her wedding ring and mischievously passed it under the table to her husband. He fell in with her mood; after pretending he had lost it, he was about to hand it back in reply to her furtive signals, when a resounding double knock was heard on the front door.

"Who can it be?" asked Joe's and Jeannie's eyes of each other, while Edgar shifted uneasily on his chair; in his apprehension of what was toward, he slipped his wife's ring into a waistcoat pocket.

Three minutes later, when the servant had answered the door, Baverstock was shown into the dining-room. He was in evening-dress; although his lips smiled pleasantly enough, Jeannie trembled at seeing how his eyes were unusually hard under his shaggy eyebrows.

He bowed to Jeannie; after his gaze had lingered appreciatingly on her for a moment, he glanced coldly at Edgar before greeting Joe with a "Good evening."

"Good evening, sir," said Joe, who, although he had not met Baverstock to before, knew the owner of "Pyrantha" very well by sight. "Won't you take a seat?"

"Thank you, but as I much regret to say I've come on a somewhat unpleasant matter, perhaps I'd better stand."

"Sir!" exclaimed an astonished Joe.

"Please bear in mind what I have come to say is dictated quite as much by consideration for your daughter as by anything else."

"Please leave Miss Pilcher out of it," exclaimed Edgar angrily, as he rose from his seat.

"I'll speak to you directly," said Baverstock to Edgar, with a menacing lapse from his previous civility.

Turning to Joe, he went on:

"It is only fair to you and your very charming daughter" (there was a note of sincerity in his voice when he eulogised Jeannie) "to tell you that my son's constant visits here can only end in unhappiness for all concerned."

He had not meant to broach the reason of his visit so bluntly, but the sight of the homely meal of sausages had stimulated his ire, convincing him, as nothing else could, of the hopelessly middle-class instincts of the family with which his son was so intimate.

"How dare you?" cried Edgar.

"I—I don't understand," exclaimed Joe, the colour heightening in his face.

"I told you I came on unpleasant business, and the sooner I get it over the better. That is why I must ask you to excuse my plain speaking, which is quite as painful to me as to you."

"I—I don't understand at all, sir," said Joe. "D'ye mean to say that my Jeannie is running after your son?"

"Nothing of the kind. I've warned Edgar over and over again of his folly."

"Folly!" cried Joe.

"I shouldn't have said that. I've warned Edgar again and again of the unhappiness he is causing, and since he wouldn't listen, I conceived it to be my duty to come and put an end to it once and for all."

Joe had paid no attention to Baverstock's last words : the word "folly" possessed his mind to the exclusion of everything else.

"I can't see its folly to be attracted by my Jeannie," declared Joe doggedly.

"Quite right," cried Edgar

"You mistake my meaning," said Baverstock curtly : he was more angered than ever at Edgar's open defiance of his authority. "You mistake my meaning. It has long been understood Edgar should marry elsewhere, and——"

"Rot——!" interrupted Edgar.

"It's not what you call 'rot,'" retorted his father "The lady I refer to is the right sort of wife for you in every respect, while——!"

"Don't say any more!" interrupted Edgar.

"Sir!"

"Don't say any more."

"I will have my say. I repeat, she is the right sort of wife——!"

"Stop!" cried Joe.

"But——"

"Stop, sir. You forget yourself."

"Let me——"

"Don't listen," interposed Edgar excitedly. "Don't listen to anything he says."

"I will speak," declared Joe, who, in his righteous wrath, seemed to acquire personality, stature, and authority. "Your coming here like this, and saying what you've said, is a reflection on my daughter."

Baverstock would have spoken, but Joe persisted.

"You may not think my girl good enough for you and yours, but I tell you to your face, sir, she's as good a girl, as true a girl, as honest a girl a father was ever blessed with. She mayn't have birth or money, as those things sometimes are, but she would be a treasure to the best man in the world. And for you to come and tell me

she's not good enough for your son, and to insinuate we are running after him is nothing short of infamous. We are not like that ; and as for my daughter, she's gold all through, and she's my little Jeannie, and—and——" Emotion choked his utterance, sensibly affected Baverstock, who could always be sentimental for five minutes at a stretch, and disposed Jeannie to go to her father and throw her arms about his neck. She was on the point of doing this, when Edgar, who had been nervously fidgeting his hands in his waistcoat pockets, sharply withdrew them, at which his wife's wedding ring was unwittingly jerked on to the table, where it lay in full view of the others.

Jeannie's heart seemed to leap into her throat ; she thought she was going to faint, but she recovered herself in order to lessen her father's grief and anger at the deception she had practised.

She looked at him with an immense apprehension, to see that he stood as if he were turned into stone. She was about to sink at his feet and implore his forgiveness, when he suddenly held out his arms.

She flew to their embrace, when she was conscious that he was defiantly regarding a dumbfounded Baverstock over her shoulder.

CHAPTER XII

21 ELM GROVE, W.

"WHAT time is it ? "

" Nearly half-past seven, dear."

" Sure ? "

" I just heard it strike on St. Paul's."

" Why doesn't Kate bring the tea ? " yawned Edgar.

" It's only just time for her to get up. She doesn't bring the tea till eight."

" Anyway, you might try it on : I'm dying for a cup."

Jeannie, not a little hurt that her husband had not offered to kiss her on awakening, called Kate loudly twice. Not getting a reply, she slipped out of bed, and putting on her slippers, went to the servant's door, where she asked Kate if she were getting up.

" It's not yet half-past seven," replied Kate, and much too sharply for her mistress's liking.

" Isn't it ? " asked Jeannie feebly. For all her dislike of Kate, she knew she was by way of being a treasure, and therefore was compelled to humour her.

" No, ma'am. It's just past seven. And I don't get up till half-past."

" Be as quick as you can when you do get up," urged Jeannie, as she returned to her room. When she got into bed, she found her husband was dozing. Knowing the impossibility of getting any more sleep, she lay stark awake, and suffered her mind to dwell on the possibility of Edgar's obtaining a much-needed billet, the bestowing of which was to be decided on that day. Then, the fact of his omitting to kiss her when he awoke stuck in her

mind, and made her anxiously wonder if his love for her were waning.

As if to heal her hurt on this score, she fell to recalling the early days of their married life, and the thousand and one proofs her mind treasured of his passionate adoration of his wife.

While gratefully dwelling on these recollections, she caught sight of a slit of intensely blue sky, which the fluttering of the blind revealed above the roof of the opposite house.

In a moment, this bit of colour stimulated memories of a glorious six weeks she and Edgar had spent in the Italian Riviera almost immediately after their marriage had been discovered by Baverstock.

Edgar had inherited from an aunt sufficient capital to bring him in fifty pounds a year: although Jeannie, with her intense sense of the value of money, would have preferred to commence housekeeping in furnished rooms till her husband could get something to do (all question of his succeeding at the Bar was now at an end, owing to Baverstock's anger at his son's marriage), Edgar had insisted on raising a hundred pounds and taking his wife first to Paris, next to the south of France, finally to Bordighera, a small town on the Gulf of Genoa.

Jeannie's objections to this extravagance were speedily forgotten in the delights of travel with her husband. She had never been out of England before; the complete change of atmosphere was alone sufficient to stir her emotions; the additional fact of her being day and night in the company of the man she worshipped had moved her to the depths of her being.

Edgar, with money in his pocket, had not a care in the world, unless, perhaps, a constant anxiety to please his Jeannie, which concern was not a little stimulated at perceiving how her winsome fairness was appreciated by the Latins they encountered.

When they reached the Mediterranean, Edgar was all

for staying at Monte Carlo, where, on the night of their arrival, Jeannie won four pounds and her husband lost eight at roulette. If she had married a rich man, she would have fallen in with his wish; knowing full well there was every possibility of troublous times ahead, the ostentatious display of wealth on every hand irked and depressed her.

An hotel acquaintance had recommended Bordighera for a day's excursion; when Jeannie and Edgar had walked to Ventimilia, and finding the heat too much for them, had taken the tram to their destination, she thought she had never seen anything so uninteresting as the lower town, or anything so delightful as the old one: she had besought Edgar to pitch their tent in the latter place, and had not rested till he had done as she wished.

From their room in the smallish hotel where they stayed, Jeannie had looked across the palm trees in the garden, the steeply terraced way of the Strada Romana, to the intense blue of the Mediterranean: should she glance in the contrary direction, she saw the yellow walls, the sage green shutters, the campanile with its queer round top of many colours, of the old town, which, for all its solidity, seemed but a pigmy bit of masonry when compared with the stupendous magnificence of the Maritime Alps, which majestically towered behind.

The glorious beauty of her surroundings, the atmosphere of passionate devotion with which she was surrounded had, for the time being, carried Jeannie off her little feet. She could not believe how the old prosaic days in humdrum Putney were part and parcel of this gorgeously-hued, romantic life.

As Jeannie lay in bed, she recalled the mornings she and Edgar had spent in the hotel garden, where the rough trunks of the palms looked as if they had been bound up for their greater protection in cocoa-nut fibre matting. Of an afternoon, if not too hot, they would stroll through the cloistered ways of the old town where, through one

tall narrow arch, they would catch a glimpse of the picturesquely clad children who, sitting on the rocks, dangled their feet in the breakers ; through another, an awe-inspiring view of the eternal Alps, while the glory of sky and sea glowed with a more intense blue by reason of the passion that possessed her.

There had been one particular spot where they had loved to linger, this the Piazza della Fontana, a deserted square surrounded by tall houses ; it contained a large copper fountain, the plashing water of which made melancholy music for the lovers, and in seemingly insisting on the ruthless passage of time urged them to make the most of their youth and love and happiness.

That was then.

Immediately they had started on the return journey, Jeannie had been obsessed with apprehensions for the future, which Edgar's optimistic light-heartedness altogether failed to allay ; when she had arrived in London, her fears darkened the hues of a city which, without any efforts on her part, looked dull enough after the blue glory of the place she had left.

Joe had warmly pressed husband and wife to make a long stay with him, but Edgar had elected to take a house ; as the strictest economy was necessary even to his volatile nature, one had been selected in Elm Grove, Hammer-smith, the small rent of which contributed to this requirement.

Elm Grove was a quiet little street of old-fashioned, stucco-faced, semi-detached houses ; it ran from the High Road, by one side of the West London Hospital, till it came to a full stop at the brick wall of a local notability's garden.

The furnishing of their house made further inroads into Edgar's scanty capital, which was further depleted to provide the wherewithal to live.

Here, Edgar had valiantly striven to obtain work, to discover how, for all his Cambridge education, he had no

marketable qualifications. Things had looked desperate till a few days back, when he had been surprised to hear from Turk, one of his father's partners, that he would probably be able to obtain for him the secretaryship of a company in which he was interested, should Edgar still be in want of a job.

Edgar had made immediate application for the billet ; he was to hear that day if he had secured it, and this was the matter that Jeannie avoided dwelling upon, holding as it did such dire facilities for nerve-racking worry.

So far, husband and wife had heard nothing from Baverstock or Bevill.

Mrs. Baverstock had written Jeannie a letter containing the tenderest wishes for her own and Edgar's welfare, together with an expressed hope that she would be able to call on her daughter-in-law on some future occasion.

Mabel, who visited her brother and Jeannie in defiance of her father's prohibitions, told them how her mother was eager for a reconciliation, but that this was hotly opposed by Baverstock.

Jeannie was deeply hurt by her father-in-law's behaviour ; she readily understood how she and Edgar had offended, but believed that his determination to ignore her was dictated by the conviction that she was socially no fit mate for Edgar.

This impression incensed her profoundly whenever she suffered her mind to think of it. She recalled how all the men, and many of the women, she had met abroad had delighted to do her honour ; she had always possessed social ambitions and ached to find them employment if only to prove to Baverstock that Edgar had not done so badly after all in taking her winsome person to wife. But whenever she gave the matter thought, she bitterly laughed to herself at realising how such things were absolutely impossible without money.

With the exception of Joe, the Hiblings, who sometimes

came over from Fulham, Mabel, and Edgar's friend Mountjoy, they did not see a soul. She had not even the ghost of an acquaintance even in humble Elm Grove, the houses seemingly being inhabited by people such as herself who were too poor to make friends from fear of being put to the cost of entertaining them, even in the humblest manner.

For all those drawbacks, Jeannie, in her heart of hearts, was superlatively happy; whatever apprehensions menaced her, she, in loving and being loved, breathed the very essence of romance; this seemed to steep her days in a perfume that subtly beautified her life.

Suddenly, her mind harked back to her husband's forgetting to give her his customary kiss on awakening, which omission she coupled with a latent tendency to irritability on his part.

She recalled with a pang the glorious nights at Bordighera when he had been unable to sleep unless he had pillowed his head upon her wildly beating heart.

Their intimacy had been such that there had been no reservations on her part, with the consequence that her passion had grown to a fulness compared to which the love of her married days at Putney seemed a thing of no account.

Here it may be remarked that, if Edgar were disposed to take his wife's love as a matter of course, Jeannie had only herself to thank.

If, instead of constantly giving him the impression that he had done a noble thing in taking pity upon her, she had occasionally used him hardly, and repulsed his advances when he had believed he had offended her, she would have had him at her feet. As it was, she was but another illustration of the fact that in the inevitable contest for supremacy between husband and wife, it is the one more passionately in love who comes off second best.

Punctually at eight, Kate brought in the tea and

bread and butter, together with the morning's post, which consisted of various bills and a letter for Edgar addressed in Mountjoy's handwriting.

On being awakened, Edgar tossed the bills aside and read his letter while he sipped his tea.

Jeannie, of set purpose, held her peace.

Presently, after swallowing a mouthful of bread and butter, Edgar lit one of the cigarettes he kept handy at the bedside. He had not smoked for very long before he was sensible of his wife's silence; he quickly turned his attention to her, which should have been a valuable object-lesson to Jeannie.

"Why so silent?" he began.

"Am I?"

"Aren't you feeling all right?"

"Quite."

"Worrying about that secretary business?"

"Not exactly."

"That'll be all right, sweetest. I feel quite certain about it."

Jeannie did not speak.

"Mountjoy wants me to lunch with him to-day," he went on.

"Why don't you?"

"Want to be rid of me, 'Goldy Locks'?"

"Why shouldn't you lunch out with your friend?"

"He wants me to go to his club. And that reminds me, my club subscription isn't paid. I cancelled the bank order weeks ago, and now they send the notice to me."

"Why don't you pay it?"

"I can't afford it now, little Jeannie," he declared, to add quickly, as she made as if she would get out of bed: "Going to get up?"

"There's a lot to do to-day. Father's coming in this evening."

"Still——"

"Good-bye," cried Jeannie, as she drew her knees from the bedclothes.

"Why this haste?" he asked, as he threw away his cigarette.

"Because—because you didn't kiss me this morning."

"I'll make up for it now."

She would have avoided him, but he was too quick for her, and directly his hand touched her arm she was helpless.

When they came down to breakfast, the printed communication from the club stared them in the face from the overmantel in which it had been stuck: it was a symbol of the economies that men who marry on insufficient means are forced to make, and as such it jarred both husband and wife, and interfered with their enjoyment of the meal.

After breakfast, Edgar smoked a pipe while he looked down the "wants" columns of the *Daily Telegraph* with the usual dismal results to one who read with Edgar's now practised eye.

Presently, he put down the paper with something that sounded suspiciously like a sigh.

"Worrying about to-day?" asked Jeannie.

"I am now."

"Worrying won't help us," she faltered.

"After all, I think I'll lunch with Mountjoy if you don't mind."

"Why shouldn't you, dear?" suggested Jeannie; she would have much preferred to have Edgar at home.

"It will take my mind from this ghastly suspense."

"I'll tell Kate," she said, as she left the room in order to hide her chagrin at his decision.

When she came back, he was looking moodily into the fire.

"Still worrying?" she asked.

"I was thinking about your father."

"What of Joe?"

"We don't see very much of him."

"He always comes when he's asked, and it's rather awkward getting to Putney from Hammersmith late at night. And when daughters marry, parents like to leave them alone for a bit," explained Jeannie, in the manner of one conscious of the weakness of her case.

"Anyway, he's coming this evening."

"Yes, he's coming this evening," repeated Jeannie, as if this fact atoned for any remissness with regard to Joe of which she may have been guilty.

Jeannie spent the best part of the morning engaged in household matters, the most immediate of which were the cleaning of the Sheffield-plated cruets, one of Joe's wedding presents to her, and the making of a steak and kidney pie and strawberry tarts for the evening.

These preparations brought her into contact with Kate, a hard-featured, angular young woman who, knowing her value, was most precise in her work, not doing anything other than she conceived to be her duty.

For all the unpleasantness caused by proximity to such an unpleasing person, Jeannie found an abiding joy in her work, inasmuch as it was a labour for the comfort and well-being of the loved one.

Presently, when Edgar called to Jeannie that he was about to go, she went to him with heart abeat; as she put her arms about him in order to kiss him, she hoped he would not notice how she clung to him as if she could never loosen her hold.

"Wish me luck," he said, as he made for the door.

"With all my heart," replied Jeannie, and with such passionate earnestness, that her husband looked at her in surprise before clasping her to his heart.

The home she loved was like a desert when he had gone; to enable her to forget her loneliness, she worked hard, and to such purpose that she was quite hungry when she sat down to her midday meal.

In the interests of economy, she had intended having

bread and cheese and cocoa, but she was now in such appetite, she resolved to have an egg; being disposed, however, to reproach herself for this extravagance, she compromised with her conscience by having a "fresh" as compared with a new-laid one.

After her frugal meal, she recollected that there was no whisky in the house. As the price of a bottle would make serious inroads on her scanty housekeeping allowance, she did what she had done before when Mountjoy had been invited for the evening; she sent Kate to a public-house for a shilling's worth of whisky which, when obtained, was emptied into a decanter where, to Jeannie's honest eyes, the spirit seemed to be conscious it was there under false pretences.

During the afternoon, she was in a fever of trepidation as to what would befall with regard to the appointment. Towards five, she heard the postman's knock coming down the little street, at which she could hardly contain herself for excitement. When he came in at the gate of 21, she feared she would never have the courage to open the fateful letter if it arrived in her husband's absence.

Sure enough a letter addressed to her husband in Turk's writing was dropped into the box; as it was marked "immediate," Jeannie opened it, in order to be able to tell her husband the news he was eager to hear when he reached home.

She read how Turk regretted his recommendation had been overborne with regard to the secretaryship, but that he could offer Edgar a clerkship in the new company he was forming at three pounds a week, if he cared to accept it.

If her husband had been other than he was, that is to say not a Baverstock, she knew he would have jumped at the offer of such a comparatively humble position; but Jeannie, besides being aware how bitterly disappointed Edgar would be, doubted whether his pride would suffer him to take the proffered billet.

In any case, he would have to resign his club, which she knew would be a bitter deprivation for him.

Her dismal cogitations were interrupted by Edgar's step in the little front garden. She crammed the letter into her pocket, undecided whether or not to tell him the bad tidings at once; when, ever so pleased with himself, he came into the room, she resolved to postpone communicating the purport of Turk's letter for so long as she dared.

"Any news?" he asked, as he affectionately greeted her.

She shook her head.

"No news, good news," he cried. "I know, little Jeannie, it'll all be right as rain. I've an idea it will be, and that sort of thing never plays me false."

"You seem very happy," she remarked, striving valiantly to be cheerful.

"I am. It does one good to get out and mix with one's kind. That's why, between ourselves, I'm not at all keen on dropping my club. What about tea?"

She rang the bell, when Edgar said:

"I quite forgot. Mountjoy is likely to look in this evening."

"But father's coming!"

"Eh! I forgot that when I asked him. But the more the merrier. And after all he mayn't come."

"He mayn't come," repeated Jeannie.

Joe was expected about half-past six. Just before that time, Edgar went into the dining-room, where dinner was ready laid out, in order to get some tobacco. His eye fell on the great Sheffield-plated cruet-stand, which occupied the place of honour in the centre of the table.

"What on earth is that doing there?" he asked of Jeannie, who had followed him into the room.

"Why shouldn't it be there?" she asked, in surprise.

"Surely you know it's very bad form nowadays to have a cruet on the table!"

"But it's one of father's wedding presents."

"I meant to mention it before, little Jeannie. And as there's no time like the present, you'd better put it away."

"But it belonged to mother."

"Do what I ask, dearest."

"And Joe will expect to see it."

"If he does, you can easily give some excuse."

Jeannie made further protests, but seeing how seriously Edgar took the matter she, at last, returned the cruet-stand to the cupboard in which it was kept when not in use.

It was an anxious-faced Joe who arrived a few minutes later, being greatly worried at the prospects of the young couple. As invariably happened upon his infrequent visits, he did not come empty-handed. This time, he brought a handsome pair of old brass candlesticks, which he suggested might do for Edgar's writing-table.

Joe had not been in the tiny drawing-room five minutes when Jeannie, who had a keen sense of atmosphere, was aware of the difference between her present social point of view and that of her father's which, to some extent, represented the outlook she had known before her marriage. So much had she appreciated since living with Edgar and unconsciously imbibing his prejudice, that even the most select opinions of once-honoured Clarence College now appeared to be rather small beer.

If a good-natured friend had been at hand to tell Jeannie she had only become more snobbish, the latter would have put down the other's candour to some form of jealousy on account of her having married the peerless Edgar.

To-night, she was so distressed on account of his failure to obtain the coveted berth, fearful of how he would take the news, that she was moodily silent.

Her depression reacted on Joe, who was narrowly watching her, in order to discover if she were anything like as happy as he wished her to be. The evening would have been a dismal failure but for Edgar, who was in the highest spirits, and looking forward to Mountjoy's arrival.

His exuberance was, presently, infectious in so far as it set Joe talking.

"There's rather bad news about some old friends of yours," he said to Jeannie.

"Indeed! Who?"

"The Miss Hitches. It seems they've been speculating, and have lost everything."

"What will they do?" asked Jeanie, whose own troubles were so immediate that other people's seemed remote.

"Goodness knows. Though I've no reason to like them beyond their being kind to you, I'm quite worried about them," replied Joe.

"Are they the old girls I told you to warn?" asked Edgar.

"I believe I did tell them what you said," Jeannie informed him.

"It's greed and nothing else that has sent them wrong. Not content with what they've got, they listen to the first shark who tells 'em money can be had for the asking," declared Edgar.

Dinner was put back a quarter of an hour in anticipation of Mountjoy's coming; on his failing to put in an appearance, a move was made for the dining-room, where an attack was made on Jeannie's pie, which was served by the host and handed round by Kate, who, rather to Joe's discomfiture, had been carefully trained by Edgar to wait at table.

"No sign of the postman yet, Jeannie," said Edgar, when they were seated.

"Not yet," she replied.

"Expecting good news?" asked Joe.

"Rather. And I'm going to get it," answered Edgar.

"Good," exclaimed Joe, with his mouth full of steak and kidney pie. When he had swallowed it, he said:

"This pie is very good."

"Isn't it!" from Edgar.

"Is it home-made?"

Although Jeannie had made it herself, her devotion to an abstract social ambition caused her to ask of Kate:

"Kate! Is this pie home-made?"

Before the words were out of her mouth, she regretted such behaviour in her father's company.

"Yes, ma'am," promptly replied Kate.

"It is home-made," said Jeannie, in a subdued voice, at which Joe, who had recognised his daughter's light hand in the pastry, shifted uneasily in his seat, and seemed to be suddenly deprived of appetite.

A silence fell on the little gathering: it was, presently, broken by Joe, who was anxious the evening should go off well.

"Although it's been a fine day, I expect it will rain to-morrow," he began.

"There's the weather prophet!" smiled Jeannie.

"The wind's in the south-west and all the week it's been due east. Apart from the sudden change, there was a circle round the moon last night."

A little later, he said:

"I saw Coop last night."

"How is he?" asked Jeannie.

"Going on famously. He asked after you."

"Very nice of him."

"And he's getting on well with the house he's putting up next to your husband's respected father's. He expects to be in in a very few months now."

"You should hear what my father has to say about that confounded house," laughed Edgar. "I believe worrying about it keeps him awake at night."

"Has Mr. Coop any family yet?" asked Jeannie.

"No, I'm sorry to say. He's so devoted to children, like some one else I could mention."

Jeannie deftly turned the subject into less embarrassing channels. When the tarts and custard were on the table, Joe surprised her by saying:

"I'm giving up the house, Jeannie."

"Joe!"

"It's too big for me now, and what with one thing and another, I think it's the best thing to be done."

She did not speak for a moment, old associations flooding her mind.

"But what are you going to do?" she, presently, asked.

"I shall take a room somewhere. It isn't very much that I want."

"But what about the furniture and all the old things?"

"I shall keep the best, and you'd better tell me what you want, as it will all be yours some day."

"You won't get rid of the clock?"

"The old grandfather! Never that, Jeannie. He's too old a friend to lose after all these years. Why! I was listening to his ticking in the minutes before you were born."

When the simple meal was over, Joe furnished a further surprise to Jeannie.

"I'm not living alone, Jeannie," he began.

"What do you mean?"

"For all my objections to letting you have a dog, I've got one myself."

"What is he?" asked Edgar.

"It's a she. A mongrel, but such a dear. I found her starving in the road, and when I took her back and fed her, she made such a fuss of me I hadn't the heart to turn her out."

"What do you call her?" asked Jeannie.

"'Lassie.' I've only had her a week, but we're absurdly attached to one another already."

Jeannie was sorry she had asked Kate if the pie were home-made.

This was not the only regret she knew.

Apart from the knowledge that the old home she remembered so well was to be broken up, she had an uneasy

sense that the social ideals she cherished were scarcely so admirable as she usually believed them to be, which conviction was caused by the sheer honesty inspired by Joe's homespun personality.

So far as her worries would permit, she was more considerate to Joe than she had been for some time.

"What about your retiring from the railway?" she asked.

"That can wait," he informed her.

"You mean to say you're not going to retire as soon as you can?" she asked, in amazement.

"There's no knowing what I'm going to do," he replied evasively.

"But—but——"

"I shall be quite happy whatever I do," he told her.

When he was about to go, after taking an affectionate leave of Jeannie, a cordial one of her husband, he fidgeted uneasily before saying:

"I don't know how you young people are getting on, but if you are ever in any fix you have only to come to me."

"I shouldn't think of it, Joe," protested Jeannie.

"I know I'm a poor man, but I'm not so poor that I might not be able to give you a lift. Good-night, dear. And God bless you both."

When Edgar was showing him out, Jeannie was following, when she was seized with terror at realising how she must interfere with her husband's high spirits by communicating Turk's ill news. She fearfully wondered how he would take it, as she hastened into the dining-room where the application for the club subscription stared her reproachfully in the face.

The slamming of the door was followed by the appearance of her husband, who, as he came into the room, asked:

"I wonder what on earth happened to Mountjoy, little Jeannie?"

She did not reply, at which he looked at her, to discover her forlorn appearance.

"What is it, little Jeannie?"

"I've bad news, dear."

"Bills?"

She handed him the fateful letter, which he took and read without saying a word.

His silence persisting, she glanced at him timidly: his face was set and hard.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked.

"I—I didn't want to spoil your evening," she faltered.

"A clerkship: a damned clerkship! I suppose I shall have to take it. But a damned clerkship!" He paced the little room greatly agitated, when he perceived that Jeannie's eyes were aswim with tears.

"I am a brute," he remarked reproachfully.

"Dearest!"

"I'm only thinking of myself when all the time you've been suffering in order to give me a happy evening. Forgive me, sweetheart."

He took her in his arms; while he kissed happiness into her eyes, he reached behind her and, taking the application from the club, he crunched it in his hand before throwing it into the fireplace.

CHAPTER XIII

TEA AT TITTERTON'S

FOR all Edgar's appreciation of Jeannie's concealment of the indifferent news from Turk, he was not one of the many who take to the ignominious drudgery of City employment with a light heart.

It irked him not a little to have to leave Hammersmith station by the 9.8 on weekdays in order to be on his stool at ten. He hated the regular hours, the ordered work, the confinement indoors; he had little or nothing in common with his fellow-workers, and when he came home quite tired out at something after six, Jeannie found it as much as she could do to coax him into any approach to his normal light-hearted self.

Otherwise, the three pounds a week he earned made a considerable difference to the little household, stopping the frequent calls which had been made on Edgar's dwindling capital.

Jeannie was an admirable housekeeper; she had the knack of getting more out of sixpence than most people from a shilling; indeed, husband and wife could have lived with some approach to comfort of sorts were it not for the former's extravagant leanings.

He would frequently ask Mountjoy home to dinner, when he would expect a presentable meal to be served: he indulged in cigars and such-like trifling luxuries, and had an indifferent sense of the value of money: the little presents he frequently bought Jeannie, while delighting his wife, caused her many anxious moments by reason of their cost, however insignificant it might be.

Although the weeks were speeding, and it was now summer, Baverstock still ignored his son's existence; Bevill did likewise with regard to his brother, while Mrs. Baverstock had not yet found time to call.

From what Mabel divulged on the erratic visits she paid to Elm Grove, Jeannie gathered how Edgar's headstrong sister frequently gave her parents what she called "a warm time."

Although Joe had long since given up his little house and gone to live in rooms at Putney, Jeannie did not see so much of him as she might have done, considering that he made use of Hammersmith station twice every weekday: he never called unless asked, and such invitations were infrequently given owing to Edgar being tired of an evening, at least, so Jeannie told herself.

She did not mean to be unkind to Joe, but she was so wrapped up in the object of her love that she had little thought for anything else in the world.

Also, as on the occasion of Joe's visit on the evening Edgar had been disappointed of his expected employment, her father's transparent honesty gave her inconvenient searchings of heart with regard to social pretensions she had known since she had married Edgar.

As if this were not enough to discourage her from inviting her father, she believed that his presence served to urge upon her husband that his troubles were caused by his quixotic marriage.

Occasionally, should she happen to go out of an evening, she would fancy she saw some one very like Joe hovering about at the High Road end of the little street; but when she reached the main thoroughfare, this person was not to be seen, at which she would put down the impression to fancy. She was still possessed by social ambitions, but realised their futility while they were still so badly off.

True, she had made the acquaintance of a buxom matron when shopping, and had been asked first to call and then to an "Early and Social" at that person's house in the

Grove, Hammersmith, which invitation she had accepted on learning that Edgar was dining with Mountjoy on the same evening. Mrs. Blowers, her hostess, was the mother of a large family of varied musical accomplishments, and the entertainment consisted of the playing of the different instruments her sons and daughters had laboriously learned.

Mr. Blowers, who, his wife informed Jeannie, was a bank official, whatever that was, although he did not put in an appearance, made a distinct impression on the company. Believing that the world would be better for going to bed in good time, he turned off the gas at the meter punctually at ten, at which the guests had to say good-night, and find their way out with the aid of matches lit by members of the Blowers family, who made urgent requests that the musical instruments, which were lying about, should not be trodden upon.

Apart from her perfunctory acquaintance with this family, Jeannie's only other callers were her husband's cousins, the Hiblings; indeed, with Mrs. Hibling she had struck up something of a friendship. The latter came about once a week, when she retailed to Jeannie the long list of society notabilities whom she knew by sight and had encountered in her walks.

Yet, for all her prepossessions with regard to the endeavour to make two reluctant ends meet, Jeannie was, on the whole, supremely happy; indeed she never realised how blissful her life was until her later years of stress.

Her ever-deepening love for her husband seemed, as if with the touch of a magician's wand, to ennoble and beautify the commonest household tasks with which it gladdened her heart to take infinite pains, inasmuch as she was doing something for the loved one and his home.

Those who passed the faded, stucco, semi-detached villa, had not the remotest conception of the golden, romantic happiness its walls enshrined.

One August morning, Jeannie came down to breakfast

betimes ; she went into the little front garden by way of the French windows, in order to pick for the breakfast-table a few flowers she had contrived to grow.

Outside the front door were the two papers, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Morning Post*, which Edgar had ordered to be delivered every morning. Jeannie, so far as she would admit that her husband could do other than right, rather objected to the extravagance which, in her opinion, these papers denoted. She could have used the shilling a week they represented to good purpose in her household expenditure ; also, as she had no interest in anything that did not pertain to her home, she found it hard to believe her husband was not of the same mind.

Then she fell to thinking of his description of a board meeting of the company that employed him, particularly of one of the directors, who was not only notoriously wealthy, but the nephew of the Earl of Brentwood. Directly this personage (his name was Byfleet) got inside the board-room, he would send a messenger for a pint of old ale and some bread and cheese. When this arrived, Byfleet would pace up and down with the jug of beer in his hand, from which he would occasionally take a drink ; when he, presently, ate the bread and cheese, he would flick with his thumb pieces against the ceiling.

Jeannie was rather perplexed by this eccentric behaviour in one occupying such an exalted position. She was elated, however, to hear he had taken a fancy to Edgar, which might lead to his early advancement.

Hearing his step on the stairs, she went quickly indoors, all unaware that the ship of her happiness was about to have the nastiest of jars, and on the rock on which most couples who wed on insufficient means come to grief.

"What are you doing to-day ?" asked Edgar, as he cracked his one egg. Jeannie, from motives of economy, had lately affected to dislike such things.

"Lucy Hibling is coming over after lunch."

"Will she be in when I come back ?"

"I don't think so. We're only going for a walk up Notting Hill."

"Don't bring her back if you can help it, Jeannie. Talking about dukes and duchesses isn't particularly stimulating when one's as hard up as we are."

There was such a suggestion of bitterness in his voice that she glanced at him timidly before saying:

"Perhaps Mr. Byfleet may do something for us."

He made no reply to her remark. After glancing at the heading of one of his papers, which Jeannie had brought in, he remarked:

"The 21st! How the months pass!"

"Don't forget the rent is almost due, dear."

"Eh!"

"The landlord grumbled before when it was not paid directly it——"

She did not finish, being dismayed by the expression on her husband's face.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed.

"What is it, Edgar?" asked Jeannie, in alarm.

"I've clean forgotten the rent," he replied, as he pushed away his half-eaten egg.

They stared at each other in blank astonishment, although it must be confessed that Jeannie was the more disturbed of the two, she having a far keener realisation of the value of money.

"What's to be done, dear?" she asked presently.

"Give it up," he said wearily, to add a little later: "I can always raise some more of my little capital."

"We don't want to do that."

"Perhaps not; but, speaking for myself—myself mind—I often feel I'd like to raise and 'blow' every farthing of it. And then we'd know exactly where we were."

He spoke so bitterly that she was moved to exclaim reproachfully:

"Edgar!"

"I've certainly got four pounds towards the rent," he

went on as before, "but I had some idea of our going somewhere with it in the week's holiday they've promised me next month."

"I will willingly give up going."

"And I shall have to whether I like to or not," he remarked. Before her trembling lips could formulate any reply, he went on:

"I tell you what it is, little Jeannie. Whatever holes we get into, you have only yourself to thank for being so foolish as to marry a confounded pauper like myself. If you'd only kept your head, you might have married sensibly, and been spared all these wretched, sordid worries. As it is, you'll be up to your neck in them before you know where you are."

Although he was seemingly pitying her, she perceived he was sympathising with himself.

"Am—am I complaining?" she was presently able to ask.

"No. And that makes it harder for me," he declared, in a wilful access of unreason.

During the silence that followed, they both made a fine pretence of going on with their respective breakfasts, while, for her part, Jeannie had much ado to stop herself from bursting into tears.

Vague thoughts of asking Joe for help hovered in her mind, but she knew well enough that her pride would not suffer her to make this appeal.

"I'm willing to go without anything I particularly wanted," she hazarded.

"I know you are, and that's what makes it so hard for me, as I said before. I'm always reproaching myself I can't make more money and keep you in comfort and free from these worries."

For all this exhibition of concern for her feelings, he remained obstinately silent until it was time for him to start for the 9.8.

A kiss, a tender word would have done much to allay

her distress. As these were not forthcoming, she could only dumbly watch his preparations for departure.

When she perceived he was going without giving her his customary embrace, she forced herself to say :

“ You’ll be back at the usual time ! ”

“ I suppose so.”

“ And we can then talk over what is best to be done.”

He laughed mirthlessly as he opened the front door.

“ Edgar ! Edgar ! ” she cried desperately. “ Don’t go for a moment. I want to say this.”

“ Be quick. I shall have to hurry as it is.”

His discouragement was such that it was only with an effort that she forced herself to say :

“ Don’t think I mind at all for myself ; it’s only for you, because you are not used to such troubles. But so far as I am concerned, always, always remember that I’m quite content and happy so long as you love me.”

“ Thank you, Jeannie,” was all he said in reply.

The glimpse she caught of his engaging profile as he turned out of the gate stimulated the sufferings begotten of his coldness.

She passed a wretched morning, during which the minutes seemed like long-drawn hours ; at one o’clock, she had no heart for food, and when Mrs. Hibling called at something after two, perhaps the latter approximated to the truth in declaring that “ dear, sweet, pretty Jeannie reminded her like nothing else in the world of the dear Duchess of Salisbury after her recent sad bereavement.”

When they, presently, set out for their walk, the air, the warm autumn sunshine, to some extent blunted Jeannie’s griefs, and enabled her to take some interest in the shop windows they inspected and in her friend’s conversation.

But at the back of her mind there were lurking dismal apprehensions regarding Edgar’s love for her and their financial difficulties.

For all Lucy Hibling’s abiding affection for the

aristocracy, and her habit of seasoning her conversation with references to its members and its doings, she was a past mistress in the art of shopping; indeed, it was only after meeting with her that Jeannie knew searchings of heart with reference to her own housekeeping capacities, Lucy Hibling possessing an encyclopædic knowledge where groceries and provisions of all kinds could be obtained at fractions of a penny less than the current price.

At a bargain sale, she was in her element, pushing and comparing and cheapening with the most expert.

It was not that she had to be careful of her husband's pocket, he being an insurance broker in a fair way of business, but like many others of her sex she was possessed by a passion for economy.

Three boxes of Swedish matches were doled out every Monday morning for her own, husband's, and their one servant's use; should any of these be exhausted before the week was out, her heart was adamant with regard to providing more.

Presently, Mrs. Hibling got on to the subject of Edgar.

"Such a dear. He might have married any one," she said, at which Jeannie knew a tugging at her heart-strings. Mrs. Hibling went on:

"Has it ever occurred to you that he's so like Lord Waycott, Lord Garling's eldest son? He's in the Rifle Brigade."

Jeannie, knowing nothing of the kind, murmured, "Indeed."

"The dear fellow's married to——"

A touch upon Jeannie's arm caused her to turn sharply, when she saw that Titterton had approached her from behind, a Titterton who looked older and more purposeful than the lovelorn young man she had known.

"I thought it was Mrs. Edgar Baverstock," he said. "Do you mind my speaking to you?"

"Why should I?"

‘It’s such a long time since I saw anything of you, and-

“Why don’t you walk with us a little way?”

“May I?”

“Why not?” replied Jeannie, before introducing Titterton to Mrs. Hibling.

Just then, Jeannie dropped her handkerchief; as the railway clerk stooped to pick it up, Mrs. Hibling whispered to her friend:

“He’s quite good-looking; and so like the Honourable Arthur Faulkner, Lord Hulton’s second son.”

Both Mrs. Hibling and Jeannie were ignorant of the social solecism the former had committed.

Meantime, Jeannie was disposed to regret her precipitancy in asking her old admirer to accompany her; she had been moved by a feminine curiosity to discover if he still cared for her, but, as she had been brought up in an atmosphere in which wives scarcely so much as looked at any man other than their husbands, she wondered if her present conduct were in the nature of an infidelity to Edgar: at the same time, she could not hide from herself how Titterton’s company not only eased her load of care but gave a spice of adventure to what had promised to be a commonplace afternoon.

To Jeannie’s gratification, Titterton ignored Mrs. Hibling and addressed his remarks exclusively to her; also, his eyes constantly sought her face, from which she intuitively divined he was still attracted by her.

It was not long before he spoke of Joe, when it occurred to Jeannie that her companion was out and about when he should have been at his desk.

“How is it you are not with my father?” she asked.

“Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“Hasn’t he told you? I’ve left the ‘G.W.’ and am going out shortly to Canada.”

“I haven’t seen my father lately.”

"I thought he saw you constantly."

"And you are actually going to Canada?"

"In three weeks."

"Why?"

"Eh?"

She repeated her question.

"There's nothing to be done where I am. I want to strike out for myself."

"But it's a hard life."

"I'll chance that."

Jeannie appreciated him as she had never done before; she turned to Mrs. Hibling and told her of Titterton's intention of going abroad.

"Just like so many younger sons," was Lucy Hibling's characteristic comment.

"Are you still living in Shepherd's Bush?" asked Jeannie of Titterton.

"I've left there since my father died. I'm living quite near here."

"How many more surprises?" asked Jeannie.

"It's a house that belonged to my father, and since I can't let it, I have to live in it myself."

"Can't let it?" queried Mrs. Hibling.

"I believe it's too big for the neighbourhood. It's only a few minutes from here. Perhaps you'd like to see it!"

Upon the two women assenting, Titterton piloted them along a turning to the left, which led into a square of surprisingly big, rather dilapidated-looking houses.

"Mine's No. 13," said Titterton, as he produced a key.

"Unlucky number," commented Jeannie.

"Not to-day," he replied gravely.

They went up the steps and into the outer and inner halls, which latter spacious place was furnished with the tiniest and most rickety of veneered mahogany hatstands. Through the open door of the vast dining-room Jeannie

perceived a bicycle leaning against a wall ; otherwise, it was destitute of furniture.

They ascended the broad staircase ; this was meanly and very partially covered so far as the first landing with a strip of poor stair carpet ; afterwards, the stairs were bare.

"I've only got the furniture from the old house," explained Titterton. "I'm afraid it doesn't go very far."

"But I've heard it's quite fashionable nowadays to have as little furniture as possible," said Mrs. Hibling, in the endeavour to be pleasant.

Titterton opened one of the two drawing-room doors, and when Jeannie entered she found herself in a very large double drawing-room, the three fine front windows of which overlooked the square.

The back room was empty, but forming two tiny oases of habitation in the angles of the larger drawing-room were two squares of threadbare carpet, on one of which was the dining-room furniture of the Shepherd's Bush house, on the other, that of the drawing-room. The vastness of the apartment emphasised and called attention to the poor little chiffonier, the round table, and chairs, upholstered in American cloth, on one side ; to the rickety odds and ends, and gaudy modern china of the drawing-room corner : a small gilt-framed glass stuck on the noble marble mantelshelf appeared pathetically ludicrous.

"I'd no idea the furniture went such a little way," said Titterton ruefully. "Perhaps I shouldn't have asked you in."

"It's all delightful and ever so charmin'," cried Mrs. Hibling, who had lately got hold of the idea that it was aristocratic to drop her "g's." "And where do you sleep?"

"In the room overhead," replied Titterton, from which Jeannie rightly divined that this apartment was furnished

to the same proportionate extent as the room she was in.

"Now you've been good enough to come in, perhaps you'll let me make you some tea."

"By all means," said Jeannie. She was making a bee-line for the dining-room corner when she was sharply motioned to the drawing-room portion by Mrs. Hibling, who was eager to do quite the right thing.

Titterton produced and lit a spirit stove, and put the kettle upon it; then, he went out of the room, to return with plates, knives, cups, saucers, bread, butter, and little cakes.

"Let me help you," said Jeannie, rising and taking off her gloves.

"Thank you all the same, but please don't. I make a point of doing everything for myself."

"Indeed," said Jeannie, in a non-committal manner, while Mrs. Hibling rather put her nose in the air.

"You see," explained Titterton, "I shall probably have to rough it and camp out in Canada; doing these things for myself is a sort of preparation."

"Quite so," assented enthusiastically a mollified Mrs. Hibling: the more natural part of her was becoming attracted by her host's unaffected simplicity.

While the water was being heated, Titterton made the bread and butter so clumsily that Jeannie, who could cut it like an angel, again proffered her assistance.

"Please don't," replied Titterton. "It's all a preparation for the life out there."

While he was making preparations for tea, Jeannie noticed how frequently his eyes sought hers; indeed, she put down the clumsy performance with the bread-knife largely to the interest she held for Titterton.

She was both gratified and embarrassed by this attention, and at last she nervously took up some pamphlets that were almost torn in half: they were socialistic tracts.

"Don't you want these?" asked Jeannie.

"No fear. I was keen on socialism for a time; but all the socialists I knew were always quarrelling amongst themselves, so I've dropped it."

While they were having tea, that was made, bachelor fashion, with scarcely boiling water, Jeannie said to Titterton:

"Why were you so surprised when I didn't know you had left the railway?"

"I thought Mr. Pilcher would have told you."

"I haven't seen him so very lately."

"I thought from what he told me he saw such a lot of you."

"Not so very much," said Jeannie, slightly reddening.

"But I should have thought——"

"Then you haven't forgotten to ask after me sometimes?" she interrupted.

He dropped his eyes before replying:

"Not altogether."

Although Jeannie longed to see Edgar, she dreaded spending an evening with him if he were out of temper, which unhappy condition of things she had every reason to expect after his behaviour of the morning; consequently, she made a longer stay than she otherwise would have done.

"How is your husband getting on?" he asked, when he took Jeannie's cup.

"Very well. But then he works very hard."

