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I THE PLUM TREE

At Wittisham several of the little houses had crept down very close to the river. Mrs. Prettyman's cottage was just like a hive made for the habitation of some gigantic bee; its pointed roof covered with deep, close-cut thatch the colour of a donkey's hide. There were small windows under the overhanging eaves, a pathway of irregular flat stones ran up to the doorway, and a bit of low wall divided the tiny garden from the river. The Plum Tree grew just beside the wall, so near indeed that it could look at itself on spring days when the water was like a mirror. In autumn the branches on that side of the tree were the first to be shaken, lest any of the fruit should fall down and be lost. Sometimes a village child treading cautiously on bare toes amongst the stones along the narrow margin, would pounce upon a plum with a squeal of joy, for although the village was surrounded with orchards, the fruit of Mrs. Prettyman's tree had a flavour all its own.

The tree had been given to her by a nephew who was a gardener in a great fruit orchard in the North, and her husband had planted and tended it for years. It began life as a slender thing with two or three rods of branches, that looked as if the first wind of winter would blow it away, but before the storms came, it had begun to trust itself to the new earth, and to root itself with force and determination. There were good soil and water near it, and plenty of sunshine, and, as is the way of Nature, it set itself to do its own business at all seasons, unlike the distracted heart of man. The traffic of the river came and went; around the headland the big ships were steering in, or going out to sea; and in the village the human life went on while the Plum Tree grew high enough to look over the wall. Its stem by that time had a firm footing; next it took a charming bend to the side, and then again threw out new branches in that direction. It turned itself from the prevailing wind, throwing a new grace into its attitude, and went on growing; returning in blossom and leaves and fruit an hundredfold for all that it received from the earth and the sun.

In spring it was enchanting; at first, before the blossoms came out, with small bright leaves, and buds like pearls, heaped upon the branches; then, later, when the whole tree was white, imaged like a bride, in the looking-glass of the river. It only wanted a nightingale to sing in it by moonlight. There were no nightingales there, but the thrushes sang in the dawning, and the little birds whose voices were sweet and thin chirruped about it in crowds, while the larks, trilling out the ardour of mating time, sometimes rose from their nests in the grass and soared over its topmost branches on their skyward flight.

Spring, therefore, was its merriest time, for then every passer-by would cry, "What a beautiful tree!" or "Did ye ever see the likes of it?"

There were a few days of inevitable sadness a little later when its million petals fell and made a delicate carpet of snow on the ground. There they lay in a kind of fairy ring, as if there had been a shower of mother-of-pearl in the April night; and no human creature would have dared set a vandal foot on that magic circle, and mar the perfection of its beauty. All the same the Plum Tree had lost its petals, and that was hard to bear at first. But though its Wittisham neighbours often said to summer trippers, "I wish you could have seen it in blossom!" the Plum Tree did not repine, because of the secrets—the thousand, thousand secrets—it held under its leaves. "The blossoms were but a promise," it thought, "and soon everybody will see the meaning of them."

Then the tiny green globes began to appear on every branch and twig; crowding, crowding, crowding till it seemed as if there could never be room for so many to grow; but the weaker ones fell from the boughs or were blown away when the wind was fierce, so the Plum Tree felt no anxiety, knowing that it was built for a large family! The little green globes grew and grew, and drank in sweet mother-juices, and swelled, and when the summer sun touched their cheeks all day they flushed and reddened, till when August came the tree was laden with purpling fruit; fruit so tempting that its rosy beauty had sometimes to be hidden under a veil of grey fishing net, lest the myriad bird-friends it had made during the summer should love it too much for its own good.

So the Plum Tree grew and flourished, taking its part in the pageant of the seasons, unaware that its existence was to be interwoven with that of men; or that creatures of another order of being were to owe some changes in their fortunes to its silent obedience to the motive of life.

II

THE MANOR HOUSE

The long, low drawing room of the Manor at Stoke Revel was the warmest and most genial room in the old Georgian house. It was four-windowed and faced south, and even on this morning of a chilly and backward spring, the tentative sunshine of April had contrived to put out the fire in the steel grate. One of the windows opened wide to the garden, and let in a scent which was less of flowers than of the promise of flowers—a scent of earth and green leaves, of the leafless daphne still a-bloom in the shrubbery, of hyacinths and daffodils and tulips and primroses still sheathed in their buds and awaiting a warmer air.

But this promise of spring borne into the room by the wandering breeze from the river, was nipped, as it were, by the frigid spirit of age and formalism in its living occupants. Mrs. de Tracy, a lady of seventy-five, sat at her writing-table. Her companion, Miss Smeardon, a person of indeterminate age, nursed the lap-dog Rupert during such time as her employer was too deeply engaged to fulfil that agreeable duty. Mrs. de Tracy, as she wrote, was surrounded by countless photographs of her family and her wide connection, most prominent among them two—that of her husband, Admiral de Tracy, who had died many years ago, and that of her grandson, his successor, whose guardian she was, and whose minority she directed. Her eldest son, the father of this boy, who had died on his ship off the coast of Africa; his wife, dead too these many years; her other sons as well (she had borne four); their wives and children—grown men, fashionable women, beautiful children, fat babies: the likenesses of them all were around her, standing amid china and flowers and bric-a-brac on the crowded tables and what-nots of the not inharmonious and yet shabby Victorian room. Mrs. de Tracy, it might at a glance be seen, was no innovator, either in furniture, in dress, or probably in ideas. As she was dressed now, in the severely simple black of a widow, so she had been dressed when she first mourned Admiral de Tracy. The muslin ends of her widow's cap fell upon her shoulders, and its border rested on the hard lines of iron-grey hair which framed a face small, pale, aquiline in character and decidedly austere in expression.

She took one from a docketed pile of letters and held it up under her glasses, the sun suddenly striking a dazzle of blue and green from the diamond rings on her small, withered hands. Then she read it aloud to her companion in an even and chilly voice. She had read it before, in the same way, at the same hour, several times. The letter, couched in an epistolary style largely dependent upon underlining, appeared to contain, nevertheless, some matter of moment. It was dated from Eaton Square, in London, some weeks before, and signed Maria Spalding. ("Her mother was a Gallup," Mrs. de Tracy would say, if any one asked who Maria Spalding was; and this was considered sufficient, for Mrs. de Tracy's maiden name had been Gallup,—not euphonious but nevertheless aristocratic.)

