VARIOUS

AINSLEE'S, VOL. 15, NO. 5, JUNE 1905

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Содержание

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THE OUTGOING OF SIMEON

By Elizabeth Duer

Simeon Ponsonby – the professor of botany at Harmouth – had married when over forty the eldest daughter of a distinguished though impecunious family in his own college town. His mother, on her deathbed, foresaw that he would need a housekeeper and suggested the match.

"Simeon," she said, "it isn't for us to question the Lord's ways, but I am mortally sorry to leave you, my son; it is hard for a man to shift for himself. I was thinking now if you were to marry Deena Shelton you might go right along in the old house. The Sheltons would be glad to have her off their hands, and she is used to plain living. She would know enough to keep her soup pot always simmering on the back of the range and make her preserves with half the regular quantity of sugar. I like her because she brushes her hair and parts it in the middle, and she has worn the same best dress for three years."

Soon after Mrs. Ponsonby died and Simeon married Deena.

She didn't particularly want to marry him, but then, on the other hand, she was not violently set against it. She saw romance through her mother's eyes, and Mrs. Shelton said Professor Ponsonby was a man any girl might be proud to win. If his sympathies were as narrow as his shoulders, his scientific reputation extended over the civilized world, and Harmouth was proud of the fact. Deena's attention was not called to his sympathies, and it was called to his reputation.

He proposed to Miss Shelton in a few well-chosen words, placed his mother's old-fashioned diamond ring on her finger, and urged forward the preparations for the wedding with an impatience that bespoke an ardent disposition. Later Deena learned that his one servant had grown reckless in joints after Mrs. Ponsonby's death, and the house bills had shocked Simeon into seeking immediate aid.

At twenty Deena was able to accommodate herself to her new life with something more than resignation; a wider experience would have made it intolerable. She was flattered by his selection, proud to have a house of her own, and not sorry to be freed from the burdens of her own home. There were no little Ponsonbys, and there had been five younger Sheltons, all clamoring for Deena's love and care, whereas Simeon made no claims except that she should stay at home and care for the house and not exceed her allowance. If she expected to see a great deal of her own family she was mistaken, for, while no words passed on the subject, she felt that visiting was to be discouraged and the power to invite was vested in Simeon alone. Respect was the keynote of her attitude in regard to him, and he made little effort to bridge the chasm of years between them.

He was a tall, spare man, slightly stooped, with a prominent forehead, insignificant nose, and eyes red and strained through too ardent a use of the microscope. He habitually wore gold-rimmed spectacles; indeed, he put them on in the morning before he tied his cravat, and took them off at the corresponding moment of undressing at night. His mouth was his best feature, for, while the lips were pinched, they had a kind of cold refinement.

He was a just man but close, and the stipend he gave his wife for their monthly expenses barely kept them in comfort, but Deena had been brought up in the school of adversity, and had few personal

needs. Her house absorbed all her interest, as well as stray pennies. The old mahogany furniture was polished till it shone; the Ponsonby silver tea set looked as bright as if no battering years lay between it and its maker's hand a century ago; the curtains were always clean; the flowers seemed to grow by magic – and Deena still parted her wonderful bronze hair and kept it sleek.

At the end of two years, when she was twenty-two, a ripple of excitement came into her life; another Shelton girl married, and caused even greater relief to her family than had Deena, for she married a Boston man with money. He had been a student at Harmouth and had fallen in love with Polly Shelton's violet eyes and strange red-gold hair, that seemed the only gold fate had bestowed upon the Sheltons. He took Polly to Boston, where, as young Mrs. Benjamin Minthrop, she became the belle of the season, and almost a professional beauty, though she couldn't hold a candle to Deena – Deena whose adornment was "a meek and quiet spirit," who obeyed Simeon with the subjection St. Peter recommended – whose conversation was "chaste coupled with fear."

But one day all this admirable monotony came to an end quite adventitiously, and events came treading on each other's heels. It was a crisp October day, and an automobile ran tooting and snorting, and trailing its vile smells, through Harmouth till it stopped at Professor Ponsonby's gate and a lady got out and ran up the courtyard path. Deena had been trying in vain to make quince jelly stiffen —*jell* was the word used in the receipt book of the late Mrs. Ponsonby – with the modicum of sugar prescribed, till in despair she had resorted to a pinch of gelatine, and felt that the shade of her mother-in-law was ticking the word *incompetent* from the clock in the hall – when suddenly the watchword was drowned in the stertorous breathing of the machine at the gate, and Polly whisked in without ringing and met Deena face to face.

"We have come to take you for a spin in our new automobile," Polly cried, gayly. "Where is Simeon? You think he would not care to go? Well, leave him for once, and come as far as Wolfshead, and we will lunch there and bring you back before sunset."

Deena's delicate complexion was reddened by the heat of the preserve kettle, her sleeves were rolled above her elbows, and a checked apron with a bib acted as overalls. Polly twitched her to the stairs.

"What a fright you make of yourself," she exclaimed; "and yet, I declare, you are pretty, in spite of it! Ben has to go down in the town to get some more gasoline, and then he means to persuade Stephen French to go with us, so rush upstairs and change your dress while I report to him that you will go, and he will come back for us in half an hour."

Stephen French, who was to make the fourth in the automobile, was Harmouth's young professor of zoölogy, a favorite alike with the students and the dons, with the social element in the town as well as the academic. To Ben Minthrop he had been a saving grace during a rather dissipated career at college, and now that that young gentleman was married, and his feet set in the path of commercial respectability, the friendship was even more cemented. On Ben's part there was admiration and gratitude, on Stephen's the genuine liking an older man has for a youngster who has had the pluck to pull himself together. It was a bond between the Shelton sisters that their husbands shared one sentiment in common – namely, a romantic affection for Stephen French.

Deena was standing in her petticoat when her sister joined her in her bed-room – not in a petticoat of lace and needlework, such as peeped from under the edge of Polly's smart frock as she threw herself into a chair, but a skimpy black silk skirt with a prim ruffle, made from an old gown of Mrs. Ponsonby's. It was neat and fresh, however, and her neck and arms, exposed by her little tucked underwaist, were of a beauty to ravish a painter or a sculptor. Polly herself, boyish and angular in build, groaned to think of such perfection "born to blush unseen"; her one season in Boston had demonstrated to her the value of beauty as an asset in that strange, modern exchange we call society. She was evidently trying to say something that would not get itself said, and her elder sister was too busy with her toilet to notice the signs of perturbation. Finally the words came with a rush.

"Deena," she said, "when we were children in the nursery you once said I was a 'coward *at* you' – I remember your very words. Well, I believe I am still! You are so dignified and repressing that I am always considering what you will think a liberty. I have taken a liberty now, but please don't be angry. It does seem so absurd to be afraid to make a present to one's own sister."

She opened the bedroom door, and dragged in a huge box, which she proceeded to uncord, talking all the while.

"I have brought you a dress," she said; "a coat and skirt made for me by R – , but Ben cannot bear me in it because it's so womanish – pockets where no man would have them, and the sleeves all trimmed – and so, as I think it charming myself, I hoped, perhaps, you would accept it."

Both sisters blushed, Polly with shyness, Deena with genuine delight. She loved pretty things, although she rarely yielded to their temptations, and she kissed her sister in loving acknowledgment of the gift. It never occurred to her that Simeon could object.

Polly, in high spirits at her success, next declared that she must arrange Deena's hair, and she pushed her into a low chair in front of the dressing table, and fluffed the golden mane high above the temples, and coiled and pinned it into waves and curls that caught the sunlight on their silken sheen and gave it back. A very beautiful young woman was reflected in old Mother Ponsonby's small looking-glass, a face of character and spirit, in spite of its regularity.

"There, admire yourself!" exclaimed Polly, thrusting a hand mirror into her sister's grasp. "I don't believe you ever look at your profile or the back of your head! You are so busy enacting the part of your own mother-in-law that I only wonder you don't insist upon wearing widow's caps. Oh! I beg your pardon – I forgot that could only be done by forfeiting Simeon! Where do you keep your shirt-waists? This one isn't half bad; let me help you into it."

She chose the least antiquated blouse in Deena's wardrobe, and pinned it into place with the precision of experience; next she hooked the new skirt round the waist and held the little coat for her sister to put on.

"Where is your hat?" she demanded.

Deena fetched a plain black straw, rusty from the sun and dust of two summers, and shook her head as she tried to pinch the bows into shape.

"I shall be like a peacock turned topsy-turvy," she laughed – "ashamed of my head instead of my feet!"

Polly took it out of her hand.

"Of course, you cannot wear *that* with your hair done in the new way – besides, it spoils your whole costume. I saw quite a decent hat in a shop window in the next street. I'll get it for you!" and she was out of the room like a flash of lightning.

Deena ran to the window and caught her mercurial sister issuing from the door below.

"Stop, Polly!" she called. "I cannot afford a new hat, and I cannot accept anything more – please come back."

Polly made a little grimace and walked steadily down the path; at the gate she condescended to remark:

"Have all your last words said to your cook by the time I get back, for Ben will not want to wait."

In ten minutes she returned with a smart little hat, and in answer to Deena's remonstrances, she tossed the condemned one into the wood fire that was burning on the dining-room hearth; at the same instant the automobile arrived at the gate. Deena, nearly in tears, pinned the unwelcome purchase on her head, and followed her sister to the street. The hat set lightly enough on her curls, but it weighed heavily on her conscience.

After the manner of the amateur chauffeur, Ben was doubled up under the front wheels of his motor, offering a stirrup-cup of machine oil to the god of the car, but Stephen French stood at the gate, his grave face lighted up with the fun of a stolen holiday.

"You see a truant professor!" he exclaimed. "Simeon doesn't approve; we couldn't induce him to come. He said a day off meant a night on for him – he is so wise, is Simeon – but I positively had to do something in the way of sport; I am in a reckless mood to-day."

"I'll do the wrecking for you, if that's all you want," came from under the auto's wheels.

Stephen conveyed his thanks.

"I dare say you will, with no effort on your part," he said, opening the back door of the great, puffing monster. "Get in here, Mrs. Ponsonby. Ben likes his wife beside him in front, he says, because she understands how to run the machine when he blows his nose, but I think it is a clear case of belated honeymoon."

Here Ben scrambled to his feet, his broad, good-humored face crimson from groveling.

"Deena, good-day to you," he cried. "How perfectly stunning you look! I declare I thought Polly was the pick of the Sheltons, but, by Jove! you are running her hard. What have you been doing to yourself?"

Stephen French was delighted – he laughed his slow, reluctant laugh, and then he called to Ben:

"Turn round and see whether you dropped them in the road."

"Dropped what?" asked Ben, his hand on the lever, making a black semicircle.

"Your manners," said Stephen, and chuckled again.

"You go to thunder," roared Ben, shooting ahead. "A poor, wretched bachelor like you instructing a married man how to treat his sister-in-law, and just because once upon a time I sat in your lecture room and let you bore me by the hour about protoplasms! Do you suppose I should dare admit to Polly that Deena is as handsome as she is? Why, man alive, a Russian warship off Port Arthur would be a place of safety compared to this automobile."

Deena, laughing though embarrassed, was trying to cover the countenance that provoked the discussion with a veil, for her hat strained at its pins and threatened to blow back to Harmouth before the knotty point was settled as to who should pay for it.

They were flying between fields strewn with Michaelmas daisies and wooded banks gay with the first kiss of frost, and gradually Deena forgot everything but the exhilaration of rushing through the air, and their attitude of holiday-making. She was thoroughly at her ease with French; he was Simeon's one intimate in the corps of professors, the only creature who was ever welcome at the Ponsonby table, the one discerning soul who found something to admire in Simeon's harsh dealings with himself and the world. Their line of study naturally drew them together, but Stephen admired the man as well as the scholar; the purity of his scientific ambition, the patience with which he bore his poverty – for poverty seemed a serious thing to French, who was a man of independent fortune, and whose connection with the university was a matter of predilection only. With Ponsonby it was bread and butter, and yet he had ventured to marry with nothing but his splendid brain between his wife and absolute want. French stole a glance at Deena, who was looking more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and wondered whether she found her lot satisfactory; whether there were not times when Simeon's absence was precious to her. Without disloyalty to his friend, he hoped so, for he had something to tell her before the day was over that might lead to a temporary separation, and he hated to think of those lovely eyes swimming in tears – all women were not Penelopes.

"She can't care in *that way*," he reflected. "Ponsonby is tremendous in his own line, of course, but no woman could love him."

Perhaps he was mistaken – perhaps Mrs. Ponsonby loved her husband with all the fervor of passion, but she conveyed an impression of emancipation to-day, and of powers of enjoyment hitherto suppressed, that made Stephen doubt. She was like a child bubbling over with happiness, gay as a lark, as unlike her usual self in behavior as her modish appearance was unlike that of Simeon Ponsonby's self-denying wife.

"Of course she won't mind; why should she?" he decided, and yet determined to put off making his announcement till after lunch.

At Wolfshead they stopped at the little inn, found the one o'clock dinner smoking on the table, and sat down with the rest of the hungry company – employees of a branch railroad that had its terminus there; drummers in flashy shop-made clothes, and temporary residents in the little town. This jaunt had given them an appetite, and roast beef and apple tart disappeared at a rate that should have doubled their bill.

After lunch they strolled down to the beach, Deena starting ahead with French, while Polly went with Ben to get cushions from the automobile. The present generation seems to consider comfort the first aim of existence, though the trouble they take to insure it more than counterbalances the results in old-fashioned judgment.

Stephen stopped to light his cigar behind the shelter of a tree, and then came running after Deena, who was walking slowly toward the vast plain of blue water stretching to the east. She turned at the sound of his footsteps and waited for him, wondering what his classes would think if they could see their professor bounding along with his hat under his arm. There was something peculiarly charming in the lighter side of Stephen's nature; a simplicity and boyishness, which was the secret of his popularity far more than his weightier qualities. The women of Harmouth called him handsome, but he had small claims to beauty. A well set-up figure rather above the medium height, dark hair grizzled at the temples, eyes that seemed to laugh because of a slight contraction of the muscles at the outer corners, and a nose decidedly too high and bony. The expression of the mouth was shrewd, almost sarcastic, and possibly a little coarse, but his smile redeemed it and illumined his face like sunshine. What dazzled the ladies of Harmouth was really a certain easy luxury in dress and habits not common in the little town. It is always the exotic we prize in our conservatories.

