

H. Rider Haggard

Joan Haste

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Аннотация

The author of adventures as King Solomon's Mines and She turns to domestic drama in this romance. Joan is a shop girl of illegitimate birth a single mother at the same time. Torn from the love of country-dwelling Captain Henry Graves, Joan endures exile with a Dickensian London family, and pursuit by a Victorian-era stalker.

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TO I.H.

Il y a une page effrayante dans le livre des destinées humaines; on y lit en tête ces mots: "les désirs accomplis"
Georges Sand

Chapter 1

Joan Haste

Alone and desolate, within hearing of the thunder of the waters of the North Sea, but not upon them, stand the ruins of Ramborough Abbey. Once there was a city at their feet, now the city has gone; nothing is left of its greatness save the stone skeleton of the fabric of the Abbey above and the skeletons of the men who built it mouldering in the earth below. To the east, across a waste of uncultivated heath, lies the wide ocean; and, following the trend of the coast northward, the eye falls upon the red roofs of the fishing village of Bradmouth. When Ramborough was a town, this village was a great port; but the sea, advancing remorselessly, has choked its harbour and swallowed up the ancient borough which to-day lies beneath the waters.

With that of Ramborough the glory of Bradmouth is departed, and of its priory and churches there remains but one lovely and dilapidated fane, the largest perhaps in the east of England – that of Yarmouth alone excepted – and, as many think, the most beautiful. At the back of Bradmouth church, which, standing upon a knoll at some distance from the cliff, has escaped the fate of the city that once nestled beneath it, stretch rich marsh meadows, ribbed with raised lines of roadway. But these do not make up all the landscape, for between Bradmouth and the ruins of Ramborough, following the indentations of the sea coast and set back in a fold or depression of the ground, lie a chain of small and melancholy meres, whose brackish waters, devoid of sparkle even on the brightest day, are surrounded by coarse and worthless grass land, the haunt of the shore-shooter, and a favourite feeding- place of curlews, gulls, coots and other wild-fowl. Beyond these meres the ground rises rapidly, and is clothed in gorse and bracken, interspersed with patches of heather, till it culminates in the crest of a bank that marks doubtless the boundary of some primeval fiord or lake, where, standing in a ragged line, are groups of wind-torn Scotch fir trees, surrounding a grey and solitary house known as Moor Farm.

The dwellers in these parts – that is, those of them who are alive to such matters – think that there are few more beautiful spots than this slope of barren land pitted with sullen meres and bordered by the sea. Indeed, it has attractions in every season: even in winter, when the snow lies in drifts upon the dead fern,

and the frost-browed gorse shivers in the east wind leaping on it from the ocean. It is always beautiful, and yet there is truth in the old doggerel verse that is written in a quaint Elizabethan hand upon the fly-lead of one of the Bradmouth parish registers -

“Of Rambro’, north and west and south, Man’s eyes can never see enough; Yet winter’s gloom or summer’s light, Wide England hath no sadder sight.”

And so it is; even in the glory of June, when lizards run across the grey stonework and the gorse shows its blaze of gold, there is a stamp of native sadness on the landscape which lies between Bradmouth and Ramborough, that neither the hanging woodlands to the north, nor the distant glitter of the sea, on which boats move to and fro, can altogether conquer. Nature set that seal upon the district in the beginning, and the lost labours of the generations now sleeping round its rotting churches have but accentuated the primal impress of her hand.

Though on the day in that June when this story opens, the sea shone like a mirror beneath her, and the bees hummed in the flowers growing on the ancient graves, and the larks sang sweetly above her head, Joan felt this sadness strike her heart like the chill of an autumn night. Even in the midst of life everything about her seemed to speak of death and oblivion: the ruined church, the long neglected graves, the barren landscape, all cried to her with one voice, seeming to say, “Our troubles are done with, yours lie before you. Be like us, be like us.”

It was no high-born lady to whom these voices spoke in that

appropriate spot, nor were the sorrows which opened her ears to them either deep or poetical. To tell the truth, Joan Haste was but a village girl, or, to be more accurate, a girl who had spent most of her life in a village. She was lovely in her own fashion, it is true – but of this presently; and, through circumstances that shall be explained, she chanced to have enjoyed a certain measure of education, enough to awaken longings and to call forth visions that perhaps she would have been happier without. Moreover, although Fate had placed her humbly, Nature gave to her, together with the beauty of her face and form, a mind which, if a little narrow, certainly did not lack for depth, a considerable power of will, and more than her share of that noble dissatisfaction without which no human creature can rise in things spiritual or temporal, and having which, no human creature can be happy.

Her troubles were vulgar enough, poor girl: a scolding and coarse-minded aunt, a suitor toward whom she had no longings, the constant jar of the talk and jest of the ale-house where she lived, and the irk of some vague and half-understood shame that clung to her closely as the ivy clung to the ruined tower above her. Common though such woes be, they were yet sufficiently real to Joan – in truth, their somewhat sordid atmosphere pressed with added weight upon a mind which was not sordid. Those misfortunes that are proper to our station and inherent to our fate we can bear, if not readily, at least with some show of resignation; those that fall upon us from a sphere of which we

lack experience, or arise out of a temperament unsuited to its surroundings, are harder to endure. To be different from our fellows, to look upwards where they look down, to live inwardly at a mental level higher than our circumstances warrant, to desire that which is too far above us, are miseries petty in themselves, but gifted with Protean reproductiveness.

Put briefly, this was Joan's position. Her parentage was a mystery, at least so far as her father was concerned. Her mother was her aunt's younger sister; but she had never known this mother, whose short life closed within two years of Joan's birth. Indeed, the only tokens left to link their existences together were a lock of soft brown hair and a faded photograph of a girl not unlike herself, who seemed to have been beautiful. Her aunt, Mrs. Gillingwater, gave her these mementos of the dead some years ago, saying, with the brutal frankness of her class, that they were almost the only property that her mother had left behind her, so she, the daughter, might as well take possession of them.

Of this mother, however, there remained one other memento – a mound in the churchyard of the Abbey, where until quite recently the inhabitants of Ramborough had been wont to be laid to sleep beside their ancestors. This mound Joan knew, for, upon her earnest entreaty, Mr. Gillingwater, her uncle by marriage, pointed it out to her; indeed, she was sitting by it now. It had no headstone, and when Joan asked him why, he replied that those who were neither wife nor maid had best take their names with them six feet underground.

The poor girl shrank back abashed at this rough answer, nor did she ever return to the subject. But from this moment she knew that she had been unlucky in her birth, and though such an accident is by no means unusual in country villages, the sense of it galled her, lowering her in her own esteem. Still she bore no resentment against this dead and erring mother, but rather loved her with a strange and wondering love than which there could be nothing more pathetic. The woman who bore her, but whom she had never seen with remembering eyes, was often in her thoughts; and once, when some slight illness had affected the balance of her mind, Joan believed that she came and kissed her on the brow – a vision whereof the memory was sweet to her, though she knew it to be but a dream. Perhaps it was because she had nothing else to love that she clung thus to the impalpable, making a companion of the outcast dead whose blood ran in her veins. At the least this is sure, that when her worries overcame her, or the sense of incongruity in her life grew too strong, she was accustomed to seek this lowly mound, and, seated by it, heedless of the weather, she would fix her eyes upon the sea and soothe herself with a sadness that seemed deeper than her own.

Her aunt, indeed, was left to her, but from this relation she won no comfort. From many incidents trifling in themselves, but in the mass irresistible, Joan gathered that there had been little sympathy between her mother and Mrs. Gillingwater – if, in truth, their attitude was not one of mutual dislike. It would appear also that in her own case this want of affection was an

hereditary quality, seeing that she found it difficult to regard her aunt with any feeling warmer than tolerance, and was in turn held in an open aversion, which to Joan's mind, was scarcely mitigated by the very obvious pride Mrs. Gillingwater took in her beauty. In these circumstances Joan had often wondered why she was not dismissed to seek her fortune. More than once, when after some quarrel she sought leave to go, she found that there was no surer path to reconciliation than to proffer this request; and speeches of apology, which, as she knew well, were not due to any softening of Mrs. Gillingwater's temper, or regret for hasty misbehaviour, were at once showered upon her.

To what, then, were they due? The question was one that Joan took some years to answer satisfactorily. Clearly not to love, and almost as clearly to no desire to retain her services, since, beyond attending to her own room, she did but little work in the way of ministering to the wants and comforts of the few customers of the Crown and Mitre, nor was she ever asked to interest herself in such duties.

Gradually a solution to the riddle forced itself onto Joan's intelligence – namely, that in some mysterious way her aunt and uncle lived on her, not she on them. If this were not so, it certainly became difficult to understand how they did live, in view of the fact that Mr. Gillingwater steadily consumed the profits of the tap-room, if any, and that they had no other visible means of subsistence. Yet money never seemed to be wanting; and did Joan need a new dress, or any other luxury, it was given

to her without demur. More, when some years since she had expressed a sudden and spontaneous desire for education; after a few days' interval, which, it seemed to her, might well have been employed in reference to superior powers in the background, she was informed that arrangements had been made for her to be sent to a boarding school in the capital of the county. She went, to find that her fellow-pupils were for the most part the daughters of shopkeepers and large farmers, and that in consequence the establishment was looked down upon by the students of similar, but higher-class institutions in the same town, and by all who belonged to them. Joan being sensitive and ambitious, resented this state of affairs, though she had small enough right to do so, and on her return home informed her aunt that she wished to be taken away from that school and sent to another of a better sort. The request was received without surprise, and again there was a pause as though to allow of reference to others. Then she was told that if she did not like her school she could leave it, but that she was not to be educated above her station in life.

So Joan returned to the middle-class establishment, where she remained till she was over nineteen years of age. On the whole she was very happy there, for she felt that she was acquiring useful knowledge which she could not have obtained at home. Moreover, among her schoolfellows were certain girls, the daughters of poor clergymen and widows, ladies by birth, with whom she consorted instinctively, and who did not repel her advances.

At the age of nineteen she was informed suddenly that she must leave her school, though no hint of this determination had been previously conveyed to her. Indeed, but a day or two before her aunt had spoken of her return thither as if it were a settled thing. Pondering over this decision in much grief, Joan wondered why it had been arrived at, and more especially whether the visit that morning of her uncle's landlord, Mr. Levinger, who came, she understood, to see about some repairs to the house, had anything to do with it. To Mr. Levinger herself she had scarcely spoken half a dozen times in her life, and yet it seemed to her that whenever they met he regarded her with the keenest interest. Also on this particular occasion Joan chanced to pass the bar-parlour where Mr. Levinger was closeted with her aunt, and to overhear his parting words, or rather the tag of them – which was “too much of a lady,” a remark that she could not help thinking had to do with herself. Seeing her go by, he stopped her, keeping her in conversation for some minutes, then abruptly turned upon his heel and left the house with the air of a man who is determined not to say too much.

Then it was that Joan's life became insupportable to her. Accustomed as she had become to more refined associations, from which henceforth she was cut off, the Crown and Mitre, and most of those connected with it, grew hateful in her sight. In her disgust she racked her brain to find some means of escape, and could think of none other than the time-honoured expedient of “going as a governess.” This she asked leave to do, and the

permission was accorded after the usual pause; but here again she was destined to meet with disappointment. Her surroundings and her attainments were too humble to admit of her finding a footing in that overcrowded profession. Moreover, as one lady whom she saw told her frankly, she was far too pretty for this walk of life. At length she did obtain a situation, however, a modest one enough, that of nursery governess to the children of the rector of Bradmouth, Mr. Biggen. This post she held for nine months, till Mr. Biggen, a kind-hearted and scholarly man, noting her beauty and intelligence, began to take more interest in her than pleased his wife – a state of affairs that resulted in Joan's abrupt dismissal on the day previous to the beginning of this history.

To come to the last and greatest of her troubles: it will be obvious that such a woman would not lack for admirers. Joan had several, all of whom she disliked; but chiefly did she detest the most ardent and persistent of them, the favoured of her aunt, Mr. Samuel Rock. Samuel Rock was a Dissenter, and the best-to-do agriculturalist in the neighbourhood, farming some five hundred acres, most of them rich marsh-lands, of which three hundred or more were his own property inherited and acquired. Clearly, therefore, he was an excellent match for a girl in the position of Joan Haste, and when it is added that he had conceived a sincere admiration for her, and that to make her his wife was the principal desire of his life, it becomes evident that in the nature of things the sole object of hers ought to have been to meet his advances half-way. Unfortunately this was not the

case. For reasons which to herself were good and valid, however insufficient they may have appeared to others, Joan would have nothing to do with Samuel Rock. It was to escape from him that she had fled this day to Ramborough Abbey, whither she fondly hoped he would not follow her. It was the thought of him that made life seem so hateful to her even in the golden afternoon; it was terror of him that caused her to search out every possible avenue of retreat from the neighbourhood of Bradmouth.

She might have spared herself the trouble, for even as she sighed and sought, a shadow fell upon her, and looking up she saw Samuel Rock standing before her, hat in hand and smiling his most obsequious smile.

Chapter 2

Samuel Rock Declares Himself

Mr. Samuel Rock was young-looking rather than young in years, of which he might have seen some thirty-five, and, on the whole, not uncomely in appearance. His build was slender for his height, his eyes were blue and somewhat shifty, his features sharp and regular except the chin, which was prominent, massive, and developed almost to deformity. Perhaps it was to hide this blemish that he wore a brown beard, very long, but thin and straggling. His greatest peculiarity, however, was his hands, which were shaped like those of a woman, were long, white notwithstanding their exposure to the weather, and adorned with almond-shaped nails that any lady might have envied. These hands were never still; moreover, there was something furtive and unpleasant about them, capable as they were of the strangest contortions. Mr. Rock's garments suggested a compromise between the dress affected by Dissenters who are pillars of their local chapel and anxious to proclaim the fact, and those worn by the ordinary farmer, consisting as they did of a long-tailed black coat rather the worse for wear, a black felt wide-awake, and a pair of cord breeches and stout riding boots.

"How do you do, Miss Haste?" said Samuel Rock, in his soft, melodious voice, but not offering to shake hands, perhaps

because his fingers were engaged in nervously crushing the crown of his hat.

“How do you do?” answered Joan, starting violently. “How did you – -” (“find me here,” she was about to add; then, remembering that such a remark would show a guilty knowledge of being sought after, substituted) “get here?”

“I – I walked, Miss Haste,” he replied, looking at his legs and blushing, as though there were something improper about the fact; then added, “You are quite close to my house, Moor Farm, you know, and I was told that – I thought that I should find you here.”

“I suppose you mean that you asked my aunt, and she sent you after me?” said Joan bluntly.

Samuel smiled evasively, but made no other reply to this remark.

Then came a pause, while, with a growing irritation, Joan watched the long white fingers squeezing at the black wide-awake.

“You had better put your hat on, or you will catch cold,” she suggested, presently.

“Thank you, Miss Haste, it is not what I am liable to – not but what I take it kindly that you should think of my health;” and he carefully replaced the hat upon his head in such a fashion that the long brown hair showed beneath it in a ragged fringe.

“Oh, please don’t thank me,” said Joan rudely, dreading lest her remark should be taken as a sign of encouragement.

Then came another pause, while Samuel searched the heavens with his wandering blue eyes, as though to find inspiration there.

“You are very fond of graves, Miss Haste,” he said at length.

“Yes, Mr. Rock; they are comfortable to sit on – and I don’t doubt very good beds to sleep in,” she added, with a touch of grim humour.

Samuel gave a slight but perceptible shiver. He was a highly strung man, and, his piety notwithstanding, he did not appreciate the allusion. When you wish to make love to a young woman, to say the least of it, it is disagreeable if she begins to talk of that place whither no earthly love can follow.

“You shouldn’t think of such things at your age – you should not indeed, Miss Haste,” he replied; “there are many things you have got to think of before you think of them.”

“What things?” asked Joan rashly.

Again Samuel blushed.

“Well – husbands, and – cradles and such-like,” he answered vaguely.

“Thank you, I prefer graves,” Joan replied with tartness.

By this time it had dawned upon Samuel that he was “getting no forwarder.” For a moment he thought of retreat; then the native determination that underlay his soft voice and timid manner came to his aid.

“Miss Haste – Joan,” he said huskily, “I want to speak to you.”

Joan felt that the hour of trial had come, but still sought a feeble refuge in flippancy.

"You have been doing that for the last five minutes, Mr. Rock," she said; "and I should like to go home."

"No, no, not yet – not till you have heard what I have to say." And he made a quick movement as though to cut off her retreat.

"Well, be quick then," she answered, in a voice in which vexation and fear struggled for the mastery.

Twice Samuel strove to speak, and twice words failed him, for his agitation was very real. At last they came.

"I love you," he said, in an intense whisper. "By the God above you, and the dead beneath your feet, I love you, Joan, as you have never been loved before and never will be loved again!"

She threw her head back and looked at him, frightened by his passion. The realities of his declaration were worse than she had anticipated. His thin face was fierce with emotion, his sensitive lips quivered, and the long lithe fingers of his right hand played with his beard as though he were plaiting it. Joan grew seriously alarmed: she had never seen Samuel Rock look like this before.

"I am sorry," she murmured.

"Don't be sorry," he broke in; "why should you be sorry? It is a great thing to be loved as I love you, Joan, a thing that does not often come in the way of a woman, as you will find out before you die. Look here: do you suppose that I have not fought against this? Do you suppose that I wanted to fall into the power of a girl without a sixpence, without even an honest name? I tell you, Joan, I have fought against it and I have prayed against it since you were a chit of sixteen. Chance after chance have I let

slip through my fingers for your sake. There was Mrs. Morton yonder, a handsome body as a man need wish for a wife, with six thousand pounds invested and house property into the bargain, who as good as told me that she would marry me, and I gave her the go-by for you. There was the minister's widow, a lady born, and a holy woman, who would have had me fast enough, and I gave her the go-by for you. I love you, Joan – I tell you that I love you more than land or goods, more than my own soul, more than anything that is. I think of you all day, I dream of you all night. I love you, and I want you, and if I don't get you then I may as well die for all the world is worth to me." And he ceased, trembling with passion.

If Joan had been alarmed before, now she was terrified. The man's earnestness impressed her artistic sense – in a certain rude way there was something fine about it – but it awoke no answer within her heart. His passion repelled her; she had always disliked him, now she loathed him. Swiftly she reviewed the position in her mind, searching a way of escape. She knew well enough that he had not meant to affront her by his references to her poverty and the stain upon her birth – that these truths had broken from him together with that great truth which animated his life; nevertheless, with a woman's wit putting the rest aside, it was on these unlucky sayings that she pounced in her emergency.

"How, Mr. Rock," she asked, rising and standing before him, "how can you ask me to marry you, for I suppose that is what you mean, when you throw my poverty – and the rest – in my

teeth? I think, Mr. Rock, that you would do well to go back to Mrs. Morton, or the minister's widow who was born a lady, and to leave me in peace."

"Oh, don't be angry with me," he said, with something like a groan; "you know that I did not mean to offend you. Why should I offend you when I love you so, and want to win you? I wish that I had bitten out my tongue before I said that, but it slipped in with the rest. Will you have me, Joan? Look here: you are the first that ever I said a sweet word to, and that ought to go some way with a woman; and I would make you a good husband. There isn't much that you shall want for if you marry me, Joan. If any one had told me when I was a youngster that I should live to go begging and craving after a woman in this fashion, I'd have said he lied; but you have put me off, and pushed me aside, and given me the slip, till at length you have worked me up to this, and I can't live without you – I can't live without you, that's the truth."

"But I am afraid you will have to, Mr. Rock," said Joan more gently, for the tears which trembled in Samuel's light blue eyes touched her somewhat; and after all, although he repelled her, it was flattering that any man should value her so highly: "I do not love you."

His chin dropped upon his breast dejectedly. Presently he looked up and spoke again.

"I did not expect that you would," he said: "it had been too much luck for a miserable sinner. But be honest with me, Joan – if a woman can – and tell me, do you love anybody else?"

“Not a soul,” she answered, opening her brown eyes wide. “Who is there that I should love here?”