My dear Augusta (Maria Spalding wrote): I am going to ask you to help me out of a *difficulty*. There is no *use* beating about the bush. You know that Cynthia's daughter Robinetta (Loring is her *married* name) has been with me for a month. *American* or no *American*, I meant to have had her for a part of the season, and to *present* her, if possible (so *good* for these Americans to learn what royalty *is* and to breathe the atmosphere which doth hedge a *King* as Shakespeare says, and which they can never *have*, of course, in a country like theirs). I know you can't *approve*, dear Augusta, and you will blame me for sentimentality—but I never *can* forget what a *sweet* creature Cynthia was before she ran away with that odious American—and my *greatest* friend in girlhood, too, you must remember. So Robinette, as she is generally called, has come to my house as a *home*, but a most *unlucky* thing has happened. I have had influenza so badly that it has affected my *heart* (an old trouble), I am ordered to Nauheim, and Robinette is *stranded*, poor dear. She has few friends in London and certainly none who can put her up. Tho' she *is* a widow, she is only twenty-two (just *imagine!*), very pretty, and

really, tho' you won't believe it, *quite* nice. I am *desperate*, and just wondering if you would let by-gones be by-gones, and receive her at Stoke Revel. She has set her heart upon seeing the place, and some *picture* she was called after (I can't remember it, so it can't be one of the *famous* Stoke Revel group—a *copy*, I fancy), and on paying a visit to Lizzie Prettyman, her mother's old nurse at Wittisham over the river. She *promised* her mother she would do this—and such a promise is *sacred*, don't you think? It's such an *old* story now, Cynthia's American marriage, and no fault of *Robinette's*, poor dear child. Her wish is almost a *pious* one, don't you agree, to pay respect to her mother's memory and the family, and is *much* to be encouraged in these days of radicalism, when every natural tie is loosened and people pay no more *respect* to their parents than if they hadn't any, but had made themselves and brought themselves up from the beginning. So don't you think it's a *good* thing to encourage the *right* kind of feeling in Robinette, especially as she is an *American*, you know...

Mrs. de Tracy paused, and replaced the letter in the package from which she had withdrawn it.

"Maria Spalding's point of view," she observed, "has, I confess, helped me to overcome the extreme reluctance I felt to receive the child of that American here. Cynthia de Tracy's elopement nearly broke my dear husband's heart. She was the apple of his eye before our marriage; so much younger than himself that she was like his child rather than his sister."

"What a shock it must have been!" murmured the companion. "What ingratitude! Can you really receive her child? Of course you know best, Mrs. de Tracy; but it seems a risk."

"Hardly a risk," rejoined Mrs. de Tracy with dignity. "But it is a trial to me, and an effort that I scarcely feel called upon to make."

Miss Smeardon was so well versed in her duties that she knew she always had to urge her employer to do exactly what she most wanted to do, and the poor creature had developed a really wonderful ingenuity in divining what these wishes were. Just now, however, she was, to use a sporting phrase, "at fault" for a minute. She could not exactly tell whether Mrs. de Tracy wanted to be urged to ask her niece to Stoke Revel, or whether she wanted to be supplied with a really plausible excuse for not doing so. Those of you who have seen a hound at fault can imagine the companion at this moment: irresolute, tense, desperately anxious to find and follow up the right scent. Compromise, that useful refuge, came to her aid.

"It is difficult to know," she faltered. Then Mrs. de Tracy gave her the lead.

"Maria Spalding is right when she says that my husband's niece contemplates a duty in visiting Stoke Revel," she announced. "The young woman is the lawful daughter of Cynthia de Tracy that was: our solicitors could never discover anything dubious in the marriage, though we long suspected it. Therefore, though I never could have invited her here, I admit that the Admiral's niece has a right to come, in a way."

"Though her maiden name was Bean!" ejaculated the companion, almost under her breath. "There are Pease in the North, as everyone knows; perhaps there are Beans somewhere."

"There have never been Beans," said Mrs. de Tracy solemnly and totally unconscious of a pun. "Look for yourself!"

Miss Smeardon did not need to rise from her seat and fetch Burke: it lay always close at hand. She merely lifted it on to her knee and ran her finger down the names beginning with B-e-a.

"Beaton, Beare, Beatty, Beale—" she read out, and she shook her head in dismal triumph; "but never a Bean! No! we English have no such dreadful names, thank Heavens!"

"This is the beginning of April," pursued Mrs. de Tracy, referring to a date-card. "Maria Spalding's course at Nauheim will take three weeks. We must allow her a week for going and coming. During that time Mrs. David Loring can be my guest."

"A whole month!" cried the companion, as though in ecstasy at her employer's generosity. "A whole month at Stoke Revel!"

Mrs. de Tracy took no notice. "Write in my name to Maria Spalding, please," she commanded. "Be sure that there is no mistake about dates. Mention the departure and arrival of trains, and say that Mrs. David Loring will find a fly at the station. That is all, I think."

The companion bent officiously forward. "You remember, of course, that young Mr. Lavendar comes down next week upon business?"

"Well, what if he does?" asked Mrs. de Tracy shortly.

"Mrs. David Loring is a widow," murmured the companion darkly; "a young American widow; and they are said to be so dangerous!"

Mrs. de Tracy drew herself up. "Do you insinuate that the Admiral's niece will lay herself out to attract Mr. Lavendar, a widow in the house of a widow! You go rather too far, Miss Smeardon, though you are speaking of an American. Besides, allusions of this character are extremely distasteful to me. I have been told that the minds of unmarried women are always running upon love affairs, but I should hardly have thought it of you."

"I'm sure I never imagined any about myself!" murmured Miss Smeardon with the pitiable writhe of the trodden-on worm.

"I should suppose not," rejoined Mrs. de Tracy gravely, and the companion took up her pen obediently to write to Maria Spalding.

"Shall I send your love to the Admiral's niece?" she humbly enquired, "or—or something of the kind?" There was irony in the last phrase, but it was quite unconscious.

"Not my love," replied Mrs. de Tracy, "some suitable message. Make no mistake about the dates, remember."

Thus a letter containing dates, and though not love, the substitute described by Miss Smeardon as "something of the kind" for an unwanted niece from an unknown aunt, left Stoke Revel by the afternoon post and reached Robinette Loring at breakfast next morning.

III

YOUNG MRS. LORING

Young Mrs. Loring thought she had never taken so long a drive as that from the Weston railway station to Stoke Revel. The way stretched through narrow winding roads, always up hill, always between high Devonshire hedges. The rain-soaked lanes were slippery and she was unpleasantly conscious of the size and weight of the American wardrobe trunk that reared its mighty frame in front of her almost to the blotting-out of the driver, who steadied it with one hand as he plied the whip with the other. It struck her humorously that the trunk was larger than most of the cottages they were passing.

It was a late spring that year in England,—Robinette was a new-comer and did not know that England runs to late and wet springs, believing that they make more conversation than early, fine ones,—and the trees were just bursting into leaf. The sun had not shone for three days and the landscape, for all its beautiful greenness, looked gloomy to an eye accustomed to a good deal of crude sunshine.

As the horse mounted higher and higher Robinette glanced out of the windows at the dripping boughs and her face lost something of its sparkle of anticipation. She had little to expect in the way of a warm welcome, she knew that; or at least her mind knew it, but Robinette's heart always expected surprises, although she had lived two and twenty summers and was a widow at that.

Her mother had been a de Tracy of Stoke Revel whose connection with that ancient family had ceased abruptly when she met an American architect while traveling on the Continent, married him out of hand and went to his native New England with him. The de Tracys had no opinion of America, its government, its institutions, its customs, or its people, and when they learned that Cynthia de Tracy had not only allied herself with this undesirable nation, but had selected a native by the name of Harold Bean, they regarded the incident of the marriage as closed.

The union had been a happy one, though the de Tracys of Stoke Revel had always regarded the unfortunately named architect more as a vegetable than a human being; and the daughter of the marriage was the young Mrs. Loring now driving in the station fly to the home of her mother's people.