This summing up of French's outer man was not Deena's estimate, as she watched his approach – she was too familiar with his appearance to receive any especial impression. She accepted his apologies for his cigar and for keeping her waiting with an indifferent air, and turned once more toward the sea.

CHAPTER II

The beach at Wolfshead was pebbly, with rocks thrown untidily about and ridges of blackened seaweed marking the various encroachments of the tide. Stephen brushed the top of a low bowlder with his handkerchief and invited Deena to sit down.

"You would be more comfortable," he said, "if Ben would come with the cushions."

"I am quite comfortable without them," she answered, "though I cannot but resent the Paul and Virginia attitude of the young Minthrops. One would think a year of married life would have satisfied their greed for *tête-à-têtes*. I wonder whether they would continue sufficient to each other if they really were stranded on a desert island."

"Could you be happy on such an island with the man of your heart, Mrs. Ponsonby?" asked Stephen.

And Deena, feeling that Simeon was perforce the man of her heart, and that he was quite unfitted to live on sea air and love, answered, smiling:

"Not unless there were a perfectly new flora to keep him contented."

Stephen saw his opportunity to make his communication, and said, quickly:

"I suspect you have been reading those articles of Simeon's in the *Scientist* on the vegetation of Tierra del Fuego. They are very able. He ought to go there and verify all he has gleaned by his reading. We fully appreciate we have a remarkable man at Harmouth in our professor of botany."

Deena colored with pleasure.

"Poor Simeon," she said; "his limited means have stood in the way of such personal research, and then, also, the college holidays are too short for extended trips."

"Let him throw over his classes in the cause of science," said Stephen, with excitement. "Why, such a book as Simeon would write after an exploration of – Fuegia, let us say – would place him among the scientists of the world."

The thought that raced across Deena's mind was what dull reading it would be, but she recognized the impropriety of the reflection and said, simply:

"It is too bad we haven't a little more money."

Stephen put his hand in his breast pocket and half drew out a letter, and then let it drop back, and then he walked a little apart from Deena and looked at her thoughtfully, as if trying to readjust his previous ideas of her to the present coquetry of her appearance. The way her thoughts had flown to Simeon when a desert island existence was mooted seemed as if she did care, and Stephen hated to give pain, and yet the letter had to be answered, and the opportunity was not likely to occur again. The thing he had always admired most in his friend's wife was her common sense – to that he trusted.

"Mrs. Ponsonby," he said, boldly, "if Simeon had a chance to do this very thing – free of expense – would you be unhappy at his desertion? Would you feel that the man who sent him to Patagonia was doing you an unkindness you could not forgive?"

"I should rejoice at his good fortune," she answered, calmly. "The fact that I should miss him would not weigh with me for a moment."

French gave a sigh of relief, while his imagination pictured to him a dissolving view of Polly under similar circumstances.

"The Argentine Government is fitting up an expedition," he went on, "to go through the Straits of Magellan and down the east coast of Fuegia with a view of finding out something more exact in regard to the mineral and agricultural resources than has been known hitherto. I happen to have been in active correspondence for some time with the man who virtually set the thing going, and he has asked me to send him a botanist from here. Shall I offer the chance to your husband? He must go at once. It is already spring in that part of the world, and the summer at Cape Horn is short."

Deena's face grew crimson and then paled. She felt an emotion she could not believe – pure, unalloyed joy! But in a second she understood better; it was joy, of course, but joy at Simeon's good luck.

"Could he get leave of absence right in the beginning of the term?" she asked, breathlessly.

And Stephen answered that he had never taken his Sabbatical year, and that some one could be found to do his work, though it might mean forfeiting half his salary.

Here they were joined by Polly and Ben, and as Deena made no reference to the subject they had been discussing, the talk wandered to general topics.

The sun was making long shadows and the hour to start was come. The gayety of the morning deserted Deena as they sped back to Harmouth. Her brain was busy fitting her ideas to this possible change that French had just foreshadowed, and though she was silent, her eyes shone with excitement and her color came and went in response to her unspoken thoughts.

In her mind she saw Tierra del Fuego as it looked on the map at the end of the narrowing continent, and then she remembered a picture of Cape Horn that had been in her geography when she was a child – a bold, rocky promontory jutting into a restless sea, in which three whales were blowing fountains from the tops of their heads. She reflected that it was very far away, and that in going there Simeon might encounter possible dangers and certain discomfort, and she tried to feel sorry, and all the time a wild excitement blazed in her breast. She felt as if her youth had been atrophied, and that if Simeon went it might revive, and then a great shame shook her to have allowed such thoughts, and a tender pity for the lonely man she had married obliterated self.

Stephen's voice broke in upon her reverie.

"Have I depressed you, Mrs. Ponsonby?"

"No, no," she answered. "I am only considering ways and means. I want him to go. We might rent our house for the winter, and I could go home to live. Count upon my doing everything in my power to make Simeon's going easy, Mr. French."

"You are admirable," said Stephen, with genuine satisfaction. He even half put out his hand to give hers a grasp of approbation, but thought better of it. If she had had her hair parted in the middle, and had been mending Ponsonby's stockings under the drop-light in her parlor, he might have done so, braving the needle's point; but, looking as she did to-day, it seemed safer to refrain.

It was six o'clock when the auto stopped at Deena's door.

"I wish she had shown a little more emotion at his going," was Stephen's reflection as he helped her out, forgetting how he had dreaded any evidence of distress; but he only said:

"May I come back to tea, Mrs. Ponsonby? I should like to talk this over with Simeon to-night."

She acquiesced with an inward misgiving; it was the first time, she had ever given an invitation to her own table, but it was her husband's friend, and she was still excited. As she exchanged good-bys with her sister and Ben, Polly suddenly remembered to tell her something quite unimportant.

"Oh, Deena!" she whispered, bending over the side of the automobile, "when I came to pay for your hat today, I found I hadn't enough money, and I knew you wouldn't like me to explain the circumstances to Ben, so I told them to send the bill to you and we will settle it later."

"I'll settle it!" said Deena. She was a proud woman, and hated favors that savored of cash. "Good-night – I am afraid you will be late in getting to Newbury Hill for your dinner."

"All aboard, French!" shouted Ben – and they were gone.

Deena stood for a moment and watched the retreating machine before she followed the path to the front door. A great deal that was pleasant was disappearing with its puffs – Ben's gay spirits and Polly's ready sympathy, which, if superficial, was very soothing – and the money power that made them what they were, which, in fact, permitted the auto to exist for them at all. It had all come into Deena's life for a few brief hours, and was gone, but something remained – something that had not been there when she got up that morning: the knowledge that she was a very beautiful woman, and more than a suspicion that a crisis was impending in her life.

As she turned to face the house the remembrance of the unpaid hat bill laid a cold clutch on her heart. Until the first of next month she had exactly ten dollars at her credit, and that was Simeon's – not hers – given to her for a specific purpose. She determined to throw herself upon his indulgence, confess her weakness and beg him to pay the bill for her. She had never before asked a personal favor of him, but was she justified in doubting his kindness, because of her own shyness and pride in concealing her needs? She almost persuaded herself he would be gratified at her request. After all, Simeon was not an anchorite; he had his moods like other men, and there were times when a rough passion marked his dealings with his wife; perhaps he had not been very felicitous in his rôle of lover, but the remembrance that there was such a side to his nature gave a fillip to her courage.

For the first time he would see her at her best; might not her prettiness – bah! the thought disgusted her! That she, a typical, housewifely, modest New England woman should be calculating on her beauty to draw money from a man's pocket, even though that man were her husband, seemed to her immoral. She would plainly and directly ask him to pay the money, and there was the end of it. She opened the front door and went in.

The Ponsonby house was two stories high, built of wood and set a little back from the street, with flower beds bordering the path to the gate and neat grass plots on either side. Within, a small parlor and dining room on the right of the hall, and to the left a spacious study; behind that was the kitchen.

The door of the study was half open, and Simeon sat at his desk reading proof; one of his many contributions to a scientific periodical, and, judging by the pile of galley sheets, an important article. He had a way of pursing his lips and glaring through his spectacles when he read that gave him a look of preternatural wisdom. He was never what Deena's cook called "a pretty man."

Mrs. Ponsonby's slim figure slid through the opening without pushing the door wide, and spoke with a kind of reckless gayety.

"Good-evening, Simeon," she said, making a little courtesy; "you see, I have returned safely, 'clothed and in my right mind.'"

He made a marginal note of cabalistic import before he swung round in his chair and looked at her over his spectacles.

"Hardly in your right mind, I should think," he said, coldly.

"Don't you like me in my new clothes?" she asked, twirling slowly round to give him the entire effect of her costume.

He was apt to be irritable when disturbed at his work, and Deena had not attached much importance to his speech.

"I think," he said, curtly, "you look like a woman on a poster, and not a reputable woman at that."

"That is hardly a nice thing to say of one's wife – " she began, when he interrupted her.

"Look here, Deena, I have work to do before tea, and the discussion of your appearance is hardly important enough to keep publishers waiting. Oblige me by taking off that dress before I see you again. Where did you get it – if I may ask?"

"Polly gave it to me," she answered, and was astonished to find a lump in her throat, a sudden desire to burst into tears.

"Then Polly was guilty of an impertinence you should have resented instead of accepting. Ben Minthrop's money may dress his own wife, but not mine. Let it go for this time, but never again subject me to such an indignity."

"But she didn't give me the hat, Simeon," said poor Deena, who knew it was now or never.

"And who furnished you with the hat?" he asked, insultingly.

"I meant to ask you to," she said, and a tear escaped and splashed on the lapel of her new coat, "but never mind, I will find some means to pay for it myself." And she moved toward the door, wounded pride expressed in every line of her retreating figure.

"Come back, if you please," he called. "This is childish folly. How can you pay when you have no money except what I give you? I am responsible for your debts, and as you have taken advantage of that fact, I have no choice but to pay. This must never occur again. How much is it?"

"I – I don't know," faltered Deena, struggling with her emotion.

"You don't know? You buy without even asking the price?" he pursued.

The enormity of the offense crushed his irritation; it struck at the very foundations of his trust in Deena's judgment, at her whole future usefulness to him; he almost felt as if his bank account were not in his own keeping.

She tried to answer, but no words would come; explanations were beyond her powers, and she left the room, shutting the door behind her. A passion of tears would have made the situation bearable, but when you are the lady of the house and unexpected company is coming to tea, and you have but one servant, you have to deny yourself such luxuries.

Deena went for a moment into the open air while she steadied her nerves; she forced herself to think what she could add to the evening meal, and succeeded in burying her mortification in a dish of smoked beef and eggs.

Old Mrs. Ponsonby had never given in to late dinners, and Simeon's digestion was regulated to the more economical plan of a light supper or tea at seven o'clock.

Deena gave the necessary orders and went upstairs to her own room. One blessing was hers – a bedroom to herself. Simeon had given her his mother's room and retained his own, which was directly in the rear. She shut the communicating door, and was glad she had done so when she heard his step in the passage and knew he had come to make the brief toilet he thought necessary for tea. She tore off her finery – hung the pretty costume in her closet, and, as she laid her hat on the shelf, registered a vow that no power on earth should induce her to pay for it with Ponsonby money. Though the clock pointed to ten minutes to seven, she shook down her hair and parted it in the severe style that had won its way to her mother-in-law's heart. At this point Simeon's door opened, and Deena remembered, with regret, that she had omitted to tell him that French was coming to tea. He was already halfway downstairs, but she came out into the passageway and called him. He stopped, gave a weary sigh, and came back.

"I forgot to tell you Mr. French is coming to tea," she said, quite in her usual tone.

"Who asked him?" demanded Simeon, and Deena, too proud to put the responsibility on French, where it belonged, said: "I did."

Simeon was not an ill-tempered man, but he had had an exasperating day, and his wife's conduct had offended his prejudices; he was not in a company frame of mind, and was at small pains to conceal his feelings; he hardly looked at her as he said:

"I do not question your right to ask people to the house, but I should be glad to be consulted. My time is often precious beyond what you can appreciate, and I happen to be exceptionally busy to-night – even French will be an unwelcome interruption."

"I shall remember your wish," Deena said, quietly, and returned to her room.

A moment later she heard Stephen arrive, and the study door shut behind him.

Her toilet was soon made. She knew every idiosyncrasy of the hooks and buttons of her well-worn afternoon frock. It was dark blue, of some clinging material that fell naturally into graceful lines, and was relieved at the throat and wrists by embroidered bands always immaculate. The damp sea breeze had ruffled her hair into rebellion against the sleekness Simeon approved, so that, in spite of her efforts, some effects of the holiday still lingered. Suppressed tears had made violet shadows under her eyes, and her mouth – sweet and sensitive like a child's – drooped a little in recollection of her annoyances, but, all the same, she was a very beautiful young woman, whether sad or merry.

The study door was still shut as she passed downstairs and into the little parlor. Her workbasket was standing by her chair, piled high with mending that she had neglected for her pleasuring. It was Saturday night, and no good housewife should let the duties of one week overlap the next. Simeon's

aphorism, “A day off means a night on,” seemed likely to be her experience with darning needle and patches, but it was a quarter past seven, and she deferred beginning her task till after tea.

The servant announced the meal, and by Deena’s orders knocked at the study door, but got no response; indeed, the *pièce de résistance*– the smoked beef and eggs – had almost hardened into a solid cake before the friends emerged, arm in arm, and followed Deena to the table. French drew out her chair with that slight exaggeration of courtesy that lent a charm to all he did, and with his hands still on the bar he bent over her and said – smiling the while at Simeon:

“I have been telling your husband of what I hinted to you this afternoon, Mrs. Ponsonby; the expedition to Patagonia and his chance to join it.”

Simeon’s brow contracted. It was disagreeable to him to have momentous affairs like his own discussed by anticipation with Deena – Deena, who was only a woman, and he now feared a silly one at that.

“It is no secret, then!” said Simeon, contemptuously, and added, turning to his wife: “Be good enough not to speak of this before the servant; I should be sorry to have the faculty hear of such a thing from anyone but me.”

