

**FLORENCE
BARCLAY**

THE MISTRESS
OF SHENSTONE

Florence Barclay

The Mistress of Shenstone

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The Mistress of Shenstone

CHAPTER I ON THE TERRACE AT SHENSTONE

Three o'clock on a dank afternoon, early in November. The wintry sunshine, in fitful gleams, pierced the greyness of the leaden sky.

The great trees in Shenstone Park stood gaunt and bare, spreading wide arms over the sodden grass. All nature seemed waiting the first fall of winter's snow, which should hide its deadness and decay under a lovely pall of sparkling white, beneath which a promise of fresh life to come might gently move and stir; and, eventually, spring forth.

The Mistress of Shenstone moved slowly up and down the terrace, wrapped in her long cloak, listening to the soft "drip, drip" of autumn all around; noting the silent fall of the last dead leaves; the steely grey of the lake beyond; the empty flower-garden; the deserted lawn.

The large stone house had a desolate appearance, most of the rooms being, evidently, closed; but, in one or two, cheerful log-fires blazed, casting a ruddy glow upon the window-panes, and sending forth a tempting promise of warmth and cosiness within.

A tiny white toy-poodle walked the terrace with his mistress – an agitated little bundle of white curls; sometimes running round and round her; then hurrying on before, or dropping behind, only to rush on, in unexpected haste, at the corners; almost tripping her up, as she turned.

"Peter," said Lady Ingleby, on one of these occasions, "I do wish you would behave in a more rational manner! Either come to heel and follow sedately, as a dog of your age should do; or trot on in front, in the gaily juvenile manner you assume when Michael takes you out for a walk; but, for goodness sake, don't be so fidgety; and don't run round and round me in this bewildering way, or I shall call for William, and send you in. I only wish Michael could see you!"

The little animal looked up at her, pathetically, through his tumbled curls – a soft silky mass, which had earned for him his name of Shockheaded Peter. His eyes, red-rimmed from the cold wind, had that unseeing look, often noticeable in a very old dog. Yet there was in them, and in the whole pose of his tiny body, an anguish of anxiety, which could not have escaped a genuine dog-lover. Even Lady Ingleby became partially aware of it. She stooped and patted his head.

"Poor little Peter," she said, more kindly. "It is horrid, for us both, having Michael so far away at this tiresome war. But he will come home before long; and we shall forget all the anxiety and loneliness. It will be spring again. Michael will have you properly clipped, and we will go to Brighton, where you enjoy trotting about, and hearing people call you 'The British Lion.' I verily believe you consider yourself the size of the lions in Trafalgar Square! I cannot imagine why a great big man, such as Michael, is so devoted to a tiny scrap of a dog, such as you! Now, if you were a Great Dane, or a mighty St. Bernard – ! However, Michael loves us both, and we both love Michael; so we must be nice to each other, little Peter, while he is away."

Myra Ingleby smiled, drew the folds of her cloak more closely around her, and moved on. A small white shadow, with no wag to its tail, followed dejectedly behind.

And the dead leaves, loosing their hold of the sapless branches, fluttered to the sodden turf; and the soft "drip, drip" of autumn fell all around.

The door of the lower hall opened. A footman, bringing a telegram, came quickly out. His features were set, in well-trained impassivity; but his eyelids flickered nervously as he handed the silver salver to his mistress.

Lady Ingleby's lovely face paled to absolute whiteness beneath her large beaver hat; but she took up the orange envelope with a steady hand, opening it with fingers which did not tremble. As she glanced at the signature, the colour came back to her cheeks.

"From Dr. Brand," she said, with an involuntary exclamation of relief; and the waiting footman turned and nodded furtively toward the house. A maid, at a window, dropped the blind, and ran to tell the anxious household all was well.

Meanwhile, Lady Ingleby read her telegram.

Visiting patient in your neighbourhood. Can you put me up for the night?

Arriving 4.30.

Deryck Brand.

Lady Ingleby turned to the footman. "William," she said, "tell Mrs. Jarvis, Sir Deryck Brand is called to this neighbourhood, and will stay here to-night. They can light a fire at once in the magnolia room, and prepare it for him. He will be here in an hour. Send the motor to the station. Tell Groatley we will have tea in my sitting-room as soon as Sir Deryck arrives. Send down word to the Lodge to Mrs. O'Mara, that I shall want her up here this evening. Oh, and – by the way – mention at once at the Lodge that there is no further news from abroad."

"Yes, m' lady," said the footman; and Myra Ingleby smiled at the reflection, in the lad's voice and face, of her own immense relief. He turned and hastened to the house; Peter, in a sudden access of misplaced energy, barking furiously at his heels.

Lady Ingleby moved to the front of the terrace and stood beside one of the stone lions, close to an empty vase, which in summer had been a brilliant mass of scarlet geraniums. Her face was glad with expectation.

"Somebody to talk to, at last!" she said. "I had begun to think I should have to brave dear mamma, and return to town. And Sir Deryck of all people! He wires from Victoria, so I conclude he sees his patient *en route*, or in the morning. How perfectly charming of him to give me a whole evening. I wonder how many people would, if they knew of it, be breaking the tenth commandment concerning me! ... Peter, you little fiend! Come here! Why the footmen, and gardeners, and postmen, do not kick out your few remaining teeth, passes me! You pretend to be too unwell to eat your dinner, and then behave like a frantic hyena, because poor innocent William brings me a telegram! I shall write and ask Michael if I may have you hanged."

And, in high good humour, Lady Ingleby went into the house.

But, outside, the dead leaves turned slowly, and rustled on the grass; while the soft "drip, drip" of autumn fell all around. The dying year was almost dead; and nature waited for her pall of snow.

CHAPTER II

THE FORERUNNER

“What it is to have somebody to talk to, at last! And *you*, of all people, dear Doctor! Though I still fail to understand how a patient, who has brought you down to these parts, can wait for your visit until to-morrow morning, thus giving a perfectly healthy person, such as myself, the inestimable privilege of your company at tea, dinner, and breakfast, with delightful *tête-à-têtes* in between. All the world knows your minutes are golden.”

Thus Lady Ingleby, as she poured out the doctor’s tea, and handed it to him.

Deryck Brand placed the cup carefully on his corner of the folding tea-table, helped himself to thin bread-and-butter; then answered, with his most charming smile,

“Mine would be a very dismal profession dear lady, if it precluded me from ever having a meal, or a conversation, or from spending a pleasant evening, with a perfectly healthy person. I find the surest way to live one’s life to the full, accomplishing the maximum amount of work with the minimum amount of strain, is to cultivate the habit of living in the present; giving the whole mind to the scene, the subject, the person, of the moment. Therefore, with your leave, we will dismiss my patients, past and future; and enjoy, to the full, this unexpected *tête-à-tête*.”

Myra Ingleby looked at her visitor. His forty-two years sat lightly on him, notwithstanding the streaks of silver in the dark hair just over each temple. There was a youthful alertness about the tall athletic figure; but the lean brown face, clean shaven and reposeful, held a look of quiet strength and power, mingled with a keen kindness and ready comprehension, which inspired trust, and drew forth confidence.

The burden of a great loneliness seemed lifted from Myra’s heart.

“Do you always put so much salt on your bread-and-butter?” she said. “And how glad I am to be ‘the person of the moment.’ Only – until this mysterious ‘patient in the neighbourhood’ demands your attention, – you ought to be having a complete holiday, and I must try to forget that I am talking to the greatest nerve specialist of the day, and only realise the pleasure of entertaining so good a friend of Michael’s and my own. Otherwise I should be tempted to consult you; for I really believe, Sir Deryck, for the first time in my life, I am becoming neurotic.”

The doctor did not need to look at his hostess. His practised eye had already noted the thin cheeks; the haunted look; the purple shadows beneath the lovely grey eyes, for which the dark fringes of black eyelashes were not altogether accountable. He leaned forward and looked into the fire.

“If such is really the case,” he said, “that you should be aware of it, is so excellent a symptom, that the condition cannot be serious. But I want you to remember, Lady Ingleby, that I count all my patients, friends; also that my friends may consider themselves at liberty, at any moment, to become my patients. So consult me, if I can be of any use to you.”

