

Benson Edward Frederic

Daisy's Aunt



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CHAPTER I

Daisy Hanbury poked her parasol between the bars of the cage, with the amiable intention of scratching the tiger's back. The tiger could not be expected to know this all by himself, and so he savagely bit the end of it off, with diabolical snarlings. Daisy turned to her cousin with a glow of sympathetic pleasure.

"What a darling!" she said. "He didn't understand, you see, and was perfectly furious. And it cost pounds and pounds, and I've spent all my allowance, and so I can't buy another, and my complexion will go to the dogs. Let's go there, too; the dingoes are absolutely fascinating. We'll come back to see these angels fed."

Gladys laughed.

"Daisy, you have got the most admirable temper," she said. "I should have called that brute any names except 'darling' and 'angel.'"

"I know you would, because you don't understand either it or me. I understand both perfectly. You see, you don't love fierce wild things – things that are wicked and angry, and, above all, natural. I don't mind good, sweet, gentle things, like – oh, like almost everybody, if only they are sweet and good naturally. But generally they are not. Their sweetness is the result of education or morality, or something tedious, not the result of their natures, of themselves. Oh, I know all about it! Gladys, this parasol is beyond hope. Let's conceal it in the bushes like a corpse."

Daisy looked round with a wild and suspicious eye.

"There's a policeman," she said. "I'm sure he'll think that I have murdered my own parasol. Oh, kind Mr. Policeman – there, that softened him, and he's looking the other way."

Gladys gave a little shriek of dismay as Daisy thrust her parasol into a laurustinus.

"Oh! but the handle, and the ribs!" she cried. "It only wanted a new point, and – and to be recovered. Daisy, I never saw such extravagance. You mustn't leave it. I'll have it done up for you."

"That's angelic of you," said Daisy; "but will you carry it for me in the meantime? It's that that matters. I couldn't be seen going about even at the Zoo with a parasol in that condition. I should have to explain to everybody exactly how it happened, which would take time."

"But of course I'll carry it for you," said Gladys.

Daisy considered this noble offer.

"It's quite too wonderful of you," she said, "but I don't think I could be seen with you if you were carrying it. No; come to the dogs. Oh, Gladys, you are sweet and good and gentle quite, quite naturally, and I adore you."

The dingoes were rewarding, and Daisy instantly curried favour with their keeper, and learnt about their entrancing habits; afterwards the two went back to see the lions fed before leaving. The tiger which had ruined her parasol proved to have the most excellent appetite, which much relieved Daisy's mind, as she feared that the point, which he seemed to have completely eaten, might have spoilt his dinner. She hurried breathlessly down the line as the huge chops of raw meat were passed in and snatched up by the animals, absorbed and radiant. Gladys, as always, followed where the other led, but was conscious of qualms. These she concealed as best she could.

"Oh, I want to say grace for them all," said Daisy at the end. "I *do* hope they are pleased with their dinners. Are the keepers fair, do you think? There was a dreadful amount of bone in my parasol-tiger's dinner, if you understand. Gladys, I don't believe you loved it. How stupid of you! You don't

quite understand; you don't know how nice it is to be greedy instead of gentle. Do try. Oh, no, let's go out by this gate."

"But we shall have to walk miles before we get a cab," said Gladys.

"I know; that's why. It will make us late for Aunt Alice's tea-party. I hate tea-parties."

"But mother asked me to be back by five," said Gladys.

"Did she? Did she really?" asked Daisy.

"Indeed she did."

"Oh, well, then of course we'll drive back, though I did want to walk. But it can't possibly be helped. We must drive. It is such a pity not to do as you are asked. I always do, except when Willie asks me to marry him."

They got into their hansom and bowled silently down the dry grey road. All June was in flower in the pink pyramids of the chestnut-trees, and was already beginning to bleach the colour out of the long coarse grass in the open spaces of the Park. There swarms of girls and boys rioted ecstatically; here the more lucky, in possession of a battered bat and a ball begrimed with much honourable usage, had set up three crooked sticks to serve as wickets, and played with an enthusiasm that the conditions of the game might justly have rendered difficult of achievement. The one thing certain about the ball was that it would not come off the baked, uneven ground at the angle at which it might be expected. It might shoot, or on pitching might tower like a partridge, and any ball pitched off the wicket might easily take it; the only thing quite certain was that a straight ball (unless a full pitch) would not. Above, the thick dusky blue of a fine summer day in London formed a cloudless dome, where the sun still swung high on its westering course. In front of the distances that dusky pall was visible, and the houses at the edge of the Park were blurred in outline and made beautiful by the inimitable dinginess of the city.

But Gladys had no eye for all this; she was burning to know what was the latest development in the Willie affair, but her whole-hearted affection for her cousin was a little touched by timidity, and she did not quite like to question her. For Daisy, in spite of her charm, was a little formidable at times; at times she would have moods of entrancing tenderness; she could comfort or appeal, just as she could take the most sympathetic pleasure in the fact that a fierce tiger was annoyed at her amiable intentions, and had spoilt her best parasol. But at other times there was something of the tiger in her – that, no doubt, was why she understood this one so well – which made Gladys a little shy of her. She had often, so to speak, bitten off the end of her cousin's parasol before now, and Gladys did not appreciate that as much as Daisy had just done. So in silence she looked a little sideways at that brilliant, vivid face, flushed with the swift blood of its twenty-two years, that looked so eagerly from its dark grey eyes on to the activity of the playing children. But silences were generally short when Daisy was present, and she proceeded to unfold herself with rapidity and all the naturalness of which she deplored the lack in the gentle, good people.