"It is a privilege to work for you," he declared simply, at which Jeannie felt both flattered and conscience-stricken for allowing another man to pay her compliments.

"Wish me luck," said Titterton, when Jeannie offered her hand at parting.

"With all my heart," she declared, in all sincerity.

"Thank you."

He accompanied them so far as Notting Hill, where he stood and watched Jeannie till she was out of sight.

"I believe that man cares for you," said Mrs. Hibling, when they had left Titterton.

"What makes you think that?" asked a curious Jeannie; when the other enumerated her reasons, all she replied was, "Nonsense."

Jeannie, fearing Edgar would be home before her, a thing that had not happened since he had gone to the City, took a hurried farewell of her friend at the Broadway, and hurried to Elm Grove where she had the not unfamiliar experience of things turning out in quite a different manner from what she had expected.

An anxious Edgar awaited her at the gate; directly she reached him, in defiance of publicity, he kissed her before saying:

"Where on earth has my darling been?"

She was so moved by his unexpected greeting that she looked at him with an adorable perturbation.

"I love you—I love you," he went on. "Forgive me for this morning, and come inside. I've something to show you."

Delightedly wondering what was toward, she accompanied her husband indoors.

"What do you think of that?" he cried, handing her a letter.

It was from his father; after lamenting their estrangement, it invited Edgar and Jeannie to a dinner-party at "Pyra-cantha" where, if a certain financial big-wig were at all impressed by Edgar, there was every prospect of his doing him a good turn with regard to providing him with appropriate employment.

"What do you think of that, 'Goldy Locks'?" cried Edgar.

Before she could express her gratification, he went on:

"I can't tell you, little Jeannie, how I loathe and hate my present job: to be at the beck and call of one's social inferiors, to have to keep regular hours, do commonplace work, and look after other people's money is simply hell for me. I despise the drudgery and despise myself for doing it, knowing all the time I was in the ranks of labour

that men in my class of life look down upon. You look surprised, little Jeannie, but you must know that I was born among those who employ ; and to be amongst the employed is degradation. What am I saying ? I'm a right-down Baverstock through and through. And what I've said proves it. But never mind, little Jeannie, I'm out of it now, or will be very soon. Isn't my dearest darling delighted ? ”

If Jeannie had been capable of sober reason, which she was not, she might have taken exception to his abhorrence of work that, after all, was undertaken for her, particularly after what Titterton had said, on the same subject : also, she might have pertinently reminded him that he had married into the class he affected to despise.

But just now she was blinded to every other consideration but the fact that her husband loved her after all ; that his life would not be marred from having allied himself to her.

Directly he had spoken, she flew to his arms, and hiding her face on his shoulder wept happy tears—tears which he kissed away with the tenderest of endearments.

That night, they sat up till ever so late in affectionate, intimate converse, and made plans for the future on the strength of Baverstock's communication.

It was one of the happiest evenings she had ever spent.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOMENTOUS MEAL

SIX o'clock on the evening of Baverstock's dinner-party found Jeannie putting the finishing touches to her person in the bedroom while Edgar, who had made a point of leaving business early, was shaving against time in the tiny bathroom.

At a quarter to seven, a hired brougham would carry them to "Pyraantha" in time for half-past seven dinner, a time which in those far-away days was considered daringly smart for Putney.

The brougham was by no means the only extravagance in which Edgar and his wife had indulged in order to make a brave show before relations and guests: sufficient money had been raised (from Edgar's capital) to buy Jeannie a resplendent dinner-gown, which was of ivory silk with collar and cuffs of old embroidery.

It was this expensive frock to which, with trembling hands, Jeannie was putting the finishing touches.

This expenditure had not been incurred with a view to vulgar display, but from motives of sheer expediency, it being necessary to give Bringeman, Baverstock's influential friend, the impression of not being in financial extremity.

Edgar had twice lunched with his father in the City after receiving his letter of reconciliation, when the latter had insisted how the great Bringeman was an arrant snob, and would not do anything for any one who was at all in need of assistance: Baverstock had as good as told Edgar that, if he and his wife could not appear as if they were in the habit of "doing themselves well,"

as he termed it, they would be better advised not to come.

Hence these preparations.

Edgar had been a different man since there was every prospect of bettering himself; he was the light-hearted self of the old days, and as such he the more endeared himself to his adoring Jeannie, who owing, as she conceived it, to her inability to express adequately her consuming love was wont to indulge in dismal half-hours of self-depreciation.

Such, however, were remote from her thoughts this evening.

She had determined to assist her husband to the utmost of her ability; to this end, she had tired herself with meticulous care, when even her exacting self-criticism was delighted at her appearance.

Tall, of a surpassing fairness, slight, she yet possessed a figure that was surprisingly developed for one of her build. She had never worn such a low-cut frock before; her trepidations with regard to its complete propriety heightened the colour on her cheek and enhanced the shy sweetness of her eyes.

The frock and the brougham were not the only preparations they had made for their evening's campaign; when discussing the adventure, husband and wife, apparently for fun, had taken to speaking of men and things from the pretentious point of view which might be expected to obtain at the dinner-table where Bringenman was an honoured guest: the experiment had been laughingly repeated: neither of them guessed how serious the other was.

"Will I do?" she asked, when Edgar came into the room.

Rather to her dismay he did not immediately reply, but fell to examining her attentively.

"Dear! dear!" he complained.

"Am I a failure after all?" she cried, aghast.

"How easily my sweetheart is taken in," he laughed, as he made as if he would take her in his arms. She dexterously avoided his embrace, at which he said :

"What's that in *Mademoiselle de Maupant* ?"

"What's that ?"

"A naughty book."

"I haven't read it."

"I hope not indeed. But it says there that the supreme test of love is whether or not a woman will let her lover kiss her when she's wearing all her finery, or words to that effect."

"I'm certainly not going to let you kiss me now," she declared.

"Don't you love me well enough for that ?"

"No."

"Jeannie !"

"How easily you're taken in," she laughed merrily, before bending over to give him the tiniest kiss.

When the brougham arrived, they drove off in state, and when Jeannie had got over the novelty of being in such an unaccustomed conveyance, she placed a hand on her husband's knee, and said :

"I wonder if everything will go right."

"It must, little Jeannie. It must, because you and I simply must have money. What's that Spanish proverb ?"

"I don't know any Spanish."

"Neither do I, or very little. But I know the proverb, and it's this : "With money one does not know oneself : without it, no one knows you."

They laughed gaily and talked, which conversation gradually became more and more subdued, until complete silence obtained and prevailed. They were both obsessed by the importance of what was toward.

When they reached Putney, Jeannie noticed, so far as her perturbation would permit, that there was something of a fog.

Presently, when the brougham deposited its excited

contents at the gate of a brightly lit "Pyracantha," she noticed how four or five cabs passed in quick succession, to draw up before a house that had not existed when she had last called at the Baverstocks'.

As one in a dream, she was conducted to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to find Edgar awaiting her at the foot of the stairs when she came down.

Conscious of the value of first impressions, he eagerly scanned her. She glanced at him with pitifully inquiring eyes, at which he transported her into a heaven of delight by whispering :

"You'll do, little Jeannie. Hold up your head, and keep the flag flying."

Then, Jeannie heard "Mr. and Mrs. Edgar Baverstock" announced by the man-servant ; the next moment, aware that all eyes were critically examining her, she advanced with her husband into the big, garish drawing-room to greet her frail-looking mother-in-law.

Hardly had she been tenderly kissed and welcomed by Mrs. Baverstock, when the latter's husband effusively greeted Jeannie, from which she divined that her turnout and appearance were pleasing in the eyes that rarely smiled. These greedily appraised her, as he said in an undertone :

"I was foolish enough to be angry with Edgar ; now I envy him."

She was soon free of his attentions, for Bevill and Mabel pressed about her, while she noticed that Edgar, who was talking to his mother, was more than pleased by the favourable impression she had made.

Almost directly, the man-servant announced that "dinner was served," at which Mrs. Baverstock advanced on Jeannie, accompanied by an imposing-looking man who was introduced as Mr. Bringeman. He was to take her in to dinner.

"We will have a quiet talk presently, dear," said Mrs. Baverstock to Jeannie, as she left her.

In the brief interval before a move was made to the dining-room across the hall, to which Jeannie, by reason of her being in the eyes of her host still a bride, was taken in first, she was able to obtain some idea of the man who had the power to contribute so extensively to her husband's and her own happiness.

There was no getting away from the fact that Bringeman had substance written large over his massive person; he exuded prosperity at every pore; indeed, for all his evening-dress, he looked as if his most appropriate attire would be the fur-lined overcoat, glossy tall hat, and roomy boots of the City magnate.

He was by way of being distinguished looking, having a big aquiline nose, a well-trimmed, pointed grey beard, and a long moustache, which was waxed at the ends.

Otherwise, he was possessed of a faint Cockney accent and an immense conceit, which, apparent in his eyes, seemingly urged him barely to tolerate his species, and then only to suffer them with an irritating condescension.

Although when seated at a corner of the table, with Baverstock and Bringeman on either side, Jeannie was outwardly calm, within, she was painfully apprehensive of how she would come through her ordeal; she could have despaired utterly but for Edgar's presence (he seemed to expand in the prosperous atmosphere of his old home) and the encouragement of his mother's kindly eyes, which constantly sought her own.

While the *hors d'œuvres* and soup were being consumed, little was said, and that chiefly about the fog, there being a depressing constraint over the gathering: but when Jeannie had swallowed the turtle soup, in which queer little bits of green fat were floating, she was heartened into glancing about her.

Directly she looked up, she was conscious that the men other than Edgar, who faced her, were furtively regarding her, while the women whose glances she encountered looked at her venomously, from which two facts she might,

if more sophisticated in the ways of the world, have divined how attractive she looked.

The next impression she received was that the men present had either predatory noses like Baverstock and Bringeman, or noses of the pug variety, of which the crushed-looking little man almost opposite possessed an arrant specimen.

As she looked about her, she was disappointed by the appearance of those bidden to the feast : always excepting Edgar and his mother, they, for all their fine clothes, looked prosperously third-rate, which indeed they were.

The sherry stimulated Mrs. Bringeman, who faced Jeannie, into conversation.

The financier's wife was a full-throated, fine figure of a woman, for all the fact of her being in the middle fifties : she spoke in a modulated, rather theatrical voice, which she had assumed ever since she had taken part in Shakesperian readings : she was only interested in herself and in her own somewhat energetic comings and goings ; so far as others were concerned, she found that the easiest way of putting up with their existence was to agree cordially with everything that was said, even with the most contradictory opinions : for these reasons she was a deadly bore.

"Are you going South this year?" she asked of Baverstock.

"I've no money to lose at Monte," he replied.

"Perhaps you play roulette when you go?"

"Don't you?"

"That's exactly what I wished to explain. If you play *trente-et-quarante*, you stand a much greater chance of winning."

"I'm afraid there's not very much brought away from Monte," remarked Baverstock, as he smiled with his lips, while his eyes grew hard beneath his shaggy eyebrows at thought of all the money that some lucky people occasionally won.

Mrs. Bringeman made the most of the opening she had made: with a redundancy of detail, she told how she had won four hundred francs at the game she favoured.

She had got as far as a description of the play with its two packs of cards, when conversation, after one or two spasmodic outbursts, became general, at which Mrs. Bringeman directed her guns on her host: Baverstock, however, was not bored to any appreciable extent, the savour of the "Soles Livournaise," which were now being served, whole-heartedly claiming his attention.

When Bringeman had quite finished what was on his plate, he took wine, and wiped his mouth with his napkin before condescendingly saying to Jeannie:

"Have you ever been as far as Monte Carlo?"

"I was there last year," replied Jeannie.

"Indeed! Where did you stay?"

"At the 'Hermitage.'"

She did not mention she was there for only four days.

"Go anywhere after?"

"We went into Italy."

She omitted to mention that Bordighera, a small town just over the border, was their only stopping place.

"Indeed! Away long?"

"Some months."

"Ah!" remarked Bringeman, who was pleasantly surprised at the prosperity suggested by his companion's information. "And now your husband wants something to do."

The sherry Jeannie had sipped assisted her to the inspiration that possessed her.

"Does he?" she asked innocently.

"He doesn't look as if he did," smiled Bringeman, as he glanced at Edgar, who was amusing the other end of the table with his sallies.

"Scarcely."

"Perhaps he wants merely to be kept out of mischief!"

"Very likely," said Jeannie, which reply, although commonplace enough, acquired a special significance when spoken by the red lips of an alluring young woman.

To use a Stock Exchange simile, the fact of Jeannie having been for several weeks in Monte Carlo and Italy sent her up many points in the estimation of the man in whose eyes she was anxious to appear prosperous.

With a scarcely perceptible diminution of condescension, he asked :

"Live near here ?"

"Not very."

"West End ?"

"Kensington."

"Awkward getting back if the fog continues."

"I dare say we shall be able to drive."

"Cab ?"

"Brougham."

Then, while Bringeman spoke to the woman on his right, Jeannie, with her sensibility to atmospheres, found herself appraising that of the house in which she was being received as an honoured guest.

It suggested a selfish, self-satisfied opulence which, for all its pretensions, was ever ready to bend the knee to greater prosperity than its own ; also, that its appreciation of things was largely determined by their cost ; finally, and here Jeannie inwardly trembled, that, in its avaricious, money-loving eyes, the worst possible offence was to be poor.

This stock-jobbing fraternity had one peculiarity in its social predilections of which Jeannie was ignorant. For all its pride of purse, it would humble itself utterly before any unit of the world of society in the true sense of the word ; should this latter person also possess means, its abasement would be abject.

Jeannie was awakened from her reverie by the voice of the crushed-looking little man opposite, a Mr. Basing Dicker, who for all the world looked as if a steam-roller had gone over his spirits.

He was questioning Baverstock about his newly arrived next-door neighbour, Mr. Coop.

Mr. Dicker, nephew of the well-known banker of that name, was by no means the futile person he looked. Over and above being a keen man of business, he had a passion for consorting with lordlings and gilded youths, who tolerated him for his unassuming manners: but the humour of this acquaintance was that Dicker's commercial instincts would get the better of his aristocratic predilections, and, to the astonishment of those to whom he toadied, he would unmercifully fleece them either at "Nap" or "Snooker."

"What d'ye think of the house next door?" asked Dicker.

"Don't speak of it," almost groaned Baverstock.

"Is it finished?"

"Not only is it finished but the people are in."

"Who are they?" asked Mrs. Bringeman.

"Quite impossible," declared Baverstock, with his mouth full of *Poularde à la broche*: ordinarily, he hated to speak while he was eating, but just now his indignation got the better of his love for his palate.

"D'ye know anything about them?" asked Bringeman.

"Only that his name's Coop, that he seems to have pots of money, and that he has the most vulgar laugh any one ever heard."

"How did he get his money?" asked the company promoter.

"Invalid furniture."

"Is there so much money in that?"

"There appears to be," replied Baverstock, while his eyes for the twentieth time sought his daughter-in-law's comely person.

During this conversation, she had much ado to prevent herself from self-consciously flushing.

Those adjacent to Jeannie, who had been talking, were silent for a few moments, during which she heard Bevill

Baverstock retailing to the woman at his side a few facts from his store of elementary science : just now he was relating incidents of stickleback life and the ingenious way the females of that genus set about making a nest in the spawning season.

Very soon, however, Baverstock returned to the subject of his new neighbour.

"It's very hard when one puts up a house and one has reckoned on a certain amount of privacy to be built over as I am."

"You should have bought up the land," remarked Bringeman.

"Coop was too quick for me," declared Baverstock unblushingly, the truth of the matter being that owing to one of his sudden passions for speculation he had not the means just then to forestall the manufacturer of invalid furniture.

"Anyway, you must take good care not to know him," said Mr. Bringeman. "If one has next-door neighbours, it's the greatest mistake in the world to have anything to do with them."

"I shall take good care of that," declared Baverstock grimly. A little later, he said :

"To-night, of all nights, they've invited a lot of friends : house-warming I suppose they call it. And I hear they've invited all kinds of people ; when I say that I should say people of all ages : children, youngsters, and grown-ups."

"Children ?" queried crushed-looking Mr. Dicker.

"Dozens of 'em. I saw them crowding in when I came back from town."

"Hard lines on Baverstock !" said Bringeman to Jeannie, who confusedly replied :

"Very."

"There's no separating people nowadays," he went on. "The way the lower orders thrust themselves in the faces of their betters is positively appalling !"

He looked at Jeannie inquiringly : she thought it expedient to agree with him.

"Happily, people in your position are still able to pick and choose their friends," he went on.

"True," declared Jeannie, with downcast eyes ; in her heart of hearts, she had an abiding affection for Coop, which even her association with her husband had not weakened.

At the same time, the champagne she had taken blunted her mind to the vulgar reflections which had been made on her father's old friend, and made her believe that she was in a world where everything happened almost for the best. Not quite for the best, because she dimly, and in her present elated condition, pleasurably realised that at all costs she must escape the censure that would be visited on her by those present did they learn how well she was acquainted with the owner of the offending house next door.

To this end, she ached for an opportunity to prove convincingly to Bringeman that she and Edgar, who she thought had never looked so handsome, in being far removed from any approximation to poverty, were deserving of his assistance.

A Mr. Levitt, a swarthy, predatory-nosed, brilliant-eyed man, who was well down on the opposite side of the table, was relating an anecdote of the Prince of Wales (when mentioning him he said "His Royal Highness") in the manner of one who was on intimate terms with the doings of royalty : the subject seemed congenial to those present, for the same exalted personage's recent doings were discussed at length, during which Mr. Levitt, who, in his heart, despised his fellow-guests for their insensibility to the arts he dabbled in when free of the City, could hardly take his eyes from Jeannie.

She had no idea how radiant she looked, champagne stimulating her to look her best, and not imparting the vulgar flush with which it disfigures many women.

She had, for the time being, so identified herself with the atmosphere of "Pyracantha," that she could hardly realise the shifts and expedients to which she had been daily put in the effort to make two very reluctant ends meet : she felt she was like a latter-day Cinderella who, long before the clock struck twelve, would again find herself in the familiar little semi-detached stucco villa in Elm Grove, Hammersmith.

She was awakened from her reverie by hearing a familiar name mentioned, that of Lord Brentwood, the uncle of the rich Mr. Byfleet who was one of the directors of the company Edgar worked for.

The way in which she became slightly animated on hearing the name of Brentwood caused Bringeman to ask :

" Know the Earl ? "

" N—not exactly," replied Jeannie, who was surprised at her audacity. " But I know something of his nephew."

" Freddy Byfleet ? "

" Yes," she replied boldly, although she could not believe that it was she who was talking. Then, vaguely realising the necessity of caution, she asked :

" Do you know him ? "

" N—not exactly."

" Not ? " she queried, with raised eyebrows, while she was conscious how Edgar, although apparently engaged with the woman whom he had brought in to dinner, was keenly listening to what she was saying.

" No. We've been on the point of meeting several times, but it's never come off. And now I hear he's going to drop the City altogether, and go in for big game shooting."

" Then you're not likely to see much of him ! "

" I'm afraid not. What's he like ? "

" Rather eccentric," replied a recklessly emboldened Jeannie.

" Most of his family are. In what way ? "

"His idea of happiness seems to be to walk about eating bread and cheese, and drink beer from a jug."

Hardly was this information out of her mouth when she realised how she had been drawing the long bow. At the same time, owing to the increased attention Bringeman loftily paid her, she did not regret her behaviour anything like so much as she otherwise might have done.

The company promoter was proceeding to make almost flattering references to her husband (to which the latter's keen-faced father greedily listened), when a loud knocking and ringing were heard at the front door.

Although no notice was apparently taken of this summons by those present, it seemed as if the table with one accord had pricked up its ears.

The door was audibly answered; a few moments later, the handle of the dining-room door was violently turned.

Then, the astounded dinner-party perceived the spectacle of a man who entered on his hands and knees before turning a series of violent somersaults round the severely pretentious dining-room.

The men rose to their feet, while one or two of the women considered the propriety of fainting.

Suddenly, the intruder sat bolt upright, when he was seen to be an elderly man who was eccentrically got up; his face was blacked.

"Why—where are the children?" asked a voice, that to Jeannie bore a remarkable likeness to Joe's.

"What—what does this mean?" cried an indignant Baverstock.

"Mean—. Where's Tom?"

"Tom!"

"Tom Coop. I'm his oldest friend, Joe Pilcher, and I came like this to amuse the—the——"

He stopped short, having caught sight of Jeannie.

"Well, sir?" asked a confounded Baverstock, who now perceived that Joe was Edgar's father-in-law.

The latter did not speak, but continued to stare blankly

at Jeannie, in the manner of one who can scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes.

"W—well, sir?" hesitatingly repeated the master of the house.

"It is—it is my Jeannie," declared Joe. "Ask her, and she will explain how I've come to the wrong house by mistake. It must have been because of the fog."

"You know him?" asked Bringeman of Jeannie.

"Yes."

"Indeed!" he almost sneered. "Who is he?"

"He—he is my father," she faltered.

CHAPTER XV

"LARKSLEASE"

ONE April night, Jeannie lay stark awake. When not in the thrall of one of her many tribulations, she listened to the ceaseless stream music which came from the adjacent meadow, or "hoppet," as it is called in the county in which she and her husband had gone to live.

One trouble would possess her mind to the exclusion of everything else; when it seemed well-nigh unendurable, she would find herself soothed by hearkening to the running water, which sweetly told her of the endlessness of time; consequently, of the futility of worry, inasmuch as the passing of the years would resolve the most obstinate of troubles.

After awhile, however, her mind would become sufficiently strengthened to concern itself with another anxiety, at which she would suffer as before until the stream alleviated temporarily her distress.

Very soon after the unfortunate dinner-party at her father-in-law's, Edgar had thrown up his employment when, with the fatuity that is the exclusive possession of the town bred, he had taken a poultry farm, in the firm belief that a living was thereby to be secured.

Although Jeannie was dismayed at his recklessness in giving up a certain job, however indifferently paid, she fell in with her husband's views, as she rightly believed the irksome confinement of a sedentary life was affecting his health.

Also, she perceived how deeply he felt Bringeman's refusal to do anything for him, which was a direct conse-

quence of Joe's unfortunate impingement on the select Baverstock gathering; she feared that, if Edgar had continued his City occupation, it might dismally affect his love for her.

From the moment she had acknowledged the intruder at "Pyracantha" as her father, she had intuitively divined that she and Edgar had sunk in Bringeman's estimation beyond all possibility of recovery: although Joe had speedily taken his departure, the spirit had gone out of the evening: she had felt how it had been proclaimed to the snobbish, purse-proud dinner-party that her Edgar had married beneath him.

His anger at the unlooked-for catastrophe had persisted for so many days that, apart from its economic bearings, she almost welcomed his determination to go into the country, as being calculated to divert his mind from the cause of the destruction of his hopes.

Eleven hundred pounds remained of Edgar's capital; when he had advertised for a profitable poultry farm, even his volatile disposition had been taken aback by the number of replies he received, shoals arriving by every post.

At last, after many disappointing visits of inspection, which ran away with a surprising lot of money, he had determined on one within a few miles of Wicksea in Essex.

Jeannie had wished him to rent it, but as he had it in his blood to have a place of his own, he had bought the old-world cottage, five acres of ground, stock, runs, pony and cart, and goodwill for seven hundred pounds.

They had entered into possession in November, and had forthwith started their new career with a fund of hope and an appalling ignorance of the matter in hand so far as Edgar was concerned.

Scarcely so Jeannie.

Directly she had known what was before her, she had taken in poultry papers and bought handbooks on the subject. These, she had assiduously studied; long before they had moved in, she had her own convictions (what poultry farmer had not?) as to the most remunerative

breeds and the best means of coaxing eggs from reluctant hens.

She, also, read books on small farming, and believed there was money in the keeping of bees, geese, and goats ; these she determined to go in for when opportunity offered.

They had now been in possession six months, and had discovered, as have so many others who have followed their example, firstly, that there was little or no money in poultry farming ; secondly, that they had been mercilessly done over the goodwill and stock.

While expenses increased, the proceeds were meagre, and this was almost the principal preoccupation of Jeannie's mind as she lay awake on that April night.

It would have been the chief, but for the fact that her love for the man sleeping at her side would, in the fulness of time, bear fruit.

It had been a recent discovery on her part : also, one she feared to communicate to her husband, inasmuch as it was a possibility he had always dreaded in the face of their embarrassed circumstances.

Apart from these misfortunes, her mind was burdened by the countless anxieties attendant on that most vexatious of industries, poultry farming.

In the ordinary way, the constant losses of stock, the bitter disappointments which were always lying in wait for her would have been bad enough, but in her heart of hearts she believed that the continuance of her husband's love and, therefore, of all that made life worth living was dependent on the success of the venture.

When living at Elm Grove, she had perceived how money troubles occasioned an attrition of his ardent affection ; dreading their further influence on impressionable Edgar, she dauntlessly fought the adverse circumstances with which she was constantly confronted.

One of the troubles that possessed her to-night was that her husband, after the first frenzy at having something fresh to interest him had subsided, did not work nearly so

hard as might have been expected, considering what was at stake : his chief preoccupation after getting himself up to look nice in rough tweeds, leggings, and a tie of his college colours, seemed to be an abiding sympathy with himself at being compelled to renounce the delights of town life for a monotonous and profitless occupation in the country, for which last he was peculiarly unfitted, he having the corpuscles of London existence in his blood.

Another thing that presently troubled Jeannie was that his friend Mountjoy was expected in the late afternoon of the forthcoming day : he would stay the night, which would mean that the two men would sit up late talking over the latest gossip Mountjoy would bring from his haunts, a proceeding that invariably had the result of making Edgar more than commonly discontented with his lot.

Then, Jeannie noticed that the night was growing wan, while the intense stillness which preceded the dawn enabled the stream to welcome coming day with louder music.

Presently, a blackbird sang, at which she perceived that it was now light enough for her to discern the face of her husband, who, as if he had not a care in the world, slept peacefully at her side.

As the familiar features were revealed to her, her heart went out, as it had never done before, to the man to whom she would bear a child before the year was out.

In the twinkling of an eye, her heart was bared to her gaze, at which she realised how pitifully she was his.

This knowledge so dismayed her that she cast her mind back to other occasions on which she had believed her love had touched bottom ; she was appalled at perceiving that compared to her present extremity her other emotions appeared of no account.

She only got relief from the fears begotten of her helplessness by listening to the stream.

When she had obtained some familiarity with her distresses, she fell to thinking of what purpose was served by the designs of Providence in making loving women so

miserably powerless in the hands of the men to whom they had surrendered their all.

This barren speculation was interrupted by a sudden access of love for the sleeping Edgar.

For good or for evil, she found herself rejoicing that she was always his ; that nothing could ever unbind the bonds that gripped her.

For any pains or sorrows that might be begotten of this helplessness, she knew a reckless defiance : at the same time, she had a profound contempt for women whose lives had never been touched by the magic of passion ; for those who hesitated to devote their days to the ecstasy of loving, no matter what might betide.

" If one is not loving, one is not living," she told herself, and as if by way of giving an outward and visible sign of her conviction, she kissed her lover (just now, she preferred that word to husband) very, very tenderly on the lips before sinking into a fairly sound sleep.

The April sun was high in the heavens, and the larks had long since sung their first hymn to their mates and the spring day, when Jeannie slipped out of bed and scrambled into her oldest things before stealing from the room ; as she went downstairs, she awoke as quietly as possible the very indifferent general servant, Ethel by name, who, for all her sluttish ways, had a heart of gold.

After finding a morsel to eat, Jeannie went out of doors : she was anxious to make a good start with the long day's work.

Although " Rufus," the pony, eager for his breakfast, was vigorously kicking the stable door, and the cocks, for the same reason, were crowing lustily in the pens, Jeannie paused for a few moments to appreciate the glory of the cloudless day.

Beyond the little garden was the queerly shaped hoppet across which the stream took its varying way, its course being seemingly staked out by pollard willows. Some distance farther, the ground, hitherto level, fell away in a

series of gradual descents for some three miles, until it reached the great river which, like a mighty grey serpent, wound from London to the sea.

This morning, the Thames, the Kentish hills beyond, seemed unusually distinct and quite near, an atmospheric trick which Jeannie often noticed in the ensuing days of summer ; this morning, it held her attention as being in the nature of a phenomenon.

For the best part of the last six months, Jeannie had lived in a spot that presented a striking contrast to the well-lit streets of shabbily sophisticated Hammersmith.

Here, more often than not, dense river mists rolled about her, obscuring the very tree-trunks and making the bare branches look like gaunt fingers suspended in space by supernatural means.

The raw river-fog had seemed to pervade the world, and at certain intervals during the day and night, intervals that corresponded to the state of the tides, the blowing of the fog-horns on the ships would be borne mournfully to her ears : it was like the bellowings of great beasts which had lost their way.

Of an evening, the mists thinned, when a bright light in a house some half-mile away was like a superb planet which, in successfully defying the attraction of the sun, was always in the same place.

Jeannie, in drawing in deep draughts of the good, clean air, seemed to fill her being with much of the gladness of the day : it was with something of a light heart that she set about work, which elation was largely caused by the fact of her shouldering burdens that were rightly her husband's.

To keep " Rufus " quiet, she took a pail to the stream ; after a preliminary swill, she three-quarters filled it for the pony : then, she held it up for him to drink, and when he had had enough, she mixed his first feed in a trug ; this operation keenly interested the pony, he eagerly eyeing the proportion of oats, that he loved, to chaff.

Much to his disgust, Jeannie sprinkled the mixture with water before giving it to him ; this prevented “Rufus” from bolting the oats and ignoring the chaff. She left him fairly contentedly munching, while she applied herself to getting middlings, bran and barley meal from the binns ; these she kneaded with water into a firm paste.

Carrying two pailfuls of the mixture, she proceeded to the runs behind the cottage. These were put up on some acres of wild-looking land ; indeed, it was this aspect of the place that had suggested to Edgar calling it “Larkslease,” a name that he had some time back discovered was given in Hampshire to wastes which, in being unprofitable to cultivate, were tenanted only by larks.

When Edgar had taken over the business, Buff Orpingtons and Plymouth Rocks formed the stock-in-trade, but, for all their fine appearance, Jeannie soon discovered how they were unsuitable for the heavy soil of Essex ; so far as funds would permit, she was gradually substituting White Leghorns for laying, and Silver Wyandottes for general utility purposes, although the yellow legs of the latter were by way of handicapping them as table birds.

Before putting food in the troughs, Jeannie was careful to see that none of the nest boxes were occupied, otherwise the birds in their eagerness to fill their crops would leave their nests and might forget to lay their eggs.

It was hard work filling the feeding-troughs ; cleaning and refilling the drinking pans with scrupulously clean water ; collecting the eggs of which it gladdened her heart to see that a goodly number were laid that morning.

She was thankful that, owing to the mildness of the weather, it was not necessary to mix hot food.

This was only a fraction of Jeannie’s labours.

She returned to the stable for maize for the clamorous ducks, for more middlings for the chicks and ducklings, when she perceived that “Rufus,” having finished his feed, was neighing for hay.

She unbound a fresh truss, and gathered as much as she could carry, when she was momentarily overcome by the appealing fragrance of her burden, the hay having plenty of what is locally known as "nose."

When she got to the coops (these were called hips by the countryfolk) in which ducklings and chicks had been shut up for the night, she perceived that the ground was tunnelled and scarred about these in the frantic efforts rats had made to get inside in the night: Jeannie could afford to laugh at these attempts, as she had recently covered the bottoms of the coops with half-inch wire-netting: but for this protection, it being the rats' breeding-season, the interior of the coops, as she to her cost had discovered twice before, would have been a shambles.

Of the sixty ducklings of all ages she was fattening for the market, four of the younger ones had died in the night: it was losses such as these which, in constantly occurring, reduced profits to a vanishing point, and had the effect of putting her nerves on edge.

The yellow ducklings seemed as if they would never stop eating. When their appetites had some appearance of being stayed, Jeannie went to the kitchen, where Ethel was now at work, to obtain skim milk, small quantities of which were given to the ducklings in place of water, the latter having the effect of retarding their growth.

Next, there was the tedious business of attending to the sitting hens, of which there were twenty: the shifting, feeding, the separation of the combatants—sitting hens being very quarrelsome—and replacing of the birds, tried her patience sorely.

She was feeling tired, and was thankful her task was almost accomplished, when she discovered a persistent tapping in the shells of three sittings of pheasants' eggs which she had bought as a speculation: this would mean that she would have to prepare the incubator in order to dry the chicks when they were free of the eggs, before re-turning them to the care of the hens.

She was about to proceed to the house for this purpose when, without any warning, she was overwhelmed with the realisation of her approaching motherhood.

The prospect both cheered and dismayed her, but she would have been more pleased than otherwise if she could have believed that Edgar would not be annoyed at what was toward.

Then, she was weighed down by her helplessness in the face of her physical extremity : it seemed that her situation in this respect was all of a piece with her love for Edgar, inasmuch as she had no say in the matter, and that she was the sport of pitiless natural forces over which she had no control.

It was with a considerable dissatisfaction with the ruthless manner in which the elemental facts of life affected women, which was accompanied by a conviction of her personal insignificance, that she went towards the house : she encountered Edgar on the threshold.

In spite of herself, she stopped short and regarded him with appealing eyes : her loneliness was such, just then, that she ached to confide her secret to the man who was responsible for its existence.

“ Where have you been ? ” he asked, none too graciously.

“ Out and about.”

“ Not doing work ? ”

“ A little.”

“ Seen anything of the postman ? ”

“ Not yet.”

She made as if she would pass him, at which he asked :

“ Where are you going ? ”

“ To light the incubator and see about breakfast.”

“ Why the incubator ? ”

“ The pheasants will be through by twelve o’clock.”

“ Have you been doing my work ? ” he asked quickly.

“ Some of it.”

“ How good of you,” he remarked, to add as if angrily :

“ It is really good of you, and all that, but I wish to good-

ness you wouldn't do it. It as good as tells me I'm too lazy to do my own work."

His concern would have pleased her but for a note of insincerity in his voice, which told her he was speaking with no particular conviction.

When breakfast was ready, it was eaten in all but silence until the arrival of the post.

This consisted of the usual advertising circulars of poultry requisites; Joe's weekly postal order for twenty-five shillings, for which he requested two boiling fowls and the balance in eggs; Mrs. Baverstock's weekly postal order for ten shillings' worth of eggs; a complaint by a customer that two eggs had been broken in the last consignment, and, beyond a letter for Edgar, little else.

Directly he had read his letter, he was a different being.

"Good heavens!" he cried cheerily. "Here's a bit of luck."

"A good order?" asked practical Jeannie.

"Good gracious, no! It's from Pightle."

"Son of Sir Roger Pightle?"

"He's getting up a local cricket eleven. He wants me to play."

"Will you?"

"What do you think! A chance of knowing some decent people at last."

If Jeannie had **not** been obsessed by economic cares, she would have welcomed the possibility of meeting local gentlepeople on equal terms; in her daily fight with financial adversity, her social ambitions had been forgotten as if they had never existed.

Edgar chatted and laughed gaily: he was quite his old self, at which Jeannie remembered similar instances when he had been elevated by some trifling occurrence, flattering to his vanity, after a period of depression.

She had an uneasy conviction that her husband was amiable enough so long as things went well, but that adversity found him wanting in grit.

He, also, gave her the impression of being a man who could be strong minded when he was prosperous but who would be pitifully weak if fortune deserted him.

This morning, however, Jeannie was so eager to divulge her secret to sympathetic ears that, in spite of herself, and of the coldness that had struck at her heart when he had not caressed her after she had been doing his work, she insensibly attuned herself to his new-found gaiety: she was unconscious that her elation was a means of screwing up her courage to tell him what she was so eager to communicate.

Presently, it seemed as if he were insensibly providing the opening she sought.

“How long have we been married?” he asked.

“Ages.”

“I’m sorry it seems so to you.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I was thinking how strange it was a child has never come along.”

Jeannie bent her golden head over a letter she caught up. He went on:

“Although the family are upset with me, I believe the mater is rather disappointed.”

“Are you?” she asked, without looking up.

“I don’t know.”

“I should have thought you would have hated the very idea of such a thing,” she remarked, as casually as she was able: she waited with heart abeat for his reply.

“It’s all a question of money, little Jeannie!”

“Money?” she cried sharply.

“It’s all such a great expense, but that’s only the beginning. If one has a girl it doesn’t matter so much, but, if one has a boy, how can paupers like ourselves educate him properly and give him a start in life?”

“Why bring money into everything?”

“Because it is everything. I won’t say any more,

because it would only be expounding the obvious. But just think what money would do for us."

"Money is not everything," she declared.

"Eh?"

"Money is not everything," she repeated doggedly.

"Why isn't it?" he asked sharply.

By way of reply, she looked at him with tender eyes.

"Sentimental little Jeannie is right," he cried, as he rose from his chair and, advancing to her, kissed her golden hair. "No; money is not everything. The Baverstock faith has been confounded by Jeannie's pretty eyes."

As if by magic, the down-at-heel poultry farm became a palace of enchantment in Jeannie's estimation. Believing the golden moment had arrived, she was about to tell him her news, when he said:

"You can thank Mountjoy for our talking like this."

Jeannie resented the introduction of a third person into their domain of romance.

"He's going to be married; at least, he's thinking about it," continued Edgar.

"Indeed!" remarked Jeannie, who, for all her disappointment at the deflection of the conversation, wondered if the fact of Mountjoy's being a bridegroom would more reconcile her husband to married life.

"How do you mean his talking about getting married? Can't he make up his mind?"

"It's this way. The girl he's thinking about is awfully keen on him, but he doesn't particularly care about her."

"What do you mean?" cried Jeannie, whose romantic sensibilities had been shocked by the possibility of a marriage in which all the love was on one side.

"What I say, little Jeannie."

"But—but——"

"Don't you know that, in all love affairs, one is the lover and the other is the loved?"

"Say that again," she requested sharply, as she sat bolt upright.

“Is little Jeannie so unsophisticated that she doesn’t know that, in all love affairs, one is the lover and the other is the loved? And if Mountjoy is loved, as he appears to be, by a rich and charming girl, he’s certainly better off than if he cared for some one who didn’t want him.”

Jeannie paid no attention to Edgar’s last words; she was endeavouring to realise the purport of his assertion regarding lovers and loved, more particularly its bearings on her abiding passion for her husband.

Although Edgar went on talking, she did not heed what he was saying; she was fearfully wondering if the fact of her caring for her husband meant that he did not love her, which would certainly be the case if there were no exceptions to the rule he had laid down.

Even as she painfully dwelt upon this dire possibility, her mind was flooded by a recollection of selfishness or want of thought on Edgar’s part which tended to confirm her belief.

The apprehension that his words had occasioned obsessed her, not only while she was packing the eggs and poultry for Joe and her mother-in-law (which Edgar would take to the station, when he met Mountjoy with the pony-cart), but for the rest of the day; indeed, for some time to come it would frequently assail her mind with varying degrees of intensity.

Whatever the strength of the attack, it had the invariable effect of stimulating her love for her husband.

She had just finished addressing Joe’s parcel in her firm round hand, when Edgar came in, quite tired from attending to the pony.

“Who’s that for?” he asked, as he sat wearily.

“Joe.”

“You were saying something the other day about asking him down.”

“We must sometime. He hasn’t been once since we’ve been here.”

“The weather’s been so bad.”

"Yes," assented Jeannie quickly.

"Perhaps he'd like it better when the spring's really here."

"No doubt," agreed Jeannie, as before.

For all the fact of Joe's unfortunate appearance at "Pyracantha" having interfered so seriously with Edgar's prospects, there was no denying that Jeannie had treated her father with, to put it mildly, no particular consideration.

She knew that what had happened on the night of the dinner-party had been an accident; also, that Joe would not have understood how he had prejudiced Bringeman against Edgar.

But this did not mitigate Jeannie's resentment against her father, which was stimulated by her husband's anger with the hapless Joe.

Also, as is the case with many others, she credited Joe with having the lessened affection for her that, just now, she had for him.

Over and over again she had made up her mind to have him down for the day.

It was never a hard matter to find an easy excuse to put off his visit.

She had sent him a half-hearted invitation for Christmas, but had been vaguely relieved when Joe, divining its lukewarm nature, had pleaded his inability to come.

For all her not infrequent disposition to behave dutifully to her father, her anxieties with regard to Edgar and poultry farming interfered with the fulfilment of these inclinations.

Jeannie had just come in from shutting up the stock, after giving them their final feed of hard food, when she heard the cart that carried Mountjoy and Edgar approaching; she hastened upstairs and changed into a becoming frock before descending for tea.

Mountjoy, who ordinarily talked well on anything and everything, was, to-night, prone to silence: she presumed

his uncertainty with regard to getting married was weighing his mind.

"How is poultry farming?" he asked of Jeannie, as she greeted him.

"Much as usual."

"Making your fortune at it?"

"Never that," replied Edgar.

"But there's always a market for eggs."

"But you forget this. When eggs are cheap, you get them in large quantities; but directly they fetch anything of a price, the hens won't lay."

Edgar, in a few words, had given the most cogent reason why poultry farming is an unprofitable industry.

During dinner, Mountjoy showed such an increasing disposition to address his remarks to Edgar that Jeannie took an early opportunity of withdrawing. She retired to a little workroom at the back of the dining-room, and produced from a carefully concealed hiding-place tiny garments in various stages of completion.

The partition between the apartments was so thin that she heard nearly every word of what the two men were saying.

She had been sewing for some twenty minutes when it seemed that Mountjoy was piloting the conversation to the subject of marriage, at which Edgar presently asked:

"Have you made up your mind what you are going to do?"

"It's what I wanted your advice about."

"If you should get married?"

"Yes. Do you really think the game is worth the candle?"

Jeannie waited with heart abeat for her husband's reply.

"Remember, I don't overmuch care for her," continued Mountjoy.

It seemed to Jeannie a very long time before Edgar said:

"As she's well off, and you've parliamentary ambitions, I certainly advise it."

"You advise a loveless marriage?" asked an astonished Mountjoy.

"Better that with money than a lot of romantic nonsense without," declared Edgar.

Although he proceeded to qualify his assertion, Jeannie did not hear what he was saying: neither could she see what she was at, for all that she was stitching away as if for dear life.

CHAPTER XVI

JEANNIE DESPAIRS

"I DON'T approve of it at all."

"No one need know anything about it."

"It's sure to get out. Those things always do," declared Edgar, with considerable heat.

"But if I can make money at it, I don't see why you should object to my doing it," persisted Jeannie, who was surprised at her temerity in opposing her husband.

"The fact of my objecting ought to be enough. It seems it isn't. But when there's such a chance of my getting in with the Pightles, for you to suggest going round to the farms collecting eggs, and selling them at a profit seems little short of madness."

"We have to live," urged Jeannie.

"It's surely not necessary to come down to that."

"We're not very far off coming down to anything."

"I've still two hundred pounds."

"I know, and that's what I'm trying to save being touched."

"If I'd my way, I'd raise and 'blow' the lot, and then we'd know exactly where we are. That I've told you before," declared Edgar irritably.

"I don't know where we should be if you had done so."

"We couldn't be much worse off than we are now."

"Whose idea was it to come here?" asked Jeannie, who, by reason of her condition, was peevish.

"That's right. Throw it in my face I'd no business to have married you."

"I did not throw it in your face, and——"

"If you didn't say it, it was in your mind. I believe you're always thinking it. And if you are, I don't blame you. I don't expect you to stick poverty any more than I can."

"It's poverty I'm trying to avoid by trying to make money out of poultry in the only way it can be made."

"What you suggest is nothing more or less than higgling. Good heavens! Pightle would drop me in no time if he heard about it. As it is, I told him we're poultry farming for a lark."

Jeannie laughed outright.

"That's right! Laugh at me," cried Edgar, who failed to detect the note of hysteria in Jeannie's hilarity.

"I wasn't laughing at you," protested Jeannie, who was now divided between an inclination to tears and laughter.

"Yes, you were. And I'll tell you I'm fairly sick of the whole thing. More than you can ever guess."

"What time do you expect Mr. Pightle?" asked Jeannie. Receiving no reply, she turned (she had had her back to her husband), to perceive that he had left the room.

Such domestic jangles as the foregoing were now of almost daily occurrence at "Larkslease"; they usually ended, as had this one, in Edgar leaving Jeannie alone, when her distress found some approximation to relief in tears.

Sometimes, these discords would be followed by fits of sulkiness on Edgar's part, which Jeannie found well-nigh unendurable.

A month had elapsed since Mountjoy's visit: during this interval, poultry farming as a profitable industry had gone from bad to worse, so far as Jeannie and Edgar were concerned.

Cold and wet days had succeeded each other with un-failing persistency; they had had disastrous effects upon the stock.

The hens laid intermittently; ducklings and chicks had died by the score, for all that Jeannie had carefully tended

the sickly ones before the kitchen fire ; the experiment with the pheasants' eggs had been a failure and, as if to deepen Jeannie's distress, Edgar had lost heart.

There was no getting away from the fact that the farm was being run at a dead loss ; while next to nothing was coming in beyond Joe's and Mrs. Baverstock's weekly postal order, debts, that were steadily accumulating, were owing to tradespeople, who were pressing for a settlement.

