

Weyman Stanley John

When Love Calls



Stanley Weyman
When Love Calls

«Public Domain»

Weyman S.

When Love Calls / S. Weyman — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	11
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	15

Weyman Stanley John

When Love Calls

I

HER STORY

"Clare," I said, "I wish that we had brought some better clothes, if it were only one frock. You look the oddest figure."

And she did. She was lying head to head with me on the thick moss that clothed one part of the river-bank above Breistolen near the Sogn Fiord. We were staying at Breistolen, but there was no moss thereabouts, nor in all the Sogn district, I often thought, so deep and soft, and so dazzling orange and white and crimson as that particular patch. It lay quite high upon the hills, and there were great gray boulders peeping through the moss here and there, very fit to break your legs if you were careless. Little more than a mile higher up was the watershed, where our river, putting away with reluctance a first thought of going down the farther slope towards Bysberg, parted from its twin brother who was thither bound with scores upon scores of puny green-backed fishlets; and instead, came down our side gliding and swishing, and swirling faster and faster, and deeper and wider, every hundred yards to Breistolen, full of red-speckled yellow trout all half-a-pound apiece, and very good to eat.

But they were not so sweet or toothsome to our girlish tastes as the tawny-orange cloud-berries which Clare and I were eating as we lay. So busy was she with the luscious pile we had gathered that I had to wait for an answer. And then, "Speak for yourself," she said. "I'm sure you look like a short-coated baby. He is somewhere up the river too." Munch, munch, munch!

"Who is, you impertinent, greedy little chit?"

"Oh, you know," she answered. "Don't you wish you had your gray plush here, Bab?"

I flung a look of calm disdain at her; but whether it was the berry juice which stained our faces that took from its effect, or the free mountain air which papa says saps the foundations of despotism, that made her callous, at any rate she only laughed scornfully and got up and went off down the stream with her rod, leaving me to finish the cloud-berries, and stare lazily up at the snow patches on the hillside-which somehow put me in mind of the gray plush-and follow or not as I liked.

Clare has a wicked story of how I gave in to papa, and came to start without anything but those rough clothes. She says he said-and Jack Buchanan has told me that lawyers put no faith in anything that he says she says, or she says he says, which proves how much truth there is in this-that if Bab took none but her oldest clothes, and fished all day and had no one to run upon her errands-he meant Jack and the others, I suppose-she might possibly grow an inch in Norway. Just as if I wanted to grow an inch! An inch indeed! I am five feet one and a half high, and papa, who puts me an inch shorter, is the worst measurer in the world. As for Miss Clare, she would give all her inches for my eyes. So there!

After Clare left, it began to be dull and chilly. When I had pictured to myself how nice it would be to dress for dinner again, and chosen the frock I would wear upon the first evening, I grew tired of the snow patches, and started up stream, stumbling and falling into holes, and clambering over rocks, and only careful to save my rod and my face. It was no occasion for the gray plush, but I had made up my mind to reach a pool which lay, I knew, a little above me, having filched a yellow-bodied fly from Clare's hat with a view to that particular place.

Our river did the oddest things hereabouts-pleased to be so young, I suppose. It was not a great churning stream of snow water foaming and milky, such as we had seen in some parts, streams that affected to be always in flood, and had the look of forcing the rocks asunder and clearing their path even while you watched them with your fingers in your ears. Our river was none of these: still it was

swifter than English rivers are wont to be, and in parts deeper, and transparent as glass. In one place it would sweep over a ledge and fall wreathed in spray into a spreading lake of black, rock-bound water. Then it would narrow again until, where you could almost jump across, it darted smooth and unbroken down a polished shoot with a swoop like a swallow's. Out of this it would hurry afresh to brawl along a gravelly bed, skipping jauntily over first one and then another ridge of stones that had silted up weir-wise and made as if they would bar the channel. Under the lee of these there were lovely pools.