She grew scarlet, but managed to murmur a word of acquiescence. Stephen looked amazed; he thought he must be mistaken in the rudeness of his friend’s manner, and then began making imaginary excuses for him. Of course, the tea table was not the place for confidences, and, naturally, a man would prefer telling such things privately to his wife, and the rebuke was meant for him, not for Mrs. Ponsonby. How lovely she looked – even prettier than in those smart clothes she had worn in the morning. He wondered whether Ponsonby knew how absolutely perfect she was.

The servant was much in the room, and the talk turned on the progressive spirit of Argentina, its railroads, its great natural resources, its vast agricultural development. It was a dialogue between the men, for Simeon addressed himself exclusively to French – what could a woman know of what goes to make the wealth of nations! – and, as for Stephen, he was still uncomfortable from the failure of his first effort to bring her into the discussion.

When tea was over Simeon pushed back his chair and was about to stalk from the room, when he remembered that French was his guest, and halted to let him go out first, but when French waited beside him to let Deena pass, an expression of impatience crossed her husband’s face, as if the precious half seconds he could so ill spare from his work, in order to reach conclusions, were being sacrificed to dancing master ceremonials.

Deena sat sewing till Stephen came to bid her good-night.

“I think it is all arranged,” he said, but without the joyousness of his first announcement. He had, perhaps, lost a little of his interest in his friend, Ponsonby, since the incident at the tea table.

Deena, with a woman’s instinct, guessed at his feelings, and made no effort to detain him. She was tired and discouraged, and would gladly have gone to bed when their guest departed, except for a suspicion that Simeon would want to talk things over with her, in spite of his seeming indifference. She was not mistaken. In ten minutes he came into the parlor and threw himself wearily on the sofa.

“Deena,” he said, and his tone was kind, “if I should go away for six months, do you think you could manage without me?”

“I am sure I could,” she answered, cheerfully, “and I want to say to you, now that you have opened the subject, that you must not let my expenses stand in your way. I know, of course, if you give up your college work, part of your salary would naturally pass to the person who, for the time, undertakes your duties, and I have been thinking that a simple plan would be to rent this house.”

The idea was not quite agreeable to Simeon – the old house was part of himself; he had been born there; his love for his mother overflowed into every rickety chair; but the common-sense commercial value of the scheme made him regard Deena with revived respect.

“It is hardly practicable,” he said. “In the first place, it is too old-fashioned to attract, and, in the second, there is no market for furnished houses at Harmouth.”

"Mrs. Barnes would take it, I fancy," said Deena. "She is the mother of the student who was hurt last week in the football match. She is trying everywhere to find a furnished house so that she can take care of him and yet let him stay on here. I think we could rent it, Simeon, and I should need so little – so very little to keep me while you are gone."

He took off his spectacles and sat up.

"It isn't a bad idea," he said, almost gayly. "The rent would pay the taxes and give you a small income besides, and leave me practically free. You have relieved my mind of a serious worry. Thank you, Deena."

"You will see the president to-morrow?" she asked.

He hesitated before admitting that such was his intention; it was one thing for his wife to meet his difficulties with practical suggestions, and quite another for her to put intrusive questions.

"You shall be informed when things take a definite shape," he said, pompously. "Good-night, my dear; I shall be at work on my galley proof till daylight."

"Good-night, Simeon," she said, gently. "I am sorry I displeased you today."

He mumbled something about young people having to make mistakes, but his mumble was pleasant, and then he crossed to her side, and kissed her forehead.

She felt the pucker of his lips like wrinkled leather, but she told herself it was kind in Simeon to kiss her.

As she laid her head on her pillow, she thought:

"He never had the curiosity to ask what I proposed to do with myself when my home and husband were taken from me," and the tears came at last, unchecked.

CHAPTER III

Simeon was gone – gone with his clothes packed in the sole leather trunk that his father had used before him, but with an equipment for botanizing as modern and extended as his personal arrangements were meager.

The house was rented to Mrs. Barnes, the mother of the too ardent champion of the football field – but as her son was too suffering to be moved for several weeks to come, Deena had leisure to get the house in order and habituate herself to the idea of being homeless.

Simeon behaved liberally in money matters; that is, he arranged that the rent should be paid to his wife, and he gave her a power of attorney which was to make her free of his bank account should anything delay his return beyond her resources. At the same time the injunctions against spending were so solemn that she understood she was to regard her control of his money as a mere formality – a peradventure – made as one makes his will, anticipating the unlikely.

The faculty made no objection to Simeon's going; indeed, his researches were thought likely to redound to the high scientific reputation that Harmouth particularly cherished, and Stephen French had taken care to foster this impression.

The day he left was sharp for October; a wood fire crackled on the hearth in the dining room, and Deena, pale and calm, sat behind the breakfast service and made his coffee for the last time in many months. He ate and drank, and filled in the moments with the Harmouth *Morning Herald*, and his wife's natural courtesy forbade her interrupting him. Without a word he stretched his arm across the table with his cup to have it refilled, and Deena, feeling her insignificance as compared with the morning news, still dared not speak. When finally he pushed back his chair, the little carryall was at the door waiting to take him and his luggage to the train.

"You will write from New York, Simeon, and again by the pilot," she urged, following him into the hall. "And where is your first port – Rio? Then from Rio, and as often as you can."

He was stuffing the pockets of his overcoat with papers and pamphlets, but he nodded assent.

She came a step nearer and laid her hand on his arm.

"Be sure *I* shall try to do as you would wish," she half whispered, and there were tears in her eyes.

"To be sure, to be sure," said Simeon, with a kind of embarrassment. "Oh, yes, *I* shall write frequently – if not to you, to French, who will keep you informed. Don't forget to make your weekly contribution to your mother's housekeeping. *I* cannot allow you to be a burden on them during my absence; and consult Stephen whenever you are in doubt. Good-by, Deena – I am sorry to leave you."

He puckered his lips into the hard wrinkles that made his kisses so discreet, and gave her a parting embrace. She stood at the open door watching the distribution of his luggage, which he superintended with anxious care, and then he stepped into the one free seat reserved for him, and the driver squeezed himself between a trunk and roll of rugs, and they were off.

Simeon waved his hand, and even leaned far out from the carriage window and smiled pleasantly, and Deena wiped her eyes, and began the awful work of making an old house, bristling with the characteristic accumulations of several generations, impersonal enough to rent. She had plenty to do to keep her loneliness in abeyance, but in the back of her consciousness there was a feeling that she had no abiding place. Her family had urged her to marry Simeon, and he was now throwing her back upon her family, and her dignity was hurt.

At sunset Stephen came to see how she was getting on, and they had a cup of tea beside the dining-room fire, and talked about the voyage and the ports Simeon would touch at; and Stephen, who had the power of visualizing the descriptions he met with in his reading, made her see his word-painted pictures so clearly that she exclaimed:

"When were you in South America, Mr. French?" and he laughed and declared himself a fraud.

They talked on till the firelight alone challenged the darkness, and then French remembered he was dining out, and left her with an imagination aglow with all the wonders Simeon was to see. Lest she should be lonely, he undid a roll of papers, and took out several new magazines which he said would keep her amused till bedtime, and somehow he put new courage into her heart.

Presently she went into the study and lit the Welsbach over the table, and curled herself up in Simeon's great chair to enjoy her periodicals, and then her eye fell upon a parcel of proof, directed but not sent, and she read the address, weighed and stamped the package, and rang the bell for the servant to post it. As she took up her magazine once more, she noticed on the outside cover the same name of street and building as on Simeon's direction, and she wondered whether the same publishers lent themselves to fact and fancy.

Her servant brought her something to eat on a tray – women left to themselves always find economy in discomfort – and she nibbled her chicken and read her stories till she felt surfeited with both, and fell to pondering on what made a story effective. Her eye lit upon a short poem at the end of a page; it seemed to her poor to banality – did it please the public or the editor? Her own verses were a thousand times better.

She sat up suddenly with a heightened color and shining eyes, and laughed out loud. She had an inspiration. She, too, would become a contributor to that great publishing output; she would try her luck at making her brains pay her bills. The name "Mrs. Simeon Ponsonby" would carry weight with the magazine she selected, but, while disclosing her identity to the editor, she determined to choose a pen name, fearing her husband's disapproval.

From childhood Deena had loved to express herself in rhyme, and of late years she had found her rhyming – so she modestly called it – a safety valve to a whole set of repressed feelings which she was too simple to recognize as starved affections, and which she thought was nature calling to her from without. It was nature, but calling from within, thrilling her with the beauty of things sensuous and driving her for sympathy to pen and ink.

Tossing down her book, she ran to her own room, unlocked a drawer, took out an old portfolio and returned to the study. There were, perhaps, twenty poems she had thought worth preserving, and her eye traveled over page after page as she weighed the merits and defects of each before making her choice. A sensitive ear had given her admirable imitative powers in versification, and her father, before dissipation had dulled his intellect, had been a man of rare cultivation and literary taste. Deena, among all his children, was the only one whose education he had personally superintended, and she brought to her passion for poetry some critical acumen.

She finally selected a song of the Gloucester fishermen she had written two years before – a song of toil and death – but with a refrain that effaced the terror with the dance of summer seas. She wrote a formal note to the editor, saying the price was fifteen dollars, that if accepted the signature was to be Gerald Shelton, and the check to be made to her, and she signed her own name. Simeon should know as soon as he came home, but she thought he could have no objection to Geraldine Ponsonby accepting a check for the supposititious Gerald Shelton.

Before all this was accomplished, her servant had gone to bed and Deena, afraid to be left alone downstairs in a house so prone to spooky noises, followed her example, but alas! not to sleep. She tossed on her bed, sacred for many years to the ponderous weight of old Mrs. Ponsonby, till suddenly all she had suffered from the maxims and example of her mother-in-law took form, and she wove a story half humorous, half pathetic, that she longed to commit to paper; but her delicacy forbade. She was even ashamed to have found a passing amusement at the expense of Simeon's mother, and she tried to make her mind a blank and go to sleep. Toward morning she must have lost consciousness, for she dreamed – or thought she dreamed – that old Mrs. Ponsonby sat in her hard wooden rocking-chair by the window – the chair with the patchwork cushion fastened by three tape bows to the ribs of its back; the chair Simeon had often told her was "mother's favorite." The old lady rocked slowly, and her large head and heavy figure were silhouetted against the transparent window shade. A sound

of wheels came from the street, and she raised the shade and looked out, leaning back, in order to follow the disappearing object till it was out of range, and then she buried her face in her hands and sobbed the low, hopeless sobs of old-age.

Deena found herself sitting up in bed, the early daylight making "the casement slowly grow a glimmering square." The impression of her dream was so vivid that the depression weighed upon her like something physical. It was impossible to sleep, and at seven o'clock she got up to dress, having heard the servant go downstairs. On her way to her bath she passed the rocking-chair, and lying directly in her path was a little card, yellow with age. Deena picked it up and read: "From Mother to Simeon." The coincidence worked so on her imagination that she sank into the nearest chair trembling from head to foot, and then she reflected that she must have pulled the card out of the table drawer when she went to fetch the portfolio the night before, and she called herself a superstitious *silly*, and made her bath a little colder than usual, as a tonic to her nerves. Cold water and hot food work wonders, and after breakfast young Mrs. Ponsonby forgot she had ever had a predecessor.

Her family paid her flying visits during the day, with a freedom unknown in Simeon's reign, and she worked hard at her preparations for renting, but in the evening, when the house was quiet, she settled herself at the study table and made her first attempt at story writing, this time steering clear of the personal note that had brought such swift reprisal the night before. The occupation was absorbing; she neither desired nor missed companionship. She was not the first person to find life's stage amply filled by the puppets of her own imagination.

At the end of the week two things had happened. *The Illuminator* had accepted her poem, and her story was finished. She determined to submit it to Stephen, and yet when he looked in at five o'clock, she was ashamed to ask him; what she had thought so well of the night before, in the excitement of work, suddenly seemed to her beneath contempt.

He lingered later than usual, for he mistook her preoccupation for unhappiness, and hated to leave her alone.

"When do you move to your mother's?" he asked, for he thought anything better than her present desolation; the genteel poverty brought about by Mr. Shelton's habits, the worldliness of Mrs. Shelton, and the demands upon time and temper made by the younger brothers and sisters, were only the old conditions under which she had grown up.

"Next week," she said, sadly. "I shall be sorry to leave here."

"You are not lonely, then, poor little lady?" he said, kindly, while he searched her face to see whether she told the whole truth.

His eyes were so merry, his smile so encouraging, that Deena blurted out her request.

"I haven't felt lonely," she said, "because I have been writing a foolish story, and my characters have been my companions. I am sure it is no good, and yet my head is a little turned at having expressed myself on paper. Like Dr. Johnson's simile of the dog walking on its hind legs, the wonder isn't to find it ill done, but done at all. I am trying to screw my courage to the point of asking you – "

"To be sure I will," he interrupted, eagerly, "and what is a great deal stronger proof of friendship, I'll tell you what I think, even if my opinion is nihilistic."

He followed her into the study, and she laid her manuscript on the table and left him without a word.

The story was the usual magazine length, about five thousand words, and Deena's handwriting was as clear and direct as her character. At the end of half an hour she heard his voice calling her name, and she joined him.

"It is very creditable," he said. "It fairly glows with vitality. Without minute description, you have conveyed your story in pictures which lodge in the imagination; but in construction it is poor – your presentment of the plot is amateurish, and you have missed making your points tell by too uniform a value to each."

"I understand you," said Deena, looking puzzled, "and yet, somehow, fail to apply what you say to what I have written."

He drew a chair for her beside his own, and began making a rapid synopsis of her story, to which he applied his criticism, showing her what should be accentuated, what only hinted, what descriptions were valuable, what clogged the narrative. She was discouraged but grateful.

"You advise me to destroy it?" she asked.

"I advise you to rewrite it," he answered. Then, after a pause, he asked: "Why do you want to write?"

"For money," she answered.

"But Simeon told me," French remonstrated, "that he had left you the rent of this house as well as part of his salary, and a power of attorney that makes you free of all he possesses. Why add this kind of labor to a life that is sober enough already? Amuse yourself; look the way you did that day at Wolfshead; be young!"

"Simeon is very generous," she said, loyally, silent as to the restrictions put upon his provisions for her maintenance, as well as the fact that his salary only covered the letter of credit he took with him for such expenses as he might incur outside the expedition. "In spite of his kindness, can't you understand that I am proud to be a worker? Have you lived so long in the companionship of New England women without appreciating their reserves of energy? I have to make use of mine!"

