GEORGE GISSING

THE CROWN OF LIFE

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Gissing G.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Amid the throng of suburban arrivals volleyed forth from Waterloo Station on a May morning in the year '86, moved a slim, dark, absent-looking young man of one-and-twenty, whose name was Piers Otway. In regard to costume—blameless silk hat, and dark morning coat with lighter trousers—the City would not have disowned him, but he had not the City countenance. The rush for omnibus seats left him unconcerned; clear of the railway station, he walked at a moderate pace, his eyes mostly on the ground; he crossed the foot-bridge to Charing Cross, and steadily made his way into the Haymarket, where his progress was arrested by a picture shop.

A window hung with engravings, mostly after pictures of the day; some of them very large, and attractive to a passing glance. One or two admirable landscapes offered solace to the street-wearied imagination, but upon these Piers Otway did not fix his eye; it was drawn irresistibly to the faces and forms of beautiful women set forth with varied allurement. Some great lady of the passing time lounged in exquisite array amid luxurious furniture lightly suggested; the faint smile of her flattered loveliness hovered about the gazer; the subtle perfume of her presence touched his nerves; the greys of her complexion transmuted themselves through the current of his blood into life's carnation; whilst he dreamed upon her lips, his breath was caught, as though of a sudden she had smiled for him, and for him alone. Near to her was a maiden of Hellas, resting upon a marble seat, her eyes bent towards some AEgean isle; the translucent robe clung about her perfect body; her breast was warm against the white stone; the mazes of her woven hair shone with unguent. The gazer lost himself in memories of epic and idyll, warming through worship to desire. Then his look strayed to the next engraving; a peasant girl, consummate in grace and strength, supreme in chaste pride, cheek and neck soft-glowing from the sunny field, eyes revealing the heart at one with nature. Others there were, women of many worlds, only less beautiful; but by these three the young man was held bound. He could not satisfy himself with looking and musing; he could not pluck himself away. An old experience; he always lingered by the print shops of the Haymarket, and always went on with troubled blood, with mind rapt above familiar circumstance, dreaming passionately, making wild forecast of his fate.

At this hour of the morning not many passers had leisure to stand and gaze; one, however, came to a pause beside Piers Otway, and viewed the engravings. He was a man considerably older; not so well dressed, but still, on the strength of externals, entitled to the style of gentleman; his brown, hard felt hat was entirely respectable, as were his tan gloves and his boots, but the cut-away coat began to hint at release from service, and the trousers owed a superficial smartness merely to being tightly strapped. This man had a not quite agreeable face; inasmuch as it was smoothly shaven, and exhibited a peculiar mobility, it might have denoted him an actor; but the actor is wont to twinkle a good-natured mood which did not appear upon this visage. The contour was good, and spoke intelligence; the eyes must once have been charming. It was a face which had lost by the advance of years; which had hardened where it was soft, and seemed likely to grow harder yet; for about the lips, as he stood examining these pictures, came a suggestion of the vice in blood which tends to cruelty. The nostrils began to expand and to tremble a little; the eyes seemed to project themselves; the long throat grew longer. Presently, he turned a glance upon the young man standing near to him, and in that moment his expression entirely altered.

"Why," he exclaimed, "Piers!"

The other gave a start of astonishment, and at once smiled recognition.

"Daniel! I hadn't looked—I had no idea–" They shook hands, with graceful cordiality on the elder man's part, with a slightly embarrassed goodwill on that of the younger. Daniel Otway, whose age was about eight-and-thirty, stood in the relation of half-brotherhood to Piers, a relation suggested by no single trait of their visages. Piers had a dark complexion, a face of the square, emphatic type, and an eye of shy vivacity; Daniel, with the long, smooth curves of his countenance and his chestnut hair was, in the common sense, better looking, and managed his expression with a skill which concealed the characteristics visible a few moments ago; he bore himself like a suave man of the world, whereas his brother still betrayed something of the boy in tone and gesture, something, too, of the student accustomed to seclusion. Daniel's accent had nothing at all in keeping with a shabby coat; that of the younger man was less markedly refined, with much more of individuality.

"You live in London?" inquired Daniel, reading the other's look as if affectionately.

"No. Out at Ewell—in Surrey."

"Oh yes, I know Ewell. Reading?"

"Yes for the Civil Service. I've come up to lunch with a man who knows father—Mr. Jacks."

"John Jacks, the M.P.?"

Piers nodded nervously, and the other regarded him with a smile of new interest.

"But you're very early. Any other engagements?"

"None," said Piers. It being so fine a morning, he had proposed a long ramble about London streets before making for his destination in the West End.

"Then you must come to my club," returned Daniel. "I shall be glad of a talk with you, very glad, my dear boy. Why, it must be four years since we saw each other. And, by the bye, you are just of age, I think?"

"Three days ago."

"To be sure. Heard anything from father?—No?—You're looking very well, Piers—take my arm. I understood you were going into business. Altered your mind? And how is the dear old man?"

They walked for a quarter of an hour, turning at last into a quiet, genteel byway westward of Regent Street, and so into a club house of respectable appearance. Daniel wrote his brother's name, and led up to the smoking-room, which they found unoccupied.

"You smoke?—I am very glad to hear it. I began far too young, and have suffered. It's too early to drink—and perhaps you don't do that either?—Really? Vegetarian also, perhaps?—Why, you are the model son of your father. And the regime seems to suit you. *Per Bacco*! couldn't follow it myself: but I, like our fat friend, am little better than one of the wicked. So you are one-and-twenty. You have entered upon your inheritance, I presume?"

Piers answered with a look of puzzled inquiry.

"Haven't you heard about it? The little capital due to you."

"Not a word!"

"That's odd. *Was soil es bedeuten*?—By the bye, I suppose you speak German well?"

"Tolerably."

"And French?"

"Moderately."

"*Benissimo*!" Daniel had just lit a cigar; he lounged gracefully, observing his brother with an eye of veiled keenness. "Well, I think there is no harm in telling you that you are entitled to something—your mother's money, you know."

"I had no idea of it," replied Piers, whom the news had in some degree excited.

"Apropos, why don't you live with father? Couldn't you read as well down there?"

"Not quite, I think, and—the truth is, the stepmother doesn't much like me. She's rather difficult to get on with you know."

"I imagined it. So you're just in lodgings?"

"I am with some people called Hannaford. I got to know them at Geneva—they're not very well off; I have a room and they board me."

"I must look you up there—Piers, my dear boy, I suppose you know your mother's history?"

It was asked with an affected carelessness, with a look suggestive of delicacy in approaching the subject. More and more perturbed, Piers abruptly declared his ignorance; he sat in an awkward attitude, bending forward; his brows were knit, his dark eyes had a solemn intensity, and his square jaw asserted itself more than usual.

"Well, between brothers, I don't see why you shouldn't. In fact, I am a good deal surprised that the worthy old man has held his peace about that legacy, and I don't think I shall scruple to tell you all I know. You are aware, at all events, that our interesting parent has been a little unfortunate in his matrimonial adventures. His first wife—not to pick one's phrase—quarrelled furiously with him. His second, you inform me, is somewhat difficult to live with."

"His *third*," interrupted Piers.

"No, my dear boy," said the other gravely, sympathetically. "That intermediate connection was not legal."

"Not–? My mother was not–?"

"Don't worry about it," proceeded Daniel in a kind tone. "These are the merest prejudices, you know. She could not become Mrs. Otway, being already Mrs. Somebody-else. Her death, I fear, was a great misfortune to our parent. I have gathered that they suited each other—fate, you know, plays these little tricks. Your mother, I am sure, was a most charming and admirable woman—I remember her portrait. *A l'heure qu'il est*, no doubt, it has to be kept out of sight. She had, I am given to understand, a trilling capital of her own, and this was to become yours."

Piers stared at vacancy. When he recovered himself he said with decision:

"Of course I shall hear about it. There's no hurry. Father knows I don't want it just now. Why, of course he will tell me. The exam. comes off in autumn, and no doubt he keeps the news back as a sort of reward when I get my place. I think that would be just like him, you know."

"Or as a solatium, if you fail," remarked the other genially.

"Fail? Oh, I'm not going to fail," cried Piers in a voice of half-resentful confidence.

"Bravo!" laughed the other; "I like that spirit. So you're going to lunch with John Jacks. I don't exactly know him, but I know friends of his very well. Known him long?"

Piers explained that as yet he had no personal acquaintance with Mr. Jacks; that he had, to his surprise, received a written invitation a few days ago.

"It may be useful," Daniel remarked reflectively. "But if you'll permit the liberty, Piers, I am sorry you didn't pay a little more attention to costume. It should have been a frock coat—really it should."

"I haven't such a thing," exclaimed the younger brother, with some annoyance and confusion. "And what can it matter? You know very well how father would go."

"Yes, yes; but Jerome Otway the democratic prophet and young Mr. Piers Otway his promising son, are very different persons. Never mind, but take care to get a frock coat; you'll find it indispensable if you are going into that world. Where does Jacks live?"

"Queen's Gate."

Daniel Otway meditated, half closing his eyes as he seemed to watch the smoke from his cigar. Dropping them upon his brother, he found that the young man wore a look of troubled thoughtfulness.

"Daniel," began Piers suddenly, "are you quite sure about all you have told me?"

"Quite. I am astonished it's news to you."

Piers was no longer able to converse, and very soon he found it difficult to sit still. Observant of his face and movements, the elder brother proposed that they should resume their walk together, and forth they went. But both were now taciturn, and they did not walk far in company.

"I shall look you up at Ewell," said Daniel, taking leave. "Address me at that club; I have no permanent quarters just now. We must see more of each other."

And Piers went his way with shadowed countenance.

CHAPTER II

Straying about Kensington Gardens in the pleasant sunshine, his mind occupied with Daniel's information, Piers Otway lost count of time, and at last had to hurry to keep his engagement. As he entered the house in Queen's Gate, a mirrored image of himself made him uneasy about his costume. But for Daniel, such a point would never have troubled him. It was with an unfamiliar sense of Irritation and misgiving that he moved into the drawing-room.

A man of sixty or so, well preserved, with a warm complexion, broad homely countenance and genial smile, stepped forward to receive him. Mr. Jacks was member for the Penistone Division of the West Riding; new to Parliament, having entered with the triumphant Liberals in the January of this year 1886. His friends believed, and it seemed credible, that he had sought election to please the lady whom, as a widower of twenty years' endurance, he had wedded only a short time before; politics interested him but moderately, and the greater part of his life had been devoted to the manufacturing business which brought him wealth and local influence. Not many people remembered that in the days of his youth John Jacks had been something of a Revolutionist, that he had supported the People's Charter; that he had written, nay had published, verses of democratic tenor, earning thereby dark reputation in the respectable society of his native town. The turning-point was his early marriage. For a while he still wrote verses—of another kind, but he ceased to talk about liberty, ceased to attend public meetings, and led an entirely private life until, years later, his name became reputably connected with municipal affairs. Observing Mr. Jacks' face, one saw the possibility of that early enthusiasm; he had fine eyes full of subdued tenderness, and something youthful, impulsive, in his expression when he uttered a thought. Good-humoured, often merry, abounding in kindness and generosity, he passed for a man as happy as he was prosperous; yet those who talked intimately with him obtained now and then a glimpse of something not quite in harmony with these characteristics, a touch of what would be called fancifulness, of uncertain spirits. Men of his world knew that he was not particularly shrewd in commerce; the great business to which his name was attached had been established by his father, and was kept flourishing mainly by the energy of his younger brother. As an occasional lecturer before his townsfolk, he gave evidence of wide reading and literary aptitudes. Of three children of his first marriage, two had died; his profound grief at their loss, and the inclination for domestic life which always appeared in the man, made it matter for surprise that he had waited so long before taking another wife. It would not have occurred to most of those who knew him that his extreme devotion to women made him shy, diffident, all but timorous in their presence. But Piers Otway, for all his mental disturbance at this moment, remarked the singular deference, the tone and look of admiring gentleness, with which Mr. Jacks turned to his wife as he presented their guest.

Mrs. Jacks was well fitted to inspire homage. Her age appeared to be less than five-and-twenty; she was of that tall and gracefully commanding height which became the English ideal in the last quarter of the century—her portrait appears on every page illustrated by Du Manner. She had a brilliant complexion, a perfect profile; her smile, though perhaps a little mechanical, was the last expression of immutable sweetness, of impeccable self-control; her voice never slipped from the just note of unexaggerated suavity. Consummate as an ornament of the drawing-room, she would be no less admirably at ease on the tennis lawn, in the boat, on horseback, or walking by the seashore. Beyond criticism her breeding; excellent her education. There appeared, too, in her ordinary speech, her common look, a real amiability of disposition; one could not imagine her behaving harshly or with conscious injustice. Her manners—within the recognised limits—were frank, spontaneous; she had for the most part a liberal tone in conversation, and was evidently quite incapable of bitter feeling on any everyday subject. Piers Otway bent before her with unfeigned reverence; she dazzled him, she delighted and confused his senses. As often as he dared look at her, his eye discovered some new

elegance in her attitude, some marvel of delicate beauty in the details of her person. A spectator might have observed that this worship was manifest to Mr. Jacks, and that it by no means displeased him.

"You are very like your father, Mr. Otway," was the host's first remark after a moment of ceremony. "Very like what he was forty years ago." He laughed, not quite naturally, glancing at his wife. "At that time he and I were much together. But he went to London; I stayed in the North; and so we lost sight of each other for many a long year. Somewhere about 1870 we met by chance, on a Channel steamer; yes, it was just before the war; I remember your father prophesied it, and foretold its course very accurately. Then we didn't see each other again until a month ago—I had run down into Yorkshire for a couple of days and stood waiting for a train at Northallerton. Someone came towards me, and looked me in the face, then held out his hand without speaking; and it was my old friend. He has become a man of few words."

"Yes, he talks very little," said Piers. "I've known him silent for two or three days together."

"And what does he do with himself there among the moors? You don't know Hawes," he remarked to the graciously attentive Mrs. Jacks. "A little stony town at the wild end of Wensleydale. Delightful for a few months, but very grim all the rest of the year. Has he any society there?"

"None outside his home, I think. He sits by the fire and reads Dante."

"Dante?"

"Yes, Dante; he seems to care for hardly anything else. It has been so for two or three years. Editions of Dante and books about Dante crowd his room—they are constantly coming. I asked him once if he was going to write on the subject, but he shook his head."

"It must be a very engrossing study," remarked Mrs. Jacks, with her most intelligent air. "Dante opens such a world."

"Strange!" murmured her husband, with his kindly smile. "The last thing I should have imagined."

They were summoned to luncheon. As they entered the dining-room, there appeared a young man whom Mr. Jacks greeted warmly.

"Hullo, Arnold! I am so glad you lunch here to-day. Here is the son of my old friend Jerome Otway."

Arnold Jacks pressed the visitor's hand and spoke a few courteous words in a remarkably pleasant voice. In physique he was quite unlike his father; tall, well but slenderly built, with a small finely-shaped head, large grey-blue eyes and brown hair. The delicacy of his complexion and the lines of his figure did not suggest strength, yet he walked with a very firm step, and his whole bearing betokened habits of healthy activity. In early years he had seemed to inherit a very feeble constitution; the death of his brother and sister, followed by that of their mother at an untimely age, left little hope that he would reach manhood; now, in his thirtieth year, he was rarely troubled on the score of health, and few men relieved from the necessity of earning money found fuller occupation for their time. Some portion of each day he spent at the offices of a certain Company, which held rule in a British colony of considerable importance. His interest in this colony had originated at the time when he was gaining vigour and enlarging his experience in world-wide travel; he enjoyed the sense of power, and his voice did not lack weight at the Board of the Company in question. He had all manner of talents and pursuits. Knowledge—the only kind of knowledge he cared for, that of practical things, things alive in the world of to-day—seemed to come to him without any effort on his part. A new invention concealed no mysteries from him; he looked into it; understood, calculated its scope. A strange piece of news from any part of the world found him unsurprised, explanatory. He liked mathematics, and was wont to say jocosely that an abstract computation had a fine moral affect, favouring unselfishness. Music was one of his foibles; he learnt an instrument with wonderful facility, and, up to a certain point, played well. For poetry, though as a rule he disguised the fact, he had a strong distaste; once, when aged about twenty, he startled his father by observing that "In Memoriam" seemed to him a shocking instance of wasted energy; he would undertake to compress the whole significance of each

section, with its laborious rhymings, into two or three lines of good clear prose. Naturally the young man had undergone no sentimental troubles; he had not yet talked of marrying, and cared only for the society of mature women who took common-sense views of life. His religion was the British Empire; his saints, the men who had made it; his prophets, the politicians and publicists who held most firmly the Imperial tone.