To be able to throw into mine, I had to walk out along the ridge on which the water was shallow, yet sufficiently deep to cover my boots. But I was well rewarded. The "forellin" – the Norse name for trout, and as pretty as their girls' wavy fair hair-were rising so merrily that I hooked and landed one in five minutes, the fly falling from its mouth as it touched the stones. I hate taking out hooks. I used at one time to leave the fly in the fish's mouth to be removed by papa at the weighing house; until Clare pricked her tongue at dinner with an almost new, red tackle, and was so mean as to keep it, though I remembered then what I had done with it, and was certain it was mine-which was nothing less than dishonest of her.

I had just got back to my place and made a fine cast, when there came-not the leap, and splash, and tug which announced the half-pounder-but a deep, rich gurgle as the fly was gently sucked under, and then a quiet, growing strain upon the line, which began to move away down the pool in a way that made the winch spin again and filled me with mysterious pleasure. I was not conscious of striking or of anything but that I had hooked a really good fish, and I clutched the rod with both hands and set my feet as tightly as I could upon the slippery gravel. The line moved up and down, and this way and that, now steadily and as with a purpose, and then again with an eccentric rush that made the top of the rod spring and bend so that I looked for it to snap each moment. My hands began to grow numb, and the landing-net, hitherto an ornament, fell out of my waist-belt and went I knew not whither. I suppose I must have stepped unwittingly into deeper water, for I felt that my skirts were afloat, and altogether things were going dreadfully against me, when the presence of an ally close at hand was announced by a cheery shout from the far side of the river.

"Keep up your point! Keep up your point!" some one cried briskly. "That is better!"

The unexpected sound-it was a man's voice-did something to keep my heart up. But for answer I could only shriek, "I can't! It will break!" watching the top of my rod as it jiggled up and down, very much in the fashion of Clare performing what she calls a waltz. She dances as badly as a man.

"No, it will not," he cried back, bluntly. "Keep it up, and let out a little line with your fingers when he pulls hardest."

We were forced to shout and scream. The wind had risen and was adding to the noise of the water. Soon I heard him wading behind me. "Where's your landing net?" he asked, with the most provoking coolness.

"Oh, in the pool! Somewhere about. I am sure I don't know," I answered wildly.

What he said to this I could not catch, but it sounded rude. And then he waded off to fetch, as I guessed, his own net. By the time he reached me again I was in a sad plight, feet like ice, and hands benumbed, while the wind, and rain, and hail, which had come down upon us with a sudden violence, unknown, it is to be hoped, anywhere else, were mottling my face all sorts of unbecoming colors. But the line was taut. And wet and cold went for nothing five minutes later, when the fish lay upon the bank, its prismatic sides slowly turning pale and dull, and I knelt over it half in pity and half in triumph, but wholly forgetful of the wind and rain.

"You did that very pluckily, little one," said the on-looker; "but I am afraid you will suffer for it by and by. You must be chilled through."

Quickly as I looked up at him, I only met a good-humored smile. He did not mean to be rude. And, after all, when I was in such a mess it was not possible that he could see what I was like. He was wet enough himself. The rain was streaming from the brim of the soft hat which he had turned down to shelter his face, and trickling from his chin, and turning his shabby Norfolk jacket a darker shade.

As for his hands, they looked red and knuckly enough, and he had been wading almost to his waist. But he looked, I don't know why, all the stronger and manlier and nicer for these things, because, perhaps, he cared for them not one whit. What I looked like myself I dared not think. My skirts were as short as short could be, and they were soaked: most of my hair was unplaited, my gloves were split, and my sodden boots were out of shape. I was forced, too, to shiver and shake from cold; which was provoking, for I knew it made me seem half as small again.

"Thank you, I am a little cold, Mr. —, Mr. —," I said, grave, only my teeth would chatter so that he laughed outright as he took me up with-

"Herapath. And to whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"I am Miss Guest," I said, miserably. It was too cold to be frigid to advantage.

"Commonly called Bab, I think," the wretch answered. "The walls of our hut are not soundproof, you see. But, come, the sooner you get back to dry clothes and the stove, the better, Bab. You can cross the river just below, and cut off half-a-mile that way."

"I can't," I said, obstinately. Bab, indeed! How dared he?

"Oh, yes, you can," with intolerable good-temper. "You shall take your rod and I the prey. You cannot be wetter than you are now."