"Then use it in having 'a good time.' I conjure you, in the name, as well as the language, of young America."

Deena shook her head, and French stood hesitating near the door, wondering what he could do to reawaken the spirit of enjoyment that had danced in her eyes the day at Wolfshead.

"Will you dine with me to-morrow if I can get Mrs. McLean to chaperon us?" he asked.

The phrase "chaperon us" was pleasant to him; it implied they had a common interest in being together, and her companionship meant much to him. He smiled persuasively – waiting, hat in hand, for her answer.

Deena felt an almost irresistible desire to say yes – to follow the suggestions of this overmastering delightful companion who seemed to make her happiness his care, but she managed to refuse.

"Thank you very much," she murmured, "it is quite impossible."

It was not at all impossible, as Stephen knew, and he turned away with a short good-night. He wondered whether his friend's wife were a prude.

Undoubtedly the refusal was prudent, whether Mrs. Ponsonby were a prude or no, but it had its rise in quite a different cause. She had no dress she considered suitable for such an occasion. Her wedding dress still hung in ghostly splendor in a closet all by itself, but that was too grand, and the others of her trousseau had been few in number and plain in make, and would now have been consigned to the rag bag had she seen any means of supplying their place. They were certainly too shabby to grace one of Stephen's beautiful little dinners, which were the pride of Harmouth.

Deena's ideas of French in his own *entourage* as opposed to him in hers were amusing. Viewed in the light of Simeon's friend, voluntarily seeking their companionship and sharing their modest hospitality, they met on terms of perfect equality; but when associated with his own surroundings he seemed transformed into a person of fashion, haughty and aloof. It was quite absurd. Stephen was as simple and straightforward in one relation as the other, but perhaps the truth was that Deena was afraid of his servants.

The house was the most attractive in the town, and stood in the midst of well-kept grounds with smooth lawns and conservatories, and Deena felt oppressed by so much prosperity. On the few occasions when Simeon had taken her there to lunch on Sunday – the only dissipation he allowed himself – she had thought the butler supercilious, and the maid who came to help her off with her

wraps, snippy. She had suspected the woman of turning her little coat inside out after it was confided to her care, and sneering at its common lining.

Deena was too superior a woman not to be ashamed of such thoughts, but the repression of her married life had developed a morbid sensitiveness, and she was always trying to adjust the unadjustable – Simeon's small economies to her own ideas of personal dignity; she hardly realized how much the desire to live fittingly in their position had to do with her wish to earn an income.

While Stephen's criticisms were still fresh in her mind she rewrote her story, and when she read it again – which was not till several days had passed – she felt she had made large strides in the art she so coveted.

CHAPTER IV

When affairs of a family once begin to stir, they seem unable to settle till a flurry takes place quite bewildering to the stagnant ideas of the easy-going. The fact that Deena was coming back to her old quarters in the third story was the first event to excite a flutter of interest in the Shelton home circle; with Mr. Shelton, because she was his favorite child; with Mrs. Shelton, because Deena would both pay and help; with the children, because they could count upon her kindness no matter how outrageous their demands. The next thing that happened, while it hastened her coming, entirely eclipsed it. Fortunately it was delayed until the day before the Ponsonby house was to be handed over to its new tenant, Mrs. Barnes.

Mrs. Shelton was busy clearing a closet for her daughter's use when she heard her husband calling to her from below.

"Mary," he said, "here is a telegram."

They were not of everyday occurrence, and Mrs. Shelton's fears were for Polly, her one absent child, as she joined her husband and stretched out her hand for the yellow envelope.

The magnetic heart of a mother is almost as invariably set to the prosperous daughter as to the good-for-nothing son; there is a subtle philosophy in it, but quite aside from the interest of this story.

The telegram said:

Mrs. Thomas Beck's funeral will take place on Thursday at 11 A. M.

It was dated Chicago, and signed "Herbert Beck."

"Who is Mrs. Beck?" asked Mr. Shelton, crossly; the morning was not his happiest time.

"She is my first cousin, once removed," Mrs. Shelton answered, with painstaking accuracy. "You must remember her, John. She was my bridesmaid, and we corresponded for years after she married and moved to Chicago until" – here Mrs. Shelton's pale face flushed – "I once asked her to lend me some money, and told her how badly things were going with us, and she refused – very unkindly, I thought at the time; but perhaps it was just as well – we might never have paid it back."

It was Mr. Shelton's turn to flush, but he only said, irritably:

"And why the devil should they think you want to go to her funeral?"

Mrs. Shelton professed herself unable to guess, unless the fact that the family was nearly extinct had led her cousin to remember her on her deathbed.

"Well, they might have saved themselves the expense of the telegram," Mr. Shelton grumbled, adding, sarcastically, "unless they would like to pay our expenses to Chicago, and entertain us when we get there!"

It appeared later that was exactly what they hoped to do. A registered letter, written at Mrs. Beck's request, when her death was approaching, arrived within an hour. She begged her cousin's forgiveness for past unkindness, told her that she had left her the savings of her lifetime – though the main part of the estate passed to Mr. Beck's nephew – and besought Mrs. Shelton, as her only relation, to follow her to her grave. Young Mr. Beck, the said nephew, who wrote the letter, added that the house should be kept up for Mrs. Shelton's convenience till after her visit, and that his aunt had expressed a wish that her clothes and jewels should be given to Mrs. Shelton.

"We'll go, Mary!" said Mr. Shelton, blithe as a lark – several things had raised his spirits! – and Mrs. Shelton, with a burst of her old energy, borrowed some mourning, packed her trunk, summoned Deena and caught the train, with five minutes to spare.

And so it happened that when Mr. French called, as was his daily custom, to take his last cup of tea with Mrs. Ponsonby before her flitting, he found the house in the temporary charge of the servant and Master Dicky Shelton, a shrimpish boy of thirteen, whose red hair and absurd profile bore just enough likeness to his sister's beauty to make one feel the caricature an intentional impertinence.

French had got into the drawing room before he understood what the servant was saying. Deena had gone, leaving no message for him! His first feeling of surprise was succeeded by one of chagrin; these afternoon chats by her fireside had become so much to him, so much a part of his daily life, that he hated to think they had no corresponding value to her. He was recalled from these sentimental regrets by the irate voice of Master Shelton in dispute with Bridget.

"She —*said*– there – was cake! Mrs. Ponsonby —*said*– there – was – cake – and – that I – could – have some!" each word very emphatic, judicial and accusative. Then followed a rattling tail to the sentence: "And if you have eaten it all, it was horridly greedy in you, and I hope it will disagree with you – so I do!"

Bridget now came forward and addressed French.

"There ain't so much as a cheese-paring left in the house, Mr. French. Mrs. Ponsonby's gone off at a moment's notice, and I'm off myself to-morrow; and there sits that boy asking for cake! He's been here now the better part of an hour, trackin' mud over the clean carpets till I'm a'most ready to cry."

Dick seized his hat and moved sulkily to the door, hurling back threats as he walked.

"Just you wait! We'll see – you think I won't tell, but I will!"

French perceived that the case was to be carried to the Supreme Court for Deena's decision, and to save her annoyance at a time when he felt sure she was both tired and busy, he made a proposition to the heir of the Sheltons that established his everlasting popularity with that young person.

"Come home with me, Dicky," he said, "and if my people haven't any cake, I can at least give you all the hothouse grapes you can eat, and some to carry home. How does that strike you?"

"Done!" cried Dicky, slipping his hand under Stephen's arm, and, after one horrid grimace at Bridget, he allowed himself to be led away.

The sun had nearly disappeared when they reached French's house, which was a little outside of the town, and he reflected that he must quickly redeem his promise, and dispatch his young companion home before the darkness should make his absence a cause of alarm. He rang the bell by way of summoning a servant, and then, opening the door with his latchkey, he invited Dicky to enter.

It was a most cheerful interior. The staircase, wide and old-fashioned, faced you at the far end of the hall, and on the first landing a high-arched window was glowing with the level rays of the setting sun. A wood fire blazed on the hearth, and on the walls the portraits of all the Frenches, who for two hundred years had made a point of recording their individualities in oil, looked down to welcome each arrival.

Dicky, who wore no overcoat, presented his nether boy to the fire, while he gazed at the portraits with a frown. He thought them extremely plain.

A servant came from some hidden door, took his master's coat and hat and received an order in which such inspiring words as "cakes, or chocolates, or dessert of any kind," gave the earnest of things hoped for.

"And, Charles," Mr. French concluded, "tell Marble to bring the things as quickly as he can to the library, with a good supply of grapes."

Dicky smiled a slow smile. He could even allow his mind to wander to other things, now that his refreshment was drawing nigh.

"I say, Mr. French, who is that old cove over the door, with a frill on his shirt and a ribbon to his eyeglass? He is nearly as ugly as brother Simeon."

Stephen felt genuine alarm; he was unused to children.

"That," he said, "is my great-grandfather. I don't think he is much like your brother-in-law, I must confess."

"He doesn't look quite so musty," said Dicky, reflectively. "Did it ever seem strange to you, Mr. French, that a pretty girl like Deena could marry Mr. Ponsonby?"

"He is a very distinguished man," Stephen replied, in an agony of embarrassment. "You ought to appreciate what an honor it is to be connected by marriage with Professor Ponsonby."

"We ain't intimate," said Dicky, lightly, and his tone betrayed how much Simeon was the loser by a restricted intercourse.

"One of these days when you are a little older you will be very proud of his reputation," Stephen protested.

Dicky walked to the end of the great Persian rug on the blue pattern – it was evidently a point of honor to avoid the red – before he answered:

"Well, I'm blamed glad he's gone away, anyhow." And then, to French's relief, Marble came and announced in his unctuous voice:

"The tray is in the library, sir," and all thought of Simeon was abandoned.

That feast at Stephen's lived in Dicky's memory for years. It supported him through the disappointments of many a dessertless dinner – in the hopeless fancy engendered by seeing sweets pressed to the lips of others; it won for him an easy victory in times of gustatory boasting when at school. He could affirm, with truth, that for once he had had his fill of the very best.

With Stephen also the experience was a revelation. The capacity of his guest caused him amazement mingled with fear.

> And still he gazed
> And still the wonder grew
> That one small boy
> Could hold all he could chew.

The chiming of the clock reminded French that it was already dark and high time Dicky was dispatched home.

"Do you want to take these grapes home with you," asked Stephen, "or shall I send you a basket of them tomorrow?"

Dicky looked coy.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I guess I'll take the chocolates, and you can send the grapes tomorrow."

He pulled a very dirty handkerchief from his pocket, in order to provide a wrapping for the chocolates, and, as he spread it on the table, a letter dropped out. He turned his eyes upon French with an expression of sincere regret.

"I say!" he began. "Now, isn't that too bad! And Deena so particular that you should get the note before tea time. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. French – it's all Bridget's fault. Deena said if I got that note to you before five o'clock I should have a piece of cake, and when Bridget wouldn't give it to me it made me so mad I forgot everything. I wanted to kill her."

"I know just how you felt," said Stephen, with irony.

Dicky was tying his chocolates into a hard ball, but with the finishing grimy knot he tossed responsibility to the winds.

"Oh, well," he said, soothingly, "you've got it now, at any rate, so there's no occasion for saying just *when* I gave it to you, unless you want to get a fellow into trouble."

Stephen looked grave; he did want Mrs. Ponsonby to know why he had failed to follow her suggestion of taking tea with her at her mother's house – and also he hated evasion.

"As it happens, that is the exact point I wish your sister to know. I shall not tell her, but I expect you, as a gentleman, to tell of yourself."

"All right," said Dicky, mournfully. "Good-night, Mr. French."

CHAPTER V

Deena had ample time to get accustomed to the old home life before her parents returned, for she had already been in charge for two weeks and still they tarried.

It was evident that young Mr. Beck wished to carry out his aunt's bequests in the spirit as well as the letter of her instructions, for trunks of linen and silver began to arrive from Chicago which gave some idea of the loot obtained from the dismantling of Mrs. Beck's fine house. The young Sheltons took the keenest interest in unpacking these treasures. Children are naturally communistic. They enjoy possessions held in common almost as much as their individual acquisitions – only in a different way. There is more glorification in the general good luck, but not such far-reaching privilege.

In the midst of these excitements Deena received a letter the possession of which no one seemed inclined to dispute with her. It was from Simeon, posted at Montevideo, and containing the first news of his voyage. His wife read it in the retirement of her own room, but she might have proclaimed it from the rostrum, so impersonal was its nature. He had made an attempt, however, to meet what he conceived to be feminine requirements in a correspondent, for the handwriting was neat, and the facts he recorded of an unscientific nature. He described his cabin in the vessel, also his fellow passengers; not humorously, but with an appreciation of their peculiarities Deena had not anticipated; he introduced her to flying fish, and then to the renowned albatross, and he conducted her up the river Platte to Montevideo, which he described with the ponderous minuteness of a guide book. At the end he made a confidence – namely, that even his summer flannels had proved oppressive in that climate – but the intimacy of his letter went no further, and he omitted to mention any personal feelings in regard to their separation.

It was an admirable family letter, instructive and kind, and rather pleasanter and lighter in tone than his conversation. Deena was glad that no exhortations to economy made it too private to show to French when he called that afternoon. She but anticipated his object in coming. He also had a letter which he had brought for her to read, and they sat on opposite sides of the fire, enjoying their exchanged correspondence.

But what a difference there was in the letters; Deena's had three pages of pretty handwriting; Stephen's six of closely written scrawl. In Deena's the ideas barely flowed to the ink; in Stephen's they flowed so fast they couldn't get themselves written down – he used contractions, he left out whole words; he showed the interest he felt in the work he left behind in endless questions in regard to his department; he thanked Stephen more heartily than he had ever done by word of mouth for suggesting him for the appointment, and finally he gave such an account of his voyage as one intelligent man gives another.

Deena recognized her place in her husband's estimation when she finished his letter to Stephen, and said, with pardonable sarcasm:

"Simeon saves the strong meat of observation for masculine digestion, and I get only the *hors-d'œuvres*; perhaps he has discriminated wisely."