Her father had died when she was fifteen and her mother followed three years after, leaving her with a respectable fortune but no relations; the entire family (happily, Mrs. de Tracy would have said) having died out with Harold. Robinette was unspeakably lonely, even with her hundred friends, for there was enough English blood in her to make her cry out inwardly for kith and kin, for family ties, for all the dear familiar backgrounds of hearth and home. Had a welcoming hand been stretched across the sea she would have flown at once to make acquaintance with the de Tracys, cold and indifferent as they had always been, but no bidding ever came, and the picture of the Manor House of Stoke Revel on her dressing-table was the only reminder of her connection with that ancient and honourable house.

It is not difficult to see, under the circumstances, how the nineteen-year-old Robinette became the wife of the first man in whom she inspired a serious passion.

It is incredible that women should confuse the passive process of being loved with the active process of loving, but it occurs nevertheless, and Robinette drifted into marriage with the vaguest possible notions of what it meant; feeling and knowing that she needed something, and supposing it must be a husband. It was better fortune, perhaps, than she merited, and equally kind for both parties, that her husband died before either of them realized the tragic mistake. David Loring was too absorbed in his own emotions to note the absence of full response on the part of his wife; Robinette was too much a child and too inexperienced to be conscious of her own lack of feeling.

It was death, not life, that opened her eyes. When David Loring lay in his coffin, Robinette's heart was suddenly seized with growing pains. Her vision widened; words and promises took on a new and larger meaning, and she became a serious woman for her years, although there was an ineradicable gaiety of spirit in her that needed only sunshine to make it the dominant note of her nature.

At the moment, Robinette, in the station fly on her way to Stoke Revel, was only in the making, although she herself considered her life as practically finished. The past and the present were moulding her into something that only the future could determine. Sometimes April, sometimes July, sometimes witch, sometimes woman; impetuous, intrepid, romantic, tempestuous, illogical,—these were but the elements of which the coming years of experience had yet to shape a character. Young Mrs. Loring had plenty of briars, but she had good roots and in favorable soil would be certain to bear roses.

But in the immediate present, the fly with the immense American wardrobe trunk beside the driver, turned into the avenue of Stoke Revel, and Mrs. David Loring bestowed upon herself those little feminine attentions which precede arrival—pattings of the hair behind the ears, twitches of the veil, and pullings down about the waist and sleeves. A little toy of a purse made of golden chainwork, hanging from her wrist, was searched for the driver's fare, and it had hardly snapped to again when the fly drew up before the entrance to the house. How interesting it looked! Robinette put her head out of the carriage window and gazed up at the long row of windows, the old weather-coloured stones, and the carved front of the building. Here was a house where things might happen, she thought, and her young heart gave a sudden bound of anticipation.

But the door was shut, alas! and a blank feeling came over Robinette as she looked at it. Some one perhaps would come out and welcome her, she thought for a brief moment, but only the butler appeared, who, with the formal announcement of her name, ushered her into a long, low room with a row of windows on one side and a pleasant old-fashioned look of comfort and habitation. She caught a glimpse of a tea-table with a steaming urn upon it, heard the furious barking of a little dog, saw that there were two figures in the room and moved instinctively towards the one beside the window, the figure in weeds, neither very tall nor very imposing, yet somehow formidable.

"How do you do?" said an icy voice, and a chill hand held hers for a moment, but did not press it. The colour in Robinette's cheeks paled and then rushed back, as she drew herself up unconsciously.

"I am very well, thank you, Aunt de Tracy," she answered with commendable composure.

"This is my friend and companion, Miss Smeardon," continued Mrs. de Tracy, advancing to the tea-table where that useful personage officiated. "Mrs. David Loring—Miss Smeardon." Miss Smeardon had the dog upon her lap, yapping, clashing his teeth together, and obviously thirsting for the visitor's blood. He was quieted with soothing words, and Robinette seated herself innocently in the nearest chair, beside the table.

"Excuse me!" the companion said with a slight cough; "Mrs. de Tracy's chair! Do you mind taking another?" There was something disagreeable in her voice, and in Mrs. de Tracy's deliberate scrutiny something so nearly insulting that a childish impulse to cry then and there suddenly seized upon Robinette. This was her mother's home—and no kiss had welcomed her to it, no kind word! There were perfunctory questions about her journey, references to the coldness and lateness of the spring, enquiries after the health of Maria Spalding (whose mother was a Gallup), but no claiming of kinship, no naming of her mother's name nor of her native country! Robinette's ardent spirit had felt sorrow, but it had never met rebuff nor known injustice, and the sudden stir of revolt at her heart was painful with an almost physical pain.

After a long drawn hour of this social torture, Mrs. de Tracy rang, and a hard-featured elderly maid appeared.

"Show Mrs. Loring to her room, Benson," said the mistress of the house, "and help her to unpack."

Robinette followed her conductor upstairs with a sinking heart. Oh! but the chill of this English spring was in her bones, and the coldness of a reception so frigid that her passionate young spirit almost rebelled on the spot, prompting wild ideas and impulsive impossibilities; even a flight to her mother's old nurse—to Lizzie Prettyman, so often lovingly described, with her little thatched cottage beyond the river! Surely she would find the welcome there that was lacking here, and the touch of human kindness that one craved in a foreign land. But no! Robinette called to her aid her strong American common sense and the "grit" that her countrymen admire. Was she to confess herself routed in the very first onset—the very first attempt in storming the ancestral stronghold? With a characteristically quick return of hope, the Admiral's niece exclaimed, "Certainly not!"

IV A CHILLY RECEPTION

Mrs. Benson approached the wardrobe trunk with the air of a person who has taken an immediate and violent dislike to an object.

"We have all looked at your box, ma'am, but I am sorry to say we are not sure that it is set up properly. It is very different from any we have ever seen at the Manor, and the men had some difficulty in getting it up to the room. I fancy it is upside down, is it not? No? We rather thought it was. I would call the boot-and-knife boy to unlock it, but he jammed his hand in attempting to force the catches, and I thought you would be kind enough to instruct me how to open it, perhaps?"

"I am quite able to do it myself," said Robinette, keeping down a hysterical laugh. "See how easily it goes when you know the secret!" and she deftly turned her key in two locks one after the other, let down the mysterious façade of the affair, and pulled out an extraordinary rack on which hung so many dresses and wraps that Mrs. Benson lost her breath in surprise.

"Would you like me to carry some of your things into another room, ma'am?" she asked. "They will never go in the wardrobe; it is only a plain English wardrobe, ma'am. We have never had any American guests."

"The things needn't be moved," said Robinette, "many of them will be quite convenient where they are;—and now you need not trouble about me; I am well used to helping myself, if you will be kind enough to come in just before dinner for a moment."

Mrs. Benson disappeared below stairs, where she regaled the injured boot-and-knife boy and the female servants with the first instalment of what was destined to be the most dramatic and sensational serial story ever told at the Manor House.

"The lid of the box don't lift up," she explained, "like all the box lids as ever I saw, and me with Lady Chitterton for six years, traveling constantly. The front of the thing splits in the middle and the bottom half falls on the floor. A heathenish kind of tray lifts off from its hinges like a door, and a clothes rack pulls out on runners. 'T is a sight to curdle your blood; and the number of dresses she's brought would make her out to be richer than Crusoe!—though I have heard from a cousin of mine who was in service in America that the ladies over there spend every penny they can rake and scrape on their clothes. Their husbands may work their fingers to the bone, and their parents be in the workhouse, but fine frocks they will have!"

"Rather!" said the boot-and-knife boy, nursing his injured thumb.

