ALLEN GRANT

THE WOMAN WHO DID

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Содержание

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PREFACE

"But surely no woman would ever dare to do so," said my friend.

"I knew a woman who did," said I; "and this is her story."

I

Mrs. Dewsbury's lawn was held by those who knew it the loveliest in Surrey. The smooth and springy sward that stretched in front of the house was all composed of a tiny yellow clover. It gave beneath the foot like the pile on velvet. One's gaze looked forth from it upon the endless middle distances of the oak-clad Weald, with the uncertain blue line of the South Downs in the background. Ridge behind ridge, the long, low hills of paludina limestone stood out in successive tiers, each thrown up against its neighbor by the misty haze that broods eternally over the wooded valley; till, roaming across them all, the eye rested at last on the rearing scarp of Chanctonbury Ring, faintly pencilled on the furthest skyline. Shadowy phantoms of dim heights framed the verge to east and west. Alan Merrick drank it in with profound satisfaction. After those sharp and clear-cut Italian outlines, hard as lapis lazuli, the mysterious vagueness, the pregnant suggestiveness, of our English scenery strikes the imagination; and Alan was fresh home from an early summer tour among the Peruginesque solidities of the Umbrian Apennines. "How beautiful it all is, after all," he said, turning to his entertainer. "In Italy 'tis the background the painter dwells upon; in England, we look rather at the middle distance."

Mrs. Dewsbury darted round her the restless eye of a hostess, to see upon whom she could socially bestow him. "Oh, come this

way," she said, sweeping across the lawn towards a girl in a blue dress at the opposite corner. "You must know our new-comer. I want to introduce you to Miss Barton, from Cambridge. She's SUCH a nice girl too,—the Dean of Dunwich's daughter."

Alan Merrick drew back with a vague gesture of distaste. "Oh, thank you," he replied; "but, do you know, I don't think I like deans, Mrs. Dewsbury." Mrs. Dewsbury's smile was recondite and diplomatic. "Then you'll exactly suit one another," she answered with gay wisdom. "For, to tell you the truth, I don't think SHE does either."

The young man allowed himself to be led with a passive protest in the direction where Mrs. Dewsbury so impulsively hurried him. He heard that cultivated voice murmuring in the usual inaudible tone of introduction, "Miss Barton, Mr. Alan Merrick." Then he raised his hat. As he did so, he looked down at Herminia Barton's face with a sudden start of surprise. Why, this was a girl of most unusual beauty!

She was tall and dark, with abundant black hair, richly waved above the ample forehead; and she wore a curious Oriental-looking navy-blue robe of some soft woollen stuff, that fell in natural folds and set off to the utmost the lissome grace of her rounded figure. It was a sort of sleeveless sack, embroidered in front with arabesques in gold thread, and fastened obliquely two inches below the waist with a belt of gilt braid, and a clasp of Moorish jewel-work. Beneath it, a bodice of darker silk showed at the arms and neck, with loose sleeves in keeping. The whole

costume, though quite simple in style, a compromise either for afternoon or evening, was charming in its novelty, charming too in the way it permitted the utmost liberty and variety of movement to the lithe limbs of its wearer. But it was her face particularly that struck Alan Merrick at first sight. That face was above all things the face of a free woman. Something so frank and fearless shone in Herminia's glance, as her eye met his, that Alan, who respected human freedom above all other qualities in man or woman, was taken on the spot by its perfect air of untrammelled liberty. Yet it was subtle and beautiful too, undeniably beautiful. Herminia Barton's features, I think, were even more striking in their way in later life, when sorrow had stamped her, and the mark of her willing martyrdom for humanity's sake was deeply printed upon them. But their beauty then was the beauty of holiness, which not all can appreciate. In her younger days, as Alan Merrick first saw her, she was beautiful still with the first flush of health and strength and womanhood in a free and vigorous English girl's body. A certain lofty serenity, not untouched with pathos, seemed to strike the keynote. But that was not all. Some hint of every element in the highest loveliness met in that face and form,—physical, intellectual, emotional, moral.

"You'll like him, Herminia," Mrs. Dewsbury said, nodding. "He's one of your own kind, as dreadful as you are; very free and advanced; a perfect firebrand. In fact, my dear child, I don't know which of you makes my hair stand on end most." And with that

introductory hint, she left the pair forthwith to their own devices.

Mrs. Dewsbury was right. It took those two but little time to feel quite at home with one another. Built of similar mould, each seemed instinctively to grasp what each was aiming at. Two or three turns pacing up and down the lawn, two or three steps along the box-covered path at the side, and they read one another perfectly. For he was true man, and she was real woman.

"Then you were at Girton?" Alan asked, as he paused with one hand on the rustic seat that looks up towards Leith Hill, and the heather-clad moorland.

"Yes, at Girton," Herminia answered, sinking easily upon the bench, and letting one arm rest on the back in a graceful attitude of unstudied attention. "But I didn't take my degree," she went on hurriedly, as one who is anxious to disclaim some too great honor thrust upon her. "I didn't care for the life; I thought it cramping. You see, if we women are ever to be free in the world, we must have in the end a freeman's education. But the education at Girton made only a pretence at freedom. At heart, our girls were as enslaved to conventions as any girls elsewhere. The whole object of the training was to see just how far you could manage to push a woman's education without the faintest danger of her emancipation."

"You are right," Alan answered briskly, for the point was a pet one with him. "I was an Oxford man myself, and I know that servitude. When I go up to Oxford now and see the girls who are being ground in the mill at Somerville, I'm heartily sorry for

them. It's worse for them than for us; they miss the only part of university life that has educational value. When we men were undergraduates, we lived our whole lives, lived them all round, developing equally every fibre of our natures. We read Plato, and Aristotle, and John Stuart Mill, to be sure,—and I'm not quite certain we got much good from them; but then our talk and thought were not all of books, and of what we spelt out in them. We rowed on the river, we played in the cricket-field, we lounged in the billiard-rooms, we ran up to town for the day, we had wine in one another's rooms after hall in the evening, and behaved like young fools, and threw oranges wildly at one another's heads, and generally enjoyed ourselves. It was all very silly and irrational, no doubt, but it was life, it was reality; while the pretended earnestness of those pallid Somerville girls is all an affectation of one-sided culture."