The mere fact of being able to exchange letters with Deena was a revelation to French, and as he walked home from their interview his fancy was busy putting himself in Simeon's place. The paths that lead through another man's kingdom are never very safe for the wandering feet of imagination. It is an old refrain, "If I were king," the song of a usurper, if only in thought.

If he were king of Deena Ponsonby's life, Stephen thought, would he write letters that another chap might read? Would he dwell upon the shape of an albatross, when there must be memories – beautiful, glowing memories – between them to recall? Pen and ink was a wretched medium for love, but the heart of the world has throbbed to its inspiration before now. Why, if a woman like Mrs. Ponsonby shared his hearth, he would let Tierra del Fuego, with its flora and its fauna, sink into the

sea and be damned to it, before he'd put the hall door between himself and her. His own front door had suggested the idea, and he shut it with a bang.

He picked up the letters he found waiting on the hall table, and went directly to his library, passing through a room that would have been a drawing-room had a lady presided there, but to the master served only as a defense against intrusion into the privacy of his sanctum.

The postman had left a pile of bills and advertisements, but there was one letter in Ben Minthrop's familiar writing, and Stephen turned up his light and settled himself to read it. Ben wrote:

> Dear French: When I asked you to spend Christmas with us in Boston I had no idea that, like the Prophet Habbacuc, I, with my dinner pail, was to be lifted by the hair of my head, and transported to Babylon – in other words, New York. But so it is! If you know your Apocrypha, this figurative language will seem apt, but in case you should like my end of it explained I will leave the mystifications of Bel and the Dragon and come down to plain speech.
>
> My father has conceived the idea that I am one of the dawning lights in the financial world, and he has decided to open a branch office of our business in New York and to put me at its head. I must confess that the whole thing is very pleasant and flattering, and it has stirred all the decent ambitions I have – that I have any I owe to you, old fellow – and I am rather keen to be off.
>
> We have taken a house not far from the park in East Sixty-fifth Street, where a welcome will always be yours, and where Polly and I hope you will eat your Christmas dinner.
>
> Perhaps you may reflect that it is a serious thing to befriend straying men and dogs; they are apt to regard past kindness as a guarantee of future interest in their welfare. I do not believe, however, that I am making too large a demand upon your friendship in asking for your good wishes in this pleasant turn to my future affairs.
>
> Of course I want one more favor. If you have any influence with Deena Ponsonby, will you urge her to spend the winter with us? Polly is writing to her by this same mail, but I know the New England conscience will suggest to Deena that anything amusing is wrong, and so you might explain that I am nervous about Polly's health, and that I look to her to help me get settled without overstrain to my wife – in short, administer a dose of duty, and she may see her way to coming.
>
> Ever, my dear French,
>
> *Sincerely yours,*
> *Benjamin Minthrop.*

Anger gives to the natural man a pedal impulse – in plain language, he wants to kick something. Rage flows from the toes as freely as gunpowder ran out of the great Panjandrum's boots when he played "Catch who catch can" on the immortal occasion of the gardener's wife marrying the barber. Now, Stephen French was a man of habitual self-restraint, and yet upon reading Ben Minthrop's letter he got up and – ignoring the poker and tongs – kicked the fire with a savagery that showed how little the best of us has softened by civilization. And yet the letter was distinctly friendly, even modest and grateful – without one kick-inspiring sentence. Stephen began pacing his library floor, hurling his thoughts broadcast, since there was no one to listen to his words.

Why were people never content to let well enough alone? he demanded. There was old Minthrop, with enough money to spoil his son, laying plans for Ben to muddle away a few millions in New York in the hope of making more; or even if, by some wild chance, the boy were successful and doubled it – still one would think the place for an only son was in the same town with his parents. Of course it was their business, but when it came to dragging Mrs. Ponsonby into their schemes it was a

different matter. Simeon would disapprove, he knew, and as her adviser in Simeon's absence, he felt it his duty to tell her to stay at home with *her* parents till her husband returned.

And then common sense asserted itself, and he asked himself what Deena owed to her parents; and why Harmouth was a better place for her than New York; and what possible difference it could make to Simeon? The answer came in plain, bold, horrid words, and he shrank from them. The curse of Nathan was upon him; like David, he had condemned his friend to absence and danger, and had then promptly fallen in love with his wife. But not willingly, he pleaded, in extenuation; it had crept upon him unawares. It was his own secret, he had never betrayed himself, and so help his God, he would trample it down till he gained the mastery. Not for one moment would he tolerate disloyalty to his friend, even in his thoughts. Ben's suggestion was a happy solution of the situation as far as he was concerned; he would urge Deena to go before his folly could be suspected. To have any sentiments for a woman like Mrs. Ponsonby except a chivalrous reverence was an offense against his manhood.

French was a man who had been brought up to respect ceremonial in daily living, and he dressed as scrupulously for his lonely dinner as if a wife presided and expected the courtesy to her toilet. Somebody has wisely said that unconsciously we lay aside our smaller worries with our morning clothes, and come down to dinner refreshed in mind as well as body by the interval of dressing. If Stephen did not exactly hang up his anxiety with his coat, he at least took a more reasonable view of his attachment to his neighbor's wife. He began to think he had exaggerated an extreme admiration into love – that he was an honorable man and a gentleman, and could keep his secret as many another had done before him; and that if Deena went away for the winter it removed the only danger, which was in daily meeting under terms of established intimacy.

There was to be a lecture at the Athenæum that evening on the engineering difficulties incident to building the Panama Canal, and Stephen, who was interested in the subject, made up his mind to start early and stop for a moment at the Sheltons' to carry out Ben's request. He took glory to himself for choosing an hour when Mrs. Ponsonby was likely to be surrounded by a bevy of brothers and sisters; he would never again try to see her alone.

His very footfall sounded heroic when he ran up the steps and rang the bell. As he stood within the shelter of the storm door waiting to be let in, the voices of the young Sheltons reached him, all talking at once in voluble excitement, and then a hand was laid on the inside knob and advice offered in a shrill treble.

"You had better run, Deena, if you don't want to be caught," and then more giggling, and a quick rush across the hall.

Dicky threw open the hall door, and French, glancing up the stairs, caught sight of a velvet train disappearing round the turn of the first landing. He took the chances of making a blunder and called:

"Come down, Mrs. Ponsonby. It is I – Stephen French – and I have something to say to you."

This was first received in silence, and then in piercing whispers, the little sisters tried to inspire courage:

"Go down, Deena; you don't look a bit *funny*– really."

"'Funny' – ye gods!" thought French, as Deena turned and came slowly down the stairs. He only wished she did look *funny*, or anything, except the intoxicating, maddening contrast to her usual sober self that was descending to him.

She was dressed in black velvet of a fashion evidently copied from a picture, for the waist was prolonged over the hips in Van Dykes, and from the shoulders and sleeves Venetian point turned back, displaying the lovely neck and arms that Polly had so envied. Her hair was loosely knotted at the back, and on her forehead were straying curls which were seldom tolerated in the severity of her usual neatness. She wore a collar of pearls, and her bodice was ornamented with two sunbursts and a star.

French, who had never seen her in evening dress, was amazed. He seemed to forget that he had asked speech with her, and stood gazing as if she were an animated portrait whose exceeding merit

left him dumb. He was recalled alike to his senses and his manners by Dicky, who turned a handspring over his sister's long train and then addressed Stephen, when he found himself right-end up.

"I say, Mr. French, mustn't she have been sort of loony to wear a dress like that, and she sixty-five?"

"Who?" asked French, completely mystified.

"Why, mother's cousin, Mrs. Beck. Didn't you know she had died and left us things?" said Dicky, proudly. "A trunk full of clothes and diamond ornaments came to-day, and mother wrote to Deena to unpack it, and we persuaded her to dress up in this. Don't she look queer? That Mrs. Beck must have been a dressy old girl."

Deena ignored the explanation. She appeared to treat her costume as a usual and prosaic affair, and said to Stephen, almost coldly:

"You have something to tell me?"

He wondered whether his eyes had offended her, whether the stupidity of his admiration had hurt her self-respect. She didn't look at him squarely and openly, as usual, but kept her head half turned so that the perfect line of her throat and chin was emphasized, and the tiny curls at the back of her neck set off the creamy whiteness of her skin. To tell the truth, Deena had never before worn a low-necked dress. Prior to her early marriage a simple white muslin, a little curtailed in the sleeves and transparent over the neck, had been sufficient for any college dance she went to, and after Simeon had assumed command, even the white muslin was superfluous, for she never saw company either at home or abroad. Her present costume was sufficiently discreet in sleeves – they came almost to the elbow, but the bodice allowed so liberal a view of neck and shoulders as to cover the wearer with confusion. She felt exactly as you feel in a dream when you flit down the aisle of a crowded car in your night clothes, or inadvertently remove most of your garments in a pew in church, and with Deena self-consciousness always took the form of dignity.

Stephen pulled himself together.

"I have had a letter from Ben," he said, "who seems to think an appeal he has made for your company in New York this winter will be more apt to win a favorable answer if backed up by your *Temporary Adviser*. That describes the position Simeon indicated for me; doesn't it, Mrs. Ponsonby?"

She sank back in her chair and, forgetting herself for a moment, allowed her eyes to meet his with a merry smile.

"This seems to be like a conspiracy to make a hungry man eat!" she answered. "No urging is necessary to persuade me to go to New York – why should you and Ben suppose I do not like to do pleasant things? I shall delight in being with Polly – I shall like the excitement and the fun – I am perfectly mad to go!"

If it had not been for the exaggeration of the last sentence French would have been sure of the genuineness of her wishes, but the force of the expression was so foreign to her usual moderation that he asked himself whether Deena might not also find a separation desirable. The thought sent the blood bounding through his veins. If she cared for him ever so little, it would be easier to let her go – easier if he knew she suffered too! Then he called himself a coxcomb and a self-deceiver, and made a grasp at the good resolutions that had almost escaped him.

"I always knew you possessed that adorable quality, common sense," he remarked. "Ben and I might have guessed you would do the wise thing. When men rush hot-footed into the affairs of women, they are apt to play the fool."

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't go?" she demanded, anxiously.

"On the contrary, every reason why you should; but I feared some mistaken idea about expense or Simeon's approbation might interfere with your taking a holiday, which you will enjoy as much as he enjoys digging up roots in Patagonia."

Deena considered the two points of his answer – expense and Simeon's approbation – and replied thoughtfully:

"My husband would recognize so simple a duty, and, as far as expense goes, I am a perfectly independent woman. Didn't you know *our* story – the one you made me rewrite – sold at once, and, besides that, I have placed a number of fugitive poems? So I snap my fingers at expenses till the bank breaks," and she tapped her forehead to indicate from whence the supply flowed.

"Then make the most of the sensation while it lasts," he said, with good-natured cynicism, "for expenses have a way of sizing you up – cleaning out your pockets – and going you one better! If you are still snapping your fingers when you come back from New York, then, indeed, you may boast."

A troubled look came into her face.

"Simeon would like me to go to Polly when she is out of health and needs me," she said, in a tone she meant to be assertive, but which was only appealing, "and if we are careful about spending, it is because we are proud and do not wish to incur obligations."

The *we* was a masterpiece of loyalty, and French was suitably impressed by it.

"Dear Mrs. Ponsonby," he said, "you speak as if *I* were likely to misjudge Simeon, whereas my object in coming here was to prevent *your* misjudging him by allowing your sensitive conscience to forbid pleasures he would be the first to suggest."

The speech was genuine; in Stephen's estimation his friend had noble qualities, and in bearing testimony to them he was beginning his chapter of self-discipline. In this interview, at least, he had preserved a conscience void of offense, and he hastened to say goodnight before any temptation should assail his discretion. Perhaps, also – for he was but mortal – the reflection in the parlor mirror of what was passing in the hall may have accelerated his departure.

For the benefit of an admiring gallery at the head of the stairs, Master Shelton was performing jugglers' tricks with their visitor's best silk hat. Twice it had turned a somersault in the air, and twice safely alighted well down over Dicky's ears, but a third time it might miss even such a conspicuous mark and be smashed out of symmetry on the hard floor. French beat a hasty retreat, but he was no match for Dicky in change of tactics; as he came into the hall that young gentleman stood stiffly and solemnly waiting to hand him his hat and open the front door with an air he had copied precisely from Stephen's own servant the day of the memorable feast. His presumption carried him a little too far, however, for as he closed the door on Stephen he favored his sister with a comment that promptly brought its punishment.

"If I were an old bag of bones like brother Simeon," he said, grinning, "I shouldn't care to have good-lookin' fellows like Mr. French running after you twice in the same day, Deena!"

Deena had always been the tenderest of elder sisters, but at this apparently innocent remark, she first got red as fire, and then, paling with anger, she rushed at her brother and pulled his ruddy locks till he cried for mercy, while she burst into tears.

"Stop it!" roared Dicky, burrowing his head in a sofa cushion. "I tell you, you're hurting me! And I'd like to know what the mischief *you're* crying for, anyhow?"

Deena left the room, her face buried in her handkerchief, but she managed to answer brokenly:

"I will – not – allow – you – to call – my husband – 'a bag of bones'!"

CHAPTER VI

The house the young Minthrops had taken was of a contracted luxury that oppressed Deena, accustomed as she was to space and sunshine at Harmouth. She told Ben that fortunes in New York could be gauged by the amount of light the individual could afford – billionaires had houses standing free, with light on four sides; millionaires had corner houses with light on three sides; while ordinary mortals lived in tunnels more or less magnificent where electric light had often to do duty for the sun. Ben declared that his income only admitted light fore and aft, but that with skillful decoration they could at least travesty the sunshine, and so they tried to reproduce its effects by wall hangings of faint yellow and pale green, by chintz-covered bedrooms that seemed to blossom with roses, and living rooms sweet with fresh flowers. There was no solemn mahogany – no light-absorbing color on door or window; all was delicately bright and gay as the tinting of the spring.

Deena worked hard to get the house ready for Polly, who was still in Boston with her mother-in-law, and seemed quite content to leave the arranging of her new quarters to her sister and husband, who preceded her by several weeks; indeed, she was becoming so accustomed to being waited upon that she considered herself in a fair way of being spoiled. An heir was expected, and an heir seemed a very important thing to the elder Minthrops. They treated Polly as a queen bee, and the rest of the world as slaves to wait upon her. She was behaving in a way to satisfy their requirements in a daughter-in-law, and life was to be smoothed accordingly.