He had his way, of course, since I did not foresee that at the ford he would lift me up bodily and carry me over the deeper part without a pretence of asking leave, or a word of apology. It was done so quickly that I had no time to remonstrate. Still I was not going to let it pass, and when I had shaken myself straight again, I said, with all the haughtiness I could assume, "Don't you think, Mr. Herapath, that it would have been more-more-"

"Polite to offer to carry you over, child? No, not at all. It will be wiser and warmer for you to run down the hill. Come along!"

And without more ado, while I was still choking with rage, he seized my hands and set off at a trot, lugging me through the sloppy places much as I have seen a nurse drag a fractious child down Constitution Hill. It was not wonderful that I soon lost the little breath his speech had left me, and was powerless to complain when we reached the bridge. I could only thank heaven that there was no sign of Clare. I think I should have died of mortification if she had seen us come down the hill hand-in-hand in that ridiculous fashion. But she had gone home, and at any rate I escaped that degradation.

A wet stool-car and wetter pony were dimly visible on the bridge; to which, as we came up, a damp urchin creeping from some crevice added himself. I was pushed in as if I had no will of my own, the gentleman sprang up beside me, the boy tucked himself away somewhere behind, and the little "teste" set off at a canter, so deceived by the driver's excellent imitation of "Pss," the Norse for "Tchk," that in ten minutes we were at home.

"Well, I never!" Clare said, surveying me from a respectful distance, when at last I was safe in our room. "I would not be seen in such a state by a man for all the fish in the sea!"

And she looked so tall, and trim, and neat, that it was the more provoking. At the moment I was too miserable to answer her, and had to find comfort in promising myself, that when we were back in Bolton Gardens I would see that Fräulein kept Miss Clare's pretty nose to the grindstone though it were ever so much her last term, or Jack were ever so fond of her. Papa was in the plot against me, too. What right had he to thank Mr. Herapath for bringing "his little girl" home safe? He can be pompous enough at times. I never knew a stout Queen's Counsel-and papa is stout-who was not, any more than a thin one, who did not contradict. It is in their patents, I think.

Mr. Herapath dined with us that evening-if fish and potatoes and boiled eggs, and sour bread and pancakes, and claret and coffee can be called a dinner-but nothing I could do, though I made the best of my wretched frock and was as stiff as Clare herself, could alter his first impression. It was too bad: he had no eyes! He either could not or would not see any one but the draggled Bab-fifteen at most and a very tom-boy-whom he had carried across the river. He styled Clare, who talked Baedeker to him in her primmest and most precocious way, Miss Guest, and once at least during the

evening dubbed me plain Bab. I tried to freeze him with a look then, and papa gave him a taste of the pompous manner, saying coldly that I was older than I seemed. But it was not a bit of use: I could see that he set it all down to the grand airs of a spoiled child. If I had put my hair up, it might have opened his eyes, but Clare teased me about it and I was too proud for that.

When I asked him if he was fond of dancing, he said good-naturedly, "I don't visit very much, Miss Bab. I am generally engaged in the evening."

Here was a chance. I was going to say that that no doubt was the reason why I had never met him, when papa ruthlessly cut me short by asking, "You are not in the law?"

"No," he replied. "I am in the London Fire Brigade."

I think that we all upon the instant saw him in a helmet sitting at the door of the fire station by St. Martin's Church. Clare turned crimson and papa seemed on a sudden to call his patent to mind. The moment before I had been as angry as angry could be with our guest, but I was not going to look on and see him snubbed when he was dining with us and all. So I rushed into the gap as quickly as surprise would let me with "Good gracious, how nice! Do tell me all about a fire!"

It made matters-my matters-worse, for I could have cried with vexation when I read in his face next moment that he had looked for their astonishment; while the ungrateful fellow set down my eager remark to mere childish ignorance.

"Some time I will," he said with a quiet smile *de haut en bas*; "but I do not often attend one in person. I am Captain – 's private secretary, aide-de-camp, and general factotum."