"Oh! how they are enjoying themselves," she said, "with really no material at all. Gladys, think what a lot of material a person like me wants to make her enjoy herself! It really is shocking. My gracious, what an ugly child that is! Don't look at it; you never should look at ugly things – it's bad for the soul. Yes, I want such a lot to make me happy – all there is, in fact – and poor darling Willie hasn't got all there is. He's the sort of man I should like to marry when I am forty-three. Do you know what I mean? He would be quite charming if one were forty-three. He's quite charming now, if it comes to that, and I'm dreadfully fond of him, but he thinks about me too much; he's too devoted. I hear his devotion going on tick, tick, all the time, like the best clocks. That's one reason for not marrying him."

"I don't think it's a good one, though," remarked Gladys.

"Yes, it is. Because a man always expects from his wife what he gives her. He would be absolutely happy living with me on a desert island; but – I know it's true – he would tacitly require that I should be absolutely happy living with him on a desert island. Well, I shouldn't – I shouldn't – I shouldn't. I should not! Is that clear?"

"Quite."

"Very well, then, why did you say it wasn't? Oh, yes, I know I am right. And he would always see that I was well wrapped up, and wonder whether I wasn't a little pale. I can't bear that sort of thing. No doubt it's one way of love; but I must say I prefer another. I daresay the love that is founded on esteem and respect and affection is a very excellent thing, but it's one of those excellent things which I am quite willing to let other people have and enjoy. It's like – like Dresden china; I am sure it is quite beautiful, but I don't want any myself. I wish you would marry Willie yourself, darling. Don't mind me."

They rattled out over the cobblestones of the gate into Baker Street, and plunged into the roaring traffic. Daisy had still a great deal to say, and she raised her voice to make it heard above the intolerable clatter of motor 'buses and the clip-clop of horses' hoofs.

"Besides, as I said, I want such a lot of things. I'm hard and worldly and disgusting; but so it is. I want to be right at the top of the tree, and if I married Willie I should just be Mrs. Carton, with that decaying old place in Somerset; very nice and intensely respectable, but that's all. It's quite a good thing to be nice and respectable, but it's rather a vegetable thing to be, if you are nothing else. I must be an animal at least, and that's why I'm playing 'Animal Grab.'"

Gladys looked – as was indeed the case – as if she did not quite understand this surprising statement.

"I'm very slow, I know," she said, "but –"

"Yes, darling, you are, but you do know what I mean, though you don't know you know it. I've often seen you wondering about it. Oh, that motor 'bus is going to run into us! It isn't; how can you be so nervous? It cleared us by at least a quarter of an inch. Yes, 'Animal Grab.' Now 'yes' or 'no,' do you know what I mean, or don't you?"

Gladys trembled under these direct assaults. But she thought "yes" was more likely to be favourably received than "no," and so allowed herself to say "yes."

But it proved to be a vain hope that Daisy would thereupon go on and explain. That was so like Daisy; she never did what you hoped or expected she might. Gladys on this occasion, with her pink, timorous face and general air of discouragement, prayed that Daisy might not trouble about her, but just go on talking. It is true that Daisy did talk next, but, instead of expounding, she rapped out a question.

"So you do know," she said. "Then what is it?"

Gladys shut her eyes for a moment to encourage bravery.

"I suppose it means that you are thinking whether you will marry Lord Lindfield or not," she said.

Daisy, however peremptory, was not a bully.

"How did you guess that, dear?" she asked.

"It wasn't very difficult. It couldn't have been, you see, or I shouldn't have guessed it. But he has been – well, a good deal interested in you, hasn't he, and you –"

"Do you mean I've encouraged him?" asked Daisy, with an inquisitorial air.

"No, I mean just the opposite. You've rather snubbed him." Gladys made a huge demand on her courage. "But you've snubbed him in such a way that it comes to the same thing as if you had encouraged him," she said.

Daisy considered this.

"I think you've got a horrid mind, Gladys," she said at length. "If I encourage somebody you tell me I am flirting, and if I discourage him you tell me it comes to the same thing. And you do me an injustice. I haven't snubbed or discouraged him. I've – I've remained neutral, until I could make up my mind. Do you think he cares for me? I really don't know whether he does or not. I can always tell with the gentle, good people like Willie, and it is gentle, good people whom I see most. Oh!"

Daisy gave a great sigh, and leant out over the folded door of the hansom.

"I'm not sure if I want to marry Lord Lindfield or not," she said, "but I'm perfectly certain that I don't want him to marry anybody else. I think I should like him always to remain wanting to marry me, while I didn't want to marry him. I'm dreadfully glad you think that I can snub or encourage him, because that means that you think he cares. I should be perfectly miserable if I thought he didn't."

"I don't think you need be miserable," said Gladys.

"I'm not. Oh, there's the Prime Minister; I shall bow. That was a failure. He looked at me like a fish. How rude the Cabinet makes people! The Cabinet always goes about with the British Empire pick-a-back. At least, it thinks the British Empire is pick-a-back. The Empire doesn't. About Lord Lindfield. He's turning grey over the temples, and I think that is so frightfully attractive. Of course, he's awfully old; he must be nearly forty. He's dining to-night, isn't he? Then I shall arrange the table. Yes, you needn't look like that. I shan't make him take me in. He's supposed to be wicked, too. Oh, Gladys, it is so nice if men go playing about, and then fall in love with me. It's worth heaps of the other kind. Oh, don't look shocked; it is silly to look shocked, and so easy."