On the departure of Mrs. Benson from her room, Robinette gave a stifled shriek in which laughter and tears were equally mingled. Then she flew like a lapwing to the fire-place and lifted off a fan of white paper from the grate.

"No possibility of help there!" she exclaimed. "Cold within, cold without! How shall I unpack? How shall I dress? How shall I live without a fire? Ah! here is the coal box! Empty! Empty, and it is only the month of April! 'Oh! to be in England now that April's there!' How could Browning write that line without his teeth chattering! How well I understand the desire of the British to keep India and South Africa! They must have some place to go where they can get warm! Now for unpacking, or any sort of manual labour which will put my frozen blood in circulation!"

Slapping her hands, beating her breast, stamping her feet, Mrs. Loring removed a few dresses from the offending trunk to the mahogany wardrobe, and disposed her effects neatly in the drawers of bureau and highboy.

"I have made a mistake at the very beginning," she thought. "I supposed nothing could be too pretty for the Manor House and now I am afraid my worst is too fine. The Manor House of Stoke Revel! Wouldn't that appeal to anyone's imagination? Now what for to-night? White satin with

crystal? Back you go into the trunk! Back goes the silver grey chiffon! I'll have it re-hung over flannel! Avaunt! heliotrope velvet with amethyst spangles, made with a view to ensnaring the High Church clergy! I wish I had a princess dress of moleskin with a court train of squirrel hanging from the shoulders! Here is the thing; my black Liberty satin two years old. I will cover part of my exposed neck and shoulders with a fichu of lace; my black silk openwork stockings will be drawn on over a pair of balbriggans, and the number of petticoats I shall don would discourage a Scotch fishwife! To-morrow I'll write Mrs. Spalding's maid to buy me two hot-water bottles, mittens, a box of quinine tablets and a Shetland shawl... What are these—*fans*? Retire into the depths of that tray and never look me in the face again!.. *Parasols*? I wonder at your impertinence in coming here! I shall give you cod liver oil and make you grow into umbrellas!"

Presently the dinner gong growled through the house, and Robinette, still shivering, flung across her shoulders a shimmering scarf of white and silver. It fell over her simple black dress in just the right way, adding a last touch to the somewhat exotic grace which made her a stranger in her mother's home. Then she fled down the darkening passages, instinctively aware that unpunctuality was a crime in this house. Yet in spite of her haste, she paused before the window of an upper lobby, arrested by the scene it framed. Heavy rain still fell, and the light, made greenish by the nearness of great trees just coming into leaf, was cheerless and singularly cold. But that could not mar the majesty of the outlook which made the Manor of Stoke Revel, on its height, unique. Far below the house, the broad river slipped towards the sea, between woods that rose tier upon tier above and beyond—woods of beech and of oak, not yet green, but purplish under the rainy mist. On the bank, woods too, and here, where the river, in excess of strength, swirled into a creek—a shining sand-bank where fishing nets were hung. Then the low, strong tower of a church, with the sombreness of cypress beside it, and the thatched roofs of cottages.

Something stirred in the heart of Robinette as she looked, that part of her blood which her English mother had given her. This scene, so indescribably English as hardly to be imaginable in another land, had been painted for her again and again by her mother with all the retrospective romance of an exile's touch. She knew it, but she did not know if she could ever love it, beautiful though it was and noble.

But she banished these misgivings and ran down the twisted stairway so fast that she was almost panting when she reached the drawing-room door.

"I will take your arm, please," said the hostess coldly, while Miss Smeardon wore the virtuous and injured air of one who has been kept waiting. Mrs. de Tracy laid, on the warm and smooth arm of her guest, one of her small, dry hands, sparkling with rings, and the procession closed with the companion and the lap-dog.

In the dining room, the shutters were closed, and the candles, in branching candlesticks of silver, only partially lit a room long and low like the other. The walls were darkened with pictures, and Robinette's bright eyes searched them eagerly.

"The Sir Joshua is not here!" she thought. "And it was not in the drawing room. Has Aunt de Tracy given, or hidden it away—my very own name-picture?"

With all her determination, Robinette somehow could not summon courage enough to ask where this picture was. Such a question would involve the mention of her mother's name, and from that she shrank. Young Mrs. Loring had never before found herself in a society where conversation was apparently regarded as a crime, and to fit herself to her environment, under the scrutiny of Mrs. de Tracy and the decidedly inimical looks of the companion, took all her time. A burden of self-consciousness lay upon her such as her light and elastic spirit had never known. She found herself morbidly observant of minute details; the pattern of the tablecloth; the crest upon the spoons; the curious red knobs upon Miss Smeardon's fingers, and the odd mincing way she held her fork; the almost athletic efforts of the butler when he raised an enormous silver dish-cover, and the curiously frugal and unappetizing nature of the viand it disclosed. The wizened face of the lap-dog, too, peering

over the table's edge, out of Miss Smeardon's lap, might have acquired its distrustful expression, Robinette thought, from habitual doubts as to whether enough to eat would ever be his good fortune. The meal ended with the ceremonious presentation to each lady in turn, of three wrinkled apples and two crooked bananas in a probably priceless dish of Crown Derby. Then the procession re-formed and returned to the drawing room.

“And the evening and the morning were the first day!” sighed Robinette to herself in the chilly solitude of her own room. How often could she endure the repetition?

V AT WITTISHAM

"May I have a fire to dress by, Benson?" Robinette asked rather timidly that night, her head just peeping above the blankets.

"*Fire?*" returned Benson, in italics, with an interrogation point.

Robinette longed to spell the word and ask Benson if it had ever come to her notice before, but she stifled her desire and said, "I am quite ashamed, Benson, but you see I am not used to the climate yet. If you'll pamper me just a little at the beginning, I shall behave better presently."

"I will give orders for a fire night and morning, certainly, ma'am," said Benson. "I did not offer it because our ladies never have one in their bedrooms at this time of the year. Mrs. de Tracy is very strong and active for her age."

"It's my opinion she's a w'eedler," remarked Benson at the housekeeper's luncheon table. "She asks for what she wants like a child. She has a pretty way with her, I can't deny that, but is she a w'eedler?"

Wheedler or not, Robinette got her fire to dress by, and so was able to come down in the morning feeling tolerably warm. It was well that she was, for the cold tea and tough toast of the de Tracy breakfast had little in them to warm the heart. Conversation languished during the meal, and after a walk to the stables Robinette was thankful to return to her own room again on the pretext of writing letters. There she piled up the fire, drew her chair close up to the hearth, and employed herself until noon, when she took her embroidery and joined her aunt in the drawing room. Luncheon was announced at half past one, and immediately after it Mrs. de Tracy and Miss Smeardon went to their respective bedrooms for rest.

"Are there indeed only twelve hours in the day?" Robinette asked herself desperately as she heard the great, solemn-toned hall clock strike two. It seemed quite impossible that it could be only two; the whole afternoon had still to be accounted for, and how? Well, she might look over her clothes again, re-arranging them in all their dainty variety in the wardrobe and drawers; she might put tissue paper into the sleeves of each bodice, smoothing out every crease; she might even find that some tiny repairs were needed! There were three new hats, and several pairs of new gloves to be tried on; her accounts must be made up, her cheque book balanced; yet all these things would take but a short time. Then the hall clock struck three.

"I must go out," she thought.