And it turned out that he was the son of a certain Canon Herapath, so that papa lost sight of his patent box altogether, and they set to discussing Mr. Gladstone, while I slipped off to bed feeling as small as I ever did in my life and out of temper with everybody. It was a long time since I had been used to young men talking politics to papa, when they could talk-politics-to me.

Possibly I deserved the week of vexation which followed; but it was almost more than I could bear. He-Mr. Herapath, of course-was always about fishing or lounging outside the little white posting-house, taking walks and meals with us, and seeming heartily to enjoy papa's society. He came with us when we drove to the top of the pass to get a glimpse of the Sulethid peak; and it looked so brilliantly clear and softly beautiful as it seemed to float, just tinged with color, in a far-off atmosphere of its own, beyond the dark ranges of nearer hills, that I began to think at once of the drawing-room in Bolton Gardens with a cosy fire burning, and afternoon tea coming up. The tears came into my eyes, and he saw them before I could turn away from the view; and said to papa that he feared his little girl was tired as well as cold-and so spoiled all my pleasure. I looked back afterwards as papa and I drove down: he was walking by Clare's carcole and they were laughing heartily.

And that was the way always. He was such an elder brother to me-a thing I never had and do not want-that a dozen times a day I set my teeth viciously together and said to myself that if ever we met in London-but what nonsense that was, because, of course, it mattered nothing to me what he was thinking, only he had no right to be so rudely familiar. That was all; but it was quite enough to make me dislike him.

However, a sunny morning in the holidays is a cheerful thing, and when I strolled down stream with my rod on the day after our expedition, I felt I could enjoy myself very nearly as much as I had before his coming spoiled our party. I dawdled along, now trying a pool, now clambering up the hillsides to pick raspberries, and now counting the magpies that flew across, feeling altogether very placid and good and contented. I had chosen the lower river because Mr. Herapath usually fished the upper part, and I would not be ruffled this nice day. So I was the more vexed to come suddenly upon him fishing; and fishing where he had no right to be. Papa had spoken to him about the danger of it, and he had as good as said he would not do it again. Yet there he was, thinking, I dare say, that we should not know. It was a spot where one bank rose into quite a cliff, frowning over a deep pool at the foot of some falls. Close to the cliff the water still ran with the speed of a mill-race, so fast as to endanger a good swimmer. But on the far side of this current there was a bit of slack water which

was tempting enough to have set some one's wits to work to devise means to fish it, which from the top of the cliff was impossible. Just above the water was a ledge, a foot wide, perhaps, which might have done, only it did not reach to this end of the cliff. However, that foolhardy person had espied this, and got over the gap by bridging the latter with a bit of plank, and then had drowned himself or gone away, in either case leaving his board to tempt others to do likewise.

And there was Mr. Herapath fishing from the ledge. It made me giddy to look at him. The rock overhung the water so much that he could not stand upright; the first person who got there must surely have learned to curl himself up from much sleeping in Norwegian beds, which were short for me. I thought of this oddly enough as I watched him, and laughed, and was for going on. But when I had walked a few yards, meaning to pass round the rear of the cliff, I began to fancy all sorts of foolish things would happen. I felt sure that I should have no more peace or pleasure if I left him there. I hesitated. Yes, I would. I would go down, and ask him to leave the place; and, of course, he would do it.

I lost no time, but ran down the slope smartly and carelessly. My way lay over loose shale mingled with large stones, and it was steep. It is wonderful how quickly an accident happens; how swiftly a thing that cannot be undone is done, and we are left wishing-oh, so vainly-that we could put the world, and all things in it, back by a few seconds. I was checking myself near the bottom, when a big stone on which I stepped moved under me. The shale began to slip in a mass, and the stone to roll. It was all done in a moment. I stayed myself, that was easy enough, but the stone took two bounds, jumped sideways, struck the piece of board which was only resting lightly at either end, and before I could take it all in the little bridge plunged end first into the current, which swept it out of sight in an instant.