The hansom waited for a moment at the junction of Orchard Street and Oxford Street, and the innumerable company of locomotives sped by it. Motors shot by with a whirr and a bubbling, hansoms jingled westwards, large slow vans made deliberate progress, delaying the traffic as some half-built dam impedes the course of flowing water till it finds a way round it, and through the streams of wheels and horses pedestrians scuttled in and out like bolted rabbits. The whole tide of movement was at its height, and the little islands in mid-street were crowded with folk who were cut off, it would seem, by the rising flood-water from all communication with the shore, with but remote chance of escape. Then an omnipotent policeman stepped out into the surging traffic, held up a compelling and resistless hand, and at his gesture the tides, more obedient to him than to Canute, ceased to flow, and the cross-movement began, which permitted Daisy and her cousin to cross the stream. But whether it was that the stoppage in their passage made a corresponding halt in her thoughts, or whether, as was more likely, she had said all that she meant to say on the subject of Lord Lindfield, she began, just as they started to move again, on something widely different.

"And Aunt Jeannie comes to-morrow," she said, "which is quite delightful. For I do believe I've missed her every single day since she went away a year ago. And if I do that, you may depend upon it that she is very nice indeed. As a rule, I like people very much when they are there, and I get along excellently without them when they are not."

"Quite – quite true," said Gladys, with a touch of acidity.

"It's much the most sensible plan," continued Daisy, perceiving, but completely ignoring, the tone. "It does no good to miss people, and, as I say, I seldom do it. But I always miss Aunt Jeannie. I should like to see her every day of my life. It would be dreadful to see most people every day, though I like them so much when I do see them. Oh, Gladys darling, don't look as if you were in church! You can't take things lightly, you know."

"And you can't take them in any other way," remarked Gladys.

"Oh, but I can; it is only that I don't usually choose to. It is a great blessing I don't take every one seriously. If I took Willie seriously, I should find him a great bore; as it is, I think he is quite charming, and I should certainly marry him if I were fifty."

"It was forty-three just now," said Gladys.

"Yes; but being with you has made me grow older very quickly," said Daisy.

Gladys laughed; with Daisy it was very true that "c'est le ton qui fait la musique," and the same words which in another tone could have wounded her, now merely amused. It had taken her a long time to get used, so to speak, to this brilliant, vivid friend, who turned such an engaging smile on the world in general, and shone with supreme impartiality on the wicked and the good, and to know her, as she knew her now, with greater thoroughness than she knew herself. Ethically, if Gladys had been put to the question on her oath, she would have had to give the most unsatisfactory account of her friend, and, to sum up all questions in one, it would have come to this – that she believed Daisy to be

quite heartless. But, humanly, there was in Daisy much to take the place of that profound organ. She had the joy of life and the interest in life to a supreme degree, and though she resolutely turned her back on anything disagreeable or ugly, her peremptory dismissal of such things was more than made up for by her unbounded welcome of all that pleased her. You had only to please her (and she was very ready to be pleased), and she poured sunlight on you. And Gladys, who was naturally rather shy, rather slow to make friends, rather reticent, soon grasped this essential fact about Daisy, and having grasped it, held tightly to it. She felt she would not readily go to Daisy if she was in trouble, but there was no one to whom she would hurry with such certainty of welcome if she was happy. And though, no doubt, sympathy, to be complete, must feel for sorrow as keenly as it feels for joy, yet a nature that feels keenly for joy and turns its back on sorrow is perhaps quite as fine a one as that which, though it may be an excellent comforter, is rather of the nature of a wet blanket when a happy soul appeals to it for sympathy. And on joy, whether her own or that of another, Daisy never turned her back. She delighted in the happiness of others.

CHAPTER II

Daisy's father and mother had both died when she was quite young, and not yet half-way through the momentous teens. For seven years after that she had lived with her mother's sister, the inimitable Aunt Jeannie, whom she wished to see every day. But though she had passed seven years with her, she had barely seen her aunt's husband. It was his death, a year ago, that had sent her to the Nottinghams, for Aunt Jeannie in a crisis of nerves had been ordered abroad for a year, and was now on the point of return, and, having returned, was to stay with Lady Nottingham for the indefinite period which may be taken up by the finding of a suitable house.

Daisy knew there had been trouble at the back of all this. Uncle Francis, Aunt Jeannie's husband, had been called an invalid, and she gathered that his ill-health was something not to be openly alluded to. Morphia was connected with it, a "habit" was connected with it, and since this was somehow disagreeable, she had long ago so successfully banished it from her thoughts that her curiosity about it was a thing without existence. Certainly he made Aunt Jeannie very unhappy, but Aunt Jeannie, who was such a dear, and so young still – not more than thirty, for she was the youngest of a family of whom Daisy's mother was the eldest – had been always sedulous to hide disquietude from her niece. And it was entirely characteristic of Daisy to be grateful for having it all hid from her, and not even in thought to conjecture what it was all about. During this year of separation from Aunt Jeannie, in which, as she had said (and Daisy, with all her faults and limitations, was a George Washington for truth), she had missed her every day, she had always looked forward to her return, and, though she liked being with Lady Nottingham very much, knew that she would ultimately go back to the unrivalled other aunt again with the intensest satisfaction.