Where Arnold Jacks was in company, there could be no dullness. Alone with his host and hostess, Otway would have found the occasion rather solemn, and have wished it over, but Arnold's melodious voice, his sprightly discussion and anecdotage, his frequent laughter, charmed the guest into self-oblivion.

"You are no doubt a Home Ruler, Mr. Otway," observed Arnold, soon after they were seated.

"Yes, I am," answered Piers cheerily. "You too, I hope?"

"Why, yes. I would grant Home Rule of the completest description, and I would let it run its natural course for—shall we say five years? When the state of Ireland had become intolerable to herself and dangerous to this adjacent island, I would send over dragoons. And," he added quietly, crumbling his bread, "the question would not rise again."

"Arnold," remarked Mr. Jacks, with good humour, "you are quite incapable of understanding this question. We shall see. Mr. Gladstone's Bill–"

"Mr. Gladstone's *little* Bill—do say his *little* Bill."

"Arnold, you are too absurd!" exclaimed the hostess mirthfully.

"What does your father think?" Mr. Jacks inquired of their guest. "Has he broken silence on the subject?"

"I think not. He never says a word about politics."

"The little Bill hasn't a chance," cried Arnold. "Your majority is melting away. You, of course, will stand by the old man, but that is chivalry, not politics. You don't know what a picturesque figure you make, sir; you help me to realise Horatius Codes, and that kind of thing."

John Jacks laughed heartily at his own expense, but his wife seemed to think the jest unmannerly. Home Rule did not in the least commend itself to her sedate, practical mind, but she would never have committed such an error in taste as to proclaim divergence from her husband's views.

"It is a most difficult and complicated question," she said, addressing herself to Otway. "The character of the people makes it so; the Irish are so sentimental."

Upon the young man's ear this utterance fell strangely; it gave him a little shock, and he could only murmur some commonplace of assent. With men, Piers had plenty of moral courage, but women daunted him.

"I heard a capital idea last night," resumed Arnold Jacks, "from a man I was dining with—interesting fellow called Hannaford. He suggested that Ireland should be made into a military and naval depot—used solely for that purpose. The details of his scheme were really very ingenious. He didn't propose to exterminate the natives–"

John Jacks interrupted with hilarity, which his son affected to resent: the look exchanged by the two making pleasant proof of how little their natural affection was disturbed by political and other differences. At the name of Hannaford, Otway had looked keenly towards the speaker.

"Is that Lee Hannaford?" he asked. "Oh, I know him. In fact, I'm living in his house just now."

Arnold was interested. He had only the slightest acquaintance with Hannaford, and would like to hear more of him.

"Not long ago," Piers responded, "he was a teacher of chemistry at Geneva—I got to know him there. He seems to speak half a dozen languages in perfection; I believe he was born in Switzerland. His house down in Surrey is a museum of modern weapons—a regular armoury. He has invented some new gun."

"So I gathered. And a new explosive, I'm told."

"I hope he doesn't store it in his house?" said Mr. Jacks, looking with concern at Piers.

"I've had a moment's uneasiness about that, now and then," Otway replied, laughing, "especially after hearing him talk."

"A tremendous fellow!" Arnold exclaimed admiringly. "He showed me, by sketch diagrams, how many men he could kill within a given space."

"If this gentleman were not your friend, Mr. Otway," began the host, "I should say–"

"Oh, pray say whatever you like! He isn't my friend at all, and I detest his inventions."

"Shocking!" fell sweetly from the lady at the head of the table.

"As usual, I must beg leave to differ," put in Arnold. "What would become of us if we left all that kind of thing to the other countries? Hannaford is a patriot. He struck me as quite disinterested; personal gain is nothing to him. He loves his country, and is using his genius in her service."

John Jacks nodded.

"Well, yes, yes. But I wish your father were here, Mr. Otway, to give his estimate of such genius; at all events if he thinks as he did years ago. Get him on that topic, and he was one of the most eloquent men living. I am convinced that he only wanted a little more self-confidence to become a real power in public life—a genuine orator, such, perhaps, as England has never had."

"Nor ever will have," Arnold interrupted. "We act instead of talking."

"My dear boy," said his father weightily, "we talk very much, and very badly; in pulpit, and Parliament, and press, We want the man who has something new to say, and knows how to say it. For my own part, I don't think, when he comes, that he will glorify explosives. I want to hear someone talk about Peace—and *not* from the commercial point of view. The slaughterers shan't have it all their own way, Arnold; civilisation will be too strong for them, and if Old England doesn't lead in that direction, it will be her shame to the end of history."

Arnold smiled, but kept silence. Mrs. Jacks looked and murmured her approval.

"I wish Hannaford could hear you," said Piers Otway.

When they rose from the table, John Jacks invited the young man to come with him into his study for a little private talk.

"I haven't many books here," he said, noticing Otway's glance at the shelves. "My library is down in Yorkshire, at the old home; where I shall be very glad indeed to see you, whenever you come north in vacation-time. Well now, let us make friends; tell me something about yourself. You are reading for the Civil Service, I understand?"

Piers liked Mr. Jacks, and was soon chatting freely. He told how his education had begun at a private school in London, how he had then gone to school at Geneva, and, when seventeen years old, had entered an office of London merchants, dealing with Russia.

"It wasn't my own choice. My father talked to me, and seemed so anxious for me to go into business that I made no objection. I didn't understand him then, but I think I do now. You know"—he added in a lower tone—"that I have two elder brothers?"

"Yes, I know. And a word that fell from your father at Northallerton the other day—I think I understand."

"Both went in for professions," Otway pursued, "and I suppose he wasn't very well satisfied with the results. However, after I had been two years in the office, I felt I couldn't stand it, and I began privately to read law. Then one day I wrote to my father, and asked whether he would allow me to be articled to a solicitor. He replied that he would, if, at the age of twenty, I had gone steadily on with the distasteful office work, and had continued to read law in my leisure. Well, I accepted this, of course, and in a year's time found how right he had been; already I had got sick of the law books, and didn't care for the idea of being articled. I told father that, and he asked me to wait six months more, and then to let him know my mind again. I hadn't got to like business any better, and one day it seemed to me that I would try for a place in a Government office. When the time came, I suggested

this, and my father ultimately agreed. I lived with him at Hawes for a month or two, then came into Surrey, to work on for the examination. We shall see what I get."

The young man spoke with a curious blending of modesty and self-confidence, of sobriety beyond his years and the glow of a fervid temperament. He seemed to hold himself consciously in restraint, but, as if to compensate for subdued language, he used more gesticulation than is common with Englishmen. Mr. Jacks watched him very closely, and, when he ceased, reflected for a moment.

"True; we shall see. You are working steadily?"

"About fourteen hours a day."

"Too much! too much!—All at the Civil Service subjects?"

"No; I manage a few other things. For instance, I'm trying to learn Russian. Father says he made the attempt long ago, but was beaten. I don't think I shall give in."

"Your father knew Herzen and Bakounine, in the old days. Well, don't overdo it; don't neglect the body. We must have another talk before long."

Again Mr. Jacks looked thoughtfully at the keen young face, and his countenance betrayed a troublous mood.

"How you remind me of my old friend, forty years ago—forty years ago!"

CHAPTER III

A little apart from the village of Ewell, within sight of the noble trees and broad herbage of Nonsuch Park, and looking southward to the tilth and pasture of the Downs, stood the house occupied by Mr. Lee Hannaford. It was just too large to be called a cottage; not quite old enough to be picturesque; a pleasant enough dwelling, amid its green garden plot, sheltered on the north side by a dark hedge of yew, and shut from the quiet road by privet topped with lilac and laburnum. This day of early summer, fresh after rains, with a clear sky and the sun wide-gleaming over young leaf and bright blossom, with Nature's perfume wafted along every alley, about every field and lane, showed the spot at its best. But it was with no eye to natural beauty that Mr. Hannaford had chosen this abode; such considerations left him untouched. He wanted a cheap house not far from London, where his wife's uncertain health might receive benefit, and where the simplicity of the surroundings would offer no temptations to casual expense. For his own part, he was a good deal from home, coming and going as it suited him; a very small income from capital, and occasional earnings by contribution to scientific journalism, left slender resources to Mrs. Hannaford and her daughter after the husband's needs were supplied. Thus it came about that they gladly ceded a spare room to Piers Otway, who, having boarded with them during his student time at Geneva, had at long intervals kept up a correspondence with Mrs. Hannaford, a lady he admired.

The rooms were indifferently furnished; in part, owing to poverty, and partly because neither of the ladies cared much for things domestic. Mr. Hannaford's sanctum alone had character; it was hung about with lethal weapons of many kinds and many epochs, including a memento of every important war waged in Europe since the date of Waterloo. A smoke-grimed rifle from some battlefield was in Hannaford's view a thing greatly precious; still more, a bayonet with stain of blood; these relics appealed to his emotions. Under glass were ranged minutiae such as bullets, fragments of shells, bits of gore-drenched cloth or linen, a splinter of human bone—all ticketed with neat inscription. A bookcase contained volumes of military history, works on firearms, treatises on (chiefly explosive) chemistry; several great portfolios were packed with maps and diagrams of warfare. Upstairs, a long garret served as laboratory, and here were ranged less valuable possessions; weapons to which some doubt attached, unbloody scraps of accoutrements, also a few models of cannon and the like.

In society, Hannaford was an entertaining, sometimes a charming, man, with a flow of well-informed talk, of agreeable anecdote; his friends liked to have him at the dinner-table; he could never be at a loss for a day or two's board and lodging when his home wearied him. Under his own roof he seldom spoke save to find fault, rarely showed anything but acrid countenance. He and his wife were completely alienated; but for their child, they would long ago have parted. It had been a love match, and the daughter's name, Olga, still testified to the romance of their honeymoon; but that was nearly twenty years gone by, and of these at least fifteen had been spent in discord, concealed or flagrant. Mrs. Hannaford was something of an artist; her husband spoke of all art with contempt—except the great art of human slaughter. She liked the society of foreigners; he, though a remarkable linguist, at heart distrusted and despised all but English-speaking folk. As a girl in her teens, she had been charmed by the man's virile accomplishments, his soldierly bearing and gay talk of martial things, though Hannaford was only a teacher of science. Nowadays she thought with dreary wonder of that fascination, and had come to loathe every trapping and habiliment of war. She knew him profoundly selfish, and recognised the other faults which had hindered so clever a man from success in life; indolent habits, moral untrustworthiness, and a conceit which at times menaced insanity. He hated her, she was well aware, because of her cold criticism; she returned his hate with interest.

Save in suicide, of which she had sometimes thought, Mrs. Hannaford saw but one hope of release. A sister of hers had married a rich American, and was now a widow in falling health. That

sister's death might perchance endow her with the means of liberty; she hung upon every message from across the Atlantic.

She had a brother, too; a distinguished, but not a wealthy man. Dr. Derwent would gladly have seen more of her, gladly have helped to cheer her life, but a hearty antipathy held him aloof from Lee Hannaford. Communication between the two families was chiefly maintained through Dr. Derwent's daughter Irene, now in her nineteenth year. The girl had visited her aunt at Geneva, and since then had occasionally been a guest at Ewell. Having just returned from a winter abroad with her father, and no house being ready for her reception in London, Irene was even now about to pass a week with her relatives. They expected her to-day. The prospect of Irene's arrival enabled Mrs. Hannaford and Olga to find pleasure in the sunshine, which otherwise brought them little solace.

Neither was in sound health. The mother had an interesting face; the daughter had a touch of beauty; but something morbid appeared on the countenance of each. They lived a strange life, lonely, silent; the stillness of the house unbroken by a note of music, unrelieved by a sound of laughter. In the neighbourhood they had no friends; only at long intervals did a London acquaintance come thus far to call upon them. But for the presence of Piers Otway at meals, and sometimes in the afternoon or evening, they would hardly have known conversation. For when Hannaford was at home, his sour muteness discouraged any kind of talk; in his absence, mother and daughter soon exhausted all they had to say to each other, and read or brooded or nursed their headaches apart.

With the coming of Irene, gloom vanished. It had always been so, since the beginning of her girlhood; the name of Irene Derwent signified miseries forgotten, mirthful hours, the revival of health and hope. Unable to resist her influence, Hannaford always kept as much as possible out of the way when she was under his roof; the conflict between inclination to unbend and stubborn coldness towards his family made him too uncomfortable. Vivaciously tactful in this as in all things, Irene had invented a pleasant fiction which enabled her to meet Mr. Hannaford without embarrassment; she always asked him "How is your neuralgia?" And the man, according as he felt, made answer that it was better or worse. That neuralgia was often a subject of bitter jest between Mrs. Hannaford and Olga, but it had entered into the life of the family, and at times seemed to be believed in even by the imagined sufferer.

Nothing could have been more characteristic of Irene. Wit at the service of good feeling expressed her nature.

Her visit this time would be specially interesting, for she had passed the winter in Finland, amid the intellectual society of Helsingfors. Letters had given a foretaste of what she would have to tell, but Irene was no great letter-writer. She had an impatience of remaining seated at a desk. She did not even read very much. Her delight was in conversation, in movement, in active life. For several years her father had made her his companion, as often as possible, in holiday travel and on the journeys prompted by scientific study. Though successful as a medical man, Dr. Derwent no longer practised; he devoted himself to pathological research, and was making a name in the world of science. His wife, who had died young, left him two children; the elder, Eustace, was an amiable and intelligent young man, but had small place in his father's life compared with that held by Irene.

She was to arrive at Ewell in time for luncheon. Her brother would bring her, and return to London in the afternoon.

Olga walked to the station to meet them. Mrs. Hannaford having paid unusual attention to her dress—she had long since ceased to care how she looked, save on very exceptional occasions—moved impatiently, nervously, about the house and the garden. Her age was not yet forty, but a life of disappointment and unrest had dulled her complexion, made her movements languid, and was beginning to touch with grey her soft, wavy hair. Under happier circumstances she would have been a most attractive woman; her natural graces were many, her emotions were vivid and linked with a bright intelligence, her natural temper inclined to the nobler modes of life. Unfortunately, little care had been given to her education; her best possibilities lay undeveloped; thrown upon her inadequate

resources, she nourished the weaknesses instead of the virtues of her nature. She was always saying to herself that life had gone by, and was wasted; for life meant love, and love in her experience had been a flitting folly, an error of crude years, which should, in all justice, have been thrown aside and forgotten, allowing her a second chance. Too late, now. Often she lay through the long nights shedding tears of misery. Too late; her beauty blurred, her heart worn with suffering, often poisoned with bitterness. Yet there came moments of revolt, when she rose and looked at herself in the mirror, and asked–But for Olga, she would have tried to shape her own destiny.

To-day she could look up at the sunshine. Irene was coming.

A sound of young voices in the quiet road; then the shimmer of a bright costume, the gleam of a face all health and charm and merriment. Irene came into the garden, followed by her brother, and behind them Olga.

Her voice woke the dull house; of a sudden it was alive, responding to the cheerful mood of its inhabitants. The rooms had a new appearance; sunlight seemed to penetrate to every shadowed comer; colours were brighter, too familiar objects became interesting. The dining-room table, commonly so uninviting, gleamed as for a festival. Irene's eyes fell on everything and diffused her own happy spirit. Irene had an excellent appetite; everyone enjoyed the meal. This girl could not but bestow something of herself on all with whom she came together; where she felt liking, her influence was incalculable.

"How much better you look than when I last saw you." she said to her aunt. "Ewell evidently suits you."

And at once Mrs. Hannaford felt that she was stronger, younger, than she had thought. Yes, she felt better than for a long time, and Ewell was exactly suited to her health.

"Is that pastel yours, Olga? Admirable! The best thing of yours I ever saw."

And Olga, who had thought her pastel worthless, saw all at once that it really was not bad; she glowed with gratification.

The cousins were almost of an age, of much the same stature; but Olga had a pallid tint, tawny hair, and bluish eyes, whilst Irene's was a warm complexion, her hair of dark-brown, and her eyes of hazel. As efficient human beings, there could be no comparison between them; Olga looked frail, despondent, inclined to sullenness, whilst Irene impressed one as in perfect health, abounding in gay vitality, infinite in helpful resource. Straight as an arrow, her shoulders the perfect curve, bosom and hips full-moulded to the ideal of ripe girlhood, she could not make a gesture which was not graceful, nor change her position without revealing a new excellence of form. Yet a certain taste would have leant towards Miss Hannaford, whose traits had more mystery; as an uncommon type, she gained by this juxtaposition. Miss Derwent, despite her larger experience of the world, her vastly better education, was a much younger person than Olga; she had an occasional *naivete* unknown to her cousin; her sex was far less developed. To the average man, Olga's proximity would have been troubling, whereas Irene's would simply have given delight.