He threw up his hands in affright, for he had turned, and we both saw it happen. He made indeed as if he would try to save it, but that was impossible; and then, while I cowered in dismay, he waved his arm to me in the direction of home-again and again. The roar of the falls drowned what he said, but I guessed his meaning. I could not help him myself, but I could fetch help. It was three miles to Breistolen, rough, rocky ones, and I doubted whether he could keep his cramped position with that noise deafening him, and the endless whirling stream before his eyes, while I was going and coming. But there was no better way I could think of; and even as I wavered, he signalled to me again imperatively. For an instant everything seemed to go round with me, but it was not the time for that yet, and I tried to collect myself, and harden my heart. Up the bank I went steadily, and once at the top set off at a run homewards.

I cannot tell at all how I did it; how I passed over the uneven ground, or whether I went quickly or slowly save by the reckoning papa made afterwards. I can only remember one long hurrying scramble; now I panted uphill, now I ran down, now I was on my face in a hole, breathless and half-stunned, and now I was up to my knees in water. I slipped and dropped down places I should at other times have shrunk from, and hurt myself so that I bore the marks for months. But I thought nothing of these things: all my being was spent in hurrying on for his life, the clamor of every cataract I passed seeming to stop my heart's beating with very fear. So I reached Breistolen and panted over the bridge and up to the little white house lying so quiet in the afternoon sunshine, papa's stool-car even then at the door ready to take him to some favorite pool. Somehow I made him understand in broken words that Herapath was in danger, drowning already, for all I knew, and then I seized a great pole which was leaning against the porch, and climbed into the car. Papa was not slow either; he snatched a coil of rope from the luggage, and away we went, a man and boy whom he had hastily called running behind us. We had lost very little time, but so much may happen in so little time.

We were forced to leave the car a quarter of a mile from that part of the river, and walk or run the rest of the way. We all ran, even papa, as I had never known him run before. My heart sank at the groan he let escape him when I pointed out the spot. We came to it one by one and we all looked. The ledge was empty. Jem Herapath was gone. I suppose it startled me. At any rate I could only look at

the water in a dazed way, and cry quietly without much feeling that it was my doing; while the men, shouting to one another in strange, hushed voices, searched about for any sign of his fate-"Jem! Jem Herapath!" So he had written his name only yesterday in the travellers' book at the posting-house, and I had sullenly watched him from the window, and then had sneaked to the book and read it. That was yesterday, and now! Oh, Jem, to hear you say "Bab" once more!

"Bab! Why, Miss Bab, what is the matter?"

Safe and sound! Yes, there he was when I turned, safe, and strong, and cool, rod in hand, and a quiet smile in his eyes. Just as I had seen him yesterday, and thought never to see him again; and saying "Bab" exactly as of old, so that something in my throat-it may have been anger at his rudeness, but I do not think it was-prevented me saying a word until all the others came round us, and a babel of Norse and English, and something that was neither, yet both, set in.

"But how is this?" objected my father when he could be heard, "you are quite dry, my boy?"

"Dry! Why not, sir? For goodness' sake, what is the matter?"

"The matter! Didn't you fall in, or something of the kind?" papa asked, bewildered by this new aspect of the case.

"It does not look like it, does it? Your daughter gave me a very uncomfortable start by nearly doing so."

Every one looked at him for an explanation. "How did you manage to get from the ledge?" I said feebly. Where was the mistake? I had not dreamed it.

"From the ledge? Why, by the other end, to be sure, so that I had to walk back round the hill. Still I did not mind, for I was thankful that it was the plank and not you that fell in.

"I-I thought-you could not get from the ledge," I muttered. The possibility of getting off at the other end had never occurred to me, and so I had made such a simpleton of myself. It was too absurd, too ridiculous. It was no wonder that they all screamed with laughter at the fool's errand they had come upon, and stamped about and clung to one another. But when he laughed too-and he did until the tears came into his eyes-there was not an ache or pain in my body-and I had cut my wrist to the bone against a splinter of rock-that hurt me one-half as much. Surely he might have seen another side to it. But he did not; and so I managed to hide my bandaged wrist from him, and papa drove me home. There I broke down entirely, and Clare put me to bed, and petted me, and was very good to me. And when I came down next day, with an ache in every part of me, he was gone.

"He asked me to tell you," said Clare, not looking up from the fly she was tying at the window, "that he thought you were the bravest girl he had ever met."