But of late the prospect of going back, or living with any aunt at all, had receded into at least a middle distance. There was no doubt in her own mind (though she liked the absence of doubt to be endorsed by her cousin) that Lord Lindfield had been extremely attentive to her for the last month or so. He had committed dreadful social crimes, such as throwing over an engagement already made and nearly due, when he found that she would be at some house to which he was subsequently invited. And somehow (that was the charm of him, or part of it), though he upset dinner-tables right and left, nobody really minded. Match-making London, which includes the larger part of that marriageable city, even when they were personally affronted and inconvenienced, smiled sympathetically when they heard what his movements on the night he ought to have dined with them had been. He did even worse than that; he had once, indeed, omitted to send the excuse of a subsequent engagement, and everybody had waited a quarter of an hour for him to put in a belated appearance. And when he did not his hostess had remarked that he must be "picking daisies," and the procession had gone dinner-wards with a widowed girl.

It turned out to be true, did this conjecture of the hostess. He had dined "quietly" that night at Lady Nottingham's, and had played "old maid" afterwards, as bridge was universally voted to be far too intellectual. And Daisy took huge pleasure in such facts as these, stealthily conveyed to her by one if not more of her innumerable girl friends. For though there was no doubt that many dutiful mothers would have liked their daughters to marry Lord Lindfield, yet when he declared himself by signs as unmistakable as this, they neither felt nor communicated any ill-humour.

He was picking daisies; very well, the sooner he plucked the particular one the better. Daisy was so pleasant; no wonder, after all, that he wished for her. And she too, quite soon, would join the ranks of the match-makers, and be immensely kind to everybody else. Yet if only Katie or Elsie or Nellie – But it was no use thinking about that. Daisy, once settled, would certainly do her best for those to whom fortune must pay a "subsequent" visit.

Lady Nottingham purred approval over the girls on their punctual return, before any of her guests had arrived. She was rather stout and very comfortable. Behind her stoutness and her comfort

there beat a heart of gold, and an extremely acute brain, which was not always allowed for, was alert and watchful. A heart of gold is considered as not incompatible with comfort and stoutness, but nobody who had not come to grips with her, or been her ally in some affair that called for diplomacy or tact, knew how excessively efficient her brain was. She had, too, the supreme gift of only sending into action as much of it as was required to do the work, and never made elaborate plans when something simple would do as well.

All this combined to make not only a character that was lovable, but a friend whose wisdom might be depended on, and Daisy was eminently right in valuing her aunt's counsel and advice. She sought it, indeed, this evening, in the quiet half-hour that intervened between the departure of the tea-party guests and the time when it was necessary to dress for dinner.

Lady Nottingham was resting in her room when Daisy went to her, ostensibly (and quite truly) to get the list of those who were coming to dinner that night in order to arrange the table. But though she would have gone there in any case for that reason, another and far more essential one lay behind it. She wanted, indeed, to get her aunt's opinion on the point she had herself talked to Gladys about that afternoon, and sound her as to her opinion about Lord Lindfield.

The sorting of people to see who would take whom in to dinner, with abstracted frownings over the map of the table, seemed to Daisy an admirable accompaniment for disjointed questions, and one which would give her an adventitious advantage, since at any moment she could be absorbed in the task she was so kindly occupying herself with, and be silent over it, if a reply was in any way inconvenient.

This sort of diplomacy, though not exactly habitual with Daisy, seemed to her sufficiently acute and blinding, and she sat on the floor with a peerage, the list of the guests, a sheet of paper and a pencil, and began at once, while Lady Nottingham "rested" on the sofa against which Daisy leant her back.

"Oh, what nice people!" said Daisy. "Can't they all take me in? Willie Carton, Jimmie, Lord Lindfield, Mr. Braithwaite, and Lord Pately. Dear Willie! I suppose he ought to take me in. Do you mind whether you sit at the end of the table or in the middle of the middle, Aunt Alice? Middle of the middle always works out more easily. All right. Dear Willie!"

The diplomat, who is known to be a diplomat, is at once under a heavy handicap. Daisy was instantly detected, and Lady Nottingham, since there was no direct question to reply to, preserved silence. Then, after a sufficient pause, she asked, —

"Have you settled about Willie, dear?"

"Ye-es. It will be better if he takes Gladys in."

"Then he's settled for," said Lady Nottingham, turning over a page in her book.

This did not suit Daisy; she had meant to make Aunt Alice ask leading questions, instead of which she only gave the most prosaic answers. She sighed.

"Poor Willie!" she said.

Aunt Alice laughed quietly and comfortably.

"Dearest Daisy," she said, "as you want to tell me about Willie, why don't you do so? I suppose you want me to ask instead. Very well, it makes no difference. I imagine he has proposed again to you, and that you have refused him, and want to be quite sure I think you are wise about it. You see, you said, 'Dear Willie' first, and 'Poor Willie' afterwards. What other inference could a reasonable woman like me draw? If you hadn't wanted to talk about it, you would have said neither the one nor the other. Hadn't you better begin?"

Daisy laughed.

"I think you are a witch," she said. "Oh, one moment; the table is coming right. Yes, and me at the end."

"And Lord Lindfield on your left," said Lady Nottingham, without looking up.

That was the end of Daisy's diplomacy.

"You would have been burnt at the stake two hundred years ago, darling Aunt Alice," she said. "I should have helped to pile the faggots."

"What a good thing I wasn't born earlier," said she. Then for a moment she thought intently; what she wanted to say next required consideration. "Daisy dear," she said, "I wanted to talk to you also, and if you had not been so very diplomatic I should have begun."