Coming through the hall from her room Robinette met her aunt and Miss Smeardon descending the staircase.

"We are driving this afternoon," said Mrs. de Tracy, "would you not like to come with us?"

The thought turned Robinette to stone: she had visited the stables, and seen the coachman lead what seemed to her a palsied horse out into the yard. Her sympathetic allusion to the supposed condition of the steed had not been well received, for the man had given her to understand that this was the one horse of the establishment, but Robinette had vowed never to sit behind it.

"I think I'd rather walk, Aunt de Tracy," she said, "I'd like to go and see my mother's old nurse, Mrs. Prettyman. Can I do any errands for you?"

"None, thank you. To go to Wittisham you have to cross the ferry, remember."

"Oh! that must be simple! you may be sure I shall not lose myself!" said Robinette.

Both the older women looked curiously at her for a moment; then Mrs. de Tracy said:—

"You will kindly not use the public ferry; the footman will row you across to Wittisham at any hour you may mention to him."

"Oh, but Aunt de Tracy, I'd really prefer the public ferry."

“Nonsense, impossible; the footman shall row you,” said Mrs. de Tracy with finality.

Robinette said nothing; she hated the idea of the footman, but it seemed inevitable. “Am I never to get away from their dullnesses?” she thought. “A public ferry sounds quite lively in place of being rowed by William!”

When the shore was reached, however, Robinette discovered that the passage across the river in a leaky little boat, rowed by a painfully inexperienced servant, was almost too much for her. To see him fumbling with the oars, made her tingle to take them herself; she could not abide the irritation of a return journey with such a boatman. This determination was hastened when she saw that instead of the three-decker steamer of her native land, the ferry at Wittisham was just like an ordinary row-boat; that one rang a bell hanging from a picturesque tower; that a nice young man with a sprig of wallflower in his cap rowed one across, and that each passenger handed out a penny to him on the farther side.

“How enchantingly quaint!” she cried. “William, you can go home; I shall return by the public ferry.”

William looked surprised but only replied, “Very good, ma’am.”

On warm summer afternoons the tiny square of Mrs. Prettyman’s garden made as delightful a place to sit in as one could wish. There was sunshine on the turf, and a thin shade was cast by the drooping boughs of the plum tree; just enough to shelter old eyes from the glare. When she was very tired with doing her work Mrs. Prettyman would totter out into the garden. She was getting terribly lame now, yet afraid to acknowledge it, knowing, with the desperate wisdom of poverty, that once to give in, very often ended in giving up altogether. So her lameness was ‘blamed on the weather,’ ‘blamed on scrubbing the floor,’ blamed on anything rather than the tragic, incurable fact of old age. This afternoon her rheumatism had been specially bad: she had an inclination to cry out when she rose from her chair, and every step was an effort. Yet the sunshine was tempting; it warmed old and aching bones through and through as no fire could do; and Mrs. Prettyman thought she must make the effort to go out.

She had just arrived at this conclusion, when a tap came to the door.

“That you, Mrs. Darke?” she called out in her piping old voice. “Come in, me dear, I’m that stiff with me rheumatics to-day I can’t scarce rise out of me chair.”

“It’s not Mrs. Darke,” said Robinette, stooping to enter through the tiny doorway. “It’s a stranger, Mrs. Prettyman, come all the way from America to see you.”

“Lor’ now, Miss, whoever may you be?” the old woman cried, making as if she would rise from her chair. But Robinette caught her arm and made her sit still.

“Don’t get up; please sit right there where you are, and I’ll take this chair beside you. Now, Mrs. Prettyman, look at me hard, and tell me if you know who I am.”

The old woman gazed into Robinette’s face, and then a light seemed to break over her.

“It’s Miss Cynthia’s daughter you are!” she cried. “My Miss Cynthia as went and married in America!”

She caught Robinette’s white ringed hands in hers, and Robinette bent down and kissed the wrinkled old face.

“I know that mother loved you, Nurse,” she said. “She used often, often to tell me about you.”

After the fashion of old people, Mrs. Prettyman was too much moved to speak. Her face worked all over, and then slow tears began to run down her furrowed cheeks. She got up from her chair and walked across the uneven floor, leaning on a stick.

“I’ve something here, Miss, I’ve something here; something I never parts with,” she said. A tall chest of drawers stood against the wall, and the old woman began to search among its contents as she spoke. At last she found a little kid shoe, laid away in a handkerchief.

“See here, Miss! here’s my Miss Cynthia’s shoe! ’T was tied on to my wedding coach the day I got married and left her. My ’usband ’e laughed at me cruel because I’d have that shoe with me; but I’ve kept it ever since.”

Robinette came and stood beside her, and they both wept together over the silly little shoe.

"I want to talk a great deal to you, Nurse; I want to tell you all about mother and father, and how they died," said Robinette through her tears. How strange that she should have to come to this cottage and to this poor old woman before she found anyone to whom she could speak of her beloved dead! Her heart was so full that she could scarcely speak. A crowd of memories rushed into her mind; last scenes and parting words; those innumerable unforgettable details that are printed once for all upon the heart that loves and feels.

"I'd like to tell you about it out of doors, Nurse dear," she said tearfully; "can you come out under the plum tree in your garden? It's lovely there."

"Yes, dearie, yes, we'll come out under the plum tree, we will," echoed Mrs. Prettyman.

"See, Nursie, take my arm, I'll help you out into the warm sunshine," Robinette said.

They progressed very slowly, the old woman leaning with all her weight upon the arm of her strong young helper. Then under the flickering shade of the tree they sat down together for their talk.

So much to tell, so much to hear, the afternoon slipped away unknown to them, and still they were sitting there hand in hand talking and listening; sometimes crying a little, sometimes laughing; a queerly assorted couple, these new-made friends.

But when all the recollections had been talked over and wept over, when Mrs. Prettyman had told Robinette, with the extraordinary detail that old people can put into their memories of long ago, all that she remembered of Cynthia de Tracy's childhood, then Robinette began to question the old woman about her own life. Was she comfortable? Was she tolerably well off? Or had she difficulty in making ends meet?

To these questions Mrs. Prettyman made valiant answers: she had a fine spirit, and no wish to let a stranger see the skeleton in the cupboard. But Robinette's quick instinct pierced through the veil of well-meant bravery and touched the truth.

"Nurse dear," she said, "you say you're comfortable, and well off, but you won't mind my telling you that I just don't quite believe you."

"Oh, my dear heart, what's that you be sayin'? callin' of me a liar?" chuckled the old woman fondly.

Robinette rose from her seat on the bench and stood back to scrutinize the cottage. It was exquisitely picturesque, but this very picturesqueness constituted its danger; for the place was a perfect death trap. The crumbling cob-walls that had taken on those wonderful patches of green colour, soaked in the damp like a sponge: the irregularity of the thatched roof that looked so well, admitted trickles of rain on wet nights; and the uneven mud floor of the kitchen revealed the fact that the cottage had been built without any proper foundation. The door did not fit, and in cold weather a knife-like draught must run in under it. All this Robinette's quick, practical glance took in; she gave a little nod or two, murmuring to herself, "A new thatch roof, a new door, a new cement floor." Then she came and sat down again.

"Tell me now, how much do you have to live on every week, Nurse?" she asked.