So he understood now, when others had explained it to him. "No, Clare," I said coldly, "he did not say that exactly; he said 'the bravest little girl.'" For indeed, lying upstairs with the window open, I had heard him set off on his long drive to Laerdalsören. As for papa, he was half-proud and half-ashamed of my foolishness, and wholly at a loss to think how I could have made the mistake.

"You've generally some common-sense, my dear," he said that day at dinner, "and how in the world you could have been so ready to fancy the man was in danger, I-can-not-imagine!"

"Papa," put in Clare, suddenly, "your elbow is upsetting the salt."

And as I had to move my seat just then to avoid the glare of the stove which was falling on my face, we never thought it out.

II HIS STORY

I was not dining out much at that time, partly because my acquaintance in town was limited, and something too because I cared little for it. But these were pleasant people, the old gentleman witty and amusing, the children, lively girls, nice to look at and good to talk with. The party had too a holiday flavor about them wholesome to recall in Scotland Yard: and as I had thought, play-time over, I should see no more of them, I was proportionately pleased to find that Mr. Guest had not forgotten me, and pleased also-shrewdly expecting that we might kill our fish over again-to regard his invitation to dinner at a quarter-to-eight as a royal command.

But if I took it so, I was sadly wanting in the regal courtesy to match. What with one delay owing to work that would admit of none, and another caused by a cabman strange to the ways of town, it was twenty-five minutes after the hour named, when I reached Bolton Gardens. A stately man, so like the Queen's Counsel, that it was plain upon whom the latter modelled himself, ushered me straight into the dining-room, where Guest greeted me very kindly, and met my excuses by apologies on his part-for preferring, I suppose, the comfort of eleven people to mine. Then he took me down the table, and said, "My daughter," and Miss Guest shook hands with me and pointed to the chair at her left. I had still, as I unfolded my napkin, to say "Clear, if you please," and then I was free to turn and apologize to her, being a little shy, and, as I have said, a somewhat infrequent diner out.

I think that I never saw so remarkable a likeness-to her younger sister-in my life. She might have been little Bab herself, but for her dress and some striking differences. Miss Guest could not be more than eighteen, in form almost as fairy-like as the little one, with the same child-like, innocent look on her face. She had the big, gray eyes, too, that were so charming in Bab; but in her they were more soft and tender and thoughtful, and a thousand times more charming. Her hair too was brown and wavy: only, instead of hanging loose or in a pig-tail anywhere and anyhow in a fashion I well remembered, it was coiled in a coronal on the shapely little head, that was so Greek, and in its gracious, stately, old-fashioned pose, so unlike Bab's. Her dress, of some creamy, gauzy stuff, revealed the prettiest white throat in the world, and arms decked in pearls, and, so far, no more recalled my little fishing-mate than the sedate self-possession and assured dignity of this girl, as she talked to her other neighbor, suggested Bab making pancakes and chattering with the landlady's children in her strangely and wonderfully acquired Norse. It was not Bab in fact: and yet it almost might have been: an etherealized, queenly, womanly Bab. Who presently turned to me-

"Have you quite settled down after your holiday?" she asked, staying the apologies I was for pouring into her ear.

"I had until this evening, but the sight of your father is like a breath of fiord air. I hope your sisters are well."

"My sisters?" she murmured wonderingly, her fork half-way to her pretty mouth and her attitude one of questioning.

"Yes," I said rather puzzled. "You know they were with your father when I had the good fortune to meet him. Miss Clare and Bab."

"Eh?" dropping her fork on the plate with a great clatter.

"Yes, Miss Guest, Miss Clare and Miss Bab."

I really began to feel uncomfortable. Her color rose, and she looked me in the face in a half-proud, half-fearful way as if she resented the inquiry. It was a relief to me, when, with some show of confusion, she at length stammered, "Oh, yes, I beg your pardon, of course they were! How very foolish of me. They are quite well, thank you," and so was silent again. But I understood now. Mr. Guest had omitted to mention my name, and she had taken me for some one else of whose holiday

she knew. I gathered from the aspect of the table and the room that the Guests saw a good deal of company, and it was a very natural mistake, though by the grave look she bent upon her plate it was clear that the young hostess was taking herself to task for it: not without, if I might judge from the lurking smile at the corners of her mouth, a humorous sense of the slip, and perhaps of the difference between myself and the gentleman whose part I had been unwittingly supporting. Meanwhile I had a chance of looking at her unchecked; and thought of Dresden china, she was so frail and pretty.