"Oh, I wish I had waited," said Daisy.

"Yes. But it makes no difference. What you want is my advice to you as to whether you should accept Lord Lindfield. I quite agree with you that he is going to propose to you. Otherwise he has been flirting with you disgracefully, and I have never known him flirt with a girl before."

Lady Nottingham put her book quite completely down. She wanted to convey certain things quite clearly but without grossness.

"Now, Daisy, you are very young," she said, "but in some ways you are extremely grown-up. I mean, I think you know your own mind very well. I wish very much that your Aunt Jeannie had come back sooner, because she is about nine times as wise as I, and could have advised you instead of me. As it is, since I think you may have to settle a very important question any day, I have got to give you the best advice I can. I think he will propose to you, as I said, any day; indeed, I feel quite certain of it, else it would be abominable in me to talk to you about it at all. Therefore, do make up your mind before he does. Don't say, when he does, that you are not sure, that you must take time to consider it. There is no reason why a girl should not say 'yes' or 'no' at once, unless the question comes as an entire surprise, which it does not do except in second-rate novels like this one."

Lady Nottingham dropped the condemned volume on the floor.

"In real life," she said, "every girl sees long before a man proposes whether he is likely to do so, and should know quite well what she is going to say. And I think you intend to say 'yes.' You must, however, be quite sure that, as far as you can tell, you are making a wise choice.

"Now, I am not going to shock you, but very likely I am going to make you think you are shocked. You are not really. The fact is, you are not in love with him, but he attracts you with an attraction that is very often in the same relation to love as the bud is to the flower. He has the sort of attraction for you that often contains the folded immature petals of the full flower. You wanted to ask me some series of questions which would lead up to that answer. And then you wanted to ask me one further question, which was whether that was enough to say 'yes' on. And my answer to that is 'yes.'"

The diplomacy in Daisy was quite completely dead. All this, so easy to the mature woman, seemed a sort of conjuring-trick to her. It was thought-reading of the most advanced kind, the reading of thoughts that she had not consciously formulated. And the soothsayer proceeded: —

"You have seen the advantages of such a marriage clearly enough. You are ambitious, my dear, you want to have a big position, to have big houses and plenty of money, and to take no thought of any material morrow. That is an advantage; it is only the stupid people, who call their stupidity unworldly, who think otherwise. But the great point is not to keep 'to-morrow' comfortable, but to keep an everlasting 'to-day.' You must be sure of that. Whatever the years bring — and Heaven knows what they will bring — you should feel now, when you consider whether you will accept him or not, that they can bring no difference to you. You must be unable to conceive of yourself at seventy as different from yourself now with regard to him. What is that music-hall song? 'We've been together now for forty years.' It expresses exactly what a girl should feel forty years before.

"And now for a thing more difficult to say. Lord Lindfield has — has knocked about a good deal. Sooner or later you will know that, and it is infinitely better that you should know it sooner, for it seems to me almost criminal that girls should be left to find that sort of thing out for themselves when it is too late. Mind, I do not say that he will knock about again. The fact that he is quite certainly intending to propose to you shows that he does not mean to. But he is not bringing a boy's first love to a girl."

Lady Nottingham leant forward and stroked Daisy's head.

"My dear, how brutal this must sound," she said. "But I am the least brutal of women. Assure yourself of that. And I have told you all there is to tell, as far as I know, but I should have blamed myself if I had told you less. And here is Hendon, and it is time for us to dress."

Daisy got up and kissed her aunt with a quick, trembling caress.

"I think you are a perfect darling," she said.

CHAPTER III

The Dover boat, midday service, was on the point of starting from the quay at Calais, and luggage was being swung on to it in square trucks, the passengers having already embarked. The day before a midsummer storm had vexed the soul of the silver streak, which had turned to a grey pewter streak of a peculiarly streaky nature, with white tops to the waves that slung themselves over the head of the pier. Cabin-boys and stewards were making horrible dispositions of tinware, and the head steward was on the verge of distraction, since the whole world seemed to have chosen this particular day to return to England, and the whole world, with an eye on the Channel, desired private cabins, which were numerically less than the demand. At the moment he was trying to keep calm before the infuriated questions of a Frenchwoman who believed herself to be speaking English.

"Mais que faire?" she said. "I have ordered, and where is it? It is not, you tell me. I cannot be seeck with the canaille on the deck. I wish reservée. If not, I shall not go, and charge the company."

"Yes'm," said the steward. "Cabin-ticket, ma'am? Cabin No. 9. Show the lady to cabin No. 9."

Cabin No. 9 had heard these volubilities with sympathy, and a little secret amusement impossible to avoid if one were ever so little humorous, and lingered a moment while her maid went on to the cabin followed by a porter carrying small luggage.

"But I demand a cabin," continued this deeply-wronged lady. "C'est mon droit, si je la demande. Where is the capitan? Fetch him to me. Bring him. Oh, mon Dieu, the deck – to be seeck on the deck!"

Mrs. Halton, who was No. 9, called to her maid, and then spoke to the Frenchwoman.

"But I will gladly let you have my cabin," she said. "I do not mind the sea. I shall be quite happy on deck. Indeed it is no kindness. Very likely I should not have gone into my cabin at all."

The poor lady nearly wept with joy, and would willingly have paid Mrs. Halton ten times the amount the private cabin had cost; but that lady refused to make a start in trading at this time in her life, and having secured a sheltered corner watched for a little the inboarding of the passengers, but soon lost herself in her own reflections.