During the excitement of the arrival, and through the cheerful meal which followed, Eustace Derwent maintained a certain reserve, was always rather in the background. This implied no defect of decent sentiment; the young man—he was four-and-twenty—could not regard his aunt and cousin with any fond emotion, but he did not dislike them, and was willing to credit them with all the excellent qualities perceived by Irene, wondering merely how his father's sister, a member of the Derwent family, could have married such a "doubtful customer" as Lee Hannaford. Eustace never became demonstrative; he had in perfection the repose of a self-conscious, delicately bred, and highly trained Englishman. In a day of democratisation, he supported the ancient fame of the University which fostered gentlemen. Balliol was his College. His respect for that name, and his reverence for the great master who ruled there, were not inconsistent with a private feeling that, whatever he might owe to Balliol, Balliol in turn lay under a certain obligation to him. His academic record had no brilliancy; he aimed at nothing of the kind, knowing his limitations—or rather his distinctions; but he was quietly

conscious that no graduate of his year better understood the niceties of decorum, more creditably represented the tone of that famous school of manners.

Eustace Derwent was in fact a thoroughly clear-minded and well-meaning young man; sensitive as to his honour; ambitious of such social advancement as would illustrate his name; unaffectedly attached to those of his own blood, and anxious to fulfil with entire propriety all the recognised duties of life. He was intelligent, with originality; he was good-natured without shadow of boisterous impulse. In countenance he strongly resembled his mother, who had been a very handsome woman (Irene had more of her father's features), and, of course, he well knew that the eyes of ladies rested upon him with peculiar interest; but no vulgar vanity appeared in his demeanour. As a matter of routine, he dressed well, but he abhorred the hint of foppishness. In athletics he had kept the golden mean, as in all else; he exercised his body for health, not for the pride of emulation. As to his career, he was at present reading for the Bar. In meditative moments it seemed to him that he was, perhaps, best fitted for the diplomatic service.

Not till this gentleman had taken his leave, which he did (to catch a train) soon after lunch, was there any mention of the fact that the Hannafords had a stranger residing under their roof: in coarse English, a lodger.

To Eustace, as his aunt knew, the subject would necessarily have been painful; and not only in the snobbish sense; it would really have distressed him to learn that his kinsfolk were glad of such a supplement to their income. But soon after his retirement, Mrs. Hannaford spoke of the matter, and no sooner had she mentioned Piers Otway's name than Irene flashed upon her a look of attentive interest.

"Is he related to Jerome Otway, the agitator?—His son? How delightful! Oh, I know all about him; I mean, about the old man. One of our friends at Helsingfors was an old French revolutionist, who has lived a great deal in England; he was always talking about his English friends of long ago, and Jerome Otway often came in. He didn't know whether he was still alive. Oh, I must write and tell him."

The ladies gave what information they could (it amounted to very little) about the recluse of Wensleydale; then they talked of the young man.

"We knew him at Geneva, first of all," said Mrs. Hannaford. "Indeed, he lived with us there for a time; he was only a boy, then, and such a nice boy! He has changed a good deal—don't you think so, Olga? I don't mean for the worse; not at all; but he is not so talkative and companionable. You'll find him shy at first, I fancy."

"He works terrifically," put in Olga. "It's certain he must be injuring his health."

"Then," exclaimed Irene, "why do you let him?"

"Let him? We have no right to interfere with a young man of one-and-twenty."

"Surely you have, if he's behaving foolishly, to his own harm. But what do you call terrific work?"

"All day long, and goodness knows how much of the night. Somebody told us his light had been seen burning once at nearly three o'clock."

"Is he at it now?" asked Irene, with a comical look towards the ceiling.

They explained Otway's absence.

"Oh, he lunches with Members of Parliament, does he?"

"It's a very exceptional thing for him to leave home," said Mrs. Hannaford. "He only goes out to breathe the air for half an hour or so in an afternoon."

"You astonish me, aunt! You oughtn't to allow it—*I* shan't allow it, I assure you."

The listeners laughed gaily.

"My dear Irene," said her aunt, "Mr. Otway will be much flattered, I'm sure. But his examination comes on very soon, and he was telling us only yesterday that he didn't want to lose an hour if he could help it."

"He'll lose a good many hours before long, at this rate. Silly fellow! That's not the way to do well at an exam! I must counsel him for his soul's good, I must, indeed. Will he dine here to-night?"

"No doubt."

"And make all haste to get away when dinner is over," said Olga, with a smile.

"Then we won't let him. He shall tell us all about the Member of Parliament; and then all about his famous father. I undertake to keep him talking till ten."

"Then, poor fellow, he'll have to work all night to make it up."

"Indeed, no! I shall expressly forbid it. What a shocking thing if he died here, and it got into the papers! Aunt, do consider; they would call you his *landlady*!"

Mrs. Hannaford reddened whilst laughing, and the girl saw that her joke was not entirely relished, but she could never resist the temptation to make fun of certain prejudices.

"And when you give your evidence," she went on, "the coroner will remark that if the influence of a lady so obviously sweet and right-feeling and intelligent could not avail to save the poor youth, he was plainly destined to a premature end."

At which Mrs. Hannaford again laughed and reddened, but this time with gratification.

If Irene sometimes made a mistake, no one could have perceived it more quickly, and more charmingly have redeemed the slip.

CHAPTER IV

When Piers Otway got back to Ewell, about four o'clock, he felt the beginning of a headache. The day of excitement might have accounted for it, but in the last few weeks it had been too common an experience with him, a warning, naturally, against his mode of life, and of course unheeded. On reaching the house, he saw and heard no one; the door stood open, and he went straight up to his room.

He had only one, which served him for study and bedchamber. In front of the window stood a large table, covered with his books and papers, and there, on the blotting pad, lay a letter which had arrived for him since his departure this morning. It came, he saw, from his father. He took it up eagerly, and was tearing the envelope when his eye fell on something that stayed his hand.

The wide-open window offered a view over the garden at the back of the house, and on the lawn he saw a little group of ladies. Seated in basket chairs, Mrs. Hannaford and her daughter were conversing with a third person whom Piers did not know, a tall, fair-faced girl who stood before them and seemed at this moment to be narrating some lively story. Even had her features been hidden, the attitude of this stranger, her admirable form and rapid, graceful gestures, must have held the young man's attention; seeing her with the light full on her countenance, he gazed and gazed, in sudden complete forgetfulness of his half-opened letter. Just so had he stood before the print shop in London this morning, with the same wide eyes, the same hurried breathing; rapt, self-oblivious.

He remembered. The Hannafords' relative, Miss Derwent, was expected to-day; and Miss Derwent, doubtless, he beheld.

The next moment it occurred to him that his observation, within earshot of the group, was a sort of eavesdropping; he closed his window and turned away. The sound must have drawn attention, for very soon there came a knock at the door, and the servant inquired of him whether he would have tea, as usual, in his room, or join the ladies below.

"Bring it here, please," he replied. "And—yes, tell Mrs. Hannaford that I shall not come down to dinner—you can bring me anything you like—just a mouthful of something."

Now there went, obscurely, no less than three reasons to the quick shaping of this decision. In the first place, Piers had glanced over his father's letter, and saw in it matter for long reflection. Secondly, his headache was declared, and he would be better alone for the evening. Thirdly, he shrank from meeting Miss Derwent. And this last was the predominant motive. Letter and headache notwithstanding, he would have joined the ladies at dinner but for the presence of their guest. An inexplicable irritation all at once possessed him; a grotesque resentment of Miss Derwent's arrival.

Why should she have come just when he wanted to work harder than ever? That was how things happened—the perversity of circumstance! She would be at every meal for at least a week; he must needs talk with her, look at her, think about her. His annoyance became so acute that he tramped nervously about the floor, muttering maledictions.

It passed. A cup of tea brought him to his right mind, and he no longer saw the event in such exaggerated colours. But he was glad of his decision to spend the evening alone.

His father's letter had come at the right moment; in some degree it allayed the worry caused by his brother Daniel's talk this morning. Jerome Otway wrote, as usual, briefly, on the large letter-paper he always used; his bold hand, full of a certain character, demanded space. He began by congratulating Piers on the completion of his one-and-twentieth year. "I am late, but had not forgotten the day; it costs me an effort to put pen to paper, as you know." Proceeding, he informed his son that a sum of money, a few hundred pounds, had become payable to him on the attainment of his majority. "It was your mother's, and she wished you to have it. A man of law will communicate with you about the matter. Speak of it to me, or not, as you prefer. If you wish it, I will advise; if you wish it not, I will keep silence." There followed a few words about the beauty of spring in the moorland; then: "Your ordeal approaches. An absurdity, I fear, but the wisdom of our day will have it thus. I wish you

success. If you fall short of your hopes, come to me and we will talk once more. Befall what may, I am to the end your father who wishes you well." The signature was very large, and might have drawn censure of affectation from the unsympathetic. As, indeed, might the whole epistle: very significant of the mind and temper of Jerome Otway.

To Piers, the style was too familiar to suggest reflections besides, he had a loyal mind towards his father, and never criticised the old man's dealing with him. The confirmation of Daniel's report about the legacy concerned him little in itself; he had no immediate need of money, and so small a sum could not affect the course of his life; but, this being true, it seemed probable that Daniel's other piece of information was equally well founded. If so, what matter? Already he had asked himself why the story about his mother should have caused him a shock. His father, in all likelihood, would now never speak of that; and, indeed, why should he? The story no longer affected either of them, and to worry oneself about it was mere "philistinism," a favourite term with Piers at that day.

In replying, which he did this same night, he decided to make no mention of Daniel. The name would give his father no pleasure.

When he rang to have his tea-things taken away, Mrs. Hannaford presented herself. She was anxious about him. Why would he not dine? She wished him to make the acquaintance of Miss Derwent, whose talk was sure to interest him. Piers pleaded his headache, causing the lady more solicitude. She entreated. As he could not work, it would be much better for him to spend an hour or two in company. Would he not? to please her?

Mrs. Hannaford spoke in a soft, caressing voice, and Piers returned her look of kindness; but he was firm. An affection had grown up between these two; their intercourse, though they seldom talked long together, was much like that of mother and son.

"You are injuring you health," said Mrs. Hannaford gravely, "and it is unkind to those who care for you."

"Wait a few weeks," he replied cheerily, "and I'll make up the health account."

"You refuse to come down to please me, this once?"

"I must be alone—indeed I must," Piers replied, with unusual abruptness. And Mrs. Hannaford, a little hurt, left the room without speaking.

He all but hastened after her, to apologise; but the irritable impulse overcame him again, and he had to pace the room till his nerves grew steady.

Very soon after it was dark he gave up the effort to read, and went to bed. A good night's sleep restored him. He rose with the sun, felt the old appetite for work, and when the breakfast bell rang had redeemed more than three good hours. He was able now to face Miss Derwent, or anyone else. Indeed, that young lady hardly came into his mind before he met her downstairs. At the introduction he behaved with his natural reserve, which had nothing, as a rule, of awkwardness. Irene was equally formal, though a smile at the corner of her lips half betrayed a mischievous thought. They barely spoke to each other, and at table Irene took no heed of him.

But with the others she talked as brightly as usual, managing, none the less, to do full justice to the meal. Miss Derwent's vigour of mind and body was not sustained on air, and she never affected a delicate appetite. There was still something of the healthy schoolgirl in her manner. Otway glanced at her once or twice, but immediately averted his eyes—with a slight frown, as if the light had dazzled him.

She was talking of Finland, and mentioned the name of her father's man-servant, Thibaut. It entered several times into the narrative, and always with an approving epithet, the excellent Thibaut, the brave Thibaut.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Hannaford, presently, "do tell Mr. Otway the story of Thibaut."

"Yes, do!" urged Olga.

Piers raised his eyes to the last speaker, and moved them timidly towards Irene. She smiled, meeting his look with a sort of merry satisfaction.

"Mr. Otway is occupied with serious thoughts," was her good-humoured remark.

"I should much like to hear the story of Thibaut," said Piers, bending forward a little.

"Would you? You shall—Thibaut Rossignol; delightful name, isn't it? And one of the most delightful of men, though only a servant, and the son of a village shopkeeper. It begins fifteen years ago, just after the Franco-Prussian War. My father was taking a holiday in eastern France, and he came one day to a village where an epidemic of typhoid was raging. *Tant mieux*! Something to do; some help to be given. If you knew my father—but you will understand. He offered his services to the overworked couple of doctors and was welcomed. He fought the typhoid day and night—if you knew my father! Well, there was a bad case in a family named Rossignol: a boy of twelve. What made it worse was that two elder brothers had been killed in the war, and the parents sat in despair by the bedside of their only remaining child. The father was old and very shaky; the mother much younger, but she had suffered dreadfully from the death of her two boys—you should hear my father tell it! I make a hash of it; when *he* tells it people cry. Madame Rossignol was the sweetest little woman—you know that kind of Frenchwoman, don't you? Soft-voiced, tender, intelligent, using the most delightful phrases; a jewel of a woman. My father settled himself by the bedside and fought; Madame Rossignol watching him with eyes he did not dare to meet—until a certain moment. Then—*then* the soft voice for once was loud. '*Ii est sauve*!' My father shed tears; everybody shed tears—except Thibaut himself."

Piers hung on the speaker's lips. No music had ever held him so rapt. When she ceased he gazed at her.

"No, of course, that's not all," Irene proceeded, with the mischievous smile again; and she spoke much as she might have done to an eagerly listening child. "Six years pass by. My father is again in the east of France, and he goes to the old village. He is received with enthusiasm; his name has become a proverb. Rossignol *pere*, alas, is dead, long since. Dear Madame Rossignol lives, but my father sees at a glance that she will not live long. The excitement of meeting him was almost too much for her—pale, sweet little woman. Thibaut was keeping shop with her, but he seemed out of place there; a fine lad of eighteen; very intelligent, wonderfully good-humoured, and his poor mother had no peace, night or day, for the thought of what would become of him after her death; he had no male kinsfolk, and certainly would not stick to a dull little trade. My father thought, and after thinking, spoke. 'Madame, will you let me take your son to England, and find something for him to do?' She screamed with delight. 'But will Thibaut consent?' Thibaut had his patriotic scruples; but when he saw and heard his poor mother, he consented. Madame Rossignol had a sister near by, with whom she could live. And so on the spot it was settled."

Piers hung on the speaker's lips; no tale had ever so engrossed him. Indeed, it was charmingly told; with so much girlish sincerity, so much womanly feeling.

"No, that's not all. My father went to his inn for the night. Early in the morning he was hastily summoned; he must come at once to the house of the Rossignols; something was wrong. He went, and there, in her bed, lay the little woman, just as if asleep, and a smile on her face—but she was dead."

Piers had a lump in his throat; he straightened himself, and tried to command his features. Irene, smiling, looked steadily at him.

"From that day," she added, "Thibaut has been my father's servant. He wouldn't be anything else. This, he always says, would best have pleased his mother. He will never leave Dr. Derwent. The good Thibaut!"

All were silent for a minute; then Piers pushed back his chair.

"Work?" said Mrs. Hannaford, with a little note of allusion to last evening.

"Work!" Piers replied grimly, his eyes down.

"Well, now," exclaimed Irene, turning to her cousin, "what shall we do this splendid morning? Where can we go?"

Piers left the room as the words were spoken. He went upstairs with slower step than usual, head bent. On entering his room (it was always made ready for him while he was at breakfast), he walked to the window, and stared out at the fleecy clouds in the summer blue, at the trees and the lawn. He was thinking of the story of Thibaut. What a fine fellow Dr. Derwent must be! He would like to know him.

To work! He meant to give an hour or two to his Russian, with which he had already made fair progress. By the bye, he must tell his father that; the old man would be pleased.

An hour later, he again stood at his window, staring at the clouds and the blue. Russian was against the grain, somehow, this morning. He wondered whether Miss Derwent had learnt any during her winter at Helsingfors.

What a long day was before him! He kept looking at his watch. And, instead of getting on with his work, he thought and thought again of the story of Thibaut.

CHAPTER V

At lunch Piers was as silent as at breakfast; he hardly spoke, save in answer to a chance question from Mrs. Hannaford. His face had an unwonted expression, a shade of sullenness, a mood rarely seen in him. Miss Derwent, whose animation more than made up for this muteness in one of the company, glanced occasionally at Otway, but did not address him.