Every day brought a fresh suggestion covered by a check. Ben was invited to select a high-stepping gray horse – a pair of cobs – a tiny brougham – a victoria – a piano – a pianola. Deena shopped till she almost sank exhausted, and yet the requests kept coming. If dear Mrs. Ponsonby didn't mind the trouble, perhaps Polly might be warmer with sable rugs – perhaps an extra sofa in her room might induce her to lie down oftener – perhaps a few of those charming lace and linen tablecloths might make her feel like giving little dinners at home instead of fatiguing herself by going out to find her amusements.

Deena would have been more than mortal if the image of old Mrs. Ponsonby had not risen before her eyes in forbidding contrast to so much indulgence. She realized that the genus mother-in-law has widely differing species, and yet in her heart she doubted whether Mrs. Minthrop, with money to anticipate every wish of her only son, loved him a whit more than frugal, self-denying Mother Ponsonby had loved her Simeon. Lavishness or thrift, alike they proved a mother's affection.

Deena executed all the commissions without a shadow of covetousness and rejoiced in her sister's good fortune; it was reserved for Polly and Ben, when they took up their life in New York, to show her the depths of her own loneliness by the fullness of their comradeship, and her yearning needs by their mutual devotion.

Polly arrived one bleak December day, the week before Christmas, escorted by Mrs. Minthrop and two maids, and was met at the Grand Central by her husband in a state of boyish excitement. His delight in having his wife with him once more was so genuine that Deena forgave him an amount of fussiness she never before suspected in his easy-going nature. He altered his orders half a dozen times as to which carriage should bring her from the train to the house, and finally ordered both; he repeated half a dozen times the hour at which the Boston express was due, in order that Deena might make no mistake about having tea served to the minute, and when he had shut the front door, on his way to the Grand Central, he came tearing back to ask the menu for dinner, as Polly was apt to be fanciful about her food. Deena remembered the time – not two years ago – when it was quantity rather than quality that balked Polly's appetite, and nearly laughed in his face, but she loved her big brother-in-law for his forethought.

The curtains were drawn and the lights turned up before the bustle of arrival drew Deena to the stairs. First old Mrs. Minthrop came, stopping to commend the house at every step, and then

Polly, with her arm linked in her husband's, chattering volubly at the delight everything gave her; and Deena, wedged between the elder lady and the wall in cordial greeting, could not help hearing Ben welcome his wife to her own home with a sentiment she never suspected in him before. Polly flew to her sister and kissed and thanked her for all she had done, and lavished her praises broadcast, and then she insisted upon pouring out the tea at her own fireside, and Ben perched on the arm of her chair; and once, when Deena turned suddenly from handing the toast to Mrs. Minthrop, she saw him kiss Polly's hair.

Her thoughts sped back to her parting with Simeon, with its prosaic formality – the feel of his puckered lips brushing her forehead. What a lack of imagination marked all his dealings with her! She felt rebellious and sad; not that she wanted any of the luxury that surrounded Polly, but she was hungry for love. She saw suddenly what marriage ought to be, and the realization frightened her. How was it she had committed this crime against her own nature? Was it her sin or her parents' that she had been so blind? Not Simeon's – she exonerated him, she knew he had given her as much of himself as he had to spare, and that his conduct was uniform; what it had been at the beginning was now and for all time, and if she had suddenly become a connoisseur in husbands she was not the first woman to whom knowledge brought misery. It was not Simeon's fault that he remained stationary while her views expanded. Fortunately for Deena's peace of mind, it was Ben who figured in these reflections as the exponent of what a husband should be, and she had no suspicion that it was Stephen French who had waked her from her domestic coma.

Poor sleeping beauty, her conscience had long ago been pricked by her mother-in-law's spindle, and her whole moral sense infected with the belief that to keep house wisely was the end and aim of wifely duty. She reverenced Simeon for his learning and dignity, and felt proud that so simple a person as herself should have been chosen in marriage by a professor of Harmouth. On that she had existed for two years, and now she was waking up to new needs that stirred her like the prince's kiss.

Life in the young Minthrops' dovecote soon settled down into a glorified routine. The elder Mrs. Minthrop returned to Boston, leaving Deena as her lieutenant, and perplexing her with the multiplicity of her charges; apparently Mrs. Ponsonby was to be Providence to her sister, with health and happiness under her control. The situation was paradoxical. Polly was to be denied nothing, but not allowed to have her own way too freely; she was to be kept amused, but most amusements were strictly prohibited – she was not to be encouraged to think herself an invalid, and at the same time her usual occupations were taken from her. Deena was wise enough to listen and make no promises, and when she assumed command she contented herself with trying to stand between her sister and domestic worries.

Christmas came and went without the visit from Stephen, which Ben had hoped for, and invitations were pouring in for the plethora of social functions that mark the season's height. Deena came in for her share, but she felt too much of a stranger to venture alone into the vortex. Polly entertained in a modest way at home – a few people at dinner, a friend or two at lunch – and this Deena greatly enjoyed, and had begun to make herself favorably known to a small circle when a stop was put to this mild dissipation. The great doctor, who had been charged by Mrs. Minthrop never to forget her daughter-in-law's inexperience, issued orders that Polly was to stay in her room. This enforced quiet found an outlet in a desire to send Deena everywhere. She drove her forth to dinners and balls, and the high-stepping gray horse was always at her service, and so the beautiful Mrs. Ponsonby became the fashion. New York does not ask too many questions in these days about the husbands of handsome married women who appear as grass widows in its midst; indeed, the suspicion of a latent romance or scandal gives a flavor to the interest, and Deena suffered not a whit from the rumor that she was a deserted wife, with money.

"Oh, yes, there is a husband," the great Mrs. Star admitted. "She married him for his money, and he has a hobby – fossils, I think it is – and he has gone to collect them at Cape Horn. She bears his

absence surprisingly well, doesn't she? Old Mrs. Minthrop's son married the sister, and she begged me to be civil to them. I forget who she said they were, but *Mayflower* people, you know."

In this way Deena was passed on, stamped with the hall-mark of the *Mayflower*. Mrs. Shelton had contributed very generously to her daughter's outfit for the season in New York. The black velvet picture dress was only one of several found suitable for her use in the trunk of finery belonging to the Chicago cousin, and the jewels that had come into the Shelton family from the same source were worthy of Deena's beauty. Her clothes were good, and she wore them like a princess.

One evening late in January, Deena and Ben were dining with a gay young matron, who, without any especial personal charm herself, had the faculty of drawing to her house the best element society had to offer. The engagement had been made for them by Polly, much against her husband's wishes, and his anxiety at leaving her alone could hardly be concealed during dinner. As soon as the ladies left the table he excused himself to his host, and, following the little hostess into the drawing room, he whispered a few words in her ear, nodded to Deena and disappeared.

"Your brother-in-law has gone home to his wife, Mrs. Ponsonby," said the hostess. "I have never seen such devotion." She laughed a trifle enviously; her own infelicities were the talk of the town.

Deena started forward in alarm.

"Was he sent for? Is my sister ill?" she inquired, nervously, and then sank back in her chair, smiling, when she found it was only a phase of young Minthropism.

While her own daylight hours were given to her sister, she was always pleased to be out of the way in the evening – it left the lovers to themselves – though she could not quite free herself from a sense of responsibility to the elder Mrs. Minthrop.

Mrs. Star, who was beside Deena, gave a sniff – if so fine a lady could be suspected of such a plebeian way of marking her disapprobation.

"My dear," she said, "why should your charming sister be treated as a prisoner over whom somebody must perpetually keep watch? I have had six children – they were all healthy and had their full complement of legs and arms – except Bob, who lost an arm in the Spanish war, but that doesn't count – and I never was shut up in my room before I had to be – nor put on a milk diet – nor forbidden reasonable exercise – and I think the modern doctors are full of fads and greed. Their bills! I don't know who is rich enough to be ill nowadays!" Here she shut her eyes and trembled to think of the portion of her own great fortune that might have transferred itself to the doctor's pockets if her nursery had not antedated the present school. "It may not seem very expensive to young Mrs. Minthrop to lie on her sofa and drink milk – but just wait till she comes to pay for it!"

"I don't believe anyone will care about the bill, Mrs. Star," said Deena, "so long as Polly keeps well."

"It is bad enough to have food and exercise taken away from the young mothers," continued Mrs. Star, who was evidently mounted on a hobby, "but when helpless infants are deprived of their natural sustenance and fed from bottles filled in a laboratory and stuffed with cotton, it is time for the Gerry Society to interfere. Cruelty to children is practiced far more by the rich than by the poor, in my opinion, and if you want to see cases of inanition and feeble spines, I'll show you where to look for them, and it won't be in the tenements!"

Deena wanted to laugh, but didn't dare to; the old lady proclaimed her fierce sentiments with such earnest gravity. She managed, however, to say politely:

"You think that science has not improved upon nature in rearing the race, but you must remember that it finds the higher classes existing under unnatural conditions."

"The conditions would do very well if we could banish the doctors," said the old lady, testily. "I am out of patience with their incubators and their weighing machines and their charts and their thermometers – yes, and their baby nurses! What do you suppose I heard a mother say to her own servant the other day: 'Please, nurse, may I take the baby up? He is crying fearfully,' and the nurse,

who had reluctantly put down the morning paper, said: 'No, m'am, when he cries in that angry way, he must learn that it is useless!' *His age was six weeks.*"

Deena burst into a hearty laugh.

"My dear Mrs. Star," she said, "I am a convert."

Mrs. Star wagged her head in approbation.

"Just tell your sister what I have said, will you?" she pursued, afraid that so much wisdom might be lost. "And, my dear, since your brother-in-law has gone home, suppose you come along to the opera with me. I sent some tickets to a few stray men, and I must look in before the last act."

At this point they were joined by the gentlemen, and as soon as decency would permit, Mrs. Star made her adieux, followed by Deena. The Minthrop brougham was dismissed, and the ladies whirled away in Mrs. Star's electric carriage. She at once took up her parable, but this time the topic was not the care of infants.

"I think a great deal of the scenic effect of an opera box," she said. "I always dress with respect to the hangings, and I never take a discordant color beside me if I can help it. You happen to please me very much this evening; I like the simplicity of the white dress. Still, it wouldn't be anything if you didn't have such a neck – it gives an air to any low gown."

"It was my wedding dress," said Deena, frankly, "and my sister's maid rearranged it for me. I am glad you like it."

"Your wedding dress," said Mrs. Star, reflectively. "I think I heard you had married a naturalist – prehistoric bones, is it not? Very interesting subject – so inspiring. Milliken" – to the footman, who opened the door on their arrival at the opera house – "you may keep the carriage here. I shall not be more than half an hour."

Half an hour for the enjoyment of a pleasure that cost her, yearly, a moderate fortune!

On their way through the foyer to the box, Deena ventured to disclaim for her husband a peculiar interest in fossils.

"My husband is a botanist," she began, and then desisted when she saw her companion's attention was barely held by a desire to be civil.

"Ah, indeed!" Mrs. Star vaguely responded. "Delightful topic. I went into it myself quite extensively when I was a girl."

Deena was not often malicious, but she couldn't help wishing Simeon could have stood by to hear this announcement of a girlish mastery of his life's work. She tried to think in what dry words he would have rebuked the levity, but before she could arrange a phrase quite in character, they were in the front of the box, and in the obscurity some one took her hand, and Stephen French's voice murmured:

"What a piece of luck that I should see you to-night! I have only been in town a few hours, and obeyed my aunt's summons to the opera as a means of keeping myself from Ben's house till the morning. You can't think how eager I have been to see you again, Mrs. Ponsonby."

There was a strange break in his voice, as if he were trying to restrain the rush of happiness.

All the six mighty artists who made the opera the marvel it was were combining their voices in the closing sextet of the fourth act, and Deena, thrilled by the loveliness of the music and, perhaps, by the surprise of French's presence, felt she was trembling with excitement.

"Fancy meeting you here!" she kept repeating, the stupid phrase concealing the great joy that was puzzling her conscience.

"What is so wonderful in my being in my aunt's opera box?" Stephen demanded. "Cannot a professor of zoology like music, or do you object to a bachelor owning an aunt?"

How pleasant it was to hear his kind voice, with its good-natured raillery! But that was sub-conscious pleasure – her immediate attention was busy with the first part of his speech about his aunt's opera box; she never supposed he had any relations.

"Who is your aunt?" she asked, abruptly.

"Mrs. Star," he answered. "Don't you see the family likeness?"

And oddly enough, in the half light, there was a distinct resemblance in the profile of the bewigged old lady to her handsome young kinsman's. Deena regretted both the likeness and the relationship; it made her uncomfortable to know that Stephen was the nephew of this worldly-minded old lady, with her fictitious standards and her enormous riches; it seemed to place a barrier between them and to lift him out of the simplicity of his college setting.

"Have I become a snob in this Relentless City'?" she exclaimed. "*I* find my whole idea of you changed by this announcement. It depresses me! You seem to me a different person here, with these affiliations of fashion and grandeur, than when I thought of you simply as Simeon's friend."

"Don't think of me simply as Simeon's friend," he pleaded, half in fun, half in sinful earnest.

"I never shall again," she said, sadly. "Your greatest charm is eclipsed by this luxury – I want you to belong to Harmouth only."

Stephen's lips were twitching with suppressed amusement.

"There is a proverb, my dear lady," he said, "of the pot and the kettle, that you may recall. I am not sure but what I may find a word to say to you upon the cruelty of disturbing associations."

"To me!" she said, turning to him with the gentle dignity that was her crowning charm. "Surely there are no surprises in me."

Stephen shook his head in mock disapproval as he allowed his eyes to sweep from the topmost curl of her head to her slipper points, and then he said:

"Go home, Mrs. Ponsonby, and take off that white lace evening dress, and perhaps the wreath of holly might come, too – and that diamond star on your bodice; and put on, instead – let me see – the dark blue frock you wore the evening I told Simeon about the Patagonian expedition, and then you will be in a position to reproach me for any relapse from the simplicity of Harmouth. If you disapprove of me as the nephew of my aunt, how do you suppose I feel about you? And oh! my stars! what would Simeon say?"

"Simeon," she said, faintly. "You are right; Simeon might not understand – " and before French had time to protest that he had only been teasing her, the curtain went down, strange men came flocking into the box, Mrs. Star was introducing a Russian grand duke, and Stephen, surrendering his chair, withdrew to the other side of his aunt.