"That's just it," Herminia answered, leaning back on the rustic seat like David's Madame Recamier. "You put your finger on the real blot when you said those words, developing equally every fibre of your natures. That's what nobody yet wants us women to do. They're trying hard enough to develop us intellectually; but morally and socially they want to mew us up just as close as ever. And they won't succeed. The zenana must go. Sooner or later, I'm sure, if you begin by educating women, you must end by emancipating them."

"So I think too," Alan answered, growing every moment more interested. "And for my part, it's the emancipation, not the mere

education, that most appeals to me."

"Yes, I've always felt that," Herminia went on, letting herself out more freely, for she felt she was face to face with a sympathetic listener. "And for that reason, it's the question of social and moral emancipation that interests me far more than the mere political one,—woman's rights as they call it. Of course I'm a member of all the woman's franchise leagues and everything of that sort,—they can't afford to do without a single friend's name on their lists at present; but the vote is a matter that troubles me little in itself, what I want is to see women made fit to use it. After all, political life fills but a small and unimportant part in our total existence. It's the perpetual pressure of social and ethical restrictions that most weighs down women."

Alan paused and looked hard at her. "And they tell me," he said in a slow voice, "you're the Dean of Dunwich's daughter!"

Herminia laughed lightly,—a ringing girlish laugh. Alan noticed it with pleasure. He felt at once that the iron of Girton had not entered into her soul, as into so many of our modern young women's. There was vitality enough left in her for a genuine laugh of innocent amusement. "Oh yes," she said, merrily; "that's what I always answer to all possible objectors to my ways and ideas. I reply with dignity, '*I* was brought up in the family of a clergyman of the Church of England.'"

"And what does the Dean say to your views?" Alan interposed doubtfully.

Herminia laughed again. If her eyes were profound, two

dimples saved her. "I thought you were with us," she answered with a twinkle; "now, I begin to doubt it. You don't expect a man of twenty-two to be governed in all things, especially in the formation of his abstract ideas, by his father's opinions. Why then a woman?"

"Why, indeed?" Alan answered. "There I quite agree with you. I was thinking not so much of what is right and reasonable as of what is practical and usual. For most women, of course, are—well, more or less dependent upon their fathers."

"But I am not," Herminia answered, with a faint suspicion of just pride in the undercurrent of her tone. "That's in part why I went away so soon from Girton. I felt that if women are ever to be free, they must first of all be independent. It is the dependence of women that has allowed men to make laws for them, socially and ethically. So I wouldn't stop at Girton, partly because I felt the life was one-sided,—our girls thought and talked of nothing else on earth except Herodotus, trigonometry, and the higher culture,—but partly also because I wouldn't be dependent on any man, not even my own father. It left me freer to act and think as I would. So I threw Girton overboard, and came up to live in London."

"I see," Alan replied. "You wouldn't let your schooling interfere with your education. And now you support yourself?" he went on quite frankly.

Herminia nodded assent.

"Yes, I support myself," she answered; "in part by teaching at a high school for girls, and in part by doing a little hack-work

for newspapers."

"Then you're just down here for your holidays, I suppose?" Alan put in, leaning forward.

"Yes, just down here for my holidays. I've lodgings on the Holmwood, in such a dear old thatched cottage; roses peep in at the porch, and birds sing on the bushes. After a term in London, it's a delicious change for one."

"But are you alone?" Alan interposed again, still half hesitating.

Herminia smiled once more; his surprise amused her. "Yes, quite alone," she answered. "But if you seem so astonished at that, I shall believe you and Mrs. Dewsbury have been trying to take me in, and that you're not really with us. Why shouldn't a woman come down alone to pretty lodgings in the country?"

"Why not, indeed?" Alan echoed in turn. "It's not at all that I disapprove, Miss Barton; on the contrary, I admire it; it's only that one's surprised to find a woman, or for the matter of that anybody, acting up to his or her convictions. That's what I've always felt; 'tis the Nemesis of reason; if people begin by thinking rationally, the danger is that they may end by acting rationally also."

Herminia laughed. "I'm afraid," she answered, "I've already reached that pass. You'll never find me hesitate to do anything on earth, once I'm convinced it's right, merely because other people think differently on the subject."

Alan looked at her and mused. She was tall and stately, but

her figure was well developed, and her form softly moulded. He admired her immensely. How incongruous an outcome from a clerical family! "It's curious," he said, gazing hard at her, "that you should be a dean's daughter."

"On the contrary," Herminia answered, with perfect frankness, "I regard myself as a living proof of the doctrine of heredity."

"How so?" Alan inquired.

"Well, my father was a Senior Wrangler," Herminia replied, blushing faintly; "and I suppose that implies a certain moderate development of the logical faculties. In HIS generation, people didn't apply the logical faculties to the grounds of belief; they took those for granted; but within his own limits, my father is still an acute reasoner. And then he had always the ethical and social interests. Those two things—a love of logic, and a love of right—are the forces that tend to make us what we call religious. Worldly people don't care for fundamental questions of the universe at all; they accept passively whatever is told them; they think they think, and believe they believe it. But people with an interest in fundamental truth inquire for themselves into the constitution of the cosmos; if they are convinced one way, they become what we call theologians; if they are convinced the other way, they become what we call free-thinkers. Interest in the problem is common to both; it's the nature of the solution alone that differs in the two cases."

"That's quite true," Alan assented. "And have you ever

noticed this curious corollary, that you and I can talk far more sympathetically with an earnest Catholic, for example, or an earnest Evangelical, than we can talk with a mere ordinary worldly person."

"Oh dear, yes," Herminia answered with conviction. "Thought will always sympathize with thought. It's the unthinking mass one can get no further with."

Alan changed the subject abruptly. This girl so interested him. She was the girl he had imagined, the girl he had dreamt of, the girl he had thought possible, but never yet met with. "And you're in lodgings on the Holmwood here?" he said, musing. "For how much longer?"

"For, six weeks, I'm glad to say," Herminia answered, rising.

"At what cottage?"

"Mrs. Burke's,—not far from the station."

"May I come to see you there?"

Herminia's clear brown eyes gazed down at him, all puzzlement. "Why, surely," she answered; "I shall be delighted to see you!" She paused for a second. "We agree about so many things," she went on; "and it's so rare to find a man who can sympathize with the higher longings in women."

"When are you likeliest to be at home?" Alan asked.

"In the morning, after breakfast,—that is, at eight o'clock," Herminia answered, smiling; "or later, after lunch, say two or thereabouts."