The doctor helped himself to more bread-and-butter, folding it with careful precision.

Lady Ingleby held out her hand for his cup, grateful that he did not appear to notice the rush of unexpected tears to her eyes. She busied herself with the urn until she could control her voice; then said, with a rather tremulous laugh: “Ah, thank you! Presently – if I may – I gladly will consult you. Meanwhile, how do you like ‘the scene of the moment’? Do you consider my boudoir improved? Michael made all these alterations before he went away. The new electric lights are a patent arrangement of his own. And had you seen his portrait? A wonderful likeness, isn’t it?”

The doctor looked around him, appreciatively.

“I have been admiring the room, ever since I entered,” he said. “It is charming.” Then he raised his eyes to the picture over the mantelpiece: – the life-sized portrait of a tall, bearded man, with the high brow of the scholar and thinker; the eyes of the mystic; the gentle unruffled expression of the

saint. He appeared old enough to be the father of the woman in whose boudoir his portrait was the central object. The artist had painted him in an old Norfolk shooting-suit, leather leggings, hunting-crop in hand, seated in a garden chair, beside a rustic table. Everything in the picture was homely, old, and comfortable; the creases in the suit were old friends; the ancient tobacco pouch on the table was worn and stained. Russet-brown predominated, and the highest light in the painting was the clear blue of those dreamy, musing eyes. They were bent upon the table, where sat, in an expectant attitude of adoring attention, a white toy-poodle. The palpable devotion between the big man and the tiny dog, the concentrated affection with which they looked at one another, were very cleverly depicted. The picture might have been called: "We two"; also it left an impression of a friendship in which there had been no room for a third. The doctor glanced, for an instant, at the lovely woman on the lounge, behind the silver urn, and his subconsciousness propounded the question: "Where did *she* come in?" But the next moment he turned towards the large armchair on his right, where a small dejected mass of white curls lay in a huddled heap. It was impossible to distinguish between head and tail.

"Is this the little dog?" asked the doctor.

"Yes; that is Peter. But in the picture he is smart and properly clipped, and feeling better than he does just now. Peter and Michael are devoted to each other; and, when Michael is away, Peter is left in my charge. But I am not fond of small dogs; and I really consider Peter very much spoilt. Also I always feel he just tolerates me because I am Michael's wife, and remains with me because, where I am, there Michael will return. But I am quite kind to him, for Michael's sake. Only he really is a nasty little dog; and too old to be allowed to continue. Michael always speaks of him as if he were quite too good to live; and, personally, I think it is high time he went where all good dogs go. I cannot imagine what is the matter with him now. Since yesterday afternoon he has refused all his food, and been so restless and fidgety. He always sleeps on Michael's bed; and, as a rule, after I have put him there, and closed the door between Michael's room and mine, I hear no more of Peter, until he barks to be let out in the morning, and my maid takes him down-stairs. But last night, he whined and howled for hours. At length I got up, found Michael's old shooting jacket – the very one in the portrait – and laid it on the bed. Peter crawled into it, and cuddled down, I folded the sleeves around him, and he seemed content. But to-day he still refuses to eat. I believe he is dyspeptic, or has some other complaint, such as dogs develop when they are old. Honestly – don't you think – a little effective poison, in an attractive pill – ?"

"Oh, hush!" said the doctor. "Peter may not be asleep."

Lady Ingleby laughed. "My dear Sir Deryck! Do you suppose animals understand our conversation?"

"Indeed I do," replied the doctor. "And more than that, they do not require the medium of language. Their comprehension is telepathic. They read our thoughts. A nervous rider or driver can terrify a horse. Dumb creatures will turn away from those who think of them with dislike or aversion; whereas a true lover of animals can win them without a spoken word. The thought of love and of goodwill reaches them telepathically, winning instant trust and response. Also, if we take the trouble to do so, we can, to a great extent, arrive at their ideas, in the same way."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Lady Ingleby. "Well, I wish you would thought-read what is the matter with Peter. I shall not know how to face Michael's home-coming, if anything goes wrong with his beloved dog."

The doctor lay back in his armchair; crossed his knees the one over the other; rested his elbows on the arms of the chair; then let his finger-tips meet very exactly. Instinctively he assumed the attitude in which he usually sat when bending his mind intently on a patient. Presently he turned and looked steadily at the little white heap curled up in the big armchair.

The room was very still.

"Peter!" said the doctor, suddenly.

Peter sat up at once, and peeped at the doctor, through his curls.

“Poor little Peter,” said the doctor, kindly.

Peter moved to the edge of the chair; sat very upright, and looked eagerly across to where the doctor was sitting. Then he wagged his tail, tapping the chair with quick, anxious, little taps.

“The first wag I have seen in twenty-four hours,” remarked Lady Ingleby; but neither Deryck Brand nor Shockheaded Peter heeded the remark.

The anxious eyes of the dog were gazing, with an agony of question, into the kind keen eyes of the man.

Without moving, the doctor spoke.

“Yes, little Peter,” he said.

Peter’s small tufted tail ceased thumping. He sat very still for a moment; then quietly moved back to the middle of the chair, turned round and round three or four times; then lay down, dropping his head between his paws with one long shuddering sigh, like a little child which has sobbed itself to sleep.

The doctor turned, and looked at Lady Ingleby.

“What does that mean?” queried Myra, astonished.

“Little Peter asked a question,” replied Sir Deryck, gravely; “and I answered it.”

“Wonderful! Will you talk this telepathy over with Michael when he comes home? It would interest him.”

The doctor looked into the fire.

“It is a big subject,” he said. “When I can spare the time, I am thinking of writing an essay on the mental and spiritual development of animals, as revealed in the Bible.”

“Balaam’s ass?” suggested Lady Ingleby, promptly.

The doctor smiled. “Quite so,” he said. “But Balaam’s ass is neither the only animal in the Bible, nor the most interesting case. Have you ever noticed the many instances in which animals immediately obeyed God’s commands, even when those commands ran counter to their strongest instincts? For instance: – the lion, who met the disobedient man of God on the road from Bethel. The instinct of the beast, after slaying the man, would have been to maul the body, drag it away into his lair, and devour it. But the Divine command was: – that he should slay, but not eat the carcass, nor tear the ass. The instinct of the ass would have been to flee in terror from the lion; but, undoubtedly, a Divine assurance overcame her natural fear; and all men who passed by beheld this remarkable sight: – a lion and an ass standing sentry, one on either side of the dead body of the man of God; and there they remained until the old prophet from Bethel arrived, to fetch away the body and bury it.”

“Extraordinary!” said Lady Ingleby. “So they did. And now one comes to think of it there are plenty of similar instances. The instinct of the serpent which Moses lifted up on a pole, would have been to come scriggling down, and go about biting the Israelites, instead of staying up on the pole, to be looked at for their healing.”

The doctor smiled. “Quite so,” he said, “Only, we must not quote him as an instance; because, being made of brass, I fear he was devoid of instinct. Otherwise he would have been an excellent case in point. And I believe animals possess far more spiritual life than we suspect. Do you remember a passage in the Psalms which says that the lions ‘seek their meat from God’? And, more striking still, in the same Psalm we read of the whole brute creation, that when God hides His face ‘they are troubled.’ Good heavens!” said the doctor, earnestly; “I wish *our* spiritual life always answered to these two tests: – that God’s will should be paramount over our strongest instincts; and that any cloud between us and the light of His face, should cause us instant trouble of soul.”