As his habit was, he went out for an afternoon walk, and returned with no brighter countenance. On the first landing of the staircase, as he stole softly to his room, he came face to face with Miss Derwent, descending.

"We are going to have tea in the garden," she exclaimed, with the friendliest look and tone.

"Are you? It will be enjoyable—it's so warm and sunny."

"You will come, of course?"

"I'm sorry—I have too much to do."

He blundered out the words with hot embarrassment, and would have passed on. Irene did not permit it.

"But you have been working all the morning?"

"Oh, yes–"

"Since when?"

"Since about—oh, five o'clock–"

"Then you have already worked something like eight hours, Mr. Otway. How many more do you think of working?"

"Five or six, I hope," Piers answered, finding courage to look into her face, and trying to smile.

"Mr. Otway," she rejoined, with an air of self-possession which made him feel like a rebuked schoolboy, "I prophesy that you will come to grief over your examination."

"I don't think so, Miss Derwent," he said, with the firmness of desperation, as he felt his face grow red under her gaze.

"I am the daughter of a medical man. Prescriptions are in my blood. Allow me to tell you that you have worked enough for one day, and that it is your plain duty to come and have tea in the garden."

So serious was the note of interest which blended with her natural gaiety as she spoke these words that Piers felt his nerves thrill with delight. He was able to meet her eyes, and to respond in becoming terms.

"You are right. Certainly I will come, and gladly."

Irene nodded, smiled approval, and moved past him.

In his room he walked hither and thither aimlessly, still holding his hat and stick. A throbbing of the heart, a quickening of the senses, seemed to give him a new consciousness of life. His mood of five minutes ago had completely vanished. He remembered his dreary ramble about the lanes as if it had taken place last week. Miss Derwent was still speaking to him; his mind echoed again and again every word she had said, perfectly reproducing her voice, her intonation; he saw her bright, beautiful face, its changing lights, its infinite subtleties of expression. The arch of her eyebrows and the lovely hazel eyes beneath; the small and exquisitely shaped mouth; the little chin, so delicately round and firm; all were engraved on his memory, once and for ever.

He sat down and was lost in a dream. His arms hung idly; all his muscles were relaxed. His eyes dwelt on a point of the carpet which he did not see.

Then, with a sudden start of activity, he went to the looking-glass and surveyed himself. His tie was the worse for wear. He exchanged it for another. He brushed his hair violently, and smoothed his moustache. Never had he felt such dissatisfaction with his appearance. Never had it struck him so disagreeably before that he was hard-featured, sallow, anything but a handsome man. Yet, he

had good teeth, very white and regular; that was something, perhaps. Observing them, he grinned at himself grotesquely—and at once was so disgusted that he turned with a shudder away.

Ordinarily, he would have awaited the summons of the bell for tea. But, after making himself ready, he gazed from the window and saw Miss Derwent walking alone in the garden; he hastened down.

She gave him a look of intelligence, but took his arrival as a matter of course, and spoke to him about a flowering shrub which pleased her. Otway's heart sank. What had he expected? He neither knew nor asked himself; he stood beside her, seeing nothing, hearing only a voice and wishing it would speak on for ever. He was no longer a reflecting, reasoning young man, with a tolerably firm will and fixed purposes, but a mere embodied emotion, and that of the vaguest, swaying in dependence on another's personality.

Olga Hannaford joined them. Olga, for all the various charms of her face, had never thus affected him. But then, he had known her a few years ago, when, as something between child and woman, she had little power to interest an imaginative boy, whose ideal was some actress seen only in a photograph, or some great lady on her travels glimpsed as he strayed about Geneva. She, in turn, regarded him with the coolest friendliness, her own imagination busy with far other figures than that of a would-be Government clerk.

Just as tea was being served, there sounded a voice welcome to no one present, that of Lee Hannaford. He came forward with his wonted air of preoccupation; a well-built man, in the prime of life, carefully dressed, his lips close-set, his eyes seemingly vacant, but in reality very attentive; a pinched ironical smile meant for cordiality. After greetings, he stood before Miss Derwent's chair conversing with her; a cup of tea in his steady hand, his body just bent, his forehead curiously wrinkled —a habit of his when he talked for civility's sake and nothing else. Hannaford could never be at ease in the presence of his wife and daughter if others were there to observe him; he avoided speaking to them, or, if obliged, did so with awkward formality. Indeed, he was not fond of the society of women, and grew less so every year. His tone with regard to them was marked with an almost puritanical coldness; he visited any feminine breach of the proprieties with angry censure. Yet, before his marriage, he had lived, if anything, more laxly than the average man, and to his wife he had confessed (strange memory nowadays), that he owed to her a moral redemption. His morality, in fact, no one doubted; the suspicions Mrs. Hannaford had once entertained when his coldness to her began, she now knew to be baseless. Absorbed in meditations upon bloodshed and havoc, he held high the ideal of chastity, and, in company agreeable to him, could allude to it as the safeguard of civil life.

When he withdrew into the house, Mrs. Hannaford followed him. Olga, always nervous when her father was near, sat silent. Piers Otway, with a new reluctance, was rising to return to his studies, when Miss Derwent checked him with a look.

"What a perfect afternoon!"

"It is, indeed," he murmured, his eyes falling.

"Olga, are you too tired for another walk?"

"I? Oh, no! I should enjoy it."

"Do you think"—Irene looked roguishly at her cousin—"Mr. Otway would forgive us if we begged him to come, too?"

Olga smiled, and glanced at the young man with certainty that he would excuse himself.

"We can but ask," she said.

And Piers, to her astonishment, at once assented. He did so with sudden colour in his cheeks, avoiding Olga's look.

So they set forth together; and, little by little, Piers grew remarkably talkative. Miss Derwent mentioned his father, declared an interest in Jerome Otway, and this was a subject on which Piers could always discourse to friendly hearers. This evening he did so with exceptional fervour, abounded in reminiscences, rose at moments to enthusiasm. His companions were impressed; to Irene it was

an unexpected revelation of character. She had imagined young Otway dry and rather conventional, perhaps conceited; she found him impassioned and an idealist, full of hero-worship, devoted to his father's name and fame.

"And he lives all the year round in that out-of-the-way place?" she asked. "I must make a pilgrimage to Hawes. Would he be annoyed? I could tell him about his old friends at Helsingfors–"

"He would be delighted to see you!" cried Piers, his face glowing. "Let me know before—let me write–"

"Is he quite alone?"

"No, his wife—my stepmother—is living."

Irene's quick perception interpreted the change of note.

"It would really be very interesting—if I can manage to get so far," she said, less impulsively.

They walked the length of the great avenue at Nonsuch, and back again in the golden light of the west. Piers Otway disregarded the beauty of earth and sky, he had eyes for nothing but the face and form beside him. At dinner, made dull by Hannaford's presence, he lived still in the dream of his delight, listening only when Irene spoke, speaking only when she addressed him, which she did several times. The meal over, he sought an excuse for spending the next hour in the drawing-room; but Mrs. Hannaford, unconscious of any change in his habits, offered no invitation, and he stole silently away.

He did not light his lamp, but sat in the dim afterglow till it faded through dusk into dark. He sat without movement, in an enchanted reverie. And when night had fallen, he suddenly threw off his clothes and got into bed, where for hours he lay dreaming in wakefulness.

He rose at eight the next morning, and would, under ordinary circumstances, have taken a book till breakfast. But no book could hold him, for he had already looked from the window, and in the garden below had seen Irene. Panting with the haste he had made to finish his toilet, he stepped towards her.

"Three hours' work already, I suppose," she said, as they shook hands.

"Unfortunately, not one. I overslept myself."

"Come, that's reasonable! There's hope of you. Tell me about this examination. What are the subjects?"

He expounded the matter as they walked up and down. It led to a question regarding the possibilities of such a career as he had in view.

"To tell the truth, I haven't thought much about that," said Piers, with wandering look. "My idea was, I fancy, to get a means of earning my living which would leave me a good deal of time for private work."

"What, literary work?"

"No; I didn't think of writing. I like study for its own sake."

"Then you have no ambitions, of the common kind?"

"Well, perhaps not. I suppose I have been influenced by my father's talk about that kind of thing."

"To be sure."

He noticed a shrinking movement in Miss Derwent and saw that Hannaford was approaching. This dislike of the man, involuntarily betrayed, gave Piers an exquisite pleasure. Not only because it showed they had a strong feeling in common; it would have delighted him in any case, for he was jealous of any human being who approached Irene.

Hannaford made known at breakfast that he was leaving home again that afternoon, and might be absent for several days. A sensitive person must have felt the secret satisfaction caused all round the table by this announcement; Hannaford, whether he noticed it or not, was completely indifferent; certain letters he had received took most of his attention during the meal. One of them related to an appointment in London which he was trying to obtain; the news was favourable, and it cheered him.

An hour later, as he sat writing in his study, Mrs. Hannaford brought in a parcel, which had just arrived for him.

"Ah, what's that?" he asked, looking up with interest.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered his wife. "Something with blood on it, I dare say."

Hannaford uttered a crowing laugh of scorn and amusement.

Through the afternoon Piers Otway sat in the garden with the ladies. After tea he again went for a walk with Olga and Irene. After dinner he lingered so significantly that Mrs. Hannaford invited him to the drawing-room, and with unconcealed pleasure he followed her thither. When at length he had taken his leave for the night, there was a short silence, Mrs. Hannaford glancing from her daughter to Irene, and smiling reflectively.

"Mr. Otway seems to be taking a holiday," she said at length.

"Yes, so it seemed to me," fell from Olga, who caught her mother's eye.

"It'll do him good," was Miss Derwent's remark. She exchanged no glance with the others, and seemed to be thinking of something else.

Next morning, though the sun shone brilliantly, she did not appear in the garden before breakfast. From a window above, eyes were watching, watching in vain. At the meal Irene was her wonted self, but she did not enter into conversation with Otway. The young man had grown silent again.

Heavily he went up to his room. Mechanically he seated himself at the table. But, instead of opening books, he propped his head upon his hands, and so sat for a long, long time.

When thoughts began to shape themselves (at first he did not think, but lived in a mere tumult of emotions) he recalled Irene's question: what career had he really in view? A dull, respectable clerkship, with two or three hundred a year, and the chance of dreary progress by seniority till it was time to retire on a decent pension? That, he knew, was what the Civil Service meant. The far, faint possibility of some assistant secretaryship to some statesman in office; really nothing else. His inquiries had apprised him of this delightful state of things, but he had not cared. Now he did care. He was beginning to understand himself better.

In truth, he had never looked forward beyond a year or two. Ambition, desires, he possessed in no common degree, but as a vague, unexamined impulse. He had dreamt of love, but timidly, tremulously; that was for the time to come. He had dreamt of distinction; that, also, must be patiently awaited. In the meantime, labour. He enjoyed intellectual effort; he gloried in the amassing of mental riches.

> "To follow Knowledge like a sinking star
> Beyond the
> utmost bound of human thought—"

these lines were frequently in his mind, and helped to shape his enthusiasm. Consciously he subdued a great part of himself, binding his daily life in asceticism. He would not live in London because he dreaded its temptations. Gladly he adhered to his father's principles in the matter of food and drink; this helped him to subdue his body, or at least he thought so. He was happiest when, throwing himself into bed after some fourteen hours of hard reading, he felt the stupor of utter weariness creep upon him, with certainty of oblivion until the next sunrise.

He did not much reflect upon the course of his life hitherto, with its false starts, its wavering; he had not experience enough to understand their significance. Of course his father was mainly responsible for what had so far happened. Jerome Otway, whilst deciding that this youngest son of his should be set in the sober way of commerce, to advance himself, if fate pleased, through recognised grades of social respectability, was by no means careful to hide from the lad his own rooted contempt of such ideals. Nothing could have been more inconsistent than the old agitator's

behaviour in attempting to discharge this practical duty. That he meant well was all one could say of him; for it was not permissible to suppose Jerome Otway defective in intelligence. Perhaps the outcome of solicitude in the case of his two elder sons had so far discouraged him, that, on the first symptoms of instability, he ceased to regard Piers as within his influence.

Piers, this morning, had a terrible sense of loneliness, of abandonment. The one certainty by which he had lived, his delight in books, his resolve to become erudite, now of a sudden vanished. He did not know himself; he was in a strange world, and bewildered. Nay, he was suffering anguish.

Why had Miss Derwent disregarded him at breakfast? He must have offended her last night. And that could only be in one way, by neglecting his work to loiter about the drawing-room. She had respected him at all events; now, no doubt she fancied he had not deserved her respect.

This magnificent piece of self-torturing logic sufficed to occupy him all the morning.

At luncheon-time he was careful not to come down before the bell rang. As he prepared himself, the glass showed a drawn visage, heavy eyes; he thought he was uglier than ever.

Descending, he heard no voices. With tremors he stepped into the dining-room, and there sat Mrs. Hannaford alone.

"They have gone off for the day," she said, with a kind look. "To Dorking, and Leith Hill, and I don't know where."

Piers felt a stab through the heart. He stammered something about a hope that they would enjoy themselves. The meal passed very silently, for Mrs. Hannaford was meditative. She paid unusual attention to Piers, trying to tempt his appetite; but with difficulty he swallowed a mouthful. And, the meal over, he returned at once to his room.

About four o'clock—he was lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling—a knock aroused him. The servant opened the door.

"A gentleman wanting to see you, sir—Mr. Daniel Otway."

Piers was glad. He would have welcomed any visitor. When Daniel—who was better dressed than the other day—came into the room, Piers shook hands warmly with him.

"Delightful spot!" exclaimed the elder, with more than his accustomed suavity. "Charming little house!—I hope I shan't be wasting your time?"

"Of course not. We shall have some tea presently. How glad I am to see you!—I must introduce you to Mrs. Hannaford."

"Delighted, my dear boy! How well you look!—stop though; you are *not* looking very well–"

Piers broke into extravagant gaiety.

CHAPTER VI

There had only been time to satisfy Daniel's profound and touching interest in his brother's work for the examination when the tea bell rang, and they went down to the drawing-room. Piers noticed that Mrs. Hannaford had made a special toilet; so rarely did a new acquaintance enter the house that she was a little fluttered in receiving Daniel Otway, whose manners evidently impressed and pleased her. Had he known his brother well, Piers would have understood that this exhibition of fine courtesy meant a peculiar interest on Daniel's part. Such interest was not difficult to excite; there needed only an agreeable woman's face of a type not familiar to him, in circumstances which offered the chance of intimacy. And Mrs. Hannaford, as it happened, made peculiar appeal to Daniel's sensibilities. As they conversed, her thin cheeks grew warm, her eyes gathered light; she unfolded a charm of personality barely to be divined in her usual despondent mood.

Daniel's talk was animated, varied, full of cleverness and character. No wonder if his hostess thought that she had never met so delightful a man. Incidentally, in quite the permissible way, he made known that he was a connoisseur of art; he spoke of his travels on the track of this or that old master, of being consulted by directors of great Galleries, by wealthy amateurs. He was gracefully anecdotic; he allowed one to perceive a fine enthusiasm. And Piers listened quite as attentively as Mrs. Hannaford, for he had no idea how Daniel made his living. The kernel of truth in this fascinating representation was that Daniel Otway, among other things, collected *bric-a-brac* for a certain dealer, and at times himself disposed of it to persons with more money than knowledge or taste. At the age of thirty-eight this was the point he had reached in a career which once promised brilliant things. In whatever profession he had steadily pursued, Daniel would have come to the front; but precisely that steady pursuit was the thing impossible to him. His special weakness, originally amiable, had become an enthralling vice; the soul of goodness in the man was corrupted, and had turned poisonous.

The conversation was still unflagging when Olga and her cousin returned from their day's ramble. Daniel was presented to them. Olga at once noticed her mother's strange vivacity, and, sitting silent, closely observed Mr. Otway. Irene, also, studied him with her keen eyes; not, one would have guessed, with very satisfactory results. As time was drawing on, Mrs. Hannaford presently asked Daniel if he could give them the pleasure of staying to dine; and Daniel accepted without a moment's hesitation. When the ladies retired to dress, he went up to Piers' room, where a little dialogue of some importance passed between the brothers.

"Have you heard anything about that matter I spoke of?" Daniel began by asking, confidentially.