"Six weeks," Alan repeated, more to himself than to her.

Those six week were precious. Not a moment of them must be lost. "Then I think," he went on quietly, "I shall call tomorrow."

A wave of conscious pleasure broke over Herminia's cheek, blush rose on white lily; but she answered nothing. She was glad this kindred soul should seem in such a hurry to renew her acquaintance.

II

Next afternoon, about two o'clock, Alan called with a tremulous heart at the cottage. Herminia had heard not a little of him meanwhile from her friend Mrs. Dewsbury. "He's a charming young man, my dear," the woman of the world observed with confidence. "I felt quite sure you'd attract one another. He's so clever and advanced, and everything that's dreadful,—just like yourself, Herminia. But then he's also very well connected. That's always something, especially when one's an oddity. You wouldn't go down one bit yourself, dear, if you weren't a dean's daughter. The shadow of a cathedral steeple covers a multitude of sins. Mr. Merrick's the son of the famous London gout doctor,—you MUST know his name,—all the royal dukes flock to him. He's a barrister himself, and in excellent practice. You might do worse, do you know, than to go in for Alan Merrick."

Herminia's lip curled an almost imperceptible curl as she answered gravely, "I don't think you quite understand my plans in life, Mrs. Dewsbury. It isn't my present intention to GO IN for anybody."

But Mrs. Dewsbury shook her head. She knew the world she lived in. "Ah, I've heard a great many girls talk like that beforehand," she answered at once with her society glibness; "but when the right man turned up, they soon forgot their

protestations. It makes a lot of difference, dear, when a man really asks you!"

Herminia bent her head. "You misunderstand me," she replied. "I don't mean to say I will never fall in love. I expect to do that. I look forward to it frankly,—it is a woman's place in life. I only mean to say, I don't think anything will ever induce me to marry,—that is to say, legally."

Mrs. Dewsbury gave a start of surprise and horror. She really didn't know what girls were coming to nowadays,—which, considering her first principles, was certainly natural. But if only she had seen the conscious flush with which Herminia received her visitor that afternoon, she would have been confirmed in her belief that Herminia, after all, in spite of her learning, was much like other girls. In which conclusion Mrs. Dewsbury would not in the end have been fully justified.

When Alan arrived, Herminia sat at the window by the quaintly clipped box-tree, a volume of verse held half closed in her hand, though she was a great deal too honest and transparent to pretend she was reading it. She expected Alan to call, in accordance with his promise, for she had seen at Mrs. Dewsbury's how great an impression she produced upon him; and, having taught herself that it was every true woman's duty to avoid the affectations and self-deceptions which the rule of man has begotten in women, she didn't try to conceal from herself the fact that she on her side was by no means without interest in the question how soon he would pay her his promised visit. As he

appeared at the rustic gate in the privet hedge, Herminia looked out, and changed color with pleasure when she saw him push it open.

"Oh, how nice of you to look me up so soon!" she cried, jumping from her seat (with just a glance at the glass) and strolling out bareheaded into the cottage garden. "Isn't this a charming place? Only look at our hollyhocks! Consider what an oasis after six months of London!"

She seemed even prettier than last night, in her simple white morning dress, a mere ordinary English gown, without affectation of any sort, yet touched with some faint reminiscence of a flowing Greek chiton. Its half-classical drapery exactly suited the severe regularity of her pensive features and her graceful figure. Alan thought as he looked at her he had never before seen anybody who appeared at all points so nearly to approach his ideal of womanhood. She was at once so high in type, so serene, so tranquil, and yet so purely womanly.

"Yes, it IS a lovely place," he answered, looking around at the clematis that drooped from the gable-ends. "I'm staying myself with the Watertons at the Park, but I'd rather have this pretty little rose-bowered garden than all their balustrades and Italian terraces. The cottagers have chosen the better part. What gillyflowers and what columbines! And here you look out so directly on the common. I love the gorse and the bracken, I love the stagnant pond, I love the very geese that tug hard at the silverweed, they make it all seem so deliciously English."

"Shall we walk to the ridge?" Herminia asked with a sudden burst of suggestion. "It's too rare a day to waste a minute of it indoors. I was waiting till you came. We can talk all the freer for the fresh air on the hill-top."

Nothing could have suited Alan Merrick better, and he said so at once. Herminia disappeared for a moment to get her hat. Alan observed almost without observing it that she was gone but for a second. She asked none of that long interval that most women require for the simplest matter of toilet. She was back again almost instantly, bright and fresh and smiling, in the most modest of hats, set so artlessly on her head that it became her better than all art could have made it. Then they started for a long stroll across the breezy common, yellow in places with upright spikes of small summer furze, and pink with wild pea-blossom. Bees buzzed, broom crackled, the chirp of the field cricket rang shrill from the sand-banks. Herminia's light foot tripped over the spongy turf. By the top of the furthest ridge, looking down on North Holmwood church, they sat side by side for a while on the close short grass, brocaded with daisies, and gazed across at the cropped sward of Denbies and the long line of the North Downs stretching away towards Reigate. Tender grays and greens melted into one another on the larches hard by; Betchworth chalk-pit gleamed dreamy white in the middle distance. They had been talking earnestly all the way, like two old friends together; for they were both of them young, and they felt at once that nameless bond which often draws one closer to a new acquaintance at first

sight than years of converse. "How seriously you look at life," Alan cried at last, in answer to one of Herminias graver thoughts. "I wonder what makes you take it so much more earnestly than all other women?"

"It came to me all at once when I was about sixteen," Herminia answered with quiet composure, like one who remarks upon some objective fact of external nature. "It came to me in listening to a sermon of my father's,—which I always look upon as one more instance of the force of heredity. He was preaching on the text, 'The Truth shall make you Free,' and all that he said about it seemed to me strangely alive, to be heard from a pulpit. He said we ought to seek the Truth before all things, and never to rest till we felt sure we had found it. We should not suffer our souls to be beguiled into believing a falsehood merely because we wouldn't take the trouble to find out the Truth for ourselves by searching. We must dig for it; we must grope after it. And as he spoke, I made up my mind, in a flash of resolution, to find out the Truth for myself about everything, and never to be deterred from seeking it, and embracing it, and ensuing it when found, by any convention or preconception. Then he went on to say how the Truth would make us Free, and I felt he was right. It would open our eyes, and emancipate us from social and moral slaveries. So I made up my mind, at the same time, that whenever I found the Truth I would not scruple to follow it to its logical conclusions, but would practise it in my life, and let it make me Free with perfect freedom. Then, in search of Truth, I got my father to send

me to Girton; and when I had lighted on it there half by accident, and it had made me Free indeed, I went away from Girton again, because I saw if I stopped there I could never achieve and guard my freedom. From that day forth I have aimed at nothing but to know the Truth, and to act upon it freely; for, as Tennyson says, —

> 'To live by law
> Acting the law we live by without fear,
> And because right is right to follow right,
> Were wisdom in the scorn of consequence.'"