Ah, but how pleasant they were! She was coming home after a year abroad which had begun in widowhood and loneliness and misery and shattered health, and was now returning, restored and comforted, to her friends and all that made life so engrossingly pleasant a business. No one deserved friends more thoroughly than she, and she was rich in that priceless capital of human affection. Sorrows and trials she had had in plenty in her life, but these the sweetness of her nature had transformed, so that from being things difficult to bear, she had built up with them her own character. Sorrow had increased her own power of sympathy; out of trials she had learnt patience; and failure and the gradual sinking of one she had loved into the bottomless slough of evil habit had but left her with an added dower of pity and tolerance.

So the past had no sting left, and if iron had ever entered into her soul it now but served to make it strong. She was still young, too; it was not near sunset with her yet, nor even midday, and the future that, humanly speaking, she counted to be hers was almost dazzling in its brightness. For love had dawned for her again, and no uncertain love, wrapped in the mists of memory, but one that had ripened through liking and friendship and intimacy into the authentic glory. He was in England, too; she was going back to him. And before very long she would never go away from him again.

Her place on deck had been wisely chosen, and, defended by the row of cabins at her back, she could watch in a dry windlessness the jovial riot of the seas. Now the steamer would stagger to some cross-blow of the waves; now, making a friend of them, swerved into a trough of opalescent green, and emerged again to take, like some fine-spirited horse, the liquid fence, flecked with bubbles, that lay in its course. The wind that had raised this gale still blew from the westward, and on the undefended deck great parcels of water, cut off from their seas, fell in solid lumps that resolved themselves into hissing streams.

And Daisy – Daisy occupied no small portion of her thoughts. A year ago she was on the threshold of womanhood, and at such critical periods Aunt Jeannie knew well that a year may confirm existing tendencies or completely alter them, bringing to light strands of character that had been woven below the surface. For many reasons she had a peculiar tenderness towards this dear niece. For seven rather dreadful years Daisy had lived with her, and during these Jeannie had never remitted her efforts to conceal from her that which had darkened her own life.

She believed (quietly, under her breath) that those efforts had been successful; she hoped anyhow that Daisy did not know of, did not even guess at, the underlying tragedy. For Daisy, all these years, had been in the seedtime of her life, and Mrs. Halton, rightly or wrongly, quite firmly believed that the young years of those who are to become men and women are best spent if during them they can be brought to learn the joy of life, while its possible tragedies are kept as far from them as may be. For, in general, the habit of joy is the best weapon with which to fight sorrow when sorrow comes. To expect the best of everything and everybody, and to go on doing so, is the best antidote for disappointments. To expect the worst, to think that disappointment is the usual outcome, is to be already unnerved for it. Life is best encountered with a sanguine heart.

Such, at any rate, was the creed of her who sat now on the deck of this labouring steamer as it ploughed its passage home, where were her friends and her lover. The tarpaulin had proved unnecessary, for she was sheltered by the deck-buildings from spray. Her book was also unnecessary, for she was more congenially occupied in this pleasant web of thought, and she sat there in her big fur cloak – for the wind of their motion made the air feel cold – with eyes that looked outwards, yet brooded inwardly, April-eyes, that were turned towards the summer that was coming. And all the past was poured into that, even as the squalls and tempests of winter are transmuted into and feed the luxuriance of June-time. The sorrow and the pain that were past had become herself; they were over, but their passage had left her more patient, more tolerant, more loving.

The deck was nearly empty, and but few of the more valiant walked up and down the sheltered swaying boards; but these, as often as they passed, looked again at her. Her mouth and chin were half lost and buried in the furry collar of her cloak, but above them was that fine, straight nose, just a little tip-tilted, the great brown eyes, and black hair growing low on the brow. Had her mouth been visible, a man would have said, "This is a woman," but without that he would very likely have said, "This is a girl," so young and so full of expectancy was her face. Yet had he looked twice at eyes and smooth, flushed cheeks alone, he would have said, "This is a woman," for though the joy of life beamed so freshly in her eyes, behind that there lurked something of its transmuted sorrows. Her expectancy was not that of ignorance; she knew, and still looked forward.

Under the lee of the English shore the sea abated, and she came on to the top deck from which they would disembark, and looked eagerly along the pier, telling herself that her expectations that she would see a certain figure there were preposterous, and yet cherishing them with a secret conviction. And then she knew that they were not preposterous at all; that it could not have been otherwise. Of course he had come down to Dover to meet her, and as she left the boat she was taken into his charge at once.

"Oh, Victor, how nice of you," she said. "I didn't expect you would come all the way down here a bit."

He held her hand, "but as long as all may, or so very little longer." But there was much that passed between them in that "very little longer."

"Nor did I expect to come," he said. "I only came."

She smiled at him.

"Ah, that's so like you," she said.

They waited with talk of commonplaces as to her journey and the crossing till Jeannie's maid came off the boat with her attendant baggage-bearer, and then went towards the train. They were the sort of people to whom a railway guard always touches his cap, and this duly occurred. Victor

Braithwaite, however, had on this occasion already been in consultation with him, and they were taken to a compartment he had caused to be reserved. On principle Jeannie felt bound to remonstrate.

"You are so extravagant," she said. "I know exactly what that means: you have paid for four places."

"Three," he said. "You have paid for your own. And if you say a word more I shall get another compartment for your maid."

Jeannie laughed.

"My lips are dumb," she said. "Ah! it is good to see you."