Piers answered in the affirmative, and gave details, much to the elder's satisfaction. Thereupon, Daniel began talking in a strain of yet closer confidence, sitting knee to knee with Piers and tapping him occasionally in a fraternal way. It might interest Piers to know that he was writing a book—a book which would revolutionise opinion with regard to certain matters, and certain periods of art. The work was all but finished. Unfortunately, no publisher could be found to bear the entire expense of this publication, which of course appealed to a very small circle of readers. The illustrations made it costly, and—in short, Daniel found himself pressingly in need of a certain sum to complete this undertaking, which could not but establish his fame as a connoisseur, and in all likelihood would secure his appointment as Director of a certain Gallery which he must not name. The money could be had for the asking from twenty persons—a mere bagatelle of a hundred and fifty pounds or so; but how much pleasanter it would be if this little loan could be arranged between brothers Daniel would engage to return the sum on publication of the book, probably some six months hence. Of course he merely threw out the suggestion—

"I shall be only too glad to help," exclaimed Piers at once. "You shall have the money as soon as I get it."

"That's really noble of you, my dear boy—By the bye, let all this be very strictly *entre nous*. To tell you the truth. I want to give the dear old philosopher of Wensleydale a pleasant surprise. I'm afraid he misjudges me; we have not been on the terms of perfect confidence which I should desire. But this book will delight him, I know. Let it come as a surprise."

Piers undertook to say nothing; and Daniel after washing his hands and face, and smoothing his thin hair, was radiant with gratification.

"Charming girl, Miss Derwent—eh, Piers? I seem to know the name—Dr. Derwent? Why, to be sure! Capital acquaintance for you. Lucky rascal, to have got into this house. Miss Hannaford, too, has points. Nothing so good at your age, my dear boy, as the habit of associating with intelligent girls and women. *Emollit mores*, and something more than that. An excellent influence every way. I'm no preacher, Piers, but I hold by morality; it's the salt of life—the salt of life!"

At dinner, Daniel surpassed himself. He told admirable stories, he started just the right topics, and dealt with them in the right way; he seemed to know intuitively the habits of thought of each person he addressed. The hostess was radiant; Olga looked almost happy; Irene, after a seeming struggle with herself, which an unkind observer might have attributed to displeasure at being rivalled in talk, yielded to the cheery influence, and held her own against the visitor in wit and merriment. Not till half-past ten did Daniel resolve to tear himself away. His thanks to Mrs. Hannaford for an "enjoyable evening" were spoken with impressive sincerity, and the lady's expression of hope that they might meet again made his face shine.

Piers accompanied him to the station. After humming to himself for a few moments, as they walked along the dark lane, Daniel slipped a hand through his brother's arm and spoke affectionately.

"You don't know how glad I am that we have met, old boy! Now don't let us lose sight of each other—By the bye, do you ever hear of Alec?"

Alexander, Jerome Otway's second son, had not communicated with his father for a good many years. His reputation was that of a good-natured wastrel. Piers replied that he knew nothing whatever of him.

"He is in London," pursued Daniel, "and he is rather anxious to meet *you*. Now let me give you a word of warning. Alec isn't at all a bad sort. I confess I like him, for all his faults—and unfortunately he has plenty of them; but to you, Piers, he would be dangerous. Dangerous, first of all, because of his want of principle—you know my feelings on that point. Then, I'm afraid he knows of your little inheritance, and he *might*—I don't say he would—but he might be tempted to presume upon your good nature. You understand?"

"What is he doing?" Piers inquired.

"Nothing worth speaking of, I fear. Alec has no stability—so unlike you and me in that. You and I inherit the brave old man's love of work; Alec was born an idler. If I thought you might influence him for good—but no, it is too risky. One doesn't like to speak so of a brother, Piers, but I feel it my duty to warn you against poor Alec. *Basta*!"

That night Piers did not close his eyes. The evening's excitement and the unusual warmth of the weather enhanced the feverishness due to his passionate thoughts. Before daybreak he rose and tried to read, but no book would hold his attention. Again he flung himself on to the bed, and lay till sunrise vainly groaning for sleep.

With the new day came a light rain, which threatened to continue. Dullness ruled at breakfast. The cousins spoke fitfully of what they might do if the rain ceased.

"A good time for work," said Irene to Piers. "But perhaps it's all the same to you, rain or shine?

"Much the same," Piers answered mechanically.

He passed a strange morning. Though to begin with he had seated himself resolutely, the attempt to study was ridiculous; the sight of his books and papers moved him to loathing. He watched the sky, hoping to see it broken. He stood by his door, listening, listening if perchance he might hear

the movements of the girls, or hear a word in Irene's voice. Once he did hear her; she called to Olga, laughingly; and at the sound he quivered, his breath stopped.

The clouds parted; a fresh breeze unveiled the summer blue. Piers stood at the window, watching; and at length he had his reward; the cousins came out and walked along the garden paths, conversing intimately. At one moment, Olga gave a glance up at his window, and he darted back, fearful of having been detected. Were they talking of him? How would Miss Derwent speak of him? Did he interest her in the least?

He peeped again. Irene was standing with her hands linked at the back of her head, seeming to gaze at a lovely cloud above the great elm tree. This attitude showed her to perfection. Piers felt sick and dizzy as his eyes fed upon her form.

At an impulse as sudden as irresistible, he pushed up the sash.

"Miss Hannaford! It's going to be fine, you see."

The girls turned to him with surprise.

"Shall you have a walk after lunch?" he continued.

"Certainly," replied Olga. "We were just talking about it."

A moment's pause—then:

"Would you let me go with you?"

"Of course—if you can really spare the time."

"Thank you."

He shut down the window, turned away, stood in an agony of shame. Why had he done this absurd thing? Was it not as good as telling them that he had been spying? Irene's absolute silence meant disapproval, perhaps annoyance. And Olga's remark about his ability to spare time had hinted the same thing: her tone was not quite natural; she averted her look in speaking. Idiot that he was! He had forced his company upon them, when, more likely than not, they much preferred to be alone. Oh, tactless idiot! Now they would never be able to walk in the garden without a suspicion that he was observing them.

He all but resolved to pack a travelling-bag and leave home at once. It seemed impossible to face Irene at luncheon.

When the bell rang, he stole, slunk, downstairs. Scarcely had he entered the dining-room, when he began an apology; after all, he could not go this afternoon; he must work; the sky had tempted him, but–

"Mr. Otway," said Irene, regarding him with mock sternness, "we don't allow that kind of thing. It is shameful vacillation—I love a long word—What's the other word I was trying for?—still longer—I mean, tergiversation! it comes from *tergum* and *verso*, and means turning the back. It is rude to turn your back on ladies."

Piers would have liked to fall at her feet, in his voiceless gratitude. She had rescued him from his shame, had put an end to all awkwardness, and, instead of merely permitting, had invited his company.

"That decides it, Miss Derwent. Of course I shall come. Forgive me for being so uncivil."

At lunch and during their long walk afterwards, Irene was very gracious to him. She had never talked with him in such a tone of entire friendliness; all at once they seemed to have become intimate. Yet there was another change less pleasing to the young man; Irene talked as though either she had become older, or he younger. She counselled him with serious kindness, urged him to make rational rules about study and recreation.

"You're overdoing it, you know. To-day you don't look very well."

"I had no sleep last night," he replied abruptly, shunning her gaze.

"That's bad. You weren't so foolish as to try to make up for lost time?"

"No, no! I *couldn't* sleep."

He reddened, hung his head. Miss Derwent grew almost maternal. This, she pointed out, was the natural result of nerves overstrained. He must really use common sense. Come now, would he promise?

"I will promise you anything!"

Olga glanced quickly at him from one side; Irene, on the other, looked away with a slight smile.

"No," she said, "you shall promise Miss Hannaford. She will have you under observation; whereas you might play tricks with me after I'm gone. Olga, be strict with this young gentleman. He is well-meaning, but he vacillates; at times he even tergiversates—a shocking thing."

There was laughter, but Piers suffered. He felt humiliated. Had he been alone with Miss Derwent, he might have asserted his manhood, and it would have been *her* turn to blush, to be confused. He had a couple of years more than she. The trouble was that he could not feel this superiority of age; she treated him like a schoolboy, and to himself he seemed one. Even more than Irene's, he avoided Olga's look, and walked on shamefaced.

The remaining days, until Miss Derwent departed, were to him a mere blank of misery. Impossible to open a book, and sleep came only with uttermost exhaustion. How he passed the hours, he knew not. Spying at windows, listening for voices, creeping hither and thither in torment of multiform ignominy, forcing speech when he longed to be silent, not daring to break silence when his heart seemed bursting with desire to utter itself—a terrible time. And Irene persevered in her elder-sister attitude; she was kindness itself, but never seemed to remark a strangeness in his look and manner. Once he found courage to say that he would like to know Dr. Derwent; she replied that her father was a very busy man, but that no doubt some opportunity for their meeting would arise—and that was all. When the moment came for leave-taking, Piers tried to put all his soul into a look; but he failed, his eyes dropped, even as his tongue faltered. And Irene Derwent was gone.

If, in the night that followed, a wish could have put an end to his existence, Piers would have died. He saw no hope in living, and the burden seemed intolerable. Love-anguish of one-and-twenty; we smile at it, but it is anguish all the same, and may break or mould a life.

CHAPTER VII

A week went by, and Piers was as far as ever from resuming his regular laborious life. One day he spent in London. His father's solicitor had desired to see him, in the matter of the legacy; Piers received his money, and on the same day made over one hundred and fifty pounds to Daniel Otway, whom he met by appointment; in exchange, Daniel handed him a beautifully written I.O.U., which the younger brother would pocket only with protest.

Another week passed. Piers no longer pretended to keep his usual times; he wandered forth whenever home grew intolerable, and sometimes snatched his only sleep in the four-and-twenty hours under the hawthorn blossom of some remote meadow. His mood had passed into bitterness. "I was well before; why did she interfere with me? She did it knowing what would happen; it promised her amusement. I should have kept to myself, and have been safe. She waylaid me. That first meeting on the stairs–"

He raged against her and against all women.

One evening, towards sunset, he came home dusty and weary and with a hang-dog air, for he had done something which made him ashamed. Miles away from Ewell thirst and misery had brought him to a wayside inn, where—the first time for years—he drank strong liquor. He drank more than he needed, and afterwards fell asleep in a lane, and woke to new wretchedness.

As he entered the house and was about to ascend the stairs, a voice called to him. It was Mrs. Hannaford's; she bade him come to her in the drawing-room. Reluctantly he moved thither. The lady was sitting idle and alone; she looked at him for a moment without speaking, then beckoned him forward.

"Your brother has been here," she said, in a low voice not quite her own.

"Daniel?"

"Yes. He called very soon after you had gone out. He wouldn't—couldn't stay. He'll let you know when he is coming next time."

"Oh, all right."

"Come and sit down." She pointed to a chair next hers. "How tired you look!"

Her tone was very soft, and, as he seated himself, she touched his arm gently. The room was scented with roses. A blind, half-drawn on the open window, broke the warm western rays; upon a tree near by, a garden warbler was piping evensong.

"What is it?" she asked, with a timid kindness. "What has happened? Won't you tell me?"

"You know—I am sure you know–"

His voice was choked into silence.

"But you will get over it—oh, yes, you will! Your work–"

"I can't work!" he broke out vehemently—"I shall never work again. She has changed all my life. I must find something else to do—I don't care what. I can't go in for that examination."

Then abruptly he turned to her with a look of eagerness.

"Would it be any use? Suppose I got a place in one of the offices? Would there be any hope for me?"

Mrs. Hannaford's eyes dropped.

"Don't think of her," she answered. "She has such brilliant prospects—it is so unlikely. You think me unsympathetic—oh, I'm not!" Again she let her fingers rest on his arm. "I feel so much with you that I daren't offer imaginary hopes. She belongs to such a different world, try, try to forget her."

"Of course I know she cares and thinks nothing about me now. But if I made my way–"

"She will marry very early, and someone–"

With an upward movement of her hand the speaker, was sufficiently explicit. Otway, he knew not why, tried to laugh, and frightened himself with the sound.

"She is not the only girl, good and beautiful," Mrs. Hannaford continued, pleading with him.

"For me she is," he replied, in a hard voice. "And I believe she will be always."

For a minute or two the little warbler sang in silence, then Piers, of a sudden, stood up, and strode hastily away.

Mrs. Hannaford fell into reverie. Her daughter was in London to-day, her husband absent somewhere else. But she had not been solitary, for Daniel Otway, failing to meet his brother, lingered a couple of hours in the drawing-room. As she sat dreaming under the soft light, her face relieved for the moment of its weariness and discontent, had a beauty more touching than that of youth.

Upstairs, Piers found a letter awaiting him. He did not know the writing, and found with surprise that it came from his brother Alexander, who had addressed it to him through their father's solicitor. Alexander wrote from the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury Square; it was an odd letter, beginning formally, almost paternally, and running off into chirruping facetiousness, as if the writer had tried in vain to subdue his natural gaiety. There were extraordinary phrases. "I congratulate you on being gazetted major in the regiment of Old Time." "For my own part I am just beginning my thirty-fifth round with knuckly life, and I rejoice to say that I have come up smiling. Floorers I have suffered, not a few, in the rounds preceding, but I am harder for it, harder and gamer." "Shall we not crack a bottle together on this side of the circumfluent Oceanus?" And so on, to the effect that Alexander much wished for a meeting with his brother, and urged him to come to Theobald's Road as soon as possible, at his own convenience.

It gave Piers—what he needed badly—something new to think about. From what he remembered of Alexander, he did not dislike him, and this letter made, on the whole, an agreeable impression; but he remembered Daniel's warning. In any case, there could be no harm in calling on his brother; it made an excuse for a day in London, the country stillness having driven him all but to frenzy. So he replied at once, saying that he would call on the following afternoon.

Alexander occupied the top floor of a great old house in Theobald's Road. Whether he was married or not, Piers had not heard; the appearance of the place suggested bachelor quarters, but, as he knocked at what seemed the likely door, there sounded from within an infantine wail, which became alarmingly shrill when the door was thrown open by a dirty little girl. At sight of Piers this young person, evidently a servant, drew back smiling, and said with a strong Irish accent:

"Please to come in. They're expecting of you."

He passed into a large room, magnificently lighted by the sunshine, but very simply furnished. A small round table, two or three chairs and a piano were lost on the great floor, which had no carpeting, only a small Indian rug being displayed as a thing of beauty, in the very middle. There were no pictures, but here and there, to break the surface of the wall, strips of bright-coloured material were hung from the cornice. At the table, next the window, sat a man writing, also, as his lips showed, whistling a tune; and on the bare boards beside him sat a young woman with her baby on her lap, another child, of two or three years old, amusing itself by pulling her dishevelled hair.

"Here's your brother, Mr. Otw'y," yelled the little servant. "Give that baby to me, mum. I know what'll quoiet him, bless his little heart."

Alexander sprang up, waving his arm in welcome. He was a stoutish man of middle height, with thick curly auburn hair, and a full beard; geniality beamed from his blue eyes.

"Is it yourself, Piers?" he shouted, with utterance suggestive of the Emerald Isle, though the man was so loudly English. "It does me good to set eyes on you, upon my soul, it does! I knew you'd come. Didn't I say he'd come, Biddy?—Piers, this is my wife, Bridget the best wife living in all the four quarters of the world!"

Mrs. Otway had risen, and stood smiling, the picture of cordiality. She was not a beauty, though the black hair broad-flung over her shoulders made no common adornment; but her round, healthy face, with its merry eyes and gleaming teeth, had an honest attractiveness, and her soft Irish tongue went to the heart. It never occurred to her to apologise for the disorderly state of things. Having got

rid of her fractious baby—not without a kiss—she took the other child by the hand and with pride presented "My daughter Leonora"—a name which gave Piers a little shock of astonishment.

"Sit down, Piers," shouted her husband. "First we'll have tea and talk; then we'll have talk and tobacco; then we'll have dinner and talk again, and after that whatever the gods please to send us. My day's work is done—*ecce signum*!"

He pointed to the slips of manuscript from which he had risen. Alexander had begun life as a medical student, but never got so far as a diploma. In many capacities, often humble but never disgraceful, he had wandered over Broader Britain—drifting at length, as he was bound to do, into irregular journalism.

"And how's the old man at home?" he asked, whilst Mrs. Otway busied herself in getting tea. "Piers, it's the sorrow of my life that he hasn't a good opinion of me. I don't say I deserve it, but, as I live, I've always meant to And I admire him, Piers. I've written about him; and I sent him the article, but he didn't acknowledge it. How does he bear his years, the old Trojan? And how does his wife use him? Ah, that was a mistake, Piers; that was a mistake. In marriage—and remember this, Piers, for your time'll come—it must be the best, or none at all. I acted upon that, though Heaven knows the trials and temptations I went through. I said to myself—the best or none! And I found her, Piers; I found her sitting at a cottage door by Enniscorthy, County Wexford, where for a time I had the honour of acting as tutor to a young gentleman of promise, cut short, alas!—'the blind Fury with the abhorred shears!' I wrote an elegy on him, which I'll show you. His father admired it, had it printed, and gave me twenty pounds, like the gentleman he was!"