She broke off suddenly, and looking up, let her eye rest for a second on the dark thread of clambering pines that crest the down just above Brockham. "This is dreadfully egotistical," she cried, with a sharp little start. "I ought to apologize for talking so much to you about my own feelings."

Alan gazed at her and smiled. "Why apologize," he asked, "for managing to be interesting? You, are not egotistical at all. What you are telling me is history,—the history of a soul, which is always the one thing on earth worth hearing. I take it as a compliment that you should hold me worthy to hear it. It is a proof of confidence. Besides," he went on, after a second's pause, "I am a man; you are a woman. Under those circumstances, what would otherwise be egotism becomes common and mutual. When two people sympathize with one another, all they can say about themselves loses its personal tinge and merges into pure

human and abstract interest."

Herminia brought back her eyes from infinity to his face. "That's true," she said frankly. "The magic link of sex that severs and unites us makes all the difference. And, indeed, I confess I wouldn't so have spoken of my inmost feelings to another woman."

III

From that day forth, Alan and Herminia met frequently. Alan was given to sketching, and he sketched a great deal in his idle times on the common. He translated the cottages from real estate into poetry. On such occasions, Herminia's walks often led her in the same direction. For Herminia was frank; she liked the young man, and, the truth having made her free, she knew no reason why she should avoid or pretend to avoid his company. She had no fear of that sordid impersonal goddess who rules Philistia; it mattered not to her what "people said," or whether or not they said anything about her. "Aiunt: quid aiunt? aiant," was her motto. Could she have known to a certainty that her meetings on the common with Alan Merrick had excited unfavorable comment among the old ladies of Holmwood, the point would have seemed to her unworthy of an emancipated soul's consideration. She could estimate at its true worth the value of all human criticism upon human action.

So, day after day, she met Alan Merrick, half by accident, half by design, on the slopes of the Holmwood. They talked much together, for Alan liked her and understood her. His heart went out to her. Compact of like clay, he knew the meaning of her hopes and aspirations. Often as he sketched he would look up and wait, expecting to catch the faint sound of her light step, or see her lithe figure poised breezy against the sky on the neighboring

ridges. Whenever she drew near, his pulse thrilled at her coming, —a somewhat unusual experience with Alan Merrick. For Alan, though a pure soul in his way, and mixed of the finer paste, was not quite like those best of men, who are, so to speak, born married. A man with an innate genius for loving and being loved cannot long remain single. He MUST marry young; or at least, if he does not marry, he must find a companion, a woman to his heart, a help that is meet for him. What is commonly called prudence in such concerns is only another name for vice and cruelty. The purest and best of men necessarily mate themselves before they are twenty. As a rule, it is the selfish, the mean, the calculating, who wait, as they say, "till they can afford to marry." That vile phrase scarcely veils hidden depths of depravity. A man who is really a man, and who has a genius for loving, must love from the very first, and must feel himself surrounded by those who love him. 'Tis the first necessity of life to him; bread, meat, raiment, a house, an income, rank far second to that prime want in the good man's economy.

But Alan Merrick, though an excellent fellow in his way, and of noble fibre, was not quite one of the first, the picked souls of humanity. He did not count among the finger-posts who point the way that mankind will travel. Though Herminia always thought him so. That was her true woman's gift of the highest idealizing power. Indeed, it adds, to my mind, to the tragedy of Herminia Barton's life that the man for whom she risked and lost everything was never quite worthy of her; and that Herminia to the end not

once suspected it. Alan was over thirty, and was still "looking about him." That alone, you will admit, is a sufficiently grave condemnation. That a man should have arrived at the ripe age of thirty and not yet have lighted upon the elect lady—the woman without whose companionship life would be to him unendurable is in itself a strong proof of much underlying selfishness, or, what comes to the same thing, of a calculating disposition. The right sort of man doesn't argue with himself at all on these matters. He doesn't say with selfish coldness, "I can't afford a wife;" or, "If I marry now, I shall ruin my prospects." He feels and acts. He mates, like the birds, because he can't help himself. A woman crosses his path who is to him indispensable, a part of himself, the needful complement of his own personality; and without heed or hesitation he takes her to himself, lawfully or unlawfully, because he has need of her. That is how nature has made us; that is how every man worthy of the name of man has always felt, and thought, and acted. The worst of all possible and conceivable checks upon population is the vile one which Malthus glossed over as "the prudential," and which consists in substituting prostitution for marriage through the spring-tide of one's manhood.

Alan Merrick, however, was over thirty and still unmarried. More than that, he was heart-free,—a very evil record. And, like most other unmarried men of thirty, he was a trifle fastidious. He was "looking about him." That means to say, he was waiting to find some woman who suited him. No man does so at twenty.

He sees and loves. But Alan Merrick, having let slip the golden moment when nature prompts every growing youth to fling himself with pure devotion at the feet of the first good angel who happens to cross his path and attract his worship, had now outlived the early flush of pure passion, and was thinking only of "comfortably settling himself." In one word, when a man is young, he asks himself with a thrill what he can do to make happy this sweet soul he loves; when he has let that critical moment flow by him unseized, he asks only, in cold blood, what woman will most agreeably make life run smooth for him. The first stage is pure love; the second, pure selfishness.

Still, Alan Merrick was now "getting on in his profession," and, as people said, it was high time he should be settled. They said it as they might have said it was high time he should take a business partner. From that lowest depth of emotional disgrace Herminia Barton was to preserve him. It was her task in life, though she knew it not, to save Alan Merrick's soul. And nobly she saved it.