“Ah! that’s it,” he answered, with a sigh of relief: “there is nobody good enough for you in these parts. You are a lady, however you were born, and you want to mate with your own sort. It is no use denying it: I have watched you, and I’ve seen how you look down upon us; and all I’ve got to say is: – Be careful that it does not bring you into trouble. Still, while you don’t love anybody else – and the man you do love had better keep out of my way, curse him! – there is hope for me. Look here, Joan: I don’t want to press you – take time to think it over. I’m in no hurry. I could wait five years if I were sure of getting you at last. I dare say I frightened you by my roughness: I was a fool; I should have remembered that it is all new to you, though it is old enough for me. Listen, Joan: tell me that I may wait awhile and come again – though, whether you tell me or not, I shall wait and I shall come, while there is breath in my body and I can find you out.”

“What’s the use?” said Joan. “I don’t love you, and love does not grow with waiting; and if I do not love you, how can I marry you? We had better make an end of the business once and for all. I am very sorry, but it is not been my fault.”

“What’s the use? Why, all in the world! In time you will come to think differently; in time you will learn that a Christian man’s honest love and all that goes with it isn’t a thing to be chucked away like dirty water; in time, perhaps, your aunt and uncle will teach you reason about it, though you do despise me since you

went away for your fine schooling — — ”

“Oh, don’t tell them!” broke in Joan imploringly.

“Why, I have told them. I spoke to your aunt this very day about it, and she wished me God-speed with all her heart, and I am sure she will be vexed enough when she hears the truth.”

As Joan heard these words her face betrayed the perturbation of her mind. Her aunt’s fury when she understood that she, Joan, had rejected Samuel Rock would indeed be hard to bear. Samuel, watching, read her thoughts, and, growing cunning in his despair, was not slow to turn them to his advantage.

“Listen, Joan,” he said: “say that you will take time to think it over, and I will make matters easy for you with Mrs. Gillingwater. I know how to manage her, and I promise that not a rough word shall be said to you. Joan, Joan, it is not much to ask. Tell me that I may come again for my answer in six months. That can’t hurt you, and it will be hope to me.”

She hesitated. A warning sense told her that it would be better to have done with this man at once; but then, if she obeyed it, the one thing which she truly feared — her aunt’s fury — would fall upon her and crush her. If she gave way, on the other hand, she knew well enough that Samuel would shelter her from this storm for his own sake if not for hers. What could it matter, she argued weakly, if she did postpone her final decision for six months? Perhaps before that time she might be able to escape from Bradmouth and Samuel Rock, and thus avoid the necessity of giving any answer.

"If I do as you wish, will you promise not to trouble me, or interfere with me, or to speak to me about this kind of thing in the meanwhile?" she asked.

"Yes; I swear that I will not."

"Very good: have your own way about it, Mr. Rock; but understand that I do not mean to encourage you by this, and I don't think it likely that my answer six months hence will be any different from what it is to-day."

"I understand, Joan."

"Very well, then: good-bye." And she held out her hand.

He took it, and, overmastered by a sudden impulse, pressed it to his lips and kissed it twice or thrice.

"Leave go," she said, wrenching herself free. "Is that the way you keep your promise?"

"I beg your pardon," he answered humbly. "I could not help it – Heaven knows that I could not help it. I will not break my word again." And he turned and left her, walking through the grass of the graves with a slow and somewhat feline step.

* * *

At last he was gone, and Joan sat down once more, with a gasp of relief. Her first feelings were those of exultation at being rid of Mr. Rock; but they did not endure. Would he keep his promise, she wondered, and hide from her aunt the fact that he had proposed and been rejected? If he did not, one thing was

clear to her – that she would be forced to fly from Bradmouth, since by many a hint she knew well that it was expected of her that she should marry Samuel Rock, who was considered to have honoured her greatly by his attentions. This, in view of their relative social positions in the small society of Bradmouth, was not wonderful; but Joan's pride revolted at the thought.

“After all this,” she said aloud, “how is he so much higher than I am? and why should my aunt always speak of him as though he were a king and I a beggar girl? My blood is as good as his, and better,” and she glanced at a row of ancient tombstones, whereof the tops were visible above the herbage of rank grass, yellow crowsfoot, and sheep's-parsley still white with bloom, that marked the resting-places of the Lacons.

These Lacons had been yeoman farmers for many generations, until the last of them, Joan's grandfather, took to evil courses and dissipated his ancestral patrimony, the greater part of which was now in the possession of Samuel Rock.

Yes, that side of her pedigree was well enough, and were it not for the mystery about her father she could have held her head up with the best of them. Oh, it was a bitter thing that, through no fault of her own, Samuel Rock should be able to reproach her with her lack of an “honest name”! So it was, however – she was an outcast, a waif and a stray, and it was useless to cloak this fact. But, outcast or no, she was mistress of herself, and would not be driven into marriage, however advantageous, with Samuel Rock or any other man who was repellent to her.

Having come to this conclusion, Joan's spirits rose. After all, she was young and healthy, and, she believed, beautiful, with the wide world before her. There were even advantages in lacking an "honest name," since it freed her from responsibilities and rendered it impossible for her to disgrace that which she had not got. As it was, she had only herself to please in the world, and within reasonable and decent limits Joan meant to please herself. Most of all did she mean to do so in connection with these matters of the heart. Nobody had ever loved her, and she had never found anybody to love; and yet, as in all true women, love of one sort or another was the great desire and necessity of her life. Therefore on this point she was determined: she would never marry where she could not love.

Thus thought Joan; then, weary of the subject, she dismissed it from her mind for a while, and, lying back upon the grass in idle contentment, watched the little clouds float across the sky till, far out to sea, they melted into the blue of the horizon. It was a perfect afternoon, and she would enjoy what was left of it before she returned to Bradmouth to face Samuel Rock and all her other worries. Grasshoppers chirped in the flowers at her feet, a beautiful butterfly flitted from tombstone to grey tombstone, sunning itself on each, and high over her head flew the jackdaws, taking food to their young in the crumbling tower above.

For a while Joan watched these jackdaws through her half-shut eyes, till suddenly she remembered that her late employer Mr. Biggen's little boy had confided to her his ardent desire for a

young bird of that species, and she began to wonder if she could reach the nest and rob it as a farewell gift to him.

Speculation led to desire, and desire to endeavour. The ruined belfry stairway still ran up the interior of the tower for twenty feet or more – to a spot, indeed, in the stonework where a huge fragment of masonry had fallen bodily, leaving a V-shaped opening that reached to the battlements. Ivy grew upon this gap in the flint rubble, and the nest of the two jackdaws that Joan had been watching particularly, did not appear to be more than a dozen feet above the top of the broken stair. This stair she proceeded to climb without further hesitation. It was not at all safe, but she was active, and her head being good, she reached the point where it was broken away without accident, and, taking her stand on the thickness of the wall, supported herself by the ivy and looked up. There, twice her own height above her, was the window slit with the nest in it, but the mortar and stone upon which she must cling to reach it looked so crumbling and insecure that she did not dare to trust herself to them. So, having finished her inspection, Joan decided to leave those young jackdaws in peace and descend to earth again.

Chapter 3

The Beginnings of Fate

It was at this juncture that Captain Henry Archibald Graves, R.N., pursuing his way by the little-frequented sea road that runs along the top of the cliff past the Ramborough ruins to Bradmouth, halted the cob on which he was riding in order that he might admire the scene at leisure. Presently his eyes, following the line of the ruined tower, lit upon the figure of a girl standing twenty feet from the ground in a gap of the broken wall. He was sixty yards away or more, but there was something so striking and graceful about this figure, poised on high and outlined against the glow of the westering sun, that his curiosity became excited to know whose it was and what the girl might be doing. So strongly was it excited, indeed, that, after a fateful moment of hesitation, Captain Graves, reflecting that he had never examined Ramborough Abbey since he was a boy, turned his horse and rode up the slope of broken ground that intervened between him and the churchyard, where he dismounted and made the bridle fast to a stunted thorn. Possibly the lady might be in difficulty or danger, he explained to himself.

When he had tied up the cob to his satisfaction, he climbed the bank whereon the thorn grew, and reached the dilapidated wall of the churchyard, whence he could again see the lower parts of

the tower which had been hidden from his view for a while by the nature of the ground. Now the figure of the woman that had stood there was gone, and a genuine fear seized him lest she should have fallen. With some haste he walked to the foot of the tower, to halt suddenly within five paces of it, for before him stood the object of his search. She had emerged from behind a thicket of briars that grew among the fallen masonry; and, holding her straw hat in her hand, was standing with her back towards him, gazing upwards at the unattainable nest.

“She is safe enough, and I had better move on,” thought Captain Graves.

At that moment Joan seemed to become aware of his presence; at any rate, she wheeled round quickly, and they were face to face.

She started and blushed – perhaps more violently than the occasion warranted, for Joan was not accustomed to meet strange men of his class thus unexpectedly. Captain Graves scarcely noticed either the start or the blush, for, to tell the truth, he was employed in studying the appearance of the loveliest woman that he had ever beheld. Perhaps it was only to him that she seemed lovely, and others might not have rated her so highly; perhaps his senses deceived him, and Joan was not truly beautiful; but, in his judgment, neither before nor after did he see her equal, and he had looked on many women in different quarters of the world.

She was tall, and her figure was rounded without being coarse, or even giving promise of coarseness. Her arms were somewhat

long for her height, and set on to the shoulders with a peculiar grace, her hands were rather thin, and delicately shaped, and her appearance conveyed an impression of vigour and perfect health. These gifts, however, are not uncommon among English girls. What, to his mind, seemed uncommon was Joan's face as it appeared then, in the beginning of her two-and-twentieth year, with its curved lips, its dimpled yet resolute chin, its flawless oval, its arched brows, and the steady, tender eyes of deepest brown that shone beneath them. For the rest, her head was small and covered with rippling chestnut hair gathered into a knot at the back, her loose-bodied white dress, secured about the waist with a leather girdle, was clean and simple, and her bearing had a grace and dignity that Nature alone can give. Lastly, though from various indications he judged that she did not belong to his own station in life, she looked like a person of some refinement.

Such was Joan's outward appearance. It was attractive enough, and yet it was not her beauty only that fascinated Henry Graves. There was something about this girl which was new to him; a mystery more beautiful than beauty shone upon her sweet face – such a mystery as he had noted once or twice in the masterpieces of ancient art, but never till that hour on human lips or eyes. In those days Joan might have posed as a model of Psyche before Cupid kissed her.

Now let us turn for a moment to Henry Archibald Graves, the man destined to be the hero of her life's romance.

Like so many sailors, he was short, scarcely taller than Joan

herself indeed, and stout in build. In complexion he was fair, though much bronzed by exposure to foreign climates; his blue eyes were keen and searching, as might be expected in one who had watched at sea by night for nearly twenty years; and he was clean shaved. His features were good though strongly marked, especially as regards the nose and chin; but he could not be called handsome, only a distinguished-looking man of gentlemanly bearing. At first sight the face might strike a stranger as hard, but more careful examination showed it to be rather that of a person who made it a practice to keep guard over his emotions. In repose it was a somewhat proud face, that of one accustomed to command and to be obeyed; but frank and open withal, particularly if its owner smiled, when it became decidedly pleasing.

For a few seconds they stood still in their mutual surprise, looking at each other, and the astonishment and admiration written in the stranger's eyes were so evident, and yet so obviously involuntary, that Joan blushed more deeply than before.

Captain Graves felt the situation to be awkward. His first impulse was to take off his hat and go, his next and stronger one to stay and explain.

"I really beg your pardon," he said, with a shyness which was almost comic; "I saw a lady standing on the tower as I was riding by, and feared that she might be in difficulties."

Joan turned her head away, being terribly conscious of the blush which would not fade. This stranger's appearance pleased

her greatly; moreover, she was flattered by his notice, and by the designation of "lady." Hitherto her safety had not been a matter of much moment to any one, except, perhaps, to Samuel Rock.

"It is very kind of you," she answered, with hesitation; "but I was in no danger – I got down quite easily."

Again Captain Graves paused. He was puzzled. The girl's voice was as sweet as her person – low and rich in tone – but she spoke with a slight Eastern-counties accent. Who and what was she?

"Then I must apologise for troubling you, Miss – Miss – ?"

"I am only Joan Haste of Bradmouth, sir," she interrupted confusedly, as though she guessed his thoughts.

"Indeed! and I am Captain Graves of Rosham – up there, you know. Bradmouth is – I mean, is the view good from that tower?"

"I think so; but I did not go up to look at it. I went to try to get those young jackdaws. I wanted them for a little boy in Bradmouth, the clergyman's son."

"Ah!" he said, his face lighting up, for he saw an opportunity of prolonging the acquaintance, which interested him not a little; "then perhaps I may be of service after all. I think that I can help you there." And he stepped towards the tower.

"I don't believe that it is quite safe, sir," said Joan, in some alarm; "please do not take the trouble," – and she stretched out her hand as though to detain him.

"Oh, it is no trouble at all, I assure you: I like climbing. You see, I am well accustomed to it. Once I climbed the second

Pyramid, the one with the casing on it, though I won't try that again," he replied, with a pleasant laugh. And before she could interfere further he was mounting the broken stair.

At the top of it Henry halted, surveying the crumbling slope of wall doubtfully. Then he took his coat off, threw it down into the churchyard, and rolled his shirt sleeves up above his elbows, revealing a pair of very powerful and fair-skinned arms.

"Please don't – please!" implored Joan from below.

"I am not going to give in now," he answered; and, grasping a firm and projecting stone with his right hand, he set his foot upon a second fragment and began the ascent of the broken wall. Soon he reached the head of the slope in safety, but only to be encountered by another difficulty. The window slit containing the jackdaws' nest was round the corner, a little above him on the surface of the wall, and it proved impossible to reach it from where he stood. Very cautiously he bent to one side and looked round the angle of the masonry. Close to him a strong stem of ivy grew up the tower, dividing into two branches some five feet below the nest. He knew that it would be dangerous to trust his weight to it, and still more dangerous to attempt the turning of the corner; but at this moment he was more set upon getting the young birds which this village beauty desired, than on his own safety or any other earthly thing. Henry Graves was a man who disliked being beaten.

Very swiftly he shifted his hold, and, stretching out his left hand, he felt about until it gripped the ivy stem. Now he must

go on. Exactly how it happened would be difficult to describe on paper, but in two more seconds his foot was in the fork of ivy and his face was opposite to the window slit containing the nest.

"I can see the young ones," he said. "I will throw them out, and you must catch them in your hat, for I can't carry them."

"Oh! pray take care," gasped Joan.

He laughed by way of answer; and next second, with loud squawks and an impotent flapping of untried wings, a callow jackdaw was launched upon its first flight, to be deftly caught in Joan's broad hat before it touched the earth. A second followed, then another, and another. The last bird was the strongest of the four, and flew some yards in its descent. Joan ran to catch it – a process that took a little time, for it lay upon its back behind a broken tombstone, and pecked at her hand in a fashion necessitating its envelopment in her handkerchief. Just as she secured it she heard Captain Graves say: "That's the lot. Now I am coming down."

Next instant there was a sound as of something being torn. Joan looked up, to see him hanging by one arm against the sheer face of the tower. In attempting to repass the corner Henry's foot had slipped, throwing all his weight on to the stem of ivy which he held; but it was not equal to the strain, and a slab of it had come away from the wall. To this ivy he clung desperately, striving to find foothold with his heels, his face towards her, for he had swung round. Uttering a low cry of fear, Joan sped back to the tower like a swallow. She knew that he must fall; but that was not

the worst of it, for almost immediately beneath where he hung stood a raised tomb shaped like a stone coffin, having its top set thickly with rusted iron spikes, three inches or more in length, especially designed to prevent the idle youth of all generations from seating themselves upon this home of the dead.

If he struck upon these!

Joan rushed round the spiked tomb, and halted almost, but not quite, beneath Henry's hanging shape. His eyes fell upon her agonised and upturned face.

"Stand clear! I am coming," he said in a low voice.

Watching, she saw the muscles of his arm work convulsively. Then the rough stem of ivy began to slip through his clenched fingers. Another second, and he dropped like a stone from a height of twenty feet or more. Instinctively Joan stretched out her arms as though to catch him; but he struck the ground legs first just in front of her, and, with a sharp exclamation, pitched forward against her.

The shock was tremendous. Joan saw it coming, and prepared to meet it as well as she might by bending her body forward, since, at all hazards, he must be prevented from falling face foremost on the spiked tomb, there to be impaled. His brow cut her lip almost through, his shoulder struck her bosom, knocking the breath out of her, then her strong arms closed around him like a vice, and down they went together.

All this while her mind remained clear. She knew that she must not go down backwards, or the fate from which she strove

to protect him would overtake her – the iron spikes would pierce her back and brain. By a desperate effort she altered the direction of their fall, trusting to come to earth alongside the tomb. But she could not quite clear it, as a sudden pang in the right shoulder told her. For a moment they lay on the edge of the tomb, then rolled free. Captain Graves fell undermost, his head striking with some violence on a stone, and he lay still, as did Joan for nearly a minute, since her breath was gone.

Presently the pain of breathlessness passed a little, and she began to recover. Glancing at her arm, she saw that a stream of blood trickled along her sleeve, and blood from her cut lips was falling on the bosom of her dress and upon the forehead of Henry Graves beneath her, staining his white face.

“Oh, he is dead!” mourned Joan aloud; “and it is my fault.”

At this moment Henry opened his eyes. Apparently he had overheard her, for he answered: “Don’t distress yourself: I am all right.”

As he spoke, he tried to move his leg, with the result that a groan of agony broke from him. Glancing at the limb, Joan saw that it was twisted beneath him in a fashion so unnatural that it became evident even to her inexperience that it must be broken. At this discovery her distress overpowered her to so great an extent that she burst into tears.

“Oh! your leg is broken,” she sobbed. “What shall I do?”

“I think,” he whispered, with a ghastly smile, biting his lips to keep back any further expression of his pain, “that you will find

a flask in my coat pocket, if you do not mind getting it.”

Joan rose from her knees, and going to the coat, which lay hard by, took from it a little silver flask of whiskey-and-water; then, returning, she placed one arm beneath the injured man's head and with the other contrived to pour some of the liquid down his throat.

“Thank you,” he said: “I feel better”; then suddenly fainted away.

In great alarm she poured some more of the spirit down his throat; for now a new terror had taken her that he might be suffering from internal injuries also. To her relief, he came to himself again, and caught sight of the red stain growing upon her white dress.

“You are hurt,” he said. “What a selfish fellow I am, thinking only of myself!”

“Oh, don't think of me,” Joan answered: “it is nothing – a mere scratch. What is to be done? How can I get you from here? Nobody lives about, and we are a long way from Bradmouth.”

“There is my horse,” he murmured, “but I fear that I cannot ride him.”

“I will go,” said Joan; “yet how can I leave you by yourself?”

“I shall get on for a while,” Henry answered. “It is very good of you.”

Then, since there was no help for it, Joan rose, and running to where the horse was tied, she loosed it. But now a new difficulty confronted her; her wounded arm was already helpless

and painful, and without its aid she could not manage to climb into the saddle, for the cob, although a quiet animal enough, was not accustomed to a woman's skirts, and at every effort shifted itself a foot or two away from her. At length, Joan, crying with pain, grief and vexation, determined to abandon the attempt and to set out for Bradmouth on foot, when for the first time fortune favoured her in the person of a red-haired lad whom she knew well, and who was returning homewards from an expedition in search of the eggs of wild-fowl.

"Oh! Willie Hood," she cried, "come and help me. A gentleman has fallen from the tower yonder and broken his leg. Now do you get on this horse and ride as hard as you can to Dr. Child's, and tell him that he must come out here with some men, and a door or something to carry him on. Mind you say his leg is broken, and that he must bring things to tie it up with. Do you understand?"

"Why you're all bloody!" answered the boy, whose face betrayed his bewilderment; "and I never did ride a horse in my life."

"Yes, yes, I am hurt too; but don't think of that. You get on to him, and you'll be safe enough. Why, surely you're not afraid, Willie Hood?"

"Afraid? No, I aren't afraid," answered the boy, colouring, "only I like my legs better than his'n, that's all. Here goes." And with a prodigious and scuffling effort Willie landed himself on the back of the astonished cob.

"Stop," said Joan; "you know what to say?"

"Yes," he answered proudly; "don't you fret – I know right enough. I'll bring the doctor back myself."