“I like that expression ‘spiritual life,’” said Lady Ingleby. “I am sure you mean by it what other people sometimes express so differently. Did you hear of the Duchess of Meldrum attending that big evangelistic meeting in the Albert Hall? I really don’t know exactly what it was. Some sort of non-sectarian mission, I gather, with a preacher over from America; and the meetings went on for a fortnight. It would never have occurred to me to go to them. But the dear old duchess always likes to

be 'in the know' and to sample everything. Besides, she holds a proprietary stall. So she sailed into the Albert Hall one afternoon, in excellent time, and remained throughout the entire proceedings. She enjoyed the singing; thought the vast listening crowd, marvellous; was moved to tears by the eloquence of the preacher, and was leaving the hall more touched than she had been for years, and fully intending to return, bringing others with her, when a smug person, hovering about the entrance, accosted her with: 'Excuse me madam; are you a Christian?' The duchess raised her lorgnette in blank amazement, and looked him tip and down. Very likely the tears still glistened upon her proud old face. Anyway this impossible person appears to have considered her a promising case. Emboldened by her silence, he laid his hand upon her arm, and repeated his question: 'Madam, are you a Christian?' Then the duchess awoke to the situation with a vengeance. 'My good man,' she said, clearly and deliberately, so that all in the lobby could hear; 'I should have thought it would have been perfectly patent to your finely trained perceptions, that I am an engaging mixture of Jew, Turk, Infidel, and Heathen Chineese! Now, if you will kindly stand aside, I will pass to my carriage.' – And the duchess sampled no more evangelistic meetings!"

The doctor sighed. "Tactless," he said. "Ah, the pity of it, when 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread!'"

"People scream with laughter, when the duchess tells it," said Lady Ingleby; "but then she imitates the unctuous person so exactly; and she does not mention the tears. I have them from an eye-witness. But – as I was saying – I like your expression: 'spiritual life.' It really holds a meaning; and, though one may have to admit one does not possess any, or, that what one does possess is at a low ebb, yet one sees the genuine thing in others, and it is something to believe in, at all events. – Look how peacefully little Peter is sleeping. You have evidently set his mind at rest. That is Michael's armchair; and, therefore, Peter's. Now we will send away the tea-things; and then – may I become a patient?"

CHAPTER III

WHAT PETER KNEW

“Isn’t my good Groatley a curious looking person?” said Lady Ingleby, as the door closed behind the butler. “I call him the Gryphon, because he looks perpetually astonished. His eyebrows are like black horseshoes, and they mount higher and higher up his forehead as one’s sentence proceeds. But he is very faithful, and knows his work, and Michael approves him. Do you like this portrait of Michael? Garth Dalmain stayed here a few months before he lost his sight, poor boy, and painted us both. I believe mine was practically his last portrait. It hangs in the dining-room.”

The doctor moved his chair opposite the fireplace, so that he could sit facing the picture over the mantelpiece, yet turn readily toward Lady Ingleby on his left. On his right, little Peter, with an occasional sobbing sigh, slept heavily in his absent master’s chair. The log-fire burned brightly. The electric light, from behind amber glass, sent a golden glow as of sunshine through the room. The dank damp drip of autumn had no place in this warm luxury. The curtains were closely drawn; and that which is not seen, can be forgotten.

The doctor glanced at the clock. The minute-hand pointed to the quarter before six.

He lifted his eyes to the picture.

“I hardly know Lord Ingleby sufficiently well to give an opinion; but I should say it is an excellent likeness, possessing, to a large degree, the peculiar quality of all Dalmain’s portraits: – the more you look at them, the more you see in them. They are such extraordinary character studies. With your increased knowledge of the person, grows your appreciation of the cleverness of the portrait.”

“Yes,” said Lady Ingleby, leaning forward to look intently up at the picture. “It often startles me as I come into the room, because I see a fresh expression on the face, just according to my own mood, or what I happen to have been doing; and I realise Michael’s mind on the subject more readily from the portrait than from my own knowledge of him. Garth Dalmain was a genius!”

“Now tell me,” said the doctor, gently. “Why did you leave town, your many friends, your interests there, in order to bury yourself down here, during this dismal autumn weather? Surely the strain of waiting for news would have been less, within such easy reach of the War Office and of the evening papers.”

Lady Ingleby laughed, rather mirthlessly.

“I came away, Sir Deryck, partly to escape from dear mamma; and as you do not know dear mamma, it is almost impossible for you to understand how essential it was to escape. When Michael is away, I am defenceless. Mamma swoops down; takes up her abode in my house; reduces my household, according to their sex and temperament, to rage, hysterics, or despair; tells unpalatable home-truths to my friends, so that all – save the duchess – flee discomfited. Then mamma proceeds to ‘divide the spoil’! In other words: she lies in wait for my telegrams, and opens them herself, saying that if they contain *good* news, a dutiful daughter should delight in at once sharing it with her; whereas, if they contain *bad* news, which heaven forbid! – and surely, with mamma snorting skyward, heaven would not venture to do otherwise! —*she* is the right person to break it to me, gently. I bore it for six weeks; then fled down here, well knowing that not even the dear delight of bullying me would bring mamma to Shenstone in autumn.”

The doctor’s face was grave. For a moment he looked silently into the fire. He was a man of many ideals, and foremost among them was his ideal of the relation which should be between parents and children; of the loyalty to a mother, which, even if forced to admit faults or failings, should tenderly shield them from the knowledge or criticism of outsiders. It hurt him, as a sacrilege, to hear a daughter speak thus of her mother; yet he knew well, from facts which were common knowledge, how little cause the sweet, lovable woman at his side had to consider the tie either a sacred or a tender

one. He had come to help, not to find fault. Also, the minute-hand was hastening towards the hour; and the final instructions of the kind-hearted old Duchess of Meldrum, as she parted from him at the War Office, had been: "Remember! Six o'clock from London. I shall *insist* upon its being kept back until then. If they make difficulties, I shall camp in the entrance and 'hold up' every messenger who attempts to pass out. But I am accustomed to have my own way with these good people. I should not hesitate to ring up Buckingham Palace, if necessary, as they very well know! So you may rest assured it will not leave London until six o'clock. It gives you ample time."

Therefore the doctor said: "I understand. It does not come within my own experience; yet I think I understand. But tell me, Lady Ingleby. If bad news were to come, would you sooner receive it direct from the War Office, in the terribly crude wording which cannot be avoided in those telegrams; or would you rather that a friend – other than your mother – broke it to you, more gently?"

Myra's eyes flashed. She sat up with instant animation.

"Oh, I would receive it direct," she said. "It would be far less hard, if it were official. I should hear the roll of the drums, and see the wave of the flag. For England, and for Honour! A soldier's daughter, and a soldier's wife, should be able to stand up to anything. If they had to tell me Michael was in great danger, I should share his danger in receiving the news without flinching. If he were wounded, as I read the telegram I should receive a wound myself, and try to be as brave as he. All which came direct from the war, would unite me to Michael. But interfering friends, however well-meaning, would come between. If *he* had not been shielded from a bullet or a sword-thrust, why should *I* be shielded from the knowledge of his wound?"

The doctor screened his face with his hand,

"I see," he said.

The clock struck six.

"But that was not the only reason I left town," continued Lady Ingleby, with evident effort. Then she flung out both hands towards him. "Oh, doctor! I wonder if I might tell you a thing which has been a burden on my heart and life for years!"

There followed a tense moment of silence; but the doctor was used to such moments, and could usually determine during the silence, whether the confidence should be allowed or avoided. He turned and looked steadily at the lovely wistful face.

It was the face of an exceedingly beautiful woman, nearing thirty. But the lovely eyes still held the clear candour of the eyes of a little child, the sweet lips quivered with quickly felt emotion, the low brow showed no trace of shame or sin. The doctor knew he was in the presence of one of the most popular hostesses, one of the most admired women, in the kingdom. Yet his keen professional insight revealed to him an arrested development; possibilities unfulfilled; a problem of inadequacy and consequent disappointment, to which he had not the key. But those outstretched hands eagerly held it towards him. Could he bring help, if he accepted a knowledge of the solution; or – did help come too late?

"Dear Lady Ingleby," he said, quietly; "tell me anything you like; that is to say, anything which you feel assured Lord Ingleby would allow discussed with a third person."

Myra leaned back among the cushions and laughed – a gay little laugh, half of amusement, half of relief.