Alan, "looking about him," with some fine qualities of nature underlying in the background that mean social philosophy of the class from which he sprang, fell frankly in love almost at first sight with Herminia. He admired and respected her. More than that, he understood her. She had power in her purity to raise his nature for a time to something approaching her own high level. True woman has the real Midas gift: all that she touches turns to purest gold. Seeing Herminia much and talking with her,

Alan could not fail to be impressed with the idea that here was a soul which could do a great deal more for him than "make him comfortable,"—which could raise him to moral heights he had hardly yet dreamt of,—which could wake in him the best of which he was capable. And watching her thus, he soon fell in love with her, as few men of thirty are able to fall in love for the first time,—as the young man falls in love, with the unselfish energy of an unspoilt nature. He asked no longer whether Herminia was the sort of girl who could make him comfortable; he asked only, with that delicious tremor of self-distrust which belongs to naive youth, whether he dare offer himself to one so pure and good and beautiful. And his hesitation was justified; for our sordid England has not brought forth many such serene and single-minded souls as Herminia Barton.

At last one afternoon they had climbed together the steep red face of the sandy slope that rises abruptly from the Holmwood towards Leith Hill, by the Robin Gate entrance. Near the top, they had seated themselves on a carpet of sheep-sorrel, looking out across the imperturbable expanse of the Weald, and the broad pastures of Sussex. A solemn blue haze brooded soft over the land. The sun was sinking low; oblique afternoon lights flooded the distant South Downs. Their combes came out aslant in saucer-shaped shadows. Alan turned and gazed at Herminia; she was hot with climbing, and her calm face was flushed. A town-bred girl would have looked red and blowsy; but the color and the exertion just suited Herminia. On that healthy brown

cheek it seemed natural to discern the visible marks of effort. Alan gazed at her with a sudden rush of untrammelled feeling. The elusive outline of her grave sweet face, the wistful eyes, the ripe red mouth enticed him. "Oh, Herminia," he cried, calling her for the first time by her Christian name alone, "how glad I am I happened to go that afternoon to Mrs. Dewsbury's. For otherwise perhaps I might never have known you."

Herminia's heart gave a delicious bound. She was a woman, and therefore she was glad he should speak so. She was a woman, and therefore she shrank from acknowledging it. But she looked him back in the face tranquilly, none the less on that account, and answered with sweet candor, "Thank you so much, Mr. Merrick."

"*I* said 'Herminia,'" the young man corrected, smiling, yet aghast at his own audacity.

"And I thanked you for it," Herminia answered, casting down those dark lashes, and feeling the heart throb violently under her neat bodice.

Alan drew a deep breath. "And it was THAT you thanked me for," he ejaculated, tingling.

"Yes, it was that I thanked you for," Herminia answered, with a still deeper rose spreading down to her bare throat. "I like you very much, and it pleases me to hear you call me Herminia. Why should I shrink from admitting it? 'Tis the Truth, you know; and the Truth shall make us Free. I'm not afraid of my freedom."

Alan paused for a second, irresolute. "Herminia," he said at last, leaning forward till his face was very close to hers, and he

could feel the warm breath that came and went so quickly; "that's very, very kind of you. I needn't tell you I've been thinking a great deal about you these last three weeks or so. You have filled my mind; filled it to the brim, and I think you know it."

Philosopher as she was, Herminia plucked a blade of grass, and drew it quivering through her tremulous fingers. It caught and hesitated. "I guessed as much, I think," she answered, low but frankly.

The young man's heart gave a bound. "And YOU, Herminia?" he asked, in an eager ecstasy.

Herminia was true to the Truth. "I've thought a great deal about you too, Mr. Merrick," she answered, looking down, but with a great gladness thrilling her.

"I said 'Herminia,'" the young man repeated, with a marked stress on the Christian name.

Herminia hesitated a second. Then two crimson spots flared forth on her speaking face, as she answered with an effort, "About you too, Alan."

The young man drew back and gazed at her.

She was very, very beautiful. "Dare I ask you, Herminia?" he cried. "Have I a right to ask you? Am I worthy of you, I mean? Ought I to retire as not your peer, and leave you to some man who could rise more easily to the height of your dignity?"

"I've thought about that too," Herminia answered, still firm to her principles. "I've thought it all over. I've said to myself, Shall I do right in monopolizing him, when he is so great, and sweet,

and true, and generous? Not monopolizing, of course, for that would be wrong and selfish; but making you my own more than any other woman's. And I answered my own heart, Yes, yes, I shall do right to accept him, if he asks me; for I love him, that is enough. The thrill within me tells me so. Nature put that thrill in our souls to cry out to us with a clear voice when we had met the soul she then and there intended for us."

Alan's face flushed like her own. "Then you love me," he cried, all on fire. "And you deign to tell me so; Oh, Herminia, how sweet you are. What have I done to deserve it?"

He folded her in his arms. Her bosom throbbed on his. Their lips met for a second. Herminia took his kiss with sweet submission, and made no faint pretence of fighting against it. Her heart was full. She quickened to the finger-tips.

There was silence for a minute or two,—the silence when soul speaks direct to soul through the vehicle of touch, the mother-tongue of the affections. Then Alan leaned back once more, and hanging over her in a rapture murmured in soft low tones, "So Herminia, you will be mine! You say beforehand you will take me."

"Not WILL be yours," Herminia corrected in that silvery voice of hers. "AM yours already, Alan. I somehow feel as if I had always been yours. I am yours this moment. You may do what you would with me."

She said it so simply, so purely, so naturally, with all the supreme faith of the good woman, enamoured, who can yield

herself up without blame to the man who loves her, that it hardly even occurred to Alan's mind to wonder at her self-surrender. Yet he drew back all the same in a sudden little crisis of doubt and uncertainty. He scarcely realized what she meant. "Then, dearest," he cried tentatively, "how soon may we be married?"

At sound of those unexpected words from such lips as his, a flush of shame and horror overspread Herminia's cheek. "Never!" she cried firmly, drawing away. "Oh, Alan, what can you mean by it? Don't tell me, after all I've tried to make you feel and understand, you thought I could possibly consent to MARRY you?"

The man gazed at her in surprise. Though he was prepared for much, he was scarcely prepared for such devotion to principle. "Oh, Herminia," he cried, "you can't mean it. You can't have thought of what it entails. Surely, surely, you won't carry your ideas of freedom to such an extreme, such a dangerous conclusion!"