"No, Willie: you go on to the Crown and Mitre, and tell my aunt that a gentleman, Captain Graves of Rosham, has hurt himself badly, and that she must get a room ready for him. It had best be mine, for it's the nicest," she added, "and there is nowhere else that he can go."

Willie nodded, and with a loud "gee-up" to the horse, started on his journey, his legs hanging clear of the stirrups, and gripping the pommel of the saddle with his right hand.

Having watched him disappear, Joan returned to where the wounded man lay. His eyes were shut, but apparently he heard her come, for presently he opened them.

"What, back so soon?" he said; "I must have been asleep."

"No, no: I could not leave you. I found a boy and sent him on the horse for the doctor. I only trust that he may get there safely," she added to herself.

"Very well: I am glad you have come back," he said faintly. "I am afraid that I am giving you a great deal of trouble, but do you mind rubbing my hand? It feels so cold."

She sat down on the grass beside him, having first wrapped his coat round him as best she could, and began to chafe his hand. Presently the pain, which had subsided for a while, set in more sharply than ever, and his fingers, that had been like ice, were now burning hot. Another half-hour passed, while the shadows

lengthened and the evening waned, and Henry's speech became incoherent. He fancied himself on board a man-of-war, and uttered words of command; he talked of foreign countries, and mentioned many names, among them one that was not strange to Joan's ears – that of Emma Levinger; lastly even he spoke of herself:

“What a lovely girl!” he muttered. “It's worth risking one's neck to please her. Worth risking one's neck to please her!”

A third half-hour passed; the fever lessened, and he grew silent. Then the cold fit took him again – his flesh shivered.

“I am frozen,” he murmured through his chattering teeth; “for Heaven's sake help me! Can't you see how cold I am?”

Joan was in despair. Alas and alas! she had nothing to put on him, for even if she took it off, her thin white dress would be no protection. Again and again he prayed for warmth, till at length her tender pity overcame her natural shrinking, and she did the only thing she could. Lying down beside him, she put her arms about him, and held him so, to comfort him if she might.

Apparently it did comfort him, for his moaning ceased, and by slow degrees he sank into stupor. Now twilight was upon them, and still no help came. Where could Willie have gone, Joan wondered: if, he did not come quickly, the man would surely die! Her own strength was failing her – she felt it going with the blood that ebbed continually from the wound in her shoulder. Periods of mist and oblivion alternated in her mind with times of clearest reason. Quick they came and quicker, till at last all was a blank

and she knew no more.

And now the twilight had grown into darkness, and these two lay silent, locked in each other's arms among the graves, and the stars shed their light upon them.

Chapter 4

The Home-Coming of Henry Graves

Henry Graves, a man of thirty-three years of age, was the second and only surviving son of Sir Reginald Graves, of Rosham Hall, a place situated about four miles from Bradmouth. When a lad he chose the Navy as a profession, and to that profession he clung with such unusual earnestness, that during the last eighteen years or so but little of his time had been passed at home. Some months previous to his meeting with Joan Haste, however, very much against his own will, he was forced to abandon his calling. He was cruising in command of a gunboat off the coast of British Columbia, when one evening a telegram reached him informing him of the death of his elder brother, Reginald, who met his end through an accident whilst riding a steeplechase. There had never been much sympathy or affection between the two brothers, for reasons to be explained presently; still this sudden and terrible intelligence was a heavy shock to Henry, nor did the fact that it left him heir to an entailed property, which he believed to be considerable, greatly mitigate it in his mind.

When there are but two sons, it is almost inevitable that one should be preferred before the other. Certainly that was the case in the Graves family. As children Reginald, the elder, had been wayward, handsome, merry and attractive; whereas Henry was

a somewhat plain and silent boy, with a habit of courting his own society, and almost aggressive ideas of honour and duty. Naturally, therefore, the love of father, mother and sister went out to the brilliant Reginald, while Henry was left very much to his own devices. He said nothing, and he was too proud to be jealous, but nobody except the lad himself ever knew what he suffered under this daily, if unintentional, neglect. Though his constitutional reserve prevented him from showing his heart, in truth he was very affectionate, and almost adored the relations who looked on him as a dullard, and even spoke of him at times as "poor Henry," as though he were deficient in intellect.

Thus it came about that very early in his young life, with characteristic determination, Henry arrived at the conclusion that he would be happier away from the home where he was little wanted. Once in the Navy, he applied himself to his profession with industry and intelligence, and as a result did better in the service than most young men who cannot bring to their support any particular interest, or the advantage of considerable private means. In whatever capacity he served, he won the confidence and the respect both of his subordinates and of his superiors. He was a hard-working man, so hard work was thrust upon him; and he never shirked it, though often enough others got the credit of his efforts. At heart, moreover, he was ambitious. Henry could never forget the slights that he had experienced as a child, and he was animated by a great but secret desire to show the relatives who disparaged him in favour of his more showy brother that he

was made of better stuff than they were disposed to believe.

To this purpose he subordinated his life. His allowance was small, for their father's means were not in proportion to his nominal estate, and as time went on his brother Reginald grew more and more extravagant. But, such as it was, Henry never exceeded it, though few were aware of the straits to which he was put at times. In the same way, though by nature he was a man of strong passions and genial temperament, he rarely allowed either the one or the other to master him. Geniality meant expense, and he observed that indulgence in passion of any sort, more especially if it led to mixing with the other sex, spelt anxiety and sorrow at the best, or at the worst disgrace and ruin. Therefore he curbed these inclinations till what began in the pride of duty ended in the pride of habit.

Thus time wore on till he received the telegram announcing his brother's shocking death. A fortnight or so afterwards it was followed by a letter from his father, a portion of which may be transcribed. It began:

“My dear Henry, -

“My telegram has informed you of the terrible loss which has overtaken our family. Your brother Reginald is no more; it has pleased Providence to remove him from the world in the fulness of his manhood, and we must accept the fact that we cannot alter with such patience as we may.”

Here followed particulars of the accident, and of arrangements for the interment. The letter went on:

“Your mother and sister are prostrated, and for myself I can only say that my heart is broken. Life is a ruin to me henceforward, and I think that when the time comes I shall welcome its close. It does indeed seem cruel that one so brilliant and so beloved as your brother should be snatched from us thus, but God’s will be done. Though you have been little together of late years, I know that we shall have your sympathy in our overwhelming sorrow.

“To turn to other matters, of which this event makes it necessary that I should speak: of course your beloved brother’s death puts you in the place he held – that is, so far as temporal things are concerned. I may as well tell you at once that the finances of this property are in great confusion. Latterly Reginald had the largest share in its management, and as yet I cannot therefore follow all the details. It seems, however, that, speaking generally, affairs are much worse than I supposed, and already, though he lies unburied, some very heavy claims have come in against his estate, which of course must be met for the honour of the family.

“And now, my dear boy, I – or rather your mother, your sister, and I – must ask you to make a sacrifice, should you look at it in that light: namely, to give up your profession and take the place at home to which the death of your brother has promoted you. This request is not made lightly; but, as you know, my health is now very feeble, and I find myself quite unable to cope with the difficulties of the time and the grave embarrassments by which I am hampered. Indeed, it would be idle to disguise from you that unless matters are

speedily taken in hand and some solution is found to our troubles, there is every prospect that before long Rosham will be foreclosed on – a probability of which I can scarcely bear to think, and one that will be equally painful to yourself when you remember that the property has been in our family for full three hundred years, and that we have no resources beyond those of the land.”

Then the letter went into details that were black enough, and ended by hinting at some possible mode of escape from the family troubles which would be revealed to him on his return to England.

The receipt of this epistle plunged Henry Graves into a severe mental struggle. As has been said, he was fond of his profession, and he had no wish to leave it. His prospects in the Navy were not especially brilliant, indeed, but his record at the Admiralty was good, and he was popular in the service both with his brother officers and the men, though perhaps more so with the latter than the former. Moreover, he had confidence in himself, and was filled with a sincere ambition to rise to the top of the tree, or near it. Now, after serving many years as a lieutenant, when at last he had earned an independent command, he was asked to abandon his career, and with it the hopes of half a lifetime, in order that he might undertake the management of a bankrupt estate, a task for which he did not conceive himself to be suited.

At first he was minded to refuse altogether; but while he was still hesitating a second letter arrived, from his mother, with

whom he was in greater sympathy than with any other member of the family. This epistle, which did not enter into details, was written in evident distress, and implored him to return to England at all hazards if he wished to save them from ruin. In conclusion, like that received from his father, it hinted mysteriously at an unknown something by means of which it would be in his power, and his alone, to restore the broken fortunes of their house.

Duty had always been the first consideration with Henry Graves, and so it remained in this emergency of his life. He had no longer any doubt as to what he ought to do, and, sacrificing his private wishes and what he considered to be his own advantage, he set himself to do it.

An effort to obtain leave on urgent private affairs having failed, he was reduced to the necessity of sending in his papers and begging the Lords of the Admiralty for permission to retire from the service on the ground of his brother's death.

The night that he posted this application was an unhappy one for him: the career he had hoped to make for himself and the future honour which he dreamed of had melted away, and the only prospect left to him was that of one day becoming a baronet without a sixpence to support his title, and the nominal owner of a bankrupt estate. Moreover, however reasonable and enlightened he may be, no sailor is entirely without superstition, and on this matter Henry Graves was superstitious. Something in his heart seemed to tell him that this new start would bring him little luck, whatever advantage might result to his family. Once again he felt

the awe of an imaginative boy who for the first time understands that the world is before him, and that he must fight his way through its cruel multitudes, or be trampled to death of them.

In due course my Lords of the Admiralty signified to Commander Graves that his request had been taken into favourable consideration, and that he was granted leave pending the arrangements necessary to his retirement from Her Majesty's Navy. His feelings as for the last time he was rowed away from the ship in the gig which had been his especial property need not be dwelt upon. They were bitter enough, and the evident regret of his messmates at parting from him did not draw their sting: indeed, it would not be too much to say that in this hour of farewell Henry Graves went as near to tears as he had done since he attained to manhood.

But he got through it somehow, and even laughed and waved his hat when the crew of the Hawk – that was the name of the gunboat he had commanded – cheered him as he left her deck for ever.

Eighteen days later he stood in the library of Rosham Hall. Although the season was mid-May the weather held bitterly cold, and such green as had appeared upon the trees did not suffice to persuade the traveller that winter was done with. An indescribable air of gloom hung about the great white house, which, shaped like an early Victorian mausoleum, and treed up to the windows with funereal cedars, was never a cheerful dwelling even in the height of summer. The shadow of death lay upon the

place and on the hearts of its inmates, and struck a chill through Henry as he crossed the threshold. His father, a tall and dignified old gentleman with snowy hair, met him in the hall with a show of cordiality that soon flickered away.

“How are you, my dear boy?” he said. “I am very glad to see you home and looking so well. It is most kind of you to have fallen in with our wishes as to your leaving the Navy. I scarcely expected that you would myself. Indeed, was I never more surprised than when I received your letter saying that you had sent in your papers. It is a comfort to have you back again, though I doubt whether you will be able to do any good.”

“Then perhaps I might as well have stopped where I was, father,” answered Henry.

“No, no, you did well to come. For many reasons which you will understand soon you did well to come. You are looking for your mother and Ellen. They have gone to the church with a wreath for your poor brother’s grave. The train is generally late – you were not expected so soon. That was a terrible blow to me, Henry: I am quite broken down, and shall never get over it. Ah! here they are.”

As Sir Reginald spoke Lady Graves and her daughter entered the hall and greeted Henry warmly enough. His mother was a person of about sixty, still handsome in appearance, but like himself somewhat silent and reserved in manner. Trouble had got hold of her, and she showed it on her face. For the rest, she was an upright and a religious woman, whose one passion in life, as

distinguished from her predilections, had been for her dead son Reginald. He was taken away, her spirit was broken, and there remained to her nothing except an unvarying desire to stave off the ruin that threatened her husband's house and herself.

The daughter, Ellen, now a woman of twenty-five, was of a different type. In appearance she was fair and well-developed, striking and ladylike rather than good-looking; in manner she was quick and vivacious, well-read, moreover, in a certain shallow fashion, and capital company. Ellen was not a person of deep affections, though she also had worshipped Reginald; but on the other hand she was swift to see her own advantage and to shape the course of events toward that end. At this moment her mind was set secretly upon making a rich marriage with the only eligible bachelor in the neighbourhood, Milward by name, a vain man of good extraction but of little strength of character, and one whom she knew that she could rule.

It has been said that his welcome was warm enough to all outward appearance, and yet it left a sense of disappointment in Henry's mind. Instinctively he felt, with the exception, perhaps, of his mother, that they all hoped to use him – that he had been summoned because he might be of service, not because the consolation of his presence was desired in a great family misfortune; and once more he wished himself back on the quarter-deck of the Hawk, dependent upon his own exertions to make his way in the world.

After a somewhat depressing dinner in the great dining-

room, of which the cold stone columns and distempered walls, decorated with rather dingy specimens of the old masters, did not tend to expansion of the heart, a family council was held in the study. It lasted far into the night, but its results may be summed up briefly. In good times the Rosham Hall property was worth about a hundred thousand pounds; now, in the depths of the terrible depression which is ruining rural England, it was doubtful if it would find a purchaser at half that amount, notwithstanding its capacities as a sporting estate. When Sir Reginald Graves came into possession the place was burdened with a mortgage of twenty-five thousand pounds, more or less. On the coming of age of his elder son, Reginald, Henry's brother, the entail had been cut and further moneys raised upon resettlement, so that in the upshot the incumbrances upon the property including overdue interests which were added to the capital at different dates, stood at a total of fifty-one thousand, or something more than the present selling value of the estate.

Henry inquired where all the money had gone; and, after some beating about the bush, he discovered that of late years, for the most part, it had been absorbed by his dead brother's racing debts. After this revelation he held his tongue upon the matter.

In addition to these burdens there were unsatisfied claims against Reginald's estate amounting to over a thousand pounds; and, to top up with, three of the principal tenants had given notice to leave at the approaching Michaelmas, and no applicants for their farms were forthcoming. Also the interest on the mortgages

was over a year in arrear.

When everything had been explained, Henry spoke with irritation: "The long and the short of it is that we are bankrupt, and badly bankrupt. Why on earth did you force me to leave the Navy? At any rate I could have helped myself to some sort of a living there. Now I must starve with the rest."

Lady Graves sighed and wiped her eyes. The sigh was for their broken fortunes, the tear for the son who had ruined them.

Sir Reginald, who was hardened to money troubles, did not seem to be so deeply affected.

"Oh, it is not so bad as that, my boy," he said, almost cheerfully. "Your poor brother always managed to find a way out of these difficulties when they cropped up, and I have no doubt that you will be able to do the same. For me the matter no longer has much personal interest, since my day is over; but you must do the best for yourself, and for your mother and sister. And now I think that I will go to bed, for business tires me at night."

When his father and mother had gone Henry lit his pipe.

"Who holds these mortgages?" he asked of his sister Ellen, who sat opposite to him, watching him curiously across the fire.

"Mr. Levinger," she answered. "He and his daughter are coming here to-morrow to stay till Monday."

"What, my father's mysterious friend, the good-looking man who used to be agent for the property when I was a boy?"

"Yes, the man who was shooting here when you were on leave eighteen months ago."

"I remember: he had his daughter with him – a pale-faced, quiet girl."

"Yes; but do not disparage his daughter, Henry."

"Why not?"

"Because it is a mistake to find fault with one's future wife. That way salvation lies, my dear brother. She is an heiress, and more than half in love with you, Henry. No, it is not a mistake – I know it for a fact. Now, perhaps, you understand why it was necessary that you should come home. Either you must follow the family tradition and marry an heiress, Miss Levinger or some other, or this place will be foreclosed on and we may all adjourn to the workhouse."

"So that is why I was sent for," said Henry, throwing down his pipe: "to be sold to this lady? Well, Ellen, all I have to say is that it is an infernal shame!"

And, turning, he went to bed without even bidding her good night.

His sister watched him go without irritation or surprise. Rising from her chair, she stood by the fire warming her feet, and glancing from time to time at the dim rows of family portraits that adorned the library walls. There were many of them, dating back to the early part of the seventeenth century or even before it; for the Graveses, or the De Grêves as they used to be called, were an ancient race, and though the house had been rebuilt within the last hundred and twenty years, they had occupied this same spot of ground for many generations. During all these years the family

could not be said either to have sunk or risen, although one of its members was made a baronet at the beginning of the century in payment for political services. It had produced no great men, and no villains; it had never been remarkable for wealth or penury, or indeed for anything that distinguishes one man, or a race of men, from its fellows.

It may be asked how it came about that these Graveses contrived to survive the natural waste and dwindling of possessions that they never did anything to augment. A glance at the family pedigree supplies an answer. From generation to generation it had been held to be the duty of the eldest son for the time being to marry an heiress; and this rule was acted on with sufficient regularity to keep the fortunes of the race at a dead level, notwithstanding the extravagances of occasional spendthrifts and the claims of younger children.

“They all did so,” said Ellen to herself, as she looked upon the portraits of her dead-and-gone forefathers by the light of the flickering flame; “and why shouldn’t he? I am not sentimental, but I believe that I’d marry a Russian Jew rather than see the old place go to the dogs, and that sort of thing is worse for a woman than a man. It will be difficult to manage, but he will marry her in the end, even if he hates the very sight of her. A man has no right to let his private inclinations weigh with him in such a matter, for he passes but his family remains. Thank Heaven, Henry always had a strong sense of duty, and when he comes to look at the position coolly he will see it in a proper light; though what made

that flaxen-haired little mummy fall in love with him is a mystery to me, for he never spoke a word to her. Blessings on her! It is the only piece of good luck that has come to our family for a generation. And now I must go to bed – those old pictures are beginning to stare at me.”

Chapter 5

The Levingers Visit Rosham

Seldom did Henry Graves spend a more miserable night than on this occasion of his return to Rosham. He had expected to find his father's affairs in evil case, but the reality was worse than anything that he had imagined. The family was absolutely ruined – thanks to his poor brother's wickedness, for no other word was strong enough to describe his conduct – and now it seemed that the remedy suggested for this stage of things was that he should marry the daughter of their principal creditor. That was why he had been forced to leave the Navy and dragged home from the other side of the world. Henry laughed as he thought of it, for the situation had a comical side. Both in stories and in real life it is common enough for the heroine of the piece to be driven into these dilemmas, in order to save the honour or credit of her family; but it is unusual to hear of such a choice being thrust upon a man, perhaps because, when they chance to meet with them, men keep these adventures to themselves.

Henry tried to recall the appearance of the young lady; and after a while a vision of her came back to him. He remembered a pale-faced, silent girl, with an elegant figure, large grey eyes, dark lashes, and absolutely flaxen hair, who sat in the corner of the room and watched everybody and everything almost without

speaking, but who, through her silence, or perhaps on account of it, had given him a curious impression of intensity.

This was the woman whom his family expected him to marry, and, as his sister seemed to suggest, who, directly or indirectly, had intimated a willingness to marry him! Ellen said, indeed, that she was “half in love” with him, which was absurd. How could Miss Levinger be to any degree whatsoever in love with a person whom she knew so slightly? If there were truth in the tale at all, it seemed more probable that she was consumed by a strange desire to become Lady Graves at some future time; or perhaps her father was a victim to the desire and she a tool in his hands. Although personally he had met him little, Henry remembered some odds and ends of information about Mr. Levinger now, and as he lay unable to sleep he set himself to piece them together.

In substance this is what they amounted to: many years ago Mr. Levinger had appeared in the neighbourhood; he was then a man of about thirty, very handsome and courteous in his manners, and, it was rumoured, of good birth. It was said that he had been in the Army and seen much service; but whether this were true or no, obviously he did not lack experience of the world. He settled himself at Bradmouth, lodging in the house of one Johnson, a smack owner; and, being the best of company and an excellent sportsman, gradually, by the help of Sir Reginald Graves, who seemed to take an interest in him and employed him to manage the Rosham estates, he built up a business as a land agent, out of which he supported himself – for, to all

appearances, he had no other means of subsistence.