"Oh, Michael would not mind!" she said. "Anything Michael would mind, I have always told straight to himself; and they were silly little things; such as foolish people trying to make love to me; or a foreign prince, with moustaches like the German Emperor's, offering to shoot Michael, if I would promise to marry him when his period of consequent imprisonment was over. I cut the idiots who had presumed to make love to me, ever after; and assured the foreign prince, I should undoubtedly kill him myself, if he hurt a hair of Michael's head! No, dear doctor. My life is clear of all that sort of complication. My trouble is a harder one, involving one's whole life-problem. And that problem is

incompetence and inadequacy – not towards the world, I should not care a rap for that; but towards the one to whom I owe most: towards Michael, – my husband.”

The doctor moved uneasily in his chair, and glanced at the clock.

“Oh, hush!” he said. “Do not – ”

“No!” cried Myra. “You must not stop me. Let me at last have the relief of speech! My friend, I am twenty-eight; I have had ten years of married life; yet I do not believe I have ever really grown up! In heart and brain I am an undeveloped child, and I know it; and, worse still, Michael knows it, and —*Michael does not mind*. Listen! It dates back to years ago. Mamma never allowed any of her daughters to grow up. We were permitted no individuality of our own, no opinions, no independence. All that was required of us, was to ‘do her behests, and follow in her train.’ Forgive the misquotation. We were always children in mamma’s eyes. We grew tall; we grew good-looking; but we never grew up. We remained children, to be snubbed, domineered over, and bullied. My sisters, who were good children, had plenty of jam and cake; and, eventually, husbands after mamma’s own heart were found for them. Perhaps you know how those marriages have turned out?”

Lady Ingleby paused, and the doctor made an almost imperceptible sign of assent. One of the ladies in question, a most unhappy woman, was under treatment in his Mental Sanatorium at that very moment; but he doubted whether Lady Ingleby knew it.

“I was the black sheep,” continued Myra, finding no remark forthcoming. “Nothing I did was ever right; everything I did was always wrong. When Michael met me I was nearly eighteen, the height I am now, but in the nursery, as regards mental development or knowledge of the world; and, as regards character, a most unhappy, utterly reckless, little child. Michael’s love, when at last I realised it, was wonderful to me. Tenderness, appreciation, consideration, were experiences so novel that they would have turned my head, had not the elation they produced been counterbalanced by a gratitude which was overwhelming; and a terror of being handed back to mamma, which would have made me agree to anything. Years later, Michael told me that what first attracted him to me was a look in my eyes just like the look in those of a favourite spaniel of his, who was always in trouble with everyone else, and had just been accidentally shot, by a keeper. Michael told me this himself; and really thought I should be pleased! Somehow it gave me the key to my standing with him – just that of a very tenderly-loved pet dog. No words can say how good he has always been to me. If I lost him, I should lose my all – everything which makes home, home; and life a safe, and certain, thing. But if *he* lost little Peter, it would be a more real loss to him than if he lost me; because Peter is more intelligent for his size, and really more of an actual companion to Michael, than I am. Many a time, when he has passed through my room on the way to his, with Peter tucked securely under his arm; and saying, ‘Good-night, my dear,’ to me, has gone in and shut the door, I have felt I could slay little Peter, because he had the better place, and because he looked at me through his curls, as he was carried away, as if to say: ‘*You are out of it!*’ Yet I knew I had all I deserved; and Michael’s kindness and goodness and patience were beyond words. Only – only – ah, *can* you understand? I would sooner he had found fault and scolded; I would sooner have been shaken and called a fool, than smiled at, and left alone. I was in the nursery when he married me; I have been in the school-room ever since, trying to learn life’s lessons, alone, without a teacher. Nothing has helped me to grow up. Michael has always told me I am perfect, and everything I do is perfect, and he does not want me different. But I have never really shared his life and interests. If I make idiotic mistakes he does not correct me. I have to find them out, when I repeat them before others. When I made that silly blunder about the brazen serpent, you so kindly put me right. Michael would have smiled and let it pass as not worth correcting; then I should have repeated it before a roomful of people, and wondered why they looked amused! Ah, but what do I care for people, or the world! It is my true place beside Michael I want to win. I want to ‘grow up unto him in all things.’ Yes, I know that is a text. I am famous for misquotations, or rather, misapplications. But it expresses my meaning – as the duchess remarks, when *she* has said something mild under provocation, and her parrot swears! – And now tell me, dear wise kind doctor;

you, who have been the lifelong friend of that grand creature, Jane Dalmain; you, who have done so much for dozens of women I know; tell me how I can cease to be inadequate towards my husband.”

The passionate flow of words ceased suddenly. Lady Ingleby leaned back against the cushions. Peter sighed in his sleep.

A clock in the hall chimed the quarter after six.

The doctor looked steadily into the fire. He seemed to find speech difficult.

At last he said, in a voice which shook slightly: “Dear Lady Ingleby, he did not – he does not – think you so.”

“No, no!” she cried, sitting forward again. “He thinks of me nothing but what is kind and right. But he never expected me to be more than a nice, affectionate, good-looking dog; and I – I have not known how to be better than his expectations. But, although he is so patient, he sometimes grows unutterably tired of being with me. All other pet creatures are dumb; but I love talking, and I constantly say silly things, which do not *sound* silly, until I have said them. He goes off to Norway, fishing; to the Engadine, mountain-climbing; to this horrid war, risking his precious life. Anywhere to get away alone; anywhere to – ”

“Hush,” said the doctor, and laid a firm brown hand, for a moment, on the white fluttering fingers. “You are overwrought by the suspense of these past weeks. You know perfectly well that Lord Ingleby volunteered for this border war because he was so keen on experimenting with his new explosives, and on trying these ideas for using electricity in modern warfare, at which he has worked so long.”

“Oh, yes, I know,” said Myra, smiling wistfully. “Tiresome things, which keep him hours in his laboratory. And he has some very clever plan for long distance signalling from fort to fort – hieroglyphics in the sky, isn’t it? you know what I mean. But the fact that he volunteered into all this danger, merely to do experimenting, makes it harder to bear than if he had been at the head of his old regiment, and gone at the imperative call of duty. However – nothing matters so long as he comes home safely. And now you – you, Sir Deryck – must help me to become a real helpmeet to Michael. Tell me how you helped – oh, very well, we will not mention names. But give me wise advice. Give me hope; give me courage. Make me strong.”

The doctor looked at the clock; and, even as he looked, the chimes in the hall rang out the half-hour.

“You have not yet told me,” he said, speaking very slowly, as if listening for some other sound; “you have not yet told me, your second reason for leaving town.”

“Ah,” said Lady Ingleby, and her voice held a deeper, older, tone – a note bordering on tragedy. “Ah! I left town, Sir Deryck, because other people were teaching me love-lessons, and I did not want to learn them apart from Michael. I stayed with Jane Dalmain and her blind husband, before they went back to Gleneesh. You remember? They were in town for the production of his symphony. I saw that ideal wedded life, and I realised something of what a perfect mating of souls could mean. And then – well, there were others; people who did not understand how wholly I am Michael’s; nothing actually wrong; but not so fresh and youthful as Billy’s innocent adoration; and I feared I should accidentally learn what only Michael must teach. Therefore I fled away! Oh, doctor; if I ever learned from another man, that which I have failed to learn from my own husband, I should lie at Michael’s feet and implore him to kill me!”

The doctor looked up at the portrait over the mantelpiece. The calm passionless face smiled blandly at the tiny dog. One sensitive hand, white and delicate as a woman’s, was raised, forefinger uplifted, gently holding the attention of the little animal’s eager eyes. The magic skill of the artist supplied the doctor with the key to the problem. A *woman* – as mate, as wife, as part of himself, was not a necessity in the life of this thinker, inventor, scholar, saint. He could appreciate dumb devotion; he was capable of unlimited kindness, leniency, patience, toleration. But woman and dog alike, remained outside the citadel of his inner self. Had not her eyes resembled those of a favourite

spaniel, he would very probably not have wedded the lovely woman who, now, during ten years had borne his name; and even then he might not have done so, had not the tyranny of her mother, awakening his instinct of protection towards the weak and oppressed, aroused in him a determination to withstand that tyranny, and to carry her off triumphantly to freedom.