"You were nearly drowned, or something of the kind, were you not?" she asked, after an interval during which we had both talked to others.

"Well, not precisely. Your sister fancied I was in danger, and behaved in the pluckiest manner—so bravely that I can almost feel sorry that the danger was not there to dignify her heroism."

"That was like her," she answered in a tone just a little scornful. "You must have thought her a terrible tomboy."

While she was speaking there came one of those dreadful lulls in the talk, and Mr. Guest overhearing, cried, "Who is that you are abusing, my dear? Let us all share in the sport. If it's Clare, I think I can name one who is a far worse hoyden upon occasion."

"It is no one of whom you have ever heard, papa," she answered, archly. "It is a person in whom Mr. — Mr. Herapath—" I had murmured my name as she stumbled—"and I are interested. Now tell me, did you not think so?" she murmured, graciously leaning the slightest bit towards me, and opening her eyes as they looked into mine in a way that to a man who had spent the day in a dusty room in Great Scotland Yard was sufficiently intoxicating.

"No," I said, lowering my voice in imitation of hers. "No, Miss Guest, I did not think so at all. I thought your sister a brave little thing, rather careless as children are apt to be, but likely to grow into a charming girl."

I wondered, marking how she bit her lip and refrained from assent, whether, impossible as it must seem to any one looking in her face, there might not be something of the shrew about my beautiful neighbor. Her tone when she spoke of her sister seemed to impart no great goodwill.

"So that is your opinion?" she said, after a pause. "Do you know," with a laughing glance, "that some people think I am like her."

"Yes?" I answered, gravely. "Well, I should be able to judge, who have seen you both and yet am not an old friend. And I think you are both like and unlike. Your sister has very beautiful eyes" — she lowered hers swiftly—"and hair like yours, but her manner and style were very different. I can no more fancy Bab in your place than I can picture you, Miss Guest, as I saw her for the first time—and on many after occasions," I added, laughing as much to cover my own hardihood as at the queer little figure I had conjured up.

"Thank you, Mr. Herapath," she replied, with coldness, though she had blushed darkly to her ears. "That, I think, must be enough of compliments, for to-night—as you are not an old friend." And she turned away, leaving me to curse my folly in saying so much, when our acquaintance was as yet in the bud, and as susceptible to over-warmth as to a temperature below zero.

A moment later the ladies left us. The flush I had brought to her cheek still lingered there, as she swept past me with a wondrous show of dignity in one so young. Mr. Guest came down and took her place, and we talked of the "land of berries," and our adventures there, while the rest—older friends—listened indulgently or struck in from time to time with their own biggest fish and deadliest flies.

I used to wonder why women like to visit dusty chambers; why they get more joy—I am fain to think they do—out of a scrambling tea up three pairs of stairs in Pump Court, than from the very same materials—and comfort withal—in their own house. I imagine it is for the same reason that the bachelor finds a singular charm in a lady's drawing-room, and there, if anywhere, sees her with a reverent mind. A charm and a subservience which I felt to the full in the Guests' drawing-room—a room rich in subdued colors and a cunning blending of luxury and comfort. Yet it depressed me. I felt alone. Mr. Guest had passed on to others and I stood aside, the sense that I was not of these people troubling

me in a manner as new as it was absurd: for I had been in the habit of rather despising "society." Miss Guest was at the piano, the centre of a circle of soft light, which showed up also a keen-faced, dark-whiskered man leaning over her with the air of one used to the position. Every one else was so fully engaged that I may have looked, as well as felt, forlorn, and meeting her eyes could have fancied she was regarding me with amusement-almost triumph. It must have been mere fancy, bred of self-consciousness, for the next moment she beckoned me to her, and said to her cavalier:

"There, Jack, Mr. Herapath is going to talk to me about Norway now, so that I don't want you any longer. Perhaps you won't mind stepping up to the schoolroom-Fräulein and Clare are there-and telling Clare, that-that-oh, anything."