There appeared a handsome tea-service; the only objection to it being that every piece was chipped or cracked, and not one thoroughly clean. Leonora, a well-behaved little creature who gave earnest of a striking face, sat on her mother's lap, watching the visitor and plainly afraid of him.

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Otway, "I should never have taken you two for brothers—no, not even the half of it!"

"He has an intellectual face, Biddy," observed her husband. "Pale just now, but it's 'the pale cast of thought.' What are you aiming at, Piers?"

"I don't know," was the reply, absently spoken.

"Ah, but I'm sorry to hear that. You should have concentrated yourself by now, indeed you should. If I had to begin over again, I should go in for commerce."

Piers gave him a look of interest.

"Indeed? You mean that?"

"I do. I would apply myself to the science and art of money-making in the only hopeful way—honest buying and selling. There's something so satisfying about it. I envy even the little shopkeeper, who reckons up his profits every Saturday night, and sees his business growing. But you must begin early; you must learn money-making like anything else. If I had made money, Piers, I should be at this moment the most virtuous and meritorious citizen of the British Empire!"

Alexander was vexed to find that his brother did not smoke. He lit his pipe after tea, and for a couple of hours talked ceaselessly, relating the course of his adventurous life; an entertaining story, told with abundant vigour, with humorous originality. Though he had in his possession scarce a dozen volumes, Alexander was really a bookish man and something of a scholar; his quotations, which were frequent, ranged from Homer to Horace, from Chaucer to Tennyson. He recited a few of his own poetical compositions, and they might have been worse; Piers made him glow and sparkle with a little praise.

Meanwhile, Bridget was putting the children to bed and cooking the evening meal—styled dinner for this occasion. Both proceedings were rather tumultuous, but, amid the clamour they necessitated, no word of ill-temper could be heard; screams of laughter, on the other hand, were frequent. With manifest pride the little servant came in to lay the table; she only broke one glass in the operation, and her "Sure now, who'd have thought it!" as she looked at the fragments,

delighted Alexander beyond measure. The chief dish was a stewed rabbit, smothered in onions; after it appeared an immense gooseberry tart, the pastry hardly to be attacked with an ordinary table knife. Compromising for the nonce with his teetotalism as well as his vegetarianism—not to pain the hosts—Piers drank bottled ale. It was an uproarious meal. The little servant, whilst in attendance, took her full share of the conversation, and joined shrilly in the laughter. Mrs. Otway had arrayed herself in a scarlet gown, and her hair was picturesquely braided. She ceased not from hospitable cares, and set a brave example in eating and drinking. Yet she was never vulgar, as an untaught London woman in her circumstances would have been, and many a delightful phrase fell from her lips in the mellow language of County Wexford.

When the remnants of dinner were removed, a bottle of Irish whisky came forth, with the due appurtenances. Then it was that Alexander, with pride in his eyes, made known Bridget's one accomplishment; she had a voice, and would presently use it for their guest's delectation. She was trying to learn the piano, as yet with small success; but Alexander who had studied music concurrently with medicine, and to better result, was able to furnish accompaniments. The concert began, and Piers, who had felt misgivings, was most agreeably surprised. Not only had Bridget a voice, a very sweet mezzo-contralto, but she sang with remarkable feeling. More than once the listener had much ado to keep tears out of his eyes; they were at his throat all the time, and his heart swelled with the passionate emotion which had lurked there to the ruin of his peace. But music, the blessed, the peacemaker (for music called martial is but a blustering bastard), changed his torments to ecstasy; his love, however hopeless, became an inestimable possession, and he seemed to himself capable of such great, such noble things as had never entered into the thought of man.

The crying of her baby obliged Bridget to withdraw for a little. Alexander, who had already made a gallant inroad on the whisky bottle, looked almost fiercely at his brother, and exclaimed:

"What do you day to *that*? Isn't that a woman? Isn't that a wife to be proud of?"

Piers replied with enthusiasm.

"Not long ago," proceeded the other, "when we were really hard up, she wanted me to let her try to earn money with her voice. She could, you know! But do you think I'd allow it? Sooner I'll fry the soles of my boots and make believe they're beefsteak!—Look at her, and remember her when you're seeking for a wife of your own. Never mind if you have to wait; it's worth it. When it comes to wives, the best or none! That's my motto."

In his emotional mood, Piers had an impulse. He bent forward and asked quietly:

"Are things all right now? About money, I mean."

"Oh, we get on. We could do with a little more furniture, but all in good time."

Piers again listened to his impulse. He spoke hurriedly of the money he had received, and hinted, suggested, made an embarrassed offer. Impossible not to remark the gleam of joy that came into Alexander's eyes; though he vehemently, almost angrily, declared such a thing impossible, it was plain he quivered to accept. And in the end accept he did—a round fifty pounds. A loan, strictly a loan, of course, the most binding legal instrument should be given in acknowledgment of the debt; interest should be paid at the rate of three and a half per cent. per annum—not a doit less! And just when this was settled, Bridget came back again, the sleepless baby at her breast.

"He wants to have his share of the good company," she exclaimed. "And why shouldn't he, bless um!"

Alexander grew glorious. It was one of his peculiarities that, when he had drunk more than enough, he broke into noisy patriotism.

"Piers, have you ever felt grateful enough for being born an Englishman? I've seen the world, and I know; the Englishman is the top of creation. When I say English, I mean all of us, English, Irish, or Scotch. Give me an Englishman and an Irishwoman, and let all the rest of the world go hang!—I've travelled, Piers, my boy. I've seen what the great British race is doing the world round; and I'm that proud of it I can't find words to express myself."

"I've seen something of other races," interposed Piers, lifting his glass with unsteady hand, "and I don't think we've any right to despise them."

"I don't exactly despise them, but I say, What are they compared with us? A poor lot! A shabby lot!—I'm a journalist, Piers, and let me tell you that we English newspaper men have the destiny of the world in our hands. It makes me proud when I think of it. We guard the national honour. Let any confounded foreigner insult England, and he has to reckon with *us*. A word from *us*, and it means war, Piers, glorious war, with triumphs for the race and for civilisation! England means civilisation; the other nations don't count."

"Oh, come–"

"I tell you they don't count!" roared Alexander, his hair wild and his beard ferocious. "You're not one of the muffs who want to keep England little and tame, are you?"

"I think pretty much with father about these things."

"The old man! Oh, I'd forgotten the old man. But he's not of our time, Piers; he's old-fashioned, though a good old man, I admit. No, no; we must be armed and triple-armed; we must be so strong that not all the confounded foreigners leagued together can touch us. It's the cause of civilisation, Piers. I preach it whenever I get the chance; I wish I got it oftener. I stand for England's honour, England's supremacy on sea and land. I st-tand–"

He tried to do so, to reach the bottle, which proved to be empty.

"Send for another, Biddy—the right Irish, my lass! Another bottle to the glory of the British Empire! Piers, we'll make a night of it. I haven't a bed to offer you, but Biddy'll give you a shake-down here on the floor. You're the right sort, Piers. You're a noble-minded, generous-hearted Englishman."

Mrs. Otway, with a glance at the visitor, only made pretence of sending for more whisky, and Piers, after looking at his watch, insisted on taking leave. Alexander would have gone with him to the station, but Bridget forbade this. The patriot had to be content with promises of another such evening, and Piers, saying significantly "You will hear from me," hastened to catch his train.

CHAPTER VIII

When he awoke next morning from a heavy sleep, Piers suffered the half-recollection of some reproachful dream. His musty palate and dull brain reminded him of Alexander's whisky; matter, that, for self-reproach; but in the background was something more. He had dreamt of his father, and seemed to have discharged in sleep a duty still in reality neglected; that, namely, of responding to the old man's offer of advice respecting the use he should make of his money. Out of four hundred pounds, two hundred were already given away—for he had no serious expectation that his brothers would repay the so-called loans. Plainly it behoved him to be frank on this subject. Affectionate loyalty to his father had ever been a guiding principle in Piers Otway's life; he was uneasy under the sense that he had begun to slip towards neglectfulness, towards careless independence.

He would have written this morning, but, after all, it was better to wait until he had settled the doubt which made havoc of his days. At heart he knew that he would not present himself for the Civil Service examination; but he durst not yet put the resolve into words. It seemed a sort of madness, after so many months of laborious preparation, and the fixity of purpose which had grown with his studious habit. And what a return for the patient kindness with which his father had counselled and assisted him! He thought of Daniel and Alexander. Was he, too, going to drift in life, instead of following a steadfast, manly course? The perception and fear of such a danger were something new to him. Piers had seen himself as an example of moral and intellectual vigour. His abandonment of commerce had shown as a strong step in practical wisdom; the fourteen hours of daily reading had flattered his pride. Thereupon came this sudden collapse of the whole scheme. He could no longer endure the prospects for which he had toiled so strenuously.

But for shame, he would have bundled together all the books that lay on his table, and have flung them out of sight.

In the afternoon, he sought a private conversation with Mrs. Hannaford. It was not easily managed, as Hannaford and Olga were both at home; but, by watching and waiting, he caught a moment when the lady stood alone in the garden.

"Do you think," he asked, with tremulous, sudden speech, "that I might call at Dr. Derwent's?"

"Why not?" was the answer, but given with troubled countenance. "You mean"—she smiled—"call upon Miss Derwent. There would be no harm; she is the lady of the house, at present."

"Would she be annoyed?"

"I don't see why. But of course I can't answer for another person in such things."

Their eyes met. Mrs. Hannaford gazed at him sadly for an instant, shook her head, and turned away. Piers went back to lonely misery.

Early next day he stole from the house, and went to London. His business was at the tailor's; he ordered a suit of ceremony—the frock coat on which his brother Daniel had so pathetically insisted—and begged that it might be ready at the earliest possible moment. Next he made certain purchases in haberdashery. Through it all, he had a most oppressive feeling of self-contempt, which—Piers was but one-and-twenty—he did not try to analyze. Every shop-mirror which reflected him seemed to present a malicious caricature; he hurried away on to the pavement, small, ignoble, silly. His heart did battle, and at moments assailed him in a triumph of heroic desire; but then again came the sinking moments, the sense of a grovelling fellowship with people he despised.

It was raining. His shopping done, he entered an omnibus, which took him as far as the Marble Arch; thence, beneath his umbrella, he walked in search of Bryanston Square. Here was Dr. Derwent's house. Very much like a burglar, a beginner at the business, making survey of his field, he moved timidly into the Square, and sought the number; having found it with unexpected suddenness, he hurried past. To be detected here would be dreadful; he durst not go to the opposite side, lest Irene

should perchance be at a window; yet he wanted to observe the house, and did, from behind his umbrella, when a few doors away.

Never had he known what it was to feel such an insignificant mortal. Standing here in the rain, he saw no distinction between himself and the ragged, muddy crossing-sweeper; alike, they were lost in the huge welter of common London. On the other hand, there in the hard-fronted, exclusive-looking house sat Irene Derwent, a pearl of women, the prize of wealth, distinction, and high manliness. What was this wild dream he had been harbouring? Like a chill wind, reality smote him in the face; he turned away, saying to himself that he was cured of folly.

On the journey home he shaped a project. He would seek an interview with the head of the City house in which he had spent so much time and worked so conscientiously, a quite approachable man as he knew from experience, and would ask if he might be allowed to re-enter their service not, however, in London, but in their place of business at Odessa. He had made a good beginning with Russian, and living in Russia, might hope soon to master the language. If necessary, he would support himself at Odessa for a time, until he was capable of serving the firm in some position of trust. Yes, this was what he would do; it gave him a new hope. For Alexander, foolish fellow as he might be in some respects, had spoken the truth on the subject of money-making; the best and surest way was by honourable commerce. Money he must have; a substantial position; a prospect of social advance. Not for their own sake, these things, but as steps to the only end he felt worth living for —an ideal marriage.

He marvelled that the end of life should have been so obscure to him hitherto. Knowledge! What satisfaction was there in that? Fame! What profit in that by itself? Yet he had thought these aims predominant; had been willing to toil day and night in such pursuits. His eyes were opened. His first torturing love might be for ever frustrate, but it had revealed him to himself. He looked forth upon the world, its activities, its glories, and behold there was for him but one prize worth winning, the love of the ideal woman.

He found a letter at Ewell. It contained a card of invitation; Mrs. John Jacks graciously announced to him that she would be at home on an evening a week hence, at nine o'clock.

How came he to have forgotten the Jacks family? Not once had he mentioned to Miss Derwent that he was on friendly terms with these most respectable people. What a foolish omission! It would at once have given him a better standing in her sight, have smoothed their social relations.

Instantly, his plan of exile was forgotten. He would accept this invitation, and on the same day, in the afternoon, he would boldly call at the Derwents'. Why not?—as Mrs. Hannaford said. John Jacks, M.P., was undoubtedly the social superior of Dr. Derwent; admitted to the house at Queen's Gate, one might surely with all confidence present oneself in Bryanston Square. Was he not an educated man, by birth a gentleman? If he had no position, why, who had at one-and-twenty? How needlessly he had been humiliating and discouraging himself! In the highest spirits he went down into the garden to talk with Mrs. Hannaford and Olga. They gazed at him, astonished; he was a new creature; he joked and laughed and could hardly contain his exuberance of joy. When there fell from him a casual mention of Mrs. Jacks' card, no one could have imagined that this was the explanation of his altered mood. Mrs. Hannaford felt sure that he had been to see Irene, and had received, or fancied, some sort of encouragement. Olga thought so too, and felt sorry to see him in a fool's paradise.

That very evening he sat down and resolved to work. He had an appetite for it once more. He worked till long after midnight, and on the morrow kept his old hours. Moreover, he wrote a long letter to Hawes, a good, frank letter, giving his father a full account of the meetings with Daniel and Alexander, and telling all about the pecuniary transactions:—"I hope you will not think I behaved very foolishly. Indeed, it has given me pleasure to share with them. My trouble is lest you should think I acted in complete disregard of you; but, if I am glad to do a good turn, remember, dear father, that it is to you I owe this habit of mind. And I shall not need money. I feel it practically certain that

I shall get my office, and then it will go smoothly. The examination draws near, and I am working like a Trojan!"

"I cannot carp at you," wrote Jerome Otway in reply, "but tighten the purse-strings after this, and be not overmuch familiar with Alexander the Little or Daniel the Purblind. Their ways are not mine; let them not be yours!"

He had to run up to town for the trying-on of his new garments, and this time the business gave him satisfaction. In future he would be seeing much more society; he must have a decent regard for appearances.

His spirits faltered not; they were in harmony with the June weather. Never had he laboured to such purpose. Everything seemed easy; he strode with giant strides into the field of knowledge. Papers such as would be set him at the examination were matter for his mirth, mere schoolboy tests. Now and then he rose from study with a troublesome dizziness, and of a morning his head generally ached a little; but these were trifles. *Prisch zu*!—as a German friend of his at Geneva used to say.

Even on the morning of the great day he worked; it was to prove his will-power, his worthiness. After lunch, clad in the garb of respectability, he went up by a quick train.

His evening suit he had previously despatched to Alexander's abode, where he was to dine and dress.

At four o'clock he was in Bryanston Square, tremulous but sanguine, a different man from him who had sneaked about here under the umbrella. He knocked. The servant civilly informed him that Miss Derwent was not at home, asked his name, and bowed him away.

It was a shock. This possibility had not entered his mind, so engrossed was he in forecasting, in dramatising, the details of the interview. Looking like one who has received some dreadful news, he turned slowly from the door and walked away with head down. Probably no event in all his life had given him such a sense of desolating frustration. At once the sky was overcast, the ways were woebegone; he shrank within his new garments, and endured once more the feeling of personal paltriness.

Though the time before him was so long, he had no choice but to go at once to Theobald's Road, where at all events friendly faces would greet him. The streets of London are terrible to one who is both lonely and unhappy; the indifference of their hard egotism becomes fierce hostility; instead of merely disregarding, they crush. As soon as he could command his thoughts, Piers made for the shortest way, and hurried on.