The longer the doctor looked, the more persistently the picture said; “We two; and where does *she* come in?” – Righteous wrath arose in the heart of Deryck Brand; for his ideal as to man’s worship of woman was a high one. As he thought of the closed door; of the lonely wife, humbly jealous of a toy-poodle, yet blaming herself only, for her loneliness, his jaw set, and his brow darkened. And all the while he listened for a sound from the outer world which must soon come.

Lady Ingleby noticed his intent gaze, and, leaning forward, also looked up at the picture. The firelight shone on her lovely face, and on the gleaming softness of her hair. Her lips parted in a tender smile; a pure radiance shone from her eyes.

“Ah, he *is* so good!” she said. “In all the years, he has never once spoken harshly to me. And see how lovingly he looks at Peter, who really is a most unattractive little dog. Did you ever hear the duchess’s *bon mot* about Michael? He and I once stayed together at Overdene; but she did not ask us again until he was abroad, fishing in Norway; so of course I went by myself. The duchess always does those things frankly, and explains them. Therefore on this occasion she said: ‘My dear, I enjoy a visit from you; but you must only come, when you can come alone. I will never undertake again, to live up to your good Michael. It really was a case of St. Michael and All Angels. *He* was St. Michael, and *we* had to be all angels!’ Wasn’t it like the duchess; and a beautiful testimony to Michael’s consistent goodness? Oh, I wish you knew him better. And, for the matter of that, I wish I knew him better! But after all I *am* his wife. Nothing can rob me of that. And don’t you think – when Michael comes home this time – somehow, all will be different; better than ever before?”

The hall clock chimed three-quarters after the hour.

The clang of a bell resounded through the silent house.

Peter sat up, and barked once, sharply.

The doctor rose and stood with his back to the fire, facing the door.

Myra’s question remained unanswered.

Hurried steps approached.

A footman entered, with a telegram for Lady Ingleby.

She took it with calm fingers, and without the usual sinking of the heart from sudden apprehension. Her mind was full of the conversation of the moment, and the doctor’s presence made her feel so strong and safe; so sure of no approach of evil tidings.

She did not hear Sir Deryck’s quiet voice say to the man: “You need not wait.”

As the door closed, the doctor turned away, and stood looking into the fire.

The room was very still.

Lady Ingleby opened her telegram, unfolded it slowly, and read it through twice.

Afterwards she sat on, in such absolute silence that, at length, the doctor turned and looked at her.

She met his eyes, quietly.

“Sir Deryck,” she said, “it is from the War Office. They tell me Michael has been killed. Do you think it is true?”

She handed him the telegram. Taking it from her, he read it in silence. Then: “Dear Lady Ingleby,” he said, very gently, “I fear there is no doubt. He has given his life for his country. You will be as brave in giving him, as he would wish his wife to be.”

Myra smiled; but the doctor saw her face slowly whiten.

“Yes,” she said; “oh, yes! I will not fail him. I will be adequate – at last.” Then, as if a sudden thought had struck her: “Did you know of this? Is it why you came?”

“Yes,” said the doctor, slowly. “The duchess sent me. She was at the War Office this morning when the news came in, inquiring for Ronald Ingram, who has been wounded, and is down with fever. She telephoned for me, and insisted on the telegram being kept back until six o’clock this evening, in order to give me time to get here, and to break the news to you first, if it seemed well.”

Myra gazed at him, wide-eyed. “And you let me say all that, about Michael and myself?”

“Dear lady,” said the doctor, and few had ever heard that deep firm voice, so nearly tremulous, “I could not stop you. But you did not say one word which was not absolutely loving and loyal.”

“How could I have?” queried Myra, her face growing whiter, and her eyes wider and more bright. “I have never had a thought which was not loyal and loving.”

“I know,” said the doctor. “Poor brave heart, – I know.”

Myra took up the telegram, and read it again.

“Killed,” she said; “*killed*. I wish I knew how.”

“The duchess is ready to come to you immediately, if you would like to have her,” suggested the doctor.

“No,” said Myra, smiling vaguely. “No; I think not. Not unless dear mamma comes. If that happens we must wire for the duchess, because now – now Michael is away – she is the only person who can cope with mamma. But please not, otherwise; because – well, you see, – she said she could not live up to Michael; and it does not sound funny now.”

“Is there anybody you would wish sent for at once?” inquired the doctor, wondering how much larger and brighter those big grey eyes could grow; and whether any living face had ever been so absolutely colourless.

“Anybody I should wish sent for at once? I don’t know. Oh, yes – there is one person; if she could come. Jane – you know? Jane Dalmain. I always say she is like the bass of a tune; so solid, and satisfactory, and beneath one. Nothing very bad could happen, if Jane were there. But of course this *has* happened; hasn’t it?”

The doctor sat down.

“I wired to Gleneesh this morning,” he said. “Jane will be here early to-morrow.”

“Then lots of people knew before I did?” said Lady Ingleby.

The doctor did not answer.

She rose, and stood looking down into the fire; her tall graceful figure drawn up to its full height, her back to the doctor, whose watchful eyes never left her for an instant.

Suddenly she looked across to Lord Ingleby’s chair.

“And I believe *Peter* knew,” she said, in a loud, high-pitched voice. “Good heavens! Peter knew; and refused his food because Michael was dead. And *I* said he had dyspepsia! Michael, oh Michael! Your wife didn’t know you were dead; but your dog knew! Oh Michael, Michael! Little Peter knew!”

She lifted her arms toward the picture of the big man and the tiny dog.

Then she swayed backward.

The doctor caught her, as she fell.

CHAPTER IV IN SAFE HANDS

All through the night Lady Ingleby lay gazing before her, with bright unseeing eyes.

The quiet woman from the Lodge, who had been, before her own marriage, a devoted maid-companion to Lady Ingleby, arrived in speechless sorrow, and helped the doctor tenderly with all there was to do.

But when consciousness returned, and realisation, they were accompanied by no natural expressions of grief; simply a settled stony silence; the white set face; the bright unseeing eyes.

Margaret O'Mara knelt, and wept, and prayed, kissing the folded hands upon the silken quilt. But Lady Ingleby merely smiled vaguely; and once she said: "Hush, my dear Maggie. At last we will be adequate."

Several times during the night the doctor came, sitting silently beside the bed, with watchful eyes and quiet touch. Myra scarcely noticed him, and again he wondered how much larger the big grey eyes would grow, in the pale setting of that lovely face.

Once he signed to the other watcher to follow him into the corridor. Closing the door, he turned and faced her. He liked this quiet woman, in her simple black merino gown, linen collar and cuffs, and neatly braided hair. There was an air of refinement and gentle self-control about her, which pleased the doctor.

"Mrs. O'Mara," he said; "she must weep, and she must sleep."

"She does not weep easily, sir," replied Margaret O'Mara, "and I have known her to lie widely awake throughout an entire night with less cause for sorrow than this."

"Ah," said the doctor; and he looked keenly at the woman from the Lodge. "I wonder what else you have known?" he thought. But he did not voice the conjecture. Deryck Brand rarely asked questions of a third person. His patients never had to find out that his knowledge of them came through the gossip or the breach of confidence of others.

At last he could allow that fixed unseeing gaze no longer. He decided to do what was necessary, with a quiet nod, in response to Margaret O'Mara's imploring look. He turned back the loose sleeve of the silk nightdress, one firm hand grasped the soft arm beneath it; the other passed over it for a moment with swift skilful pressure. Even Margaret's anxious eyes saw nothing more; and afterwards Myra often wondered what could have caused that tiny scar upon the whiteness of her arm.

Before long she was quietly asleep. The doctor stood looking down upon her. There was tragedy to him in this perfect loveliness. Now the clear candour of the grey eyes was veiled, the childlike look was no longer there. It was the face of a woman – and of a woman who had lived, and who had suffered.

Watching it, the doctor reviewed the history of those ten years of wedded life; piecing together that which she herself had told him; his own shrewd surmisings; and facts, which were common knowledge.