She was for the moment deprived of that particular blessing, for he went out again to get a tea-basket, and Jeannie leant back in her seat, feeling, in spite of her remonstrance, that exquisite pleasure that comes from being looked after, from having everything done for you, not from a man's mere politeness, but from his right (he, the one man) to serve the one woman. In all he did he was so intensely efficient and reliable; the most casual trivial detail, if entrusted to him, took place as by some immutable natural law. He would return in the shortest possible time, yet without hurry, with the tea-basket, while half that crowd of jostling, distracted passengers outside would have to go without. And it was not otherwise in things that were far from trivial. When he told her he loved her she knew that she stood on an unshakable rock, against which nothing could prevail. There was not a woman in the world, she felt, as safe as she. Well she knew what lay beneath his quietness and undemonstrativeness, a trust how complete, a love how strong.

The train started, then he leant forward to her from his seat opposite and took both her hands.

"My dearest," he said, and kissed her.

And then there was silence for a little.

"And your plans," he said at last – "your immediate plans, I mean? You go to Lady Nottingham's in town now, don't you?"

"Yes; and you? Will you be in town?"

A smile just smouldered in his eyes.

"Well, just possibly," he said. "I hope we may meet now and then. She has asked me down to Bray the day after to-morrow for Whitsuntide. Shall I go?"

Jeannie laughed.

"I won't pretend not to know what that means," she said. "It means to ask whether I am going. What shall we do? I suppose the house will be full, whereas we might have a sort of dear little desert island all to ourselves if we stopped in town, as everybody will be away. I should not object to that in the least. But, Victor, if Alice wants me, I think I had better go down with her. There aren't really any people in the world except you and me, but they think there are." Her brown eyes softened again. "I think that is an ungrateful and selfish speech of mine," she said. "I am sorry; I don't deserve my friends."

"I like the ungrateful and selfish speech," said he.

"Then I present you with it. Yes, I think we had better go down there. I long to see Alice again, and Daisy. Dear Daisy, have you seen her lately?"

"As one may say that one has seen a meteor. She has flashed by."

"Ah, Daisy shall not flash by me. She must flash to me, and stop there, burning. Oh, look, it is the month of the briar-rose. See how the hedges foam with pink blossom. And the fields, look, knee-deep in long grasses and daisies and buttercups. I am home again, thank Heaven. I am home. Home met me on the pier, my darling – the heart of home met me there."

"And you did not expect it in the least?" he asked. "You said so, at any rate."

"Did I really? What very odd things one says! It is lucky that nobody believes them."

CHAPTER IV

They parted at Victoria, and Mrs. Halton drove straight to Lady Nottingham's, leaving her maid to claim and capture her luggage. She had not known till she returned to London how true a Londoner she was at heart, how closely the feel and sense of the great grey dirty city was knit into her self. For it was the soil out of which had grown all the things in her life which "counted" or were significant; it had been the scene of all her great joys and sorrows, and to-day all those who made up her intimate life, friends and lover, were gathered here.

There were many other places in the world to which she felt grateful: sunny hillsides overlooking the spires of Florence; cool woods on the Italian Riviera through which stirred the fresh breezes off the dim blue sea below; galleries and churches of Venice, and the grey-green stretches of its lagoons. To all these her debt of gratitude was deep, for it was in them, and through their kindly sunny aid, that during the last year she had recaptured peace and content.

But her gratitude to them was not of the quality of love; she felt rather towards them as a patient feels towards the doctors and nurses to whose ministrations he owes his return of health and the removal of the fever which, while it lasted, came between himself and the whole world, making all things strange and unreal. And then, just for a moment, a little shudder passed over her as she thought of the sharp-edged, shining streets of Paris through which she had passed with downcast, averted eyes that morning, going straight from station to station and hating every moment of her passage.

It was hard to forgive Paris for associations which it held for her of a certain fortnight; it was hard to believe even now that those bitter and miserable hours contained no more than the pain by which it was necessary that a dear and erring soul should be taught its lessons. But at heart she did not doubt that, though she could not forgive Paris for being the scene of those infinitely sad and pitiful memories. Then she shook those thoughts off; they concerned that past which was absolutely dead in so far as it was painful and bitter, and lived only in the greater tenderness and pity of which her own soul was so full.

There was an affectionate little note of greeting and welcome for her from Lady Nottingham, which was at once given her, and even as she read it somewhere overhead a door opened, and like a whirlwind Daisy descended.

"Oh, Aunt Jeannie," she cried, "how heavenly! Oh, it is quite good enough to be true. You darling person! I have never liked anything nearly as much as this minute."

Daisy made a sort of Bacchante of herself as she took her aunt up to the drawing-room, dancing round her, and ever and again rushing in upon her for another kiss.

"And I managed everything too beautifully," she said. "Aunt Alice wasn't sure if she wouldn't put off an engagement in order to be here when you arrived, and I said she oughtn't to. I put it on moral grounds, and packed her and Gladys off. And I didn't care half a row of pins for moral grounds, I only just wanted to get the first half-hour with you all to myself. And if you aren't pleased at my plan I shall burst into several tears."

Aunt Jeannie took the dear face between her hands.

"I couldn't have thought of a better plan myself," she said, "and, as you know, I am rather proud of my plans when I really give my mind to them. Oh, Daisy, it *is* good to see you! I don't think a day has passed without my just longing to have a glimpse at you."

"Oh, is that all?" said Daisy. "I know a day hasn't passed without my longing to have many glimpses."