Mrs. Otway admitted him; Alexander, she said, was away on business, but would soon return. On entering the large room, Piers was startled at the change in its appearance. The well-carpeted floor, the numerous chairs of inviting depth and softness, the centre-table, the handsome bureau, the numerous pictures, and a multitude of knickknacks not to be taken in at one glance, made it plain that most of the money he had lent his brother had been expended at once in this direction. Bridget stood watching his face, and at the first glimmer of a smile broke into jubilation. What did he think? How did he like it? Wasn't it a room to be proud of? She knew it would do his kind heart good to see such splendours! Let him sit down—after selecting his chair—and take it all in whilst she got some tea. No wonder it took away his breath! She herself had hardly yet done gazing in mute ecstasy.

"It's been such a feast for my eyes, Mr. Piers, that I've scarcely wanted to put a bit in my mouth since the room was finished!"

When Alexander arrived, he greeted his brother as though with rapturous congratulation; one would have thought some great good fortune had befallen the younger man.

"Biddy!" he shouted, "I've a grand idea! We'll celebrate the occasion with a dinner out; we'll go to a restaurant. Hanged if you shall have the trouble of cooking on such a day as this! Get ready; make yourself beautiful—though you're always that. We'll dine early, as Piers has to leave us at nine o'clock."

Outcries and gesticulations confirmed the happy thought. Tea over, Piers was dismissed to the bedroom (very bare and uncomfortable, this) to don his evening suit, and by six o'clock the trio set forth. They drove in a cab to festive regions, and, as one to the manner born, Alexander made speedy arrangements for their banquet. An odd-looking party; the young man's ceremonious garb and not ungraceful figure contrasting with his brother's aspect of Bohemian carelessness and jollity, whilst Bridget, adorned in striking colours, would have passed for anything you like but a legitimate and devoted spouse. Once again did Piers stifle his conscience in face of the exhilarating bottle; indeed, he drank deliberately to drown his troubles, and before the second course had already to some extent succeeded.

Alexander talked of his journalistic prospects. Whether there was any special reason for hopefulness, Piers could not discover; it seemed probable that here also the windfall of fifty pounds had changed the aspect of the world. To hear him, one might have supposed that the struggling casual contributor had suddenly been offered some brilliant appointment on a great journal; but he discoursed with magnificent vagueness, and could not be brought to answer direct questions. His attention to the wine was unremittent; he kept his brother's glass full, nor was Bridget allowed to shirk her convivial duty. At dessert appeared a third bottle; by this time, Piers was drinking without heed to results; jovially, mechanically, glass after glass, talking, too, in a strain of nebulous imaginativeness. There could be little doubt, he hinted, that one of his Parliamentary friends (John Jacks had been insensibly multiplied) would give him a friendly lift. A secretaryship was sure to come pretty quickly, and then, who knew what opening might present itself! He wouldn't mind a consulship, for a year or two, at some agreeable place. But eventually—who could doubt it?—he would enter the House. "Why, of course!" cried Alexander; the outline of his career was plain beyond discussion. And let him go in strong for Home Rule. That would be the great question for the next few years, until it was triumphantly settled. Private information—from a source only to be hinted at—assured him that Mr. Gladstone (after the recent defeat) was already hard at work preparing another Bill. Come now, they must drink Home Rule—"Justice to Ireland, and the world-supremacy of the British Empire!"—that was his toast. They interrupted their sipping of green Chartreuse to drink it in brimming glasses of claret.

"We'll drive you to Queen's Gate!" said Alexander, when Piers began to look at his watch. "No hurry, my boy! The night is young! 'And'"—he broke into lyric quotation—"'haply the Queen Moon is on her throne, clustered around with all her starry fays.'—I shall never forget this dinner; shall you, Biddy? We'll have a song when we get home."

One little matter had to be attended to, the paying of the bill. Having glanced carelessly at the total, Alexander began to search his pockets.

"Why, hang it!" he exclaimed. "What a fellow I am! Piers, it's really too absurd, but I shall have to ask you to lend me a sovereign; I can't make up enough—stupid carelessness! Biddy, why didn't you ask me if I'd got money?—No, no; just a sovereign, Piers; I have the rest. I'll pay you back to-morrow morning."

With laughter at such a capital joke, Piers disbursed the coin. Quaint, comical fellow, this brother of his I He liked him, and was beginning to like Biddy too.

A cab bore them all to Queen's Gate, Alexander and his wife making the journey just for the fun of the thing. Piers would have paid for the vehicle back to Theobald's Road, but this his brother declined; he and Mrs. Otway preferred the top of a 'bus this warm night. They parted at Mr. Jacks' door, where carriages and cabs were stopping every minute or two.

"I'll sit up for you, Piers," roared Alexander genially. "You'll want a whisky-and-soda after this job. Come along, Biddy!"

In another frame of mind, Piers would have felt the impropriety of these loud remarks at such a moment. Even as it was, he would doubtless have regretted the incident had he turned his head to observe the two persons who had just alighted and were moving up the steps close behind him.

A young, slim, perfectly equipped man, with features expressive of the most becoming sentiment; a lady—or girl—of admirable figure, with bright, intelligent, handsome face. These two exchanged a look; they exchanged a discreet murmur; and were careful not to overtake Piers Otway in the hall.

He, hat and overcoat surrendered, moved up the gleaming staircase. A sound of soft music fluttered his happy temper. Seeing his form in a mirror, he did not at once recognise himself; for his face had a high colour, with the result of making him far more comely than at ordinary times. He stepped firmly on, delighted to be here, eager to perceive his hostess. Mrs. Jacks, for a moment, failed to remember him; but needless to say that this did not appear in her greeting, which, as she recollected, dropped upon a tone of special friendliness. To her, Piers Otway was the least interesting of young men; but her husband had spoken of him very favourably, and Mrs. Jacks had a fine sense of her duty on such points. Piers was dazzled by the lady's personal charm; her brilliantly pure complexion, her faultless shoulders and soft white arms, her pose of consummate dignity and courtesy. Happily, his instincts and his breeding held their own against perilous circumstance; excited as he was, nothing of the cause appeared in his brief colloquy with the hostess, and he acquitted himself very creditably. A little farther on, John Jacks advanced to him with cordial welcome.

"So glad you could come. By the bye"—he lowered his voice—"if you have any trouble about trains back to Ewell, do let us put you up for the night. Just stay or not, as you like. Delighted if you do."

Piers replied that he was staying at his brother's. Whereupon John Jacks became suddenly thoughtful, said, "Ah, I see," and with a pleasant smile turned to someone else. Only when it was too late did Piers remember that Mr. Jacks possibly had a private opinion about Jerome Otway's elder sons. He wished, above all things, that he could have accepted the invitation. But doubtless it would be repeated some other time.

As he looked about him at the gathering guests, he recalled his depression this afternoon in Bryanston Square, and it seemed to him so ridiculous that he could have laughed aloud. As if he would not have other chances of calling upon Irene Derwent! Ah, but, to be sure, he must provide himself with visiting-cards. A trifling point, but he had since reflected on it with some annoyance.

A hand was extended to him, a pink, delicate, but shapely hand, which his eyes fell upon as he stood in half-reverie. He exchanged civilities with Arnold Jacks.

"I think some particular friends of yours are here," said Arnold. "The Derwents–"

"Indeed! Are they? Miss Derwent?"

Piers' vivacity caused the other to examine him curiously.

"I only learned a day or two ago," Arnold pursued, "that you knew each other."

"I knew Miss Derwent. I haven't met Dr. Derwent or her brother. Are they here yet? I wish you would introduce me."

Again Arnold, smiling discreetly, scrutinised the young man's countenance, and for an instant seemed to reflect as he glanced around.

"The Doctor perhaps hasn't come. But I see Eustace Derwent. Shall we go and speak to him?"

They walked towards Irene's brother, Piers gazing this way and that in eager hope of perceiving Irene herself. He was wild with delight. Could fortune have been kinder? Under what more favourable circumstance could he possibly have renewed his relations with Miss Derwent? Eustace, turning at the right moment, stood face to face with Arnold Jacks, who presented his companion, then moved away. Had he lingered, John Jacks' critical son would have found hints for amused speculation in the scene that followed. For Eustace Derwent, remembering, as always, what he owed to himself and to society, behaved with entire politeness; only, like certain beverages downstairs, it was iced. Otway did not immediately become aware of this.

"I think we missed each other only by an hour or two, when you brought Miss Derwent to Ewell. That very day, curiously, I was lunching here."

"Indeed?" said Eustace, with a marble smile.

"Miss Derwent is here, I hope?" pursued Piers; not with any offensive presumption, but speaking as he thought, rather impetuously.

"I believe Miss Derwent is in the room," was the answer, uttered with singular gravity and accompanied with a particularly freezing look.

This time, Piers could not but feel that Eustace Derwent was speaking oddly. In his peculiar condition, however, he thought it only an amusing characteristic of the young man. He smiled, and was about to continue the dialogue, when, with a slight, quick bow, the other turned away.

"Disagreeable fellow, that!" said Piers to himself. "I hope the Doctor isn't like him. Who could imagine him Irene's brother?"

His spirits were not in the least affected; indeed, every moment they grew more exuberant, as the wine he had drunk wrought progressively upon his brain. Only he could have wished that his cheeks and ears did not burn so; seeing himself again in a glass, he decided that he was really too high-coloured. It would pass, no doubt. Meanwhile, his eyes kept seeking Miss Derwent. The longer she escaped him, the more vehement grew his agitation. Ah, there!

She was seated, and had been hidden by a little group standing in front. At this moment, Eustace Derwent was bending to speak to her; she gave a nod in reply to what he said. As soon as the objectionable brother moved from her side, Piers stepped quickly forward.

"How delightful to meet you here! It seems too good to be true. I called this afternoon at your house—called to see you—but you were not at home. I little imagined I should see you this evening."

Irene raised her eyes, and let them fall back upon her fan; raised them again, and observed the speaker attentively.

"I was told you had called, Mr. Otway."

How her voice thrilled him! What music like that voice! It made him live through his agonies again, which by contrast heightened the rapture of this hour.

"May I sit down by you?"

"Pray do."

He remarked nothing of her coldness; he was conscious only of her presence, of the perfume which breathed from her and made his heart faint with longing.

Irene again glanced at him, and her countenance was troubled. She looked to left and right, sure that they were not overheard, and addressed him with quick directness.

"Where did you dine, Mr. Otway?"

"Dine?—Oh, at a restaurant, with one of my brothers and his wife."

"Did your brother and his wife accompany you to this house?"

Piers was startled. He gazed into her face, and Irene allowed him to meet her eyes, which reminded him most unpleasantly of the look he had seen in those of Eustace.

"Why do you ask that, Miss Derwent?" he faltered.

"I will tell you. I happened to be just behind you as you entered, and couldn't help hearing the words shouted to you by your brother. Will you forgive me for mentioning such a thing? And, as your friend, will you let me say that I think it would be unfortunate if you were introduced to my father this evening? He is not here yet, but he will be—I have taken a great liberty, Mr. Otway; but it seemed to me that I had no choice. When an unpleasant thing *has* to be done, I always try to do it quickly."

Piers was no longer red of face. A terrible sobriety had fallen upon him; his lips quivered; cold currents ran down his spine. He looked at Irene with the eyes of a dog entreating mercy.

"Had I"—his dry throat forced him to begin again—"had I better go now?"

"That is as you think fit."

Piers stood up, bowed before her, gave her one humble, imploring look, and walked away.

He went down, as though to the supper-room; in a few minutes, he had left the house. He walked to Waterloo Station, and by the last train returned to Ewell.

CHAPTER IX

At the head of Wensleydale, where rolling moor grows mountainous toward the marches of Yorkshire and Westmorland, stands the little market-town named Hawes. One winding street of houses and shops, grey, hard-featured, stout against the weather; with little byways climbing to the height above, on which rises the rugged church, stern even in sunshine; its tower, like a stronghold, looking out upon the brooding-place of storms. Like its inhabitants, the place is harsh of aspect, warm at heart; scornful of graces, its honest solidity speaks the people that built it for their home. This way and that go forth the well-kept roads, leading to other towns, their sharp tracks shine over the dark moorland, climbing by wind-swept hamlets, by many a lonely farm; dipping into sudden hollows, where streams become cascades, and guiding the wayfarers by high, rocky passes from dale to dale. A country always impressive by the severe beauty of its outlines; sometimes speaking to the heart in radiant stillness, its moments of repose mirthful sometimes, inspiring joyous life, with the gleams of its vast sky, the sweet, keen breath of its heaths and pastures; but for the most part shadowed, melancholy, an austere nurse of the striving spirit of man, with menace in its mountain-rack, in the rushing voice of its winds and torrents.

Here, in a small, plain cottage, stone-walled, stone-roofed, looking over the wide and deep hollow of a stream—a beck in the local language—which at this point makes a sounding cataract on its course from the great moor above, lived Jerome Otway. It had been his home for some ten years. He lived as a man of small but sufficient means, amid very plain household furniture, and with no sort of social pretence. With him dwelt his wife, and one maidservant.

On an evening of midsummer, still and sunny, the old man sat among his books; open before him the great poem of Dante. His much-lined face, austere in habitual expression, yet with infinite possibilities of radiance in the dark eyes, of tenderness on the mobile lips, was crowned with hair which had turned iron-grey but remained wonderfully thick and strong; the moustache and beard, only a slight growth, were perfectly white. He had once been of more than average stature; now his bent shoulders and meagre limbs gave him an appearance of shortness, whilst he suffered on the score of dignity by an excessive disregard of his clothing. He sat in a round-backed wooden chair at an ordinary table, on which were several volumes ranked on end, a large blotter, and an inkstand. The room was exclusively his, two bookcases and a few portraits on the walls being almost the only other furniture; but at this moment it was shared by Mrs. Otway, who, having some sort of woman's work on her lap, sat using her fingers and her tongue with steady diligence. She looked about forty, had a colourless but healthy face, not remarkable for charm, and was dressed as a sober, self-respecting gentlewoman. In her accents sounded nothing harsh, nothing vehement; she talked quietly, without varied inflections, as if thoughtfully expounding an agreeable theme; such talk might well have inclined a disinterested hearer to somnolence. But her husband's visage, and his movements, betokened no such peaceful tendency; every moment he grew more fidgety, betrayed a stronger irritation.

"I suppose," Mrs. Otway was saying, "there are persons who live without any religious conscience. It seems very strange; one would think that no soul could be at rest in utter disregard of its Maker, in complete neglect of the plainest duties of a creature endowed with human intelligence —which means, of course, power to perceive spiritual truths. Yet such persons seem capable of going through a long life without once feeling the impulse to worship, to render thanks and praise to the Supreme Being. I suppose they very early deaden their spiritual faculties; perhaps by loose habits of life, or by the indulgence of excessive self-esteem, or by–"

Jerome made a quick gesture with his hands, as if defending himself against a blow; then he turned to his wife, and regarded her fixedly.

"Will it take you much longer," he asked, with obvious struggle for self-command, but speaking courteously, "to exhaust this theme?"

"It annoys you?" said the lady, very coldly, straightening herself to an offended attitude.

"I confess it does. Or rather, it worries me. If I may beg–"

"I understood you to invite me to your room."

"I did. And the fact of my having done so ought, I should think, to have withheld you from assailing me with your acrid tedium."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Otway, as she rose to her full height. "I will leave you to your own tedium, which must be acrid enough, I imagine, to judge from the face you generally wear."

And she haughtily withdrew.

A scene of this kind—never more violent, always checked at the right moment—occurred between them about once every month. During the rest of their time they lived without mutual aggression; seldom conversing, but maintaining the externals of ordinary domestic intercourse. Nor was either of them acutely unhappy. The old man (Jerome Otway was sixty-five, but might have been taken for seventy) did not, as a rule, wear a sour countenance; he seldom smiled, but his grave air had no cast of gloominess; it was profoundly meditative, tending often to the rapture of high vision. The lady had her own sufficient pursuits, chief among them a rigid attention to matters ecclesiastical, local and national. That her husband held notably aloof from such interests was the subject of Mrs. Otway's avowed grief, and her peculiar method of assailing his position brought about the periodical disturbance which seemed on the whole an agreeable feature of her existence.