Deena could not but admire the old lady's admirable manner. She kept up an easy chatter, sometimes in French, sometimes in English, with the Russian and with a Spanish artist; she never allowed Deena to feel out of touch with the conversation, and in the midst of it all she managed to welcome her nephew.

"You are stopping *at* my house, of course, Stephen? No – at the Savoy? That is uncharitable to a lonely old woman. Where did you know that pretty creature, Mrs. Ponsonby?" she asked, seeing that the two foreigners were absorbing the attention of her beautiful protégée. "You should learn to guard the expression of your face, my dear boy. I begin to understand why you cling so obstinately to Harmouth. I see the place has advantages outside the work of the college."

Here she wagged her head in self-congratulation at her own astuteness, and Stephen flushed angrily.

"Hush!" he said. "She will hear you. You have little knowledge of Mrs. Ponsonby if you think she would permit the attentions of any man. She is not in the least that kind of person. She is one of the most dignified, self-respecting, high-minded women I ever knew."

Mrs. Star cut him short with a wave of her fan.

"Spare me the rhapsodies," she laughed. "You merely mark the stage of the disease you have arrived at. The object of your love sits enthroned! If the husband is wise he will throw his fossils into the sea and come back to look after this pretty possession. Flesh and blood is worth more than dry bones."

"Ponsonby is a botanist," Stephen corrected, grimly, while his inward thought was that the dry bones were Simeon's own; and then, ashamed of the disloyal – though unspoken – sneer, he went back to Deena and began talking volubly of his last letter from her husband.

They had both had letters from Simeon, now safely arrived in the Straits of Magellan. He had written to Deena when they first cast anchor off the Fuegian shore. He described to her the visits of the Indians in their great canoes, containing their entire families and possessions, and the never-dying fire of hemlock on a clay hearth in the middle of the boat; how they would sell their only garment – a fur cloak – for tobacco and rum, and how friendly they seemed to be, in spite of all the stories of cannibalism told by early voyagers.

In the midst of this earnest conversation, Mrs. Star rose to go, escorted by the grand duke, and Stephen, following with Deena, was able to let his enthusiasm rise above a whisper when they gained the corridor.

"Didn't he tell you that they were all going guanaco hunting?"

"*Simeon!*" in a tone of incredulity.

"Greatest fun in the world, I am told," pursued French; "something like stag hunting, only more exciting – done with the bolas. You whirl it round your head and let it fly, and it wraps itself round a beast's legs and bowls him over before he knows what hit him."

"Does it kill him?" asked Deena, shrinking from the miseries of the hunted.

"Only knocks him over," explained Stephen. "You finish him with your knife."

"Sport is a cruel thing," she said, shuddering. "I am glad Simeon cannot even ride."

"Can't ride!" repeated Stephen. "Indeed, I can tell you he means to. He says the Indians have offered him the best mount they have. They considered him a medicine man, on account of his root-digging propensities, and treated him as the high cockalorum of the whole ship's company."

"Surely he is joking," she said. "Simeon is making game of you."

"Simeon!" he echoed, mimicking her incredulous tone.

"A joke would be no stranger to him than a horse," she said, smiling.

They had reached the entrance, and Deena stood shaking with suppressed laughter. "Fancy! Simeon!" she repeated.

"And why not Simeon, pray?" asked Stephen, slightly nettled.

A vision of Simeon with his gold-rimmed spectacles and stooped figure mounted on horseback in the midst of a party of Indians, whirling his bolas over his head and shouting, presented itself to Deena's imagination. The carriage was waiting, and, obeying Mrs. Star's motion to get in first, Simeon Ponsonby's wife fell back on the seat and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

Outside, Stephen was entreating to be allowed to visit her the next morning.

"I haven't half finished my story, Mrs. Ponsonby," he protested.

And Deena managed to steady her voice and invite him to lunch the next day.

CHAPTER VII

French's visit to New York was not the result of any weakening resolution in regard to his neighbor's wife; the object was business. His property was chiefly in real estate, and the distinguished law firm who managed his affairs had summoned him to confer with a tenant who was desirous of becoming a purchaser. Being in the same town with Deena, he decided that he could not well avoid visiting her, to say nothing of Ben. It was his misfortune that every meeting made his self-discipline harder, for, if they lived, he had got to see her under still more trying circumstances – reunited with a husband who misunderstood her.

These thoughts passed through his mind the morning after their encounter at the opera, as he finished his breakfast at the Savoy. He had an appointment at his lawyers' at ten o'clock, and at the Minthrops' for luncheon at half-past one. The first, if properly conducted, might result in a largely increased income; the second in self-repression and a heartache; and yet his one idea was to dispatch the business, so that no precious moments of Deena's society should be lost to him.

He was hurrying out of the hotel to go downtown, when a telegram was put into his hand. For the detached bachelor such messages have little interest. Stephen opened this one as casually as most people open an advertisement – may the foul fiend fly away with those curses of our daily mail! – and read:

Buenos Ayres, Jan. 30.

Pedro Lopez to the Hon'ble Professor French, Harmouth University.
Tintoretto on its way home. Ponsonby missing.

Stephen read the dispatch several times before he quite understood its significance. Pedro Lopez was his South American friend, who had set on foot the Fuegian expedition and applied to Harmouth for a botanist; the *Tintoretto* was the vessel furnished by the Argentine Government.

The cable message had gone to Harmouth and been repeated to New York, probably by Stephen's butler.

The first effect of evil tidings is apt to be superficial. We receive a mental impression rather than a shock to the heart. We are for the moment spectators of our own misfortunes, as if the blow had produced a paralysis to the feelings, leaving the intellect clear.

Stephen went back to his own room conscious of no emotion except intense curiosity as to what had become of Simeon, though, perhaps, far back in his mind anxiety was settling down to its work of torture.

He flung himself into a chair near the window which overlooked the entrance to the park and let his eyes gaze blankly at the busy scene. It had snowed during the night, and sleighs were dashing in and out under the leafless arches of the trees. Bells were tinkling, gay plumes of horsehair floating from the front of the Russian sleighs and the turrets of the horses' harness, men and women wrapped in costly furs were being whirled along, laughing and chatting, through the crisp morning air.

Stephen didn't know he was receiving an impression – he thought his mind was at a standstill, but whenever in the future that terrible day came back to his memory, he always saw a picture, as it were, of the brilliant procession dashing into the city's playground, while Saint Gaudens' statue of Sherman stood watching, grim and cold, with the snow on his mantle and his Victory in a winding sheet.

It was not very long before French was able to pull himself together and to face the situation. What did it mean? Had Simeon lost himself in the Patagonian wilds or was he drowned? French felt that he couldn't carry such an uncertain report to Deena, the strain upon her would be too great. It was horrible to have to tell her at all, but he must try to make the news definite – not vague. Gradually he thought out a course of action; he would telegraph to Lopez to send him a detailed account, cabling

the answer at his expense, and until this reply came he thought himself justified in concealing the news. Lopez was in constant communication with the expedition, and the letter which had announced Ponsonby's disappearance must have gone into particulars.

After dispatching this cable he kept his appointment in Wall Street, transacting the business with the dull precision of a person in a hypnotic sleep, and then presented himself at the Minthrops' a few minutes before the lunch hour. He had not been prepared to find Deena installed as hostess, and her manner of greeting him and presiding at the lunch table was so assured, so different from the timid hospitality she was wont to offer under Simeon's roof, that her whole personality seemed changed. She more than ever satisfied his admiring affection, but she was so unlike the Mrs. Ponsonby of Harmouth that he felt like confiding to this gracious, sympathetic woman the tragedy that threatened her other self.

Early in the day, before that woeful message came, he had counted the minutes he could spend with her, and now he was timing his visit so as to curtail it to the least possible duration, and taxing his ingenuity as to how best to avoid seeing her alone. It was Saturday, and he trusted to the half holiday for the protection of Ben's presence; his depression of spirits would be less noticeable in general conversation.

He arrived on the stroke of the hour set for lunch, and to his chagrin was shown to the library, where Deena was sitting alone. His trouble deepened, for, after motioning him to a chair beside her, she resumed her embroidery and said, with a quizzical expression:

"You were in the midst of Simeon's last letter when we parted last evening, Mr. French; please go on with it. You may remember you left my unfortunate husband pledged to become a horseman."

Stephen could not respond to her merry mood; his anxiety was to steer the conversation away from Simeon, and he had run against a snag at the start.

"At all events, I left him safely surrounded by friends," he said – more in answer to his own feelings than her banter.

In thinking over any disaster, the mind loves to dwell on the peaceful moments that preceded it. Stephen found comfort in recalling the gay tone of Simeon's letter, his delight in his coming adventure, and the good feeling that evidently existed between him and the ship's company.

Deena took exception to his remark.

"You have strange ideas of safety!" she laughed. "Not content with mounting a confirmed pedestrian on a wild horse of the Pampas, you must needs turn him loose among a horde of savages. The hunt had not taken place when he wrote, had it? It is a pity, for I should like Simeon safely back on shipboard without the loss of spectacles or dignity."

She would like Simeon back! What wouldn't French give to know her husband was still alive!

The butler announced lunch, and Ben came dashing downstairs, delighted to see Stephen and full of excuses at having lingered in his wife's room. He said Polly was feeling rather poorly, and Stephen was glad to see a look of anxiety cross Deena's face; he rightly judged her thoughts had been diverted from Patagonia to Polly's sofa, and he breathed once more.

What a pleasant luncheon it was, in spite of the lurking dread. Deena was wearing the old blue dress he had recommended to her the night before. It could not be from coquetry – she was above coquetry – but perhaps she had put it on to recall associations; to remind him of the close bonds of friendship that existed between them in those pleasant autumn days that followed Simeon's departure. Stephen was not very learned in the make of women's frocks, but he understood color and could appreciate how that steely-blue made her complexion glow warm as ivory and her hair like copper.

They were pretending to quarrel over a dish of salted almonds; Deena declared that French was getting the lion's share, and finally covered the little silver basket that held them with her hand. On the third finger flashed old Mrs. Ponsonby's diamond in its antiquated silver setting, and below it was her wedding ring, the narrow band that symbolized her bondage to Simeon. For the first time since

French had received the cable, its possible significance to him took possession of his mind, and he flushed a dull red and fell into a reverie.

In all probability there was no longer any barrier between him and the woman he loved; nothing to prevent his striving to win her, but the period of her mourning – the respect she owed to the memory of a husband who was the palest shadow of a lover, and not even the ghost of a companion. He wondered whether she had ever guessed his feelings – feelings which he had subdued and held under with all the strength of his nature, partly through fear of forfeiting her friendship and partly because her charm was in the simplicity of her goodness. If love had once been named between them, Deena would have been other than herself.

Her voice roused him. She was excusing herself in order to go to her sister, and leave him and Ben to smoke. He held the door open for her to pass with a profound sense of relief – no suspicion of his awful secret had been betrayed. But oh! the comfort of talking it over with Ben, of sharing the burden with another! They discussed the meager announcement till they had exhausted every probability and found nothing to hope and everything to fear.

"I hope to Heaven he is dead!" cried Ben. "Imagine a man physically weak, like Ponsonby, enduring slow starvation in the damp and chill of the Patagonian seacoast. It will be a positive relief if we hear he fell overboard."

"Anything is better than uncertainty," said Stephen, and the speech must have been from the new point of view, the hope of Deena's freedom, for the next moment he was conscious of a wave of shame.

"I ought to get an answer from Lopez before night," he added, rising to go; "and as soon as I hear I will return and let you know."

Ben followed him to the front door, whispering like a conspirator and glancing furtively up the stairs. There was a childish streak in the boy's nature that gloried in a confidence; the joy of the secret nearly made up for the sorrow of the fact. But secrets and sorrows were soon put out of his head, for a crucial moment had come to the young Minthrops – one we anticipate and are never quite prepared for.

As he ran upstairs, after seeing Stephen off, he met Deena, evidently looking for him.

"Oh, Ben," she said, "Polly is ill, and I have telephoned for – "

But she got no further, for her big brother-in-law turned white as a frightened girl, and when he tried to speak no sound came from his lips.

"Goose!" said Deena, laying an affectionate hand on his shoulder. "Shall I get a glass of brandy? Do you suppose no one has ever met with this experience before?"

Ben recovered himself with a fit of irritation, which seems the corollary to being frightened.

"Brandy!" he repeated. "Why in thunder should I want brandy? Really, Deena, for a sensible woman, you are given at times to saying the most foolish things I ever heard."

In the meanwhile, as the afternoon was still early, French was anxious to find some occupation that might distract his thoughts. He decided to visit his aunt, whose conversation was usually startling enough to hold the attention of her hearers in any stress of agitation, and then when he was halfway up her steps repented the intention, on the ground that he needed soothing rather than stimulating; but his retreat was cut off by the good lady coming out of her door and discovering him, and, as she was about to walk round the block for exercise before taking her afternoon drive, she promptly claimed his company for both occasions. The wind blew her dress up to her ankles as she reached the sidewalk, displaying a pair of pointed-toed, high-heeled boots that perforce made walking – even round the block – a torturing task. But Mrs. Star was a brave woman, and walking a matter of conscience, so she tottered along beside her nephew, occasionally laying a hand on his arm when a bit of icy pavement made her footing more than usually uncertain.

"How I hate the late winter in New York!" she exclaimed, when a few minutes later they were seated in her sleigh on their way to the park. "Here we are at the threshold of February, when any

self-respecting climate would be making for spring, and we must count on two months more of solid discomfort. Ah, well, this year I do not mean to face it. I have had the yacht put in commission, and she sails next week for the Mediterranean, where I shall overtake her by one of the German boats, and do a little cruising along the African coast. Come with me, Stephen," she said, coaxingly. "Let this silly school-teaching go. You are a rich man – why under the sun do you want to work? If you are holding on to Harmouth on account of that pretty Mrs. Ponsonby, it can't do you much good when she is in New York. Besides," she added, quite as an afterthought, "it is bad morality, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

He was about to turn and rend her for what he considered an unpardonable meddling with his affairs, when he saw her eyes fixed on him with tenderest affection and his anger melted.

"Dear Stevie," she said, "be good-natured and bear an old woman company – you know you are as dear as my own sons."