One great gift Mr. Levinger possessed – that of attracting the notice and even the affection of women; and, in one way and another, this proved to be the foundation of his fortunes. At length, to the secret sorrow of sundry ladies of his acquaintance, he put a stop to his social advancement by contracting a glaring *mésalliance*, taking to wife a good-looking but homely girl, Emma Johnson, the only child of his landlord the smack owner. Thereupon local society, in which he had been popular so long as he remained single, shut its doors upon him, nor did the ladies with whom he had been in such favour so much as call upon Mrs. Levinger.

When old Johnson the smack owner died, a few months after the marriage, and it became known that he had left a sum variously reported at from fifty to a hundred thousand pounds behind him, every farthing of which his daughter and her husband inherited, society began to understand, however, that there had been method in Mr. Levinger's madness.

Owing, in all probability, to the carelessness of the lawyer, the terms of Johnson's will were somewhat peculiar. All the said Johnson's property, real and personal, was strictly settled under this will upon his daughter Emma for life, then upon her husband, George Levinger, for life, with remainder "to the issue of the body of the said George Levinger lawfully begotten."

The effect of such a will would be that, should Mrs. Levinger die childless, her husband's children by a second marriage would

inherit her father's property, though, should she survive her husband, apparently she would enjoy a right of appointment of the fund, even though she had no children by him. As a matter of fact, however, these issues had not arisen, since Mrs. Levinger predeceased her husband, leaving one child, who was named Emma after her.

As for Mr. Levinger himself, his energy seemed to have evaporated with his, pecuniarily speaking, successful marriage. At any rate, so soon as his father-in-law died, abandoning the land agency business, he retired to a comfortable red brick house situated on the sea shore in a very lonely position some four miles south of Bradmouth, and known as Monk's Lodge, which had come to him as part of his wife's inheritance. Here he lived in complete retirement; for now that the county people had dropped him he seemed to have no friends. Nor did he try to make any, but was content to occupy himself in the management of a large farm, and in the more studious pursuits of reading and archæology.

* * *

The morrow was a Saturday. At breakfast Ellen remarked casually that Mr. and Miss Levinger were to arrive at the Hall about six o'clock, and were expected to stay over the Sunday.

"Indeed," replied Henry, in a tone which did not suggest anxiety to enlarge upon the subject.

But Ellen, who had also taken a night for reflection, would not let him escape thus. "I hope that you mean to be civil to these people, Henry?" she said interrogatively.

"I trust that I am civil to everybody, Ellen."

"Yes, no doubt," she replied, in her quiet, persistent voice; "but you see there are ways and ways of being civil. I am not sure that you have quite realised the position."

"Oh, yes, I have – thoroughly. I am expected to marry this lady, that is, if she is foolish enough to take me in payment of what my father owes to hers. But I tell you, Ellen, that I do not see my way to it at present."

"Please don't get angry, dear," said Ellen, more gently; "I dare say that such a notion is unpleasant enough, and in a way – well, degrading to a proud man. Of course no one can force you to marry her if you don't wish to, and the whole business will probably fall through. All I beg is that you will cultivate the Levingers a little, and give the matter fair consideration. For my part I think that it would be much more degrading to allow our father to become bankrupt at his age than for you to marry a good and clever girl like Emma Levinger. However, of course I am only a woman, and have no 'sense of honour,' or at least one that is not strong enough to send my family to the workhouse when by a little self-sacrifice I could keep them out of it."

And with this sarcasm Ellen left the room before Henry could find words to reply to her.

That morning Henry walked with his mother to the church in

order to inspect his brother's grave – a melancholy and dispiriting duty – the more so, indeed, because his sense of justice would not allow him to acquit the dead man of conduct that, to his strict integrity, seemed culpable to the verge of dishonour. On their homeward way Lady Graves also began to talk about the Levingers.

“I suppose you have heard, Henry, that Mr. Levinger and his daughter are coming here this afternoon?”

“Yes, mother; Ellen told me.”

“Indeed. You will remember Miss Levinger, no doubt. She is a nice girl in every sense; your dear brother used to admire her very much.”

“Yes, I remember her a little; but Reginald's tastes and mine were not always similar.”

“Well, Henry, I hope that you will like her. It is a delicate matter to speak about, even for a mother to a son, but you know now how terribly indebted we are to the Levingers, and of course if a way could be found out of our difficulties it would be a great relief to me and to your dear father. Believe me, my boy, I do not care so much about myself; but I wish, if possible, to save him from further sorrow. I think that very little would kill him now.”

“See here, mother,” said Henry bluntly: “Ellen tells me that you wish me to marry Miss Levinger for family reasons. Well, in this matter, as in every other, I will try to oblige you if I can; but I cannot understand what grounds you have for supposing that the young lady wishes to marry me. So far as I can judge, she might

take her fortune to a much better market.”

“I don’t quite know about it, Henry,” answered Lady Graves, with some hesitation. “I gathered, however, that, when he came here after you had gone to join your ship about eighteen months ago, Mr. Levinger told your father, with whom you know he has been intimate since they were both young, that you were a fine fellow, and had taken his fancy as well as his daughter’s. Also I believe he said that if only he could see her married to such a man as you are he should die happy, or words to that effect.”

“Rather a slight foundation to build all these plans on, isn’t it, mother? In eighteen months her father may have changed his mind, and Miss Levinger may have seen a dozen men whom she likes better. Here comes Ellen to meet us, so let us drop the subject.”

* * *

About six o’clock that afternoon Henry, returning from a walk on the estate, saw a strange dogcart being run into the coach-house, from which he inferred that Mr. and Miss Levinger had arrived. Wishing to avoid the appearance of curiosity, he went straight to his room, and did not return downstairs till within a few minutes of the dinner-hour. The large and rather ill-lighted drawing-room seemed to be empty when he entered, and Henry was about to seat himself with an expression of relief, for his temper was none of the best this evening, when a rustling in a

distant corner attracted his attention. Glancing in the direction of the noise, he perceived a female figure seated in a big arm-chair reading.

“Why don’t you come to the light, Ellen?” he said. “You will ruin your eyes.”

Again the figure rustled, and the book was shut up; then it rose and advanced towards him timidly – a delicate figure dressed with admirable taste in pale blue, having flaxen hair, a white face, large and beseeching grey eyes, and tiny hands with tapering fingers. At the edge of the circle of lamp- light the lady halted, overcome apparently by shyness, and stood still, while her pale face grew gradually from white to pink and from pink to red. Henry also stood still, being seized with a sudden and most unaccountable nervousness. He guessed that this must be Miss Levinger – in fact, he remembered her face – but not one single word could he utter; indeed, he seemed unable to do anything except regret that he had not waited upstairs till the dinner-bell rang. There is this to be said in excuse of his conduct, that it is somewhat paralysing to a modest man unexpectedly to find himself confronted by the young woman whom his family desire him to marry.

“How do you do?” he ejaculated at last: “I think that we have met before.” And he held out his hand.

“Yes, we have met before,” she answered shyly and in a low voice, touching his sun-browned palm with her delicate fingers, “when you were at home last Christmas year.”

"It seems much longer ago than that," said Henry – "so long that I wonder you remember me."

"I do not see so many people that I am likely to forget one of them," she answered, with a curious little smile. "I dare say that the time seemed long to you, abroad in new countries; but to me, who have not stirred from Monk's Lodge, it is like yesterday."

"Well, of course that does make a difference;" then, hastening to change the subject, he added, "I am afraid I was very rude; I thought that you were my sister. I can't imagine how you can read in this light, and it always vexes me to see people trying their eyes. If you had ever kept a night watch at sea you would understand why."

"I am accustomed to reading in all sorts of lights," Emma answered.

"Do you read much, then?"

"I have nothing else to do. You see I have no brothers or sisters, no one at all except my father, who keeps very much to himself; and we have few neighbours round Monk's Lodge – at least, few that I care to be with," she added, blushing again.

Henry remembered hearing that the Levingers were considered to be outside the pale of what is called society, and did not pursue this branch of the subject.

"What do you read?" he asked.

"Oh, anything and everything. We have a good library, and sometimes I take up one class of reading, sometimes another; though perhaps I get through more history than anything else,

especially in the winter, when it is too wretched to go out much. You see," she added in explanation, "I like to know about human nature and other things, and books teach me in a second-hand kind of way," and she stopped suddenly, for just then Ellen entered the room, looking very handsome in a low-cut black dress that showed off the whiteness of her neck and arms.

"What, are you down already, Miss Levinger!" she said, "and with all your things to unpack too. You do dress quickly," – and she looked critically at her visitor's costume. "Let me see: do you and Henry know each other, or must I introduce you?"

"No, we have met before," said Emma.

"Oh yes! I remember now. Surely you were here when my brother was on leave last time." At this point Henry smiled grimly and turned away to hide his face. "There's not going to be any dinner-party, you know. Of course we couldn't have one even if we wished at present, and there is no one to ask if we could. Everybody is in London at this time of the year. Mr. Milward is positively the only creature left in these parts, and I believe mother has asked him. Ah! here he is."

As she spoke the butler opened the door and announced – "Mr. Milward."

Mr. Milward was a tall and good-looking young man, with bold prominent eyes and a receding forehead, as elaborately dressed as the plain evening attire of Englishmen will allow. His manner was confident, his self- appreciation great, and his tone towards those whom he considered his inferiors in rank or

fortune patronising to the verge of insolence. In short, he was a coarse-fibred person, puffed up with the pride of his possessions, and by the flattery of women who desired to secure him in marriage, either themselves or for some friend or relation.

“What an insufferable man!” was Henry’s inward comment, as his eyes fell upon him entering the room; nor did he change his opinion on further acquaintance.

“How do you do, Mr. Milward?” said Ellen, infusing the slightest possible inflection of warmth into her commonplace words of greeting. “I am so glad that you were able to come.”

“How do you do, Miss Graves? I had to telegraph to Lady Fisher, with whom I was going to dine to-night in Grosvenor Square, to say that I was ill and could not travel to town. I only hope she won’t find me out, that is all.”

“Indeed!” answered Ellen, with a touch of irony: “Lady Fisher’s loss is our gain, though I think that you would have found Grosvenor Square more amusing than Rosham. Let me introduce you to my brother, Captain Graves, and to Miss Levinger.”

Mr. Milward favoured Henry with a nod, and turning to Emma said, “Oh! how do you do, Miss Levinger? So we meet at last. I was dreadfully disappointed to miss you when I was staying at Cringleton Park in December. How is your mother, Lady Levinger? Has she got rid of her neuralgia?”

“I think there has been some mistake,” said Emma, visibly shrinking before this bold, assertive man: “I have never been at Cringleton Park in my life, and my mother, Mrs. Levinger, has

been dead many years.”

“Oh, indeed: I apologise. I thought you were Miss Levinger of Cringleton, the great heiress who was away in Italy when I stayed there. You see, I remember hearing Lady Levinger say that there were no other Levingers.”

“I am afraid that I am a living contradiction to Lady Levinger’s assertion,” answered Emma, flushing and turning aside.

Ellen, who had been biting her lip with vexation, was about to intervene, fearing lest Mr. Milward should make further inquiries, when the door opened and Mr. Levinger entered, followed by her father and mother. Henry took the opportunity of shaking hands with Mr. Levinger to study his appearance somewhat closely – an attention that he noticed was reciprocated.

Mr. Levinger was now a man of about sixty, but he looked much older. Either because of an accident, or through a rheumatic affection, he was so lame upon his right leg that it was necessary for him to use a stick even in walking from one room to another; and, although his hair was scarcely more than streaked with white, frailty of health had withered him and bowed his frame. Looking at him, Henry could well believe what he had heard – that five- and-twenty years ago he was one of the handsomest men in the county. To this hour the dark and sullen brown eyes were full of fire and eloquence – a slumbering fire that seemed to wax and wane within them; the brow was ample, and the outline of the features flawless. He seemed a man upon whom age had settled suddenly and prematurely – a man who

had burnt himself out in his youth, and was now but an ash of his former self, though an ash with fire in the heart of it.

Mr. Levinger greeted him in a few courteous, well-chosen words, that offered a striking contrast to the social dialect of Mr. Milward – the contrast between the old style and the new – then, with a bow, he passed on to offer his arm to Lady Graves, for at that moment dinner was announced. As Henry followed him with Miss Levinger, he found himself wondering, with a curiosity that was unusual to him, who and what this man had been in his youth, before he drifted a waif to Bradmouth, there to repair his broken fortunes by a *mésalliance* with the smack owner's daughter.

“Was your father ever in the Army?” he asked of Emma, as they filed slowly down the long corridor. “Forgive my impertinence, but he looks like a military man.”

He felt her start at his question.

“I don't know: I think so,” she answered, “because I have heard him speak of the Crimea as though he had been present at the battles; but he never talks of his young days.”

Then they entered the dining-room, and in the confusion of taking their seats the conversation dropped.

Chapter 6

Mr. Levinger Puts a Case

At dinner Henry found himself seated between Mr. Levinger and his daughter. Naturally enough he began to make conversation to the latter, only to find that, either from shyness or for some other reason, she would not talk in public, but contented herself with replies that were as monosyllabic as she could make them.

Somewhat disappointed, for their short tête-à-tête interview had given promise of better things, Henry turned his attention to her father, and soon discovered that he was a most interesting and brilliant companion. Mr. Levinger could talk well on any subject, and whatever the matter he touched, he adorned it by an aptness and facility of illustration truly remarkable in a man who for twenty years and more was reported to have been little better than a hermit. At length they settled down to the discussion of archæological questions, in which, as it chanced, Henry took an intelligent interest, and more particularly of the flint weapons used by the early inhabitants of East Anglia. Of these, as it appeared, Mr. Levinger possessed one of the best collections extant, together with a valuable and unique series of ancient British, Danish and Saxon gold ornaments and arms.

The subject proved so mutually agreeable, indeed, that before

dinner was over Mr. Levinger had given, and Henry had accepted, an invitation to stay a night or two at Monk's Lodge and inspect these treasures, and this, be it said, without any *arrière-pensée* – at any rate, so far as the latter was concerned.

In the silence that followed this pleasant termination to their talk Henry overheard Milward pumping Miss Levinger.

"Miss Graves tells me," he was saying, "er – that you live in that delightful old house beyond – er – Bradmouth – the one that is haunted."

"Yes," she answered, "if you mean Monk's Lodge. It is old, for the friars used it as a retreat in times of plague, and after that it became a headquarters of the smugglers; but I never heard that it was haunted."

"Oh! pray don't rob me of my illusion, Miss Levinger. I drove past there with your neighbours the Marchams; and Lady Marcham, the dowager – the one who wears an eye-glass I mean – assured me that it was haunted by a priest running after a grey nun, or a grey nun running after a priest, which seems more likely; and I am certain she cannot be mistaken: she never was about anything yet, spiritual or earthly, except her own age."

"Lady Marcham may have seen the ghost: I have not," said Emma.

"Oh, I have no doubt that she has seen it: she sees everything. Of course you know her? She is a dear old soul, isn't she?"

"I have met Lady Marcham; I do not know her," answered Emma.

“Not know Lady Marcham!” said Milward, in affected surprise; “why, I should have thought that it would have been as easy to escape knowing the North Sea when one was on it; she is positively surrounding. What do you mean, Miss Levinger?”

“I mean that I have not the honour of Lady Marcham’s acquaintance,” she replied, in an embarrassed voice.

“If that cad does not stop soon, I shall shut him up!” reflected Henry.

“What! have you quarrelled with her, then?” went on Milward remorselessly. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, for she is a bad enemy; and, besides, it must be so awkward, seeing that you have to meet her at every house about there.”

Emma looked round in despair; and just as Henry was wondering how he could intervene without showing the temper that was rapidly getting the mastery of him, with a polite “Excuse me” Mr. Levinger leant across him.

“Perhaps you will allow me to explain, Mr. Milward,” he said, in a particularly clear and cutting voice. “I am an invalid and a recluse. What I am my daughter must be also. I have not the honour of the acquaintance of Lady Marcham, or of any other of the ladies and gentlemen to whom you refer. Do I make myself plain?”

“Oh, perfectly, I assure you.”

“I am glad, Mr. Milward, since, from what I overheard of your remarks just now, I gathered that you are not very quick of comprehension.”

At this point Lady Graves rose with a certain haste and left the room, followed by Miss Levinger and her daughter. Thereupon Sir Reginald fell into talk with Mr. Levinger, leaving Henry and Mr. Milward together.

"Can you tell me who our friend there is?" the latter asked of Henry. "He seems a very touchy as well as a retired person. I should not have thought that there was anything offensive in my suggesting that his daughter knew Lady Marcham."

"Perhaps you insisted upon the point a little too much," said Henry drily. "I am not very well posted about Mr. Levinger myself, although my father has known him all his life; but I understand that he is a rich man, who, from one reason or another, has been more or less of a hermit for many years."

"By George! I have it now," said Milward. "He's the man who was very popular in our mothers' days, then married a wealthy cook or some one of that sort, and was barred by the whole neighbourhood. Of course I have put my foot into it horribly. I am sorry, for really I did not mean to hurt his daughter's feelings."

"I am sure I am glad to hear that you did so inadvertently," answered Henry rather gruffly. "Won't you have a cigarette?"

The rest of the evening passed quietly enough; almost too quietly, indeed, for Emma, dismayed by her former experiences, barricaded herself in a corner behind an enormous photograph album; and Ellen, irritated by a scene which jarred upon her and offended her sense of the social proprieties, grew somewhat tart in speech, especially when addressing her admirer, who quailed

visibly beneath her displeasure. Mr. Levinger noticed with some amusement, indeed, that, however largely he might talk, Mr. Milward was not a little afraid of the young lady to whom he was paying his court.

At length the party broke up. Mr. Milward retired to his own place, Upcott Hall, which was situated in the neighbourhood, remarking as he went that he hoped to see them all at church on the morrow in the afternoon; whereon Henry resolved instantly that he would not attend divine service upon that occasion. Then Sir Reginald and Lady Graves withdrew to bed, followed by Ellen and Emma Levinger; but, somewhat to his surprise, Henry having announced his intention of smoking a pipe in the library, Mr. Levinger said that he also smoked, and with his permission would accompany him.

At first the conversation turned upon Mr. Milward, of whom Henry spoke in no complimentary terms.

“You should not judge him so harshly,” said Levinger: “I have seen many such men in my day. He is not a bad fellow at bottom; but he is rich and an only child, and has been spoilt by a pack of women – wants taking down a peg or two, in short. He will find his level, never fear. Most of us do in this world. Indeed, unless my observation is at fault,” Mr. Levinger added significantly, “there is a lady in this house who will know how to bring him down to it. But perhaps you will think that is no affair of mine.”

Henry was somewhat mystified by this allusion, though he guessed that it must have reference to Ellen. Of the state of affairs

between Mr. Milward and his sister he was ignorant; indeed, he disliked the young gentleman so much himself that, except upon the clearest evidence, it would not have occurred to him that Ellen was attracted in this direction. Mr. Levinger's remark, however, gave him an opening of which he availed himself with the straightforwardness and promptitude which were natural to him.

"It seems, Mr. Levinger," he said, "from what I have heard since I returned home, that all our affairs are very much your own, or vice versa. I don't know," he added, hesitating a little, "if it is your wish that I should speak to you of these matters now. Indeed, it seems a kind of breach of hospitality to do so; although, if I understand the position, it is we who are receiving your hospitality at this moment, and not you ours."

Mr. Levinger smiled faintly at this forcible way of putting the situation.

"By all means speak, Captain Graves," he said, "and let us get it over. I am exceedingly glad that you have come home, for, between ourselves, your late brother was not a business man, and I do not like to distress Sir Reginald with these conversations – for I presume I am right in supposing that you allude to the mortgages I hold over the Rosham property."

Henry nodded, and Mr. Levinger went on: "I will tell you how matters stand in as few words as possible." And he proceeded to set out the financial details of the encumbrances on the estate, with which we are already sufficiently acquainted for the

purposes of this history.

“The state of affairs is even worse than I thought,” said Henry, when he had finished. “It is clear that we are absolutely bankrupt; and the only thing I wonder at, Mr. Levinger,” he added, with some irritation, “is that you, a business man, should have allowed things to go so far.”

“Surely that was my risk, Captain Graves,” he answered. “It is I who am liable to lose money, not your family.”