Herminia looked up at him, half hurt. "Can't have thought of what it entails!" she repeated. Her dimples deepened. "Why, Alan, haven't I had my whole lifetime to think of it? What else have I thought about in any serious way, save this one great question of a woman's duty to herself, and her sex, and her unborn children? It's been my sole study. How could you fancy I spoke hastily, or without due consideration on such a subject? Would you have me like the blind girls who go unknowing to the altar, as sheep go to the shambles? Could you suspect me of such

carelessness?—such culpable thoughtlessness?—you, to whom I have spoken of all this so freely?"

Alan stared at her, disconcerted, hardly knowing how to answer. "But what alternative do you propose, then?" he asked in his amazement.

"Propose?" Herminia repeated, taken aback in her turn. It all seemed to her so plain, and transparent, and natural. "Why, simply that we should be friends, like any others, very dear, dear friends, with the only kind of friendship that nature makes possible between men and women."

She said it so softly, with some womanly gentleness, yet with such lofty candor, that Alan couldn't help admiring her more than ever before for her translucent simplicity, and directness of purpose. Yet her suggestion frightened him. It was so much more novel to him than to her. Herminia had reasoned it all out with herself, as she truly said, for years, and knew exactly how she felt and thought about it. To Alan, on the contrary, it came with the shock of a sudden surprise, and he could hardly tell on the spur of the moment how to deal with it. He paused and reflected. "But do you mean to say, Herminia," he asked, still holding that soft brown hand unresisted in his, "you've made up your mind never to marry any one? made up your mind to brave the whole mad world, that can't possibly understand the motives of your conduct, and live with some friend, as you put it, unmarried?"

"Yes, I've made up my mind," Herminia answered, with a faint tremor in her maidenly voice, but with hardly a trace now of a

traitorous blush, where no blush was needed. "I've made up my mind, Alan; and from all we had said and talked over together, I thought you at least would sympathize in my resolve."

She spoke with a gentle tinge of regret, nay almost of disillusion. The bare suggestion of that regret stung Alan to the quick. He felt it was shame to him that he could not rise at once to the height of her splendid self-renunciation. "You mistake me, dearest," he answered, petting her hand in his own (and she allowed him to pet it). "It wasn't for myself, or for the world I hesitated. My thought was for you. You are very young yet. You say you have counted the cost. I wonder if you have. I wonder if you realize it."

"Only too well," Herminia replied, in a very earnest mood. "I have wrought it all out in my mind beforehand,—covenanted with my soul that for women's sake I would be a free woman. Alan, whoever would be free must himself strike the blow. I know what you will say,—what every man would say to the woman he loved under similar circumstances,—'Why should YOU be the victim? Why should YOU be the martyr? Bask in the sun yourself; leave this doom to some other.' But, Alan, I can't. I feel *I* must face it. Unless one woman begins, there will be no beginning." She lifted his hand in her own, and fondled it in her turn with caressing tenderness. "Think how easy it would be for me, dear friend," she cried, with a catch in her voice, "to do as other women do; to accept the HONORABLE MARRIAGE you offer me, as other women would call it; to be false to my sex,

a traitor to my convictions; to sell my kind for a mess of pottage, a name and a home, or even for thirty pieces of silver, to be some rich man's wife, as other women have sold it. But, Alan, I can't. My conscience won't let me. I know what marriage is, from what vile slavery it has sprung; on what unseen horrors for my sister women it is reared and buttressed; by what unholy sacrifices it is sustained, and made possible. I know it has a history, I know its past, I know its present, and I can't embrace it; I can't be untrue to my most sacred beliefs. I can't pander to the malignant thing, just because a man who loves me would be pleased by my giving way and would kiss me, and fondle me for it. And I love you to fondle me. But I must keep my proper place, the freedom which I have gained for myself by such arduous efforts. I have said to you already, 'So far as my will goes, I am yours; take me, and do as you choose with me.' That much I can yield, as every good woman should yield it, to the man she loves, to the man who loves her. But more than that, no. It would be treason to my sex; not my life, not my future, not my individuality, not my freedom."

"I wouldn't ask you for those," Alan answered, carried away by the torrent flood of her passionate speech. "I would wish you to guard them. But, Herminia, just as a matter of form,—to prevent the world from saying the cruel things the world is sure to say,—and as an act of justice to you, and your children! A mere ceremony of marriage; what more does it mean now-a-days than that we two agree to live together on the ordinary terms of civilized society?"

Still Herminia shook her head. "No, no," she cried vehemently. "I deny and decline those terms; they are part and parcel of a system of slavery. I have learnt that the righteous soul should avoid all appearance of evil. I will not palter and parley with the unholy thing. Even though you go to a registry-office and get rid as far as you can of every relic of the sacerdotal and sacramental idea, yet the marriage itself is still an assertion of man's supremacy over woman. It ties her to him for life, it ignores her individuality, it compels her to promise what no human heart can be sure of performing; for you can contract to do or not to do, easily enough, but contract to feel or not to feel, —what transparent absurdity! It is full of all evils, and I decline to consider it. If I love a man at all, I must love him on terms of perfect freedom. I can't bind myself down to live with him to my shame one day longer than I love him; or to love him at all if I find him unworthy of my purest love, or unable to retain it; or if I discover some other more fit to be loved by me. You admitted the other day that all this was abstractly true; why should you wish this morning to draw back from following it out to its end in practice?"

Alan was only an Englishman, and shared, of course, the inability of his countrymen to carry any principle to its logical conclusion. He was all for admitting that though things must really be so, yet it were prudent in life to pretend they were otherwise. This is the well-known English virtue of moderation and compromise; it has made England what she is, the shabbiest,

sordidest, worst-organized of nations. So he paused for a second and temporized. "It's for your sake, Herminia," he said again; "I can't bear to think of your making yourself a martyr. And I don't see how, if you act as you propose, you could escape martyrdom."

Herminia looked up at him with pleading eyes. Tears just trembled on the edge of those glistening lashes. "It never occurred to me to think," she said gently but bravely, "my life could ever end in anything else but martyrdom. It MUST needs be so with all true lives, and all good ones. For whoever sees the truth, whoever strives earnestly with all his soul to be good, must be raised many planes above the common mass of men around him; he must be a moral pioneer, and the moral pioneer is always a martyr. People won't allow others to be wiser and better than themselves, unpunished. They can forgive anything except moral superiority. We have each to choose between acquiescence in the wrong, with a life of ease, and struggle for the right, crowned at last by inevitable failure. To succeed is to fail, and failure is the only success worth aiming at. Every great and good life can but end in a Calvary."