Although Jeannie was now aware she was fighting overwhelming odds, she dared not give up the struggle, realising as she did that her hold upon what remained of her husband's affection depended upon their making some sort of living out of their present enterprise : the knowledge that every day was bringing them nearer to the end of their financial tether made her regard the future with dismay. Every trivial loss in the coops and runs was a further tax on her nerves, already overstrung from her frequent differences with Edgar ; their pecuniary embarrassments : she was beginning to wonder how much longer she could go on without completely breaking down.

As if to further weight her load of suffering, she had not yet had the courage to tell her husband of her physical condition, although she knew well enough it was a matter he must soon perceive for himself.

She dreaded the effect of this discovery on their already embittered relations ; at the same time, the suspense in which she was living kept her awake at night, and dismally affected her health.

Also, Edgar's words respecting lover and loved in all affairs of the heart were constantly in her mind : his behaviour, in seemingly being a practical illustration of his assertion, put an edge on her griefs.

This morning, while she miserably sobbed, she was conscious that a conviction of utter despair was taking root in her being ; that she was asking herself if victory, even if obtained, were worth the struggles, tears, travail which were hers.

Her unhappy cogitations were interrupted by the entrance of Ethel, the general servant, who brought her mistress a none too clean cup of bovril.

Jeannie, in her isolation of spirit, had confided her secret to Ethel's sympathetic ears, sympathetic because the latter had had her own "trouble": the attention and devotion the girl lavished on her mistress touched Jeannie not a little, and considerably assisted her to sustain her sorrows.

"Your master won't be in to luncheon, Ethel."

"Very well, ma'am."

"He's going to town with Mr. Pightle."

"He'll be back to-night?"

"Oh yes; he'll be back to-night," sighed Jeannie. "And as he's going to town, you'd better see his boots are well cleaned—extra well, I mean. You'd better see about them now."

"I'll see about 'em when you've drunk that, ma'am," declared Ethel, who was as good as her word.

Jeannie, who had had no appetite for breakfast, was refreshed by the bovril; as young Pightle, whom she liked, would soon call for Edgar, she set about bathing her eyes in water to remove evidence of her tears.

When she returned to the room they commonly used, she found Richard Pightle rummaging among the Staffordshire china on the mantelpiece.

"Hullo!" he remarked, on catching sight of Jeannie.

"What do you want?"

"Matches."

"You always do," declared Jeannie, as she produced a box.

Richard Pightle was a nice-looking, careless young man who, for all the fact that he was a confessed "rotter," had not sufficient energy to impel him to evil courses. He was the only child of Sir Roger Pightle, seventh baronet of his line, and owner of a down-at-heel Tudor house, many acres, and a reputation for eccentricity.

Although Richard, beyond a little perfunctory cricket,

l lounged away his days, he had made a profound study of a certain subject, on which he was an undoubted authority. This was London barmaids, with dozens of whom he was intimately acquainted, they confiding in him their personal and domestic troubles and histories.

He was a clever mimic ; when in the mood, he could humorously reproduce the incidents that make up the barmaid's day : one of the most amusing of these was an imitation of how a certain " Flossie ate a snack and at the same time carried on a flirtation with two admirers while she officiated at a Piccadilly private bar.

He had taken a fancy to the Baverstocks, and was in and out of " Larkslease " at all hours of the day and night, he declaring it did him a world of good to see how Jeannie and her husband worked, which assertion often had the effect of making Edgar turn to with a will.

Occasionally, Pightle would have a burst of energy, when, for half an hour at a stretch, he would assist Jeannie in the runs or in the kitchen, where he was equally at home.

This morning, he and Edgar were off to town, where the former was going to spend the night.

" What's up with you ? " he asked of Jeannie, when he had lit a cigarette.

" I'm all right," declared Jeannie quickly.

" You don't look it. I'm worried too."

" Did you have to get up earlier than usual ? "

" Yes. That was a bother, but it isn't all. Aunt Chrissy's coming."

" Who's aunt Chrissy ? "

" It's evident you don't know her. Aunt Chrissy is a fair corker, and when she comes to see us it usually means she's fairly on the job."

" Indeed ! "

" The whole show is turned upside down before she comes ; and when she's there she's always finding fault. But she isn't a bad sort. She's pots of money, or rather her husband has——"

"Lucky man," interrupted Jeannie, with something suspiciously like a sigh.

"Don't you believe it. King works jolly hard."

"Works?"

"Mines. Tommy-rot of that sort. I believe it's all his doing she's lately been going for me for slacking."

"How are the birds?" he asked, a little later.

"Dreadful," replied Jeannie.

"I could have told you that. It's the old story. The more you keep the worse they lay. It's a jolly good thing you're not doing it all for a living."

For a moment, she was taken off her guard, and looked at him with surprised eyes: then, she remembered Edgar's fiction on the subject, at which she somewhat tremulously asked:

"What if we were doing it for a living?"

"Poultry farming?"

"Yes, what if we were?"

"Workhouse. Thank Heaven you're doing it for a lark."

"You — you don't really mean that?" faltered Jeannie.

"Don't I? I can tell you you're the fourth lot who've come to grief in this very place."

"In 'Larkslease'?"

"Yes. I saw what was coming when you came in. If I'd known how nice you both were, I'd have given you the tip."

"Supposing—supposing we were doing it partly for a living? What would you suggest doing?"

"Getting out of it in no time."

"What else could we do?"

"I know what I should take on."

"What?"

"A country pub. At least it's a living, and some of the work must be quite funny."

"You're not serious?"

"Aren't I though! If you take it on, I'll come as potman."

Jeannie smiled in spite of herself.

"I'd do it for the fun of the thing. At a pinch, I'd get up as a barmaid and attract the local 'sports.' And I say! Wouldn't it just amuse aunt Chrissy!" he cried, to add regretfully: "But you're not serious. It can't matter to you whether your poultry farm does go bust."

"Not at all," assented Jeannie, with a bitterness that was unperceived by her companion.

When they were joined by Edgar a few moments later, Jeannie painfully noticed how her husband greeted and talked with his friend as if he had not a care in the world.

"Happy he is leaving me for the day," she miserably mused.

For all his light-heartedness, he did not say anything to her when he started off with his friend; although she accompanied them to the gate, Edgar did not once look back, as had been his wont on former occasions when he had absented himself.

Jeannie spent the most unhappy day she had ever known. When not busy with attending to the poultry, she moped about the house and felt abjectly wretched: occasionally, she wept pitiful tears.

Over and over again she told herself that she was the lover, Edgar the loved one: this conviction stimulated her passion for Edgar, consequently her bitterness of spirit.

It was a treacherous spring day. Scarcely without warning, an undependable blue sky would be darkened with scurrying clouds which discharged sharp, cold rain showers. The blustering weather affected the hens, causing them to lay but very few eggs, although it was a time of year when they should be doing their best.

Also, several of the birds looked sickly and exhibited disquieting symptoms which Jeannie was too depressed to diagnose from the poultry manuals.

The weather, the dismal tale of eggs, the ailing hens, further contributed to her physical and mental undoing : she repeatedly asked herself if her present life were worth living.

She ate no midday meal ; Ethel's proffered consolations irritated her ; she could not get any sleep in the afternoon : her nerves were raw.

When evening came, her isolation, surroundings, troubles, and physical condition all combined to convince her that she was fighting a hopeless battle, inasmuch as if she so much as succeeded in making a living from the poultry farm, it did not mean the retention of Edgar's affection, much less his love.

About eight, she was seized by a nameless dread : the silent house, the quiet fields, seemed to mock her extremity.

Scarcely knowing what she was at, she put on her hat, caught up the first pair of gloves that came to hand, and without a word to Ethel left her home and strode in the direction of the station.

She had a hazy idea of what time the next train left for London, but had half made up her mind that, if she found one at the station, she would go to town, seek Joe out and, after telling him how wretched her life had become, beseech him to give her harbourage.

The wind had changed since the afternoon ; it was now misty and close : over the distant river lay a thick fog.

As she went, the sound of the fog-horns on outward-bound ships came from the river : they were like the bellowing of great beasts which had lost their way.

Now and again, the distant muttering of thunder sounded as the menacing growling of a rival herd.

Occasionally, she would discern a bright light in a distant house : it was like a superb planet which, in successfully defying the attraction of the sun, was always in the same place.

Presently, she passed a gateway of Sir Roger Pightle's park, and a little way farther came upon the baronet's cart being slowly driven from the station, while Sir Roger, according to almost invariable custom, was trotting beside it to keep himself warm.

In walking an avenue of trees (they dripped water upon her) she heard footsteps, at which she was conscious of the beating of her heart : Edgar, mightily pleased with himself after a convivial day with Pightle, was approaching on his way home, his friend having arranged to stay in town for the night.

When he came upon her suddenly out of the mist, she was moved to pass him without taking any notice of him ; she almost succeeded in not being observed, when he called her name : she took no notice and pressed on.

He came after her, and perceiving it was indeed Jeannie, he again called her by name.

" Let me go on," she cried.

" What's this mean ? "

" Let me go on : let me go on."

" But where ? "

" Anywhere. Good-bye."

He followed and grasped her arm : she was disposed to protest, but his touch thrilled her body and made her realise how abjectly she loved him, how pitifully she was his.

" Jeannie ! Jeannie ! What's it all mean ? "

She looked at him with such a world of pain in her eyes that he cried :

" Dearest ! "

The tenderness that had long been strange to his lips broke down her last weak defence.

" Why are you unkind ? " she asked, while scalding tears fell out of her eyes.

" Unkind ! "

" Now of all times."

" Now—— Jeannie ! I don't understand."

"I'll tell you. I must. I've been longing to for weeks, but dare not."

"Jeannie!"

"I'm going to have a little one. Yours and mine. Born of our love: and it's breaking my heart that you don't love me any more."

There was a silence that she thought would last for ever.

If he turned on her now, as she half feared he would, she was convinced it would kill her.

"My Jeannie!" he delightedly cried.

She feared her ears had played her false.

"My own dear, darling Jeannie! Why didn't you tell me thus before?"

She looked at him with sweetly incredulous eyes, at which, such was his present exaltation, that he took her very tenderly in his arms and kissed her as if she were some rare and precious thing.

She dimly strove to realise that Edgar's love was still beyond all price; that she must increase her efforts to make the farm a success in order that money troubles should not have a chance of once more coming between them.

CHAPTER XVII

JOE AND THE NIGHT

THINGS took a turn for the better with Jeannie, and in more ways than one, after her revelation to her husband.

For all that she had made her communication to Edgar when he was on the best of terms with himself and the world at large, her information seemingly had the effect of fanning into flame the embers of his love for his wife, with the result that he was again much of the lover of the old days.

Whether or not it was on account of anxious solicitude for what might befall Jeannie during her approaching ordeal, remorse for his coldness, anticipation of parental pride in being responsible for bringing into the world another Baverstock, or a combination of these emotions, he devoted his days to furthering his wife's comfort, and to doing his utmost to rouse the stock on the farm to a more conscientious performance of their duties.

He would not allow Jeannie to do any work outside the house; with the occasional assistance of Pightle, he attended to the smallest details of the business, and would not permit his wife to so much as glance at the books, she having to rest content with his frequent assurances that things were "bucking up no end," as he termed it.

Also, such was his new-found enthusiasm for his work that he rarely played in Pightle's cricket eleven, a considerable self-denial on his part, as he loved the game.

Once more Jeannie breathed an enchanted atmosphere

of romance; also, with regard to what was toward, her little world had a deeper and more appealing quality than it had ever known before.

The family at "Pyracantha" and Joe were acquainted with the news, which brought letters of congratulation from the different members of the Baverstock family, while Jeannie's father wrote a long, tender letter to his daughter, in which he expressed fervent wishes that her little one would grow up to prove an abiding blessing to his (or her) parents.

In the fulness of their hearts, Jeannie and Edgar had written to ask Joe to fix a Sunday on which he could conveniently come down: they had been compelled to put him off on the day he had selected; although they had given him the choice of any following Sunday, or a week-end should he prefer it, he had left the matter open, but had not availed himself of the invitation.

Jeannie had written to say that she was coming herself to bring her father to "Larkslease," but whether or not he was waiting for this event, he had not replied.

She was not so disturbed at her father's apparent reluctance to visit her as might have been expected, she luxuriating in Edgar's reawakened love; also, it was not very long before opportunities occurred for furthering her social ambitions, which had the effect of diverting her thoughts from Joe.

Before these occurred, she received one Sunday an unexpected visit from her husband's cousins, the Hibblings, who told her that, having heard the good news from the Baverstocks at "Pyracantha," they had felt that writing was inadequate, and nothing short of personal congratulations would meet the case. Lucy Hibbling, after declaring Edgar was not looking so well as she had expected to find him, had furnished Jeannie with a catalogue of noble dames who were in a like interesting condition to her own; at the same time, her husband, who somehow looked more bottle-shouldered in the country than in town, talked

society with Edgar, who, to tell the truth, was rather bored with his cousin's fifth-hand information.

The Hiblings had stayed to luncheon ; as Jeannie now made a point of resting in the afternoon, Edgar had taken his cousins for a walk.

When he was presently alone with his wife, he told her how their visitors had made a point of being conducted to the two or three properties of consequence in the neighbourhood, when they had spoken to the respective lodge-keepers of the families they served, and in so doing had revealed an intimate knowledge of their histories and of the recent comings and goings of the latter : it was evident that the Hiblings had got up the subject before coming down.

Before they had taken their departure, Lucy Hibling had given Jeannie an account of all the bargain sales she had recently attended : she had, also, asked for three dozen eggs which, in the hurry of going, she had forgotten to pay for.

One morning, young Pightle appeared with a long face.

"What's the matter with you ?" asked Jeannie, who now regarded him as quite an old friend.

"Lots."

"Too dreadful to tell me ?"

"Not so bad as that. But you know I told you some time ago that aunt Chrissy was coming."

"And she put you off ?"

"She's coming next week : it's a 'dead cert' this time."

"I see nothing very dreadful in that."

"You don't know aunt Chrissy. As I told you before, when she's expected, the whole house is turned upside down ; and when she's here, the pater and I have to manage our p's and q's. No getting up when one likes, and having meals when one likes, and all that. Everything has to be 'just so' when she's about."

"It probably does you a lot of good."

"That's just it. I don't want improving. I prefer to be as I am. And there's something else I have to tell you. You'll be upset when you know."

"Well——"

"D'ye know Mrs. Parlby?"

"The vicar's wife?"

"She was asking about you the other day, and when I told her I was matey with Baverstock, she said she was going to look you up. Are you very upset?"

"I don't know that I am," replied Jeannie, who, in the secret places of her heart, was pleased that people of local importance were not above calling on her.

"That's all right, then. If I'd any idea you felt like letting 'em all come, I shouldn't have said anything to you about it."

"What is she like?" asked Jeannie.

"To begin with, she doesn't think my barmaid imitations funny. I did 'em once at a local concert, and although they were the success of the evening she and her husband were quite huffy about it."

"I can well believe that. What is he like?"

"Parlby? He's not like anything at all. He's neither one thing nor the other."

"He's one of the handsomest men I have ever seen," declared Jeannie, who had every justification for her eulogy of the handsome parson.

"Maybe. But for all that, although I'm a bit of a fool, Parlby beats me hollow."

Mrs. Parlby was as good as her word.

One June morning, Jeannie rested on the lawn, the while she basked in the warmth of the day: although the sun in drying up the brook had temporarily stayed its music, the sunshine had called into being other sounds that were eloquent of the month and season; to these, she appreciatively listened.

The melodious rattle of grass mowers was borne to her ears by an enervated wind: behind the cottage the cries

of some guinea fowl Pightle had given her were like the scraping of a hone upon a scythe: yellow-hammers commenced their song musically enough but, as if fearing to get out of tune, they suffered their note to fall away somewhat drearily before trying again: now and again, a cuckoo lazily called from the distance.

Then, Jeannie watched the gambols of two butterflies which gaily chased each other about her before disappearing behind the hedge bordering the road.

Hardly had they gone when Ethel appeared with her mistress's eleven o'clock glass of stout. This was not free of blacks, but Jeannie forbore to censure the girl by reason of the kindly feeling which informed her action.

When Ethel left her, Jeannie fell to reflecting how from her varied experiences of general servants she could divide them into two classes: there were the efficient ones to whom the suspicion of dirt was an abomination, but who were prim, cold, and precise, and would not do a stroke beyond what they conceived to be their duty; on the other hand, there were sluts like Ethel who, for all their incompetent ways, had hearts of gold.

She was wondering which, for her husband's and her own greater comfort, she preferred, when insensibly her thoughts were wholly concerned with her approaching motherhood.

A thousand and one tender speculations possessed her; these were not infrequently overshadowed by apprehensions of the ordeal through which it was written she must pass.

Presently, she was retrospectively disposed; with the optimistic eyes of a happy present she surveyed her days from her youth up.

So far as she could see in a rough-and-ready review of her existence, it seemed that, quite apart from her measured years, she had arrived at succeeding stages of sophistication with regard to her outlook upon life.

Each had a more comprehensive range of vision than the last; she appeared to have travelled far in her know-

ledge of good and evil and things : she wondered if, apart from the bearing of a child, it were possible for any further emotions and experiences to be hers.

The fact of her mind being occupied with her life before she was married recalled Joe insistently to her thoughts. She dimly realised how indifferently she had treated him, and resolutely refused to imagine any pains he may have known at his long separation from his Jeannie.

In an access of remorse she had made up her mind to write and beg Joe to come down at once, when she saw a cart drive up to the gate, and an elderly, motherly-looking woman descend, before approaching the cottage.

When she came upon Jeannie, she asked :

"Are you Mrs. Baverstock ?"

"Yes."

"I'm Mrs. Parlby. Dick Pightle told me all about you, and so I thought I'd come and see you, although it is scarcely the correct time for making a call."

"It's very good of you. Will you come in, although we're upside down!"

"If you want to be out of doors, I can sit out here."

Thus it came about that another chair was fetched, and in a very short time Mrs. Parlby was reciting the many adventures attending the births of the four children she had brought into the world.

Mrs. Parlby was a matter-of-fact, kindly woman, who had not a gleam of humour in her composition ; she had, as Jeannie divined, married rather above her own station in life, her father having made his money in the lace trade.

Over and beyond her children's ailments, her staple conversation consisted of housekeeping troubles, in which the vagaries of servants and the difficulty of getting a cook who did not drink seemed to play the chief part.

Apart from these matters, Mrs. Parlby took an abiding interest in the doings of the "dear Queen" : she was greatly surprised at learning that Jeannie did not possess and had not read *My Life in the Highlands*.

As she had parochial duties to attend to she, to Jeannie's chagrin, did not stay very long—chagrin, because the latter particularly wished Mrs. Parlby to meet Edgar before she went.

When the vicar's wife said "Good-bye," she promised to lend Jeannie *My Life in the Highlands*, providing every care was taken of the work.

When Edgar learned who had called, he was so elated that his wife's determination to speak about making amends for her conduct to her father was, for the time being, forgotten.

"It's jolly good business," he said, as he sank wearily into the chair the vicar's wife had vacated.

"Why good business, dearest?"

"Once we know her, we shall come across all sorts of useful people."

"But every one about here keeps poultry, if you're thinking of selling them eggs."

"That never occurred to me, practical little Jeannie!"

"Little Jeannie is very practical, and rightly so. If she wants to sell eggs it's because she doesn't want to see her dearest working so hard and looking so tired."

"That's all right. But what I thought was this: That if we go a 'buster' over this poultry farm, one of these well-off families about here may get me some decent job."

Jeannie's face fell, at which he asked:

"What's wrong with that, little girl?"

"You said if we go a 'buster' over poultry. You're always telling me things are looking up."

"Eh?"

"Only at breakfast you said you'd more orders——"

"That's all right," he interrupted. "A few minutes ago I mistook a china egg for a genuine one, and it's quite depressed me."

It took Jeannie some twenty-four hours to get accustomed to the fact of Mrs. Parlby's call, when she again thought of Joe, and of her neglectful behaviour to him.

This time she was on the point of sitting down to write penitently to her father, which letter would accompany his consignment of eggs, when she heard a peremptory knock on the front door ; knowing that Ethel was unpresentable in the morning, Jeannie answered it herself, when she found an imposing-looking, carelessly turned out, middle-aged woman standing outside.

"Hullo !" said this person.

"Good morning," replied Jeannie.

"May I come in ?"

"Certainly, but——"

"Shan't keep you long. I'm Mrs. King, Dick's aunt. Which way ?"

"I'm afraid it's rather untidy," said Jeannie nervously, as she glanced at the litter made by Edgar when writing letters.

"What of that ? Besides, it shows some one's been busy. Where shall I sit ?"

Dick's aunt, although well past her first youth, still retained considerable physical attractions, to which a personal distinction contributed not a little.

She was essentially a woman who had what is vulgarly known as a mind of her own ; she lived her life with scant regard for the opinions of relations or friends.

Possessing an active mind and body, she occupied her leisure and means with a sequence of more or less expensive hobbies ; such was the energy and ability she brought to bear on these that, in many instances, they almost paid their way.

She had a fund of humour and would joke broadly, familiarly with tradespeople and dependants, and would tolerate any reply so long as due respect was paid to her position : should this latter be forgotten, however, the delinquent was unmistakably reminded of his or her mistake, and in a manner that was not likely to be forgotten, the baronet's sister having a rich and varied vocabulary of strong language.

For all her force of character, and the fact of her "not caring a blow for any one," as she so often declared, her fearless disposition had marked poetical leanings, which manifested themselves in an intense love of nature, music, and good verses : when moved by these, she was as perverse and absent-minded as any poet, living in a dream-world of her own.

She was the bane of her lazy nephew's life, his effete father's, and of his happy-go-lucky establishment, as she had a knack of turning up when things were at their worst, when she would roundly assail any and every one who she believed had been at all remiss in their duties.

King was about the most suitable husband she could have wedded, he being a reserved, self-contained man, who let his wife do pretty much as she pleased : should she ever wound his not very exigent susceptibilities, however, he would make use of a pretty turn he possessed for invective, which generally had the effect of bringing his headstrong spouse to her bearings.

Now, Mrs. King lay back in her chair and crossed her legs in a manner that was considered, to put it mildly, unconventional in those days, before saying :

"How's love in a cottage?"

"Love in a cottage is quite well, thank you."

"No holes in the roof?"

"Not yet."

"Although you're poultry farmin'?"

"What has that to do with it?"

"Any one can see you're from London."

"Why?"

"Havin' such touchin' faith in what you're doin'. But as it's all done for a lark, as Dick says, it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter," repeated Jeannie as casually as she was able, while she strove to conceal the sinking of spirit which she knew.

Although her caller, in common with many other women

of character, had no particular love for those of her own sex, she had at once divined how matters stood financially with her nephew's comely friend, consequently she was more disposed to make herself agreeable than she might otherwise have been.

"I came in fear and tremblin'," she went on.

"Indeed!"

"To see what sort of people Dick had picked up. I'm more than pleased."

"Thank you," said Jeannie, who was greatly troubled by reason of Mrs. King's insinuation that there was no money in poultry farming, confirming as it did her own suspicions on the subject: she was about to question her on the matter when Edgar came into the room.

Mrs. King, who had a keen eye for a personable young man, at once became animated, while years seemed taken from her life; she went out of her way to make herself interesting and amusing; she incidentally mentioned how she was determined to make her nephew take up something definite.

She stayed for nearly an hour; before she went, she said:

"I'm goin' away almost directly: when I'm here again, you must both come up and see us."

"Delighted," said Jeannie.

"And whether or not the hens lay, you've two priceless assets."

"Is a clay soil one of them?" asked Edgar.

"Love and youth. Make the most of 'em while you can," replied the visitor.

Edgar accompanied Mrs. King to the gate where a cart, drawn by a thoroughbred pony, awaited her; she drove away herself.

The prospects of social and material advancement excited by Mrs. King's friendliness were such that Joe's claims did not receive the consideration they more than merited, although Jeannie was always on the point of doing something in the matter.

One reason for her delay was that she knew how her husband had never in his heart forgiven Joe for his unfortunate appearance at the "Pyraantha" dinner-party; with the selfish absorption of the woman in love, she invariably more or less identified her point of view with that of the man she adored.

Whenever a supply of eggs or poultry was sent to Joe, she, as often as not, contented herself with writing, "With best love," or some such message on Edgar's acknowledgment of the former's postal order.

Another reason why she behaved so indifferently was that she had an abiding fear that things were not going nearly so well on the poultry farm as Edgar constantly made out, he, for all his expressed optimism on the matter, being frequently depressed and moody.

Then, as the weeks flew by, she was troubled by the alteration in Edgar's appearance, he looking thin and worn.

At first, she put down the change to the fact of his worrying on her account; later, she feared the work of the farm was proving too much for his strength.

Whenever Joe was discussed, they invariably arrived at the same conclusion; this, that as they were anything but prosperous, and in the face of what was toward with Jeannie, they had better postpone asking him down till after her little one was born.

For three October days before, and during the night that this event took place, the flood-gates of heaven were opened, and the winds blew in gusts that shook the cottage to its foundations.

While Jeannie lay in her protracted torment, long-forgotten incidents in her life would suddenly impinge upon her agony, incidents in which her father, to whom she had written to prepare him for the news he might shortly expect, prominently figured.

Outside, the violent wind and rain storms for a time alternated with peaceful intervals, and Jeannie, in her effort to distract her mind from her anguish, listened with straining

ears to catch the music of the stream when it was at all possible to hear it.

Her nerves were so on edge that her senses were preternaturally acute ; she was presently convinced that she could distinguish footsteps passing and repassing in the road.

Their persistence so disturbed her that she was at last constrained to stop her ears with her fingers in order not to hear them.

Even then, she was certain that they were still pacing the road ; the repeated denials of those who were about her failed to disabuse her agitated mind of this belief.

At last, her extremity on this score was such that Edgar was communicated with : he, at once, went out into the night in order to assure Jeannie that her apprehensions were groundless.

He was absent some little while, which fact had anything but a calming effect on his wife's grievous imaginings.

When she was on the point of insisting that others should ascertain what had become of him, she heard his well-known step, accompanied by those of another, approaching the cottage.

It was not very long before she was told that it was her father who was outside in the night ; also, that he would remain until Jeannie knew a happy issue from her extremity.

CHAPTER XVIII

JOE AND THE CHILDREN

It was not till some four months after a son was born to Jeannie that she learned from Edgar of the financial disaster with which they were menaced.

Immediately after the rapid recovery she had made, she had been greatly troubled at noticing how ill her husband was looking ; she had previously seen how he had not been in his usual health, but had put down this declension to anxiety on her behalf : since she was now quite well, and he was in no better case, his continued indisposition had caused her endless anxiety.

As if this were not enough to distress her, he had been attacked by influenza, which he was a long time getting over. Even when he became more like his old self, physically, he appeared to have much on his mind : it was only in response to her frequent appeals for his confidence that he had divulged how matters stood.

It was a dismal story he had to tell Jeannie.

When he had taken over the entire management of the poultry, matters had quickly gone from bad to worse, chiefly owing to an outbreak of chicken cholera which had ravaged the stock, the sourness of the runs and ground being responsible for this disease.

As a desperate means of averting disaster, Edgar had asked his father to suggest a profitable Stock Exchange speculation, and the latter had replied that he knew of the very thing : he had advised his son to buy as many partly paid shares as he could afford in a certain American land company in which he (Reuben) was largely interested.

In the hope of emerging from his financial slough of despond, Edgar had raised as much as possible on "Larkslease," and had acted on his father's recommendation.

The result had been bitterly disappointing, an American panic having reduced his shares to an unsaleable value almost directly after he had parted with his money.

Baverstock had written to lament their joint ill-luck, and at the same time had urged Edgar to hold on to the shares at all costs, as they would ultimately prove extremely profitable.

Edgar, however, was entirely concerned with the present : the expenses of Jeannie's illness had eaten up a good half of his remaining capital ; he was going to London on the morrow to sell his last hundred pounds' worth of Consols ; most of this was owing to local tradespeople.

Neither he nor Jeannie had the slightest idea of what to be at in order to keep a roof over their heads. There was no hope of assistance from Reuben Baverstock, even if he were disposed to help them, he being badly hit over the land company in which Edgar had lost so heavily.

For some time, Edgar had cherished an idea that the well-to-do people he had got to know locally might help him to something ; although they occasionally saw Mrs. King, and had become acquainted with one or two of her friends, there seemed small prospect of this leading to anything tangible.

For all these tribulations, Jeannie was not so downcast as she might have been under like circumstances a few months back.

To begin with, she had her boy : in the fulness of her young motherhood, such a possession endowed her with that which was more priceless and precious than anything material the world could bestow.

Also, as Edgar was proud of, and really devoted to his son, she knew that whatever further financial adversity was theirs, she was sure of her husband's devotion where before she had been uncertain.

On the afternoon following the day on which she had

learned Edgar's ill news, she was resting in "Larkslease," and awaiting a visit from Mrs. Parlby, who had announced her intention of calling about four.

She had left her boy sleeping upstairs ; as she mused before the fire, she kept an attentive ear on the room above, so that she should know directly he was awake.

Then, her thoughts were possessed by her father.

Her baby had been born in the small hours of the morning following on the night when Edgar had discovered Joe pacing up and down in the rain and wind storms outside the house.

He had been presently permitted to come into the room for a few moments when, after he had reverently kissed Jeannie and the little one, the young mother, exhausted from her fierce ordeal, had passed her hands caressingly across Joe's face, at which he had suddenly gripped her arm.

He had waited downstairs till the afternoon ; when the doctor had assured him how Jeannie was as well as could be expected, he, for all the fact of Edgar's pressing him to stay, had insisted on taking his departure, saying that, since he knew the worst was safely over, he was better out of the way.

Edgar had written daily for a week to tell him how Jeannie was going on ; she, later, had sent to tell him how well she was progressing ; the letters he wrote in reply were eloquent of an abiding thankfulness for her recovery.

She had long meant to ask him down, but, as she was unable to afford a nurse, nearly all her time was taken up with her boy ; then, she had nursed Edgar when he was ill, and at the same time had been compelled to look after the poultry, in which latter task she had been assisted by a suddenly energetic Pightle.

Joe's visit was not the only thing with which these matters had interfered : the christening of the little one, who was to be called Edgar Joseph, had of necessity been put off : when Jeannie was about to arrange this event, and at the same time invite her father, who was to be one of the

godfathers, she had been troubled by Edgar's downcast spirits and appearance, which had moved her to question him, with the result that he had told her of their financial extremity.

Directly she had heard the ill news, she determined not to communicate with her father just yet : in the first place, she was not in the mood to have even Joe in the house while she was immersed in pecuniary worries ; also, as sooner or later her father would learn of these, she did not wish to run the risk of giving him the impression that she was eager to have him with her when she and her husband were in difficulties.

As in the days before her baby was born, she wrote little messages on Edgar's acknowledgments of Joe's postal orders for eggs.

Her mother-in-law had lately written to ask her and Edgar and the little one to pay a long visit to "Pyra-cantha" ; Jeannie told herself that if they availed themselves of this invitation, which they might be compelled to accept, she would then have every opportunity of constantly seeing her father, as he was still living at Putney.

She was easing the prickings of her conscience respecting her behaviour to Joe with this reflection, when Mrs. Parlby was announced : she had not been with Jeannie five minutes when the young mother was flattered by her visitor's request to see the baby.

Mrs. Parlby was taken upstairs to Jeannie's room, where the child was peacefully sleeping : it had been duly admired, and Jeannie was about to ask the invariable question as to which parent it most resembled, when she heard voices outside the cottage : upon going to the window, she saw Edgar approaching the door with Mrs. King, who was paying one of her flying visits to her brother.

When Mrs. Parlby and Jeannie presently went downstairs, they found Edgar and Mrs. King in the little drawing-room.

"Don't ask me to see the baby," said Mrs. King, as she

greeted Jeannie. "I don't like babies at all, so it's no use pretendin' one does."

Although Jeannie, who was now well used to her acquaintance's oddities, was not in the least offended, Mrs. Parlby looked shocked.

"Very well, then, I shan't come and see any of your puppies," the latter remarked to Mrs. King, who had lately gone in for breeding greyhounds.

"That's your loss," retorted Mrs. King, who then turned to Jeannie to say: "What I came for was this. There're the point to point races, on Wednesday week, near us. If you and your husband are goin', you'd better come to luncheon; we've all sorts of people comin'."

"Dick's ridin', isn't he?" asked Edgar.

"He thinks he is. I'm not going to let him."

"What has Dick done?"

"It isn't what he's done; it's what he's goin' to do. Old Pakeley, who's thousands of acres over Pittfield way, wants an agent; I've told Dick if he doesn't apply for the job, he'll get into trouble with me."

"What does Dick say?"

"He flatly refuses."

"It's the way of the world," complained Edgar. "Those who want billets can't get 'em; those who can get them, won't take 'em."

"I've made up my mind this time," remarked Mrs. King. "And as for old Pakeley, Dick can do what he likes with him. If you come, you'll meet the old boy on Wednesday week."

"We shall be delighted," said Edgar and Jeannie together, while the latter wished her husband had the same opportunities of obtaining remunerative employment as his friend.

Then the vicar's wife questioned Mrs. King with regard to her latest hobby, the breeding of greyhounds, at which the former explained how she had got on to a really good thing this time, inasmuch as she had paid for the last

winner of the Waterloo cup to sire her brood-bitches, which would mean that she could obtain a high price for the "slips."

"Slips?" queried Mrs. Parlby.

"Pups. Didn't you know greyhound puppies are called 'slips'?"

Mrs. Parlby gave the dog-breeder the impression that she disapproved of her latest occupation, at which Mrs. King asked, point-blank:

"What's wrong with dog-breedin'?"

After many hesitations, Mrs. Parlby replied:

"Well, dear, don't you think it's a little vulgar?"

"That never occurred to me before," replied Mrs. King. "I'm much obliged to you. It makes me keener on it than ever."

Mrs. Parlby thought it expedient to change the subject; although Mrs. King was geniality itself, Jeannie believed she was secretly annoyed at the other woman's reflection on the propriety of her new pursuit.

Somehow, the subject of masculine strength cropped up, when Mrs. King remarked:

"You've no idea how powerful my husband is."

"He scarcely looks it," said Mrs. Parlby. "But it's very hard to tell from appearances."

"When he's nothin' on, he seems all bone and muscle," continued Mrs. King.

"My husband has a very fine figure," declared Mrs. Parlby, and with truth. "When he's undressed, he looks beautiful."

"Yes, doesn't he?" queried Mrs. King enthusiastically, and in the manner of one confirming the most matter-of-fact remark.

The vicar's wife put down her teacup, coughed, took it up again, and, at risk of spilling tea over her frock, swept some crumbs that had fallen from her lap into the fireplace.

As for Jeannie, she did not know what to make of Mrs. King's remark until she saw how Edgar had turned away

to conceal his smiles, at which she was surprised at one in Mrs. King's position going out of her way to make such a vulgar and tactless joke.

This behaviour on the part of one who she thought should know better troubled her while the two women were with her (Mrs. Parlby was very distant to Mrs. King at parting) and at intervals during the evening when she was engaged with her baby or discussing ways and means with Edgar; indeed, it so worried her that she mentioned the matter to him when she went with him to London on the following afternoon, where he was going to sell his last hundred pounds' worth of Consols; she, to do some exiguous but necessary shopping.

"I can't understand it, dear," she began.

"Understand what?"

"Mrs. King saying what she did to Mrs. Parlby."

"About how nice Parlby looked when he was undressed?"

"Yes. I should have thought she would have known better."

"It was funny, though," said Edgar, smiling at the recollection of Mrs. King's audacity.

"I wonder what you would have said if I had spoken like that?"

"I shouldn't say anything at all. I should at once apply for a divorce," declared Edgar gravely.

"Dearest!"

"What else could it mean but that I'd every justification? But, speaking seriously, it seems that my pretty Jeannie, who loves me far too dearly to think of handsome parsons, does not know what a difference money and an unassailable social position make to any one. People like Mrs. King are a law to themselves, and can say and do pretty much as they please, while people in our position have to be very careful what they're at."

"One law for the rich, and another for the very poor," smiled Jeannie.

"That's exactly it, little Jeannie. And do you know why those in our position have to be so careful? There's a reason for that as there is for most other things."

"Well?" said Jeannie, as, the carriage being empty, she nestled nearer to her husband.

"It's this way, little girl. The highly respected middle classes, to which we both have the honour to belong, are never quite sure of themselves or of their precise position on the social ladder, consequently they're always on their best behaviour in order not to be found wanting in the eyes of their world."

"I don't quite understand; but it all sounds very clever," remarked Jeannie, who would much have preferred to sit on Edgar's knee than to listen to his disquisition.

He, unaware of her tender leanings, followed his train of thought.

"That explains the sheer propriety of the middle classes, and all that sort of thing. And thus it comes about that snobbishness is the handmaid of morality."

"That's the kind of remark Mountjoy says," commented Jeannie.

Edgar, ignoring her comment, went on:

"And here's something else—I feel quite clever this afternoon; I suppose it's the change of air—the middle classes, in being compelled to be always on their best behaviour, are the trustees of refinement."

Although Edgar's face was alive with intelligence just then, Jeannie, with a pain at her heart, saw how weary and careworn he was looking; she spoke of the matter, but he rather increased her apprehensions than otherwise when he assured her that his mind, for the time being, was innocent of worry.

"You know what is before us!" she urged.

"I wish I did. Then I might be upset," he laughed. "But, seriously! I've every hope of the 'point to point' race luncheon at Mrs. King's leading to something."

Jeannie sadly smiled, at which he said:

"I know it sounds foolish, little Jeannie, but just you wait and see if I'm not right."

When they got out at Fenchurch Street, and walked the crowded ways of the City in the direction of the broker's office, Jeannie could not help noticing how most of the many men they encountered had no eyes for her, but only for her husband; she marvelled at the cause, until she noticed that Edgar's buttonhole of azaleas, which was composed of some that had been given her by Dick Pightle, was responsible for the attention he attracted, so many of those who earn their bread in London being ardent gardeners in their spare time.

Mr. Rudge, Edgar's broker, was a beefy, red-necked man; he looked more like a prosperous farmer than a dealer in stocks and shares; directly he caught sight of his client, he reached for his tall hat and asked Edgar and Jeannie to accompany him to the Bank of England.

"Seen your father lately?" he presently asked of Edgar; he had been previously eyeing the latter's buttonhole.

"Not very recently."

"They say he's very hard hit over the Barfield Land Company."

"Indeed."

"You didn't have anything in it, I suppose?"

"Very little."

"I'm glad of that. It may be all right in time, but things will probably be worse before they're better. But here we are. As I sent on the papers, we won't keep you very long."

They entered the Bank of England, when Jeannie was not a little awed by her surroundings; these, in being the outward and visible signs of untold wealth, seemed to insist on her own financial insignificance, a fact of which she was already too well aware.

When they arrived at the department dealing with the realisation of Consols, the broker approached a desk at

which sat a lanky, bald, worried-looking man, whose face was decorated with red whiskers.

"Afternoon, Mr. Spanker," said Rudge.

"Afternoon, Mr. Rudge," replied the bank clerk.

"This is Mr. Edgar Baverstock, who is selling a hundred pounds' worth of Consols."

"I think we have the papers here, sir," said Mr. Spanker, who became more formal and businesslike every minute. Please be good enough to answer my questions."

He set about catechising Edgar with a view to proving his identity; the replies being satisfactory, Mr. Spanker said to the broker:

"All in order, Mr. Rudge."

"Glad to hear it, Mr. Spanker."

"Will you have the money in notes, or in notes and gold, sir?" he asked of Edgar, after the latter had carried out the necessary formalities.

"Twenty in gold; the rest in notes."

"Thank you, sir."

Then, while Edgar counted the money, Mr. Spanker turned to Rudge, to exclaim quite plaintively:

"My fowls won't lay!"

"Still?"

"Onc egg the whole of last week, and I've tried everything. Can't you suggest anything, Rudge?"

"Give it up, Spanker."

"It's keeping me awake at night."

Edgar's business being completed, he pocketed his money and shook hands with the broker; he left him talking to Spanker, who was visibly relapsing from the official bank clerk into the perplexed amateur keeper of poultry.

"I thought that chap kept hens," said Edgar to Jeannie, as they left the bank. "He's caught the worried look they have when they're about to lay an egg."

"He wishes he'd the chance of catching it."

"I suppose they laid once upon a time. Even ours did. Now for a hansom."

Jeannie, who was worrying to get back to her little one, and wondering how he would take to his temporary diet of cow's milk in her absence, accompanied her husband to Regent Street, where he insisted on "blowing," as he called it, the best part of twenty pounds on buying pretty things for his Jeannie.

"It's wicked, sweetheart," she somewhat faintly protested. "The money isn't ours; we owe nearly every penny."

"'Stolen fruits are always sweetest,' " laughed Edgar. "I want you to look smart for the 'forlorn hope.' "

"The what? "

"Mrs. King's luncheon crowd. If you're nicely turned out, it may make all the difference in my prospects. Besides, it's probably our last chance of having a little flutter. Let's make hay while we can still see the sun."

But for her eagerness to get back to the baby, she would have stayed in town for dinner, a proceeding Edgar urged upon her.

They got into a cab for Fenchurch Street, but, at the top of Cornhill, Edgar insisted on getting out and paying the cabman, as he wanted to buy some oysters for Jeannie in Leadenhall Market.

When they were about to cross Gracechurch Street opposite the entrance to this place, the press of traffic was such that they were separated, although Jeannie was unexpectedly assisted across the road by a stalwart policeman.

She was looking about for Edgar, when an altogether unexpected sight met her gaze.

Her father, looking aged and worn, was distributing buns from a big bag he carried to the poor children who wait patiently outside fishmongers' and poulterers' for the food that is given away at the close of the day.

She was divided between a desire to speak to him and fear of losing Edgar.

She stood quite still, and, although Joe more than once looked in her direction, he did not appear to see her.

Then, in turning to see if Edgar were in sight, she perceived him on the farther side of Gracechurch Street looking anxiously about him.

As he did not see her, she quickly crossed the road, but by the time she was able to hurry him into the Market, Joe was nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FORLORN HOPE

JEANNIE, assisted by Edgar, whom she had quickly told of her having seen her father, looked this way and that, and made inquiry of the Market salesmen (some of whom wear straw hats all the year round), but without being able to discover Joe ; his sudden disappearance made her believe that he had seen her and of set purpose had avoided her.

The fact of her coming upon him so unexpectedly, the good work he was doing, her conviction that he had not wished to speak to her, troubled Jeannie much ; she could think and talk of little else but her father on the way home, and for the rest of the evening ; she had determined to take the earliest opportunity of seeing him in town, and, if he could possibly get away, to bring him back with her to " Larkslcase."

Twice in the night she awoke with a start, when, for a moment, it seemed that Joe was bending over her, as was his wont when she was a child.

She had quite forgotten this tender concern, and its recollection made her the more eager to see him with as little delay as possible.

The long-postponed christening would be the ostensible reason of her visit, Joe being one of the godfathers ; even as Edgar and she had again been brought together by the prospect of the little one's coming, so Jeannie and her father would be permanently reconciled over the ecclesiastical naming of his grandson.

She wondered if she could get away on the forthcoming afternoon.

But, for all Jeannie's determination to see her father, the powers that ordered her life had willed otherwise, the morning's post bringing such dire news that, for the time being, even Joe was forgotten.

Edgar's unfortunate speculation had been in partly paid shares of an American land company ; the bad tidings he received were that a "Call" would shortly be made for the balance of capital for which he was liable.

"Larkslease" being mortgaged for as much as could be obtained, Edgar had not the least idea how this further demand was to be met ; application to his father was out of the question, inasmuch as he, also, would be badly hit over the "Call" upon his considerable holding in the same company.

As it is a dismal commonplace that misfortunes never come singly, Jeannie, whose present experience was no exception to this rule, was also troubled during the morning by applications for money, long since due, from tradesmen who both wrote and called ; although she succeeded in putting them off with promises of ultimate payment, she rightly believed that, if it had not been for their acquaintance with people of consequence in the neighbourhood, those to whom they were indebted would have proceeded to extremities.

Edgar, when speaking of their difficulties to his wife, flatly refused to consider any plan of action till after the forthcoming luncheon-party, he still adhering to his conviction that this event would lead to his getting something tangible in the way of employment.

Whenever Jeannie thought of Joe, which she frequently did, she deeply regretted she was, temporarily, prevented from seeing him as she had so fully determined ; but, apart from being all but driven to distraction by the applications of tradespeople for money, the financial disaster with which her home was menaced, she, as on a similar occasion when things were going ill, was reluctant to have her father with her when in distress, inasmuch as he might

believe that she delayed inviting him until she needed assistance.

She, to some extent, solaced her conscience with regard to Joe by writing him a long and tender letter in which, while contriving to say little about herself beyond that she was well and happy, were many expressions of regard for him and solicitation for his well-being and comfort.