“Forgive me, Mr. Levinger, there is another side to the question. It seems to me that we are not only paupers, we are also defaulters, or something like it; for if we were sold up to the last stick to-morrow we should not be able to repay you these sums, to say nothing of other debts that may be owing. To tell you the truth, I cannot quite forgive you for putting my father in this position, even if he was weak enough to allow you to do so.”

“There is something in what you say considered from the point of view of a punctiliously honest man, though it is an argument that I have never had advanced to me before,” replied Mr. Levinger drily. “However, let me disabuse your mind: the last loan of ten thousand, which, I take it, leaving interest out of the count, would about cover my loss were the security to be realised to-day, was not made at the instance of your father, who I believe did not even know of it at the time. If you want the facts, it was made because of the earnest prayer of your brother Reginald, who declared that this sum was necessary to save the family from immediate bankruptcy. It is a painful thing to have to

say, but I have since discovered that it was your brother himself who needed the money, very little of which found its way into Sir Reginald's pocket."

At this point Henry rose and, turning his back, pretended to refill his pipe. He dared not trust himself to speak, lest he might say words that should not be uttered of the dead; nor did he wish to show the shame which was written on his face. Mr. Levinger saw the movement and understood it. Dropping the subject of Reginald's delinquencies, he went on:

"You blame me, Captain Graves, for having acted as no business man should act, and for putting temptation in the path of the weak. Well, in a sense I am still a business man, but I am not an usurer, and it is possible that I may have had motives other than those of my own profit. Let us put a hypothetical case: let us suppose that once upon a time, many years ago, a young fellow of good birth, good looks and fair fortune, but lacking the advantages of careful education and not overburdened with principle, found himself a member of one of the fastest and most expensive regiments of Guards. Let us suppose that he lived – well, as such young men have done before and since – a life of extravagance and debauchery that very soon dissipated the means which he possessed. In due course this young man would not improbably have betaken himself to every kind of gambling in order to supply his pocket with money. Sometimes he would have won, but it is possible that in the end he might have found himself posted as a defaulter because he was unable to pay his racing

debts, and owing as many thousands at cards as he possessed five-pound notes in the world.

“Such a young man might not unjustly have hard things said of him; his fellow-officers might call him a scamp and rake up queer stories as to his behaviour in financial transactions, while among outsiders he might be branded openly as no better than a thief. Of course the regimental career of this imaginary person would come to a swift and shameful end, and he would find himself bankrupt and dishonoured, a pariah unfit for the society of gentlemen, with no other opening left to him than that which a pistol bullet through the head can offer. It is probable that such a man, being desperate and devoid of religion, might determine to take this course. He might also be in the act of so doing, when he, who thought himself friendless, found a friend, and that friend one by whom of all others he had dealt ill.

“And now let us suppose for the last time that this friend threw into the fire before his eyes that bankrupt’s I.O.U.’s, that he persuaded him to abandon his mad design of suicide, that he assisted him to escape his other creditors, and, finally, when the culprit, living under a false name, was almost forgotten by those who had known him, that he did his best to help him to a fresh start in life. In such a case, Captain Graves, would not this unhappy man owe a debt of gratitude to that friend?”

Mr. Levinger had begun the putting of this “strange case” quietly enough, speaking in his usual low and restrained voice; but as he went on he grew curiously excited – so much so, indeed,

that, notwithstanding his lameness, he rose from his chair, and, resting on his ebony stick, limped backwards and forwards across the room – while the increasing clearness and emphasis of his voice revealed the emotion under which he was labouring. As he asked the question with which his story culminated, he halted in his march directly opposite to the chair upon which Henry was sitting, and, leaning on his stick, looked him in the face with his piercing brown eyes.

“Of course he would,” answered Henry quietly.

“Of course he would,” repeated Mr. Levinger. “Captain Graves, that story was my story, and that friend was your father. I do not say that it is all the story, for there are things which I cannot speak of, but it is some of it – more, indeed, than is known to any living man except Sir Reginald. Forgiving me my sins against him, believing that he saw good in me, your father picked me out of the mire and started me afresh in life. When I came to these parts an unknown wanderer, he found me work; he even gave me the agency of this property, which I held till I had no longer any need of it. I have told you all this partly because you are your father’s son, and partly because I have watched you and followed your career from boyhood, and know you to be a man of the strictest honour, who will never use my words against me.

“I repeat that I have not told you everything, for even since those days I have been no saint – a man who has let his passions run riot for years does not grow good in an hour, Captain Graves. But I trust that you will not think worse of me than I deserve, for

it still pains me to lose the good opinion of an upright man. One thing at least I have done – though I borrowed from my daughter to do it, and pinched myself till I am thought to be miserly – at length I have paid back all those thousands that I owed, either to my creditors or to their descendants; yes, not a month ago I settled the last and heaviest claim. And now, Captain Graves, you will understand why I have advanced moneys beyond their value upon mortgage of the Rosham estates. Your father, who has long forgotten or rather ignored the past, believes it to have been done in the ordinary way of business; I have told you the true reason.”

“Thank you,” said Henry. “Of course I shall respect your confidence. It is not for me to judge other men, so I hope that you will excuse my making any remarks about it. You have behaved with extreme generosity to my father, but even now I cannot say that I think your conduct was well advised: indeed, I do not see how it makes the matter any better for us. This money belongs to you, or to your daughter,” – here Henry thought that Mr. Levinger winced a little – “and in one way or another it must be paid or secured. I quite understand that you do not wish to force us into bankruptcy, but it seems that there is a large amount of interest overdue, putting aside the question of the capital, and not a penny to meet it with. What is to be done?”

Mr. Levinger sat down and thought awhile before he answered.

“You have put your finger on the weak spot,” he said presently: “this money is Emma’s, every farthing of it, for whatever I have

saved out of my life interest has gone towards the payment of my own debts, and after all I have no right to be generous with my daughter's fortune. Not long ago I had occasion to appoint a guardian and trustee for her under my will, a respectable solicitor whose name does not matter, and it was owing to the remonstrances that he made when he accepted the office that I was obliged to move in this matter of the mortgages, or at least of the payment of the interest on them. Had it been my own money I would never have consented to trouble your father, since fortunately we have enough to live upon in our quiet way without this interest; but it is not."

"Quite so," said Henry. "And therefore again I ask, what is to be done?"

"Done?" answered Mr. Levinger: "at present, nothing. Let things go awhile, Captain Graves; half a year's interest more or less can make no great difference. If necessary, my daughter must lose it, and after all neither she nor any future husband of hers will be able to blame me for the loss. When those mortgages were made there was plenty of cover: who could foresee that land would fall so much in value? Let matters take their course; this is a strange world, and all sorts of unexpected things happen in it. For aught we know to the contrary, within six months Emma may be dead, or," he added, "in some position in which it would not be necessary that payment should be made to her on account of these mortgages."

For a moment he hesitated, as though wondering whether it

would be wise to say something that was on the tip of his tongue; then, deciding that it would not, Mr. Levinger rose, lit a candle, and, having shaken Henry warmly by the hand, he limped off to bed.

When he had gone Henry filled himself another pipe and sat down to think. Mr. Levinger puzzled him; there was something attractive about him, something magnetic even, and yet he could not entirely trust him. Even in his confidences there had been reservations: the man appeared to be unable to make up his mind to tell all the truth. So it was also with his generosity towards Sir Reginald: he had been generous indeed, but it seemed that it was with his daughter's money. Thus too with his somewhat tardy honesty: he had paid his debts even though "he had borrowed from his daughter to do so." To Henry's straightforward sense, upon his own showing Mr. Levinger was a curious mixture, and a man about whom as yet he could form no positive judgment.

From the father his thoughts travelled to the daughter. It was strange that she should have produced so slight an impression upon him when he had met her nearly two years before. Either she was much altered, or his appreciative powers had developed. Certainly she impressed him now. There was something very striking about this frail, flaxen-haired girl, whose appearance reminded him of a Christmas rose. It seemed odd that such a person could have been born of a mother of common blood, as he understood the late Mrs. Levinger to have been, for Emma Levinger looked "aristocratic" if ever woman did.

Moreover, it was clear that she lacked neither intellect nor dignity; her conversation, and the way in which she had met the impertinences of the insufferable Milward, proved it.

This was the lady whom Ellen had declared to be “half in love with him.” The idea was absurd, and the financial complications which surrounded her repelled him, causing him to dismiss it impatiently. Yet, as Henry followed Mr. Levinger’s example and went to bed, a voice in his heart told him that a worse fate might befall a man.

Chapter 7

A Proposal and a Difference

The morrow was a Sunday, when, according to immemorial custom, everybody belonging to Rosham Hall was expected to go to church once in the day – a rule, however, from which visitors were excused. Henry made up his mind that Mr. Levinger and his daughter would avail themselves of this liberty of choice and stay at home. There was something so uncommon about both of them that he jumped to the conclusion that they were certainly agnostics, and in all probability atheists. Therefore he was somewhat surprised when at breakfast he heard Mr. Levinger making arrangements to be driven to the church – for, short as was the distance, it was farther than he could walk – and Emma announced her intention of accompanying him.

Henry walked down to church by himself, for Sir Reginald had driven with his guests and his mother and sister were not going until the afternoon. Finding the three seated in the front pew of the nave, he placed himself in that immediately behind, where he thought that he would be more comfortable, and the service began. It was an ordinary country service in an ordinary country church celebrated by an ordinary rather long-winded parson: conditions that are apt to cause the thoughts to wander, even in the best regulated mind. Although he did his utmost to keep his

attention fixed, for it was characteristic of him that even in such a matter as the listening to ill-sung psalms his notions of duty influenced him, Henry soon found himself lost in reflections. We need not follow them all, since, wherever they began, they ended in the consideration of the father and daughter before him, and of all the circumstances connected with them. Even now, while the choir wheezed and the clergyman droned, the respective attitudes of these two struck him as exceedingly interesting. The father followed every verse and every prayer with an almost passionate devotion, that afforded a strange insight into an unsuspected side of his character. Clearly, whatever might have been the sins of his youth, he was now a religious devotee, or something very like it, for Henry felt certain that his manner was not assumed.

With Emma it was different. Her demeanour was one of earnest and respectful piety – a piety which with her was obviously a daily habit, since he noticed that she knew all the canticles and most of the psalms by heart. As it chanced, the one redeeming point in the service was the reading of the lessons. These were read by Sir Reginald Graves, whose fine voice and impressive manner were in striking contrast to the halting utterance of the clergyman. The second lesson was taken from perhaps the most beautiful of the passages in the Bible, the fifteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, wherein the Apostle sets out his inspired vision of the resurrection of the dead and of the glorious state of them who shall be found alive in it. Henry, watching Emma's face, saw it change and

glow as she followed those immortal words, till at the fifty-third verse and thence to the end of the chapter it became alight as though with the effulgence of a living faith within her. Indeed, at the words “for this corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality,” it chanced that a vivid sunbeam breaking from the grey sky fell full upon the girl’s pale countenance and spiritual eyes, adding a physical glory to them, and for one brief moment making her appear, at least in his gaze, as though some such ineffable change had already overtaken her, and the last victory of the spirit was proclaimed in her person.

Henry looked at her astonished; and since in his own way he lacked neither sympathy nor perception, in that instant he came to understand that this woman was something apart from all the women whom he had known – a being purer and sweeter, partaking very little of the nature of the earth. And yet his sister had said that she was half in love with him! Weighing his own unworthiness, he smiled to himself even then, but with the smile came a thought that he was by no means certain whether he was not “half in love” with her himself.

The sunbeam passed, and soon the lesson was finished, and with it the desire for those things which are not yet, faded from Emma’s eyes, leaving in the mind of the man who watched her a picture that could never fade.

At lunch Ellen, who had been sitting silent, suddenly awoke from her reverie and asked Emma what she would like to do that afternoon. Emma replied that she wished to take a walk if it were convenient to everybody else.

"That will do very well," said Ellen with decision. "My brother can escort you down to the Cliff: there is a good view of the sea there; and after church I will come to meet you. We cannot miss each other, as there is only one road."

Henry was about to rebel, for when Ellen issued her orders in this fashion she invariably excited an opposition in his breast which was sometimes unreasonable; but glancing at Miss Levinger's face he noticed that she seemed pleased at the prospect of a walk, or of his company, he could not tell which, and held his peace.

"That will be very pleasant," said Emma, "if it does not bore Captain Graves."

"Not at all; the sea never bores me," replied Henry. "I will be ready at three o'clock if that suits you."

"I must say that you are polite, Henry," put in his sister in a sarcastic voice. "If I were Miss Levinger I would walk by myself and leave you to contemplate the ocean in solitude."

"I am sure I did not mean to be otherwise, Ellen," he replied. "There is nothing wrong in saying that one likes the sea."

At this moment Lady Graves intervened with some tact, and the subject dropped.

About three o'clock Henry found Emma waiting for him in the hall, and they started on their walk.

Passing through the park they came to the high road, and for some way went on side by side in silence. The afternoon was cloudy, but not cold; there had been rain during the previous night, and all about them were the evidences of spring, or rather of the coming of summer. Birds sang upon every bush, most of the trees were clothed in their first green, the ashes, late this year, were bursting their black buds, the bracken was pushing up its curled fronds in the sandy banks of the roadway, already the fallen blackthorn bloom lay in patches like light snow beneath the hedgerows, while here and there pink-tipped hawthorns were breaking into bloom. As she walked the promise and happy spirit of the spring seemed to enter into Emma's blood, for her pale cheeks took a tinge of colour like that which blushed upon the May-buds, and her eyes grew joyful.

"Is it not beautiful?" she said suddenly to her companion.

"Well, it would be if there were some sunshine," he replied, in a somewhat matter-of-fact way.

"Oh, the sunshine will come. You must not expect everything in this climate, you know. I am quite content with the spring."

"Yes," he answered; "it is very pleasant after the long winter."

She hesitated a little, and then said, "To me it is more than pleasant. I cannot quite tell you what it is, and if I did you would

not understand me.”

“Won’t you try?” he replied, growing interested.

“Well, to me it is a prophecy and a promise; and I think that, although perhaps they do not understand it, that is why almost all old people love the spring. It speaks to them of life, life arising more beautiful out of death; and, perhaps unconsciously, they see in it the type of their own spiritual fortune and learn from it resignation to their fate.”

“Yes, we heard that in the lesson this morning,” said Henry. “Thou fool! that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die.”

“Oh, I know that the thought is an old one,” she answered, with some confusion, “and I put what I mean very badly, but somehow these ancient truths always seem new to us when we find them out for ourselves. We hit upon an idea that has been the common property of men for thousands of years, and think that we have made a great discovery. I suppose the fact of it is that there are no new ideas, and you see each of us must work out his own salvation. I do not mean in a spiritual sense only. Nobody else’s thoughts or feelings can help us; they may be as old as the world, but when we feel them or think them, for us they are fresh as the spring. A mother does not love her child less because millions of mothers have loved theirs before.”

Henry did not attempt to continue the argument. This young lady’s ideas, if not new, were pretty; but he was not fond of committing himself to discussion and opinions on such

metaphysical subjects, though, like other intelligent men, he had given them a share of his attention.

“You are very religious, Miss Levinger, are you not?” he said.

“Religious? What made you think so? No; I wish I were. I have certain beliefs, and I try to be – that is all.”

“It was watching your face in church that gave me the idea, or rather assured me of the fact,” he answered.

She coloured, and then said: “Why do you ask? You believe in our religion, do you not?”

“Yes, I believe in it. I think that you will find few men of my profession who do not – perhaps because their continual contact with the forces and dangers of nature brings about dependence upon an unseen protecting Power. Also my experience is that religion in one form or another is necessary to all human beings. I never knew a man to be quite happy who was devoid of it in some shape.”

“Religion does not always bring happiness, or even peace,” said Emma. “My experience is very small – indeed, I have none outside books and the village – but I have seen it in the case of my own father. I do not suppose it possible that a man could be more religious than he has been ever since I can remember much about him; but certainly he is not happy, nor can he reconcile himself to the idea of death, which to me, except for its physical side, does not seem such a terrible matter.”

“I should say that your father is a very nervous man,” Henry answered; “and the conditions of your life and of his may have

been quite different. Everybody feels these things according to his temperament.”

“Yes, he is nervous,” she said; then added suddenly, as though she wished to change the subject, “Look! there is the sea. How beautiful it is! Were you not sorry to leave it, Captain Graves?”

By now they had turned off the main road, and, following a lane which was used to cart sand and shingle from the beach, had reached a chalky slope known as the Cliff. Below them was a stretch of sand, across which raced the in-coming tide, and beyond lay the great ocean, blue in the far distance, but marked towards the shore with parallel lines of white-crested billows.

Hitherto the afternoon had been dull, but as Emma spoke the sunlight broke through the clouds, cutting a path of glory athwart the sea.

“Sorry to leave it!” he said, staring at the familiar face of the waters, and speaking almost passionately: “it has pretty well broken my heart – that is all. I loved my profession, it was everything to me: there I was somebody, and had a prospect before me; now I am nobody, and have none, except – ” And he stopped.

“And why did you leave?” she asked.

“For the same reason that we all do disagreeable things: because it was my duty. My brother died, and my family desired my presence, so I was obliged to retire from the Service, and there is an end of it.”

“I guessed as much,” said Emma softly, “and I am very sorry

for you. Well, we cannot go any farther, so we had better turn."

Henry nodded an assent, and they walked homewards silently, either because their conversation was exhausted, or because they were lost in their own thoughts.

* * *

It may be remembered that Mr. Milward had announced his intention of attending Rosham church that afternoon. As Ellen knew that he was not in the habit of honouring any place of worship with his presence, this determination of her admirer gave her cause for thought.

For a year or more Mr. Milward's attentions towards herself had been marked, but as yet he had said nothing of a decisive nature. Could it be that upon this occasion he intended to cross the line which divides attention from courtship? She believed that he did so intend, for, otherwise, why did he take the trouble to come several miles to church, and why had he suggested to her that they might go out walking together afterwards, as he had done privately on the previous evening? At any rate, if such were his mind, Ellen determined that he should have every opportunity of declaring it; and it was chiefly for this reason that she had arranged Emma's expedition with her brother, since it would then be easy for her to propose that Mr. Milward should escort herself in search of them.

Ellen did not deceive herself. She knew Mr. Milward's faults,

his vulgarity and assumption made her wince, and on the whole perhaps she disliked him. But on the other hand his admiration flattered her vanity, for many were the women who had tried to excite it and failed; his wealth appealed to her love of luxury and place, and she was well aware that, once in the position of his wife, she could guide his weaker will in whatever direction she desired. Moreover his faults were all on the surface, he had no secret vices, and she trusted to her own tact if not to counterbalance, at least to divert attention from his errors of manner.

In due course Ellen and Lady Graves went to church, but to the private mortification of the former Mr. Milward did not appear. At length, much to her relief, towards the middle of the second lesson a disturbance in the nave behind her assured her of his presence. She would not look round, indeed, but her knowledge of him told her that nobody else arriving so painfully late would have ventured to interrupt the congregation in this unnecessary fashion. Meanwhile Mr. Milward had entered the pew behind her, occupying the same place that Henry had sat in that morning, whence by many means, such as the dropping of books and the shifting of hassocks, he endeavoured to attract her attention; but in vain, for Ellen remained inflexible and would not so much as turn her head. His efforts, however, did not altogether fail of their effect, inasmuch as she could see that they drove her mother almost to distraction, for Lady Graves liked to perform her devotions in quiet.

“My dear,” she whispered to her daughter at the termination of the service, “I really wish that when he comes to church Mr. Milward could be persuaded not to disturb other people by his movements, and generally to adopt a less patronising attitude towards the Almighty,” – a sarcasm that in after days Ellen was careful to repeat to him.

At the doorway they met, and Ellen greeted him with affected surprise:

“I thought that you had given up the idea of coming, Mr. Milward.”

“Oh no; I was a little late, that was all. Did you not hear me come in?”

“No,” said Ellen sweetly.

“If Ellen did not hear you I am sure that everybody else did, Mr. Milward,” remarked Lady Graves with some severity, and then with a sigh she glided away to visit her son’s grave. By this time they were at the church gate, and Ellen turned up the path that ran across the park to the Hall.

“How about our walk?” said Milward.

“Our walk? Oh! I had forgotten. Do you wish to walk?”

“Yes; that is what I came for.”