"And I want to save you from that," Alan cried, leaning over her with real tenderness, for she was already very dear to him. "I want to save you from yourself; I want to make you think twice before you rush headlong into such a danger."

"NOT to save me from myself, but to save me from my own higher and better nature," Herminia answered with passionate

seriousness. "Alan, I don't want any man to save me from that; I want you rather to help me, to strengthen me, to sympathize with me. I want you to love me, not for my face and form alone, not for what I share with every other woman, but for all that is holiest and deepest within me. If you can't love me for that, I don't ask you to love me; I want to be loved for what I am in myself, for the yearnings I possess that are most of all peculiar to me. I know you are attracted to me by those yearnings above everything; why wish me untrue to them? It was because I saw you could sympathize with me in these impulses that I said to myself, Here, at last, is the man who can go through life as an aid and a spur to me. Don't tell me I was mistaken; don't belie my belief. Be what I thought you were, what I know you are. Work with me, and help me. Lift me! raise me! exalt me! Take me on the sole terms on which I can give myself up to you."

She stretched her arms out, pleading; she turned those subtle eyes to him, appealingly. She was a beautiful woman. Alan Merrick was human. The man in him gave way; he seized her in his clasp, and pressed her close to his bosom. It heaved tumultuously. "I could do anything for you, Herminia," he cried, "and indeed, I do sympathize with you. But give me, at least, till to-morrow to think this thing over. It is a momentous question; don't let us be precipitate."

Herminia drew a long breath. His embrace thrilled through her. "As you will," she answered with a woman's meekness. "But remember, Alan, what I say I mean; on these terms it shall be,

and upon none others. Brave women before me have tried for awhile to act on their own responsibility, for the good of their sex; but never of their own free will from the very beginning. They have avoided marriage, not because they thought it a shame and a surrender, a treason to their sex, a base yielding to the unjust pretensions of men, but because there existed at the time some obstacle in their way in the shape of the vested interest of some other woman. When Mary Godwin chose to mate herself with Shelley, she took her good name in her hands; but still there was Harriet. As soon as Harriet was dead, Mary showed she had no deep principle of action involved, by marrying Shelley. When George Eliot chose to pass her life with Lewes on terms of equal freedom, she defied the man-made law; but still, there was his wife to prevent the possibility of a legalized union. As soon as Lewes was dead, George Eliot showed she had no principle involved, by marrying another man. Now, *I* have the rare chance of acting otherwise; I can show the world from the very first that I act from principle, and from principle only. I can say to it in effect, 'See, here is the man of my choice, the man I love, truly, and purely, the man any one of you would willingly have seen offering himself in lawful marriage to your own daughters. If I would, I might go the beaten way you prescribe, and marry him legally. But of my own free will I disdain that degradation; I choose rather to be free. No fear of your scorn, no dread of your bigotry, no shrinking at your cruelty, shall prevent me from following the thorny path I know to be the right one. I seek no

temporal end. I will not prove false to the future of my kind in order to protect myself from your hateful indignities. I know on what vile foundations your temple of wedlock is based and built, what pitiable victims languish and die in its sickening vaults; and I will not consent to enter it. Here, of my own free will, I take my stand for the right, and refuse your sanctions! No woman that I know of has ever yet done that. Other women have fallen, as men choose to put it in their odious dialect; no other has voluntarily risen as I propose to do.'" She paused a moment for breath. "Now you know how I feel," she continued, looking straight into his eyes. "Say no more at present; it is wisest so. But go home and think it out, and talk it over with me tomorrow."

IV

That night Alan slept little. Even at dinner his hostess, Mrs. Waterton, noticed his preoccupation; and, on the pretext of a headache, he retired early to his own bedroom. His mind was full of Herminia and these strange ideas of hers; how could he listen with a becoming show of interest to Ethel Waterton's aspirations on the grand piano after a gipsy life,—oh, a gipsy life for her!—when in point of fact she was a most insipid blonde from the cover of a chocolate box? So he went to bed betimes, and there lay long awake, deep wondering to himself how to act about Herminia.

He was really in love with her. That much he acknowledged frankly. More profoundly in love than he had ever conceived it possible he could find himself with any one. Hitherto, he had "considered" this girl or that, mostly on his mother's or sister's recommendation; and after observing her critically for a day or two, as he might have observed a horse or any other intended purchase, he had come to the conclusion "she wouldn't do," and had ceased to entertain her. But with Herminia, he was in love. The potent god had come upon him. That imperious inner monitor which cries aloud to a man, "You must have this girl, because you can't do without her; you must strive to make her happy, because her happiness is more to you now ten thousand fold than your own," that imperious inner monitor had spoken out at last in no uncertain tone to Alan Merrick. He knew for the

first time what it is to be in love; in love with a true and beautiful woman, not with his own future convenience and comfort. The keen fresh sense it quickened within him raised him for the moment some levels above himself. For Herminia's sake, he felt, he could do or dare anything.

Nay, more; as Herminia herself had said to him, it was her better, her inner self he was in love with, not the mere statuesque face, the full and faultless figure. He saw how pure, how pellucid, how noble the woman was; treading her own ideal world of high seraphic harmonies. He was in love with her stainless soul; he could not have loved her so well, could not have admired her so profoundly, had she been other than she was, had she shared the common prejudices and preconceptions of women. It was just because she was Herminia that he felt so irresistibly attracted towards her. She drew him like a magnet. What he loved and admired was not so much the fair, frank face itself, as the lofty Cornelia-like spirit behind it.

And yet,—he hesitated.

Could he accept the sacrifice this white soul wished to make for him? Could he aid and abet her in raising up for herself so much undeserved obloquy? Could he help her to become Anathema maranatha among her sister women? Even if she felt brave enough to try the experiment herself for humanity's sake, was it not his duty as a man to protect her from her own sublime and generous impulses? Is it not for that in part that nature makes us virile? We must shield the weaker vessel. He was flattered

not a little that this leader among women should have picked him out for herself among the ranks of men as her predestined companion in her chosen task of emancipating her sex. And he was thoroughly sympathetic (as every good man must needs be) with her aims and her method. Yet, still he hesitated. Never before could he have conceived such a problem of the soul, such a moral dilemma possible. It rent heart and brain at once asunder. Instinctively he felt to himself he would be doing wrong should he try in any way to check these splendid and unselfish impulses which led Herminia to offer herself willingly up as a living sacrifice on behalf of her enslaved sisters everywhere. Yet the innate feeling of the man, that 'tis his place to protect and guard the woman, even from her own higher and purer self, intervened to distract him. He couldn't bear to feel he might be instrumental in bringing upon his pure Herminia the tortures that must be in store for her; he couldn't bear to think his name might be coupled with hers in shameful ways, too base for any man to contemplate.