On the Sunday before the Wednesday on which she and her husband were asked to the luncheon-party, Jeannie tucked her little one into his perambulator before he was taken out by Ethel; while thus engaged, she wondered why she had received no reply from Joe, although three days had elapsed since she had written; she wondered if he were away on a holiday and, if so, if he had made arrangements to have his letters forwarded.

When she had seen to her baby's comfort, and the girl was setting off with her charge, Jeannie perceived that he was being taken towards the station, although she had previously told the girl to go in the contrary direction, this leading to higher and, therefore, healthier ground.

She remembered that, on several occasions recently, Ethel had disobeyed her in this respect, and she was about to recall her in order to reprimand her when she was diverted from her purpose by seeing a radiant Dick Pightle come in at the gate.

"What's up with you?" asked Pightle as he caught sight of his friend's none too cheerful face. "Why can't you be happy and light-hearted, like I am?"

"We can't all live your energetic, hard-working life," replied Edgar, who, coming out just then, had overheard this remark.

"There's no fear of that. That's why I'm so 'chirpy.'"

"What about your aunt?" asked Jeannie.

"What about her? That's just it."

"Isn't she still determined you're to work for an old friend of yours?" persisted Jeannie.

"That's all ancient history."

"Is it 'off'?" asked Edgar.

"Absolutely and finally. We had an awful bust up; she stormed and I grinned; but I won after all."

"I should like to hear your aunt's version of the story," remarked Jeannie.

"Buck up, and ask her. She'll only tell you how I got round her."

"Your aunt doesn't strike me as a person who is very easily got round."

"Anyway, I managed it. And that's where I'm so clever. I did an altogether new and original barmaid imitation; it made her laugh like anything, and afterwards she said she gave me up altogether as a bad job."

While Jeannie was occupied with thoughts suggested by Pightle's refusal to take the work he was offered, the two men continued talking; presently, Mrs. Parlby's name caught her ear.

"What's up with Mrs. Parlby?" Pightle was asking.

"Nothing that I know of," replied Edgar. "Why?"

"Something's upset her."

"What?"

"I dunno. All I know is this: Parlby often used to be at our place upon his own; he likes to borrow books from the library. Now, whenever he comes, his missus is never far off, peering and craning her neck in the most extraordinary way. It quite worries me, but it amuses aunt Chrissy and father 'no end.'"

Edgar proceeded to tell his friend of Mrs. King's remark to the vicar's wife concerning Parlby's figure; this, he explained, was doubtless responsible for Mrs. Parlby's strange behaviour.

When Pightle was on the point of going, Jeannie resolved to act on a resolution she had suddenly formed; to this end, she accompanied him to the gate.

"I want you to do something for me," said Jeannie, when they were alone.

"Anything in the world, so long as you don't want me to

be energetic," replied Pightle, to add as an afterthought :
" I really believe I'd work, though, if you asked me."

" Here's a chance of making good your words," continued Jeannie, who had now some knowledge of the power pretty and charming women wield over the male of their species.
" You know Mr. Pakeley wants an agent ? "

" Too well."

" I want you to promise me to do your best to get my husband the billet."

Pightle stared in astonishment at Jeannie, before remarking :

" Say that again."

" I mean it," the other reassured him.

" You do surprise me. Aunt Chrissy was right after all."

" Why ? What did she say ? "

" Eh ? "

" What did she say ? I wish to know."

" That no one in their senses would live in this mud flat of an Essex unless they were hard up ; much less go in for poultry."

" Will you do your best for me ? " pleaded Jeannie.

" That I will. It isn't often I make up my mind to do anything ; when I do, I usually get there."

" Thank you," said Jeannie gratefully.

" That's all right. But, I say——"

" Well——"

" I'm not really so very sorry you're down on your luck. D'ye know why ? "

" Well——"

" You'll have to take that pub after all, and engage me as barmaid. Then we'll make money hand over fist."

When Pightle had gone and Jeannie was about to return to the house, she perceived a downcast-looking Ethel returning with the baby, at which her mistress asked her why she had come back so soon ; she could get nothing out of the girl, and would have been angry with her had she not

noticed that Ethel was sullenly setting off in the direction in which she had wished her to go.

Jeannie did not mention to Edgar the request she had made to his friend ; she could only possess her soul in what patience she might on the chance of Pightle being able to assist her husband to the employment of which he was in need.

The following afternoon (she had still not heard from Joe) her heart beat high with hope at learning from Ethel that Mr. King wished to see either Edgar or her ; her husband being busy in the runs just then, she hastened indoors to her visitor.

King was a short, broad-shouldered man, who was twiddling his thumbs between his knees as she came in.

Directly he saw her, he rose to his feet, shook hands, and then sat down without saying a word.

It soon became evident to Jeannie that King was no talker ; he mostly replied to her remarks with a nod, but, if this did not meet the exigencies of the case, he went so far as to employ a monosyllable ; entertaining him was such uphill work that she was greatly relieved when Edgar joined them.

If she had hoped that her husband's presence would have thawed the visitor's reserve, she was disappointed ; although he stayed for the best part of an hour, there was no getting anything out of him beyond that he was going to Paris on business on the morrow, and would not be present at his wife's luncheon-party ; husband and wife were greatly relieved when he got up to go.

Although Jeannie's hopes were raised somewhat by King's visit, she did not mention to Edgar the most likely cause of his coming, for which, she told herself, she had to thank Pightle.

For the best part of the next two days, Jeannie, who had still received no reply to her letter to Joe, nor his customary postal order for eggs, was busy in her spare time making ready for the luncheon-party, Edgar wishing her to look as

smart as possible ; her preparations not a little reminded her of the time immediately preceding the dinner-party at "Pyracantha," to which she had been bidden to meet Bringeman ; the pleasurable anticipations with which she had regarded that event ; the dismal climax occasioned by her father's appearance.

In order to prepare Edgar for possible disappointment, she reminded him of the similarity of the two anticipations, at which he at length and repeatedly assured her (and doubtless himself) of the chances being hopelessly against the possibility of two failures in succession.

Although Jeannie did not share her husband's optimism, she was moved at seeing how the prospect of emerging from his money troubles put such heart into Edgar that he was quite another man, he looking alert and well, whereas before he had been depressed and continually out of sorts.

The change in his appearance put an end to the anxiety she had of late almost continually known on the score of his health.

The last post of the day before the luncheon-party at last brought a letter from Joe ; it was written and addressed in pencil, and ran as follows :

" 30 EGLANTINE ROAD, FULHAM,

" Tuesday night.

" MY DEAR JEANNIE,—I hope you and yours are well and happy. Since you have written, I am writing to tell you I am not very grand myself, having caught a chill. It is nothing serious, but should much like to see you if you could come up. Don't, if any bother. Love, as always, from your ever-loving father,
JOE."

Jeannie was all for starting at once, and was only restrained by her husband, who argued that her father could not be seriously ill, otherwise he would not only have said so, but have requested his daughter's immediate presence ;

it was evident that Edgar was eager to be accompanied by his wife to the luncheon-party.

Words, phrases of the letter were debated at length, and in the end Jeannie, much against her will, was persuaded to compromise the matter by dispatching a telegram to Joe saying she was coming for certain on Thursday morning, but that if he wanted her immediately he was at once to let her know.

She spent a disturbed night, was unsettled in the morning, and, after dressing without taking any interest in what she was at, she set off in the cart with her husband, her heart full of misgivings for not having started for Putney directly she had heard from her father.

They went for some minutes in silence, each being occupied with their thoughts. Edgar was the first to speak.

"I know what my Jeannie is worrying about; but I'm convinced he's in no danger."

"He looked dreadfully ill when I saw him in London."

"That may have been the effect of the light. And Londoners look unusually pallid to those who are accustomed to see countrypeople as we are."

"He's a good age," persisted Jeannie.

"Sixty-two. That's nothing."

"But he's worked hard all his life."

"What has that to do with it? It's work that keeps men going," cried Edgar, with the enthusiasm that the none too energetic invariably express for those who labour tirelessly. "And look at the regular life he's led: no excesses or anything of that sort."

"True," asserted Jeannie; she was only too eager to believe there was nothing seriously amiss with her father.

"D'ye know what kills quicker than anything?"

"What?"

"Worry. I should say your father has had precious little of that."

"I'm not so sure," replied Jeannie, whose conscience was pricking her for her neglect of her father. "He lost

mother, which was a terrible blow to him. Joe is a man who feels very deeply. And since——”

“Yes?”

“His whole life centred on me. He must miss me very much.”

“Anyway, you’ll be up the first thing in the morning.”

“I was wondering if I could go up to-night.”

“You’ll be too tired, and—here we are. Look your prettiest, little Jeannie: so much depends on the impression we make.”

They had arrived at the nearest lodge gate to “Wyvenhoes,” Sir Roger Pightle’s house; as they turned into the ill-kept drive, Edgar muttered:

“Now for the forlorn hope.”

A little way farther, Jeannie, who was endeavouring to divert her mind from her father’s indisposition, said:

“I don’t see any other people.”

“We started in such good time,” replied her husband.

When Edgar had assisted Jeannie from the cart, and had knocked at the front door, it was a very long time before it was answered, at which they looked at each other with apprehensive eyes.

Presently, when the door was at last opened, an unshaven man-servant looked at them in sulky surprise.

“Mrs. King in?” asked Edgar.

“No, sir.”

“Not?”

“No, sir.”

“Isn’t she—I thought she was giving a luncheon-party to-day.”

“She went away Tuesday, sir; and all of a sudden.”

“Is Mr. Richard Pightle in?”

“He be lunching out. What name, sir?”

It was a thoroughly discomfited couple which drove away from “Wyvenhoes”: Edgar was abjectly dumb-founded, and looked aged and careworn, while Jeannie was torn between a desire to hearten her husband and

exasperation at having neglected Joe for such a barren enterprise as the expected luncheon-party had proved.

She was not particularly angry at Mrs. King's rudeness, because she was concerned for her husband and Joe ; also, she had before heard of that person's social vagaries, which were entirely owing to her occasional periods of absent-mindedness.

That she and her husband were not the only victims was proved by the three carts containing smartly dressed folk they encountered before they reached the lodge gates.

"There's only one thing now," said Edgar presently.

"What, dearest ?"

"Bankruptcy. A nice disgrace for my name."

"Things aren't surely as bad as that."

"That's all you know," he retorted savagely.

Directly they arrived at "Larkslease," Ethel ran out with a telegram that had arrived in their absence : it was addressed to Jeannie.

"From Mrs. King," suggested Edgar.

"I'm not so sure," replied Jeannie, as she tore at the envelope with trembling hands.

The telegram was sent from Putney, and all it said was .

"Come at once."

CHAPTER XX

JOE'S LAST ANECDOTE

JEANNIE waited in an immense suspense in the none too large bed-sitting-room in which her father had lived since he had given up his house.

Joe, oblivious of his daughter's presence, lay in the bed, one of his hands grasping a forepaw of "Lassie," who was beside him; such was the latter's distress at her friend's insensibility that she never took her eyes from his face.

By the bedside was a table on which were medicine, invalid nourishment, and a bottle of brandy.

Should Jeannie take her eyes from the sufferer, which, such was her distress at the pitiful sight he presented, she was more than once minded to do, her gaze would rest on familiar articles of furniture from the old home; being of old-world make and design, their beauty and dignity were in marked contrast to the lodging-house things which completed the equipment of the room: conspicuous among her father's possessions was the solemn grandfather clock; now, as always, it was ticking with an assertive aloofness to the joys and tribulations of life.

Jeannie had arrived shortly before four; she had travelled from Wicksea with all haste after receiving the telegram, and had arranged with Edgar that, if she made anything of a stay, he and Ethel should bring up her little one.

Directly she had arrived at the house, she had gone up to her father's room, to find him unconscious, disposed to delirium, and apparently suffering from some

form of lung trouble, he having difficulty with his breathing.

Although Joe's extremity had cut her to the quick, there had been no time to indulge her griefs, it being obviously immediately necessary for her to set about succouring her father.

She had made the bed comfortable, smoothed the pillows, and tenderly kissed his now white head before descending to see Mrs. Ebbage, the landlady.

This person was a big, stoutish, middle-aged, beefy-faced woman who, dressed in a none too clean compromise between a tea and a dressing gown, had a lackadaisical, die-away manner which was in marked contrast to her robust person.

"My father——" Jeannie had breathlessly begun.

"Are you his daughter, Mrs. Baverstock?" asked Mrs. Ebbage wearily: the former had been shown upstairs by a slatternly servant.

"I want to know all about his illness. And I want the doctor fetched."

"I'm glad you've come, as you can now see for yourself how bad your pa is, and he worrying dreadful about you. I've been bad myself."

"Is he seriously ill?" Jeannie had asked impatiently.

"Whenever I eats a little pork, I always has a catch under my 'eart."

"I'm asking about my father. Has he had a doctor?"

"As I was saying to Mrs. Eastlake——"

"I want you to tell me about my father."

"I shall never make old bones myself," continued Mrs. Ebbage, with weary imperturbability.

Jeannie, who was in no mood for trifling, pulled up Mrs. Ebbage sharply, which, for the time being, had the effect of bringing that person to her bearings.

She rose, nervously smoothed her soiled wrapper with her hands, and with some approach to deference gave Jeannie the particulars she needed.

According to Mrs. Ebbage, Joe had been ailing for some time, seeming to have much on his mind : then, he had had a sharp attack of influenza which was the more virulent by reason of his insisting upon going to his employment. He had been a bad patient, being ever wishful to get up, and making the strongest objections to being kept in bed.

When the post was due he was most intractable, and when he was convalescent, instead of looking after himself, he would go out in all weathers and at all times of the day and evening in order to meet the postman on his rounds.

This proceeding had led to his catching a chill, which had set up pneumonia in the left lung, this dread illness being complicated by an attack of ptomaine poisoning which he had probably taken from his partiality for the cheaper variety of tinned meats.

This liking for tinned food had astonished Jeannie, who could see no reason for such an economy : she, also, learned that, for all Joe's apparent partiality for this form of diet, he was comparatively extravagant where his dog, " Lassie," was concerned, he always providing her with a liberal supply of bones and bits from the butcher's.

"Of course he has had a doctor ?" Jeannie had remarked at this stage of the landlady's information.

"Dr. Street : such a clever man. I'm always thinking of sending for him myself" (here, she was diverted from detailing her own ills by a glance from Jeannie). "He's been twice to-day, and is coming again at six, and you'll be able to hear from his own lips what he thinks."

"When was my father last conscious ?" had been Jeannie's next question.

"Until jess before you came. He lay with his eyes on the door a-hoping for you to come. He was sure, he said, you wouldn't fail him this time."

"Is he better or worse than he has been ?"

"Much about the same, although I sat with him a lot. An' when, of an evening, he started a-telling of the dorg, jess as if it was a human creature, how beautiful you

was, what a lady you had become, and how you was quite the wonderfulest person as ever was, I thought it time to send for you, well knowing of your address, as your pa had often told me of it."

Jeannie, after hearing this information, which smote her heart, went upstairs to her father's room when, as she went in at the door, she caught sight of a postcard that had fallen under the bed.

She picked it up, to find that on it her father had scrawled in pencil:

"To Jeannie, if she comes. If anything happens to me, find a good home for Lassie. Love and God bless you.—JOE."

Then, as her eye fell on the unconscious form of her father, words of Mrs. Ebbage recurred to her—words that insistently and eloquently told her of Joe's sufferings on account of his separation from his Jeannie.

If all the landlady had said were true, and there was no cause to doubt her statements, her father had taken his dread illness from anxiety to receive a certain letter: she could arrive at no other conclusion but that he was desperately eager to hear from her.

In an access of remorse, she went to the side of the bed, other than that in which lay the dog, and caressed him tenderly, lovingly, in the hope that he might learn that she had come.

To her consternation, although he looked hard at her, there was no recognition in his eyes.

To awaken him to consciousness, she called him repeatedly by name; this proving of no avail, she, at first, gently, then, almost frantically, told him who she was and, as if to make good her words, she reminded him of any and every remembrance of the days when she had lived with him which came into her mind.

Presently, the sound of his voice gladdened her heart, but only for a moment, for she at once perceived the incoherence of his utterances. 4

At six o'clock, when his temperature increased, he rambled almost without intermission.

His chief theme was his Jeannie; recollections of all periods of her life were inextricably mixed: mingled with these were odd memories of his boyhood, youth, early married life, and of his recent doings when his only companion had been "Lassie."

Jeannie listened intently in the hope of a return to consciousness, but beyond his occasionally gazing at her with eyes that held some approximation to recognition, she was disappointed in her desire.

More than once, she was puzzled by references he made, not only to travelling to Wicksea, but to Ethel and Jeannie's boy; she was waiting for anything that might elucidate this mystery when Mrs. Ebbage announced the arrival of the doctor.

At the first glance, Street was a small-featured man who was by way of looking insignificant; but when he opened his mouth, voice and manner were eloquent of an abiding sympathy and understanding of the mental and physical ills to which flesh is heir.

Jeannie quickly introduced herself before asking the question that was inevitable under the circumstances.

"Is there any hope?"

He did not reply, and looked so grave that, in spite of herself, she was all but overcome by faintness; to save herself from a possible fall, she gripped the rail of the bed, at which Street was about to support her, when she said:

"It's all right. I'm not going to faint. Tell me the worst."

His first words raised her hopes.

"On the face of it, there's no reason why your father should not recover. He's a fine constitution and has led a regular, fairly healthy life."

"Then you think——"

"Let me tell you everything. Your father is very

seriously ill, and could not be any worse. What I wished to say was that with a man of his habits and constitution he should have every chance of recovery, whereas now——”

“Now,” faltered Jeannie.

She was such a pitiful picture in her fairness and distress that he was urged to soften the blow.

“It will be a hard struggle to pull him through.”

“We must try. If I can do anything, I will do it. But you must tell me what to do.”

She spoke so vehemently that he was momentarily taken aback.

“And there’s another thing,” she went on. “I want to speak to him. I want him to know I’m here, and didn’t lose a moment in coming.”

“He will know you in the morning.”

“Not till then?” cried Jeannie, as she gazed with an immense tenderness at her father, whose babblings, if anything, were more continuous than before.

“Not till then. Where there’s any fever, the temperature is higher at night.”

“But after to-night! What can we do to get him through?”

He looked at her curiously before replying.

“You and I can do nothing, nor any one else for that matter,” he informed her. “It all depends on what fight he has left.”

“But you said he ought to have every chance of recovery!” declared Jeannie, who was eager to clutch at any straw that offered.

“So he should, but for his having had great mental worry.”

Jeannie involuntarily started.

“W—what worry?” she forced herself to ask.

“That I scarcely know.”

“But——”

He silenced her with a gesture, and approached the

patient whom, before examining, he regarded for some moments with a fine compassion.

Then he set about taking the sufferer's temperature and sounding his lungs, during which operations Jeannie watched the doctor's doings with straining eyes, eager to learn of any symptom that provided the least ray of hope.

When he had completed his examination, she breathlessly waited for him to speak.

"If you will give me a piece of paper, I will write down the treatment that you must follow through the night, that is if you sit up with him."

"Of course I will."

"That is what I expected. If you did not, you would have to have a nurse, as he must never be left. In any case, you must have a nurse to-morrow if——"

"If!" exclaimed Jeannie, as the doctor hesitated.

"If you should want a rest."

Jeannie listened with all her ears to the doctor's instructions; she, also, repeatedly questioned him with regard to these; she did not wish to run any risk of making the least mistake.

Then, as he did not offer any opinion of her father's condition, she knew an acute sinking of spirit: she was gathering her courage to ask the question her lips feared to put when Street said almost casually:

"You're his only child?"

"Yes."

"Fond of you, I suppose?"

"Very."

"Been married long?"

"Nearly two years."

"Seen much of your father since?"

"N—no."

"Any children?"

"One; a boy: he's nearly five months old."

"Perhaps your father worried a bit at being separated from you!"

"Perhaps. But you see he lived in town and I in the country."

"Indeed; always?"

"Latterly. Before we lived at Ken — Hammersmith."

"Putney is not far from Hammersmith!"

"Not very. But it's awkward getting back to Putney late at night," faltered Jeannie.

Suspecting the doctor to have knowledge of her neglectful behaviour to Joe, she entered upon a confused explanation of how she had not seen so much of her father as she might have done, when she was interrupted by Street, who said:

"Send for me if I'm wanted in the night. I can do nothing, but I'll gladly come."

His words gave her something of a shock, from which she had scarcely recovered when she perceived that the doctor had left the room.

Her first impulse was to follow him and question him further: she refrained, chiefly because she wished to atone for her shortcomings to her father by not leaving his bedside for a moment; also, she feared to hear further confirmation of her fears from the doctor's lips.

Alone with Joe and the rapidly drawing-in night, she concentrated her mind on carrying out to the letter the doctor's instructions: she fully realised how the giving of food and stimulant at the prescribed times could do little to deflect the course of the illness, but in order not to lose a fighting chance, she meticulously made her preparations: as a preliminary, she put coals on the fire and remade the bed as far as this was possible without disturbing the patient.

It was in turning the pillow that she found the telegram, and the last letter she had sent her father; also, the leaf from the "ABC" giving the Wicksea trains, which discoveries

stimulated, if it were possible, the immense remorse she knew.

As the time passed, it seemed to Jeannie that her husband, child, and home interests were fading from her life : that Joe and she were, as in the old days, everything to each other ; that so long as all was well with them, nothing alien to their interests was of the least consequence.

Now that he was in his present extremity, it followed that her world was threatened with complete destruction, a catastrophe that might possibly be averted by her efforts.

There were intervals between the occasions he required attention ; during these, she either pillowed her father's white head on her heart or caressed him with a wealth of endearing words which, could he have appreciated them, would have done much to atone for the many months of pain he had suffered on her account.

Although, as the hours passed, his delirium increased, she, for all that the doctor had told her that he would not recover consciousness till the morning, did not lose hope that he might any moment awaken to the fact of her presence.

Now and again, she would fall on her knees and pray fervently, passionately for her father's recovery.

She had been brought up devoutly; and had had an average amount of faith ; since, however, she had married Edgar, she had imbibed much of his laxity concerning religious observances.

Such being the case, she had a momentary disinclination to invoke Divine assistance, but at remembering the indulgence granted to the one sinner that repented, she no longer hesitated.

When it became too dark to see, she forbore to have the lamp, she preferring the firelight, till she perceived it had the effect of contrasting Joe's hair with the darkness about him, and in so doing emphasised its whiteness.

This appealing witness of her long neglect caused a tugging at her heartstrings.

In order to save herself pain, and render her more competent for her vigil, she lit the lamp.

This done, she perceived her father had fallen into a profound sleep: fearing to disturb this, she sat mouse still when, beyond his fairly regular breathing, all she heard was the insistent ticking of the clock.

To distract her troubled mind, she attempted, first to fondle, then to feed "Lassie," her father's faithful friend. But "Lassie" would have none of these things; Joe's hold having relaxed from her paw, she was now persistently licking his hand, and nothing Jeannie did could divert her mind from this preoccupation.

Then, the solemn tick of the grandfather impinged on her thoughts and claimed her attention.

To this, Joe had often told her he had listened while waiting to hear the news of her birth.

That was then.

Now, his little one had grown into a tall woman who had loved and had a baby of her own, while the once expectant father was unconsciously walking the dim borderland which lay on the confines of the life he had known and loved.

As a little girl, she had constantly asked the clock, "Why do you go on ticking?"

These childish questionings recurred to her as she reflected how then, and before she was born, and now, during her father's tussle with death, the clock ticked with a fine detachment from the concerns of life; it was as if its business of measuring the resistless march of time made it loftily indifferent to anything that might be toward.

This unconcern suggested to Jeannie the comparative insignificance of human endeavour, hopes and fears, even of love and life, inasmuch as a little sooner or a little later it must lead to a struggle akin to that which was taking place under her eyes.

She put the insinuation from her mind as, in insisting

on the littleness of her emotions, in common with every one else's, it lessened and made seem of no account the remorse that now was hers ; her anguish at her father's extremity to which she could do so little to alleviate.

Instead, she concentrated her thoughts upon her father and eagerly awaited the termination of his sleep in the hope that rest would assist him to consciousness.

Presently, he stirred uneasily, at which Jeannie believed the longed-for moment had arrived ; she knew an infinite suspense until Joe should open his eyes.

When this occurred, she was grievously disappointed, he continually staring at her, but not in the least recognising her.

She appealed to him as before, but all she got for her pains were references to his struggling at the pit door of a theatre ; a little later, she heard him chuckling at the stage jokes, while now and again he would praise the actors.

"Bravo ! Splendid ! Ha-ah ! That's a good 'un," he cried.

"*Sic transit gloria mundi*—going to Boulogne ! You'll be sick in transit if you go on a Monday. Ha-ah !"

Then, he fell to repeating the refrain of a song that was popular in his young days.

"With my too-roo-ral, too-roo-ral, too-roo-ral day."

The contrast between this pleasurable reminiscence of his youth and his present condition touched Jeannie to the quick ; she was watching the sufferer with wet eyes when Mrs. Ebbage entered, after knocking at the door.

The landlady, for all her affectations of ill-health, was not a bad sort at heart : she was well disposed to Joe by reason of his having made such a long stay and paid her with unfailing punctuality : besides wishing to know what Jeannie should want for her night's vigil, she had brought her up some supper on a tray.

After Jeannie had ordered what she required, Mrs. Ebbage looked compassionately at the patient as she said :

"He's even worse than I am." Then, conscious of immediate antagonism on Jeannie's part, she went on: "You've said nothing about coals, ma'am, which you'll be wanting in the night to keep your two selves warm. It's turned quite cold."

This mention of the weather awoke an immediate response in Joe's disordered mind.

Hardly were the words out of Mrs. Ebbage's mouth, when he raised himself on his elbows and said:

"Wind's veered round to the east: forecast for to-morrow—cold with occasional gusts; frequent sleet showers as the day wears."

"He was always a willing gentleman for a-telling of the weather," was the landlady's comment, as she took herself from the room.

Encouraged by Joe's approximation to sanity, Jeannie made a further and a desperate effort to awaken him to the fact of her presence but, as if his meteorological forecast had exhausted his mental strength, he relapsed into insensibility.

When coal and one or two other things had been brought up to the sick-room, Jeannie ate a morsel of supper and made her preparations for the night.

She had come in the smart frock she had got ready for the luncheon-party, there being no time to change if she had wished to catch the next train to town: not knowing how long it would be before she would be able to afford another such a dress, she took it off and put it carefully away before getting into a dressing-gown she had brought with her.

As she was doing this, she fancied that Joe shivered; she was about to put more clothing on the bed, when an idea occurred to her by which she could make a trifling atonement to her father: she caught up her smart bodice and skirt, and wrapped them very tenderly about his shoulders.

Next, she attended to the fire, and after making other

preparations, she, feeling desperately tired, took her place at the bedside.

Joe had become slightly less delirious, intervals of silence alternating with periods of hallucination, but whenever he spoke, she listened intently in the hope of his recovering his understanding.

Once or twice a sane remark would cause her heart to beat; although she quickly replied to this or asked Joe if he recognised her, she quickly learned that his mind was ever wandering.

For instance, when at something after twelve, the ticking of the clock seemed more and more insistent, he suddenly surprised Jeannie by laying a hand upon her arm before saying :

"Hear the clock?"

"Yes, dear."

"Tick, tick, tick, tick."

"Don't you know me, Joe?" cried Jeannie desperately, but although his eyes sought hers, he continued as before :

"He's a friend is that grandfather. Night after night I've listened to him while waiting for my Jeannie." Then, after a pause: "But she never came; she never, never came."

This last was spoken with such an infinite sadness that Jeannie appealed for forgiveness; but all he replied was :

"Can't Coop laugh?"

As the time dragged on, he became more restless, and a little later he called "Emily" repeatedly; it was the name of a servant who had worked at "Laurel" Villa when Jeannie was a little girl.

"Where is my little sweetheart?" he asked. "Out by herself, and with no one to look after her? Where do you say she has gone? Down the road! How can you let her go by herself? Ah, here she is! All happiness and laughter, and with a kiss for her Joe. Here's my little sweetheart!"

He became silent, while big tears rolled from Jeannie's eyes.

So much had happened during the preceding hours, and she had suffered so keenly, that about one she felt she was being overcome by drowsiness; in order to keep herself awake, she made and drank a strong cup of tea; fearing this might prove of no avail, she again made up the fire and poured out brandy ready to hand in case Joe might require it at a moment's notice.

Scarcely had she done these things, when she leaned forward on the bed and fell asleep.

As she slept, it was as if she were living the days of her childhood over again, days which were illumined by Joe's love and devotion.

After awhile, it seemed that she had fallen asleep before going to bed, at the which her father kissed her very tenderly before wrapping something about her in order to keep her warm. This accomplished, he held her gently in his arms with his heart pressed against her body, but fearing he might rouse her, he loosened his hold and watched beside her.

She awoke with a start, when she perceived that the smart skirt she had wrapped about Joe was carefully arranged on her shoulders.

She wondered how this could have happened, till it occurred to her that her dream was a reality; that Joe had recovered consciousness when she was asleep and, ill as he was, had, as of old, seen to her comfort.

As if to confirm this belief, the tumbler had been emptied of the brandy she had poured out.

Profoundly touched by his loving solicitude, deeply thankful he had learned she was with him, she was yet chagrined he had found her asleep.

To implore his forgiveness for this weakness, and for the many other things in which she had been wanting, she turned quickly to see if he were still aware of her presence. He was lying quite still, while "Lassie" was piteously

regarding Jeannie, and now and again uttering a little cry.

She spoke, but Joe did not answer ; she kissed his lined forehead, at which he quickly opened his eyes and said :

“ Jeannie ! ”

“ Yes, my dearest ! ”

“ You’ve not been well. But I’m thankful to say you’re better now, and I’ll cheer you by telling you a story.”

“ Don’t you know me ? Won’t you ever know me ? ” she cried desperately.

Seemingly indifferent to her agony of mind, Joe continued :

“ A Mr. Kenny once had a dinner party, when the butler, in opening the sherry, left some of the cork in the bottle. Mr. Kenny, in drinking the wine, got a piece of cork in his throat, at which one of the guests remarked——”

He stopped short, and with such a plaintive appeal in his eyes that Jeannie, in spite of her griefs, was moved to prompt him, as in the old days.

“ ‘ That’s not the way for Cork,’ ” she murmured.

Joe immediately continued.

“ ‘ That’s not the way for Cork.’ ‘ No, that’s not the way for Cork,’ declared another. ‘ It’s the way to Kill Kenny ! ’ ”

His eyes smiled with all the old innocent enjoyment into hers, but even as she looked, a swift and sudden change possessed him.

A few moments later, she was striving to realise that Joe would never again tell his story in this world, whatever he might do in the next.

CHAPTER XXI

A STRANGE WOMAN

JEANNIE, in deep mourning, stood beside Joe's wreath-covered resting-place the day after he was buried.

She had gone to the church, but had not felt equal to following his body to the grave ; in order that her thoughts should not suffer distraction, she had come alone to make pilgrimage to where Joe slept so soundly.

Ever since he had passed away in the small hours of the morning, Jeannie had been willing, if not eager, to suffer, in order to make some atonement to his memory ; her inability to realise that he was no more prevented this expiation.

As she stood with bowed head, she made a further effort to appreciate her loss by recalling typical instances of Joe's tenderness and loving-kindness ; although, in dwelling on those she selected from the storehouse of her memory, her under lip trembled and tears fell from her eyes, her heart, as yet, was innocent of suffering ; all she was conscious of was a vague feeling of discomfort.

Inexperienced as she was in the mental and physical processes of an unexpected supreme sorrow, she wondered at her comparative freedom from pain : to divert her thoughts from a disquieting suspicion that she was incapable of deep feeling, she fell to examining the cards attached to the now crushed-looking wreaths at her feet.

The names of Coop and Reuben Baverstock caught her eyes, while upon another was written : " From old friends and colleagues in token of loving respect."

Although there were other tributes, including a wreath

and a cross from Edgar and herself, and a bunch of daffodils from Ethel, the evidence that he was liked and respected by those with whom he had worked for so long, went to her heart and enabled her to appreciate in some measure her loss ; this regard on the part of his fellow-clerks made more impression upon her than it would at any other time, inasmuch as the intrusion of the Great Destroyer made seem of no account the social distinctions on which she ordinarily set store.

Then there came unbidden to her mind a picture of Joe as she remembered him when she was a little girl, and as he appeared when on one of their botanising excursions on a Saturday afternoon ; his honest, kindly face was alight with happiness at being in the fresh air, and with his Jeannie.

Loving nature as he did, she looked about her to see if his surroundings were at all akin to his country instincts, and was gratified at perceiving that the headstones and mounds were, so far, the merest settlement of death in the green expanse of cemetery.

Beyond the trees that bordered the enclosure were dark masses of clouds which were in keeping with her dolorous emotions, but, even as she looked, these were being pierced and dominated by the March sunlight.

She found herself responding to the sun's warmth, at which she blamed herself for such an indulgence under the circumstances, and attuned her mind to her griefs.

This soon became increasingly difficult, the insistent sun recalling to her mind the interests and preoccupations of her life ; of these last she had already more than enough.

Edgar, Ethel, and the little one had arrived from Wicksea during the day on which Joe had passed away, when Edgar had told to a dazed Jeannie that Pightle was looking after the farm in his absence ; he, also, dropped a hint to the effect that, in face of their local financial liabilities, it might be inadvisable to return to " Larkslease."

While Edgar had sympathised with Jeannie in her sorrow, it had been obvious to her that he was greatly worried by his difficulties, he not knowing how he was going to provide a home for wife and child.

He was staying at "Pyraantha," but although Jeannie had been welcomed and condoled with, and had taken most of her meals there, she had refused to sleep under any other roof than that which sheltered her father's body.

She had resolved to postpone the consideration of her own and husband's troubles for some days after her father had been laid to his last rest, but the ever-increasing brilliance of the sunlight reminded her of the difficulties with which she was confronted.

Two days after Edgar had arrived from Wicksea, a letter addressed in an unfamiliar handwriting had been forwarded by Pightle.

It proved to be from King, Pightle's taciturn uncle by marriage, whose lack of conversation had troubled the owners of "Larkslease" on the occasion of his visit.

King wrote to say that, hearing from his nephew Edgar was in want of a billet, he was prepared either to employ him as his confidential secretary at his London offices or to engage him to take charge of his rapidly growing interests in Johannesburg, providing he could furnish satisfactory references.

On the face of it, there seemed every prospect of Edgar being put well on his feet by the opportune arrival of these offers which, to some extent, had lightened Jeannie's load of sorrow. Edgar had quite made up his mind that the London employment was his, when a long letter from Pightle put a different complexion on the matter.

It appeared from this that King was very punctilious where those he employed were concerned, he only engaging those in whom he reposed implicit faith; Pightle warned

Edgar that King was shortly returning to Wicksea, when he proposed inquiring into Edgar's financial antecedents and present liabilities if any; should these investigations prove satisfactory, "the job, and a well-paid one too, was a dead cert," as Pightle phrased it.

Thus it seemed that fate was bent on tantalising the young couple; considering how deeply Edgar was in debt in and about Wicksea, also how "Larkslease" was mortgaged up to the hilt, he had characteristically despaired, until he bethought him of asking his father to lend him the necessary money.

He confided this idea to Jeannie, at the same time telling her he required twelve hundred pounds.

For her part, so far as she could give the matter thought, it seemed that the reception she had received at "Pyrcantha" augured well for his hopes of assistance.

Reuben, his sweet wife, and Mabel (Bevill scarcely counted), while sympathising with Jeannie, all seemed to lose their heads over her boy, indeed, her heart softened to the money-grabbing Reuben, whom, in her heart, she always called "Count Fosco," at his unconcealed joy and pride in his grandson.

The fact of the matter was that Bevill, being a muff, would be unlikely to persuade a sprightly girl to marry him, and Mabel not attracting men, Reuben Baverstock's family hopes and pride, of which he had no uncommon share, were now centred on his son's fine boy; although he never sought to disguise from himself his chagrin at the improvident marriage Edgar had made, he could not deny that Jeannie, for all her worldly disadvantages, was a remarkable looking young woman, who, after all said and done, had been a good wife to Edgar.

Jeannie, also, knew that her mother-in-law, who was looking more fragile than ever, if that were possible, would warmly second Edgar's request for money.

On the evening on which Jeannie was taking a last look at her sleeping boy before returning to the room she had

engaged at Mrs. Ebbage's, Mrs. Baverstock had joined her ; after tenderly regarding her grandson, she had approached her beautiful daughter-in-law and, without saying a word, had taken and held Jeannie in her arms for quite a long time.

Before Jeannie had set out for the cemetery, Edgar had told her of the dismal result of his momentous interview with his father.

Although Reuben had the best will in the world to assist his son, this was impossible just now, he being in financial low water owing to a protracted run of ill-luck ; he could make no suggestion to Edgar as to where the latter could obtain what he needed.

When the latter had asked his father if there were any objection to his approaching either Turk or Creadle, his partners, on the matter, Reuben had begged Edgar to do nothing of the kind, inasmuch as he was not on good terms with conceited Creadle, who, suspecting the senior partner's losses, had been attempting to sow discord between Turk and himself.

Thus, in addition to grievous loss, so far as Jeannie was concerned, misfortune dogged the steps of her husband and herself.

After a while, the difficulties with which Jeannie was confronted so possessed her mind that she deemed it in the nature of a sacrilege to indulge such mundane thoughts beside Joe's resting-place ; before taking a farewell look of the wreath-covered mound, she selected one of the freshest-looking of the flowers and, after pressing this to her lips, she took it away with her in her purse.

She was due at " Pyracantha " for luncheon, but before taking her heavy heart thither she had resolved to visit Mrs. Ebbage's to see to some papers that had belonged to her father, other than those business documents Edgar was to look into during the morning.

Outside of the house where Joe had lodged, Jeannie

found a troubled-looking Ethel; her first thought was that something was amiss with the child, but upon being reassured on this point, and being, also, told that Mabel was looking after him, she asked Ethel what had brought her there.

"I had to come and tell you, ma'am. I couldn't help it."

"Tell me what?"

Ethel commenced to weep; it was after Jeannie had lent the girl a handkerchief with which to wipe her eyes that she said:

"Mr. Joe, your father, ma'am!"

Jeannie bit her lips; Ethel continued:

"Of Sundays he used to meet me near the station because he wanted to see the baby."

Jeannie looked at the girl in wide-eyed amazement.

"That's the truth, ma'am, if I never speak another word. He stopped and arst me who the baby belonged to, an' when I said it was yours he give me a sovereign and tells me not to tell you. And that proud he was of——"

An access of tears interrupted the girl's narrative, while Jeannie, whose heart was too full to give Ethel the assurances she needed, left her to knock at Mrs. Ebbage's door.

Joe's room, which was still much as it was when he had lived in it, looked strangely desolate when she entered it after acquainting Mrs. Ebbage with her arrival; its intense stillness was so insistent, and she was so distressed at Ethel's communication, that she hurriedly set about securing the papers she had come to obtain.

Even then, she more than once desisted from her work, for it seemed that, for all the tomb-like silence, Joe's personality still informed the room; that this still held the echoes of his rare laughter, his many sighs.

When she hastened downstairs, she found Mrs. Ebbage wearily attempting to feed "Lassie," attempting, as

since her friend had passed away, the dog had been well nigh inconsolable.

The animal's extremity went to Jeannie's heart ; she made up her mind to take her back to " Pyracantha " in the face of the Baverstocks' possible disapproval.

Soon after she had entered Mrs. Ebbage's parlour, her late father's landlady, doubtless in order to propitiate a relation of one of the leading Putney families, commenced to relate the thousand and one things she had done in order to contribute to Joe's comfort.

Jeannie was not ill-disposed to listen to these confidences ; the fact of her father having been well looked after, the possibility of his having enjoyed a certain measure of happiness tending to lessen her remorse for her undutiful behaviour.

Presently, when Mrs. Ebbage showed an inclination to drag her own ills into her narrative, Jeannie asked :

" I suppose my father didn't drop all his old friends ? "

" None ever came here, so far as I remember. "

" Not one ? "

" I should have known if they had, particularly of an evening. The girl is often out doing a bit of shopping, and it's such an effort for one, who is almost an invalid, as you might say, to drag herself up and down them thirteen stairs to answer the door. That, more than anything else, tells me I shall never make old bones. "

" I should have thought a Mr. Coop would have come, " persisted Jeannie.

" I should have known it if he had. Mr. Joe was a gentleman who kept himself to himself, though he was fond of a gossip with me, and was always sorry to hear I was so bad. And to think of his being taken first and me left ! "

" Surely he went out to visit friends sometimes ? "

" Twice a week reg'lar, unless he was put off. "

" Ah ! Do you know who it was ? "

"A lady friend of his."

"A what?" cried Jeannie, in astonishment.

"A lady friend of his. Mondays and Fridays he used to go, unless, as I tell you, he were put off."

"But—but my father had no lady friends."

"This was a lady as lived in Mansion House Street, Hammersmith. I know, because he used to leave her letters about," declared Mrs. Ebbage; then, as she became aware of the offence to which she had admitted, she reddened, as she added:

"He used to leave her letters lying about just as if it was the paper bill."

This last piece of information lessened Jeannie's apprehensions, till she reflected that the landlady was probably telling an untruth in order to shield herself from her (Jeannie's) censure at her misdemeanour.

"What was her name?"

"Miss Hacker—Amelia Hacker."

"But—but——" faltered Jeannie.

"I'm sure he wasn't the gentleman to do anything of which you would disapprove," declared Mrs. Ebbage, hastening to reassure Jeannie on a matter on which the elder woman had divined the drift of the other's thoughts.

Jeannie preserved silence; Mrs. Ebbage, to divert attention from her unfortunate admission, clumsily changed the subject to Joe's passion for economy.

Although Jeannie was deeply interested in anything that concerned her father, she scarcely listened: so far as the shock she had received would permit, she was endeavouring to assimilate the landlady's information.

If her worst suspicions were true, she could not blame her father; at the same time, she told herself, her neglect had been a contributive cause to his acquaintance with the mysterious Miss Hacker.

The next moment, she was ashamed of herself for harbouring such base thoughts concerning him, such conduct being altogether alien to his nature.

She was passionately convinced that he was innocent of the more worldly construction that might be imputed to these visits, and if only to justify his reputation, and punish herself for her unworthy surmise, she resolved to see Miss Hacker on that afternoon.

But for all Jeannie's resolve, her intention was indefinitely postponed.

Mrs. Ebbage's reminiscences were interrupted by the sound of a hansom stopping outside her house, which, in a very few moments, was followed by a violent knocking on the front door.

While Jeannie wondered what was toward, Mrs. Ebbage floundered up the stairs, to call down directly she had opened the door :

" Please, come at once ; you're wanted."

Jeannie, with heart abeat, flew up the stairs to find a breathless Mabel Baverstock in the hall.

" You must come at once ! " cried the latter, directly she caught sight of Jeannie.

" The baby ? "

" Edgar. I am thankful I found you."

" What's happened ? "

" He's ill ; you must come now."

" Serious ? " asked a white-faced, heart-sick Jeannie, as she bundled herself into the waiting hansom.

" I don't think so. We'll know more when we get back. The doctor, mother sent for, is with him now."

As they were rapidly driven in the direction of " Pyracantha," a greatly agitated Jeannie learned that Edgar, in going through her father's business papers, discovered that Joe had left savings that amounted to an unexpectedly considerable amount ; that these, with his life insurance money, were at Jeannie's absolute disposal ; that the shock of suddenly learning there was a means of evading effectually his financial embarrassments had apparently brought on a series of prolonged fainting attacks which

had so alarmed every one in the house that Jeannie and the doctor had been sent for.

Although Mabel was sure that these betokened nothing really serious, Jeannie, who knew too well how ill her husband had been looking for months, had the gravest misgivings on the matter.

CHAPTER XXII

EDGAR LEAVES JEANNIE

JEANNIE glanced at the grandfather clock to see that she would have exactly twenty-four hours longer with her husband before he left her side on his long journey to Johannesburg.

So far as she could get anything out of the doctors who examined him, she learned he was suffering from acute nervous breakdown, the culmination of many months of worry ; it was hoped that the voyage to the Cape would do much to set him on his feet.

At present, he was afflicted with violent headaches ; these were often accompanied by attacks of melancholia.

Jeannie was apprehensive that other complications were feared ; as the doctors particularly urged Edgar to avoid catching cold, besides telling him to be as much as possible in the air.

She had again and again asked them if her husband were well enough to work in London, but always received the same reply which was to the effect that change and sea air were essential to his recovery.

Since it was unlikely that he would again get such good offers as King's, Edgar, after endless discussions with Jeannie, had decided to accept the one that would take him to South Africa, where he would take charge of his employer's interests in that part of the world ; it was, also, arranged she was to join him later on, when he had time to look round and see how far the place was suited to wife and child.

For all the probability of some day joining Edgar,

Jeannie was almost beside herself with grief at losing him so soon after Joe had passed away ; at the circumstances in which he was leaving her ; with apprehensions of what might befall him in a distant, unsettled country.

When Edgar had gone into Joe's affairs he had been astonished to find that the sum due from the Company in which he had insured his life, his savings, and the proceeds of the sale of " Laurel " Villa amounted to well over two thousand pounds.