So much for the past. The present, for a few hours at least, was merciful oblivion. What would the future bring? She had bravely and faithfully put from her all temptation to learn the glory of life, and the completeness of love, from any save from her own husband. And he had failed to teach. Can the deaf teach harmony, or the blind reveal the beauties of blended colour?

But the future held no such limitations. The "garden enclosed" was no longer barred against all others by an owner who ignored its fragrance. The gate would be on the latch, though all unconscious until an eager hand pressed it, that its bolts and bars were gone, and it dare swing open wide.

"Ah," mused the doctor. "Will the right man pass by? Youth teaches youth; but is there a man amongst us strong enough, and true enough, and pure enough, to teach this woman, nearing thirty,

lessons which should have been learned during the golden days of girlhood. Surely somewhere on this earth the One Man walks, and works, and waits, to whom she is to be the One Woman? God send him her way, in the fulness of time.”

And in that very hour – while at last Myra slept, and the doctor watched, and mused, and wondered – in that very hour, under an Eastern sky, a strong man, sick of life, worn and disillusioned, fighting a deadly fever, in the sultry atmosphere of a soldier’s tent, cried out in bitterness of soul: “O God, let me die!” Then added the “never-the-less” which always qualifies a brave soul’s prayer for immunity from pain: “Unless – unless, O God, there be still some work left on this earth which only I can do.”

And the doctor had just said: “Send him her way, O God, in the fulness of time.”

The two prayers reached the Throne of Omniscience together.

Deryck Brand, looking up, saw the quiet eyes of Margaret O’Mara gazing gratefully at him, across the bed. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He smiled. “Never to be done lightly, Mrs. O’Mara,” he said. “Everything else should be tried first. But there are exceptions to the strictest rules, and it is fatal weakness to hesitate when confronted by the exception. Send for me, when she wakes; and, meanwhile, lie down on that couch yourself and have some sleep. You are worn out.”

The doctor turned away; but not before he had caught the sudden look of dumb anguish which leaped into those quiet eyes. He reached the door; paused a moment; then came back.

“Mrs. O’Mara,” he said, with a hand upon her shoulder, “you have a sorrow of your own?”

She drew away from him, in terror. “Oh, hush!” she whispered. “Don’t ask! Don’t unnerve me, sir. Help me to think of her, only.” Then, more calmly: “But of course I shall think of none but her, while she needs me. Only – only, sir – as you are so kind – ” she drew from her bosom a crumpled telegram, and handed it to the doctor. “Mine came at the same time as hers,” she said, simply.

The doctor unfolded the War Office message.

Regret to report Sergeant O’Mara killed in assault on Targai yesterday.

“He was a good husband,” said Margaret O’Mara, simply; “and we were very happy.”

The doctor held out his hand. “I am proud to have met you, Mrs. O’Mara. This seems to me the bravest thing I have ever known a woman do.”

She smiled through her tears. “Thank you, sir,” she said, tremulously. “But it is easier to bear my own sorrow, when I have work to do for her.”

“God Himself comfort you, my friend,” said Deryck Brand, and it was all he could trust his voice to say; nor was he ashamed that he had to fumble blindly for the handle of the door.

The doctor had finished breakfast, and was asking Groatley for a time-table, when word reached him that Lady Ingleby was awake. He went upstairs immediately.

Myra was sitting up in bed, propped with pillows. Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes bright and hard.

She held out her hand to the doctor.

“How good you have been,” she said, speaking very fast, in a high unnatural voice: “I am afraid I have given you a great deal of trouble. I don’t remember much about last night, excepting that they said Michael had been killed. Has Michael really been killed, do you think? And will they give me details? Surely I have a right to know details. Nothing can alter the fact that I was Michael’s wife, can it? Do go to breakfast, Maggie. There is nothing gained by standing there, smiling, and saying you do not want any breakfast. Everybody wants breakfast at nine o’clock in the morning. I should want breakfast, if Michael had not been killed. Tell her she ought to have breakfast, Sir Deryck. I believe she has been up all night. It is such a comfort to have her. She is so brave and bright; and so full of sympathy.”

“She is very brave,” said the doctor; “and you are right as to her need of breakfast. Go downstairs for a little while, Mrs. O’Mara. I will stay with Lady Ingleby.”

She moved obediently to the door; but Sir Deryck reached it before her. And the famous London specialist held the door open for the sergeant's young widow, with an air of deference such as he would hardly have bestowed upon a queen.

Then he came back to Lady Ingleby. His train left in three-quarters of an hour. But his task here was not finished. She had slept; but before he dare leave her, she must weep.

"Where is Peter?" inquired the excited voice from the bed. "He always barks to be let out, in the morning; but I have heard nothing of him yet."

"He was exhausted last night, poor little chap," said the doctor. "He could scarcely walk. I carried him up, myself; and put him on the bed in the next room. The coat was still there, I wrapped him in it. He licked my hand, and lay down, content."

"I want to see him," said Lady Ingleby. "Michael loved him. He seems all I have left of Michael."

"I will fetch him," said the doctor.

He went into the adjoining room, leaving the door ajar. Myra heard him reach the bed. Then followed a long silence.

"What is it?" she called at last. "Is he not there? Why are you so long?"

Then the doctor came back. He carried something in his arms, wrapped in the old shooting jacket.

"Dear Lady Ingleby," he said, "little Peter is dead. He must have died during the night, in his sleep. He was lying just as I left him, curled up in the coat; but he is quite cold and stiff. Faithful little heart!" said the doctor, with emotion, holding his burden, tenderly.

"What!" cried Myra, with both arms outstretched. "Peter has died, because Michael is dead; and I – I have not even shed a tear!" She fell back among the pillows in a paroxysm of weeping.

The doctor stood by, silently; uncertain what to do. Myra's sobs grew more violent, shaking the bed with their convulsive force. Then she began to shriek inarticulately about Michael and Peter, and to sob again, with renewed violence.

At that moment the doctor heard the horn of a motor-car in the avenue; then, almost immediately, the clang of the bell, and the sounds of an arrival below. A look of immense relief came into his face. He went to the top of the great staircase, and looked over.

The Honourable Mrs. Dalmain had arrived. The doctor saw her tall figure, in a dark green travelling coat, walk rapidly across the hall.

"Jane!" he said. "Jeanette! Ah, I knew you would not fail us! Come straight up. You have arrived at the right moment."

Jane looked up, and saw the doctor standing at the top of the stairs; something wrapped in an old coat, held carefully in his arms. She threw him one smile of greeting and assurance; then, wasting no time in words, rapidly pulled off her coat, hat, and fur gloves, flinging them in quick succession to the astonished butler. The doctor only waited to see her actually mounting the stairs. Then, passing through Lady Ingleby's room, he laid Peter's little body back on his dead master's bed, still wrapped in the old tweed coat.

As he stepped back into Lady Ingleby's room, closing the door between, he saw Jane Dalmain kneel down beside the bed, and gather the weeping form into her arms, with a gesture of immense protective tenderness.

"Oh Jane," sobbed Lady Ingleby, as she hid her face in the sweet comfort of that generous bosom; "Oh Jane! Michael has been killed! And little Peter died, because Michael was dead. Little Peter *died*, and *I* had not even shed a tear!"

The doctor passed quickly out, closing the door behind him. He did not wait to hear the answer. He knew it would be wise, and kind, and right. He left his patient in safe hands. Jane was there, at last. All would be well.

CHAPTER V

LADY INGLEBY'S REST-CURE

From the moment when the express for Cornwall had slowly but irrevocably commenced to glide away from the Paddington platform; when she had looked her last upon Margaret O'Mara's anxious devoted face, softly framed in her simple widow's bonnet; when she had realised that her somewhat original rest-cure had really safely commenced, and that she was leaving, not only her worries, but her very identity behind her – Lady Ingleby had leaned back with closed eyes in a corner of her reserved compartment, and given herself up to quiet retrospection.