"Oh, Miss Robinette—ma'am, I should say—'t is wonderful how I gets on; and then there's the plum tree—just see the flourish on it, Missie dear! 'T will have a crop o' plums come autumn will about drag down the boughs! I don't know how 't would be with me without I had the plum tree."

"Do you really make something by it?" Robinette asked.

The old woman chuckled again. "To be sure I makes; makes jam every autumn; a sight o' jam. Come inside again, me dear, an' see me jam cupboard and you'll know."

She hobbled into the kitchen, and opened the door of a wall press in the corner. There, row above row stood a solid phalanx of jam pots; it seemed as if a whole town might be supplied out of Mrs. Prettyman's cupboard.

"'T is well thought of, me jam," the old woman said, grinning with pleasure. "I be very careful in the preparing of 'en; gets a penny the pound more for me jam than others, along of its being so fine."

Robinette was charmed to see that here Mrs. Prettyman had a reliable source of income, however slender.

“How much do you reckon to get from it every year?” she asked.

“Going five pounds, dear: four pounds fifteen shillings and sixpence, last autumn; and please the Lord there’s a better crop this season, so ’t will be the clear five pounds. Oh! I do be loving me plum tree like a friend, I do.”

They turned back into the sunshine again, that Robinette should admire this wonderful tree-friend once more. She stood under its shadow with great delight, as the Bible says, gazing up through the intricate network of boughs and blossom to the cloudless blue above her.

“It’s heavenly, Nurse, just heavenly!” she sighed as she came and sat down beside the old woman again.

“Then there’s me duck too, Missie! Lard, now I don’t know how I’d be without I had me duck. Duckie I calls ’er and Duckie she is; company she is, too, to me mornin’s, with her ‘Quack, Quack,’ under the winder.”

So the old woman prattled on, giving Robinette all the history of her life, with its tiny joys and many struggles, till it seemed to the listener that she had always known Mrs. Prettyman, the plum tree, and her duck—known them and loved them, all three.

VI

MARK LAVENDAR

Hundreds of years ago the street of Stoke Revel village, if street it could be called, and the tower of the ancient church, must have looked very much the same as now.

On such a day, when the oak woods were budding, and the English birds singing, and the spring sun was hot in a clear sky, a knight riding down the steep lane would have taken the same turn to the left on his way to the Manor. Were he a young man, he would probably have reined up his horse for a moment, and looked, as Mark Lavendar did now, at the blithe landscape before him. Only then the accessories would have been so different: the great horse, somewhat tired by long hours of riding, the armour that glinted in the sun, the casque pushed up to let the fresh air play upon the rider's face; such a figure must have often stood just at that turn where the lane wound up the little hill. The landscape was the same, and young men in all ages are very much the same, so—although this one had merely arrived by train, and walked from the nearest station—Mark Lavendar stopped and leaned over the low wall when he came to the turn of the road, and looked down at the river.

He boasted no war horse nor armour; none of the trappings of the older world added to his distinction, and yet he was a very pleasing figure of a man.

The gaunt brown face was quite hard and solemn in expression; ugly, but not commonplace, for as a friend once said of him, "His eyes seem to belong to another person." It was not this, but only that the eyes, blue as Saint Veronica's flower, showed suddenly a different aspect of the man, an unexpected tenderness that flatly contradicted the hard features of his face. He looked very nice when he laughed too, so that most people when they had found out the trick, tried to make him laugh as often as possible.

"What a day! Heavens! what a lovely day," he said to himself as he leaned on the low wall. "I want to be courting Amaryllis somewhere in these woods, and instead I've got to go and talk business with that old woman;" and he looked ruefully towards the Manor House; for this was not his first visit by any means, and he knew only too well the hours of boredom that awaited him. Mrs. de Tracy, strange to say, had a soft side towards this young man, the son of her family solicitor. Mark was invariably sent down by his father when there was any business to be transacted at Stoke Revel. The older man was fond of a good dinner, and hated circumlocution about affairs, and it was only when a death in the family, or some other crucial event, made his presence absolutely necessary that he came down himself. Mark was sacrificed instead, and many a wearisome hour had he spent in that house. However on this occasion he had been glad enough to get out of London for a while; the country was divine, and even the de Tracy business did not occupy the whole day. There would be hours on the river; afternoons spent riding along those green lanes through which he had just passed, where the banks were starred with little vivid flowers. Mark had an almost childish delight in such beauty. He had loitered on the way along, flung himself down on a bank for a few minutes, and burying his face amongst the flowers, listened with a smile upon his mouth to the birds that chirruped in the branches of the oak above him.

Now he leaned on the low wall, and gazed at the shining reaches of the river. "What a day!" he said to himself again. "What a divine afternoon"; then he added quite simply, "I wish I were in love; everyone under eighty ought to be, on such a day!"

Even at the age of thirty most men of any personal attractions have some romantic memories. Lavendar had his share, but somehow that morning he was disconcertingly candid to himself. It may have been the sudden change from London air and London noise; something in the clear transparency of the April day, in the flute-like melody of the birds' song, in the dream-like beauty of the scene before him, that made all the moth and rust that had consumed the remembrances of the past more

apparent. There was little of the treasure of heaven there,—it had mostly been nonsense or vanity or worse. He wanted, oh, how he wanted, to be able just for once to surrender himself to what was absolutely ideal; to have a memory when he was an old man, of something that had no fault in it.

“No, I’ve never been really in love,” he said to himself, “I may as well confess it; and I daresay I never shall be, but marry on an impulse like most men, make the best of it afterwards, and have a sort of middle-class happiness in the end of the day.”

“One, Two, Three,” said the church clock from the ancient tower, booming out the note, and Lavendar started, and rubbed his hands across his dazzled eyes. “Luncheon is a late meal in that awful house, if I remember,” he said, “but it must be over by this time. I really must go in. Let me collect my thoughts; the business is ‘just things in general,’ but especially the sale of some cottage or other and the land it stands on. Yes, yes, I remember; the papers are all right. Now for the old ladies.”

He made his entrance into the Manor drawing room a few minutes later with a charming smile.

Mrs. de Tracy actually walked a few steps to meet him, with a greeting less frigid than usual.

“I’m glad to see you, Mark,” said she. “Bates said you preferred to walk from the station.”

Mark turned his kind eyes on Miss Smeardon, and held her knuckly hand in his own almost tenderly. It was a very bad habit, which had led to some mischief in the past, that when he was sorry for a thing he wanted to be very kind to it; and this made him unusually pleasing, and dangerous!

“Business first and pleasure afterwards; excellent maxim!” he said to himself half an hour later, as he removed the dust of travel from his person, preparatory to an interview with Mrs. de Tracy. “Now for it!”

He liked the drawing room at Stoke Revel and always wished it had other occupants when he entered it. This afternoon it seemed particularly agreeable, the open windows letting in the slanting sunshine and a strong scent of jonquils and sweet briar.

“Well, Mrs. de Tracy,” said Mark, “I am my father’s spokesman, you know, and we have serious business to discuss. But tell me first, how’s my young friend Carnaby?”

“Thank you; my grandson has a severe attack of quinsy,” replied Mrs. de Tracy. “He is to have sick-leave whenever the Endymion returns to Portsmouth.”

“Oh! Carnaby will make short work of an attack of quinsy,” said Lavendar, genially.

“It would please me better,” retorted Mrs. de Tracy severely, “if my grandson showed signs of mental improvement as well as bodily health. His letters are ill-spelled, ill-written, and ill-expressed. They are the letters of a school-boy.”