And then, intermixed with these higher motives, came others that he hardly liked to confess to himself where Herminia was concerned, but which nevertheless would obtrude themselves, will he, nill he, upon him. What would other people say about such an innocent union as Herminia contemplated? Not indeed, "What effect would it have upon his position and prospects?" Alan Merrick's place as a barrister was fairly well assured, and the Bar is luckily one of the few professions in lie-loving England

where a man need not grovel at the mercy of the moral judgment of the meanest and grossest among his fellow-creatures, as is the case with the Church, with medicine, with the politician, and with the schoolmaster. But Alan could not help thinking all the same how people would misinterpret and misunderstand his relations with the woman he loved, if he modelled them strictly upon Herminia's wishes. It was hateful, it was horrible to have to con the thing over, where that faultless soul was concerned, in the vile and vulgar terms other people would apply to it; but for Herminia's sake, con it over so he must; and though he shrank from the effort with a deadly shrinking, he nevertheless faced it. Men at the clubs would say he had seduced Herminia. Men at the clubs would lay the whole blame of the episode upon him; and he couldn't bear to be so blamed for the sake of a woman, to save whom from the faintest shadow of disgrace or shame he would willingly have died a thousand times over. For since Herminia had confessed her love to him yesterday, he had begun to feel how much she was to him. His admiration and appreciation of her had risen inexpressibly. And was he now to be condemned for having dragged down to the dust that angel whose white wings he felt himself unworthy to touch with the hem of his garment?

And yet, once more, when he respected her so much for the sacrifice she was willing to make for humanity, would it be right for him to stand in her way, to deter her from realizing her own highest nature? She was Herminia just because she lived in that world of high hopes, just because she had the courage and the

nobility to dare this great thing. Would it be right of him to bring her down from that pedestal whereon she stood so austere, and urge upon her that she should debase herself to be as any other woman,—even as Ethel Waterton? For the Watertons had brought him there to propose to Ethel.

For hours he tossed and turned and revolved these problems. Rain beat on the leaded panes of the Waterton dormers. Day dawned, but no light came with it to his troubled spirit. The more he thought of this dilemma, the more profoundly he shrank from the idea of allowing himself to be made into the instrument for what the world would call, after its kind, Herminia's shame and degradation. For even if the world could be made to admit that Herminia had done what she did from chaste and noble motives,—which considering what we all know of the world, was improbable,—yet at any rate it could never allow that he himself had acted from any but the vilest and most unworthy reasons. Base souls would see in the sacrifice he made to Herminia's ideals, only the common story of a trustful woman cruelly betrayed by the man who pretended to love her, and would proceed to treat him with the coldness and contempt with which such a man deserves to be treated.

As the morning wore on, this view of the matter obtruded itself more and more forcibly every moment on Alan. Over and over again he said to himself, let come what come might, he must never aid and abet that innocent soul in rushing blindfold over a cliff to her own destruction. It is so easy at twenty-two to ruin

yourself for life; so difficult at thirty to climb slowly back again. No, no, holy as Herminia's impulses were, he must save her from herself; he must save her from her own purity; he must refuse to be led astray by her romantic aspirations. He must keep her to the beaten path trod by all petty souls, and preserve her from the painful crown of martyrdom she herself designed as her eternal diadem.

Full of these manful resolutions, he rose up early in the morning. He would be his Herminia's guardian angel. He would use her love for him,—for he knew she loved him,—as a lever to egg her aside from these slippery moral precipices.

He mistook the solid rock of ethical resolution he was trying to disturb with so frail an engine. The fulcrum itself would yield far sooner to the pressure than the weight of Herminia's uncompromising rectitude. Passionate as she was,—and with that opulent form she could hardly be otherwise,—principle was still deeper and more imperious with her than passion.

V

He met her by appointment on the first ridge of Bore Hill. A sunny summer morning smiled fresh after the rain. Bumble-bees bustled busily about the closed lips of the red-rattle, and ripe gorse pods burst with little elastic explosions in the basking sunlight.

When Alan reached the trysting-place, under a broad-armed oak, in a glade of the woodland, Herminia was there before him; a good woman always is, 'tis the prerogative of her affection. She was simply dressed in her dainty print gown, a single tea-rosebud peeped out from her bodice; she looked more lily-like, so Alan thought in his heart, than he had ever yet seen her. She held out her hand to him with parted lips and a conscious blush. Alan took it, but bent forward at the same time, and with a hasty glance around, just touched her rich mouth. Herminia allowed him without a struggle; she was too stately of mien ever to grant a favor without granting it of pure grace, and with queenly munificence.

Alan led her to a grassy bank where thyme and basil grew matted, and the hum of myriad wings stirred the sultry air; Herminia let him lead her. She was woman enough by nature to like being led; only, it must be the right man who led her, and he must lead her along the path that her conscience approved of. Alan seated himself by her side, and took her hand in his;

Herminia let him hold it. This lovemaking was pure honey. Dappled spots of light and shade flecked the ground beneath the trees like a jaguar's skin. Wood-pigeons crooned, unseen, from the leafy covert. She sat there long without uttering a word. Once Alan essayed to speak, but Herminia cut him short. "Oh, no, not yet," she cried half petulantly; "this silence is so delicious. I love best just to sit and hold your hand like this. Why spoil it with language?"

So they sat for some minutes, Herminia with her eyes half-closed, drinking in to the full the delight of first love. She could feel her heart beating. At last Alan interposed, and began to speak to her. The girl drew a long breath; then she sighed for a second, as she opened her eyes again. Every curve of her bosom heaved and swayed mysteriously. It seemed such a pity to let articulate words disturb that reverie. Still, if Alan wished it. For a woman is a woman, let Girton do its worst; and Herminia not less but rather more than the rest of them.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.