He lived much in the past, brooding upon his years of activity as author, journalist, lecturer, conspirator, between 1846 and 1870. He talked in his long days of silence with men whose names are written in history, men whom he had familiarly known, with whom he had struggled and hoped for the Better Time. Mazzini and Herzen, Kossuth and Ledru-Rollin, Bakounine, Louis Blanc, and a crowd of less eminent fighters in the everlasting war of human emancipation. The war that aims at Peace; the strife that assails tyranny, and militarism, and international hatred. Beginning with Chartism (and narrowly escaping the fierce penalties suffered by some of his comrades), he grew to wider activities, and for a moment seemed likely to achieve a bright position among the liberators of mankind; but Jerome Otway had more zeal than power, and such powers as he commanded were scattered over too wide a field of enthusiastic endeavour. He succeeded neither as man of thought nor as man of action. His verses were not quite poetry; his prose was not quite literature; personally he interested and exalted, but without inspiring confidence such as is given to the born leader. And in this year 1886, when two or three letters on the Irish Question appeared over his signature, few readers attached any meaning to the name. Jerome Otway had fought his fight and was forgotten.

He married, for the first time, at one-and-twenty, his choice being the daughter of an impoverished "county" family, a girl neither handsome nor sweet-natured, but, as it seemed, much in sympathy with his humanitarian views. Properly speaking, he did not choose her; the men who choose, who deliberately select a wife, are very few, and Jerome Otway could never have been one of them. He was ardent and impulsive; marriage becoming a necessity, he clutched at the first chance which in any way addressed his imagination; and the result was calamitous. In a year or two his wife repented the thoughtlessness with which she had sacrificed the possibilities of her birth and breeding for marriage with a man of no wealth. Narrow of soul, with a certain frothy intelligence, she quickly outgrew the mood of social rebellion which had originated in personal discontent, and thenceforward she had nothing but angry scorn for the husband who allowed her to live in poverty. Two sons were born to them; the elder named Daniel (after O'Connell), the second called Alexander (after the Russian Herzen). For twelve years they lived in suppressed or flagrant hostility; then Mrs. Otway died of cholera. To add to the bitterness of her fate, she had just received, from one of her "county" relatives, a legacy of a couple of thousand pounds.

This money, which became his own, Otway invested in a newspaper then being started by certain of his friends; a paper, as it seemed, little likely to have commercial success, but which, after many changes of editorship, ultimately became an established organ of Liberalism. The agitator

retained an interest in this venture, and the small income it still continued to yield him was more than enough for his personal needs; it enabled him to set a little aside, year after year, thus forming a fund which, latterly, he always thought of as destined to benefit his youngest son—the child of his second marriage.

For he did not long remain solitary, and his next adventure was somewhat in keeping with the character he had earned in public estimate. Living for a time in Switzerland, he there met with a young Englishwoman, married, but parted from her husband, who was maintaining herself at Geneva as a teacher of languages; Jerome was drawn to her, wooed her, and won her love. The husband, a Catholic, refused her legal release, but the irregular union was a true marriage. It had lasted for about four years when their only child was born. In another twelvemonth, Jerome was again a widower. A small sum of money which had belonged to the dead woman, Jerome, at her wish, put out at interest for their boy, if he should attain manhood. The child's name was Piers; for Jerome happened at that time to be studying old Langland's "Vision," with delight in the brave singer, who so long ago cried for social justice—one of the few in Christendom who held by the spirit of Christ.

He was now forty-five years old; he mourned the loss of his comrade, a gentle, loving woman, whom, though she seldom understood his views of life, his moods and his aims, he had held in affection and esteem. For eight years he went his way alone; then, chancing to be at a seaside place in the north of England, he made the acquaintance of a mother and daughter who kept a circulating library, and in less than six months the daughter became Mrs. Otway. Aged not quite thirty, tall, graceful, with a long, pale face, distinguished by its air of meditative refinement, this lady probably never made quite clear to herself her motives in accepting the wooer of fifty-three, whose life had passed in labours and experiences with which she could feel nothing like true sympathy. Perhaps it was that she had never before received offer of marriage; possibly Jerome's eloquent dark eyes, of which the gleam was not yet dulled, seconded the emotional language of his lips, and stirred her for the moment to genuine feeling. For a few months they seemed tolerably mated, then the inevitable divergence began to show itself. Jerome withdrew into his reveries, became taciturn, absorbed himself at length in the study of Dante; Mrs. Otway, resenting this desertion, grew critical, condemnatory, and, as if to atone for her union with a man who stood outside all the creeds, developed her mild orthodoxy into a peculiarly virulent form of Anglican puritanism. The only thing that kept them together was their common inclination for a retired existence, and their love of the northern moorland.

Looking back upon his marriages, the old man wondered sadly. Why had he not—he who worshipped the idea of womanhood—sought patiently for his perfect wife? Somewhere in the world he would have found her, could he but have subdued himself to the high seriousness of the quest. In a youthful poem, he had sung of Love as "the crown of life," believing it fervently; he believed it now with a fervour more intense, because more spiritual. That crown he had missed, even as did the multitude of mankind. Only to the elect is it granted—the few chosen, where all are called. To some it falls as if by the pure grace of Heaven, meeting them as they walk in the common way. Some, the fewest, attain it by merit of patient hope, climbing resolute until, on the heights of noble life, a face shines before them, the face of one who murmurs "*Guardami ben*!"

He thought much, too, about his offspring. The two children of his first marriage he had educated on the approved English model, making them "gentlemen." Partly because he knew not well how else to train them, for Jerome was far too weak on the practical side to have shaped a working system of his own—a system he durst rely upon; and partly, too, because they seemed to him to inherit many characteristics from their mother, and so to be naturally fitted for some conventional upper-class career. The result was grievous failure. In the case of Piers, he decided to disregard the boy's seeming qualifications, and, after having him schooled abroad for the sake of modern languages, to put him early into commerce. If Piers were marked out for better things, this discipline could do him no harm. And to all appearances, the course had been a wise one. Piers had as yet given no cause

for complaint. In wearying of trade, in aiming at something more liberal, he claimed no more than his rights.

With silent satisfaction, Jerome watched the boy's endeavours, his heart warming when he received one of those well-worded and dutiful, yet by no means commonplace letters, which came from Geneva and from London. On Piers he put the hope of his latter day; and it gladdened him to think that this, his only promising child, was the offspring of the union which he could recall with tenderness.

When Mrs. Otway had withdrawn with her sour dignity, the old man sighed and lost himself in melancholy musing. The house was, as usual, very still, and from without the only sound was that of the beck, leaping down over its stony ledges. Jerome loved this sound. It tuned his thoughts; it saved him from many a fit of ill-humour. It harmonised with the melody of Dante's verses, fit accompaniment to many a passage of profound feeling, of noble imagery. Even now he had been brooding the anguish of Maestro Adamo who hears for ever

> Li ruscelletti che de' verdi colli
> Del Casentin discendon giuso in Arno—"

and the music of the Tuscan fountains blended with the voice of this moorland stream.

There was a knock at the door; the maid-servant handed him a letter; it came from Piers. The father read it, and, after a few lines, with grave visage. Piers began by saying that, a day or two ago, he had all but resolved to run down to Hawes, for he had something very serious to speak about; on the whole, it seemed better to make the communication in writing.

"I have abandoned the examination, and all thought of the Civil Service. If I invented reasons for this, you would not believe them, and you would think ill of me. The best way is to tell you the plain truth, and run the risk of being thought a simpleton, or something worse. I have been in great trouble, have gone through a bad time. Some weeks ago there came to stay here a girl of eighteen or nineteen, the daughter of Dr. Lowndes Derwent (whose name perhaps you know). She is very beautiful, and I was unlucky enough—if I ought to use such a phrase—to fall in love with her. I won't try to explain what this meant to me; you wouldn't have patience to read it; but it stopped my studies, utterly overthrew my work. I was all but ill; I suffered horribly. It was my first such experience; I hope it may be the last—in that form. Indeed, I believe it will, for I can't imagine that I shall ever feel towards anyone else in the same way, and—you will smile, no doubt—I have a conviction that Irene Derwent will remain my ideal as long as I live."

Enough of that. It being quite clear to me that I simply could not go in for the examination, I hit upon another scheme; one, it seemed to me, which might not altogether displease you. I went to see Mr. Tadworth, and told him that I had decided to go back into business; could he, I asked, think of giving me a place in their office at Odessa? If necessary, I would work without salary till I had thoroughly learned Russian, and could substantially serve them. Well, Mr. Tadworth was very kind, and, after a little questioning, promised to send me out to Odessa in some capacity or other, still to be determined. I am to go in about ten days.

"This, father, is my final decision. I shall give myself to the business, heartily and energetically. I think there is no harm in telling you that I hope to make money. If I do so, it will be done, I think, honourably, as the result of hard work. I had better not see you; I should be ashamed. But I beg you will write to me soon. I hope I shall not have overtried your patience. Bear with me, if you can, and give me the encouragement I value."

Jerome pondered long. He looked anything but displeased: there was tenderness in his smile, and sympathy; something, too, of pride. Very much against his usual practice, he wrote a reply the same day.

"So be it, my dear lad! I have no fault to find, no criticism to offer. Your letter is an honest one, and it has much moved me. Let me just say this: you rightly doubt whether you should call yourself unlucky. If, as I can imagine, the daughter of Dr. Derwent is a girl worth your homage, nothing better could have befallen you than this discovery of your 'ideal.' Whether you will be faithful to be faithful to it, the gods alone know. If you *can* be, even for a few years of youth, so much the happier and nobler your lot!

"Work at money-making, then. And, as I catch a glimmer of your meaning in this resolve, I will tell you something for your comfort. If you hold on at commerce, and verily make way, and otherwise approve yourself what I think you, I promise that you shall not lack advancement. Plainly, I have a little matter of money put by, for sundry uses; and, if the day comes when something of capital would stead you (after due trial, as I premise), it shall be at your disposal.

"Write to me with a free heart. I have lived my life; perchance I can help you to live yours better. The will, assuredly, is not wanting.

"Courage, then! Pursue your purpose—

'Con l'animo che vince ogni battaglia,
Se col suo grave corpo non s'accascia.'

"And, believe me that you could have no better intimate for leisure hours than the old Florentine, who knew so many things; among them, your own particular complaint."

CHAPTER X

Clad for a long railway journey on a hot day; a grey figure of fluent lines, of composedly decisive movements; a little felt hat close-fitting to the spirited head, leaving full and frank the soft rounded face, with its quietly observant eyes, its lips of contained humour—Irene Derwent stepped from a cab at Euston Station and went forward into the booking-office. From the box-seat of the same vehicle descended a brisk, cheerful little man, looking rather like a courier than an ordinary servant, who paid the cabman, saw to the luggage, and, at a respectful distance, followed Miss Derwent along the platform; it was Thibaut Rossignol.

Grey-clad also, with air no less calm and sufficient, a gentleman carrying newspapers in Britannic abundance moved towards the train which was about to start. Surveying for a moment, with distant curiosity, the travellers about him, his eye fell upon that maiden of the sunny countenance just as she was entering a carriage; he stopped, insensibly drew himself together, subdued a smile, and advanced for recognition.

"I am going to Liverpool, Miss Derwent. May I have the pleasure–?"

"If you will promise not to talk politics, Mr. Jacks."

"I can't promise that. I want to talk politics."

"From here to Crewe?"

"As far as Rugby, let us say. After that—morphology, or some other of your light topics."

It seemed possible that they might have the compartment to themselves, for it was mid-August, and the tumult of northward migration had ceased. Arnold Jacks, had he known a moment sooner, would have settled it with the guard. He looked forbiddingly at a man who approached; who, in his turn, stared haughtily and turned away.

Irene beckoned to Thibaut, and from the window gave him a trivial message for her father, speaking in French; Thibaut, happy to serve her, put a world of chivalrous respect into his "Bien, Mademoiselle!" Arnold Jacks averted his face and smiled. Was she girlish enough, then, to find pleasure in speaking French before him? A charming trait!

The train started, and Mr. Jacks began to talk. It was not the first time that they had merrily skirmished on political and other grounds; they amused each other, and, as it seemed, in a perfectly harmless way; the English way of mirth between man and maid, candid, inallusive, without self-consciousness. Arnold made the most of his thirty years, spoke with a tone something paternal. He was wholly sure of himself, knew so well his own mind, his scheme of existence, that Irene's beauty and her charm were nothing more to him than an aesthetic perception. That she should feel an interest in him, a little awe of him, was to be hoped and enjoyed: he had not the least thought of engaging deeper emotion—would, indeed, have held himself reprobate had such purpose entered his head. Nor is it natural to an Englishman of this type to imagine that girls may fall in love with him. Love has such a restricted place in their lives, is so consistently kept out of sight in their familiar converse. They do not entirely believe in it; it ill accords with their practical philosophy. Marriage—that is another thing. The approaches to wedlock are a subject of honourable convention, not to be confused with the trivialities of romance.

"I'm going down to Liverpool," he said, presently, "to meet Trafford Romaine."

It gratified him to see the gleam in Miss Derwent's eyes the' announcement had its hoped-for effect. Trafford Romaine, the Atlas of our Colonial world; the much-debated, the universally interesting champion of Greater British interests! She knew, of course, that Arnold Jacks was his friend; no one could talk with Mr. Jacks for half an hour without learning that; but the off-hand mention of their being about to meet this very day had an impressiveness for Irene.

"I saw that he was coming to England."

"From the States—yes. He has been over there on a holiday—merely a holiday. Of course, the papers have tried to find a meaning in it. That kind of thing amuses him vastly. He says in his last letter to me–"

Carelessly, the letter was drawn from an inner pocket. Only a page and a half; Arnold read it out. A bluff and rather slangy epistolary style.

"May I see his hand?" asked Irene, trying to make fun of her wish.

He gave her the letter, and watched her amusedly as she gazed at the first page. On receiving it back again, he took his penknife, carefully cut out the great man's signature, and offered it for Irene's acceptance.

"Thank you. But you know, of course, that I regard it as a mere curiosity."

"Oh, yes! Why not? So do I the theory of Evolution."

By a leading question or two, Miss Derwent set her companion talking at large of Trafford Romaine, his views and policies. The greatest man in the Empire! he declared. The only man, in fact, who held the true Imperial conception, and had genius to inspire multitudes with his own zeal. Arnold's fervour of admiration betrayed him into no excessive vivacity, no exuberance in phrase or unusual gesture such as could conflict with "good form"; he talked like the typical public schoolboy, with a veneering of wisdom current in circles of higher officialdom. Enthusiasm was never the term for his state of mind; instinctively he shrank from that, as a thing Gallic, "foreign." But the spirit of practical determination could go no further. He followed Trafford Romaine as at school he had given allegiance to his cricket captain; impossible to detect a hint that he felt the life of peoples in any way more serious than the sports of his boyhood, yet equally impossible to perceive how he could have been more profoundly in earnest. This made the attractiveness of the man; he compelled confidence; it was felt that he never exaggerated in the suggestion of force concealed beneath his careless, mirthful manner. Irene, in spite of her humorous observation, hung upon his speech. Involuntarily, she glanced at his delicate complexion, at the whiteness and softness of his ungloved hand, and felt in a subtle way this combination of the physically fine with the morally hard, trenchant, tenacious. Close your eyes, and Arnold Jacks was a high-bred bulldog endowed with speech; not otherwise would a game animal of that species, advanced to a world-polity, utter his convictions.

"You take for granted," she remarked, "that our race is the finest fruit of civilisation."

"Certainly. Don't you?"

"It's having a pretty good conceit of ourselves. Is every foreigner who contests it a poor deluded creature? Take the best type of Frenchman, for instance. Is he necessarily fatuous in his criticism of us?"

"Why, of course he is. He doesn't understand us. He doesn't understand the world. He has his place, to be sure, but that isn't in international politics. We are the political people; we are the ultimate rulers. Our language–"

"There's a quotation from Virgil–"

"I know. We are very like the Romans. But there are no new races to overthrow us."

He began to sketch the future extension of Britannic lordship and influence. Kingdoms were overthrown with a joke, continents were annexed in a boyish phrase; Armageddon transacted itself in sheer lightness of heart. Laughing, he waded through the blood of nations, and in the end seated himself with crossed legs upon the throne of the universe.

"Do you know what it makes me wish?" said Irene, looking wicked.

"That you may live to see it?"

"No. That someone would give us a good licking, for the benefit of our souls."

Having spoken it, she was ashamed, and her lip quivered a little. But the train had slackened speed; they entered a station.

"Rugby!" she exclaimed, with relief. "Have you any views about treatment of the phylloxera?"

"Odd that you should mention that. Why?"

"Only because my father has been thinking about it: we have a friend from Avignon staying with us—all but ruined in his vineyards."

Jacks had again taken out his letter-case. He selected a folded sheet of paper, and showed what looked like a dry blade of grass. The wheat, he said, on certain farms in his Company's territory had begun to suffer from a strange disease; here was an example of the parasite-eaten growth; no one yet had recognised the disease or discovered a check for it.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.