“He is not much more than a school-boy, is he?” suggested Mark, “only fifteen! The mental improvement will come; too soon, for my taste. I like Carnaby as he is!”

The young man had seated himself beside his hostess in an attitude of perfect ease. Though bored by his present environment, he was entirely at home in it. Just because he greatly dared towards her and was never afraid, Mrs. de Tracy liked him. With the mere flicker of an eyelid, she dismissed the attendant Smeardon.

“There has been an offer for the land at Wittisham,” Lavendar said, when they were alone.

Mrs. de Tracy winced. “That is no matter of congratulation with me,” she said bleakly.

“But it is with us, for it is a most excellent one!” returned the young man hardily. “The firm has had the responsibility of advising the sale, which we consider absolutely unavoidable in the present financial condition of Stoke Revel. We have advertised for a year, and advertisement is costly. Now comes an offer of a somewhat peculiar kind, but sound enough.” Lavendar here produced a bundle of documents tied with the traditional red tape. “An artist,” he continued, “Waller, R. A.—you know the name?”

“I do not,” interpolated Mrs. de Tracy grimly.

“Nevertheless, a well known painter,” persisted Mark, “and one, as it happens, of the orchard scenery of this part of England. He has known Wittisham for a long time, and only last year he made a success with the painting of a plum tree which grows in front of one of the cottages. It was sold

for a large sum, and, as a matter of sentiment, I suppose, Waller wishes to buy the cottage and make it into a summer retreat or studio for himself."

"He cannot buy it," said Mrs. de Tracy with the snort of a war horse.

"He cannot buy it apart from the land," insinuated Mark, "but he is flush of cash and ready to buy the land too—very nearly as much as we want to sell, and the bargain merely waits your consent. The sum that has been agreed upon is of the kind that a man in the height of his triumph offers for a fancy article. No such sum will ever be offered for land at Wittisham again; old orchard land, falling into desuetude as it is and covered with condemned cottages."

Mrs. de Tracy was sternly silent, and Mark awaited her next words with some curiosity. He felt like a torturer drawing the tooth of a Jew in the good old days. This sale of land was a bitter pill to the widow, as it well might be, for it was the beginning of the end, as the de Tracy solicitors could have told you. There had been de Tracys of Stoke Revel since Queen Elizabeth's time, but there would not be de Tracys of Stoke Revel much longer,—unless young Carnaby married an heiress when he came of age—and that no de Tracy had ever done.

"The land across the river," Mrs. de Tracy said at last, "was the first land the de Tracys held, but much of it went at the Restoration. Well, let this go too!" she added harshly.

Mark blessed himself that indecision was no part of the lady's character and sighed with relief. "My father would like to know," he said, "what you propose to do with regard to the old woman who is the present tenant of the cottage."

"Elizabeth Prettyman is not a tenant," said Mrs. de Tracy coldly. "She is practically a pensioner, since she lives rent-free."

"True, I forgot," said Mark soothingly. "I beg your pardon."

"Do not suppose that it is by my wish," continued Mrs. de Tracy coldly. "I have never approved of supporting the peasantry in idleness. This woman happened to be for some years nurse to Cynthia de Tracy, my husband's younger sister, who deeply offended her family by marrying an American named Bean. I see no claim in that to a pension of any kind."

"But your husband saw it, I imagine," interpolated Mark quietly, and Mrs. de Tracy gave him a fierce look, which he met, however, without a sign of flinching.

"My husband had a mistaken idea that Prettyman was poor when she became a widow," said Mrs. de Tracy. "On the contrary she had relations quite well able to support her, I believe. I never cross the river, in these days, and the matter has escaped my memory, so that things have been left as they were."

"No great loss," said Mark candidly, "since the cottage in its present state is utterly unfit for any tenant. As to Prettyman, is it your intention to give her notice to quit?"

"Unquestionably, since the cottage is needed," answered Mrs. de Tracy. "She has occupied it too long as it is." The speaker's lips closed like a vice over the words.

"God pity Elizabeth Prettyman!" ejaculated Lavendar to himself. "Might is Right still, apparently, at Stoke Revel!" Aloud he merely said, "A weak deference to public opinion was never a foible of yours, Mrs. de Tracy; but I think I would advise you to consider some question of compensation to Mrs. Prettyman for the loss of the cottage."

"If you can show me that the woman has any legal claim upon the estate, I will consider the question, but not otherwise," said Mrs. de Tracy with such an air of finality that Lavendar was inclined to let the matter drop for the moment.

"The firm," he said, "will communicate your wishes to Mrs. Prettyman by letter."

"Prettyman cannot read," snapped Mrs. de Tracy. "She must be told, and the sooner the better."

"Well, Mrs. de Tracy," said the young man with a short laugh, "provided it is not I who have to tell her, well and good. I warn you the task would not be to my taste unless compensation were offered her."

Mrs. de Tracy's features hardened to a degree unusual even to her.

“I am apparently less tender-hearted than you,” she said sardonically. “I shall, if I think fit, deal with Prettyman in person.” The subject was dropped, and Lavendar rose to leave the room, but Mrs. de Tracy detained him.

“The Admiral’s niece, Mrs. David Loring, is my guest at present,” she said. “It happens that she has crossed the river to Wittisham and is paying a visit to Prettyman. I should be obliged, Mark, if you would row across and fetch her back, as by some misunderstanding, my servant has not waited for her. You are an oarsman, I know.”

The young man consented with alacrity. “I shall kill two birds with one stone,” he said cheerfully, “I shall visit the famous plum tree cottage and see Mrs. Prettyman for myself; and I shall have the privilege of executing your commission as Mrs. Loring’s escort. It sounds a very agreeable one!”

“You have no time to lose,” said Mrs. de Tracy with a glance at the clock.

VII

A CROSS-EXAMINATION

Lavendar escaped from the house, where, even in the smoke-room, it seemed unregenerate to light a cigar, and took the path to the shore.

"I wonder if one woman staying in a house full of men would find life as depressing as I do cooped up here under precisely opposite circumstances," he thought, as he made his way through the little churchyard. "It cannot be the atmosphere of femininity that bores me, however, for Mrs. de Tracy has a strongly masculine flavour and Miss Smeardon is as nearly neuter as a person can be."

He took a couple of oars from the boat-house as he passed, and going to the little landing stage untied the boat and started for the farther shore.

It was good to feel the water parting under his vigorous strokes and delightful to exert his strength after the hours of stifled irritation at the Manor. It was a bright, calm close of day, when in the rarefied evening air each sound began to acquire the sharpness that marks the hour. He could hear the rush of the waters behind the boat and the voices of the fishers farther up the stream. As he drew up to the bank and took in his oars the stillness was so great that you could have heard a pin fall, when suddenly from a tree above him a bird broke into one little finished song and then was still, as if it had uttered all it wished to say.