It was the shock occasioned by this discovery which had brought his nervous disorder to a climax.

The amount Joe had contrived to put by out of his small salary explained to Jeannie the economies he had practised when at Mrs. Ebbage's ; it was this passion for saving, she told herself, in order that she might some day benefit, which had shortened his days.

The anguish of mind to which this realisation, if nothing further untoward had happened, would have given rise, was discounted by her grief at losing Edgar ; his imminent departure possessed her thoughts to the exclusion of everything else.

Her distress kept her awake at night, while during the day she could not bear her husband out of her sight, she grudging the moments they spent apart.

Although the mortgage on " Larkslease " had been discharged with some of the money her father had left, she could not bear the thought of living there during her husband's absence, the place being intimately identified with Edgar ; in order that she might have a home of her own, " Larkslease," together with the stock, had been disposed of for what they would fetch, and a little house had been taken at Richmond ; this was in a tiny road which at one end had an entrance into the Park.

This had been quickly got ready for occupation with the best of the things from the old Wicksea home ; the grandfather clock and other pieces of furniture which had belonged to Joe.

Jeannie was eager to have her new house made ready with all dispatch ; she wished Edgar to live and have his being within its walls for as long as possible before he left, so that her home should be instinct with her husband's atmosphere.

"Lassie," to whom Jeannie was now greatly attached, was a member of the household.

When not in the grip of depression, Edgar's behaviour did much to weight Jeannie's load of sorrow, he now being, ardently, demonstratively in love with her, his normal affection being stimulated by their approaching separation ; also; perhaps, by her changed appearance ; with regard to this last, it seemed that the fact of being responsible for bringing a new life into the world, together with her manifold griefs, had chastened her somewhat showy beauty; with the result that, while she had lost much of her girlish attractiveness, she had acquired in its stead a pathetic dignity which made an irresistible appeal to her husband.

Incidents of emotional, almost hysterical, despair were common to both ; these alternated, so far as Jeannie was concerned, with intervals of mental dullness; when, although she fully appreciated what was toward, she was incapable of further suffering.

Edgar was to leave the house for the docks at eight o'clock on the following morning ; his boxes had been lovingly packed by his wife; corded and addressed in a sudden access of energy by Pightle, who was genuinely distressed at his friend's departure, and sent to the ship in order that the last hours husband and wife had together should be free from distraction.

Jeannie, as has been said, glanced at the grandfather clock, which, with its serene indifference to the concerns of life, was relentlessly ticking away her remaining moments with the man she adored, and even as she looked, her precious twenty-four hours had been diminished by golden seconds.

Then Edgar entered the room, and taking Jeannie in his arms, tenderly kissed her ; even as he did so, she noticed that he glanced at the clock, when she believed he was possessed by the same thought as herself, for his grip tightened on her body while his eyes looked helplessly into hers.

When they sat down to breakfast, they both made a fine pretence of eating ; Jeannie thought that every mouthful she forced herself to take would choke her.

Presently she put down her knife and fork ; to divert attention from her distress, she attempted to talk casually, light-heartedly, at which dismay invaded Edgar's face.

" Dearest ! " she cried apprehensively.

" Don't you mind I'm going ? " he asked hoarsely.

" Mind ! " she echoed, but with a catch in her voice which told him how he had misread her.

" Forgive me ; forgive me, little Jeannie ! " he pleaded, as he rose from his chair. " I ought to have known."

She restrained an inclination to tears, and ardently returned his caress.

All idea of continuing the meal being abandoned, they left the table, Edgar lighting a cigarette.

He smoked for some moments in silence, Jeannie watching him out of the corners of her eyes, when she perceived that he had let his cigarette go out and was staring moodily before him.

Fearing he was about to be attacked by the depression to which he was subject, she asked :

" What are you thinking of ? "

" You," he replied passionately. " You ! You ! "

" Me ? "

" My beautiful, golden-haired Jeannie ! How do I know she won't forget me when I'm gone ? "

" Edgar ! " she faltered.

" You're angry now, but it may be another matter when you're lonely and have no one to talk to."

She looked at him with an immense reproach when,

as if conscious of the unfairness of his words, he averted his eyes as he went on :

"And you will be tempted by men who will make love to you ; it is only natural. That will worry me more than I can say."

She was minded to protest angrily against his cruel words which cut her like a whip, but, upon seeing how abjectly miserable he was, she went to him and, kneeling beside him, said :

"If you knew how I loved you, you would not say that ! If you knew how I suffered at losing you, you would never, never doubt me !"

Her words, the conviction in her voice and manner, made an irresistible appeal to his heart ; possessed by sudden remorse, he overwhelmed her with tendernesses, while he bitterly cursed himself, until she covered his mouth with her hand.

This emotional storm was succeeded by a calm which, in view of what was to be, was not without an element of beauty ; they spoke serenely, almost dispassionately of the days when they would be united, and with a love that would be tested and strengthened by their separation.

There had been talk of paying a farewell visit to the house in Elm Grove, which had been their first home, but at Jeannie's request this excursion was abandoned ; she preferred to spend the quietest of days with her husband ; to obtain her desire, she had persistently refused invitations to stay at "Pyracantha," where Edgar's relations believed their thoughts would be distracted from their parting by those about them.

The day being fine and warm, they sat in the garden for the best part of the morning, when, for all that either of them said, they each took secret cognisance of the passing of the hours.

At the same time, the vague terror which they knew was not, so far as Jeannie was concerned, without a redeeming sweetness.

She had always dreaded the last day they should be together, but with that perversity with which expectations are falsified, the rapidly diminishing hours brought her a satisfaction that was altogether alien to her dismal anticipations.

It was as if she were conscious that their love had been tried, uplifted, and deepened by adversity, consequently it was enabled to triumph over the accidents of life, making anything short of death that might befall to seem of no account.

Now and again, she heartened Edgar with brave words, telling him how the months of separation would soon pass ; that she would occupy her days with tending her boy (who was now with them) and bringing him up to be worthy of his father.

There were occasions, however, particularly when she was alone, when she knew a failing of the spirit.

One of these was upon going to the dining-room to fetch cigarettes for Edgar.

To her tense emotions, the room seemed singularly deserted, and she found herself wondering how it would be after eight on the following morning when her husband would be torn from her arms.

The ticking of the clock claimed her attention, when its pitiless persistence made her cry out :

“ Why do you go on ticking so ? ”

Hardly were the words out of her mouth when she recalled how, as a little girl, she had made the same inquiry, but with the difference that, whereas then she had been moved by childish curiosity, she was now filled by a passionate resentment against the fleeting hours.

Afternoon and evening were passed much in the same way as the morning, intervals of silence alternating with intimate speech, but whether talking or occupied with their thoughts, each moment had a certain and momentous significance.

Now and again, Jeannie would note some expression or

aspect of her husband with her eyes, before storing it in her memory, to dwell upon fondly in the days of loneliness which stretched bleakly before her.

After they had eaten, or made pretence of eating, their last dinner, Edgar sat reflectively in an arm-chair, while Jeannie, her hands supporting her head, her elbows on the table, devoured him with her eyes.

Her surging emotions were such that she was about to throw herself in his arms, when he said, much as if he were talking to himself:

"All this comes from one having married on insufficient means. If we'd only waited till things had 'bucked up,' there wouldn't have been this brutal separation."

"Does it follow?" asked Jeannie.

"Eh! Undoubtedly, pretty Jeannie. If I'd only been making a decent living, I shouldn't have gone in for clerking, and having got disgusted with it, we shouldn't have gone in for poultry farming. It was that that's broken my health: its ceaseless worries nearly drove me out of my mind, and it must have nearly done the same to you. It's this confounded want of money that's the cause of all our troubles, as it is of most other people's. Will you ever forgive me?"

"If we had money, we might have drifted apart, whereas now——"

Her heart was too full to complete her sentence.

A few moments later, she was sufficiently recovered to continue:

"It's no use talking, sweetheart, of what might have been. You can't get away from the fact that we loved and were necessary to each other. When two people love as we did, there can't be much wrong, whatever they do, so long as they are true to one another!"

"My Jeannie! My own true Jeannie!" he said, as if musingly.

"And whatever happens, even at the worst, supposing even—but I can't say ~~that~~——"

"Yes, dearest?" he asked, when he could trust himself to speak.

"We have been happy—very, very happy. And whatever happens, no one can rob our hearts of that."

"We have been happy," he echoed, a trifle sadly.

"You speak as if you were sorry!"

"I am—I am," he assured her. "I should have appreciated y—it more."

They were both enwrapped in their thoughts for awhile, Jeannie's mind being possessed of memories of entrancing blue nights in Italy; the ecstasies she had often known in the shabby stucco villa in Elm Grove; in picturesque, tumble-down "Larkslease" when, for all the attrition caused by their manifold worries, she had lived and had her being in the magic atmosphere of romance.

They spent a prolonged, sadly-sweet evening, which was interrupted when Jeannie put her baby to bed, a duty in which, to-night, she was assisted by her husband.

When they ultimately went upstairs to bed, father and mother stood silently and for quite a long time beside the cot of the little one whom their love had called into being.

In bed, Jeannie attempted, with indifferent success, to forget it was the last time for many a long day her beloved would rest beside her.

She made no effort to sleep; indeed, she would not have succeeded if she had tried: she lay stark awake, completely at the mercy of a more than commonly alert mind.

Now and again, believing Edgar to be asleep, she would turn over and, putting her arms about him, would kiss him very tenderly on the lips, but on each occasion she discovered he was awake, when they would cling to one another in a frenzied embrace.

Once, when retrospectively disposed, her mind ranged over the leading events of her married days; more particularly on those which had affected the material prosperity of husband and wife.

So far as she could see, it was as if an unkind fate had persistently dogged their steps.

Apart from the fiasco of the dinner-party at "Pyra-cantha," which had been largely responsible for her estrangement from her father, with all its tragic consequences to the latter, she recalled how they had been cheated over the poultry farm, and just when they had believed King would get them out of their trouble they had learned the conditions attaching to the employment he offered.

This had seemed an insurmountable difficulty till Joe's death and self-sacrificing disposition had enabled them to meet their obligations and, therefore, satisfy King's stipulation.

Then when, but for her abiding grief at her father's death, her horizon had seemed clear, it was suddenly invaded by the storm clouds which would break over her life on the morrow.

A flaw in her train of thought occurred to her.

The calamity of her father's death had enabled them to conquer unexpectedly financial adversity, and thus she and hers had benefited from this dire happening.

This led her to wonder at the whys and wherefores of things, the way in which the means to secure some measure of happiness arose from a supreme sorrow.

Suddenly, certain words of her father's recurred to her—words of warning he had spoken on the last day of the year, before she had set out for the watch-night service, when Edgar had declared his love.

"From what I can see of life," he had said, "even if one gets what one wants, it's far from being plain sailing. When things seem at their fairest, there's often a bitter disappointment waiting round the corner; and at the best, for the most fortunate of us, it's a rough-and-tumble journey."

She had disregarded his admonition; now that she recalled it, she realised the truth of his words.

The man she had loved then, but who was now part of herself, was to be torn from her in a very few hours when, considering what she had been to him, their severance would be in the nature of a mutilation.

Despairingly realising her helplessness in the matter, she threw her arms about her husband, who was dozing just then, and awakening him to consciousness with passionate kisses, she cried :

“ You won’t run after other women when you’re away ? ”

“ When I have my own beautiful Jeannie waiting for me ! ”

“ But men are different to women in these things ; they’re easily tempted. And I could not bear to think of your being to other women what you have been to me.”

“ Dearest ! Dearest ! ” he cried protestingly.

“ I have given so much to you. More than I—— But our love is different to any one else’s. I love you for yourself : you love me for myself. That should make you strong.”

“ It will ; it will.”

“ If it only would ! ” she sighed.

Later, when her mind was possessed by a vision of his ship carrying him down the wide reaches of the river, and every moment increasing the distance between them, she cried out :

“ You’ll look out for ‘ Larkslease ’ on your way down.”

“ Of course, my Jeannie.”

“ Promise ! ”

“ I promise ! ”

“ And you’ll think of me then, and of how happy we were ? ”

“ What a question ! ”

“ Promise ! Promise ! ” she cried.

“ I promise ! I promise ! ”

A little before daybreak, she said :

“ There’s something else I want you to do. Don’t say

'Good-bye' when you go, or I shall think I'll never see you again. As an afterthought, she added :

"And don't come back when once you're gone. It's unlucky."

When the dread day dawned, sleep mercifully closed her eyes. When she awoke, Edgar was up and dressed.

"Why didn't you wake me?" she asked, as she sprang out of bed.

"It upsets me to see how troubled you are," he told her.

She had suffered so much that, again contrary to expectation, she was unable to feel the acute pain she had expected as the hour for his departure approached : it was as if her senses were numbed.

Reuben, his wife, Mabel, and Bevill were coming in a four-wheeler at a quarter to eight ; while Edgar's mother would have loved to accompany her son to the dock, she renounced this desire in order to be a stay to Jeannie during her ordeal. Edgar, who was to take his mother's place in the brougham, expected Pightle to join him at the station, his friend having slept the night at Richmond in order to be up in time.

Beyond drinking a little tea, neither of them had any breakfast ; presently, with one accord they ascended to where their child rested, after which, in silence and with wet eyes, Jeannie accompanied her husband on a visit they involuntarily paid to each room in the house.

Then, they went downstairs where, before they sat listening with straining ears for the sound of the cab wheels, Jeannie stopped the clock.

"Why that?" he asked.

"I couldn't stand it any longer. And—and—love laughs at time," she faltered.

As they sat in a tense, nervous silence, Jeannie could not realise that her husband was going on a long journey ; to her dulled sensibilities it seemed that nothing further than an ordinary jaunt was toward.

She ached to confess her heart of its immeasurable

wealth of love, but when she tried to voice her emotion she found she was only capable of the most commonplace remarks.

At last, after an interval of agonising suspense, they heard the dreaded wheels, and in what seemed but a very few moments, Jeannie was alone with Edgar for the last farewell.

They stood apart, as if fearful of the final embrace.

Then, she was fiercely gripping his body as she hysterically cried :

“ Don’t say good-bye ! Don’t say good-bye ! ”

“ My love ! My love ! ”

“ And don’t come back when once you’re gone ; it’s unlucky ; unlucky ! ”

Their lips met in a last long kiss, and she would have held him thus for ever if he had not torn himself away.

“ Edgar ! Edgar ! ” she cried, opening wide her arms.

“ Let me go ! Let me go ! ” he pleaded, as he hastened fearfully from the room.

She would have beseeched him to return but voice and strength failed her.

She feared faintness, but the closing of the front door brought her to herself.

At the same time, Edgar’s mother entered the room, when, despite her own griefs, she essayed to comfort the distraught wife.

But Jeannie was passionately resentful of even sweet Mrs. Baverstock’s consolations : she stopped her ears in order not to hear the departing wheels.

A moment later, she felt that anything were better than separation from Edgar : she hastened to the door in order to follow the cab and beg him to take her with him.

Her hand was on the latch when the crying of her baby upstairs made her hesitate.

The cry persisted and rose to a wail, at which Jeannie was divided between a frantic desire to seek her husband and a natural impulse to succour her child : her uncertainty

so tried her disordered nerves that, in a frenzy of indecision, she beat her hands on a wall of the passage.

Presently, she vaguely realised the futility of following Edgar, at which, with bleeding heart and throbbing pulses, she went wearily upstairs.

END OF PART

PART II

JEANNIE'S MIDDLE AGE

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FATTED CALF

ON a certain April morning, Jeannie sprang from bed with a comparatively light heart ; her elation was caused by expectation of the arrival of her son, who was coming home after an absence of many weeks.

Although it was barely eight o'clock, the sun was high in clear sky, which latter fact she gladly noted, inasmuch as it would have a fine day for his journey.

Then, such cheerfulness as she possessed was severely chastened as she reverently looked upon a photograph of her husband which occupied a place to itself on the table beside her bed.

She sighed deeply before tubbing and dressing in haste, there being many preparations to complete before the arrival of her boy.

When she was ready to go downstairs, the sunlight attracted her to the window, where she stood for some moments appreciating its gracious warmth.

In spite of herself, the spring sunshine caused a stirring in her blood ; presently, she went to the glass in order to conceal one or two grey hairs, which had lately made their appearance, but when, as she was arranging her widow's cap in order to hide these, she caught sight of a reflection of Edgar's photograph, she forbore : sighing again, she ran downstairs (she was wonderfully young in

her looks and ways for all her forty years) to ask the ever-faithful Ethel if she had seen anything of the postman.

"Not yet, ma'am," replied Ethel.

"Perhaps he's late."

"I thought I saw him go by ten minutes ago."

"Surely not!" said Jeannie, as her face fell.

"It was very like him, ma'am."

Jeannie knew a sinking of spirit; she had expected to hear overnight from her dear Joey (since Edgar's decease she could not bear to use her boy's first Christian name) saying what time she might expect him; since no letter had arrived, she was confident of getting one by the morning's post.

Although Joey had always been a poor correspondent, she could not bring herself to believe he had not troubled to write, particularly as she had sent to ask him not to fail to let her know the train he was coming by from Salisbury, where he had been at a private school. For all Ethel's assurance that the postman had gone by, she went out of the front door and looked up and down the road.

There was no one to be seen; as she waited in dismal suspense, a thousand and one fears entered her mind with regard to every conceivable misfortune which might have overtaken Joey.

Her apprehensions were such that, when she presently came indoors without seeing anything of the postman, she ate the merest morsel for breakfast, for all that Ethel made light of her mistress' forebodings.

She had scarcely finished her scanty meal when the idea occurred to her of sending Ethel for a morning paper in order to see if anything untoward in which Joey were involved had happened at Salisbury: she did not know a moment's peace till the woman returned with a *Daily Mail*, when Jeannie was immensely relieved to find no calamity reported in the county town of Wiltshire.

She had hardly concluded her search when it occurred to her that if the worst she feared had happened, she would assuredly have been telegraphed for.

Fortified with this reflection, she set about finishing her preparations for her boy's coming, which in many things practically amounted to doing over again what she had already done before.

She dusted his bedroom and rearranged it to her exigent satisfaction before making it gay with narcissi and daffodils : next, she went to the kitchen, where his bed and other clothes were airing for the third day in succession, and discussed with Ethel the preparations for dinner.

So far as Jeannie could tell, she expected Joey to arrive at something after six ; she ordered dinner for seven, which was to consist of roast lamb, baked potatoes, cauliflower, together with strawberry-jam tart and cream, these being her boy's favourite dishes.

When she had given Ethel a thousand and one unnecessary instructions concerning these, she wrote a letter to a lodging-house at West Bay, Bridport, where she purposed shortly taking Joey for a fortnight's stay.

She loved the quietude of this tumble-down port, not only for its deserted picturesqueness, but because her husband having died and been buried at sea, she could, in a sense, muse by his graveside in peace.

Next, she went up to a room at the top of the house which, by reason of its seclusion, she had had specially fitted for Joey's studies.

Her eyes rested approvingly on the new carpet ; the roll-top desk ; the revolving and other bookcases which held, amongst others, the hundred best books ; the comfortable chairs and the other appointments of the room, all of which, if they did not represent some self-denial on Jeannie's part, had been painstakingly chosen with due regard to appearance as well as use.

She mused on all the great things her clever boy was going to do in life (she had long ago destined him for the

Church)—noble things to which his studies in this room would contribute.

Before she went downstairs to see if Ethel were free to help her make the bed, she lovingly caressed the desk and chairs.

Even when the bed was carefully made, she was not satisfied that it was sufficiently aired: after carefully filling two indiarubber hot-water bottles she, at intervals of ten minutes, placed them in different parts of the bed.

Although the day continued fine, and she was minded to go out of doors, she repressed this inclination in order to complete a pair of slippers she was working for Joey: she sat in the cosy dining-room, and while she set about her labour of love, she now and again glanced at the grandfather clock, which had belonged to her father, in order to note gratefully the steady persistence of the big hand.

As the minutes passed, the clock's ticking more and more impinged on her thoughts; it awoke painful memories, which she strove to put from her mind; she wished the day of Joey's return to be free from sadness.

Fearing that, after all, she might be dominated by recollections of the tale of pain that had been hers, she went out to the pretty, old-world garden behind the house, where she busied herself with the flowers she passionately loved till luncheon was on the table.

When this meal was over, she stayed indoors in the hope of a letter arriving from Joey by the two o'clock post, but when with her own eyes she saw the postman pass, she resolved to go out as, by so doing, she hoped to escape the dolorous memories to which she was frequently subject.

As she did not feel disposed to walk, she called on a family of her acquaintance, the Trills, not only with the idea of killing time, but because she believed that young Trill would prove a suitable companion for Joey.

The master of the house was an architect's assistant

by occupation, otherwise he was a "parlour" socialist, who had done his best to convert Jeannie to his views.

To this end, he had lent her various books and leaflets on the subject near to his heart; these she had assiduously studied, but although she could make neither head nor tail of the economic arguments advanced, nor succeed in penetrating the artfully concealed sexual anarchy to which the practice of socialism would inevitably lead, she had been not a little attracted by the fine things it promised to suffering humanity.

When Jeannie knocked at the door, it was a long time before it was answered; she knew that Trill and his son were at home, because she could hear the playing of a violin and piano within.

Even when the door was opened by a none too clean maid-servant, she was left to shift for herself, at which there was nothing for it but to make for the room where music was being played.

This was in the drawing-room; as she entered, a not altogether unexpected sight met her gaze.

Mr. Trill, a dark, shaggy, middle-aged man, was perspiringly thumping the piano; Ernest, his son, was fiddling from memory with a red silk handkerchief tucked under his chin; while in another part of the room a very tall, well-made old man was playing with a fat fox-terrier which, in obeying his master's instructions, was attempting to walk on his hind-legs.

The big man was Mr. Jackson, who was Trill's father-in-law: Jeannie looked about her for Mrs. Trill, but she was not in the room.

Although Ernest, in facing her as he did, must have seen her, he made no sign of recognition, being apparently enwrapt with his playing; when he had a rest, his eyes sought the ceiling in an abandonment of artistic emotion.

Otherwise, he was a teetotaller, a non-smoker, an ardent radical, and given to serious reading: his pasty face was peppered with spots.

He and his father were practising for to-morrow's "Pleasant Sunday Afternoon."

Jackson had waved his arm to Jeannie directly she came into the room ; when he saw she had seated herself and was listening to the music, he attempted to divert her attention to the antics of his dog.

Compared to his son-in-law and grandson, Jackson was by way of being an old reprobate, being fond of his glass, and with a keen appreciation of a pretty face : he had been a street jobber connected with the Stock Exchange for many years until increasing deafness compelled him to give up this exiguous occupation.

Now that he was stone deaf, he kept a supply of half-sheets of paper and pencils in the room on which he was asked questions or information was furnished.

He occasionally made money by mysterious means when he was disposed to be defiant to his son-in-law's political opinions ; on the other hand, when hard up, as he nearly always was, he was compelled to defer to Trill's convictions.

At the conclusion of the performance, Jeannie thanked the players, at which she was amused to see that Ernest withdrew the fiddle and bowed low ; at the same time, he dexterously caught the red silk handkerchief with his right hand, and with a flourish returned it to his pocket : he was evidently rehearsing his acknowledgment of the applause he anticipated when playing in public.

"How is my dear Mrs. Baverstock ?" asked Mr. Trill, in rather a high voice. "And why didn't you let us know you were here ?"

"You might have stopped playing," replied Jeannie, as she took up a pencil from the table and wrote on one of Jackson's half-sheets of paper : "How are you ?"

This she handed to Jackson, who was now endeavouring to persuade the fox-terrier to shake hands with the visitor.

"Has Joey arrived ?" asked Trill.

"N—not yet. I was wondering if you would all come in to tea to-morrow afternoon."

"Delighted—at least Ernest and I would be. You must ask my wife yourself; she'll be down directly; she's upstairs dressing as she's going to town."

"I hope Mr. Jackson will come too."

"You must ask him."

She was about to write the invitation, when Jackson thrust a piece of paper under her nose; upon it was scrawled, "My dear, you're looking lovely."

She was well used to old Jackson's vagaries; indeed, in spite of herself, she had much of an affection for the sprightly old man. She crumpled up the paper and threw it in the fireplace before writing, "Will you come to tea to-morrow?" She was handing it to Jackson when the door opened and Trill's wife came into the room, at which he took advantage of his daughter's entrance to whisper to Jeannie:

"If you'll sit by me."

Mrs. Trill was quite the last woman in the world one could expect Trill to have married.

She was a magnificently developed creature in the prime of life, with an abundance of rich brown hair; she had a glorious complexion and big sleepy eyes, in which lurked slumbering fires.

This afternoon, she was scented and elaborately turned out for her visit to town.

She approached and kissed Jeannie, who had no particular liking for her, before asking her husband the time.

"Ten minutes to four, dear."

"Then I shall just be in time for the four-five. Good-bye, dearest."

For all her loving words, she merely offered her cheek to her husband, who said:

"Mrs. Baverstock wants us to come to tea to-morrow."

"Indeed!" remarked Mrs. Trill casually.

"She's expecting Joey to-night, and he will be there to-morrow."

"Delighted!" exclaimed Mrs. Trill, with some approach to warmth.

She kissed her father affectionately, and, as she went out of the room, her husband said :

"Remember me to aunt Mary."

"I won't forget," replied Mrs. Trill.

"She's so devoted to her aunt," Trill informed Jeannie, when his handsome wife had disappeared. "She sometimes goes to see her as often as twice a week."

"I'm looking forward to seeing Joey again," declared Trill presently. "How old is he now?"

"Nineteen."

"Just the right age."

Jeannie questioningly opened her eyes

"To form his mind politically," Trill informed her.

"I don't think Joey thinks very much about politics."

"But he should. And when so many young men are afflicted with this deplorable mania for Imperialism, it's a very great thing to pluck a brand from the burning, as one might say."

"I hope he and Ernest will become great friends," remarked Jeannie lamely.

"So do I. Ernest is a prominent member of the local 'League of Young Liberals,' and should influence Joey to join."

"Indeed!" remarked Jeannie, who, at that moment, would have given much to know what Joey was doing just then.

Trill enlarged on his subject; but her fears for her boy, and the fact of old Jackson persistently humming to his fat pet, made it difficult for Jeannie to give the socialist adequate attention.

"What is he getting excited about?" asked Jackson presently, as he thrust pencil and paper in Jeannie's hand.

" Making Joey join the ' League of Young Liberals,' " wrote Jeannie.

" Much better be a Territorial," cried Jackson, with sudden recklessness, when he had read what Jeannie had written.

" Territorial ! " almost screamed Mr. Trill. " Excepting the ' Boy Scouts,' was there ever a more pernicious movement than that ? "

" I scarcely know," murmured Jeannie.

" Just when the world is learning to do without harsh methods in international dealings, and arbitration, and such-like things are making such headway, to turn the youth of the nation into young savages ! It's infamous ! Infamous ! "

" Hear, hear ! " cried Ernest.

" What are they excited about now ? " asked Jackson, as he thrust pencil and paper in Jeannie's hand.

" Territorials and Boy Scouts," wrote Jeannie.

" Jolly fine thing," cried Jackson, after reading Jeannie's reply.

Trill turned to stare at his father-in-law with dismayed astonishment before delivering his soul of his opinion of such organisations, declaring that the fostering of military ideas hindered the approaching universal brotherhood of man, which all high-minded men and women were doing their best to establish. He was sure dear Mrs. Baverstock would agree with him.

Jeannie's mind was so full of Joey that she had given indifferent heed to what he had been saying ; wishing to be civil, however, she murmured a feeble assent to Trill's diatribe, and took the earliest opportunity of rising to go.

She was pressed, particularly by old Jackson, to stay for tea ; she declined the invitation as she was eager to hurry home in order to see if a telegram had arrived from Joey.

Jackson insisted on accompanying her to the gate ; when

he was out of earshot of his son-in-law, he jerked his head in the direction of the latter as he exclaimed :

“ Damn fool ! ”

He, then, paid Jeannie the most fulsome compliments under his breath.

When she excitedly opened her front door, there was no communication for her ; she sought to relieve her disappointment by reflecting that, all being well, Joey would be with her within two hours from now.

For all her hopes, seven o'clock found Jeannie waiting at the gate, and anxiously looking up the road in the direction of the station for the cab that would bring her boy.

Within, fires were burning in his bedroom and study, while Ethel in a smart new cap and apron was awaiting her mistress's orders to dish up the dinner, the lamb being done to a turn.

A thousand and one forebodings filled Jeannie's mind as the expected vehicle failed to put in an appearance ; every moment she was becoming increasingly apprehensive that some catastrophe had happened.

At last, she could bear the suspense no longer ; she ran to her room to put on hat and cloak, and after calling to Ethel to keep the joint hot, she hastened in the direction of the station.

As it was Saturday night, there were many people out of doors ; although Jeannie passed several with whom she was on speaking terms, she was too preoccupied with her fears to acknowledge the salutations of her acquaintances.

When she arrived at the station, a train had just come in ; she eagerly scanned the faces about the ticket collector in the hope of seeing Joey, only to meet with disappointment.

As soon as she was able, she approached the ticket collector, to inquire :

“ Are the trains late this evening ? ”

"No, ma'am."

She sighed relief before asking :

"You haven't heard of anything happening ?"

The man looked at her in surprise.

"Any railway accident, or anything of that sort ?"

"Not that I know of," replied the man, who was wondering if the approaching stationmaster had perceived he had not given a receipt for an excess fare.

Mr. Church, the stationmaster, was a burly, bearded man who occasionally exchanged a few words with Jeannie on the rare occasions on which she went to town ; seeing how perturbed she looked, he asked :

"Anything I can do for you, ma'am ?"

"I'm expecting my son. I was wondering why he hadn't arrived."

"Tall, dark young gentleman ?"

"Very tall for his age."

"I know him by sight, ma'am ; I've seen nothing of him. But there are plenty more trains between now and the twelve-forty."

Scarcely knowing what she was at, Jeannie hurried home in the hope of a telegram explaining Joey's non-arrival having come in her absence ; there was nothing for her, and she was distractedly wondering what she should do when Ethel attempted to persuade her to have some dinner.

"But what about Master Joey ?"

"Let him have it when he comes in. Serve him right if he has it cold," declared practical Ethel.

Although in her present condition of mind the sight of food nauseated her, the servant's scarcely veiled derision of her apprehensions did much to calm her mind ; but only for a time ; very soon, she was again hastening to the station to meet the next train.

For the best part of three hours, Jeannie hurried backwards and forwards ; when not convinced that something terrible had happened to Joey, she strove to discover possible explanations for his failure to arrive.

When the ten-forty came in, but six people passed the barrier, one of these being Mrs. Trill.

Apparently her aunt Mary had done very well, for her face was suffused with colour while her fine eyes were glowing and brilliant with emotion.

She was so occupied with her thoughts that she did not appear to see Jeannie ; as she passed, the latter was enveloped in perfume which at once took her mind back to a night of her belated honeymoon at Monte Carlo.

The recollection made her wince ; she was wondering if it would not be as well to set off for town by the next train and make inquiries there, when she perceived three tall youths wheeling bicycles along the platform, at which her heart beat quickly ; one of these was Joey. She darted past the ticket collector and almost threw herself on her son.

"Joey ! Joey !" she exclaimed gleefully.

"Mater !" cried the astonished boy.

"What has happened ? But you have come. Are you quite, quite well ?"

"Course. But——"

"I have been anxious. Oh ! why didn't you w—— But you've come now."

"That's all right," said Joey off-handedly. Then, as he saw that his mother was wholly oblivious of his annoyance at her effusive welcome, he said, none too graciously : "Wait a minute. I want to say good-night to my pals."

She waited outside the station ; when he joined her, she was about to throw her arms about him and kiss him when he said :

"I say, mater !"

"Yes, darling."

"You needn't have done that."

"Done what, my dearest ?"

"Made me look an ass before those chaps."

She looked at him in pained astonishment.

“Waiting for me and then going for me like that. I shall be chaffed ‘no end,’ ” he went on.

“But, Joey——”

“All very well. But it’s a bit thick, you know. You might have consideration for me ! ”

CHAPTER XXIV

DISILLUSION

FOR all Joey's ungraciousness to his mother, which continued for some time after they had reached home, Jeannie awoke betimes the next morning with a glad heart ; she was looking forward to a quiet Sunday with her boy.

As he was probably tired from his journey, she had told Ethel not to call him till half-past eight ; after half-past nine breakfast, Joey would take her to church, which proceeding would give her infinite pleasure, she being excessively proud of her well-grown boy.

Such was her joy at his safe arrival, at the fact of his sleeping under the same roof as herself, that she had quite forgotten any forebodings she may have known the previous evening on account of the coldness with which he had greeted her hopes for his ecclesiastical future ; she was confident that the influences of the day, his home, and herself would more than suffice to divert his ambition into the desired channels.

As she lay in bed, she was surprised to hear Joey moving in the room overhead where he slept ; a few moments later, he ran downstairs and turned on the bath, at which she wondered if religious fervour were urging him to early Holy Communion.

Not thinking it seemly to be abed while Joey was thus moved, she got up in all haste, resolving to walk with him so far as the church ; she would then come back in order to see that a good breakfast awaited his return.

This being Jeannie's explanation of his early rising, it may be imagined that she received a considerable shock when on

coming down she perceived Joey oiling his bicycle in a none too clean cycling suit.

Her astonishment was such that she did not know what to say, at which Joey, without looking up, asked :

"Is that you, mater ?"

"Y—yes, dear."

"Ripping morning." •

"It's Sunday, Joey."

"'Chestnuts,' mater."

"I thought you'd forgotten."

"Why should I forget? I've fixed up a run with Day and Coleby. It's the only day Coleby can get away."

"But how long will you be gone?" asked Jeannie, momentarily inspired by a gleam of hope. "Will you be back by eleven?"

"Eleven? We're going to Chelmsford. I'm meeting 'em at the bridge at half-past nine."

Jeannie was so taken aback by this information that, for want of something better to say, she remarked :

"But it's only half-past seven. You're surely not going now?"

"I've just had my three-speed gear seen to. I just want to see if it's 'OK.'"

"I'll get breakfast early, as I should like a talk with you before you go."

"Eh?"

"I said I should like a little talk with you before you go."

"What's up?" he asked casually, as with bent back he still attended to his bicycle.

Jeannie summoned all her courage to say :

"Considering you're going into the Church, dear, bicycling on a Sunday seems scarcely the right sort of preparation."

"All right, mater. But you're standing in the light."

Some half-hour later, when he returned hot and flushed from his ride, he called out :

"Breakfast ready?"

"It won't be long, dear," replied his mother. "I didn't have it cooked till you came in. I wanted it to be nice and hot for you."

"This is a rotten hole," grumbled Joey.

"Why, dear?"

His reply further jarred her susceptibilities.

"There's no getting a Sunday paper. If you want a *Referee*, you have to order it."

Jeannie hurried her preparations for breakfast, and in so doing was irritable with Ethel for no reason at all; she was determined to have a serious talk with Joey, and if it were possible dissuade him from his ride.

When she joined him at the breakfast table, he was intently examining some foreign postage stamps.

"Stamps?" remarked Jeannie.

"Yes."

"I should have thought you were too old for that sort of thing."

"Don't you believe it. There's a lot of money in stamps."

"I hate that word 'money,'" declared Jeannie, as she took her seat at the table.

He made as if he were about to reply, but, changing his mind, he preserved silence.

Although Jeannie was not a little dismayed by Joey's behaviour, she was gratified to notice his hearty appetite, coffee, rolls, eggs, bacon, and jam disappearing with astonishing quickness; she, herself, ate next to nothing, a proceeding that was unnoticed by her son.

She was meditating how best to broach the subject she had in mind, when Joey surprised her by saying:

"You know, mater, you're an awful-looking kid."

"What do you mean?" she asked, flushing.

"You look so jolly young. No one 'ud believe, unless they knew, you'd a son who was a man."

"Nonsense, Joey," she remarked, striving to stifle the pleasure his words gave her.

"Day said last night he was quite in love with you, and he wondered why you'd never married again.

Jeannie's face hardened, at which Joey said :

"It's a good thing you haven't. As likely as not, you'd have made a mess of it. Now if any one comes along, they'll have me to deal with."

"Joey !"

"And some one who knows what's what."

"I wish you wouldn't talk in that worldly fashion," declared Jeannie, but for all her reproof he imperturbably continued : "But, if I'm to look after you, you must help me to dress the part."

"What do you mean ?" cried his perplexed mother.

He looked at her sharply before replying :

"I was wondering if my pretty mater would stand me a smart dress suit ?"

When she had recovered from her surprise at his request, she asked :

"What can you want with such a thing ?"

"Other men of my age have them."

"But they're not all going into the Church."

"I'm not so sure that I am, pretty mater !"

"Joey !" she cried, in dismay.

"Being a parson is all very well so far as it goes, but there's precious little money in it."

"Why drag money into everything, dear ?"

"Because one can't do without it. But about this dress suit. I'm going to stay with Pengelly on Wednesday—"

"Pengelly !" repeated an alarmed Jeannie, who, although she had never met the youth mentioned, had, from all Joey had told her of his school friend, an intense dislike for him, she considering him anything but a fit companion for her son.

"His people have asked me up for two or three weeks, and there's a giddy old aunt coming to stay with them, and she's keen on a high old time. As she'll want us to go to all

sorts of places where one simply must dress, I should like to know where I come in if I can't ! ”

“ And—and you mean to say you've accepted this invitation ? ”

“ What do you think ? ” he replied almost scornfully.

“ I was looking forward to our going to Bridport, dear,” she gravely informed him.

“ What on earth is there to do in a hole like Bridport ? ” asked Joey, as having, at last, finished his breakfast, he produced tobacco pouch, pipe, and matches.

“ Smoking ! And so early ! ”

“ Why on earth not ? ”

“ It's not the best preparation for the Church, Joey,” his mother reminded him.

“ I'm not so wonderfully keen on the Church,” remarked Joey, as he coolly filled his pipe.

“ You mentioned that before,” she sighed.

“ And as I told you before, pretty mater, there's nowa-days precious little money in the Church.”

Believing that her son's whole moral future was at stake, she warmly applied herself to the task of combating his backsliding ; after the manner of her sex, she alternately objected and pleaded, the while she met his refusal to fall in with her point of view with scarcely the most logical of arguments.

In the nature of things, she was handicapped from the first ; to begin with, there was her abiding love for a naturally selfish youth who had only thought for his own convenience, pleasures, and interests ; also, while he was speaking, the occasional pose of his head, certain expressions of his face, and mannerisms of speech recalled her ever-dear Edgar to her mind and softened her heart where it should have been inflexibly hard.

The discussion had such an inconsequent ending that Jeannie was trying to screw up her courage to speak firmly, when Joey rose to say :

“ If I don't go now, I shall be late.”

"I was hoping you were going to church with me, dear."

"It'll do me much more good to ride to Chelmsford with Day and Coleby."

"But why Chelmsford, Joey?"

"Why not, pretty mater?"

"It's on the main road, and it's so dangerous with all these motors about."

"That's half the fun."

"Joey!"

"Dodging them, I mean."

Her heavy heart was comforted somewhat as he came to kiss her before he went; forgetful of her own troubles, she was immediately solicitous for his well-being.

"What time will you be back?" she asked.

"Any time this evening."

"But where will you get luncheon?"

"Some pub," he told her, as he went to the door.

"But you'll want some money?" she suggested

"I can borrow it," he replied, as he lingered in the doorway.

She offered him some loose silver, at which he said:

"I'll take four bob, dear."

"Is that enough?"

"You can put the rest towards my dress suit."

"Do mind the motors, Joey," she called after him, as he went.

Jeannie was so wretched when Joey had gone that she could not bear the confinement of the four walls of her home; she put on her things with the idea of going to church, but when she got out of doors, she abandoned the idea, her troubled thoughts preferring the seclusion of the adjacent Forest.

Before going there, however, she resolved to put off the Trills from coming to tea; she did not want them to find Joey absent.

The servant who opened the door informed her that Mr.

and Master Trill were at chapel, that Mrs. Trill was not yet up, and Mr. Jackson was in the garden.

Jeannie left her message, and as she came away she heard Jackson singing in the garden presumably while attempting to teach his fat terrier to walk on his hind legs.

When she crossed the London road on her way to the Forest, the passing motor-cars filled her with alarm on Joey's account ; she wondered if he dimly surmised the anxieties she suffered concerning the risks he ran of mutilation or death.

When she reached the Forest, she walked on the accumulation of dead leaves till she came to a fallen tree-trunk ; although the sunshine, and the gay evidences of the great awakening proceeding on every hand should have gladdened her heart, she remained unresponsive to the joyous influences about her ; instead, she was steeped in gloom, when she became an easy prey to the dismal memories that insistently assailed her.

She made one or two efforts to fight against these, knowing full well how they would further depress her spirits, but Joey's flouting of her wishes with regard to the career she had selected for him, the preferences he had exhibited for a worldly life enfeebled her capacity for resistance.

Motherlike, she wondered if she had been remiss in the forming of his mind, and, if so, how false she had been to the loving duty she owed her dearest Edgar.

Immediately the thoughts of her ever beloved came into her mind, the stunted trees with their high-forked limbs, the shy green on the bushes, and the masses of dead bracken, which looked as if it had been arranged for effect by the hands of a supreme artist, all faded from her sight.

She was back in her little Richmond home, waiting in an agony of suspense for her husband's letters ; if it had not been for her boy, and for the communications from Edgar, life for her would have proved unendurable.

Since her marriage, Edgar had hardly been absent one night from her side ; after he took up poultry farming, he

had been in and out of the house all day, consequently his absence had been a brutal deprivation, for all that Edgar's mother did her best to lessen her daughter-in-law's grief.

Edgar's letters had been frequent, long, and full of love for, and devotion to, his wife while, at the same time, they confessed to a homesickness which had touched Jeannie to the quick.

She wrote long moving letters in reply, begging him to make speedy arrangements for her joining him ; he had fallen in with the suggestion, and she had been expecting a letter proposing something definite, when a strange thing had happened.

There was a distinct change of tone in his writings ; it was not so much that he had indefinitely put her off from coming to him, but reading between the lines, her quick apprehensions perceived that there was more than a suggestion of throwing cold water on their mutual love.

If any other woman in a like situation had shown her these letters, she would have believed that the writer cared for some one else and, in spite of himself, betrayed the fact.

So far as she was concerned, such an impression was unthinkable, she having far too much faith in her manifold attractions even to suggest that Edgar had forgotten his golden-haired Jeannie.

Then had followed a time when her husband's letters became more and more infrequent ; until the last day of her life she would never forget the agony of mind caused by his comparative silence ; she would not, dared not, question his fidelity ; she could only pass her days in a monotony of suffering unrelieved by distraction.

He had allowed her more than enough to live on out of his comfortable salary ; with what she had saved, and the money that still remained of Joe's legacy, she had all but made up her mind to brave the inconveniences of the journey and seek out her husband in Johannesburg when he wrote her a letter that made her abandon her project.

In this, he expressed an almost hysterical passion for

his Jeannie ; declared he could no longer live without her, and announced that as he was now more than recovered in health, he was about to start for home ; he, also, said how he had acquired holdings in mines for a mere song, and that as these were rapidly appreciating, he was independent of King.

Jeannie's joy was such on receiving this communication that she could hardly contain herself ; indeed, the sudden revulsion of emotion from her previous depression brought her within measurable distance of a nervous breakdown.

He had written once more before his boat started, when he had mentioned that he had not been feeling over well for the last few days, but looked to the voyage to put him on his legs.

Although, in spite of herself, Jeannie was retrospectively disposed, she would not suffer her mind to recall the agonies of the following months ; these commenced with her suspense till she heard further from Edgar, and deepened when she received a letter from the owners of the ship by which he was coming saying that he was very seriously ill.

The news of his death from typhoid fever and burial at sea arrived a day or two later, and even as Jeannie avoided dwelling on this tragic event, she gripped tightly her fingers, while her heart was wrung with pain.

The next thing she dwelt upon was her means of escape from the ceaseless anguish which threatened to overwhelm her utterly, this, devotion to her boy.

With a passionate abnegation of self, Jeannie had to some extent assuaged her grief by consecrating her days to the upbringing of her little one.

As she sat in reverie, her mind dwelt gratefully on the thousand and one sacrifices and cares she had respectively made and known in the task she had joyfully set herself, gratefully, because she believed that in doing as she did she was but carrying out the wishes of her dearest one, could he have made them known.

She had had no thought in life that was alien to her Joey's interests.

As can readily be imagined, such a fond mother had hopelessly spoiled a boy who, although well disposed at heart, had enough and to spare of human selfishness; when he was home from school, she could have done nothing with him if she had been minded to exert authority.

Although she had done her very utmost to bring him up in the way he should go, she had discovered that, while eager to make professions of goodness, his ways were at variance with his protestations.

Even now she associated his most mischievous acts as a child with the following verse that was included in his prayers :

" The morning comes with shining light,
My God took care of me last night.
I wish I might be good all day,
And put all naughty thoughts away."

Doubtless, for all his headstrong ways, he would have proved a good enough boy if he had had a father to correct sternly his faults.