“Indeed! I thought you had come to church. Well, my brother and Miss Levinger have gone to the Cliff, and if you like we can meet them – that is, unless you think that it is going to rain.”

“Oh no, it won’t rain,” he answered.

In a few minutes they had left the park and were following

the same road that Henry and Emma had taken. But Ellen did not talk of the allegorical mystery of the spring, nor did Edward Milward set out his views as to the necessity of religion. On the contrary, he was so silent that Ellen began to be afraid they would meet the others before he found the courage to do that which, from the nervousness of his manner, she was now assured he meant to do.

At length it came, and with a rush.

“Ellen,” said Edward in a husky voice.

“I beg your pardon,” replied that young lady with dignity.

“Miss Graves, I mean. I wish to speak to you.”

“Yes, Mr. Milward.”

“I want – to ask – you to marry me.”

Ellen heard the fateful words, and a glow of satisfaction warmed her breast. She had won the game, and even then she found time to reflect with complacency upon the insight into character which had taught her from the beginning to treat her admirer with affected coldness and assumed superiority.

“This is very sudden and unexpected,” she said, gazing over his head with her steady blue eyes.

Her tone frightened Edward, and he stammered -

“Do you really think so? You are so clever that I should have thought that you must have seen it coming for a long while. I know I have only just been able to prevent myself from proposing on two or three occasions – no, that’s a mistake, I don’t mean that. Oh! there! Ellen, will you have me? I know that you are a

great deal too good for me in a way – ever so much cleverer, and all that sort of thing; but I am truly fond of you, I am really. I am well off, and I know that you would be a credit to me and help me on in the world, for I want to go into Parliament some time, and – there, I think that is all I have got to say.”

Ellen considered this speech rapidly. Its manner was somewhat to seek, but its substance was most satisfactory and left nothing to be desired. Accordingly she concluded that the time had come when she might with safety unbend a little.

“Really, Mr. Milward,” she said in a softer voice, and looking for a second into his eyes, “this is very flattering to me, and I am much touched. I can assure you I had no idea that my friend had become a” – and Ellen hesitated and even blushed as she murmured the word – “lover. I think that perhaps it would be best if I considered your offer for a while, in order that I may make perfectly sure of the state of my own feelings before I allow myself to say words which would be absolutely irrevocable, since, were I once to pledge myself – — ” and she ceased, overcome.

“Oh! pray don’t take time to consider,” said Edward. “I know what that means: you will think better of it, and tell me to-morrow that you can only be a sister to me, or something of the sort.”

Ellen looked at him a while, then said, “Do you really understand what you ask of me, and mean all you say?”

“Why, of course I do, Ellen: I am not an idiot. What do you suppose I should mean, if it is not that I want you to marry me?”

“Then, Edward,” she whispered, “I will say yes, now and for always. I will be your wife.”

“Well, that’s all right,” answered Edward, wiping his brow with his pocket-handkerchief. “Why couldn’t you tell me so at first, dear? It would have spared me a great deal of agitation.”

Then it occurred to him that further demonstrations were usual on these occasions, and, dropping the handkerchief, he made a somewhat clumsy effort to embrace her. But Ellen was not yet prepared to be kissed by Mr. Milward. She felt that these amatory proceedings would require a good deal of leading up to, so far as she was concerned.

“No, no,” she murmured – “not now and here: I am upset.” And, withdrawing her cheek, she gave him her hand to kiss.

It struck Edward that this was a somewhat poor substitute, more especially as she was wearing dogskin gloves, whereon he must press his ardent lips. However, he made the best of it, and even repeated the salute, when a sound caused him to look up.

Now, the scene of this passionate encounter was in a lane that ran from the main road to the coast; moreover, it was badly chosen, for within three paces of it the lane turned sharply to the right. Down this path, still wrapped in silence, came Henry and Emma, and as Edward was in the act of kissing Ellen’s hand they turned the corner. Emma was the first to perceive them.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, with a start.

Then Henry saw. “What the deuce – -!” he said.

Ellen took in the situation at a glance. It was discomposing,

even to a person of her considerable nerve; but she felt that on the whole nothing could have happened more opportunely. Recovering themselves, Henry and Emma were beginning to advance again, as though they had seen nothing, when Ellen whispered hurriedly to her fiancé:

“You must explain to my brother at once.”

“All right,” said Edward. “I say, Graves, I dare say you were surprised when you saw me kissing Ellen’s hand, weren’t you?”

“Yes, Mr. Milward, I was surprised.”

“Well, you won’t be any more when I tell you that we are engaged to be married.”

“Forgive me,” said Henry, somewhat icily: “I am still surprised.” And in his heart he added, “How could Ellen do it! – how could she do it!”

Guessing what was passing in his mind, his sister looked at him warningly, and at that moment Emma began to murmur some confused congratulations. Then they set out homewards. Presently Ellen, who was a person of decision, and thought that she had better make the position clear without delay, managed to attach herself to her brother, leaving the other two to walk ahead out of hearing, much to their mutual disgust.

“You have not congratulated me, Henry,” she said, in a steady voice.

“Congratulated you, Ellen! Good Lord! how can I congratulate you?”

“And why not, pray? There is nothing against Mr. Milward

that I have ever heard of. His character is irreproachable, and his past has never been tarnished by any excesses, which is more than can be said of many men. He is well born, and he has considerable means.”

“Very considerable, I understand,” interrupted Henry.

“And, lastly, he has a most sincere regard for me, as I have for him, and it was dear Reginald’s greatest wish that this should come about. Now may I ask you why I am not to be congratulated?”

“Well, if you want to know, because I think him insufferable. I cannot make out how a lady like yourself can marry such a man just for — — ” and he stopped in time.

By this time Ellen was seriously angry, and it must be admitted not altogether without cause.

“Really, my dear Henry,” she said, in her most bitter tones, “I am by no means sure that the epithet which you are so good as to apply to Mr. Milward would not be more suitable to yourself. You always were impossible, Henry — you see I imitate your frankness — and certainly your manners and temper have not improved at sea. Please let us come to an understanding once and for all: I mean to marry Mr. Milward, and if by chance any action or words of yours should cause that marriage to fall through, I will never forgive you. On reflection you must admit that this is purely my own affair. Moreover, you are aware of the circumstances of our family, which by this prudent and proper alliance I at any rate propose to do my best to improve.”

Henry looked at his stately and handsome sister and the cold anger that was written on her face, and thought to himself, "On the whole I am sorry for Milward, who, whatever his failings may be, is probably an honest man in his way." But to Ellen he said:

"I apologise. In nautical language, I come up all I have said. You are quite right: I am a bear – I have often thought so myself – and my temper, which was never of the best, has been made much worse by all that I have seen and learned since I returned home, and because I am forced by duty to leave my profession. You must make allowances for me, and put up with it, and I for my part will do my best to cultivate a better frame of mind. And now, Ellen, I offer you my warm congratulations on your engagement. You are of an age to judge for yourself, and doubtless, as you say, you know your own business. I hope that you may be happy, and of course I need hardly add, even if my prejudice makes him uncongenial to me, that I shall do my best to be friendly with Mr. Milward, and to say nothing that can cause him to think he is not welcome in our family."

Ellen heard and smiled: once more she had triumphed. Yet, while the smile was on her face, a sadness crept into her heart, which, if it was hard and worldly, was not really bad; feeling, as she did, that this bitterly polite speech of her brother's had shut an iron door between them which could never be reopened. The door was shut, and behind her were the affectionate memories of childhood and many a loving delusion of her youth. Before her lay wealth and pride of place, and every luxury, but not

a grain of love – unless indeed she should be so happy as to find the affection whereof death and the other circumstances of her life and character had deprived her, in the hearts of children yet to be. From her intended husband, be it noted, when custom had outward his passion and admiration for her, she did not expect love even in this hour of her engagement, and if it were forthcoming she knew that from him it would not satisfy her. Well, she knew also if she had done with “love” and other illusions, that she had chosen the better part according to her philosophy.

Chapter 8

Two Conversations

On arriving at the Hall, Ellen went at once to her mother's room, while Edward retired to the library, where he was informed that Sir Reginald was to be found. Lady Graves received the news of her daughter's engagement kindly, but without emotion, for since her son's death nothing seemed to move her. Sir Reginald was more expansive. When Edward told him that he was engaged to Ellen, he took his hand and shook it warmly – not, indeed, that he had any especial affection for that young man, whose tone and manners did not chime in with his old-fashioned ideas of gentlemanly demeanour, but because he knew his wealth to be large, and rejoiced at the prospect of an alliance that would strengthen the tottering fortunes of his family.

Edward had always been a little afraid of Sir Reginald, whose stately and distant courtesy oppressed him, and this fear or respect stood the older man in good stead on the present occasion. It enabled him even to explain that Ellen would inherit little with as much dignity as though he were announcing that she had ten thousand a year in her own right, and, striking while the iron was hot, to extract a statement as to settlements.

Edward mentioned a sum that was liberal enough, but by a happy inspiration Sir Reginald hummed and hawed before

making any answer – whereupon, fearing opposition to his suit, his would-be son-in-law corrected himself, adding to the amount he proposed to put into settlement a very handsome rentcharge on his real property in the event of his predeceasing Ellen.

“Yes, yes,” said Sir Reginald. “I think your amended proposal proper and even generous. But I am no business man – if I had been, things would be very different with me now – and my head for figures is so shockingly bad that perhaps you will not mind jotting down what you suggest on a piece of paper, so that I can think it over at my leisure and submit it to my lawyers. And then, will it be too much trouble to ask you to find Ellen, as I should like to congratulate her?”

“Shall I go at once? I can do the writing afterwards,” suggested Edward, with an instinctive shrinking from the cold record of pen and ink.

“No, no,” answered the old gentleman testily; “these money matters always worry me” – which was true enough – “and I want to be done with them.”

So Edward wrote first and went afterwards, albeit not without qualms.

The sight of his lawyer’s face when he explained to him the terms of settlement on his intended marriage, that he himself had propounded in black and white, amply justified his doubts.

“Well, I never!” said the man of law; “they must know their way about at Rosham Hall. However, as you have put it in writing, you cannot get out of it now. But perhaps, Mr. Milward, next time

you wish to make proposals of settlement on an almost penniless lady, you will consult me first.”

That night there was more outward show of conviviality in the cold Hall dining-room than there had been for many a day. Everybody drank champagne, and all the gentlemen made speeches with the exception of Henry, who contented himself with wishing health and happiness to Edward and his sister.

“You see,” Mr. Levinger whispered to him in the drawing-room, “I did well to caution you to be patient with the foibles of your future brother-in-law, and I was not far out in a surmise that at the time you may have thought impertinent.”

Henry shrugged his shoulders and made no answer.

After dinner Lady Graves, who always retired early, vanished to her room, Sir Reginald and Mr. Levinger went to the library, and Henry, after wandering disconsolately for a while about the great drawing-room, in a distant corner of which the engaged couple were carrying on a tête-à-tête, betook himself to the conservatory. Here he chanced upon Emma.

To-night she was dressed in white, wearing pearls upon her slender neck; and seated alone upon a bench in the moonlight, for the conservatory was not otherwise illuminated, she looked more like a spirit than a woman. Indeed, to Henry, who came upon her unobserved, this appearance was much heightened by a curious and accidental contrast. Immediately behind Emma was a life-sized marble replica of one of the most beautiful of the statues known to ancient art. There above this pale and spiritual

maiden, with outstretched arms and alluring lips stood the image of Aphrodite, triumphing in her perfect nakedness.

Henry looked from one to the other, speculating as to which was the more lovely of these types of the spirit and the flesh. "Supposing," he thought to himself, "that a man were obliged to take his choice between them, I wonder which he would choose, and which would bring him the greater happiness. For the matter of that, I wonder which I should choose myself. To make a perfect woman the two should be merged."

Then he came forward, smiling at his speculation, and little knowing that before all was done this very choice would be forced upon him.

"I hope that I am not disturbing you, Miss Levinger," he said; "but to tell you the truth I fled here for refuge, the drawing-room being engaged."

Emma started, and seeing who it was, said, "Yes, I thought so too; that is why I came away. I suppose that you are very much pleased, Captain Graves?"

"What pleases others pleases me," he answered grimly. "I am not going to marry Mr. Milward."

"Why don't you like him?" she asked.

"I never said I did not like him. I have no doubt that he is very well, but he is not quite the sort of man with whom I have been accustomed to associate – that is all."

"Well, I suppose that I ought not to say it, but I do not admire him either; not because he was rude to me last night, but because

he seems so coarse. I dislike what is coarse.”

“Do you? Life itself is coarse, and I fancy that a certain amount of that quality is necessary to happiness in the world. After all, the flesh rules here, and not the spirit,” – and again he looked first at the marble Aphrodite, then at the girl beneath it. “We are born of the flesh, we are flesh, and all our affections and instincts partake of it.”

“I do not agree with you at all,” Emma answered, with some warmth. “We are born of the spirit: that is the reality; the flesh is only an accident, if a necessary accident. When we allow it to master us, then our troubles begin.”

“Perhaps; but it is rather a pervading accident for many of us. In short, it makes up our world, and we cannot escape it. While we are of it the most refined among us must follow its routine – more or less. A day may come when that routine will be different, and our desires, aims, and objects will vary with it, but it is not here or now. Everything has its season, Miss Levinger, and it is useless to try to escape from the facts of life, for at last in one shape or another they overtake us, who, strive as we may, can very rarely defy our natures.”

Emma made no answer, though she did not look convinced, and for a while they remained silent.

“My father tells me that you are coming to see us,” she said at last.

“Yes; he kindly asked me. Do you wish me to come?”

“Of course I do,” she answered, colouring faintly. “It will be

a great change to see a stranger staying at Monk's Lodge. But I am afraid that you will find it very dull; we are quite alone, at this time of year there is nothing on earth to do, unless you like birdnesting. There are plenty of wild fowl about, and I have rather a good collection of eggs."

"Oh, I have no doubt that I shall amuse myself," he answered. "Don't you think that we had better be going back? They must have had enough of each other by this time."

Making no answer, Emma rose and walked across the conservatory, Henry following her. At the door, acting on a sudden impulse, she stopped suddenly and said, "You do really mean to come to Monk's Lodge, do you not, Captain Graves?" And she looked up into his face.

"If you wish it," he answered in a low voice.

"I have said that I do wish it," she replied, and turning led the way into the drawing-room.

* * *

Meanwhile another conversation had taken place in the library, where Sir Reginald and Mr. Levinger were seated.

"I think that you are to be very much congratulated on this engagement, Graves," said his companion. "Of course the young man is not perfect: he has faults, and obvious ones; but your daughter knows what she is about, and understands him, and altogether in the present state of affairs it is a great thing for you."

“Not for me – not for me,” answered Sir Reginald sadly; “I seem to have neither interests nor energies left, and so far as I am concerned literally I care for nothing. I have lived my life, Levinger, and I am fading away. That last blow of poor Reginald’s death has killed me, although I do not die at once. The only earthly desire which remains to me is to provide, if possible, for the welfare of my family. In furtherance of that end this afternoon I condescended even to get the best possible terms of settlement out of young Milward. Twenty years ago I should have been ashamed to do such a thing, but age and poverty have hardened me. Besides, I know my man. He blows hot to-day, a month hence he may blow cold; and as it is quite on the cards that he and Ellen will not pull together very well in married life, and I have nothing to leave her, I am anxious that she should be properly provided for. By the way, have you spoken to Henry about these mortgages?”

“Yes, I explained the position to him on Saturday night. It seemed to upset him a good deal.”

“I don’t wonder at it, I am sure. You have behaved very kindly in this matter, Levinger. Had it been in anybody else’s hands I suppose that we should all have been in the workhouse by now. But, frankly, I don’t see the end of it. The money is not yours – it is your daughter’s fortune, or the greater part of it – and you can’t go on being generous with other people’s fortunes. As it is, she stands to lose heavily on the investment, and the property is sinking in value very day. It is very well to talk of our old

friendship and of your gratitude to me. Perhaps you should be grateful, and no doubt I have pulled you out of some nasty scrapes in bygone days, when you were the Honourable – ”

“Don’t mention the name, Graves!” said Levinger, striking his stick fiercely on the floor: “that man is dead; never mention his name again to me or to anybody else.”

“As you like,” answered Sir Reginald, smiling. “I was only going to repeat that you cannot continue to be grateful on your daughter’s money, and if you take your remedy Rosham must go to the hammer after all these generations. I shall be dead first, but it breaks my heart to think of it.” And the old man covered his face with his thin hand and groaned aloud.

“Don’t distress yourself, Graves,” said Levinger gently; “I have hinted to you before that there is a possible way of escape.”

“You mean if Henry were to take a fancy to your daughter, and she were to reciprocate it?”

“Yes, that is what I mean; and why shouldn’t they? So far as Emma is concerned the matter is already done. I am convinced of it. She was much struck with your son when she was here nearly two years ago, and has often spoken of him since. Emma has no secrets from me, and her mind is clear as a glass. It is easy to read what is passing there. I do not say that she has thought of marrying Henry, but she is attached to him, and admires him and his character – which shows her sense, for he is a fine fellow, a far finer fellow than any of you give him credit for. And on his side, why shouldn’t he take to her? It is true that her mother’s

origin was humble, though she was a much more refined woman than people guessed, and that I, her father, am a man under a cloud, and deservedly. But what of that? The mother is dead, and alas! my life is not a good one, so that very soon her forbears will be forgotten. For the rest, she is a considerable, if not a large, heiress; there should be a matter of at least fifteen thousand pounds to come to her besides the mortgages on this place and real property as well. In her own way – to my mind at any rate – she is beautiful, and there never lived a sweeter, purer, or more holy-minded woman. If your son were married to her, within a year he would worship the ground she trod on. Why shouldn't it come about, then?"

"I don't know, except that things which are very suitable and very much arranged have a way of falling through. Your daughter Emma is all you say, though perhaps a little too unearthly. She strikes me as rather ghost-like – that is, compared with the girls of my young days, though I understand this sort of thing has become the fashion. The chief obstacle I fear, however, is Henry himself. He is a very queer-grained man, and as likely as not the knowledge that this marriage is necessary to our salvation will cause him to refuse to have anything to do with it."

"For his own sake I hope that it may not be so," answered Levinger, with some approach to passion, "for if it is I tell you fairly that I shall let matters take their course. Emma will either come into possession of this property as the future Lady Graves or as Miss Levinger, and it is for your son to choose which he

prefers.”

“Yes, yes, I understand all that. What I do not understand, Lvinger, is why you should be so desperately anxious for this particular marriage. There are plenty of better matches for Emma than my son Henry. We are such old friends, I do not mind telling you I have not the slightest doubt but that you have some secret reason. It seems to me – I know you won’t mind my saying it – that you carry the curious doublesidedness of your nature into every detail of life. You cannot be anything wholly – there is always a reservation about you: thus, when you seemed to be thoroughly bad, there was a reservation of good in you; and now, when you appear to be the most righteous man in the county, I sometimes think that there is still a considerable leaven of the other thing.”

Mr. Lvinger smiled and shrugged his shoulders, but he did not take offence at these remarks. That he refrained from doing so showed the peculiar terms on which the two men were – terms born of intimate knowledge and long association.

“Most people have more reasons for desiring a thing than they choose to publish on the housetops, Graves; but I don’t see why you should seek for secret motives here when there are so many that are obvious. You happen to be the only friend I have in the world; it is therefore natural that I should wish to see my daughter married to your son, and for this same reason I desire that your family, which has been part and parcel of the country-side for hundreds of years, should be saved from ruin. Further, I have

taken a greater liking to Henry than to any man I have met for many a long day, and I know that Emma would love him and be happy with him, whereas did she marry elsewhere, with her unusual temperament, she might be very unhappy.

“Also, the match would be a good one for her, which weighs with me a great deal. Your son may never be rich, but he has done well in his profession, he is the inheritor of an ancient name, and he will be a baronet. As you know, my career has been a failure, and more than a failure. Very probably my child will never even know who I really am, but that she is the granddaughter of a Bradmouth smack owner is patent to everybody. I am anxious that all this should be forgotten and covered up by an honourable marriage; I am anxious, after being slighted and neglected, that she should start afresh in a position in which she can hold her head as high as any lady in the county, and I do not think that in my case this is an unnatural or an exorbitant ambition. Finally, it is my desire, the most earnest desire of my life, and I mean to live to see it accomplished. Now have I given you reasons enough?”