The face, in repose, was sad – a quiet sadness, as of regret which held no bitterness. The cheek, upon which the dark fringe of lashes rested, was white and thin having lost the tint and contour of perfect health. But, every now and then, during those hours of retrospection, the wistful droop of the sweet expressive mouth curved into a smile, and a dimple peeped out unexpectedly, giving a look of youthfulness to the tired face.

When London and, its suburbs were completely left behind, and the summer sunshine blazed through the window from the clear blue of a radiant June sky, Lady Ingleby leaned forward, watching the rapid unfolding of country lanes and hedges; wide commons, golden with gorse; fir woods, carpeted with blue-bells; mossy banks, overhung with wild roses, honeysuckle, and traveller's-joy; the indescribable greenness and soft fragrance of England in early summer; and, as she watched, a responsive light shone in her sweet grey eyes. The drear sadness of autumn, the deadness of winter, the chill uncertainty of spring – all these were over and gone. "Flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come," murmurs the lover of Canticles; and in Myra Ingleby's sad heart there blossomed timidly, flowers of hope; vague promise of future joy, which life might yet hold in store. A blackbird in the hawthorn, trilled gaily; and Myra softly sang, to an air of Garth Dalmain's, the "Blackbird's Song."

“Wake, wake,
Sad heart!
Rise up, and sing!
On God's fair earth, 'mid blossoms blue.
Fresh hope must ever spring.
There is no room for sad despair,
When heaven's love is everywhere.”

Then, as the train sped onward through Wiltshire, Somerset, and Devon, Lady Ingleby felt the mantle of her despondence slipping from her, and reviewed the past, much as a prisoner might glance back into his dark narrow cell, from the sunlight of the open door, as he stood at last on the threshold of liberty.

Seven months had gone by since, on that chill November evening, the news of Lord Ingleby's death had reached Shenstone. The happenings of the weeks which followed, now seemed vague and dreamlike to Myra, just a few events standing out clearly from the dim blur of misery. She remembered the reliable strength of the doctor; the unselfish devotion of Margaret O'Mara; the unspeakable comfort of Jane's wholesome understanding tenderness. Then the dreaded arrival of her mother; followed, immediately, according to promise, by the protective advent of Georgina, Duchess of Meldrum; after which, tragedy and comedy walked hand in hand; and the silence of mourning was enlivened by the "Hoity-toity!" of the duchess, and the indignant sniffs of Mrs. Collier-Cray.

Later on, details of Lord Ingleby's death came to hand, and his widow had to learn that he had fallen – at the attempt upon Targai, it is true – but the victim of an accident; losing his life, not at the hands of the savage enemy, but through the unfortunate blunder of a comrade. Myra never very clearly grasped the details: – a wall to be undermined; his own patent and fearful explosive; the grim enthusiasm with which he insisted upon placing it himself, arranging to have it fired by his patent electrical plan. Then the mistaking of a signal; the fatal pressing of a button five minutes too soon; an electric flash in the mine, a terrific explosion, and instant death to the man whose skill and courage had made the gap through which crowds of cheering British soldiers, bursting from the silent darkness, dashed to expectant victory.

When full details reached the War Office, a Very Great Personage called at her house in Park Lane personally to explain to Lady Ingleby the necessity for the hushing up of some of these greatly-to-be-deplored facts. The whole unfortunate occurrence had largely partaken of the nature of an experiment. The explosive, the new method of signalling, the portable electric plant – all these were being used by Lord Ingleby and the young officers who assisted him, more or less experimentally and unofficially. The man whose unfortunate mistake caused the accident had an important career before him. His name must not be allowed to transpire. It would be unfair that a future of great promise should be blighted by what was an obvious accident. The few to whom the name was known had been immediately pledged to secrecy. Of course it would be confidentially given to Lady Ingleby if she really desired to hear it, but —

Then Myra took a very characteristic line. She sat up with instant decision; her pale face flushed, and her large pathetic grey eyes shone with sudden brightness.

“Pardon me, sir,” she said, “for interposing; but I never wish to know that name. My husband would have been the first to desire that it should not be told. And, personally, I should be sorry that there should be any man on earth whose hand I could not bring myself to touch in friendship. The hand that widowed me, did so without intention. Let it remain always to me an abstract instrument of the will of Providence. I shall never even try to guess to which of Michael's comrades that hand belonged.”

Lady Ingleby was honest in making this decision; and the Very Great Personage stepped into his brougham, five minutes later, greatly relieved, and filled with admiration for Lord Ingleby's beautiful and right-minded widow. She had always been all that was most charming. Now she added sound good sense, to personal charm. Excellent! Incomparable! Poor Ingleby! Poor – Ah! *he* must not be mentioned, even in thought.

Yes; Lady Ingleby was absolutely honest in coming to her decision. And yet, from that moment, two names revolved perpetually in her mind, around a ceaseless question – the only men mentioned constantly by Michael in his letters as being always with him in his experiments, sharing his interests and his dangers: Ronald Ingram, and Billy Cathcart – dear boys, both; her devoted adorers; almost her dearest, closest friends; faithful, trusted, tried. And now the haunting question circled around all thought of them: “Was it Ronald? Or was it Billy? Which? Billy or Ronnie? Ronnie or Billy?” Myra had said: “I shall never even try to guess,” and she had said it honestly. She did not try to guess. She guessed, in spite of trying not to do so; and the certainty, and yet *uncertainty* of her surmisings told on her nerves, becoming a cause of mental torment which was with her, subconsciously, night and day.

Time went on. The frontier war was over. England, as ever, had been bound to win in the end; and England had won. It had merely been a case of time; of learning wisdom by a series of initial mistakes; of expending a large amount of British gold and British blood. England's supremacy was satisfactorily asserted; and, those of her brave troops who had survived the initial mistakes, came home; among them Ronald Ingram and Billy Cathcart; the former obviously older than when he went away, gaunt and worn, pale beneath his bronze, showing unmistakable signs of the effects of a severe wound and subsequent fever. “Too interesting for words,” said the Duchess of Meldrum to Lady Ingleby, recounting her first sight of him. “If only I were fifty years younger than I am, I would marry

the dear boy immediately, take him down to Overdene, and nurse him back to health and strength. Oh, you need not look incredulous, my dear Myra! I always mean what I say, as you very well know.”

But Lady Ingleby denied all suspicion of incredulity, and merely suggested languidly, that – bar the matrimonial suggestion – the programme was an excellent one, and might well be carried out. Young Ronald being of the same opinion, he was soon installed at Overdene, and had what he afterwards described as *the* time of his life, being pampered, spoiled, and petted by the dear old duchess, and never allowing her to suspect that one of the chief attractions of Overdene lay in the fact that it was within easy motoring distance of Shenstone Park.

Billy returned as young, as inconsequent, as irrepressible as ever. And yet in him also, Myra was conscious of a subtle change, for which she, all too readily, found a reason, far removed from the real one.

The fact was this. Both young men, in their romantic devotion to her, had yet been true to their own manhood, and loyal, at heart, to Lord Ingleby. But their loyalty had always been with effort. Therefore, when – the strain relaxed – they met her again, they were intensely conscious of her freedom and of their own resultant liberty. This produced in them, when with her, a restraint and shyness which Myra naturally construed into a confirmation of her own suspicions. She, having never found it the smallest effort to remember she was Michael’s, and to be faithful in every thought to him, was quite unconscious of her liberty. There having been no strain in remaining true to the instincts of her own pure, honest, honourable nature, there was no tension to relax.

So it very naturally came to pass that when one day Ronald Ingram had sat long with her, silently studying his boots, his strong face tense and miserable, every now and then looking furtively at her, then, as his eyes met the calm friendliness of hers, dropping them again to the floor: – “Poor Ronnie,” she mused, “with his ‘important career’ before him. Undoubtedly it was he who did it. And Billy knows it. See how fidgety Billy is, while Ronnie sits with me.”

But by-and-by it would be: “No; of course it was Billy – dear hot-headed impulsive young Billy; and Ronald, knowing it, feels guilty also. Poor little Billy, who was as a son to Michael! There was no mistaking the emotion in his face just now, when I merely laid my hand on his. Oh, impetuous scatter-brained boy!.. Dear heavens! I wish he wouldn’t hand me the bread-and-butter.”