Almost before he had been old enough to go to school, she had made up her mind as to the profession he was to follow, this that of clergyman, the money Edgar had left more than enabling her to provide the necessary expenses.

She had altogether something over three hundred a year derived from the valuable Rand shares Edgar had left, and the American land company in which he had put money when at "Larkslease"; as Reuben had then prophesied, they had proved a profitable investment.

If she had fallen in with her father-in-law's wishes respecting her boy (he wished him to go into his business), he would have gladly paid for the most expensive education procurable; indeed, his measure of affection for his grandson could be gauged by this offer, old age having increased his close-fistedness.

But Jeannie's mind was bent on Joey's following the

vocation she had selected, consequently she would have none of Reuben's dearly loved money ; her intentions respecting her boy were warmly supported by her mother-in-law.

Reuben's wife, whom the passing of the years had made more frail-looking than ever, had had so much trouble with her husband and daughter that all her hopes in life were largely centred on her sharp-witted, comely grandson.

She was aware of her husband's desire that Joey should follow the same occupation as himself ; seeing how the greed for money had depraved Reuben's character, she constantly urged on Jeannie that the boy should, so far as it was possible, be preserved from his grandfather's influence.

To this end, Jeannie had very regretfully moved from the little Richmond house (where "Lassie," her father's dog, was buried), tenderly endeared to her from the fact of Edgar's having lived and loved within its walls, and gone to live at Woodbridge in Essex, a place that was neither suburb nor country, although rapidly approximating to the former.

Jeannie had a further motive in this change, which was that Essex being more removed from the dissipations of the West End of London than Richmond (in itself a lively place), her Joey would not be so liable to be attracted by the distractions and temptations to which youth is prone.

It was in order that he might not be diverted from the calling she had selected that, instead of sending him to a public school, he had gone to a private one, such places, at least, so Jeannie foolishly believed, providing a healthier atmosphere than the rough-and-tumble association of a large number of boys.

For the same reason, she had decided to send him to a theological college in preference to Oxford or Cambridge, it was to enable him to qualify for the less attractive means of entering the Church that she had fitted the room upstairs as a study.

At the same time, she was nervously aware that her careful arrangements were at all times liable to dislocation.

For instance, she had expected her mother-in-law a few days back in order to discuss their gentle plan of campaign respecting Joey ; but Mrs. Baverstock, who had for some months been in indifferent health, had written to say that she was not well enough to come at present ; Jeannie knew she must be seriously indisposed to abandon a visit on which she had set her heart.

Also, Joey had struck up what his mother considered to be an undesirable friendship with Pengelly, who was a fellow-pupil at the same private school ; undesirable, as the latter had a leaning to theatres and music-halls, and had even been known to put half-crowns on horses : Jeannie had done her best to break off the acquaintance, but with no particular success.

In addition to this friendship, Joey had a knack of getting to know young men of the better class in the neighbourhood, consequently she knew that all her work was cut out to prevent him from being deflected from the ecclesiastical course on which she had set her heart.

Presently, she got up, meaning to go home, but was so weighed down with dismal apprehensions that, scarcely knowing what she was doing, she fetched something of a compass.

Exercise, sunlight, the influences of spring somewhat lightened her heart, and by the time she perceived she had gone considerably out of her way, she knew an indifferent approximation to content.

Then, a strange thing happened.

She passed an orchard in full bloom.

The sight of the glorious spread of pink and white blossom caused her to stop and regard helplessly its appealing loveliness.

At the same time, in spite of herself, she was obsessed by thoughts of sex, of which as a general rule she was innocent.

Apart from the domestic wars and alarms attending

Joey's upbringing, her life had been singularly uneventful since the death of her husband.

She had made the acquaintance of families at Richmond, more with the idea of providing playmates for Joey than for any other purpose, when her chief delight had been to be invited, with him, to children's parties, and watch him amuse himself in dancing or romping games.

Much to her surprise, several more or less eligible men had made advances to the beautiful young widow, but, meeting with no encouragement, had left her to her devices.

Then, to her considerable astonishment, her husband's old friend Pightle had sought her out and, after awhile, had characteristically wondered "if Jeannie would care to take charge of a thorough-going rotter like himself."

Jeannie, believing that so much as to think of such a thing was in the nature of sacrilege to Edgar's memory, had gently declined the responsibility.

But that was all in the long ago.

Pightle was now in the nature of a tender memory, he having given his life for his country in the Boer War.

When, for all Jeannie's vow of widowhood, thoughts of sex would occasionally dominate her mind, she endeavoured to withstand them, which resistance doubtless had the effect of strengthening their attacks.

At the same time, she was not blind to the fact that she must suffer the lot of all fond mothers inasmuch as, sooner or later, her precious Joey would go out of her life to make a home of his own; she sometimes found herself wondering what she should do when this inevitable thing happened, and if she would then be too old for affection (she was convinced she could never love again as she had loved Edgar) to come into her life.

This morning, the orchard bloom in which blackbirds and thrushes were seemingly breaking their hearts in the effort to express adequately their love for their respective mates, made her being ache for a little tenderness, understanding, and sympathy from the male of her species; her isolation

from such things caused her to feel singularly lonely and miserable in a joyously amorous world, and she sighed deeply before betaking herself homeward.

For the rest of the day, Jeannie either moped or surrendered to her fears with regard to any and every accident which might befall Joey on his bicycle.

About seven, Ethel being out, she saw that a good supper awaited his return, putting on the table many little luxuries which might tempt his appetite.

As the time passed, and he did not come back, she forbore to have any lights, preferring to nurse her griefs first in the twilight ; later, in darkness.

Now and again, and with increasing frequency, she would go to the gate, and walk up the road, in the hope of seeing him.

About ten, she was still sitting in darkness when the quietness of the road was invaded by three joyous youths on bicycles.

They stopped outside the house and a familiar step crunched the gravel path ; she heard the voices of two youths at the gate, while the rays from three bicycle lamps shone uncannily into the night.

The front door was then opened and Joey's voice called :
" Mater ! Mater ! "

Partly from resentment of his behaviour, chiefly because she wished to discover if he were at all anxious on her account, she forbore to answer.

" Mater ! Mater ! " he cried, and louder than before.

Convinced that he would light the gas and search till he found her, she did not reply.

To her dismay, Joey called to one of his friends :

" It's all right. There's no one in. I'll come back with you to supper."

CHAPTER XXV

OLD ACQUAINTANCE

ON the afternoon of the following Wednesday week, Jeannie disconsolately walked the streets in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square.

She had impulsively come to town in the vague hope of coming upon Joey, who, in the face of her wishes, had insisted on going to stay with his friend Pengelly in Chelsea ; this being an afternoon on which theatrical and music-hall performances were given, she expected he would be visiting one of these places with his friends.

He had been absent a week, during which time he had only written the shortest of notes asking his mother to send him a cheque for the coveted dress suit ; this, he had declared, was necessary to his social salvation.

She was not only distressed by Joey's visit to Pengelly, but by fears of his grandfather getting hold of him ; this apprehension had been excited by a conversation that had taken place at luncheon on the Monday following her son's arrival home.

"What's happened to cousin Lucy ?" Joey had begun.

"Lucy Hibling ? I haven't seen her for some weeks. I think she's quite well."

"Is he all right ?"

"Her husband ? I think so."

"Rum pair."

"What makes you say that ?"

"Look as if they were eaten up with envy and jealousy and all the rest of it."

"Do you think so ?"

"Look at 'em. But you never see anything, pretty mater. All the world's a sort of heaven to you."

Joey had belied his mother's powers of observation ; although she would not admit it to Joey, she had seen for herself how the Hiblings' lives had been soured by unfulfilled social ambitions.

While Jeannie had smiled to herself at her son's misreading of her perceptions, Joey had continued :

"Seen anything of grandfather Baverstock ?"

Jeannie's face had hardened, but before she could reply, he had added :

"I have."

"Where ?" she had quickly asked.

"At Salisbury. He came down three times to see me."

"You never told me," she remarked, as she cut a second helping of meat for her hungry boy.

"I think he's rather keen on me," Joey had continued, while he ignored his mother's remark. "He asked me all sorts of questions about what I was going to do in life."

"Indeed !" Jeannie had remarked, while greatly troubled.

"Why don't you like him ?"

"How do you know I don't ?" replied Jeannie.

"You ought to, if only because I'm growing so like him."

Jeannie started.

She had noticed, and others, to her annoyance, had pointed out the resemblance ; it was one of the things to which she persistently blinded herself.

"Don't you think I am ?" continued the boy.

"Certainly not. You are like your dear father. And before you are influenced by Reuben, I want you to have a serious talk with your grandmother."

"How is she ?"

"Not at all well, otherwise she was coming on Saturday."

"What's up with her ?"

"No one seems to know."

"Serious ?"

"I don't know. And then she's worried a good deal by Mabel."

"Suffragette, ain't she?" queried the boy.

To divert his mind from his grandfather, Jeannie gave Joey particulars of Mabel's latest vagary.

She was now a stout, puffy woman who, after a variety of prepossessions which, for the time being, had expressed her ego, as she was fond of stating, had enthusiastically taken up woman's suffrage.

She had achieved notoriety, if not fame, amongst the manly women, and womanly men in the movement by her heroism in throwing pepper into the eyes of an inoffensive policeman, and by stabbing (from behind) in the arm a police inspector while executing his duty.

Just then, Ethel had brought in a jam tart which Joey proceeded to serve in a method that dismayed careful-minded Jeannie; he cut away the edge of pastry before helping himself and his mother to the more appetising part.

"Joey!" she remonstrated.

"What's up now?"

"Cutting the tart like that! It's wicked waste."

"Anyway, Pengelly does it like that," grumbled Joey.

"I'm a little tired of hearing so much of your friend Pengelly," declared Jeannie irritably.

"Anyway, I've quite made up my mind to go there on Wednesday."

"I was hoping you would change your mind," she had ruefully remarked.

He repeated his intention, but her repeated expostulations had no effect upon his resolve.

As if this were not enough to distress her, he had presently said:

"And I dare say I shall run against grandfather Baverstock when I'm in town!"

"And if you do?" Jeannie had tremblingly queried.

"I expect he'll want to show me round. He's a jolly good sort when he likes."

Ever since Joey had gone to Chelsea, Jeannie had dismally wondered if Reuben had met her boy, and in that event, if he were influencing him in the direction of a money-grubbing career.

When she had suddenly decided to come to town, she had dressed with extreme care, as she knew from experience how Joey liked her to look her best before his friends; she had bought a pair of white gloves in the Haymarket.

She had, also, written out the seven-guinea cheque for the coveted dress suit, and had enclosed it with a letter to Joey; undecided whether or not she should post it, she had brought it in her bag.

As she walked, she kept a sharp look-out for her boy either in passing cabs, or among those she encountered on the pavement; she soon found it necessary to restrain her glances, she presenting such a contrast to the raddled, overdressed women who forgather in that part of London, that she attracted considerable masculine curiosity.

At last, weary from walking, and regretting her impulsive journey to town, she looked about for where she could get some tea and a rest; hardly had Jeannie made this resolve when she overheard a woman remark to another as she stopped before a big glass door guarded by a stalwart commissioner: "We can get some tea in here."

Longing to sit down, she followed the twain when she crossed a large hall in which pastries and cakes were displayed for sale, and men and women were apparently waiting for friends, till her further progress was barred by a big glass partition, while an attendant repeatedly called:

"Teas on first and second floor."

She ascended in a crowded lift which disgorged its contents immediately outside a vast, irregularly shaped apartment, some of which was built round a semicircular well; in every direction were crowded tea-tables, while smart waitresses, in order to execute their orders, elbowed their way through those who were waiting for a seat.

It was with considerable difficulty that Jeannie got a

vacant place ; being on the edge of the well, it overlooked much of the ground floor, and some of the tea-gallery above, in which was a small orchestra.

When she had been looking for a seat, she believed she had strayed into one of the expensive tea-shops where they charge a shilling for a cup of tea ; but if she had not looked at the list of charges, which were what is known as " popular," a glance at the company would have sufficed to disabuse her mind of this impression, most of those present being of the homely variety of the species.

Many at the tea-tables were awed into silence by unaccustomed surroundings, while, on the other hand, there were those who talked in high, nervous voices in order to convey that they were quite at their ease.

At the same time, the faces of the ordinary, nice-looking young women about her gave her something of a shock.

Compared with the painted, over-dressed harpies she had encountered in the adjacent streets, these daughters of the suburbs seemed exquisite flowers.

Further scrutiny told her there were exceptions to the simple folk about her.

Immediately facing her were two youngish men of an unfamiliar type, having gross hooked noses, bulging eyes, and greasy curly hair ; they were frankly overdressed, while their not over-clean fingers were covered with rings.

They were greatly interested in Jeannie, who studiously avoided looking in their direction.

As if by way of a make-weight to their vulgar gallantry, the remaining occupant of the table was a plain young woman who had been stared at by men probably for the first time in her life ; she was looking fixedly at the ceiling in an agony of self-conscious rectitude.

Directly Jeannie had given her simple order, the playing of the orchestra had the effect of stimulating her mental processes ; in a very little while, her mind was again possessed by Joey.

Apart from fears with which she was dismally familiar, she realised how slender were the chances of coming upon Joey in London, and even in the circumscribed area devoted to theatrical entertainment; she half regretted having come to town, although with maternal optimism she believed that by a stroke of good fortune she might yet meet him.

Tea considerably heartened her, at which she perceived that the two vulgar young men at her table, having given up the idea of attracting her attention as a bad job, were lolling in their chairs with gold-tipped cigarettes between their thick lips.

Presently, one asked the other :

" Whath number two doing ? " at which his companion, after glancing across the well, replied :

" Nothin'."

" Not looking ? "

" Not now."

A little later, the man who had spoken first asked :

" Whath number four doing ? "

His friend looked across the intervening space to the opposite gallery as before ; he then replied :

" Eating her cake."

" Looking at me ? "

" Yeth ! "

The questioner sprawled in what he believed was a seductive attitude, when Jeannie, who was amused by his antics, divined that number one and number four referred to young women sitting at tables in the opposite gallery corresponding to the figures mentioned.

Then Jeannie was aware of a broad-shouldered, middle-aged man standing fixedly a few feet from the table at which she sat.

For all that the waitresses directed him to vacant seats, the place now emptying, he stood his ground, declaring he would sit where he pleased.

Something dimly familiar in his voice attracted Jeannie's

attention ; she glanced at him, when his sunburned features awoke vague memories.

Although she kept her eyes on her plate, she had an idea that the man was staring the two fatuous young men out of countenance in the effort to make them give up their places ; she wondered why he wished to sit at her table.

She was not left long in doubt.

When the two offensive young men presently got up, he at once took one of the vacant seats opposite Jeannie ; then, leaning towards her, he startled her by asking :

“ Are you Mrs. Baverstock ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I thought I wasn’t wrong. You don’t remember me ? ”

“ Scarcely ! ”

“ My name’s Titterton. I was a friend of your father.”

“ You Mr. Titterton ? ” asked an astonished Jeannie, as she put out her hand.

“ You haven’t forgotten me ? ”

“ You came to tea at Putney when father was alive, and then I met you——”

“ Is Joe dead ? ” he interrupted.

“ He died nearly twenty years ago,” said Jeannie very gently.

“ Poor old Joe ! ”

She dropped her eyes.

“ If ever there was a good man, he was one,” continued Titterton.

“ Then you didn’t know ? ” she asked.

He shook his head and was silent for awhile ; suddenly, he told a waitress to bring him coffee before saying with some approach to cheerfulness :

“ I had an idea it was you directly I saw you.”

“ Have I altered so little ? ”

Ignoring her question, he went on :

“ That’s why I was determined to sit at this table.”

“ And what has happened to you in all this long time ? ” she asked, not at all displeased at being discovered by one

who had admired her in the days of long ago. "You're looking extremely well."

"Never mind me. Tell me of yourself."

"But——"

"I wish it," declared Titterton firmly.

"So much has happened. I don't know where to begin," murmured Jeannie.

"Anyway, you look prosperous, and that's a lot. How is your husband?"

"I have no husband."

He looked at her with questioning eyes.

"He soon followed Joe," she continued, with trembling lips.

Titterton sat bolt upright.

"You are free?" he asked eagerly, when he had recovered from his astonishment.

"I am a widow, if that's what you mean."

"Good Lord!"

He did not speak for quite a long time, at which she said:

"What are you thinking of?"

"I scarcely know. I'm trying to get over meeting you when I'd given up hoping finding out what had become of you."

"Say that again!"

"Never mind that now. Any family?"

Jeannie told him of Joey.

"Spoiled him?"

"Of course not."

"Good boy?"

"Y—yes."

"Why isn't he taking you out this afternoon?"

"He's staying with friends."

"Where?"

"London."

"Friends of yours?"

"I'm tired of answering questions," declared Jeannie. "Tell me of yourself."

"Never mind me."

"What are you doing in London ? I wish to know."

"Amusing myself, and spending money."

"Aren't they both the same thing ?"

"No."

"I hope you're not throwing away money you'll want later on."

"I've more than enough for myself. Besides, I deserve a bit of a fling. I've worked."

It was only after considerable persuasion that Jeannie got out of him particulars of his life since he had left England. It appeared he had had a hard time for several years, having worked as a labourer in Canada before going to the States, where, amongst other things, he had driven a cab, scene-shifted at theatres, and been a waiter.

He had saved a little money in these occupations, with which he had successfully speculated, buying Canadian land and selling it at a profit ; ultimately, he had bought a partnership in a prosperous typewriting business which last he had represented in various European countries.

He had recently realised his money which he had carefully invested, making large profits in the rubber boom amongst other things, and now, being a man of means and leisure, was wondering what to do with his time.

When he had finished his account of his doings, he said :

"Beyond learning how to make and keep money—two very different things—I've struck one or two truths which I don't mind telling you.

"Well ?" she smiled.

"That the whole duty of man is to keep the sharpest of look-out for number one."

"That sounds dreadfully selfish."

"No doubt to the person who has never known what it is to be hungry. Another thing is that all this altruistic stuff that is preached nowadays is only so much unadulterated piffle. The race is to the swift, the battle to the strong. And a good thing too."

"It's time I was getting on," she said, collecting her belongings.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as he took up the bit of paper the waitress had given Jeannie, on which was scrawled the amount she had to pay for her tea.

"I scarcely know. And you?"

"I scarcely know."

They left the building, when she was not a little gratified at seeing the extreme care Titterton took of her, he piloting her through the people who were coming in to dinner as if she were some rare and precious thing.

CHAPTER XXVI

A SURPRISE

OUTSIDE, in Coventry Street, the press was such that conversation was difficult ; when unable to talk, Jeannie, so far as her excitement at meeting unexpectedly an old friend would permit, found herself appraising the wide gulf which separated the Titterton of to-day from the down-at-heel railway clerk she had known in the long ago.

It was not the fact of his being possessed of money which made the difference, she told herself ; rather it was the enterprise, endurance, foresight, and pluck he had exhibited of which ample means were the concrete expression.

Whatever he had been in the past, Titterton, she told herself, was now a man.

" Where are you living ? " he asked, when they arrived at Piccadilly Circus.

She told him.

" Not in this direction ? "

" I'm in no hurry to get back."

" Shall we walk down Piccadilly ? "

She assented ; not only did she find a certain relaxation from her fears concerning Joey in Titterton's company, but she had not abandoned hope of seeing something of her boy before she returned home.

They had not gone very far when, almost before she knew what had happened, he had shepherded her into the grill-room of an expensive restaurant.

" Why did you bring me here ? " she asked, when they were seated.

"To get something to eat. You have to dress for the other part. But we can talk all right here."

He pressed her to have all sorts of luxuries; when she had made known her simple wants, he gave his orders to the foreign waiter with unnecessary sharpness, at least, so Jeannie thought.

When the man had gone, he muttered under his breath:

"Curse these foreigners!"

"Don't you like them?"

"They're all right in their own country, but for every foreigner here, it means a Britisher out of a job," he declared emphatically.

"Is that so?"

"And I'll tell you something else. Every article bought of foreign manufacture means doing a good turn to a potential enemy."

"Are you going in for politics?"

"I don't know. But I am patriotic."

A little later, he put down his knife and fork as if lost in thought.

"What's the matter?" asked Jeannie.

"I was thinking how I used to talk to you and your father about good dinners."

"What of it?"

"You remember? What a fool you must have thought me. But after all said and done, the memory of those feeds kept me going when I'd have fought a dog for offal in the gutter."

Food, drink, companionship moved Jeannie to speak of what was nearest to her heart; very soon, she had confided to Titterton her difficulties regarding the career she wished Joey to follow.

"So he doesn't want to be a parson!" he asked, when she had done.

"I'm afraid not."

"That shows the boy's something in him."

"I thought you'd sympathise with me," she pouted.

"That parson game is all very well if one's deep convictions and one takes one's coat off, as it were, and works among the poor. But to be the ordinary drivelling parson is a contemptible game for any one who's the least self-respect. Why are you so keen on it?"

"I want him to be safeguarded from vulgar temptations," explained Jeannie.

"Much better let him go out into the world and shift for himself."

"But you don't understand——"

"What?"

"My boy is different to all other boys."

"Naturally," said Titterton, without relaxing a muscle.

"I should like to meet him."

"You shall."

An incident presently occurred that pleased and dismayed Jeannie.

An elderly man at an adjacent table persistently eyed her, which noticing, Titterton turned and stared defiantly at the offender before saying:

"If he doesn't look out, he'll get a thump in the jaw."

"S—sh!" remonstrated Jeannie.

"Why not?"

"That would be dreadful."

"For him. That's another thing I've picked up abroad: how to hit jolly hard."

Jeannie, during her years of widowhood, had lived her life among trivial people who would have recoiled with horror from any suggestion of any one violently taking the law into his own hands.

She had involuntarily absorbed their gentle predilections, which was, perhaps, the reason of her disliking old Baverstock, he having scant regard for other people's feelings, and taking the shortest cut, compatible with his age, to what he wanted.

At the same time, the novelty of Titterton's forcefulness,

together with the possibility of its being exerted on her behalf, disposed her in his favour.

"You're quite a savage," she smiled.

"Pity there's not a few more like me," he retorted.

When she was putting on her gloves before going, he said :

"What time do you want to get back ? "

"Any time. Why ? "

"I'd some idea of going down to Chelsea."

Jeannie pricked up her little ears at the mention of the place where Joey was staying.

"Why Chelsea ? " she asked.

"I'm sick of living at an hotel. I thought of seeing if I could get rooms in the same house in Chelsea where a friend of mine lives."

"Chelsea isn't very far," she remarked.

"I was wondering if you'd care to come," he suggested.

"Will you take care of me if I do ? "

"Yes ; I'll take care of you. I think I'm equal to that."

They went in a taxicab and, during their progress, she kept a sharp look-out for Joey, refusing to consider how much the chances were against her seeing him.

They alighted in the King's Road, when, for the life of him, Titterton could not remember the name of the street where his friend had taken lodgings.

"It's all your fault," declared Titterton. "Meeting with you has knocked everything else clean out of my head."

"There's no harm in looking about," declared Jeannie, ever hopeful of coming upon Joey.

They turned up a side street where the seeking for apartments was promptly forgotten ; they walked aimlessly, each being occupied with their thoughts.

Presently, Jeannie found herself telling her friend of her differences with Joey respecting the dress suit.

"Why shouldn't he have one ? " asked Titterton.

"He can have anything he wants. But what I complain of is that he goes off and never lets me know how he is."

"Goes off where?"

"To objectionable friends."

Titterton's questions elicited how anxious she was to get definite news of him; also, how he had merely written to ask for a cheque to pay for the clothes he wanted.

"Sent it?" he asked.

"I've my letter and cheque in my bag. I couldn't make up my mind."

"May I see it?"

She complied with his request, at which he took the letter and said:

"Before I give it back, you must promise not to send it."

"But——"

"You'll have him home at once if you do as I tell you."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm certain."

"I promise then."

He returned the letter and they again walked as before, when she noticed how he was constantly looking at her.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked presently.

"Joey and——"

"Yes!" he said, as she hesitated.

"I was thinking how strange it was my meeting you after all these years."

"This is only the beginning," he asserted.

She looked at him with questioning eyes.

"Can't you guess?"

He spoke so earnestly that she said:

"It's getting on. If you're not going to do what you came for, I'd better be going back."

"Please yourself. But I believe, after all, this is the street I'm looking for."

Most of the houses had a card announcing "Furnished apartments to let" in the windows.

"I'll try this one," said Titterton, selecting a house.

"Is it for you, or are you looking for your friend?"

"Both"

"Because the window curtains there are dirty."

"Try this one then," he said, as he went to the next house.

Accompanied by Jeannie, he walked up the steps and knocked at the door, which was presently opened by a harried-looking servant.

"Does Mr. Hulvert live here?" asked Titterton.

"What say?"

"I, also, want to see about some rooms."

"Please to come inside."

"What is it, Sarah?" asked a harsh woman's voice from the farther end of the hall.

"Lady and gentleman for rooms, miss," replied the servant.

Jeannie and Titterton were shown into a dark room on the right; when the gas was lit, they found themselves face to face with a tall, snub-nosed woman with dirty-white hair; her hard expression suggested heartlessness and greed; for all her uninviting appearance, there was something about her that was vaguely familiar to Jeannie.

"What do you require?" asked the landlady sharply.

"I might be wanting rooms," replied Titterton.

"For this lady and yourself?"

"Eh?"

"We charge extra for husband and wife as ladies give so much more trouble than gentlemen."

"As it happens, it's for myself," replied Titterton curtly.

"Then this lady is not your wife?"

"No such luck. But I want bedroom, sitting-room, use of bathroom, cooking, and attendance. How much for the lot?"

"Thirty shillings a week," replied the landlady, after rapidly appraising Titterton.

"That seems all right," he declared, as another tall, snub-nosed old woman, also with dirty-white hair, put her head in at the door.

"Come in, Elsie," said the landlady to this person. "Here's a gentleman come about rooms."

The other woman entered, at which Jeannie perceived that, although she bore a strong likeness to the landlady, she was a trifle stouter than the other and scarcely so rapacious looking; she, also, excited indistinct memories in Jeannie's mind.

"I'll have a look at the rooms, and if I like 'em, I'll probably take 'em," said Titterton, at which a visit of inspection was paid to the apartments that were to let.

While this took place, Jeannie became more and more possessed of an idea that she had met the lodging-house-keepers before.

"Thirty shillings a week?" asked Titterton, when they had returned to the room he and Jeannie had been shown into.

"Of course there are extras," hazarded the first woman they had interviewed. "If you have late dinners, it's three shillings a week extra."

"What?" cried Titterton.

"We might do it for two, Laura," faltered the stouter woman.

"Three, Elsie. I always charge three. Coals are a shilling a scuttle——"

"Isn't that rather a lot?" asked Jeannie, who did not want her friend to be imposed upon.

"If coal gets cheaper, we might do it for ninepence," put in the less rapacious-looking woman.

"Coals, a shilling a scuttle," reiterated the other firmly. "Hot baths, sixpence each; and for every jug of hot water that is carried upstairs we charge a penny."

Jeannie plucked Titterton's sleeve and whispered to him that the woman was making absurdly extortionate charges.

Divining what was toward, the woman said :

"I should like you to know we come of a most respected family, and we lived independent in Putney for a great many years, didn't we, Elsie?"

"Yes, Laura, till we lost all our money in speculation."

"And had to come down to this. Even now, there must be people still living in Putney who can tell you how respected the Miss Hitches were."

"Our name," explained the other, "will stand every investigation."

Thus it was that Jeannie learned how the lodging-house-keepers had been friends of her youth, although she could scarcely credit the change that had been wrought in themselves and their surroundings by their fight for existence.

She was about to say who she was, but changed her mind, believing that to reveal her identity would cause the sisters pain.

In order that she might not be recognised, she, so far as it was possible, averted her face from their gaze.

Even as, in taking her departure, she caught a further glimpse of their hard, grasping features, a vision arose to her mind of their comfortable home in Putney, and the picture of unsophisticated domesticity the two spinsters had presented.

The shock of coming upon them again, and in such different circumstances, troubled her mind during the journey to Liverpool Street in which she was accompanied by Titterton.

He marvelled at her persistent silence, but when he questioned her regarding this, she told him of her former friendship with the two lodging-house harpies.

Even after she had given this information, she could not get them out of her mind.

"Still thinking about your old friends?" he asked, as he stood by her carriage door at Liverpool Street.

"Yes."

"Don't let it bother you. One's enough troubles of one's own without worrying about other people's."

" I was wondering if I had changed in the same way," she smiled.

" You ? "

" Yes."

" Are you serious ? "

" Perhaps."

" Shall I tell you how you appear to me ? " he asked earnestly.

She did not reply, at which he said :

" As I expected to find you after all these years. The Jeannie I loved ; the tender, ever beautiful Jeannie I'd have given my life for."

His words persisted in filling her mind, not only during the tedious journey home, but until she fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXVII

"PYRACANTHA" AGAIN

TITTERTON's suggestion with regard to keeping back Joey's cheque for the dress suit had, to Jeannie's unconcealed delight, the desired effect, he arriving unexpectedly one morning about twelve.

Titterton was with Jeannie (he had called every day since their meeting in the tea-shop) and he had been telling her how he was occupying much of the spare time he had on his hands.

He had taken up the study of recent European history, and had brought with him to read in the train a volume of Busch's *Life of Bismarck*.

She had asked him why he had selected this subject, at which he had replied :

"Who knows! One of these days, I may go in for politics. If I do, I'll make some of them 'sit up.'"

"Indeed!" she had smiled.

"By telling 'em a few home truths of the danger the country is in."

Any explanation of what was in his mind was prevented by Joey's arrival.

He came in a cab, at which Jeannie hastened to the gate to greet him; it seemed to Titterton, who was watching from the window, that the young man was not in the best of tempers, which indeed was the case.

The driver carried his bag into the hall; after Jeannie had paid him, she came into the room with her son, when the latter was astonished at finding a man in the house.

Jeannie explained to Joey who Titterton was and how

she had met him again ; before the two men shook hands, each swiftly appraised the other.

" I am glad to see you, dearest," exclaimed Jeannie, whose face was aglow with gladness.

" That's all right," declared Joey off-handedly.

" I didn't expect you nearly so soon."

" You didn't write, so I had to come."

" What sort of a time have you had in London ? "

" Rotten."

" I am sorry."

" And you know whom I have to thank. Couldn't go anywhere decent in the evening because I'd nothing to wear."

" Yes, dear, but——"

" And as I was having such a rotten time, I thought the best thing I could do was to come home."

" Complimentary to your mother," remarked Titterton, who was raging at the boy's discourtesy to Jeannie.

Joey glared angrily at him, shrugged his shoulders, and went to the window, where he stood with his back to the others, his hands in his trouser pockets.

" Is all this fuss about that confounded dress suit ? " asked Titterton of Jeannie.

She shook her head as if wishing him to avoid the subject ; ignoring her admonition, he said to Joey :

" If I were your mother, I'd see you to blazes before you had your dress suit."

The young man turned and angrily faced him.

Titterton imperturbably continued :

" And if I were your father, I'd hoof you out of doors till you learned better manners."

" But you're not—see——"

" Which is lucky for you," interrupted Titterton.

" Eh ? "

" Which is lucky for you."

" I don't want any interfering cheek from you, and——"

He stopped short, for Titterton was advancing upon him with more than a suggestion of menace in his bearing.

Jeannie attempted to interfere, but Titterton put her gently on one side before going up to Joey, who, with flushed face, somewhat nervously stood his ground. When the other reached him, he patted him lightly on the shoulder and said :

“ That’s all right. I like to see a youngster who isn’t afraid. Doing anything to-morrow night ? ”

“ Why ? ”

“ Because I want you to dine with me in town.”

“ Eh ? ”

“ We’ll go to the Café Royal, and after we’ll go to the Empire. No theatre for me ; they’re too dull. And after we’ve had supper at the Savoy, I’ll put you up at my hotel.”

The boy looked at his mother with questioning eyes.

“ Go if you want to, dear,” she said, a little distressed at the tale of dissipation which was so unblushingly unfolded. “ Your grandmother isn’t very well. I’ll probably spend the night in Putney.”

“ But I should have to dress,” declared Joey, “ and——”

“ Your mother’s going to let you have a dress suit. And as for to-morrow night, we shall manage somehow,” declared Titterton.

Thus peace was made. It was cemented by Titterton going into the village and buying the three lobsters on sale in the fish shop and making the most wonderful lobster salad for luncheon ; as if this were not enough, he hired a bicycle and insisted on Joey taking him for a ride, when he talked in the most worldly fashion of the best career for the latter to select, a subject that the young man keenly debated.

When Titterton left with his volume of Busch, Joey confided to his mother that “ Her old pal wasn’t half a bad sort,” but for all this admission, he was still suspicious of the other’s intentions.

When Jeannie and Joey got out at Liverpool Street on the following afternoon, they found Titterton impatiently awaiting them ; he, at once, attached himself to Jeannie, and when it became necessary for her to leave him, he was obviously loth to lose sight of her ; before she went, she repeatedly begged him to look after Joey ; she, also, made him promise to ring her up on the telephone at " Pyracantha " on the morrow to tell her how they had got on and to arrange for their return, she intending to remain but one night with her relations.

As she drove through a Putney that was altogether alien to the suburb she had known in her youth, memories of those far-away days crowded thick and fast upon her.

Recollections of her childhood, her ever-dearest Joe, invaded her mind ; she was not at all sorry when the cab drew up at " Pyracantha," when, for all the fact of its having been Edgar's home, the necessity of talking to Mabel, who, for a wonder, was in, for a time diverted her mind from its sorrows.

Although Mabel liked Jeannie for old association's sake, she frankly despised her for her maternal ideals, labelling her as a " cow " woman ; at the same time, she was glad to see her ; she regarded her sister-in-law as one to be easily and immensely shocked with what she believed were her advanced ideas.

Years had not enhanced Mabel's physical parts, which had never been such as to call for remark, she being short, stout, and with a dissatisfied expression.

Jeannie at once asked after her mother-in-law, to learn that she was seriously ill ; although Mabel was communicative enough about herself, or would have been if Jeannie had suffered her egotistical confidences, she was reticent when it was a question of admitting what was amiss with her mother.

Jeannie took the earliest opportunity of going upstairs, when she was shocked at the change that had occurred in Mrs. Baverstock since she had last seen her ; always a

frail-looking woman, she now looked so pitfully weak that it seemed as if the merest puff of wind would blow out the lamp of her life ; she was apparently smaller than ever ; her snow-white hair was symbolical of the holiness of her life.

She received Jeannie in her dressing-gown and apologised for not being more appropriately dressed.

Jeannie made many efforts to find out what was the matter with Mrs. Baverstock, but the latter consistently avoided speaking of herself and was full of inquiries respecting her daughter-in-law and grandson.

Jeannie did not need much encouragement to speak of Joey ; very soon, she was pouring into sympathetic ears her manifold fears respecting Joey's future, more particularly in the light of his recent doings, which she narrated at length.

“ It's youth all over,” declared Mrs. Baverstock, when Jeannie had done. “ It will never listen to those wiser than themselves. It always has been so and doubtless will ever be the same.”

“ I don't want your husband to get hold of him. That would mean he would never do as I wish,” sighed Jeannie.

“ What makes you think he might ? ”

“ He's been down to see him at Salisbury.”

“ He never told me anything about it.”

“ That's what makes me think he's planning something,” complained Jeannie. “ Does he ever mention Joey to you ? ”

“ I've seen so little of Reuben since I've been ill, and when I mention him he changes the subject.”

“ But your husband is fond of him.”

“ Very, dear. And that's what makes me fear,” sighed Mrs. Baverstock.

They were each occupied with their thoughts for awhile ; presently, Mrs. Baverstock said :

“ That's why my illness troubles me so much. If I'd been well enough to come over and see you, we might between us have been able to influence Joey.”

Jeannie made a further effort to discover what was amiss with her mother-in-law, but the latter gently changed the subject.

A little later, they, of one accord, visited Edgar's room, which was unaltered from what it had been when he had used it ; his mother kept the key, which she now only made use of in Jeannie's company.

It was a pilgrimage the latter always dreaded by reason of the acute suffering she experienced when in its familiar precincts ; to-day, however, her apprehensions with regard to Joey and the sick woman she supported prevented her from appreciating to the full the room's dolorous appeal.

Circumstance was not so merciful to Mrs. Baverstock, for, presently, her body trembled with emotion, at which Jeannie sought to comfort her with a caress.

" I shall never get over it—never," moaned the old woman. " And if it is so much to me, what must it be to you ? "

Jeannie pressed her hand and sought to urge her from the room.

" Our children never, never know how much they are to us, what we have done for them, the measure of our love," she added, before she suffered her daughter-in-law to assist her downstairs.

Back in her room, Mrs. Baverstock seemed more disposed to talk of herself, a disposition Jeannie encouraged.

" Sometimes I believe I don't wish to live, wicked as it sounds," she presently said. " Perhaps I should rather say I am reconciled to going when it pleases God*to take me. Things are not what they were, dear, as I dare say you have found for yourself. I may be wrong, foolishly wrong, but the world seems altering for the worse. Women are different to what they were ; instead of living for their dear ones, they only seem to live for self. And books are written and widely read, and things are spoken of openly which would never have been tolerated years ago.

But I'm quite willing to admit that I am in the wrong, and am worn out, and the burden of life is too much for me, and that there is nothing wrong with all the new things one reads about. But, apart from all that, I should like to see my boy's boy settled safely from temptation in the calling we wish him to follow.”

Jeannie would not leave the invalid till the last possible moment as she wished the time she spent with Reuben to be as short as possible.

Although Bevill and the wife he had lately married were expected to dinner, they had not yet arrived when she entered the drawing-room at a few minutes to eight and found the master of the house standing with his back to the fire.

His appearance was now so remarkable that, were she not acquainted with his personality, it would have given her something of a shock.

Reuben was now quite bald save for a fringe of hair about the lower part of his head; this should have been white but had been indifferently dyed black. His face was covered with a network of tiny wrinkles, while unwholesome-looking pouches bagged beneath eyes which still looked from beneath shaggy eyebrows with a furtive brilliance.

He had a disgustingly large stomach; otherwise, his limbs seemed to have shrivelled.

Dressed for dinner to welcome his relation, he looked like a very old, very wary bird of prey who, for unnumbered years, had cunningly evaded his many enemies and continually gorged himself to repletion on a variety of loathsome foods.

His eyes were glued to Jeannie, who had never quite lost her awe of her father-in-law, directly he saw her; he greeted her by saying:

“Ah! My ever-sweet-Jeannie! Would we were dining alone!”

“Don't you want to see Bevill and his wife?”

Ignoring her question, he went on:

"It would be May and December, but what matter ! Although May would be bored, the heart of December would be gladdened."

"What nonsense ! More like October and December," remarked Jeannie.

"The nearer the better," he declared unblushingly.

"I have been all the afternoon upstairs," she said, eager to change the subject, and at the same time discover Mrs. Baverstock's ailment.

"Terrible ! Terrible !"

"Is it so bad as that ?" asked an alarmed Jeannie.

"Didn't Mabel tell you ?"

"No. What is it ?"

"The very worst that could befall any one. There was talk of an operation, but the specialists feared it would be too much for her."

"Is it a growth ?" fearfully asked Jeannie.

"Yes. Don't ask me any more. It's too dreadful even to think about."

Here, he theatrically waved his arms as if eager to dismiss from his mind a dread matter which threatened to lessen his vitality.

Jeannie ignored this desire as she asked :

"Does she know ?"

"No, thank Heaven."

"Are you sure ?"

"Night and morning she thanks God it is not what we know it to be."

Although for the remaining minutes they were together Reuben sought to make himself agreeable to Jeannie, she replied to his sallies with absent-minded monosyllables ; her thoughts were with the little old woman upstairs who had been sentenced to a cruel death.

Having, largely for Joey's sake, cultivated a devout habit of mind, she had accepted the facts of life as divinely ordained.

Now, she insistently asked herself what good purpose

could be served by mercilessly inflicting such brutal agony upon a pathetically frail woman whose long life had been crowded with tender thought for others.

No answer being forthcoming, she fell to raging inwardly, which emotion was interrupted by the arrival of Bevill and his wife, Evangeline, the latter of whom she had met before.

Although Evangeline was the only daughter of a well-to-do turtle merchant, there were none of the suggestions evoked by her father's occupation in her appearance, she being a tall, scraggy, ungainly woman with a long, lean neck.

She was, also, plain with boiled green eyes, but by way of compensating for these defects she affected enthusiasm for what she called the colour in life and nature.

She did not look very clean ; her hair was untidily done ; she had seemingly thrown a costly Liberty frock over her lathe-like figure.

Hardly had she sat down to dinner when she violently started, before gazing as if enthralled at the daffodils, decorating the table, a proceeding that considerably disconcerted old Baverstock, who latterly suffered from nerves.

Several times during the meal she, when least expected, repeated this performance with regard to any and every thing which attracted her attention ; it was obvious to Jeannie that the woman's antics interfered with her father-in-law's enjoyment of his food.

Bevill, being lost in admiration of his wife, said next to nothing, consequently, until the wine ultimately reached the colour enthusiast's head and unloosed her tongue, the conversation was chiefly between Reuben and Jeannie.

When Evangeline joined in, she talked a jargon of Christian science, declaring at length that pain and sorrow did not exist, being but figments of a sick imagination.

As Evangeline spoke, an unusual thing happened to ordinarily tranquil-minded Jeannie ; she briefly thought

of the sufferer upstairs, of the pains both physical and mental she, herself, had known ; then, in the twinkling of an eye, she was filled with scarcely controllable rage against one whom she regarded as a posing scarecrow, who had had no experience of life comparable to hers.

Her anger lasted till she left the dining-room, when, disregarding Evangeline and Mabel, who had come in late to dinner, she hastened upstairs to Mrs. Baverstock.

The latter was now in the big double bed, where, in the spread of sheet and counterpane, she looked, in her diminutive isolation, a being of infinite pathos.

Jeannie remained with her till she, herself, went to bed ; her concern for the doomed woman's extremity was such that her mind was only at intervals concerned with her boy.

The next morning, Jeannie remained with the sufferer till she was summoned to the telephone to speak to Joey, who told his anxious mother how he had had the best of times with Titterton ; he, also, arranged to meet her at Charing Cross (underground) railway station at one o'clock in order to take her home.

Reuben having gone to the City, she would have preferred Joey to call for her at " Pyracantha," and at the same time see his grandmother, but as he did not wish to come so far she fell in with his wishes.

Jeannie took a tender farewell of her mother-in-law, promising to come soon and often, and set out for Charing Cross station with some approach to a light heart, in the hope of shortly seeing Joey.

Arrived at the place of meeting, disappointment awaited her, a heavy-eyed Titterton, who was pacing up and down outside the station, informing her that Joey had suddenly made up his mind to visit the friends he had been staying with, and had not the least idea when he would return home.

Jeannie concealed her chagrin as well as she was able, and asked :

" What sort of a time did you have last night ? "

“ All right.”

“ Did Joey enjoy himself ? ”

“ Rather.”

“ You looked after him ? ”

“ You can trust me for that,” replied Titterton, who, as he escorted Jeannie to where they could have luncheon, gave her a short account of the evening’s doings.

What he did not tell her was that he had enjoyed himself quite as much as Joey, having let himself go ; he had drunk more than was good for him and, to his companion’s delight, had shown a man who picked a quarrel with him how hard he could hit.

They did not say very much while they ate, or on the way home, Jeannie being depressed by reason of Joey’s defection and consequently discouraging conversation.

He accompanied her indoors where, after she had taken off her things and come downstairs, he sat intently regarding her.

She addressed one or two remarks to which he did not reply ; she then saw he was violently trembling.

“ What is the matter ? ” she asked.

“ You.”

She looked at him with questioning eyes, at which he went on :

“ You, you. I have never forgotten you, but since I have found you are free, I’ve allowed you to get in my blood.”

“ You mean——”

“ What else than you are to be mine after all : that——”

His agitation was such that he was unable to complete his sentence.

She had risen at his avowal, but she now sat as if lost in pained thought.

His words disturbed her not a little, but even as she strove to realise their full import, there came into her mind a vision of a tumbledown, old-world cottage before which was a level stretch of meadow ; a stream wound through this, its course being apparently staked out by

pollard willows, and, beyond, the ground fell away to where the river, like a great grey serpent, wound from London to the sea.

It was in this place that she had moved and had her being in the magic atmosphere engendered by the loved one's presence.

"Well?" he said, when he could no longer bear the suspense.

The emotion begotten of these memories was such that she could not trust herself to speak.

Instead, she shook her head, at which, without saying a word, he came over and kissed her hair before leaving the house.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TITTERTON SPEAKS HIS MIND

ALTHOUGH Jeannie had refused Titterton, his declaration of love had unlooked-for consequences so far as she was concerned.

Almost in spite of herself, she found herself taking more than a passing interest in her appearance, worrying for no reason at all about her figure and complexion ; she ordered some almost gay and very becoming frocks ; infrequent grey hairs were no longer discernible in her head.