“Plenty, and very good ones too. But I still think that you have another and better in the background. Well, for my part I shall only be too thankful if this can be brought about. It would be a fair marriage also, for such disadvantages as there are seem to be very equally divided; and I like your daughter, Levinger – she is a sweet girl and interesting, even if she is old Will Johnson’s grandchild. Now I must be off and say something civil to my future son-in-law before he goes,” – and, rising with something

of an effort, Sir Reginald left the room.

“Graves is breaking up, but he is still shrewd,” said Mr. Levinger to himself, gazing after him with his piercing eyes. “As usual he put his finger on the weak spot. Now, if he knew my last and best reason for wishing to see Emma married to his son, I wonder what he would do? Shrug his shoulders and say nothing, I expect. Beggars cannot be choosers, and bankrupts are not likely to be very particular. Poor old friend! I am sorry for him. Well, he shall spend his last days in peace if I can manage it – that is, unless Henry proves himself an obstinate fool, as it is possible he may.”

* * *

Next morning Mr. Levinger and his daughter returned to Monk’s Lodge; but before they went it was settled that Henry was to visit them some three weeks later, on the tenth of June, that date being convenient to all concerned.

On the following day Henry went to London for a week to arrange about a little pension to which he was entitled, and other matters. This visit did not improve his spirits, for in the course of his final attendances at the Admiralty he discovered for the first time how well he was thought of there, and that he had been looked on as a man destined to rise in the Service.

“Pity that you made up your mind to go, Captain Graves – great pity!” said one of the head officials to him. “I always

thought that I should see you an admiral one day, if I lived long enough. We had several good marks against your name here, I can tell you. However, it is too late to talk of all this now, and I dare say that you will be better off as a baronet with a big estate than banging about the world in an ironclad, with the chance of being shot or drowned. You are too good a man to be lost, if you will allow me to say so, and now that you are off the active list you must go into Parliament and try to help us there."

"By Heavens, sir," answered Henry with warmth, "I'd rather be captain of an ironclad in the Channel Fleet than a baronet with twenty thousand a year, though now I have no chance of either. But we can't always please ourselves in this world. Good-bye." And, turning abruptly, he left the room.

"I wonder why that fellow went," mused the official as the door closed. "For a young man he was as good a sailor as there is in the Service, and he really might have got on. Private affairs, I suppose. Well, it can't be helped, and there are plenty ready to step into his shoes."

Henry returned to Rosham very much depressed, nor did he find the atmosphere of that establishment conducive to lightness of the heart. Putting aside his personal regrets at leaving the Navy, there was much to sadden him. First and foremost came financial trouble, which by now had reached an acute stage, for it was difficult to find ready money wherewith to carry on the ordinary expenses of the house. Then his mother's woeful face oppressed him as she went about mourning for the dead,

mourning also for their fallen fortunes, and his father's failing health gave great reason for anxiety.

Furthermore, though here he knew that he had no just cause of complaint, the constant presence of Edward Milward irritated him to a degree that he could not conceal. In vain did he try to like this young man, or even to make it appear that he liked him; his efforts were a failure, and he felt that Ellen, with whom otherwise he remained on good, though not on cordial terms, resented this fact, as he on his part resented the continual false pretences, or rather the subterfuges and suppressions of the truth, in which she indulged in order to keep from her fiancé a knowledge of the real state of the Rosham affairs. These arts exasperated Henry's pride to an extent almost unbearable, and Ellen knew that it was so, but not on this account would she desist from them. For she knew also the vulgar nature of her lover, and feared, perhaps not without reason, lest he should learn how great were their distresses, and how complete was the ruin which overshadowed them, and break off an engagement that was to connect him with a bankrupt and discredited family.

In the midst of these and other worries the time passed heavily enough, till at length that day arrived on which Henry was engaged to visit Monk's Lodge. Already he had received a note from Emma Levinger, writing on behalf of her father, to remind him of his promise. It was a prettily expressed note, written in a delicate and beautiful hand; and he answered it saying that he proposed to send his portmanteau by train and to ride over to

Monk's Lodge, arriving there in time for dinner.

Henry had not thought much of Emma during the last week or two; or, if he had thought of her, it was in an impersonal way, as part of a sordid problem with which he found himself called upon to cope. At no time was he much given to allow his mind to run upon the fascinations of any woman; and, charming and original as this lady might be, he was not in a mood just now to contemplate her from the standpoint of romance. None the less, however, was he glad of the opportunity which this visit gave him to escape for a while from Rosham, even if he could not leave his anxieties behind him.

He had no further conversation with Ellen upon the subject of Emma. The terms upon which they stood implied a mutual truce from interference in each other's affairs. His father, however, did say a word to him when he went to bid him good-bye. He found the old man in bed, for now he did not rise till lunch-time.

"Good-bye, my boy," he said. "So you are going to Monk's Lodge? Well, it will be a pleasant change for you. Old Levinger is a queer fish, and in some ways not altogether to be trusted, as I have known for many a year, but he has lots of good in him; and to my mind his daughter is charming. Ah, Henry! I wish, without doing violence to your own feelings, that you could manage to take a fancy to this girl. There, I will say no more; you know what I mean."

"I know, father," answered Henry, "and I will do my best to fall in with your views. But, all the same, however charming she

may be, it is a little hard on me that I should be brought down to this necessity.”

Then he rode away, and in due course reached the ruins of Ramborough Abbey.

Chapter 9

Mutual Admiration

That Henry and Joan were left lying for so many hours among the graves of Ramborough Abbey is not greatly to be wondered at, since, before he had ridden half a mile, Master Willie Hood's peculiar method of horsemanship resulted in frightening the cob so much that, for the first time in its peaceful career, it took the bit between its teeth and bolted. For a mile or more it galloped on at right angles to the path, while Willie clung to its mane, screaming "Wo!" at the top of his voice, and the sea-birds' eggs with which his pockets were filled, now smashed into a filthy mass, trickled in yellow streams down the steed's panting sides.

At length the end came. Arriving at a fence, the cob stopped suddenly, and Willie pitched over its head into a bramble bush. By the time that he had extricated himself – unharmed, but very much frightened, and bleeding from a dozen scratches – the horse was standing five hundred yards away, snorting and staring round in an excited manner. Willie, who was a determined youth, set to work to catch it.

Into the details of the pursuit we need not enter: suffice it to say that the sun had set before he succeeded in his enterprise. Mount it again he could not, for the saddle had twisted and one stirrup was lost; nor would he have done so if he could.

Therefore he determined to walk into Bradmouth, whither, after many halts and adventures, he arrived about ten o'clock, leading the unwilling animal by the reins.

Now Willie, although exceedingly weary, and somewhat shaken, was a boy of his word; so, still leading the horse, he proceeded straight to the residence of Dr. Childs, and rang the bell.

"I want the doctor, please, miss," he said to the servant girl who answered it.

"My gracious! you look as if you did," remarked that young lady, surveying his bleeding countenance.

"Tain't for myself, Silly!" he replied. "You ask the doctor to step out, for I don't trust this here horse to you or anybody: he's run away once, and I don't want no more of that there game."

The girl complied, laughing; and presently Dr. Childs, a middle-aged man with a quiet manner, appeared, and asked what was the matter.

"Please, sir, there's a gentleman fallen off Ramborough Tower and broken his leg; and Joan Haste she's with him, and she's all bloody too – though I don't know what she's broken. I was to ask you to go and fetch him with a shutter, and to take things along to tie him up with."

"When did he fall, and what is his name, my boy?" asked the doctor.

"I don't know when he fell, sir; but I saw Joan Haste about six o'clock time. Since then I've been getting here with this here

horse; and I wish that I'd stuck to my legs, for all the help he's been to me – the great idle brute! I'd rather wheel a barrow of bricks nor pull him along behind me. Oh! the name? She said it was Captain Graves of Rosham: that was what I was to tell her aunt."

"Captain Graves of Rosham!" said Dr. Childs to himself. "Why, I heard Mr. Levinger say that he was coming to stay with him to-day!"

Then he went into the house, and ten minutes later he was on his way to Ramborough in a dogcart, followed by some men with a stretcher. On reaching the ruined abbey, the doctor stood up and looked round; but, although the moon was bright, he could see no one. He called aloud, and presently heard a faint voice answering him. Leaving the cart in charge of his groom, he followed the direction of the sound till he came to the foot of the tower. Here, beneath the shadow of the spiked tomb, clasping the senseless body of a man in her arms, he found a woman – Joan Haste – whose white dress was smirched with blood, and who, to all appearance, had but just awakened from a faint. Very feebly – for she was quite exhausted – she explained what had happened; and, without more words, the doctor set to work.

"It's a baddish fracture," he said presently. "Lucky that the poor fellow is insensible."

In a quarter of an hour he had done all that could be done there and in that light, and by this time the men who were following with the stretcher, were seen arriving in another cart. Very gently

they lifted Henry, who was still unconscious, on to the stretcher, and set out upon the long trudge back to Bradmouth, Dr. Childs walking by their side. Meanwhile Joan was placed in the dogcart and driven forward by the coachman, to see that every possible preparation was made at the Crown and Mitre, whither it was rapidly decided that the injured man must be taken, for it was the only inn at Bradmouth, and the doctor had no place for him in his own house.

At length they arrived, and Henry, who by now was recovering consciousness, was carried into Joan's room, an ancient oak-panelled apartment on the ground floor. Once this room served as the justice-chamber of the monks; for what was now the Crown and Mitre had been their lock-up and place of assize, when, under royal charter, they exercised legal rights over the inhabitants of Bradmouth. There the doctor and his assistant, who had returned from visiting some case in the country, began the work of setting Henry's broken leg, aided by Mrs. Gillingwater, Joan's aunt, a hard-featured, stout and capable-looking woman of middle age. At length the task was completed, and Henry was sent to sleep under the influence of a powerful narcotic.

"And now, sir," said Mrs. Gillingwater, as Dr. Childs surveyed his patient with a certain grave satisfaction, for he felt that he had done well by a very difficult bit of surgery, "if you have a minute or two to spare, I think that you might give Joan a look: she's got a nasty hole in her shoulder, and seems shaken and queer."

Then she led the way across the passage to a little room that in the monastic days had served as a cell, but now was dedicated to the use of Mr. Gillingwater whenever his wife considered him too tipsy to be allowed to share the marital chamber.

Here Joan was lying on a truckle bed, in a half-fainting condition, while near her, waving a lighted candle to and fro over her prostrate form, stood Mr. Gillingwater, a long, thin-faced man, with a weak mouth, who evidently had taken advantage of the general confusion to help himself to the gin bottle.

“Poor dear! poor dear! ain’t it sad to see her dead?” he said, in maudlin tones, dropping the hot grease from the candle upon the face of the defenceless Joan; “and she, what she looks, a real lady. Oh! ain’t it sad to see her dead?” And he wept aloud.

“Get out, you drunken sot, will you!” exclaimed his wife, with savage energy. “Do you want to set the place on fire?” And, snatching the candle from Mr. Gillingwater’s hand, she pushed him through the open door so vigorously that he fell in a heap in the passage. Then she turned to Dr. Childs, and said, “I beg your pardon, sir; but there’s only one way to deal with him when he’s on the drink.”

The doctor smiled, and began to examine Joan’s shoulder.

“It is nothing serious,” he said, when he had washed the wound, “unless the rust from the spike should give some trouble in the healing. Had it been lower down, it would have been another matter, for the lung might have been pierced. As it is, with a little antiseptic ointment and a sleeping draught, I think

that your niece will be in a fair way to recovery by to-morrow morning, if she has not caught cold in that damp grass.”

“However did she come by this, sir?” asked Mrs. Gillingwater.

“I understand that Captain Graves climbed the tower to get some young jackdaws. He fell, and she tried to catch him in her arms, but of course was knocked backwards.”

“She always was a good plucked one, was Joan,” said Mrs. Gillingwater, with a certain reluctant pride. “Well, if no harm comes of it, she has brought us a bit of custom this time anyhow, and when we want it bad enough. The Captain is likely to be laid up here some weeks, ain’t he, sir?”

“For a good many weeks, I fear, Mrs. Gillingwater, even if things go well with him.”

“Is he in any danger, then?”

“There is always some danger to a middle-aged man in such a case: it is possible that he may lose his leg, and that is a serious matter.”

“Lord! and all to get her young jackdaws. You have something to answer for, miss, you have,” soliloquised Mrs. Gillingwater aloud; adding, by way of explanation, as they reached the passage, “She’s an unlucky girl, Joan is, for all her good looks – always making trouble, like her mother before her: I suppose it is in the blood.”

Leaving his assistant in charge, Dr. Childs returned home, for he had another case to visit that night. Next morning he wrote two notes – one to Sir Reginald Graves and one to Mr. Levinger,

both of whom were patients of his, acquainting them with what had occurred in language as little alarming as possible. Having despatched these letters by special messengers, he walked to the Crown and Mitre. As he had anticipated, except for the pain of the wound in her shoulder, Joan was almost herself again: she had not caught cold, the puncture looked healthy, and already her vigorous young system was shaking off the effects of her shock and distress of mind. Henry also seemed to be progressing as favourably as could be expected; but it was deemed advisable to keep him under the influence of opiates for the present.

“I suppose that we had better send for a trained nurse,” said the doctor. “If I telegraph to London, we could have one down by the evening.”

“If you do, sir, I am sure I don’t know where she’s to sleep,” answered Mrs. Gillingwater; “there isn’t a hole or corner here unless Joan turns out of the little back room, and then there is nowhere for her to go. Can’t I manage for the present, sir, with Joan to help? I’ve had a lot to do with sick folk of all sorts in my day, worse luck, and some knack of dealing with them too, they tell me. Many and many’s the eyes that I have shut for the last time. Then it isn’t as though you was far off neither: you or Mr. Salter can always be in and out if you are wanted.”

“Well,” said the doctor, after reflecting, “we will let the question stand over for the present, and see how the case goes on.”

He knew Mrs. Gillingwater to be a capable and resourceful

woman, and one who did not easily tire, for he had had to do with her in numerous maternity cases, where she acted the part of sage-femme with an address that had won her a local reputation.

About twelve o'clock a message came to him to say that Lady Graves and Mr. Levinger were at the inn, and would be glad to speak to him. He found them in the little bar-parlour, and Emma Levinger with them, looking even paler than her wont.

"Oh! doctor, how is my poor son?" said Lady Graves, in a shaken voice. "Mrs. Gillingwater says that I may not see him until I have asked you. I was in bed this morning and not very well when your note came, but Ellen had gone over to Upcott, and of course Sir Reginald could not drive so far, so I got up and came at once." And she paused, glancing at him anxiously.

"I think that you would have done better to stop where you were, Lady Graves, for you are not looking very grand," answered Dr. Childs. "I thought, of course, that your daughter would come. Well, it is a bad double fracture, and, unluckily, Captain Graves was left exposed for some hours after the accident; but at present he seems to be going on as well as possible. That is all I can say."

"How did it happen?" asked Mr. Levinger.

"Joan Haste can tell you better than I can," the doctor answered. "She is up, for I saw her standing in the passage. I will call her."

At the mention of Joan's name Mr. Levinger's face underwent a singular contraction, that, quick as it was, did not escape the

doctor's observant eye. Indeed, he made a deprecatory movement with his hand, as though he were about to negative the idea of her being brought before them; then hearing Lady Graves's murmured "by all means," he seemed to change his mind suddenly and said nothing. Dr. Childs opened the door and called Joan, and presently she stood before them.

Her face was very pale, her under lip was a little cut, and her right hand rested in a sling on the bosom of her simple brown dress; but her very pallor and the anxiety in her dark eyes made her beauty the more remarkable, by touching it with an added refinement. Joan bowed to Mr. Levinger, who acknowledged her salute with a nod, and curtsied to Lady Graves; then she opened her lips to speak, when her eyes met those of Emma Levinger, and she remained silent.

The two women had seen each other before; in childhood they had even spoken together, though rarely; but since they were grown up they had never come thus face to face, and now it seemed that each of them found a curious fascination in the other. It was of Emma Levinger, Joan remembered, that Captain Graves had spoken on the previous night, when his mind began to wander after the accident; and though she scarcely knew why, this gave her a fresh interest in Joan's eyes. Why had his thoughts flown to her so soon as his mental balance was destroyed? she wondered. Was he in love with her, or engaged to be married to her? It was possible, for she had heard that he was on his way to stay at Monk's Lodge, where they never saw any company.

Joan has almost made up her mind, with considerable perspicuity, that there was something of the sort in the air, when she remembered, with a sudden flush of pleasure, that Captain Graves had spoken of herself also yonder in the churchyard, and in singularly flattering terms, which seemed to negative the idea that the fact of a person speaking of another person, when under the influence of delirium, necessarily implied the existence of affection, or even of intimacy, between them. Still, thought Joan, it would not be wonderful if he did love Miss Levinger. Surely that sweet and spiritual face and those solemn grey eyes were such as any man might love.

But if Joan was impressed with Emma, Emma was equally impressed with Joan, for in that instant of the meeting of their gaze, the thought came to her that she had never before seen so physically perfect a specimen of womanhood. Although Emma could theorise against the material, and describe beauty as an accident, and therefore a thing to be despised, she was too honest not to confess to herself her admiration for such an example of it as Joan afforded. This was the girl whose bravery, so she was told, had saved Captain Graves from almost certain death; and, looking at her, Emma felt a pang of envy as she compared her health and shape with her own delicacy and slight proportions. Indeed, there was something more than envy in her mind – something that, if it was not jealousy, at least partook of it. Of late Emma's thoughts had centred themselves a great deal round Captain Graves, and she was envious of this lovely village girl

with whom, in some unknown way, he had become acquainted, and whose good fortune it had been to be able to protect him from the worst effects of his dreadful accident.

At that moment a warning voice seemed to speak in Emma's heart, telling her that this woman would not readily let go the man whom fate had brought to her, that she would cling to him indeed as closely as though he were her life. It had nothing to do with her, at any rate as yet; still Emma grew terribly afraid as the thought went home, afraid with a strange, impalpable fear she knew not of what. At least she trembled, and her eyes swam, and she wished in her heart that she had never seen Joan Haste, that they might live henceforth at different ends of the world, that she might never see her again.

All this flashed through the minds of the two girls in one short second; the next Emma's terror, for it may fitly be so called, had come and gone, and Lady Graves was speaking.

"Good day, Joan Haste," she said kindly: "I understand that you were with my son at the time of this shocking accident. Will you tell us how it came about?"

"Oh, my Lady," answered Joan with agitation, "it was all my fault – at least, in a way it was, though I am sure I never meant that he should be so foolish as to try and climb the tower." And in a simple straightforward fashion she went on to relate what had occurred, saying as little as possible, however, about her own share in the adventure.

"Thank you," said Lady Graves when Joan had finished. "You

seem to have behaved very bravely, and I fear that you are a good deal hurt. I hope you will soon be well again. And now, Dr. Childs, do you think that I might see Henry for a little?"

"Well, perhaps for a minute or two, if you will keep as quiet as possible," he answered, and led the way to the sick room.

By this time the effects of the sleeping draughts had passed off, and when his mother entered Henry was wide awake and talking to Mrs. Gillingwater. He knew her step at once, and addressed her in a cheery voice, trying to conceal the pain which racked him.

"How do you do, mother?" he said. "You find me in a queer way, but better off than ever I expected to be again when I was hanging against the face of that tower. It is very good of you to come to see me, and I hope that the news of my mishap has not upset my father."

"My poor boy," said Lady Graves, bending over him and kissing him, "I am afraid that you must suffer a great deal of pain."

"Nothing to speak of," he answered, "but I am pretty well smashed up, and expect that I shall be on my back here for some weeks. Queer old place, isn't it? This good lady tells me that it is her niece's room. It's a very jolly one, anyhow. Just look at the oak panelling and that old mantelpiece. By the way, I hope that Miss Joan – I think that she said her name was Joan – is not much hurt. She is a brave girl, I can tell you, mother. Had it not been that she caught me when I fell, I must have gone face first

on to that spiked tomb, and then – ”

“Had it not been for her you would never have climbed the tower,” answered Lady Graves with a shudder. “I can’t think what induced you to be so foolish, at your age, my dear boy.”