There is no piece of ill-breeding so bad to my mind as for a man who is at home in a house to flaunt his favor in the face of other guests. That young lawyer's manner as he left her, and the smile of perfect intelligence which passed between them, were such a breach of good manners as would have ruffled any one. They ruffled me-yes, me, although it was no concern of mine what she called him, or how he conducted himself-so that I could do nothing but stand by the piano and sulk. One bear makes another, you know.

She did not speak; and I, content to watch the slender hands stealing over the keys, would not, until my eyes fell upon her right wrist. She had put off her bracelets and so disclosed a scar upon it, something about which-not its newness-so startled me that I said abruptly: "That is very strange! Pray tell me how you did it?"

She looked up, saw what I meant, and stopping hastily, put on her bracelets; to all appearance so vexed by my thoughtless question, and anxious to hide the mark, that I was quick to add humbly, "I asked because your sister hurt her wrist in nearly the same place on the day when she thought I was in trouble, and the coincidence struck me."

"Yes, I remember," looking at me, I thought, with a certain suspicion, as though she were not sure that I was giving the right motive. "I did this much in the same way. By falling, I mean. Isn't it a hateful disfigurement?"

No, it was no disfigurement. Even to her, with a woman's love of conquest, it must have seemed anything but a disfigurement had she known what the quiet, awkward man at her side was thinking, who stood looking shyly at it and found no words to contradict her, though she asked him twice, and thought him stupid enough. A great longing to kiss that soft, scarred wrist was on me-and Miss Guest had added another to the number of her slaves. I don't know now why that little scar should have so touched me any more than I then could guess why, being a commonplace person, I should fall in love at first sight, and feel no surprise at my condition, but only a half consciousness (seeming fully to justify it) that in some former state of being I had met my love, and read her thoughts, and learned her moods; and come to know the bright womanly spirit that looked from her frank eyes as well as if she were an old, old friend. And so vivid was this sensation, that once or twice, then and afterwards, when I would meet her glance, another name than hers trembled on my tongue and passed away before I could shape it into sound.

After an interval, "Are you going to the Goldmace's dance?"

"No," I answered her, humbly. "I go out so little."

"Indeed," with an odd smile not too kindly; "I wish-no I don't-that we could say the same. We are engaged, I think-" she paused, her attention divided between myself and Boccherini's minuet, the low strains of which she was sending through the room-"for every afternoon-this week-except Saturday. By the way, Mr. Herapath-do you remember what was the name-Bab told me you teased her with?"

"Wee bonnie Bab," I answered absently. My thoughts had gone forward to Saturday. "We are always dropping to-day's substance for the shadow of to-morrow; like the dog-a dog was it not? – in the fable."

"Oh, yes, wee bonnie Bab," she murmured softly. "Poor Bab!" and suddenly cut short Boccherini's music and our chat by striking a terrific discord and laughing merrily at my start of discomfiture. Every one took it as a signal to leave. They all seemed to be going to meet her again next day, or the day after that; they engaged her for dances, and made up a party for the law courts, and tossed to and fro a score of laughing catch-words, that were beyond my comprehension. They all did this, except myself.

And yet I went away with something before me-that call upon Saturday afternoon. Quite unreasonably I fancied I should see her alone. And so when the day came and I stood outside the opening door of the drawing-room, and heard voices and laughter within, I was hurt and aggrieved beyond measure. There was quite a party, and a merry one, assembled, who were playing at some game, as it seemed to me, for I caught sight of Clare whipping off an impromptu bandage from her eyes, and striving by her stiffest air to give the lie to a pair of flushed cheeks. The black-whiskered man was there, and two men of his kind, and a German governess, and a very old lady in a wheel-chair, who was called "grandmamma," and Miss Guest herself looking, in the prettiest dress of silvery plush, to the full as bright and fair and graceful as I had been picturing her each hour since we parted.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.