"What a heavenly evening!" thought Lavendar, "and what a lovely spot! That must be the cottage just above me. Mrs. de Tracy said I should know it by the plum tree. Ah, there it is!" Tying up the boat he sprang up the steps and walked along the flagged path. The plum tree these last few days had begun to look its fairest. The blossoms did not yet conceal the leaves, but it was a very bower of beauty already. There was a little table spread for tea under its branches, and an old woman like thousands of old women in thousands of cottages all over England, was sitting behind it, precisely as if she had been a coloured illustration in a summer number of an English weekly. She was on the typical bench in the typical attitude, but instead of the typical old man in a clean smock frock who should have occupied the end of the bench, there sat beside her a distinctly lovely young woman. What struck Lavendar was the wealth of colour she brought into the picture: goldy brown hair, brown tweed dress, with a cape of blue cloth slipping off her shoulders, and a brown toque with a pert upstanding quill that seemed to express spirit and pluck, and a merry heart. His quick glance took in the little hands that held the withered old ones. Both heads were bowed and in the brown tweed lap was a child's shoe,—a wee, worn, fat shoe. Beside it lay an absurd bit of crumpled, tear-soaked embroidery that had been intended to do duty as a handkerchief but had evidently proved quite unseaworthy.

Waddling about on the flags close to the little table was a large fat duck wearing a look of inexpressible greed. "*Quack, quack, quack!*" it said, waddling off angrily as Lavendar approached.

At the sound of the duck's raucous voice both the women looked up.

"Is this Mrs. Prettyman's cottage, ma'am?" Lavendar asked with his charming smile.

"Yes, sir, 't is indeed, and who may you be, if I may be so bold as to ask?"

"I'm Mr. Lavendar, Mrs. de Tracy's lawyer, Mrs. Prettyman. I'm come to do some business at Stoke Revel," he added, for the old face had clouded over, and Mrs. Prettyman's whole expression changed to one of timid mistrust. "I really was sent by Mrs. de Tracy," he went on, turning to Robinette, "to take you home; Mrs. Loring, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am Mrs. Loring," she said, frankly holding out her hand to him. "I knew you were expected at Stoke Revel, but I sent the footman back myself. He spoils the scenery and the river altogether."

"I've got a boat down there; Mrs. de Tracy doesn't quite like your taking the ferry; may I have the honour of rowing you across? My orders were to bring you back as soon as possible."

"I'm blest if I hurry," was his unspoken comment as Robinette gaily agreed, and, having bidden good-bye to the old woman, with a quick caress that astonished him a good deal, she laid down the little shoe gently upon the bench, and turned to accompany him to the boat.

The river was like a looking-glass; the air like balm. "We'll take some time getting across, against the tide," said Lavendar reflectively, as he resolved that the little voyage should be prolonged to its fullest possible extent. He was not going into the Manor a moment earlier than he could help, when this charming person was sitting opposite to him. So this was Mrs. Loring! How different from the stout middle-aged lady whom Mrs. de Tracy's words had conjured up when he set out to find her!

"Old Mrs. Prettyman was my mother's nurse," Robinette remarked as Lavendar dipped his oars gently into the stream and began to row. "I went to see her feeling quite grown up, and she seemed to consider me still a child; I was feeling about four years old at the moment when you appeared and woke me to the real world again."

She had dried her eyes now and had pulled her hat down so as to shade her face, but Lavendar could see the traces of her weeping, and the dear little ineffectual rag of a handkerchief was still in one hand.

"What on earth was she crying about?" he thought, as with lowered eyes he rowed very slowly across, only just keeping the boat's head against the current, and glancing now and then at the young woman.

Was it possible that this lovely person was going to be his fellow-guest in that dull house? "My word! but she's pretty! and what were the tears about ... and the little shoe? Did it belong to a child of her own? Can she be a widow, I wonder," said Lavendar to himself.

"I often think," he said suddenly, raising his head, "that when two people meet for the first time as utter strangers to each other, they should be encouraged, not forbidden, to ask plain questions. It may be my legal training, but I'd like all conversation to begin in that way. As a child I was constantly reproved for my curiosity, especially when I once asked a touchy old gentleman, 'Which is your glass eye? The one that moves, or the one that stands still?'"

The tears had dried, the hat was pushed back again, the young woman's face broke into an April smile that matched the day and the weather.

"Oh, come, let us do it," she exclaimed. "I'd love to play it like a new game: we know nothing at all about each other, any more than if we had dropped from the moon into the boat together. Oh! do be quick! We've so little time; the river is quite narrow; who's to open the ball?"

"I'll begin, by right of my profession; put the witness in the box, please.—What is your name, madam?"

"Robinette Loring," she said demurely, clasping her hands on her knee, an almost childlike delight in the new game dimpling the corners of her mouth from time to time.

"What is your age, madam?" Lavendar hesitated just for a moment before putting this question.

"I refuse to answer; you must guess."

"Contempt of Court—"

"Well, go on; I'm twenty-two and six weeks."

"Thank you, you are remarkably well preserved. I can hardly believe—those six-weeks! What nationality?"

"American, of course, or half and half; with an English mother and American ideas."

"Thank you. Where is your present place of residence?"

"Stoke Revel Manor House."

"What is the duration of the visit?"

"Fixed at a month, but may be shortened at any time for bad behaviour."

"Your purpose in coming to Stoke Revel?"

"A Sentimental Journey, in search of fond relations."

"Have you found these relations?"

"I've found them; but the fondness is still to seek."

"Have you left your family in America?"

"I have no one belonging to me in the world," she answered simply, and her bright face clouded suddenly.

There was a moment's rather embarrassed silence. "It's getting to be a sad game"; she said. "It's my turn now. I'll be the cross-examiner, but not having had your legal training, I'll tell you a few facts about this witness to begin with. He's a lawyer; I know that already. Your Christian name, sir?"

"Mark."

"Mark Lavendar. 'Mark the perfect man.' Where have I heard that; in Pope or in the Bible? Thank you; very good; your age is between thirty and thirty-five, with a strong probability that it is thirty-three. Am I right?"

"Approximately, madam."

"You are unmarried, for married men don't play games like this; they are too sedate."

"You reassure me! Am I expected to acknowledge the truth of all your observations?"

"You have only to answer my questions, sir."

"I am unmarried, madam."

"Your nationality?"

"English of course. You don't count a French grandmother, I suppose?"

Robinette clapped her hands. "Of course I do; it accounts for this game; it just makes all the difference.—Why have you come to Stoke Revel; couldn't you help it?"

A twinkle passed from the blue eyes to the brown ones.

"I am here on business connected with the estate."

"For how long?"

"An hour ago I thought all might be completed in a few days, but these affairs are sometimes unaccountably prolonged!" (Was there another twinkle? Robinette could hardly say.) They were half-way across the river now. She leaned over and looked at herself in the water for a moment.

Lavendar rested on his oars, and began to rub the palms of his hands, smiling a little to himself as he bent his head.

"Yours is an odd Christian name," he said. "I've never heard it before."

"Then you haven't visited your National Gallery faithfully enough," said Mrs. Loring. "Robinetta is one of the Sir Joshua pictures there, you know, and it was a great favourite of my mother's in her girlhood. Indeed she saved up her pin-money for nearly two years that she might have a good copy of it made to hang in her bedroom where she could look at it night and morning."

"Then you were named after the picture?"

"I was named from the memory of it," said Robinette, trailing her hand through the clear water. "Mother took nothing to America with her but my father's love (there was so much of that, it made up for all she left behind), so the picture was thousands of miles away when I was born. Mother told me that when I was first put into her arms she thought suddenly, as she saw my dark head, 'Here is my own Robinetta, in place of the one I left behind,' and fell asleep straight away, full of joy and content."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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