More significant, however, were the mental changes Jeannie knew, of which her little vanities concerning frocks and frills, and anxieties respecting grey hairs were the outward and visible sign.

Titterton's friendship had of itself disturbed the placid stream of her uneventful life, and had already half-awakened her to the existence of unsuspected deeps and currents.

Save for her abiding love for Joey, she had believed herself immune from strong emotion ; her sudden wrath with Evangeline at her father-in-law's dinner-table had been a symptom of what was toward in her being.

Titterton's love avowal had rudely shattered her remaining self-complacency with regard to her permanent escape from the eternal capacity for loving of the desirable female.

The fact of Joey having returned home, and of his at least listening to her admonitions respecting his future, enabled her mind to occupy itself fully with the sex obsession which had invaded it.

Often, she was assailed by an insidious suggestion which urged that she was a fool to give so much thought to Joey,

she having a duty she owed her still alluring self; that the days of her comeliness being numbered, it would be madness not to gather the roses while she yet might.

For all that these insinuations frightened her, she, so far as it was possible, avoided looking at Edgar's photograph.

When free from the attacks, she wondered at their manifestations; she did not know that, when subject to them, she was but obeying an instinct of nature which impels middle-aged women, and men for that matter, to experience once more the joys and pains of love.

She often thought of Titterton, who, for all that she had refused him, was still constantly about her, when he made no reference to what had occurred on reaching home from Putney.

Perplexed by her feelings for her admirer, anxious to discover how much or how little she cared for him, she, one day, when assailed by the promptings of her blood, compared the sentiment he had excited with her old-time passion for her husband, to discover that the two emotions were not remotely comparable.

She had adored Edgar while, so far as she could see at present, she had something between a warm friendship, begotten of old acquaintance, and a supremely tender regard for the man who wished to marry her.

If it did nothing else, the comparison told her that never again, if she lived to the age of a thousand, would she care for another man as she had loved Edgar.

Then, certain words of her husband recurred to her, when he had told her that in all love affairs there is one who loves while the other is loved.

She had worshipped Edgar with every fibre in her being, and she had many times asked herself in the old days if she were the lover, he the beloved.

Whether or not this were so, there was no denying the existence of this situation where Titterton was concerned.

At the same time, she was pleased when he was with her, fretful if she fancied he neglected her.

For all these conflicting prepossessions, she made a point of going to "Pyracantha" as often as possible in order to comfort her failing mother-in-law with her sympathy.

Then a day came when her searchings of spirit were as forgotten as if they had never been.

This obliviousness to their existence was caused by Joey, who casually announced to his mother that, at his grandfather's urgent request, he was going into business in Reuben's firm and was commencing work on the morrow.

To his mother's entreaties, protestations, reproaches, the boy was exasperatingly indifferent.

As a last resource, she begged him to delay the matter a week in order that they might consider the matter in all its bearings; upon his proving obdurate, she telephoned to Titterton at his hotel to learn that he had gone out half an hour back.

She was despairingly wondering if he were bound for her house, when she saw him come in at the gate.

To her consternation, Titterton sided with Joey, telling her that in preferring business to the Church, the boy showed enterprise of which she should be proud.

Their divergence of opinion almost led to a rupture; when he left her, she believed she was the most badly used woman in the world.

This was not the sum of her troubles so far as Joey was concerned.

The first day he returned from work he read a paper during tea, and replied to her many questions concerning his duties with evasive monosyllables; when this was over, he changed into his bicycling things and made ready his bicycle, at which she asked him if he would be in for dinner.

"Haven't the least idea," he told her as he rode away.

He did not come back till late, when he ate what had been put by for him in silence; then, he perfunctorily kissed her before betaking himself to bed.

The two following evenings he did not come home till late and nearly drove her to distraction with fearing what had befallen him.

On the morning after the second occasion, she summoned her resolution and sharply reprimanded him for his behaviour, when he coldly told her that "If he couldn't do as he pleased, he'd 'turn up' home and go into 'digs' in London."

This threat completely routed Jeannie; she wept bitter tears directly he left home; she refused to be comforted by Titterton, who arrived soon after Joey's departure.

The two following evenings he was back in time for dinner; the third morning after their dispute, she said:

"Will you be back to-night, dear?"

"Why?"

"We are asked to the Trills'. I was hoping you would come."

"Titterton going?" asked the boy, as he intently regarded his mother.

"Yes. Why?"

"He's all right; you needn't get red, mater."

"Don't be absurd," replied Jeannie, who was flushing in spite of herself. "I was hoping you were coming. I like to have you with me, and I want you to be friends with Ernest."

"Thanks. But I can't stick Radicals."

"Joey!"

"Look at them. You should hear what Pengelly says about them."

"I wasn't aware he was a person whose opinion was to be deferred to."

"Don't you believe it, mater. Pengelly's all there. And what he doesn't know about girls isn't worth knowing!"

She would have protested against his friendship with Pengelly, but had learned from experience how opposition confirmed Joey in anything on which he had made up his mind.

"Anyway, if I'm not back in time to go with you, as likely as not I'll come on later," declared Joey, and there the matter rested.

When, at something after eight, Jeannie, who had been escorted by the ever-faithful Titterton, sat in the Trills' drawing-room, Joey was not present, although every time the door opened his mother anxiously looked to see if he had arrived.

The evening to which she had been asked was an indulgence her host sometimes permitted himself when he invited a few friends of like political convictions to his own : music alternated with serious conversation.

The half-dozen men guests seemed all of a piece, being bald, rather fatuously earnest men who were arrant vegetarians ; their spare time was devoted to what they called "social reform" ; so far as Jeannie could gather, their chief predilection appeared to be the abusing and passionate misrepresentation of their political opponents, to whom they could not allow a worthy motive.

One or two of their women folk were also vegetarians and looked it, but three or four more were surprisingly well turned out.

It was on these, as well as Jeannie, that old Jackson kept his eye ; he had a liberal supply of half-sheets of paper at his elbow, while now and again he furtively patted his fat fox-terrier friend, which, asleep under the table, was not supposed to be in the room.

Directly Jeannie had arrived, Titterton, who was by a long way the manliest male present, was monopolised by a scented and more than commonly sleek-looking Mrs. Trill ; to Jeannie's annoyance, her friend appeared to appreciate greatly his attractive companion.

For all her preoccupations, Jeannie noticed an atmosphere of anticipation about the gathering which was explained by Trill, who, sitting by her, was curious to know why he had seen nothing of Joey ; also, to learn what she thought of the Poor Law Minority Report.

It appeared that a Mr. Pidduck was expected ; he had been a delegate to some International Peace Association which had been meeting in Switzerland ; most of those present were eager to learn his impressions of the recent progress of the movement.

While Jeannie gave Trill indifferent attention, the voice of a rather severe-looking, elderly woman, who wore some beautiful lace, impinged on her ears. The latter was a Mrs. Craig ; she was confidently, sentimentally looking forward to the millennium of peace ; she argued that since England and France had recently made friends, the same desirable consummation would speedily be effected between the former country and Germany.

Trill had barely left Jeannie's side to accompany one of the nicer-looking women in a song when the guest of honour was announced, at which music was temporarily abandoned.

Jeannie was rather surprised at seeing that Pidduck was a handsome, rather distinguished-looking man with keen blue eyes ; he had an authoritative voice and wore very big boots, yet, for all his good looks, there was something about him that convinced her he had left a black soft felt hat in the hall.

Directly he arrived, the more ardent politicians crowded about him when he expressed particular gratification at the fact of a German delegate having assured him that the very last thing his country was thinking of was war with this country.

"What's he saying ?" asked Jackson suddenly.

His son-in-law briefly conveyed the good news on a half-sheet of paper.

"H'm ! What's Germany building thirty-two *Dreadnoughts* and ten Dreadnought cruisers for ?" asked Jackson, valiantly ignoring Trill's frowns.

Pidduck explained how Germany was making herself bankrupt in the process ; when this information was given to Jackson, he said :

"Nations don't run such risks for nothing."

With one accord, Pidduck, Trill, and most of the others set about proving to their own satisfaction the absurdity of Jackson's remarks, the fact of his being unable to hear what they were saying exasperating them and making them irritable and voluble.

As the matter discussed held no interest for Jeannie, she kept an eye on Titterton, when she was pleased to see that he now all but ignored the woman at his side and was absorbed in the political discussion.

There was more than a suggestion of antagonism in his manner to the views propounded; perhaps the others realised his dissent for they presently addressed their remarks to him.

"This is a friend of Mrs. Baverstock's," explained Trill. "I understand he's been a good deal abroad."

"And in Canada," added Jeannie.

Rather to her surprise, Titterton vouchsafed no acknowledgment of this informal introduction; as one possessed, he stared with wide-open eyes and lips slightly parted at Pidduck, who was now announcing his intention of going on a lecturing tour in support of his convictions.

"What I shall advocate is disarmament," he began.

Titterton started, at which Pidduck continued as if arguing with him: "I admit England has already given a praiseworthy earnest of our intentions, but they have been misconstrued. We must go one better this time and prove to the world with no uncertain voice our pacific convictions. As a beginning, I would suggest that the home fleet be dis——"

He got no further. Titterton, his face aglow with passion, had sprung to his feet, as he cried:

"Are you all mad?"

"Sir!" from Pidduck.

"You must be, or you wouldn't talk like that."

"Like what?"

Titterton ignored the question and continued:

"Here we have the finest heritage the world has seen,

and because you're insensible of its value and others want it, and are straining every nerve to win it, you, and others of the same opinion, whine about disarmament ! ”

Pidduck, for the moment, was too taken aback by the other's vehemence to reply : he merely spluttered in astonishment at being so unexpectedly flouted. Titterton, possessed by his subject, went on :

“ As Mrs. Baverstock told you, I have been a lot abroad, particularly on the Continent. There, I have mixed with all sorts and conditions, and what is the burden of their conversation outside Germany ? I will tell you. ‘ What fools you English are,’ they say, ‘ not to have done to Germany what she would have done to you were your relative positions reversed. But now it is too late.’ That is what they say, and, instead of our uniting to meet the greatest danger which has ever menaced this country, we are quarrelling among ourselves, and the most futile are preaching disarmament.”

“ You are one of the misguided ones,” declared Pidduck, with a superior smile. “ If you would go into the matter——”

“ And never forget the German Emperor positively rushed to the death-bed of the late Queen ! ” interrupted sentimental Mrs. Craig.

“ I don't forget that. Neither do I forget the Germans are straining every nerve to catch us up while they're doing their best to blind us as to their intentions. And who can blame them ? They know what they want, and take the shortest cut to get there. I only want you to help prevent its coming off.”

Jeannie, so far as her distress at Joey's continued absence would permit, was somewhat disturbed at the discussion that had broken out ; since the friend she had brought had been the cause, she wondered if she were responsible for the untoward happening.

Then she was aware of the impressive figure Titterton made while combating his opponents : his convictions

seemed to endow him with stature while his face was aglow with missionary zeal.

Next she noticed (and this did not please her at all) that Mrs. Trill was watching him with undiluted admiration in her fine eyes.

Soon, however, Jeannie was all but incapable of observing anything definite, her senses being nearly overborne by the hubbub that arose: every one appeared to be speaking at once in the endeavour to crush an heretical opinion, while Trill was so excited at the uproar that he was anywhere and everywhere, helplessly wringing his hands.

Jeannie also perceived that old Jackson took advantage of the confusion to pet openly his dog.

Her attention was diverted from Jackson by a discussion concerning the prospective battleships built and building for England and Germany. Most of those present flatly contradicted one another with respect to these; one authority, who suffered from acute indigestion and looked it, after making notes on one of Jackson's half-sheets of paper, excitedly thrust this into any one's face, irrespective of his or her opinion.

Pidduck vainly strove for a hearing; at last, despairing of making himself heard, he sat by Jeannie and insisted upon his point of view.

For her part, she felt the room was going round, but she would have cheerfully borne the discomfort if only Joey had put in an appearance.

Finally, Titterton, by sheer physical persistence, dominated the gathering; although he was suffered to proceed, his opponents occasionally interjected adverse remarks or made petulant gestures of protest.

"It isn't at all a question of building battleships," said Titterton, "important as these are. It's a question of national education and responsibility. Here, there is no thought of what I can do for my country; it's only what **can** I get out of it. We are too lazy, too rich, and too fat,

and too cowardly to do what men of other nations are proud to perform."

"And what might that be?" asked Pidduck.

"National service. This is England. Germany is gladly enduring the sacrifices necessary to build a great fleet: behind this is an army of seven million trained men——"

"Don't talk of soldiers. The sight of a regiment of soldiers makes me positively ill," declared one of the more attractive-looking socialists.

"I'll come to that directly," replied Titterton. "This great German nation is educated in the belief that to die gladly for the Fatherland is a German's first duty. From top to bottom the nation is organised on a scientific basis. It is disciplined to an extent to which we have no conception, and do you mean to say that a country whose precept and practice is blood and iron will not ultimately prevail against an undisciplined lot such as we are, who are ruled by flabby sentiment? Just think of it! In a world ruled by ruthless law, the folly of opposing sentiment to blood and iron! That a nation (assuming we were all like that) which hates the sight of soldiers marching, can stand against one where a uniform is revered as a symbol of duty!"

Objections were made to his assertion; heedless of these, he went on:

"Our country, as a whole, is run on unscientific, un-businesslike lines: it is obsessed by the curse of sentimentality. In this very village this afternoon I met a procession of some sixty or seventy lunatics with keepers, all kept in useless idleness at the public expense.

"Any healthy-minded community would put them painlessly out of existence, but we—— And it's the same in everything else. Hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent every year in hospitals in coddling the unfit, in keeping alive people nature intended to die. And it doesn't end there. These weaklings marry and multiply, and thus add immensely

to the sum of the world's misery, which is enough without their assistance, God knows."

He continued talking; as Jeannie listened, a half-sheet of paper was thrust under her nose on which Jackson had written:

"What's he saying?"

She took the proffered pencil and told him, at which he whispered.

"Is he a socialist?"

"Strong Imperialist," she wrote, at which the old man was hard put to it to restrain his delight.

Meantime, Titterton, undeterred by frequent interruptions, went on:

"I have been away for many years and it may interest you to know how I find home on my return. Most things seem to be going wrong, particularly the great increase in wealth on one hand, and in hideous debasing poverty on the other."

For once, the socialists were in agreement. He continued:

"Apart from that, there seems a different spirit abroad: one can't open an illustrated paper without seeing pages of photographs of third-rate actresses and such-like people. These poor creatures live by advertisement, one knows and one can't blame them for exhibiting as much of their pretty persons as they dare. But it doesn't end there. It wouldn't matter so much if it did. But now the great world of society seems to have caught the craze for publicity; side by side with the actresses are snapshots of those, who ought to know better, in intimate phases of life."

Jeannie's attention was diverted by Jackson's enthusiasm for the speaker, although he could not hear a word of what was said.

Jackson, however, was soon repressed by Trill's frowns, at which Jeannie again listened to Titterton.

"In Germany, the army is with all classes the most popular subject of conversation. Here, all our working men care about is betting on races they never see and

talking professional football. If that isn't a symptom of decadence, I don't know what is.

"And there's another thing: owing to our criminal indifference to agriculture, thousands of the best Englishmen are emigrating to countries which aren't so short-sighted, and their place is taken by the alien who has no patriotism and an inferior standard of living.

"Yesterday, I passed down streets in the East End where there were no English names over the shops, and where a foreign language was spoken. All these aliens have ruined Englishmen by the thousand; I hear they only deal among themselves, and in the event of international trouble, they would be a hindrance instead of a help."

After characteristic protests from his opponents, he said:

"I've almost done, and then you can all jump on me.

"What I complain of in you anti-everythings is that you're no sportsmen. I see in the papers that one of the Imperial pioneers, who has been recently lecturing, lost his sight in the war. One would think that that fact would alone entitle him to a respectful hearing. Not a bit of it! He was howled at and execrated as if he were a cowardly murderer instead of a hero."

He paused for very breath, at which a cultured socialism was advocated as a remedy for the country's ills.

For a moment, Titterton ignored this suggestion, as he said:

"And the pity of it is that the nation is sound at heart. Only yesterday I read in the paper of a master mariner who, for all that he lost his rudder in a storm, safely manœuvred his ship into port. We want more men like that: more men who can drop a shell into an enemy's battleship at a range of four miles. And such men should be honoured as they deserve to be honoured.

"You mentioned socialism, which after all said and done means subsidising the unfit. In my humble opinion,

what we want to put us right is a Man : one who will ask us why every German schoolboy is educated to the idea that the destruction of the British Empire is a sacred duty ; who will convince us that, if the German Navy were at the bottom of the sea, it would mean a hundred years of European peace."

" We are never likely to see the perpetration of such a crime," said Pidduck, while most of the others were aghast at such a suggestion.

" I'm afraid not," sighed Titterton. " But whatever calamities overtake this country, we have the satisfaction of knowing the German Emperor hurried to the death-bed of the late Queen."

The entrance of the refreshments occasioned a truce and brought the fat terrier from beneath the table.

Considering the heated discussion, the rest of the evening was fairly successful, although Jeannie would have been happier if Joey had come, and if Mrs. Trill had not gone out of her way to make a fuss of Titterton.

Such was her annoyance, that she would have much preferred Titterton to talk of herself on the way home instead of harping on politics as he did.

" I felt dreadfully old to-night," said Jeannie. " Didn't I look it ? "

" Eh ? That would be impossible," replied Titterton absently ; he was still possessed by his subject. " Our mistake was in sitting tight when Germany took Schleswig-Holstein. In international affairs, deferred obligations accumulate at heavy compound interest. But what can you expect of a nation that is besotted enough to allow foreign pilots to ply on our rivers ? "

" I wonder if Joey will be in when we get back," said Jeannie anxiously.

" All those chaps we met to-night are incurable sentimentalists. They believe the world is what they would like it to be."

" I'm afraid I don't trouble much about politics,"

remarked Jeannie, as she quickened her steps in the direction of the house, where she devoutly hoped to find Joey awaiting her return.

"At heart they're cowards," continued Titterton. "They don't want to fight and they veneer their cowardice with fine phrases."

When Jeannie anxiously entered the house, there was no sign of Joey; inquiry of Ethel told her that he had not arrived in her absence.

"He'll turn up sometime," said Titterton reassuringly. "I shall probably meet him on the way to the station."

"Must you go now?"

"In ten minutes. Then I shall have to run."

She sat helplessly with her eyes on the hands of the grandfather clock, at which he looked at her curiously before saying:

"It reminds me——"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, as he hesitated.

"Never mind."

"But I wish to know," she cried, with a pretty petulance. "Tell me."

"It reminds me of how Joe used to wait in the hope of hearing from you when you were married."

She started violently before saying:

"My father?"

"I shouldn't have told you."

"I don't understand."

"I haven't a moment to spare," he said, as he made for the door.

"But——"

"Good-night."

She called to him, but he did not come back.

She was alone with the thoughts begotten of his remark.

CHAPTER XXIX

REVELATION

" You remember what you said the other night ? "

" What about ? "

" My father."

" I hoped you'd forgotten."

" I've thought of it ever since."

" What do you wish to know ? " asked Titterton reluctantly.

Jeannie was on her way to visit her mother-in-law at Putney ; she was accompanied by her faithful friend, and had taken particular pains with her appearance for his behoof ; the exacting vanity of the woman of forty was in some measure appeased at noticing the frequency with which his eyes sought her person.

" You said my worrying about Joey reminded you of Joe's anxiety to hear of me when I was married ! "

" Did I ? " asked Titterton, who, by way of changing the subject, added : " What time did Joey get back last night ? "

" Not so very late. Did father worry very much about me ? "

" You really wish to know ? "

" Yes."

At the same time, she placed a hand upon his arm and gave him an appealing glance.

" It will only pain you if I tell you."

" It is my duty to know."

In as few words as possible, in order to lessen the shock of his information, he told her how he had seen much of

Joe before his departure for Canada, and had divined that he (Joe) was breaking his heart on account of his daughter's neglect.

"Why didn't you tell me at the time?" asked Jeannie.

"I wonder what you would have said if I had!"

"Did Joe ever tell you this?"

"Not in so many words."

"You don't think he had anything else on his mind—something he didn't tell you about which made you think he was worrying about me?"

"Of course, it may have been that."

"And it was such a long time ago: nearly twenty years. Your memory mayn't be very accurate!" suggested Jeannie, eager to clutch at any straw that offered.

"I admit that," he said, being only too willing to assist her escape from self-reproach.

Although Jeannie had been deeply distressed at her father's death, Edgar's illness and departure for South Africa, which had followed close on the heels of that dread event, had blunted the edge of her grief at Joe's demise.

The months of anxiety and suspense, which were hers during Edgar's absence, had prevented her from realising her father's loss; her husband's death had more than contributed to this consummation.

The lesser grief had been absorbed in the greater, and during the years she had devoted herself to Joey's upbringing, she was reluctant to dwell on anything pertaining to Joe in order to concentrate all her energies on the task she had set herself.

Memories of her father frequently invaded her mind, but she involuntarily drew a veil over any behaviour of hers in which she might have adjudged herself wanting.

She had small compunction in doing this; she believed she had endured so much that she was entitled, if it were possible, to avoid further suffering.

Titterton's remark when they had come back from the

Trills' had lifted the curtain that concealed her more flagrant conduct to her father: the glimpse she had obtained had unsettled her to such an extent that she resolved to question Titterton on the first opportunity.

Now, although the little she had wrung from him confirmed her fears, she still sought to evade the conclusion to which his information pointed.

From sheer force of habit, her mind strove to be interested in anything alien to this preoccupation, consequently, when Titterton, divining the trend of her thoughts, assisted her by changing the subject to Joey, she eagerly availed herself of the opportunity provided.

"What time do you expect Joey back?" he asked.

"He never tells me when he's coming home."

"I suppose you are going back to-night?"

"Oh yes. Are you coming to meet me?"

"No," he replied decidedly.

"Not?" she exclaimed, in surprise.

"I've been seeing too much of you as it is."

She looked at him in astonishment, at which he added, as if to qualify what he had said: "For my peace of mind. I had never forgotten the Jeannie I loved, and when I came back I made up my mind to find out what had become of you. When you told me you were free, it all seemed perfectly straightforward until—— But it's only making it worse seeing you as I do. And that is why it's to come to an end."

She started in spite of herself. He went on:

"I wanted to tell you this before, but couldn't bring myself to. Sometimes one has less pluck than at other times."

"What are you going to do?" she asked, with something of an effort.

"Go back to Canada. You're the only thing that attracts me here. And since——"

"When?" she interrupted.

"I don't know; probably soon."

An awkward silence ensued during which Jeannie

endeavoured to appraise her emotions at learning Titterton's intention.

Presently, he said :

" I know you don't care a hang about me, and all you think of is Joey, so while we're together, we'd better talk about him."

" But——"

" I wish it," he declared firmly.

For once, she did not respond to his invitation to speak of her boy ; she was disposed to be interested in Titterton, but, discovering he was obdurate, she said :

" What do you wish to know ? "

" Going on all right ? " he asked.

" No."

" What's he up to now ? "

" He gets worse and worse. He has letters addressed in common girls' writing."

Titterton concealed a smile as he said reassuringly :

" You needn't worry about that."

She raised her eyes questioningly ; he went on :

" Joey is, to put it mildly, careful with his money. Perhaps you've noticed it ? "

" He was always buying and selling stamps at school."

" I found out he knew the value of money in no time. That sort of boy never comes to grief. He's too careful."

" But he's a friend who is anything but a good influence. His name's Pengelly. Perhaps Joey mentioned him ? "

" More. I've met Master Pengelly."

" What is he really like ? " asked Jeannie quickly. Titterton shook his head.

" Isn't he a fit companion for Joey ? "

" Anything but. But for all that, you needn't worry."

" Why ? "

" He's too much of a coward to be really bad."

Later, when Jeannie left Titterton, she said a little nervously :

" I'll see you before you go back ? "

"I dare say," he moodily replied.

Jeannie arrived at "Pyracantha" with her mind in a turmoil: recollections of Joe were mingled with anxiety for Joey, resentment at Titterton's defection.

Directly she entered the ornate drawing-room, the first person she encountered was Lucy Hibling, whom she had not seen for some weeks. To her surprise, her cousin by marriage had lost the look, to which Joey had referred, of a hopelessly disappointed woman, her drawn, much-lined face being radiant with excitement. Directly she set eyes on Jeannie, she approached her, and said before kissing her:

"Of course, you have heard my good news?"

"I'm afraid I haven't."

"Not? I must tell you. Read this."

Here, she produced from her purse an advertisement cutting from a newspaper which she handed to Jeannie.

It was as follows:

"Wanted, for high-class journal, lady, who frequents West End and knows prominent society people by sight, to write bi-weekly column of chit-chat. Apply, etc."

"I've got it," declared Mrs. Hibling triumphantly, before Jeannie could make any comment. "It's the chance of a lifetime. Don't you congratulate me?"

"Of course!"

"The pay's good, but of course that's nothing. I may actually get to know some of the people I write about as even quite tip-top people are nowadays so keen on seeing their names in print."

"So long as you are pleased, there's nothing to be said," remarked Jeannie.

"Pleased! I'm delighted. It's taken twenty years off my life."

When Jeannie went upstairs, she found her sweet mother-in-law in bed and attended by a nurse.

For all her constantly diminishing vitality, she raised

herself to greet Jeannie tenderly ; after dismissing the nurse, she made many inquiries after her grandson, at which, to spare her feelings, Jeannie deliberately prevaricated.

Presently, when the sufferer lay back exhausted, Jeannie's senses persisted in playing her a sorry trick.

In spite of herself, it seemed that Joe was in the bed, and as he had appeared during his last illness.

She strove to put the impression from her mind, but although she succeeded for awhile, it constantly recurred.

She was so distressed by this phenomenon that she took her leave earlier than she had intended when she made a heavy-hearted journey home.

Ten o'clock that evening found Jeannie alone and disconsolate. Joey had not come back ; she had not the least idea when he would return.

Concern at his absence was mingled with an indefinable emotion on account of Titterton's resolve.

At the back of her mind, and continually growing in force, was an approximation to realising how much her selfishness had contributed to the undoing of her father's health, consequently to his death.

Now and again, she was conscious of the measured beat of the grandfather clock which, as always, was ticking with a magnificent indifference to anything that might be toward.

Apprehension respecting Joey filled her mind, but even as she watched the big hand's steady progress, she was possessed by memories of her father.

Again and again she essayed to put them from her thoughts, but with such poor success that she very soon found herself not only dwelling on reminiscences of the days she had lived at "Laurel" Villa, but pursuing fugitive recollections till they assumed definite shape.

Everything she remembered had one common atmosphere, this, the abiding love and sympathy with which Joe had surrounded his Jeannie.

This distinguishing quality was in the nature of an

immense reproach and relentlessly stirred her conscience into an acute sensibility to her shortcomings where he had been concerned.

In an access of blind remorse, she went to a bureau, which had belonged to Joe; unlocking the drawers that contained many of his belongings, she tenderly examined them.

There were receipts for payments he had methodically kept; memoranda of housekeeping items; the all too few letters she had written to him after her marriage to Edgar; accounts with his stockbroker for the investing of the moneys he had scraped together.

Everything she looked at was a more or less tangible evidence of his love and provision for her.

In putting back the things, her wet eyes perceived that the newspaper covering the bottom of one of the drawers was not flat; she set about ascertaining the cause, which proved to be a largish thin book with covers protected by brown paper.

She opened it, to find it was what was known in the days of her youth as a "Confession Album," a book in which people wrote answers to a string of questions respecting their predilections.

She glanced through its faded pages and found the confessions of romantic Gertrude Stubbs, and other school friends, those of Coop, the Misses Hitch (the sisters extolled honesty as the most seductive virtue), and of herself both before and after knowing Edgar; interspersed with these were three of Joe's written on different occasions.

She smiled grimly at reading her artless preferences and dislikes before her heart had been stirred by love; then, it appeared her ideal of happiness was to go to Ramsgate with Joe.

Edgar and she had later made a "confession" on the same evening when he had written that his favourite name was Jeannie; his greatest delight, to eat sausages she had cooked for supper.

With her future husband looking over her shoulder, she had laughingly set down that her pet aversion was the name of Edgar ; her supreme joy, the prospect of never seeing him again.

Her prepossessions respecting her father prevented her from being moved by this evidence of happier days ; she sought for Joe's confessions, which she eagerly read.

She could have saved herself the effort, one being typical of the rest inasmuch as they all bore naive witness to his single-hearted love for his daughter.

His favourite name was Jeannie ; his greatest delight, to hear her joyous laughter ; his favourite book, thumbed nursery rhymes she had read when a child ; his ambition, to make her happy.

She was staring dully at these pages when it occurred to her that, were her mind free of its present tribulation, and she wrote a " confession " seriously, it would be eloquent of her love for her son.

Thoughts of Joey reminded her how he had not yet come home. She glanced at the clock, to see it was getting on for eleven.

Several times she had told him how she was worried by his prolonged absences, and that she would not mind so much if she knew where he was going and when to expect him back.

He had laughed at her fears ; it was his persistent indifference to these apprehensions which pained her, inasmuch as it told her he did not one whit appreciate her loving devotion.

This conviction, allied to a further realisation of 'Joe's love for her and of her one-time indifference to his affection, filled her heart to overflowing.

Then, in an agony of self-pity, she found herself minutely detailing the innumerable sacrifices she had made for Joey ; the economies she had rigidly practised ; the countless cares and anxieties she had known on his behalf.

She had always planned and striven for his welfare, and

when he had suffered from the most trivial of ailments, she had worn herself out with ceaseless ministrations.

He had been her one concern and interest in life ; her very all.

Joyously, and at a moment's notice, she would have given her life for him.

But even as she dwelt on these things, her senses again played her a sorry trick.

As, when she had stood at her mother-in-law's bedside earlier in the day, Jeannie had persistently seen Joe stretched in the bed, as he had appeared during his last illness, so now, while she thought of all she had done for Joey, it seemed she had changed places with her father and was suffering solely by reason of her own conduct to him.

She essayed to put the impression from her mind, but with such indifferent success that, at last, she miserably surrendered to its domination.

With what a surpassing tenderness he loved his pretty, graceful daughter, and how indifferently she treated this devotion, being selfishly absorbed in her passion for the man who was to be her husband.

He wondered if, when she had a child of her own, her heart would soften to her loving father.

Then, it was as if she were enduring all the unnumbered griefs, anxieties, and tribulations he had known on his Jeannie's account ; the tale of suffering was so formidable and so persistent that it seemed as if an interminable procession of pain were pouring through her being.

Next, when he was ill, he prayed long and fervently he should see her before he died.

Finally, he had recovered consciousness and found her asleep when she should have been awake.

Although he had felt his end was near, and although he ached to hear her voice once more, he forbore to awaken her, and for fear she should take cold, he had exhausted his remaining strength in putting the first handy thing about her shoulders.

These impressions left her dry-eyed, trembling, inert ; she would have given much to ease her pain in tears.

The striking of the grandfather impinged on her agony of mind, and made her start violently.

She looked with terrified eyes at the clock, which continued ticking with characteristic indifference to her remorse for her behaviour to her father ; her concern for Joey.

Then, as she listened to its beat, and was distraught by reason of her son's being out so late, it occurred to her how often her father must have sat listening to the clock's ticking while waiting with weary heart for the daughter who never came.

Suddenly, her eyes were opened.

As she had treated her father, so her son behaved to her.

And she knew from all she had seen and heard and read that such ungrateful conduct on the part of children to parents was deplorably common, indeed, the persistence with which children neglected to appreciate loving fathers and mothers stopped little short of making their remissness attain the dignity of a natural law.

If this were true, it followed that the sufferings that were hers were the inevitable fate of many fond parents, although, with the abiding egotism of the human unit, she was confident that the pangs others endured in a like extremity were not comparable to hers.

A little later, she found herself wondering if, when selfish children grew up and had families of their own, a day came, as in her case, when they were supremely remorseful for the pains they had unwittingly inflicted on those who were beyond the reach of the most passionate penitence.

CHAPTER XXX

PILGRIMAGE

"WHAT'S up with you, pretty mater?"

"Why?"

"You look so awfully 'down in the mouth.'"

Jeannie sighed.

"You want bucking up," continued Joey. "You ought to get Titterton to take you to the 'Gaiety.'"

"I don't care for such places."

"Eh?"

"I don't care for such places."

"You ought to see some of the girls. There's one——"

"If you don't hurry, you'll miss your train," she interrupted.

"Good-bye, and take care of yourself," he said, as he kissed her quite affectionately.

"It isn't often you worry about me," she remarked.

"That's all right. I made ten quid yesterday."

"How?"

"A little spec. in rubbers."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Buy for the next account."

When Joey had gone, Jeannie went upstairs and hurriedly dressed for going out: then, she hastened to the station and caught the next train to town.

It was the third day since she had realised the simliarity between Joey's indifference to her and her neglect of her father; that she had been responsible for the shortening of the latter's days.

During the intervening time, she had been weighed down

by a conviction of her many shortcomings ; this was the more potent in her case because she had hitherto laid the flattering unction to her soul that she had led a blameless life.

The awakening that had overtaken her dismally shattered this conviction ; she was overwhelmed by the realisation of her faults, and in an access of humility, she abased herself as one utterly unworthy.

She mentally arrayed herself in sackcloth and put ashes upon her head.

Incidentally, she took a morbid pleasure in going through Joe's belongings, and after tenderly examining them, putting them neatly away, but ready to hand.

The cruet that had belonged to her mother, and which had graced the table on state occasions, was once more brought from the cupboard when, after being tenderly furbished by Jeannie, it decorated the sideboard.

While engaged in this labour of love, she remembered how Edgar had insisted upon the cruet being put away as unfashionable, and how she had prevaricated when Joe had commented on its absence.

Such were her griefs, that, for the time being, she shut her eyes to Joey's selfishness, while Titterton was almost forgotten.

Then, she became so obsessed by her remorse that, by way of making some poor atonement for her behaviour, she resolved to visit the more accessible of the places identified with her father's life.

Some day in the near future she was to sign some papers at her solicitor's relating to her affairs ; she resolved to get this matter settled before commencing the pilgrimage on which she had set her heart.

One spot she had fiercely resolved to avoid, this, " Larksease " ; she felt she could not endure the poignant memories which that place would excite.

She took a motor-bus from Liverpool Street to the Strand, her solicitor's offices being in Lancaster Place ; when she

had completed her business, she turned in the direction of the underground in order to take train to Putney.

A theatre she passed caught her eye when she perceived it was the one her father had frequented in the days of his youth ; from the burlesques played on its board he had been in the habit of quoting.

Careless of what passers-by might think, she stood in the street and gazed with soft eyes at the front of the playhouse.

She wondered how often her father's feet had trodden the vestibule, till she remembered how, being poor, he had frequented gallery or pit.

She asked her way to the entrance to these places and was directed to a side street, where she inspected two closed doors which respectively admitted to the pit and gallery.

Sighing deeply, she resumed her progress to the station, when she perceived through an open door two large frames containing small photographs which were hung on the wall of a passage ; above the door was a lamp on which was painted " stage entrance."

No one being about just then, she made bold to enter when she perceived that beneath the photographs were printed the names of actors and actresses ; some were of those of whom her father had often made mention.

Jeannie eagerly scanned them, to be more than disappointed by their appearance ; for the most part, they suggested to her that they were small tradespeople masquerading in fancy dress, at which she was disposed to be pained that the antics of such folk had amused Joe.

When she realised that they had gladdened his evenings and provided a storehouse of happy reminiscence, she looked at them first with indulgent, then with grateful eyes.

Hearing footsteps approaching from the direction of the stage, she hastened to the station.

When she got out at Putney, she crossed the bridge where memories assailed her mind of Edgar's confession of love after the watchnight service.

She had intended visiting the cemetery where Joe slept

(she had not been there for a considerable time), but resolved to go first to the towpath where he had so often fished and sought wild flowers in her company.

As she had discovered on previous visits to her relations, this had sadly altered since the days of her youth.

The enthusiastic, thirsty anglers had long ago packed up their rods and gone for good ; the boys who had fetched them beer in tin cans had grown up and doubtless forgotten that there was ever an occasional flounder to be caught in the Thames at Putney.

What had been wholesome river-bank was an ugly promenade with railings, framed regulations, and uncomfortable iron seats ; the quarters of the rowing clubs, which had once looked so important in the eyes of little Jeannie, now seemed unimpressive, down-at-heel structures, which spent their days in bewailing their lost prosperity.

She walked on.

The willow bushes, which had made continual wind music for her childish ears, had been ruthlessly cut down, while on the farther side of the river, where there had been acres of wholesome market-gardens, were now the countless houses of mean, yellow-bricked Fulham.

When she came to the streamlike backwater, which ran parallel to the Thames, a further disappointment awaited her, this now being little more than an evil-smelling ditch ; of wild flowers there was not a trace, even the humble stitchwort scorning to bloom in such a place.

Farther on she came to where the backwater widened before flowing beneath a wooden bridge into the river ; instead of noticing how this one-time spread of water had shrunk, Jeannie's thoughts were occupied with Joe as he had appeared when his honest face was aflush with anger at the unsportsmanlike, as he had termed it, behaviour of those who had dammed the stream in order to poach the fish.

She walked on, and came to the great sweep of towpath along which as a little girl she had looked for Joe on his way home from work.

As she went, it seemed that the hand of time was put back, and that any moment she could expect his stuggy, gaitered figure to round the bend, when he would wave his arms frantically before hastening to join her.

She was so overcome by this impression that she looked about her to discover possible distraction from her troubled thoughts.

This was provided by a nest of nursing thrushes which her sharp eyes discerned in a tree overhanging the remains of the backwater. It was evidently mother thrush's turn to forage for worms, for her lord was mounting guard on the edge of the nest.

Words of Joe recurred to her mind, words in which he had told her how a day would come when she would wish to leave her father, even as the nestlings would presently desire to be rid of their parents' supervision.

She had passionately resented this suggestion ; now, she bitterly realised the truth of all he had said.

Other warnings of his came into her mind, particularly that in which he had gently told her of the certainty of trouble.

With the cocksure confidence of youth, she had disregarded his admonition ; but were she to advise Joey now, she would in substance repeat what her father had said.

In the event of her doing so, she was sure he would ignore what she told him, even as she had scarcely heeded Joe.

Jeannie had not heart to go farther ; the stream she had once loved showed signs of drying up ; growths of stinging nettles covered the steep bank down which she used to race her father.

She was, also, convinced that a like disappointment awaited her in the bit of water beyond the soapworks where the boys used to fish for tiddlers with a worm and a piece of thread.

When she retraced her steps, she noticed the tide was coming in.

Suddenly it occurred to her (and the realisation pulled

her up short) that the water had passed within two miles of "Larkslease" before reaching where she now stood.

As it had left a place where she had been supremely happy, to arrive at a spot where she was acutely miserable, it seemed that in so doing it was typical of her life since the days when she had lived and loved at Wicksea.

Quarter of an hour later, she was in a bus and going in the direction of Barnes Common which, in being endeared to her by reason of the many excursions she had once upon a time made there with Joe, was to be another station in her pilgrimage.

She was not in the mood to get out and call on the sufferer at "Pyracantha"; instead, she glanced sympathetically at the window of the room where Mrs. Baverstock lay.

Barnes Common, which, for all its proximity to "Pyracantha," she had not visited for years, provided further disappointment.

The adjacent green fields were heavily burdened with bricks and mortar, and jarred her by presenting unexpected and ugly vistas.

The pond that had contained quantities of the rare water-mussel had been drained and was now covered with trim villas, while search failed to discover the bit of water where Joe had netted the "water-boatman" which had stung his finger.

Half an hour later, she stood before the site of what had once been "Laurel" Villa, the site because with other adjacent houses it had been recently razed; a board announced that "flats would shortly be erected on this desirable situation."

Jeannie had been ignorant of the demolition of the old home, it having long since passed from her possession.

She stood helplessly, while a thousand and one memories of her old home struggled to dominate her mind, before she sadly realised that "Laurel" Villa, together with much

that she associated with the old days, had gone out of her life never to return.

When she got to the cemetery, she was appalled by the great number of tombstones which had made their appearance since her last visit, indeed, since the time when Joe was buried, the place had grown from a hamlet to a crowded city.

As Jeannie sought Joe's resting-place, it occurred to her that this town of the dead had much in common with those inhabited by the living, inasmuch as there were fine central avenues for the rich and well-to-do, lesser places for the middling folk, while a shabby, unwholesome-looking corner was reserved for the poor and needy.

In the old days, the burying-ground had been bounded on three sides by fields ; now, serried ranks of houses had menacingly advanced as near the boundaries as they could get ; it was as if the living were alarmed at the multiplication of the dead and had determined to set limits to their increase.

Jeannie had a little difficulty in finding what she sought ; since her last visit, Joe's resting-place, which was then isolated, had been surrounded by graves : as a further reminder of the passing of the years, the simple headstone was grey and weather-beaten, the lettering had faded, and the railed-in grave was sadly overgrown with weeds.

Its neglected appearance filled Jeannie with self-reproaches ; a few moments later, she had taken off her gloves and was down on her knees tearing out the rank growth with her fingers.

It was a long and arduous business ; even when she had made something of a clearance, there was still much to be done.

After making up her mind what flowers she would bring and plant from the garden at home, her eye caught sight of a familiar name on a stone to the right of Joe's. It was that of Coop, her father's old friend, who, she observed, had died two years ago.

She was deeply touched by this discovery ; also, that he had elected to be in the company of his old friend, which desire was evidence of the esteem in which he had held her father.

Presently, Jeannie found herself wondering if Joe told his stories in the world to which he had gone, and in that event if, as of old, they were greeted with Coop's explosive laughter.

Whether or not this were possible, they had fought the good fight and now rested side by side.

Then Jeannie thought of Joe in his profound sleep, below where she stood, with his magnificent indifference to the anguish in her heart.

Tears fell out of her eyes, while the burden of her thoughts was :

" If only he could know how bitterly, bitterly she grieved for the heartless way she had repaid the unselfish love he had lavished upon her ! "

It was a long time before she could tear herself away she resolved to return with the flowers the very next day.

On the way back, she passed many children, at which it occurred to her what an immense volume of tender love they represented on the part of their respective fathers and mothers.

At the same time, she was, also, fully aware that in the days to come the inherent selfishness of many of these children would lay up an infinity of sorrow for those parents who disinterestedly loved them.

When she reached home about seven, although Joey had not come in, her thoughts were still concerned with her father.

After she had eaten the merest dinner, she surrounded herself with many of his belongings ; now and again, her eye fell on the Sheffield cruets which decorated the sideboard.

One thing she had hitherto forgotten came into her mind, this, how he had stayed on at the Railway Clearing House

when he was entitled to retire, and with the idea of putting by more money for his Jeannie.

She shamefacedly recalled that while he was thus denying himself for her, she, beyond her abiding love for Edgar, had been concerned with social ambitions.

How trivial and meaningless these seemed in the light of her experience of later years.

Apart from her husband, she had had the supreme possession of her father's devotion, but she had disregarded the thing that was above price.

Excepting Edgar, Joe and his love were the outstanding features of her life, and by comparison everything else now seemed flat, stale, and unprofitable.

At the same time, she urged in extenuation of her conduct that she was not altogether to blame.

Youth was synonymous with ignorance in such matters, and due appreciation of the beautiful things in life could only be learned from experience such as hers.

But although she had been incapable of learning the value of a great, unselfish love, it did not alter the brutal fact that Joe was unaware of her immense remorse.

"If only he could know!" was again the burden of her thoughts.

Perhaps, because she had some hope of Joe ultimately divining what was in her heart, was why that night she prayed long and passionately at her bedside that He, in His infinite mercy, might cause long-deaf ears to hearken.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE SEQUEL TO ROMANCE

THREE days later, Jeannie set out from home, when Joey had gone to the City, with a heavy heart. She had again visited the cemetery but, to-day, she was bound on a different errand ; it was undertaken after a conversation she had had with Joey the preceding morning.

The cruet had caught his eye upon the sideboard, at which he had said :

“ Why that ? ”

“ Why not ? ”

“ Bit old-fashioned, isn't it ? ”

“ Indeed ! ” she had coldly remarked.

“ Where did you dig it up ? ”

“ It belonged to my father.”

The suggestion of resentment in her voice made him regard her curiously.

“ What was he ? ”

“ He was in the Railway Clearing House.”

“ The what ? ”

“ The Railway Clearing House.”

“ A clerk ? ”

“ He was the head of a department.”

“ Good Lord ! ”

It was an unfortunate moment for Joey to make such a remark ; Jeannie was possessed by sudden anger as she said :

“ My father was the best man who ever lived. If you don't behave properly to me, you shall speak respectfully of him.”

Joey stared in open-mouthed surprise at this exhibition of wrath in his normally gentle, indulgent mother.

"What on earth's happened?" he asked, when he had got over his first astonishment.

"That I won't have you saying anything against my dear father."

"All right, mater."

"He was perfect."

Joey hung his head to conceal a grin, but Jeannie was too quick for him.

"Why do you laugh?" she asked sharply.

"No man is perfect, pretty mater. That's where your innocence comes in!"

"My father was."