“I think it was because she is so pretty, and I wanted to oblige her,” he answered, with the candour of a mind excited by suffering. “I say, I hope that somebody has written to the Levingers, or they will be wondering what on earth has become of me.”

“Yes, yes, dear; they are here, and everything has been explained to them.”

“Oh, indeed. Make them my excuses, will you? When I am a bit better I should like to see them, but I don’t feel quite up to it just now.”

Henry made this last remark in a weaker voice; and, taking the hint, Dr. Childs touched Lady Graves on the shoulder and nodded towards the door.

“Well, dear, I must be going,” said his mother; “but Ellen or I will come over to-morrow to see how you are getting on. By the way, should you like us to send for a trained nurse to look after you?”

“Most certainly not,” Henry answered, with vigour; “I hate the sight of hospital nurses – they always remind me of Haslar, where I was laid up with jaundice. There are two doctors, and this good lady taking care of me here, and if that isn’t enough for me, nothing will be.”

“Well, dear, we will see how you get on,” said his mother doubtfully. Then she kissed him and went; but the doctor stopped behind, and having taken his patient’s temperature, ordered him another sleeping draught.

So soon as Lady Graves had left the parlour, Joan followed her example, murmuring with truth that she felt a little faint.

“What a beautiful girl, father!” said Emma to Mr. Levinger. “Who is she? Somebody said the other day that there was a mystery about her.”

“How on earth should I know?” he answered. “She is Mrs. Gillingwater’s niece and I believe that her parents are dead; that is the only mystery I ever heard.”

“I think that there must be something odd, all the same,” said Emma. “If you notice, her manners are quite different from those of most village girls, and she speaks almost like a lady.”

“Been educated above her station in life, I fancy,” her father answered snappishly. “That is the way girls of this kind are ruined, and taught to believe that nothing in their own surroundings is good enough for them. Anyhow, she has led poor Graves into this mess, for which I shall not forgive her in a hurry.”

“At least she did her best to save him, and at great risk to herself,” said Emma gently. “I don’t see what more she could have done.”

“That’s woman’s logic all over,” replied the father. “First get a man who is worth two of you into some terrible scrape, physical or otherwise, and then do your ‘best to save him,’ and pose as a

heroine. It would be kinder to leave him alone altogether in nine cases out of ten, only then it is impossible to play the guardian angel, as every woman loves to do. Just to gratify her whim – for that is the plain English of it – this girl sends poor Graves up that tower; and because, when he falls off it, she tries to throw her arms round him, everybody talks of her wonderful courage. Bother her and her courage! The net result is that he will never be the same man again.”

Her father spoke with so much suppressed energy that Emma looked at him in astonishment, for of late years, at any rate, he had been accustomed to act calmly and to speak temperately.

“Is Captain Graves’s case so serious?”

“From what young Salter tells me I gather that it is about as bad as it can be of its kind. He has fractured his leg in a very awkward place, there is some hæmorrhage, and he lay exposed for nearly five hours, and had to be carried several miles.”

“What will happen to him, then?” asked Emma in alarm. “I thought that the worst of it was over.”

“I can’t tell you. It depends on Providence and his constitution; but what seems likely is that they will be forced to amputate his leg and make him a hopeless cripple for life.”

“Oh!” said Emma, catching her breath like one in pain; “I had no idea that it was so bad. This is terrible.” And for a moment she leant on the back of a chair to support herself.

“Yes, it is black enough; but we cannot help by stopping here, so we may as well drive home. I will send to inquire for him this

evening.”

So they went, and never had Emma a more unhappy drive. She was looking forward so much to Captain Graves’s visit, and now he lay wounded – dangerously ill. The thought wrung her heart, and she could almost find it in her gentle breast to detest the girl who, however innocently, had been the cause of all the trouble.

Chapter 10

Azrael's Wing

For the next two days, notwithstanding the serious condition of his broken leg, Henry seemed to go on well, till even his mother and Emma Levinger, both of whom were kept accurately informed of his state, ceased to feel any particular alarm about him. On the second day Mrs. Gillingwater, being called away to attend to some other matter, sent for Joan – who, although her arm was still in a sling, had now almost recovered – to watch in the sick room during her absence. She came and took her seat by the bed, for at the time Henry was asleep. Shortly afterwards he awoke and saw her.

“Is that you, Miss Haste?” he said. “I did not know that you cared for nursing.”

“Yes, sir,” answered Joan. “My aunt was obliged to go out for a little while, and, as you are doing so nicely, she said that she thought I might be trusted to look after you till she came back.”

“It is very kind of you, I am sure,” said Henry. “Sick rooms are not pleasant places. Perhaps you wouldn’t mind giving me some of that horrid stuff – barley-water I think it is. I am thirsty.”

Joan handed him the glass and supported his head while he drank. When he had satisfied his thirst he said:

“I have never thanked you yet for your bravery. I do thank you

sincerely, Miss Haste, for if I had fallen on to those spikes there would have been an end of me. I saw them as I was hanging, and thought that my hour had come.”

“And yet he told me to ‘stand clear!’” reflected Joan; but aloud she said:

“Oh! pray, pray don’t thank me, sir. It is all my fault that you have met with this dreadful accident, and it breaks my heart to think of it.” And as she spoke a great tear ran down her beautiful face.

“Come, please don’t cry: it upsets me; if the smash was anybody’s fault, it was my own. I ought to have known better.”

“I will try not, sir,” answered Joan, in a choking voice; “but aunt said that you weren’t to talk, and you are talking a great deal.”

“All right,” he replied: “you stop crying and I’ll stop talking.”

As may be guessed after this beginning, from that hour till the end of his long and dangerous illness, Joan was Henry’s most constant attendant. Her aunt did the rougher work of the sick room, indeed, but for everything else he depended upon her; clinging to her with a strange obstinacy that baffled all attempts to replace her by a more highly trained nurse. On one occasion, when an effort of the sort was made, the results upon the patient were so unfavourable that, to her secret satisfaction, Joan was at once reinstalled.

After some days Henry took a decided turn for the worse. His temperature rose alarmingly, and he became delirious, with short

coherent intervals. Blood poisoning, which the doctors feared, declared itself, and in the upshot he fell a victim to a dreadful fever that nearly cost him his life. At one time the doctors were of opinion that his only chance lay in amputation of the fractured limb; but in the end they gave up this idea, being convinced that, in his present state, he would certainly die of the shock were they to attempt the operation.

Then followed three terrible days, while Henry lay between life and death. For the greater part of those days Lady Graves and Ellen sat in the bar- parlour, the former lost in stony silence, the latter pale and anxious enough, but still calm and collected. Even now Ellen did not lose her head, and this was well, for the others were almost distracted by anxiety and grief. Distrusting the capacities of Joan, a young person whom she regarded with disfavour as being the cause of her brother's accident, it was Ellen who insisted upon the introduction of the trained nurses, with consequences that have been described. When the doctors hesitated as to the possibility of an operation, it was Ellen also who gave her voice against it, and persuaded her mother to do the same.

"I know nothing of surgery," she said, with conviction, "and it seems probable that poor Henry will die; but I feel sure that if you try to cut off his leg he will certainly die."

"I think that you are right, Miss Graves," said the eminent surgeon who had been brought down in consultation, and with whom the final word lay. "My opinion is that the only course to

follow with your brother is to leave him alone, in the hope that his constitution will pull him through.”

So it came about that Henry escaped the knife.

Emma Levinger and her father also haunted the inn, and it was during those dark days that the state of the former's affections became clear both to herself and to every one about her. Before this she had never confessed even to her own heart that she was attached to Henry Graves; but now, in the agony of her suspense, this love of hers arose in strength, and she knew that, whether he stayed or was called away, it must always be the nearest and most constant companion of her life. Why she loved him Emma could not tell, nor even when she began to do so; and indeed these things are difficult to define. But the fact remained, hard, palpable, staring: a fact which she had no longer any care to conceal or ignore, seeing that the conditions of the case caused her to set aside those considerations of womanly reserve that doubtless would otherwise have induced her to veil the secret of her heart for ever, or until circumstances gave opportunity for its legitimate expression.

At length on a certain afternoon there came a crisis to which there was but one probable issue. The doctors and nurses were in Henry's room doing their best to ward off the fate that seemed to be approaching, while Lady Graves, Mr. Levinger, Ellen and Emma sat in the parlour awaiting tidings, and striving to hope against hope. An hour passed, and Emma could bear the uncertainty no longer. Slipping out unobserved, she stole towards

the sick room and listened at a little distance from it. Within she could hear the voice of a man raving in delirium, and the cautious tread of those who tended him. Presently the door opened and Joan appeared, walking towards her with ashen face and shaking limbs.

“How is he?” asked Emma in an intense whisper, catching at her dress as she passed.

Joan looked at her and shook her head: speak she could not. Emma watched her go with vacant eyes, and a jealousy smote her, which made itself felt even through the pain that tore her heart in two. Why should this woman be free to come and go about the bedside of the man who was everything to her – to hold his dying hand and to lift his dying head – while she was shut outside his door? Emma wondered bitterly. Surely that should be her place, not the village girl’s who had been the cause of all this sorrow. Then she turned, and, creeping back to the parlour, she flung herself into a chair and covered her face with her hands.

“Have you heard anything?” asked Lady Graves.

Emma made no reply but her despair broke from her in a low moaning that was very sad to hear.

“Do not grieve so, dear,” said Ellen kindly.

“Let me grieve,” she answered, lifting her white face; “let me grieve now and always. I know that Faith should give me comfort, but it fails me. I have a right to grieve,” she went on passionately, “for I love him. I do not care who knows it now: though I am nothing to him, I love him, and if he dies it will break my heart.”

So great was the tension of suspense that Emma's announcement, startling as it was, excited no surprise. Perhaps they all knew how things were with her; at any rate Lady Graves answered only, "We all love him, dear," and for a time no more was said.

Meanwhile, could she have seen into the little room behind her, Emma might have witnessed the throes of a grief as deep as her own, and even more abandoned; for there, face downwards on her bed, lay Joan Haste, the girl whom she had envied. Sharp sobs shook her frame, notwithstanding that she had thrust her handkerchief between her teeth to check them, and she clutched nervously at the bedclothes with her outstretched hands. Hitherto she had been calm and silent; now, at length, when she was of no more service, she broke down, and Nature took its way with her.

"O my God!" she muttered between her strangling sobs, "spare him and kill me, for it was my fault, and I am his murderess. O my God! my God! What have I done that I should suffer so? What makes me suffer so? Oh! spare him, spare him!"

* * *

Another half-hour passed, and the twilight began to gather in the parlour.

"It is very long," murmured Lady Graves.

"While they do not come to call us there is hope," answered Ellen, striving to keep up a show of courage.

Once more there was silence, and the time went on and the darkness gathered.

At length a step was heard approaching, and they knew it for that of Dr. Childs. Instinctively they all rose, expecting the last dread summons. He was among them now, but they could not see his face because of the shadows.

“Is Lady Graves there?” he asked.

“Yes,” whispered the poor woman.

“Lady Graves, I have come to tell you that by the mercy of Heaven your son’s constitution has triumphed, and, so far as my skill and knowledge go, I believe that he will live.”

For a second the silence continued; then, with a short sharp cry, Emma Levinger went down upon the floor as suddenly as though she had been shot through the heart.

* * *

Joan also had heard Dr. Child’s footsteps, and, rising swiftly from her bed, she followed him to the door of the parlour, where she stood listening to his fateful words – for her anxiety was so intense that the idea of intrusion did not even cross her mind.

Joan heard the words, and she believed that they were an answer to her prayer; for her suffering had been too fierce and personal to admit of her dissociating herself from the issue, at any rate at present. She forgot that she was not concerned alone in this matter of the life or death of Henry Graves – she who,

although as yet she did not know it, was already wrapped with the wings and lost in the shadow of a great and tragic passion. She had prayed, and she had been answered. His life had been given back to her.

Thus she thought for a moment; the next she heard Emma's cry, and saw her fall, and was undeceived. Now she was assured of what before she had suspected, that this sweet and beautiful lady loved the man who lay yonder; and, in the assurance of that love, she learned her own. It became clear to her in an instant, as at night the sudden lightning makes clear the landscape to some lost wanderer among mountains. As in the darkness such a wanderer may believe that his feet are set upon a trodden road, and in that baleful glare discover himself to be surrounded by dangers, amid desolate wastes; so at this sight Joan understood whither her heart had strayed, and was affrighted, for truly the place seemed perilous and from it there was no retreat. Before her lay many a chasm and precipice, around her was darkness, and a blind mist blew upon her face, a mist wet as though with tears.

Somebody in the parlour called for a light, and the voice brought her back from her vision, her hopeless vision of what was, had been, and might be. What had chanced or could chance to her mattered little, she thought to herself, as she turned to seek the lamp. He would live, and that was what she had desired, what she had prayed for while as yet she did not know why she prayed it, offering her own life in payment. She understood now that her

prayer had been answered more fully than she deemed; for she had given her life, her true life, for him and to him, though he might never learn the price that had been exacted of her. Well, he would live – to be happy with Miss Levinger – and though her heart must die because of him, Joan could be glad of it even in those miserable moments of revelation.

She returned with the lamp, and assisted in loosening the collar of Emma's dress and in sprinkling her white face with water. Nobody took any notice of her. Why should they, who were overcome by the first joy of hope renewed, and moved with pity at the sight of the fainting girl? They even spoke openly before her, ignoring her presence.

"Do not be afraid," said Dr. Childs: "I have never known happiness to kill people. But she must have suffered a great deal from suspense."

"I did not know that it had gone so far with her," said her father in a low voice to Lady Graves. "I believe that if the verdict had been the other way it would have killed her also."

"She must be very fond of him," answered Lady Graves; "and I am thankful for it, for now I have seen how sweet she is. Well, if it pleases God that Henry should recover, I hope that it will all come right in the end. Indeed, he will be a strange man if it does not."

Just then Ellen, who was watching and listening, seemed to become aware of Joan's presence.

"Thank you," she said to her; "you can go now."

So Joan went, humbly enough, suffering a sharper misery than she had dreamed that her heart could hold, and yet vaguely happy through her wretchedness. "At least," she thought to herself, with a flash of defiant feeling, "I am his nurse, and they can't send me away from him yet, because he won't let them. It made him worse when they tried before. When he is well again Miss Levinger will take him, but till then he is mine – mine. Oh! I wish I had known that she was engaged to him from the beginning: no, it would have made no difference. It may be wicked, but I should have loved him anyhow. It is my doom that I should love him, and I would rather love him and be wretched, than not love him and be happy. I suppose that it began when I first saw him, though I did not understand it then – I only wondered why he seemed so different to any other man that I had seen. Well, it is done now, and there is no use crying over it, so I may as well laugh, if one can laugh with a heart like a lump of ice."

* * *

Once out of danger, Henry's progress towards recovery was sure, if slow. Three weeks passed before he learned how near he had been to death. It was Joan who told him, for as yet he had been allowed only the briefest of interviews with his mother and Ellen, and on these occasions, by the doctor's orders, their past anxieties were not even alluded to. Now, however, all danger was done with, and that afternoon Joan had been informed by Dr.

Childs that she might read to her patient if he wished it, or talk to him upon any subject in which he seemed to take interest.

It was a lovely July day, and Joan was seated sewing in Henry's, or rather in her own room, by the open window, through which floated the scent of flowers and a murmuring sound of the sea. Henry had been dozing, and she laid her work upon her knee and watched him while he slept. Presently she saw that his eyes were open and that he was looking at her.

"Do you want anything, sir?" she said, hastily resuming her sewing. "Are you comfortable?"

"Quite, thank you; and I want nothing except to go on looking at you. You make a very pretty picture in that old window place, I assure you."

She coloured faintly and did not answer. Presently he spoke again.

"Joan," he said – he always called her Joan now – "was I very bad at any time?"

"Yes, sir; they almost gave you up three weeks ago – indeed, they said the chances were ten to one against your living."

"It is strange: I remember nothing about it. Do you know, it gives me rather a turn. I have been too busy a man and too occupied with life to think much of death, and I don't quite like the sensation of having been so near to it; though perhaps it is not as bad as one thinks, and Heaven knows it would have saved me plenty of worry here below," and Henry sighed.

"I am very grateful to you all," he went on after a moment's

pause, “for taking so much trouble about me – especially to you, Joan, for somehow or other I realised your presence even when I was off my head. I don’t know how you occupy yourself generally, but I am sure you are fond of fresh air. It is uncommonly good of you to mew yourself up here just to look after me.”

“Don’t talk like that, sir. It is my business.”

“Your business! Why is it your business? You are not a professional nurse, are you?”

“No, sir, though they offered to pay me to-day,” and she flushed with indignation as she said it.

“Well, don’t be angry if they did. Why shouldn’t you have a week’s wage for a week’s work? I suppose you like to earn something, like the rest of us.”

“Because I don’t choose to,” answered Joan, tapping the floor with her foot: “I’d rather starve. It is my fault that you got into this trouble, and it is an insult to offer me money because I am helping to nurse you out of it.”

“Well, there is no need to excite yourself about it. I have no doubt they thought that you would take a different view, and really I cannot see why you should not. Tell me what happened on the night that they gave me up: it interests me.”

Then in a few graphic words Joan sketched the scene so vividly, that Henry seemed to see himself lying unconscious on the bed, and sinking fast into death while the doctors watched and whispered round him.

“Were you there all the time?” he asked curiously.

“Most of it, till I was of no further use and could bear no more.”

“What did you do then?”

“I went to my room.”

“And what did you do there? Go to sleep?”

“Go to sleep! I – I – cried my heart out. I mean – that I said my prayers.”

“It is very kind of you to take so much interest in me,” he answered, in a half bantering voice; then, seeming to understand that she was very much in earnest, he changed the subject, asking, “And what did the others do?”

“They were all in the bar-parlour; they waited there till it grew dark, and then they waited on in the dark, for they thought that presently they would be called in to see you die. At last the change came, and Dr. Childs left you to tell them when he was sure. I heard his step, and followed him. I had no business to do it, but I could not help myself. He went into the room and stood still, trying to make out who was in it, and you might have heard a pin drop. Then he spoke to your mother, and said that through the mercy of Heaven he believed that you would live.”

“Yes,” said Henry; “and what did they say then?”

“Nobody said anything, so far as I could hear; only Miss Levinger screamed and dropped on the floor in a faint.”

“Why did she do that?” asked Henry. “I suppose that they had been keeping her there without any dinner, and her nerves were

upset.”

“Perhaps they were, sir,” said Joan sarcastically: “most women’s nerves would be upset when they learned that the man they were engaged to was coming back to them from the door of the dead.”

“Possibly; but I don’t exactly see how the case applies.”

Joan rose slowly, and the work upon which she had been employed fell from her hand to the floor.

“I do not quite understand you, sir,” she said. “Do you mean to say that you are not engaged to Miss Levinger?”

“Engaged to Miss Levinger! Certainly not. Whatever may happen to me if I get out of this, at the present moment I am under no obligations of that sort to any human creature.”

“Then I am sorry that I said so much,” answered Joan. “Please forget my silly talk: I have made a mistake. I – think that I hear my aunt coming, and – if you will excuse me, I will go out and get a little air.”

“All this is Greek to me,” thought Henry, looking after her. “Surely Ellen cannot have been right! Oh, it is stuff and nonsense, and I will think no more about it.”

Chapter 11

Ellen Grows Alarmed

On the morrow Henry had his first long interview with his mother and Ellen, who again detailed to him those particulars of his illness of which he had no memory, speaking more especially of the events of the afternoon and evening when he was supposed to be dying. To these Ellen added her version of the incident of Emma's fainting fit, which, although it was more ample, did not differ materially from that given him by Joan.

"I have heard about this," said Henry, when she paused; "and I am sorry that my illness should have pained Miss Levinger so much."

"You have heard about it? Who told you – Dr. Childs?"

"No; Joan Haste, who is nursing me."

"Then I can only say that she had no business to do so. It is bad enough that this young woman, to whom we certainly owe no gratitude, should have thrust herself upon us at such a terrible moment; but it is worse that, after acting the spy on poor Emma's grief, she should have the hardihood to come and tell you that she had done so, and to describe what passed."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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