Then, into this atmosphere of misunderstanding and uncertainty, intruded a fresh element. A first-cousin of Lord Ingleby’s, to whom had come the title, minus the estates, came to the conclusion that title and estates might as well go together. To that end, intruding upon her privacy on every possible occasion, he proceeded to pay business-like court to Lady Ingleby.

Thus rudely Myra awoke to the understanding of her liberty. At once, her whole outlook on life was changed. All things bore a new significance. Ronnie and Billy ceased to be comforts. Ronnie’s nervous misery assumed a new importance; and, coupled with her own suspicions, filled her with a dismayed horror. The duchess’s veiled jokes took point, and hurt. A sense of unprotected loneliness engulfed her. Every man became a prospective and dreaded suitor; every woman’s remarks seemed to hold an innuendo. Her name in the papers distracted her.

She recognised the morbidness of her condition, even while she felt unable to cope with it; and, leaving Shenstone suddenly, came up to town, and consulted Sir Deryck Brand.

“Oh, my friend,” she said, “help me! I shall never face life again.”

The doctor heard her patiently, aiding the recital by his strong understanding silence.

Then he said, quietly: “Dear lady, the diagnosis is not difficult. Also there is but one possible remedy.” He paused.

Lady Ingleby’s imploring eyes and tense expectancy, besought his verdict.

“A rest-cure,” said the doctor, with finality.

“Horrors, no!” cried Myra; “Would you shut me up within four walls; cram me with rice pudding and every form of food I most detest; send a dreadful woman to pound, roll, and pommel me, and tell me gruesome stories; keep out all my friends, all letters, all books, all news; and, after six weeks

send me out into the world again, with my figure gone, and not a sane thought upon any subject under the sun? Dear doctor, think of it! Stout, and an idiot! Oh, give me something in a bottle, to shake, and take three times a day – and let me go!”

The doctor smiled. He was famed for his calm patience.

“Your somewhat highly coloured description, dear Lady Ingleby, applies to a form of rest-cure such as I rarely, if ever, recommend. In your case it would be worse than useless. We should gain nothing by shutting you up with the one person who is doing you harm, and from whom we must contrive your escape.”

“The one person – ?” queried Myra, wide-eyed.

“A charming person,” smiled the doctor, “where the rest of mankind are concerned; but very bad for you just now.”

“But – whom?” questioned Myra, again. “Whom can you mean?”

“I mean Lady Ingleby,” replied the doctor, gravely. “When I send you away for your rest-cure, Lady Ingleby with her worries and questionings, doubts and fears, must be left behind. I shall send you to a little out-of-the-world village on the wild sea coast of Cornwall, where you know nobody, and nobody knows you. You must go incognito, as ‘Miss’ or ‘Mrs.’ – anything you please. Your rest-cure will consist primarily in being set free, for a time, from Lady Ingleby’s position, predicament, and perplexities. You must send word to all intimate friends, telling them you are going into retreat, and they must not write until they hear again. You will have leave to write one letter a week, to one person only; and that person must be one of whom I can approve. You must eat plenty of wholesome food; roam about all day long in the open-air; rise early, retire early; live entirely in a simple, beautiful, wholesome present, firmly avoiding all remembrance of a sad past, and all anticipation of an uncertain future. Nobody is to know where you are, excepting myself, and the one friend to whom you may write. But we will arrange that somebody – say, for instance, your devoted attendant from the Lodge, shall hold herself free to come to you at an hour’s notice, should you be overwhelmed with a sudden sense of loneliness. The knowledge of this, will probably keep the need from arising. You can communicate with me daily if you like, by letter or by telegram; but other people must not know where you are. I do not wish you followed by the anxious or restless thoughts of many minds. To-morrow I will give you the name of a place I recommend, and of a comfortable hotel where you can order rooms. It must be a place you have never seen, probably one of which you have never heard. We are nearing the end of May. I should like you to start on the first of June. If you want a house-party at Shenstone this summer, you may invite your guests for the first of July. Lady Ingleby will be at home again by then, fully able to maintain her reputation as a hostess of unequalled charm, graciousness, and popularity. Morbid self-consciousness is a condition of mind from which you have hitherto been so completely free, that this unexpected attack has altogether unnerved you, and requires prompt and uncompromising measures. . . . Yes, Jane Dalmain may be your correspondent. You could not have chosen better.”

This was the doctor’s verdict and prescription; and, as his patients never disputed the one, or declined to take the other, Myra found herself, on “the glorious first of June” flying south in the Great Western express, bound for the little fishing village of Tregarth where she had ordered rooms at the Moorhead Inn, in the name of Mrs. O’Mara.

CHAPTER VI AT THE MOORHEAD INN

The ruddy glow of a crimson sunset illumined cliff and hamlet, tinting the distant ocean into every shade of golden glory, as Myra walked up the gravelled path to the rustic porch of the Moorhead Inn, and looked around her with a growing sense of excited refreshment.

She had come on foot from the little wayside station, her luggage following in a barrow; and this mode of progression, minus a footman and maid, and carrying her own cloak, umbrella, and travelling-bag, was in itself a charming novelty.

At the door, she was received by the proprietress, a stately lady in black satin, wearing a double row of large jet beads, who reminded her instantly of all Lord Ingleby's maiden aunts. She seemed an accentuated, dignified, concentrated embodiment of them all; and Myra longed for Billy, to share the joke.

"Aunt Ingleby" requested Mrs. O'Mara to walk in, and hoped she had had a pleasant journey. Then she rang a very loud bell twice, in order to summon a maid to show her to her room; and, the maid not appearing at once, requested Mrs. O'Mara meanwhile to write her name in the visitors' book.

Lady Ingleby walked into the hall, passing a smoking-room on the left, and, noting a door, with "Coffee Room" upon it in gold lettering, down a short passage immediately opposite. Up from the centre of the hall, on her right, went the rather wide old-fashioned staircase; and opposite to it, against the wall, between the smoking-room and a door labelled "Reception Room," stood a marble-topped table. Lying open upon this table was a ponderous visitors' book. A fresh page had been recently commenced, as yet only containing four names. The first three were dated May the 8th, and read, in crabbed precise writing:

Miss Amelia Murgatroyd, Miss Eliza Murgatroyd, Miss Susannah Murgatroyd
... Lawn View, Putney.

Below these, bearing date a week later, in small precise writing of unmistakable character and clearness, the name:

Jim Airth ... London.

Pen and ink lay ready, and, without troubling to remove her glove, Lady Ingleby wrote beneath, in large, somewhat sprawling, handwriting:

Mrs. O'Mara ... The Lodge, Shenstone.

A maid appeared, took her cloak and bag, and preceded her up the stairs.

As she reached the turn of the staircase, Lady Ingleby paused, and looked back into the hall.

The door of the smoking-room opened, and a very tall man came out, taking a pipe from the pocket of his loose Norfolk jacket. As he strolled into the hall, his face reminded her of Ronnie's, deep-bronzed and thin; only it was an older face – strong, rugged, purposeful. The heavy brown moustache could not hide the massive cut of chin and jaw.

Catching sight of a fresh name in the book, he paused; then laying one large hand upon the table, bent over and read it.

Myra stood still and watched, noting the broad shoulders, and the immense length of limb in the leather leggings.

He appeared to study the open page longer than was necessary for the mere reading of the name. Then, without looking round, reached up, took a cap from the antler of a stag's head high up on the wall, stuck it on the back of his head; swung round, and went out through the porch, whistling like a blackbird.

“Jim Airth,” said Myra to herself, as she moved slowly on; “Jim Airth of *London*. What an address! He might just as well have put: ‘of the world!’ A cross between a guardsman and a cowboy; and very likely he will turn out to be a commercial-traveller.” Then, as she reached the landing and came in sight of the rosy-cheeked maid, holding open the door of a large airy bedroom, she added with a whimsical smile: “All the same, I wish I had taken the trouble to write more neatly.”

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