"No doubt to you. But if you'd known everything, I wouldn't mind betting he was just the same as——"

"Stop!"

"Eh?"

"If you say any more, we shall quarrel."

This discussion had taken place at the breakfast table; a little later, when Joey had risen to go, and said "Good-bye, mater," she merely replied:

"Good-bye."

"Don't you want to know what time I'll be back?" he asked in surprise.

"You must please yourself."

"Eh?"

"You usually do, don't you?"

"But——"

"And let me tell you this: however much you neglect me, you'll regret it some day."

"What do you mean?"

"When you marry and have children of your own; go now or you'll have to run," said Jeannie, at which a greatly perplexed Joey took his way to the station.

Jeannie had rebelliously brooded over Joey's reflection on her father; she presently recollected that the latter's

landlady had told her of a woman living in Hammersmith he had been in the habit of visiting.

She had completely forgotten the circumstance, and as she dwelt upon it, she the more resented the ordinary construction which would be put on such an acquaintanceship : she was certain that her dearest Joe had led a stainless life.

She essayed to forget the matter, but, try as she might, it persisted in invading her mind.

At last, she surrendered herself to the fascination the subject held for her, which capitulation was followed by a fierce anger with herself at entertaining unworthy thoughts of such a man as Joe.

To punish herself for her suspicions, also, to satisfy herself if there had been any foundation for their existence, she resolved to try and discover the woman in question, and in the event of doing so to endeavour to ascertain the truth, even after so many years had elapsed.

There were endless difficulties in the way as she could not remember the landlady's or the other woman's name ; obstacles, however, strengthened her determination, she regarding the effort to clear her father's memory as a further atonement for her behaviour.

She was for starting for Putney and making inquiries at once ; although she had forgotten the landlady's name, she knew the house in which Joe had passed away, and believed that if she were not still living there, she (Jeannie) might be able to trace the woman, if still alive.

A few minutes' reflection, however, convinced her of the hopelessness of her projected quest, landladies belonging to a migratory class ; also, to inquire of the average Londoner for a woman of unknown name who had lived in a certain house some twenty years back would be to make the questioner liable to a suspicion of lunacy.

Jeannie, in despair of learning that on which she had set her heart, was about to abandon the project, when it occurred to her that, more likely than not, she would

find the landlady's name among the memoranda Joe had left : this was stored in the bureau that had belonged to him.

She acted upon the suggestion, when it did not take her long to find that the name of the woman she wanted was Mrs. Ebbage.

Possessed of this information, she resolved to commence her search on the following day ; hence her journey to town.

Arrived at Putney, she made for the little street where Joe had lodged and died.

Here, disappointment awaited her : for the house was empty, while a board announced that it was to let.

She made inquiries at adjacent dwellings, to hear that the house had been vacant some time, and that the name of the previous occupier was Lamb.

Jeannie remembered there were shops round the corner and proceeded to these in the hope of tracing the landlady.

The information she received was unsatisfactory ; although most of the shopkeepers remembered Mrs. Ebbage, Jeannie successively learned that she was living in Richmond ; that she was dead ; that she had gone to the seaside ; that she had married again and emigrated to Canada.

Jeannie despaired of getting anything definite, when a sharp-eyed girl at a milk-shop flatly contradicted her mother, who had said Mrs. Ebbage had moved to Southend, by declaring she had gone to live in Wandsworth, and that she (the informant) had seen her go into a house in Ravenscroft Road a fortnight ago.

Upon hearing that the road in question was short and the house Mrs. Ebbage had entered was about the middle of the left-hand side, Jeannie set off for Wandsworth.

As she had expected, Ravenscroft Road was a down-at-heel little street, but although she inquired at several houses in the middle of the left-hand side, she could learn nothing of Mrs. Ebbage.

Thinking the girl may have made a mistake as to which side of the road she had seen the woman, Jeannie crossed over, when the first door at which she knocked was opened by an owlish-looking slut.

"Mrs. Ebbage?" inquired Jeannie.

"What say?"

"Mrs. Ebbage!"

The girl stared stupidly before saying:

"What nyme?"

"Mrs. Baverstock!" As she saw that the girl continued to look at her with staring eyes and dropped jaw, she added: "Say Mrs. Edgar Baverstock, some one who used to know her, would like to see her." Hardly were the words out of her mouth, when a faded, small-featured, middle-aged woman, who might once have been pretty, came into the hall, to ask in a listlessly refined voice:

"Who is it you want, please?"

"A Mrs. Ebbage. She used to let rooms."

"She doesn't live here," replied the woman, who looked at Jeannie somewhat curiously.

"I'm sorry."

She turned to go, when the woman said:

"Excuse me, but did you say your name was Baverstock?"

"I did!"

"Were you Jeannie Pilcher before you married?"

"I was. Why——"

"I suppose you've forgotten Gertrude Stubbs at Clarence College, who married Mr. Scott?"

"You Gertrude Scott?" cried Jeannie, who could hardly believe that the faded woman before her was the romantic beauty she had known in the days of her youth.

"Won't you come in?" said Gertrude, with no particular enthusiasm, notwithstanding which, Jeannie accepted the invitation; she remembered how her old friend's sweetheart had threatened to shoot himself unless she ran away and married him; she was eager to know how the once pretty Gertrude had fared.

"Fancy meeting you, and after all these years. I heard you'd married one of the Baverstocks, but forget who told me. It's such a long time ago," said Gertrude, as she listlessly led the way to a small and very stuffy room.

This was furnished in a mid-Victorian style with a horsehair suite, a round table in the middle of the room, and a gilt-framed mirror on the mantelshelf; three oil-painted portraits of two old women and one elderly man decorated the walls.

The room had the cold, uninviting appearance of one that is rarely used, but although Jeannie was anxious to get impressions of her friend's home, she did not perceive this formality by reason of the offensive atmosphere; she had noticed it faintly when standing at the door, but now she was in the house, it seemed to overpower her with its persistence.

It was as if doors and windows had never been opened, and in consequence the greasy reek arising from the cooking of innumerable scratch meals had permeated the very walls of the dwelling.

"Sit down," continued Gertrude. "Whatever I may have done, you certainly haven't lost your looks."

"Indeed!" murmured Jeannie, who could not truthfully have returned the compliment.

"And how has the world used you all this time?"

Jeannie briefly outlined her history since she had lost sight of her friend.

"Where are you living now?" asked Gertrude, after listening impassively.

"Woodbridge in Essex."

"Nice there?"

"As good as you'll get near town."

"Rates high?"

"They are rather."

"Rates are a worry," declared Gertrude wearily. "Rent I understand and am usually ready for, but rates come when I least expect them."

Jeannie curiously regarded her friend, who then asked :

" Beef gone up with you ? "

" I don't think so. "

" Perhaps you're lucky and don't have to worry about things ? "

" I get along somehow. "

" I read in a paper Eustace brought home that beef's going up, and it worried me. Now I think of it though, I believe it was an old paper. "

" How is your husband ? " asked Jeannie.

" All right, " declared Gertrude indifferently. " Any family ? "

" A boy. He's nearly twenty. "

" A boy ? " she asked, without exhibiting the least interest.

" He's taller than I am, " said Jeannie proudly.

Gertrude was silent.

" Tell me all about yourself, " requested Jeannie, after a dreary pause. " I've been talking of myself ever since I've been here. "

Instead of taking advantage of this invitation, Gertrude asked :

" How much did you give for that coat and skirt ? "

Jeannie told her.

" I can't afford anything like that, " sighed the other.

" I have to get my things second-hand. "

" What does your husband do ? " asked Jeannie.

" Nothing. "

" Can't he get anything ? "

" He doesn't try. "

" Really ! "

" He's done no regular work for years. "

" Doesn't it worry you ? "

" What's the use ! "

" I should have thought you couldn't help worrying ! "

Gertrude helplessly shrugged her shoulders.

There was another pause ; this time, it was broken by Gertrude, who said :

" I suppose you have a proper servant and late dinners ? "

By way of reply, Jeannie said :

" You must come and stay a few days."

" You don't mean it ? " remarked Gertrude indifferently.

" Why shouldn't I mean it ? "

" Oh ! People say those things."

" I mean it : really, I do."

" Thank you," said Gertrude, with a faint approach to warmth.

There was evidently much amiss with Gertrude, and Jeannie more than suspected her husband to be the cause, he probably being what Titterton would call a " waster."

Jeannie set about tactfully ascertaining if this were the case, to meet with no particular success, Gertrude apparently having no interest in life, herself, or anything about her, and was in consequence disinclined to speak of anything personal.

Another silence was broken by Gertrude, who asked :

" Who is the woman you were inquiring for ? "

Jeannie told her it was some one she much wished to trace, and this recalled her to the necessity of prosecuting her search without further delay.

When she rose to go, however, Gertrude surprised her by asking her to stay for midday dinner, but when Jeannie declined, her friend looked so miserably disappointed that she changed her mind.

" Thank you," said Gertrude. " Perhaps you'll come into the kitchen while I see about it."

She led the way to the place mentioned when Jeannie's love of neatness and cleanliness was horrified at perceiving the hopeless disorder which obtained.

Unwashed breakfast-things, among which was the skeleton of a herring, littered the table ; clothes were airing before the fire ; kitchen utensils were anywhere and everywhere, while bags containing odds and ends of foodstuffs

had been put on chairs, while in some instances their contents had been spilled on the floor ; the sour atmosphere, to which Jeannie had got accustomed, was violently perceptible.

Much to Jeannie's surprise, Gertrude made no comment on the dirt and confusion ; she did not appear to notice it, indeed, the fact of her taking it all as a matter of course and not referring to the prevailing untidiness before a comparative stranger further informed Jeannie of the depths of callous indifference to which Gertrude had fallen.

After removing a torn bag of flour from a chair, and wiping it in order that her guest might sit, Gertrude made up the fire and sent the slut (her name was Doris) to the pork-butcher's for sausages for which her mistress was some time finding the money.

When these were brought, Jeannie borrowed a kitchen apron and insisted on giving a hand with the laying of the table and the grilling of the sausages : while these were cooking, Gertrude looked in her purse for money to send for beer.

" Don't get it for me, dear. I never drink anything," protested Jeannie.

" We'll have some beer if I can find the money."

" I've plenty of change," declared Jeannie, as she produced a shilling.

" I'm short and beer cheers me up," said Gertrude, when the servant had gone.

The knives were stained, and Jeannie set about cleaning them when Gertrude said :

" Don't clean any for me."

" Why not ? "

" Isn't worth the bother."

" Won't your husband be in ? " asked Jeannie.

" I don't know," replied the other diffidently.

" Doesn't he tell you ? "

" Never."

" Supposing he comes ? "

" What then ? " asked Gertrude listlessly.

Jeannie looked at her with questioning eyes, but Gertrude continued to wipe impassively the tumbler she had been washing.

Directly the beer was brought, Gertrude poured out two glasses and drank the best part of one before she had any food ; it seemed to get in her head, for very soon she spoke quickly with a tendency to run her words into each other.

Presently, she said :

" Any chance of your marrying again ? "

" I could if I wished to."

" Oh ! "

" To a man I knew when I was living at home."

" Money ? "

" Plenty."

" And he loves you ? "

" He wishes to marry me. I can't make up my mind."

A few moments later, she noticed tears in Gertrude's eyes.

Jeannie essayed to comfort her, but her sympathy had the effect of undoing her friend's remaining self-control ; Gertrude wept unrestrainedly.

" Eat your dinner, dear," said Jeannie. " You will be better then."

" Meeting you has upset me," declared Gertrude.

" I am sorry."

" Seeing you so happy and me——"

" I'm afraid you're not happy," said Jeannie, as the other was unable to finish her sentence.

" How could I be ? " asked Gertrude presently.

" Is it to do with your husband ? "

Gertrude nodded.

" And you married with such prospects of happiness ! "

" That was then. He hasn't worked properly for years. And he's taken up with some one else."

" Another woman ? "

" She's a Mrs. Fawcett. I don't think there's anything

in it. I wouldn't much mind if Eustace would only be amiable. Sometimes he doesn't speak for days."

"I am sorry," declared Jeannie, in all sincerity.

Gertrude went on :

"That's one of the reasons I wanted you to stay. If he came in and found a pretty, smart-looking woman, it might make him amiable to me."

A little later, she said, as she strove to restrain her tears :

"Usually I'm used to it. But your coming and all made me remember. And you've hardly eaten any sausage."

Jeannie, who was in no mood for eating, looked compassionately on the troubled woman ; as she gazed there came to her mind memories of the old days when Gertrude in the pride of her youth and romantic comeliness had looked confidently forward to a life which would be ever fragrant with romance.

Then Jeannie thought of the happy-go-lucky carelessness with which they had each regarded the vista of years which had so promisingly stretched before them ; they had both looked forward to a happy, sunny future, and they had each learned the inevitable lesson that for the great majority of mankind the way of life was hard and bestrewn with innumerable pitfalls.

At the same time, she did not attempt to hide from herself that she had fared considerably better than her friend, indeed, she lingered on this evident fact as in so doing it lightened her own burden of sorrow.

Jeannie stayed longer than she had originally intended, for when she made another effort to go, in order to resume her search for Mrs. Ebbage, such a pitiful look came into Gertrude's eyes as she asked her to stay for tea that she had not the heart to refuse.

She was sorry for, and genuinely sympathised with, her friend ; also, she was thankful to obtain some interruption, however short, of her own sufferings.

For a time, as if to show gratitude for Jeannie's company

Gertrude was communicative, when she told Jeannie how all her old relations had dropped her ; that she had not a friend in the world, and that she and her husband were living on the hundred a year her mother had left her.

Presently, however, she relapsed into her former passivity, which was so helpless and hopeless that it appalled warm-hearted Jeannie.

About four, Gertrude was making tea, when a key was heard in the latch of the front door, at which a look of dismay invaded her face as she said :

" Eustace ! He'll be angry I've brought you in here."

" What shall I do ? "

" Keep quiet. He mayn't come here. If he does, I'll try and get him away before he sees you."

A few moments later, Jeannie perceived from the corners of her eyes, a tall, middle-aged, remarkably handsome man, with grey hair and dark eyes, lounge against the kitchen door ; he was smoking what seemed to be a very good cigar ; apparently he did not see his wife's visitor.

" Good afternoon ! " said Gertrude.

Her husband vouchsafed no reply.

" You didn't come in to dinner ! " she remarked.

He took no notice.

" I found some papers of yours which I put in your room."

He continued smoking as before.

" I believe the gas is escaping upstairs. I wish you'd go and see."

He still ignored his wife, and Jeannie, whose nerves had been jafred by his indifference, repressed an inclination to cry out.

At last, made desperate by his exasperating rudeness, Gertrude said :

" Don't you see I've a visitor ? "

Scott's fine eyes looked about the kitchen till he saw Jeannie, when surprise and gratification were expressed in his face.

"You've heard me speak of Jeannie Pilcher? There she is, and she's now Mrs. Baverstock," explained Gertrude.

"My dear Mrs. Baverstock, how truly delighted I am to meet you," he declared effusively, as he advanced on Jeannie. "Why didn't you tell me before, dearest?" he asked of his wife. "And why on earth did you ask her in this kitchen?"

Jeannie was so annoyed at the change in his manner that she took the earliest opportunity of going, and would not allow Scott to accompany her to the station, a courtesy he was eager to perform.

She, also, contrived for Gertrude to see her to the door, when Jeannie said:

"Don't forget to come down."

"I've nothing nice enough to come in."

Jeannie was so moved by her friend's extremity that she produced her purse and gave Gertrude two sovereigns.

The unexpected gift somewhat roused Gertrude from her appealing apathy; after thanking Jeannie, she said:

"Mrs. Fawcett had a new hat the month before last. If Eustace sees me in something smart, he may be more amiable when we're alone."

CHAPTER XXXII

JOE'S LADY FRIEND

It was owing to Gertrude that Jeannie succeeded in discovering her father's landlady.

Jeannie did her best, but without achieving any results ; it was only when she confided her lack of success to her friend on her third visit to Wandsworth that the latter volunteered her assistance.

Jeannie forthwith gave Gertrude the necessary information, stipulating she should pay any expenses to which her friend might be put.

Four days after this arrangement had been made, Jeannie was at home when about three in the afternoon she received a telegram which said :

"Mrs. Ebbage, now Mrs. Bond, 23 Paradise Street, Stockwell.—SCOTT."

Jeannie at once set off for this address ; it was not till she again saw Gertrude that she learned how the former Mrs. Ebbage had been found.

It appeared that Gertrude had earned the gratitude of a postman, who had been bitten by a neighbour's savage dog, by speaking for him and preventing him from losing his pay while laid up, which would otherwise have been the case.

She had consulted this man, who, with the facilities at his command, had traced Mrs. Ebbage (she had recently married again) and had furnished her present address.

Jeannie had the haziest idea where Stockwell was situated, consequently it was something after six when

she turned into Paradise Street, a squalid thoroughfare which belied its name.

After Jeannie had knocked twice at 23, she heard the footsteps of some one approaching who was troubled with a cough ; very soon, the door was opened a couple of feet by a white-faced, haggard-looking, elderly workman.

" Is Mrs. Bond at home ? " asked Jeannie.

" Yus."

" She was Mrs. Ebbage, I think ? "

" Yus, yus."

" Tell her that Mrs. Baverstock would like to see her."

The man looked perplexed, at which Jeannie asked :

" Is there any reason why I shouldn't ? "

" Missus ain't well. I'll see."

The man shuffled along the passage and presently returned, to ask the caller to walk in ; she followed him to the kitchen, where a strange sight met her eye.

Before a blazing fire, although it was a hot May day, reclined on an American wicker sofa a fat and jolly-looking woman whom Jeannie at once recognised as her father's landlady ; twenty years had scarcely made a difference to her appearance ; as on the last occasion Jeannie had seen her, she was clad in a soiled wrapper.

The place was none too clean ; mixed up with the kitchen things were many patent medicine bottles, more or less empty, and several pill boxes.

" 'Ow are you, dear ? " asked Mrs. Ebbage in a faint voice, directly she caught sight of her visitor ; at the same time, she offered her hand, which Jeannie from motives of expediency took.

" I've had such trouble to find you," said Jeannie.

" It oughtn't to be difficult, me being almost a public character as you might say, and as I'm always telling Bond."

Here she glanced at her husband who, while fetching bread and dripping from a cupboard, was seized with a fit of coughing.

"Indeed!" remarked Jeannie.

"I'll bet you thought me with my bad 'ealth was dead an' done for years ago. Although I looks after meself, I shall never make very old bones."

"I tried to find you in Wandsworth," remarked Jeannie.

"I was there a lot two or three weeks back."

"I heard you had been seen there."

"I went to a 'ouse in Ravenscroft Road after an old 'visitor' who owes me for rent and coals." Here, memory of the defaulting lodger endowed Mrs. Bond with a robust anger which was at variance with her professions of ill-health.

"It served me something crool," declared Mrs. Bond, as she remembered to speak in a weak voice. "And not to get anythink except abuse! It made me so bad, I had to lie on me back for two days. Isn't that gospel, Bond?"

"Yus, yus," he replied, as he set about making his tea.

"Since you're so fond of looking after yourself, can't you give me the 'Green' pill I take at six?" she asked of her husband.

Bond neglected his tea to get his wife the pill and water in a tumbler; after the patient had swallowed the former with every elaboration of affected nausea, Jeannie mischievously asked:

"Don't you get your husband's tea?"

The invalid was so taken aback by this question that it was some time before she could reply:

"Me, a dying woman!"

Jeannie did not wish to offend Mrs. Bond, so she said:

"I quite forgot. I beg your pardon."

"Granted. Bond! Offer the lady a cup."

"No, thank you, I've had mine. I wanted to find you as I wished to ask you something about my father, whom you may remember."

For all her extremity, Mrs. Bond waxed eloquent in praise of Joe's virtues; she had never forgotten him by

reason of his being the only 'visitor' who had met his obligations with unfailing punctuality.

Then, while Bond frequently interrupted his tea to attend to the real or fancied needs of his wife, Jeannie, by easy stages, led the conversation to the subject of Joe's mysterious friend. Directly she mentioned her, Mrs. Bond cried :

"That there Miss 'Acker!"

"Was that her name? Then you haven't forgotten her!" exclaimed Jeannie thankfully.

"I'll never do that to me dying day. Soon after your pa died, I was that bad, I took six bottles of 'Halley's' tonic; it was jess pulling me round, and I was starting on the seventh when that there Miss 'Acker came and raised 'hell and Tommy' because your pa hadn't left her anythink. It fair got me in the liver!"

"Do you remember where she lived?" asked Jeannie.

"Mansion House Street, Hammersmith, No. 17. By the 'T.O.V.'"

"The what?"

"The 'Temple of Varieties' as it used to be called," said Mrs. Bond languidly.

Jeannie, having obtained the information she wanted, was anxious to go, but Mrs. Bond had entered upon a description of how she had been given up for lost until she had been rescued from an untimely grave by the beneficially drastic action of advertised patent medicines.

Perhaps she noticed Jeannie was restless during these intimate confidences for, by way of propitiating her caller, she presently said :

"I often heard of you when I was in Putney."

"Indeed!"

"There's always a lot of talk about swells like the Baverstocks. And I dare say you've heard of me being a sort of public character as you might say?"

"You mentioned that before!"

"And that's why I tell Bond he'd such a stroke of luck in marrying me."

"He doesn't look very strong," remarked Jeannie.

"He so worrits about me, seeing me fade before his eyes," sighed the patient, to add to her husband: "Get them papers of 'Green' pills, 'Halley's' tonic, and the 'Dublin' linament."

While Bond looked for what was wanted, bread and dripping in hand, Mrs. Bond said:

"I was that sorry to hear when you lost your husband."

Jeannie bit her lip.

"I heard of it the first day I used the 'Dublin' linament for rheumatism; that's how I remember it."

Jeannie rose to go.

"You mustn't go till you've had them papers."

"But I don't want any medicine."

"It's to see me," snapped Mrs. Bond.

Just then, Bond approached with the prospectuses of patent medicines which contained common woodcuts of a self-conscious Mrs. Bond; these were accompanied by copious details of her aggravated symptoms and consequent despair until she had come upon an exact description of her ailments in the advertised specifics; as a last desperate resource she had taken these, to obtain immediate relief, which was followed by an incredibly rapid recovery.

"One way and another, I b'leeve the medicine I've took would float a Margate steamer," said Mrs. Bond.

"And the pills I've swallowed 'ud fill that there scuttle."

Jeannie's inquiries in Mansion House Street, where the road dips far below the level of the pavement, to clear the railway arches, provided, contrary to expectation, some information, the woman who had tenanted 17, twenty years back (she had only moved across the street), telling her that Miss Hacker and her little niece had disappeared some time back in a sudden access of prosperity; more than this the woman, whose name was Rudkin, could not furnish.

Jeannie took counsel with Gertrude (she did not wish her solicitors to have anything to do with the matter),

and, as a result of their deliberations, advertisements were put in the popular Sunday papers saying that, if Miss Hacker, who lived at 17 Mansion House Street, Hammer-smith, in 1890 or thereabouts, would communicate with the advertiser, she would hear of something to her advantage.

In the interval of waiting for replies, Jeannie was still a prey to remorse ; she spent hours in striving to recall everyday incidents of her home life at " Laurel " Villa : the many instances of selfishness or remissness that she could remember having exhibited towards her father caused her long-drawn pain ; this was occasionally mitigated when she was able to recall infrequent acts of tenderness.

Although she was gratified that there was some possibility of finding Miss Hacker, and thus enabling her to discover the truth of her father's relations with the latter, she was distressed at Mrs. Bond's telling her how the other woman had made a disturbance when she had called on the landlady after Joe's death ; the fact of her expecting some sort of a legacy suggested that their relations had been intimate. Should they have been what she feared, it would only add fuel to the flames of her remorse, inasmuch as her neglect had been responsible for her father's conduct.

When she received the replies to her advertisements from the newspaper offices, she was astonished by the number of Miss Hackers (their initials were unanimously illegible) who had lived in Mansion House Street, Hammer-smith, at the time mentioned ; moreover, the letters had much in common, being written on flimsy paper and apparently with a foul nib which had been dipped in a meagre supply of ink ; they were indited from obscure addresses.

With Gertrude's assistance, the letters were sorted into districts, after which Jeannie occupied the best part of each day in calling upon and interviewing her correspondents.

It was a dismal business for Jeannie.

The instincts of her class, upbringing, convictions, indeed, of her very being, revolted against the women she met, who were all more or less of a class to themselves.

Also, for the most part, they were in what were to them the terrible "forties," when the much-raddled cheeks betray their furrows, the belladonna-drugged eyes have lost their lustre, the figure has gone grossly to pieces, and the remaining teeth, which are the stay of the dental plate, refuse to perform longer their office.

As one woman they received Jeannie in rooms that reeked of stale scent and toilet specialities while wearing dirty dressing-gowns, when it did not take her long to discover they were all arrant impostors.

She would not suffer Titterton or even Gertrude to accompany her on these visits, although her quest took her into queer places; she believed that the revulsion she acutely experienced was a further atonement to her father's memory.

One thing she learned.

Often, when interviewing these women, she would catch sight of her own reflection and that of the person she was talking to in the glass; the startling contrast the two faces presented told her of the great gulf existing between women like herself and those who were vicious.

At last, when she had despaired of finding the Miss Hacker her father had known, a belated letter arrived from a woman who declared her aunt was the person advertised for; it was written from a house in the Lambeth Road.

Jeannie made inquiries by letter; the reply suggesting that she had found the person she sought, she made an appointment for the following afternoon.

When, with considerable trepidation, Jeannie knocked at the door of the forlorn-looking house at something after

four, she wondered if she were going to see a woman who at all differed from the many she had already interviewed.

Almost directly, she was aware that a head had been thrust from the first-floor window and quickly withdrawn; a few moments later, some one ran downstairs and opened the door.

"Are you the lady that wrote?" asked a pretty, blowsy girl with a big red mouth.

"I'm Mrs. Baverstock," said Jeannie.

"Auntie isn't very well, but I've done me best with her. Please come hup."

Jeannie followed the girl, who, she noticed, wore open-work silk stockings and high-heeled shoes, to a sitting-room on the first floor, where a woman seated on a sofa before a table at once riveted her attention.

It was not so much the remains of great personal beauty which attracted her as the appearance and atmosphere of Miss Hacker; although she was obviously a confirmed dipsomaniac, there was no denying that she had a personality of sorts.

Perhaps this had been responsible for a life which was written in her face for those who had eyes to see.

Jeannie noticed with a shudder that the woman's hard, almost brutal, expression suggested lifelong indulgence in base passions; moreover, there was a reckless defiance in her bearing which was eloquent of one who sins, not from misfortune, but from choice; of one who revels in evil-doing.

Yet, for all her obvious subservience to things of the flesh, this wreck of once alluring humanity still possessed an indefinable fascination; her movements were occasionally graceful, while her head was nobly set upon her ample shoulders.

As Jeannie noticed these things, her heart sank; she feared it was all too probable that her father had succumbed to the manifold attractions Miss Hacker had once possessed.

Then her attention was arrested by the woman's eyes : these, which were of a deep blue, were hard, opaque, expressionless, while the whites were shot with blood and tinged with yellow ; when these were fixed on Jeannie, it recalled to her mind the staring eyes she had seen in the heads of dead and flayed oxen in butchers' shops.

Otherwise, Miss Hacker looked as if, much against her will, she had been dragged from the untidy bed in the adjoining room (Jeannie caught a glimpse of it through the barely shut folding doors) and washed, and dressed, and kept sober, and propped up by the table to receive the expected visitor, which indeed was the case.

What Jeannie did not know was that Miss Hacker was on the verge of her third attack of delirium tremens.

Jeannie had previously written to say that if this Miss Hacker were the woman she wanted, she would give her two pounds ; in the event of her being able to give certain information, she would pay a further eight.

Jeannie's doubts as to the possibility of this being the Miss Hacker she sought were quickly set at rest by the pretty niece, whose name was Florrie, producing old envelopes of letters and telegrams addressed to her aunt at the Mansion House Street address : these she had rummaged from boxes.

Jeannie's emotion at discovering the woman who had been the solace of the last months of Joe's life was interrupted by Florrie, who was divided between civility to Jeannie and a desire to keep her aunt in good humour.

The more Jeannie saw of the latter, the more she was convinced of her mental extremity : at the least sound, she would start violently ; now and again she would weep for no reason at all.

Then Jeannie produced her purse and put two pounds on the table ; the sight of the money fascinated the aunt, who could not take her eyes from the gold ; she wept copiously when Florrie grabbed the sovereigns, lifted her pretty skirts, and hid them in her stocking.

"What about the other height pounds?" asked Florrie, who, impressed by the refinement and social position of the visitor, assumed what was intended to be a fine society manner which sat ill on her seductive vulgarity.

"I must first see if you can tell me what I want to know," replied Jeannie.

She forthwith gave details of Joe's appearance and of the period when he had visited Miss Hacker: to Jeannie's consternation, the woman's mind was a blank on the subject; in reply to persistent inquiries, she feebly shook her head.

Despairing of losing the eight sovereigns, Florrie took the matter in hand; with a mixture of cajolery and threats, she fought hard to coax from her aunt the required information.

"Show her the money, dear. See if that'll do anything," at last said Florrie desperately. "She'll always do anything for the 'needful.'"

Jeannie did as she was bid; Miss Hacker's eyes were fascinated by the sight of the gold, but when Florrie further questioned her, she fell to whimpering.

"Blow her! She's worse than I thought. She deserves to be kept off drink for a week!" cried Florrie.

"Wouldn't that do her good?" asked Jeannie.

"I don't know when she's worse: when she has it, or when she hasn't. But give her a rest. Then I'll try again."

They waited, during which Jeannie noticed that Miss Hacker frequently and furtively regarded a cupboard on the other side of the fireplace to that on which she sat.

"Know what she's after?" asked Florrie.

"No."

"Brandy. It's kept in that cupboard. If she got hold of that, there'd be a fair chimozzle."

Jeannie, whose nerves had been jarred by this adventure

and the insight it had given her into other and less reputable horizons than her own, was seriously considering the advisability of leaving the money on the table and fleeing from the house, when Florrie said :

" There's another old box on the landing upstairs ; aunt was always a oner for storing rubbish ; I wondered if there was hany letters there as 'ud tell you what you want."

" How long would it take to look through it ? " asked Jeannie.

" Not long. I'll get it if you like, and you would know your pa's writing at a glance."

" If you wouldn't mind ! "

" Not at hall. Keep an eye on auntie while I'm gone."

Florrie left the room, at which Jeannie knew an acute discomfort at being left alone with the dipsomaniac.

Florrie was absent longer than she expected, but her fears respecting Miss Hacker were soon allayed at noticing she had fallen asleep.

To beguile the interval of waiting, Jeannie got up and looked from the window on to the sorry squalor of the Lambeth Road, but only for a moment.

Hearing a violent movement, she turned quickly, to see Miss Hacker thrust aside the imprisoning table and make for the cupboard, from which she snatched a bottle of brandy ; pulling the cork with her teeth, she swallowed mouthfuls of the raw spirit, at which Jeannie perceived the woman's sleep had been a device to put her off her guard.

A moment later, Florrie entered the room with a stout, cardboard hat-box.

" You've bally well done it," cried Florrie, at seeing what was toward. " Now she's on the job."

Jeannie was minded to go, but was rooted to where she stood by the violent alteration which took place in Miss Hacker.

A bestial expression invaded and possessed her face; her lips twitched; her lifeless eyes looked as if they were about to fall from her head; her arms worked convulsively.

Even then, with a supreme effort, Jeannie might have torn herself away, but she was held to the room by Miss Hacker's behaviour.

Clinging to the mantelshelf for support, she laughed unmusically to herself, at first softly, then harshly.

Suddenly, she drew herself to her full height and defiantly faced Jeannie with dead eyes as she said:

"Want to know about my life?"

"Y—yes," faltered Jeannie.

"I'll tell you. Different to yours, y—know."

Without waiting for encouragement, she launched out into intimate details of the more momentous incidents in a life of cunning amorous adventure, speaking with a facile and brutal coarseness of things that seared Jeannie's senses like a corrosive fluid. The latter involuntarily put out her hands as if to protest against the stream of sinful confidences which flowed without intermission from the woman's lips.

But Miss Hacker was not to be stayed.

All too soon, Jeannie was dominated by her violence; while, in spite of herself, she listened with an understanding which was shocked beyond measure, she was aware that Florrie, wholly indifferent to her aunt's mental abandonment, had lighted a cigarette.

A seemingly endless procession of mercenary infamies was paraded before Jeannie's eyes.

It was as if some malign influence were taking a foul delight in stirring the lees of a sordidly lascivious and imaginative woman's soul.

At last, the revelations became so appalling that Jeannie was about to stuff her fingers in her ears when she heard the name of Joe Pilcher mentioned; she listened intently.

To her keen disappointment, Miss Hacker spoke of other men, but just when Jeannie despaired of hearing further of her father, the other woman said :

"Old Joe was a caution if ever there was one."

"Why?" asked Jeannie, with all her nerves on edge.

"Used to visit me twice a week. Walked over from Putney Wednesdays an' Fridays, an' walked back. No hansoms for him."

"What—what did he come for?" Jeannie forced herself to ask.

Miss Hacker did not reply to this question, but said :

"Once I asked him to lend me a racy book. What d'ye think he brought? No *Maria Monks*—*Pickwick Papers*. How I did laugh when he had gone."

"What did he come for?" repeated Jeannie; Miss Hacker still ignored her question as she continued :

"One night he broke down and told me he was cracking up over a married daughter he never saw. He was a Simple Simon."

Jeannie bit her lip; the other went on :

"That's a fact. Broken up he was, and never so much as had a drink to cheer himself up."

Jeannie's breath came fast.

"You ask me what he came for? There wasn't much wickedness about him."

"Please go on," pleaded Jeannie, as Miss Hacker paused.

"He was the straightest gentleman I ever struck. Never once so much as offered to kiss me, although I had then all my looks and my teeth. And I gave him chances enough when I heard money rattling in his pocket. If it hadn't been for others, he'd have given me the fair sick."

"What did he come for then?" asked Jeannie breathlessly.

"Come for? Because he was lonely. Used to pay me ten bob a time to read and talk to him."

"Sure? Are you sure?" cried a madly excited Jeannie.

"Sure. Sure," repeated Miss Hacker. She then turned to her niece to say:

"Yer know that broken elephant we found the other day in that rubbish?"

"Yes, moth—auntie!"

"He give it to you."

"Have you still got it?" asked Jeannie quickly.

"Why?"

"I want to see it. Please—please try and find it."

Jeannie pleaded so earnestly that Florrie threw away her cigarette and set about finding the toy elephant.

It was not very long before she came upon it, and directly Jeannie saw the toy, she snatched the broken, shabby plaything as she said:

"I'll give you a sovereign for it."

"Go on!"

"Will you take it?"

"You try me!" replied Florrie, who believed the visitor must be what she called "balmy."

"And here is the other eight pounds," said Jeannie, at which Florrie grabbed the money and, despite Miss Hacker's violent protests, placed it in her stocking with the other two sovereigns.

Jeannie scarcely noticed this action; clasping her treasure to her heart, she made for the door.

"Do 'ave a cup of tea," suggested Florrie, who scented further easily gotten spoil.

"No, thank you. Good-bye."

"Don't hurry. Have a fag!"

But Jeannie with her broken elephant had vanished from the room.

Although her sufferings were increased a thousand-

fold at realising she was responsible for having driven Joe to such a creature as Miss Hacker in order to lessen his loneliness, Jeannie endured her torments gladly, thankfully by reason of her father, contrary to her unworthy suspicions, having led a stainless life.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE SCENT OF THE MAY

JEANNIE was a unit in a subdued gathering which had assembled at "Pyracantha" to take a last farewell of Mrs. Baverstock, whose very hours were numbered.

Joey, the Hibblings, Bevill and his wife waited with Reuben and Mabel in the drawing-room, while the doctors were doing their utmost to alleviate the agonies of the stricken woman.

Her condition was such that it was at considerable intervals that the members of the family presently went upstairs one by one; when it was Jeannie's turn, the sufferer begged her to come again the last thing at night.

Jeannie, in addition to her grief at her sweet friend's extremity, had endured so much of late that, when she left the sick-room, she was disinclined for conversation; she moped by herself in a corner of the drawing-room.

For all her isolation of spirit, she was compelled from time to time to speak to those who addressed her, one of the most insistent being Joey, who had recently been keeping late hours.

After making futile efforts to cheer his mother, he said :
"Some one was asking after you last night."

"Who?"

"Can't you guess?"

"How is he?"

"All right. He's going back to Canada soon——"

"Oh!"

"Unless——"

"What?"

"Never mind. We've been having a fair old 'beano' together, but last night he was awfully down on his luck."

"Why?"

"I can guess, if you can't, pretty mater. And when I said we should all probably be sent for here, he said——"

"Well—

"Never mind," remarked Joey mischievously.

She would have questioned him further had not Mabel come over to her just then and insisted on talking.

She scarcely referred to the loss she was about to sustain, at which Jeannie asked :

"Doesn't your mother suffer very much?"

"Eh?"

Jeannie repeated her question.

"She says she doesn't very much," replied Mabel, "so I don't see how she can."

"I'm not so sure. She looks dreadful."

"Anyhow, she doesn't know what it is. And that's much to be thankful for."

Later, when Reuben approached Jeannie he, also, attempted to cheer her: not succeeding, he said:

"Still worrying about Joey going into business?"

"Y—yes!" replied Jeannie.

"That's where you're wrong, my dear Jeannie."

"Why?"

"I'm, unfortunately, an old man, but I've seen more of life than you have, so let me tell you this. The secret of happiness is not to bother oneself about others, but to think more of self. Self, self and again self."

Between nine and ten Jeannie was again summoned to the sick-room where her heart was wrung by the blanched face of Edgar's mother.

The latter was unable to speak for awhile, but she motioned for the nurse to leave the room and for Jeannie to sit at the bedside.

Presently, she was able to say :

" I wanted to ask your forgiveness, my sweet Jeannie."

" What for, dearest ? "

With an effort, the doomed woman summoned what little strength was left her to whisper :

" Not coming to you when you married my boy. I liked you from the first : you had soft eyes and I knew your heart was kind. But when I wanted to come, it made trouble with Reuben."

" Forget all that ! " urged Jeannie.

" I cannot and do not wish to. You were a good wife to my dearest boy whom I shall soon meet again, and a good mother to his son. He will be glad to know that. God bless you."

Jeannie's emotion prevented her from speaking.

A little later, Mrs. Baverstock said :

" You are still young and have much before you. But let me tell you this : If you wish to be happy, live for others."

" I know ; I know," sobbed Jeannie.

Presently, she dried her eyes and was all concern for the patient's comfort, at which Mrs Baverstock said :

" I have much to be thankful for. Although I have known all along what is the matter with me, I haven't suffered so much as some. God has been very kind ! "

" You have known all along ? " asked Jeannie fearfully.

" Yes."

" They—we thought——"

" I know. I said the contrary as I did not wish to distress you all."

Jeannie was for sitting up all night with the sick woman, but Mrs. Baverstock would not hear of it ; Jeannie only fell in with her wishes upon the sufferer promising to send for her in the night if she were worse.

Then, she held the frail woman for quite a long time in her arms while nothing was said ; as she was releasing her hold, Mrs. Baverstock asked :

"Would you do one thing for me?"

"Of course."

"Read me this: you are the only person here I care to ask," she said, as she took a Bible from the table at her side and opened it at a certain chapter: she then handed it to Jeannie, who read while Mrs. Baverstock listened with closed eyes:

"And as Jesus passed by, He saw a man which was blind from his birth.

"And His disciples asked Him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

"I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.'"

She read to the end of the chapter when, upon glancing at Mrs. Baverstock, she saw she had fallen asleep.

Jeannie waited some time, but as the other did not awaken she kissed her, and after summoning the nurse, she stole from the room. She kept awake for quite a long time expecting to be sent for; two or three times she crept to the sufferer's door, but not hearing anything untoward she went back to bed and presently fell asleep.

When Jeannie awoke, the sun was high in a glorious sky, at which she wondered at the stillness that obtained in the house.

She was not left long in ignorance: very soon, the nurse entered her room with her cup of tea, to tell her that Mrs. Baverstock had passed away in the small hours; although conscious almost to the end, she would not suffer Jeannie to have her rest disturbed by being summoned.

When Jeannie had got over the first shock at this dread news and at this final instance of the dead woman's abiding unselfishness, a strange thing happened.

Whether or not it was a consequence of the glad spring day, reaction of her still youthful blood from the presence

of Death, or a desire for happiness after her recent tribulations of the spirit, she was ashamed to discover that she was possessed of a passion for happiness.

In spite of herself, her thoughts obstinately dwelt on a version of a text she had read the previous evening which her mind persisted in forming.

It was as follows :

" I must love while it is day : the night cometh when no woman can love."

She vainly attempted to shake off this unseemly prepossession, but such was its force that as soon after breakfast as she could conveniently get away she put on her hat and sought the gladness of the day which seemed to put an edge upon her craving for happiness.

When she left the house, she had a distinct impression that some one she knew very well was hovering in its vicinity, at which she turned sharply in the direction of the river ; although she had not looked, she was certain she was being followed by Titterton. As she went, she occasionally thought of Edgar, but just now she surrounded his memory with a tender haze which she did not care to penetrate.

In the High Street, she was startled at hearing her name ; she turned, to see she had been addressed by Scott, who was accompanied by a woman.

" How is my dear Mrs. Baverstock ? " he asked effusively.

" Fairly well ! How is Gertrude ? "

" Eh ? She's all right. Let me introduce you to a friend of mine, Mrs. Fawcett."

Jeannie very coldly bowed to the woman indicated, when to her surprise she saw that, contrary to her expectation, she was a plain, insignificant little frump who was dowdily turned out.

Jeannie was anxious to go, but was detained by Scott, who said :

" Who's that chap eyeing you from the other side of the road ? I believe he has been following you."

Without looking, Jeannie said a curt " Good-bye " and

walked on, but when she arrived at the bridge her feet instinctively sought the towpath.

Although she had not looked, she knew she was still being followed by the man who wished to marry her.

As she went, she altogether disregarded the glories of the day, the teeming life of the river, the very occasional people she met ; she had only thought for a means of deliverance from the shadow of a loveless old age.

Life was so uncertain, things so easily went wrong, she was so at the mercy of forces over which she had no control that she was eager to love : beyond being a means of providing happiness without alloy, it was a certain stay in time of trouble.

For all this desire to love and to be loved, she could not determine if she cared sufficiently for Titterton to marry him on the chance of love following their union.

As she was troubled by indecision, she remembered having been told that in all affairs of the heart there is one who loves while the other is loved.

She knew Titterton loved her, but was convinced that, as yet, she had no deeper feeling for him than a tender regard.

She hurried on when she heard her name called from behind.

She did not turn, at which Titterton called again ; by the sound of his voice she divined that he had stopped.

As she essayed to arrive at a definite conclusion, her thoughts flew off at a tangent to Joey, when, for a very brief while, she realised that Titterton wielded a considerable influence over him, indeed, far more than she did herself ; this reflection the more inclined her to the man who wished to win her for his own.

If she could only make up her mind !

The calling of her name once more brought her back to the immediate present when she was possessed by a further access of indecision ; her steps faltered ; her heart beat fast.

She was minded to go on, but was arrested by the scent

of May, which not only weakened her resolution, but seemed to hold her in amorous thrall. She looked about her, to see that a tree overhanging the once streamlike backwater was responsible for the insistent perfume.

Also, she perceived the nest in which she had seen the little thrushes on the occasion of her recent pilgrimage to the towpath.

To-day, believing they could fly, they, to their parents' consternation, were bent on leaving the nest.

This event took her back to a similar occurrence she had witnessed in the long ago, and not very far from where she stood.

She was then a little girl, and the incident had given rise to Joe's prediction that a day would come when, in common with the majority of young people, she would be eager to leave her father and her home.

She had hotly contended that, whatever it might be with others, she could never part from her ever-dearest Joe.

But that was then.

Now, she was more or less reconciled to the inevitability of sooner or later losing Joey, at which her mind was free to think of her immediate future.

Her thoughts flew to the man who was waiting ; she would have given many years of her life if, in a passion of abandonment, she could forget her perplexities and sufferings in his arms.

But since she was uncertain if she loved him, this was impossible.

Her fear of losing him was such that she told herself that, after all, she might be mistaken ; that she would bitterly repent if she sent him away for good.

She was disposed to go to him, but was restrained by conscience, which told her how such a surrender might be owing to the influence he exercised over Joey.

If only she could make up her mind !

Then her version of the text from St. John came into her mind.

"I must love while it is day : the night cometh when no woman can love."

This stimulated her pitiful craving for happiness which she fondly (perhaps, foolishly) believed was the birthright of the human unit.

It was this desire, reinforced by the influences of the spring day, and the lust of life begotten of the passing away of Mrs. Baverstock, which made her believe that love for Titterton had, at last, dawned in her heart.

Whether or not this emotion were genuine, Jeannie suddenly turned with a little cry.

She hoped she was not deceiving herself as she advanced upon her lover with hands outstretched.

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