She used to call him Stevie when he was a lonely little boy, and she made her house his home; when all he knew of family life was supplied by that good-natured, worldly household – the name touched a chord of memory that softened his irritation.

"I wish I could, Aunt Adelaide," he answered, "but I have managed to tie myself to my work in a way you cannot understand. You will have to take Bob as a companion."

Bob was her only unmarried child, wedded only to his clubs and amateur soldiering, and even less available than Stephen for a cruise.

"Bob!" she said, contemptuously. "He never voluntarily went to a foreign country except Cuba, and I don't believe he knows on which side of the Mediterranean Africa lies! I shall find some one who will be glad to go with me – perhaps your charming friend, Mrs. Ponsonby, might go. She looks as if she would be a pleasant traveling companion."

French's heart tightened as he thought of the horror that stood between Deena and pleasure, and was even debating in his mind whether it would not be better to tell his aunt the truth, when conversation was rendered impossible for the moment by the puffing and tooting of a great automobile advancing toward them down the west drive of the park – its wheels slipping in a crazy manner, that made the coachman of Mrs. Star's sleigh give it a wide berth. Just as it got abreast of them, it became perfectly unmanageable – slewed to the left, made a semicircle which turned it round, and, catching the back of the sleigh on its low front, turned the light vehicle over as easily as if it had been made of pasteboard.

Mrs. Star allowed herself a shrill shriek as the sleigh went over and then lay quite still in a heap by the side of the road, with Stephen across her feet. The automobile seemed to have recovered its serenity, for it now stood still like any well-behaved machine, quiet save for its noisy breathing, while the sleigh was being bumped, on its side, far up the road, at the heels of the outraged horses.

French scrambled to his feet and endeavored to help his aunt, who had raised herself to a sitting posture and was looking white and disheveled, while she cast furious glances at the motor and its owner. She took her nephew's hands and attempted to rise, but fell back, declaring she had broken her knee, as it hurt her excruciatingly when she tried to move it.

The owner of the auto now came forward in great contrition to offer help and apologies. He was a physician, he explained, hastening to a case of great urgency, and he had taken his automobile as the quickest means of covering the distance, though he had known it at times to behave badly on slippery and snowy roads.

The admission was a mistake – it put him in the wrong, and Mrs. Star, who distrusted all modern doctors, felt a consuming rage against this one in particular.

"You must have a strange estimate of a physician's duty if you feel justified in risking many lives to save one!" she said, haughtily. "Not that you are much worse than the fire engines and ambulances. We ought to add a petition to the litany for safety against our safeguards, for they kill more than they rescue."

The gentleman bore her sarcasms with becoming humility, and begged to be allowed to take her home, promising that the machine should execute no more "*Voyages en zigzag*," and she, ashamed of her temper, forced herself to decline, with some graciousness, though she made it very plain that no person on earth could tempt her to get into the automobile.

"At least let him tell you whether your knee is seriously hurt," Stephen whispered, loath to see the medical help departing.

"I'll do nothing of the sort," retorted Mrs. Star. "A nice spectacle you would make of me by the roadside! Besides, I am not going to allow my knee to buy him a new automobile. Thank Heaven, I know how to guard my pocket against the medical profession – I'll not stir from this spot till he takes himself off."

"Don't be so foolish!" urged French. "If your knee is injured it is a very serious thing."

"Well, it isn't seriously injured," she said, perversely. "I have changed my mind, and I mean to have it tied up with witch hazel."

Fortunately her equipage was now seen approaching in the charge of two park policemen, who had stopped the horses about a mile further on, righted the sleigh and now brought it back not much the worse for the misadventure. The coachman and groom were collected from the bushes, and, as they were quite uninjured, Stephen lifted his aunt into the back seat and they turned their faces homeward.

However much the rest of the party may have been inconvenienced, French had certainly attained the object of his solicitude – namely, to have his thoughts distracted from Simeon Ponsonby.

CHAPTER VIII

The second cable from Lopez arrived soon after dinner; it brought small comfort. Its nineteen words told the story but too conclusively.

> Strayed from party while hunting. Weather turned foggy. Search parties persevered for two weeks. Hope abandoned. Expedition homeward bound.

There was no further excuse for concealment; indeed, it was French's plain duty to tell Deena what might be told by the newspapers if he delayed.

It was just nine o'clock, and he walked rapidly to the Minthrops' and rang the bell. Outside an electric cab was waiting, its great lamps casting pathways of light across street and sidewalk. The motorman was inside; an indication that long waiting had driven him to shelter, though the circumstance had no significance to Stephen.

The bell was answered by the butler, who looked portentous and stood resolutely in the doorway.

"Not at 'ome, sir," he said, in response to Stephen's request to see Mrs. Ponsonby.

"Then I must see Mr. Minthrop," French insisted.

The man hesitated and then relaxed his wooden expression.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. French. I did not recognize you, sir. The truth is, we're a bit h'upset h'inside. Mrs. Minthrop is tuk ill, sir – very sudden – and we're expecting the good word every minute. I shall tell Mr. Minthrop you called."

Stephen nodded and turned away – the fates had ordained that he was to carry his secret till the morning. It had been a harassing burden in the daylight hours, but during the night it became maddening; it seemed beyond his resolution to tell Deena that the pleasure trip he had set on foot for her husband's advantage had ended in death.

As early as he thought permissible, the next morning, he presented himself at Ben's door – this time gaining, a cheerful admission – and was shown to the library on the second floor. There he found the young father, radiantly happy, and so self-centered that he had entirely forgotten the misfortune overhanging his sister-in-law.

"Come and see my son," he said, proudly, and in spite of an expression of reluctance on the part of French to intrude into the upper regions of the house, he pushed him ahead of him up the next flight of stairs and knocked softly at the door of a back bedroom.

Deena's voice bade them enter, and French was ushered into a large room fitted out as a nursery, with the newest appliances for baby comfort. There was a bassinette so be-muslined and be-ribboned and be-laced that it looked like a ball dress standing by itself in the middle of the floor; and a bathtub that looked like a hammock; and a weighing machine; and a chart for recording the daily weight; and a large table with a glass top; and a basket containing all the articles for the Lilliputian toilet; while near the fender some doll-like clothes were airing.

Deena was sitting in a low rocking-chair near the fire with her nephew in her arms. She welcomed her visitors with a smile, and turned down a corner of the baby's blanket to display his puckered ugliness to Stephen. She was looking happy, tender, proud, maternally beautiful.

"Hasn't he a beautifully shaped head?" she demanded, passing her hand tenderly over the furry down that served him for hair. "And look at his ears and his hands – was there ever anything so exquisite?"

It was French's first introduction to a young human, and he found it slightly repulsive, but Deena, in her Madonna-like sweetness, made his heart swell.

"He is part of an exquisite picture," he answered.

Ben, who had been for a moment with Polly, now came into the room with his usual noisy bustle, and Deena got up and, surrendering the baby to the nurse, led the way downstairs.

At the library door Stephen paused to whisper to Ben:

"Stay with me while I tell her," in tones of abject fright; but Ben shook his head.

"Look here, old man," he said, in mild remonstrance, "if you had had a baby last night, you wouldn't be casting about for fresh trouble to-day – now, would you?"

Stephen gave him an indignant glance, and, following Deena, he shut the library door. He did it in so pronounced a way that she looked up surprised, and was even more at a loss to account for the gravity of his expression; she wondered whether he had thought her rude yesterday when she had disappeared from the table at lunch and had never returned, but it was not like French to be touchy.

"I left you very unceremoniously yesterday," she began, "but the nurse appeared for a moment at the door, and I did not want to alarm Ben. You were not offended?"

"Believe me, no," French answered, with a sort of shudder; "for the first time in my life I was glad to see you go – your presence was torture to me – I was concealing something from you, Mrs. Ponsonby, and it has got to get itself told."

While he spoke her expression changed rapidly from amazement to alarm, and she got up and came close to him – waiting – but without a word.

"Simeon is lost," he said, hoarsely, hurling the bald fact at her before his courage failed. "I tried to tell you yesterday," he went on, drawing the cables from his pocket, "but I couldn't; it all seemed so vague at first, and I ventured to wait until I got more news."

She was standing before him with her hands clasped and her face deadly pale, but with a calm that frightened him.

"Do you mean lost at sea?" she asked, in a steady voice – toneless but perfectly clear.

He shook his head.

"No – on land. He was hunting – it must have been the very hunt we were talking about – and wandered from his party. A fog came on, and they were unable to find him. Lopez telegraphs that they sent out search parties for a fortnight, but could find no trace."

He longed for a word from her, but none came.

"At last they abandoned hope," he concluded. "The expedition is now on its way home."

She had turned her back upon him, and he waited in misery to hear her sob, to see her shoulders shake with her weeping; but, instead, the whole figure seemed to stiffen, and, wheeling round, she faced him with blazing eyes.

"The cowards!" she cried. "To abandon a man to starvation! What are they made of to do such a barbarous thing!"

"We must not judge them unheard," Stephen ventured. "Their search may have been exhaustive – they may have risked their own lives gladly – and you know," he added, gently, "that beyond a certain time it would have been useless from the standpoint of saving life."

"It was inhuman to sail away and leave him," she went on, beating her hands together in a sort of rage. "How can you defend them! You, who sent him off on this horrible journey – how can you sleep in your bed when you know Simeon in perishing by inches! I should think you would be on your way now – this moment – to search for him! Oh, do something – don't just accept it in this awful way. Haven't you any pity?" Unconsciously she laid her hand on his shoulder, as if she would push him from the room.

Stephen bore her reproaches with a meekness that exasperated her.

"Are there no cables to Magellan?" she asked. "There must be somebody there who for money would do your bidding. Don't waste time," she answered, stamping her foot.

Stephen kept his temper. Perhaps he was shrewd enough to see that it was pity rather than love that gave the fierceness to her mood. It was the frenzy of a tender-hearted woman at hearing of an act of cruelty rather than the agony of one who suffers a personal bereavement.

"Deena," he said, not even knowing he had used her name, "do you really want me to go on this hopeless errand? Think of its utter uselessness – the time that has elapsed, the impossibility of

penetrating into such a country in the advancing winter. It is the first of February, and I could not get there before March; it would be already their autumn. By this time he has either reached help or he is beyond it."

At the beginning of his speech Deena's pale face flushed, but as he went on setting forth the obstacles to his going she seemed to harden in her scorn.

"Oh, yes," she sneered. "Let him die! It is cold in Patagonia for a gently nurtured person like Mr. French. Simeon is poor in friends – he only had one besides his wife, and that one is a fair-weather friend. But I'll go – I am not afraid of privation. I'll entreat the Argentine Government for help – I'll make friends with the Indians – I'll – "

"Hush," he said, "you have said enough – I will go."

Having gained her point, she burst into tears.

"I am cruel," she said, "selfishly cruel to you, who have been so good to me – but whom can I turn to except to you? How can we abandon Simeon without raising a finger to save him? Say you forgive me."

He held out his hand in mute acquiescence. Her sneers had stung him to the quick, but her appeal to his manhood for help in her distress moved him deeply.

"Perhaps," she went on, half to herself, "perhaps if I had been a better wife – if I had loved him more, I could bear it better – but it is so pitiful. He has always been alone in life, and now he is dying alone."

Stephen, who was pacing the floor, tried not to listen. He knew she was not thinking of him when she was confessing her shortcomings to her own conscience, but the admission that she felt herself lacking in love to Simeon filled him with a deep joy. He did not dare to linger.

"I am going," he said, gently. "Good-by, Deena. Will you pray God to send you back the man who loves you?"

She stood staring at him dumb with misery, but as the door shut between them a cry of anguish burst from her very soul.

"Come back!" she cried. "Oh, Stephen, come back! I can't bear it! I can't let you go! Don't you know I love you? – and I have sent you off to die!"

She knew that he had gone – that her appeal was to the empty air, and she flung herself on the sofa in a frenzy of sobs. But the cry reached Stephen in the hall, where he stood battling with himself against his yearning for one more look, one more word to carry with him, and at the sound his resolution melted like wax in the flame of his passion. With a bound he was back in the room, on his knees beside her, soothing her with tenderest endearments – pouring out the fullness of his love.

"Must I go, Deena?" he pleaded. "Must I leave you when I know you love me? And for what? – a search for the dead!"

At his words her conscience woke with a stab of shame.

"Yes, go!" she said. "Go quickly. A moment ago I sent you in the name of compassion; now I send you in expiation for this one intolerable glimpse of Heaven."

Stephen, eager to do her bidding, went straight to Mrs. Star's house to take leave of the only person to whom he owed the obligations of family affection, and found that redoubtable lady on a sofa in her dressing room. In answer to his expressions of regret at this intimation of invalidism, she gave an angry groan.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "Our medical friend has succeeded in providing another doctor with as pretty a case of water-on-the-knee – to say nothing of other complications – as he could desire. My only comfort is, he didn't get the charge himself."

"But you have seen a specialist, surely?" exclaimed French, who feared her hatred of physicians might have prevented her calling in proper aid.

"Don't distress yourself," she answered. "McTorture has me fast in his clutches; and for how long do you suppose? Two months! He will promise nothing short of two months, and even then

objects to my going abroad, and the yacht ready to start this very week! I am waiting for Bob to come into lunch, to get him to send for the sailing master and break the news to him. He'll be a disappointed man!"

"I will take the yacht off your hands," said Stephen, casually.

"You!" she exclaimed. "Are you running away *from* or *with* anybody, that you suddenly annex an ocean steamer? You were prosing only yesterday afternoon about work and duty, as if nothing could separate you from Harmouth. Is the attraction going to bolt with you, Stevie?"

Stephen could have killed her as she lay there, allowing her tongue free play with his most intimate concerns, but the respect due to an old woman, to say nothing of an aunt, restrained his anger, and he answered, coldly:

"If you want to get rid of the yacht for the rest of the year, say so. My friend, Simeon Ponsonby, is lost in the wilderness of Patagonia, and I am organizing a party to search for him. I shall have to resign my work at Harmouth, but I feel responsible for poor Ponsonby's fate; I sent him on the expedition."

"Ah! did you?" she said, laughing wickedly. "Poor Uriah has been disposed of, and now the lady sends you to look for his bones. Don't look too hard, Stevie, you might find he wasn't lost, after all!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.