"You dear child! You shall have such a lot. And what a lot you will have to tell me; I shall want to know exactly what you have done, and whether you've been wise and good and kind, and what new friends you have. I shall want to see them all, and make friends with them all. And I shall want to know all your plans. Just think, Daisy, it's a year since I saw you."

"I know, but I don't believe it. Oh, Aunt Jeannie, you must come down to Bray for Whitsuntide. Gladys and I go to-morrow just to look round and see that everything is all right, and you and Aunt Alice are to come the next day with all the party, and it will be such fun. Oh! I've got such a lot to tell you."

Daisy paused a moment.

"I think I mean quite the opposite," she said. "I don't think that I've anything whatever to tell you that's of the very smallest importance. I only just want to babble and be glad. I am glad, oh, so frightfully glad! You are the nicest aunt that anybody ever had."

Daisy poured out tea for her aunt, and considering her admission that she had nothing to say, made a very substantial job of it. Yet all the time she was talking with a reservation, having clearly made up her mind not to mention Lord Lindfield's name. She felt sure, if she did, Aunt Jeannie would see that she mentioned him somehow differently from the way in which she mentioned others, and these first moments of meeting, for all the sincerity of her joy to see her, struck her as not suitable for confidences.

"Another reason why I wanted half an hour with you," she said, "is that I am dining out to-night, and shan't see you. It is quite too disgusting, but I couldn't help myself; and if one dines out one probably dances, you know, so after this I shan't see you at all till to-morrow. Oh, Aunt Jeannie, what a nice world it is! I am glad I happened to be born. And you are looking so young, I can't think why everybody doesn't want to marry you at once. They probably do."

Mrs. Halton's engagement was at present a secret, for it was still only just a year since her husband's death, and though that had been a release merciful both to him and her, her wisdom had rightly decided that the event should not be announced yet. They were to be married in the autumn, and the news need not be made public immediately. One reservation she had made, namely, that she would tell Lady Nottingham; but Daisy, even Daisy, must not know at present.

She laughed.

"They have a remarkable power of keeping their desires to themselves, then," she said. "Dover pier" – and she smiled inwardly as she said it – "was not thick with aspirants for my rather large hand. But as we are on the subject, Daisy, what about Mr. Carton?"

Daisy looked at her imploringly.

"Oh, don't!" she said. "There is nothing more to tell you than what I have written to you. He's so much too good for me that I should feel uncomfortably inferior, which is never pleasant. Oh, Aunt Jeannie, what a fraud I am! That isn't the reason a bit – and the reason is simply that I don't want to. It sounds so easy to understand, doesn't it, when it's stated like that, but poor darling Willie finds it so difficult to grasp. I had to say it all over again three times last Monday. It isn't that I feel inferior to him. If I did, it might mean that I was in love with him, because people always say that they aren't the least worthy when they fully intend to marry each other. No. I don't want to, that's all; and if I am to be an old maid with a canary – well, I shall be an old maid with a canary, which I shall instantly sell, because they make such a row, don't they? Do you think we might talk about something else?"

It was scarcely necessary for Daisy to add the last sentence, for without pause she proceeded to do so. At the back of her mind Mrs. Halton felt that there was something behind this, but since Daisy clearly did not desire to speak of it, she would be committing the crime – almost unpardonable between friends – of attempting to force a confidence, if she showed the slightest eagerness to hear more or even let her manner betray that she thought there was more to be heard. Besides, she had her own secret from Daisy. It would be a meanness to deny to others the liberty she claimed herself.

Lady Nottingham came in soon after this, and before long the two girls had to go and dress for their dinner. Daisy, in the highest spirits, rushed in again to say good-night to the aunts before starting, a ravishing figure.

"Good-night, darling Aunt Jeannie," she cried. "Yes, my frock is nice, isn't it? – and it cost twopence-halfpenny! Wasn't it a cheap shop? Silver has gone down in value, you see, so much, and

green was always cheap. It's too heavenly to think that I shall come back to the house where you are. Usually I hate coming back from balls."

A cab was waiting for them, and Daisy pulled the window down with a jerk.

"She's a darling!" she exclaimed, "and I want to tell her everything, Gladys, yet not one word did I say about Lord Lindfield. I have a perfectly good reason as to why I did not in my own mind, but it doesn't happen to be the right one. I say to myself that I wish to tell her nothing until there is really something to tell. But that isn't the real reason. Do you generally have a good reason *and* a real reason? I always do. Then you can use either and satisfy anybody. I think I must be a hypocrite. The real reason is that I think she would see that I wasn't in love with him. Well, I'm not – but I'm going to be. I shall tell her then."

"Is he going to be at the Streathams to-night?" asked Gladys.

"Yes, of course. That's why I am going. If he wasn't, I should say I was ill, and stop at home with Aunt Jeannie. Darling, if you look shocked I shall be sick! Every girl wants to see the man she intends to marry as often as possible. But most girls don't say so; that is why, as a sex, we are such unutterable humbugs. Men are so much more sensible. They say, 'She's a ripper!' or 'a clipper!' – or whatever is the word in use – 'and I shall go and call on that cad of a woman with whom she is dining on Thursday next, in order to be asked to dinner.' That's sensible; there's no nonsense about it. But girls pretend it happens by accident. As if anything happened by accident! They plot and scheme in just the same way, only they aren't frank about it. We want to marry certain men just as much as they want to marry us, and yet we pretend they do it all. You pretend. You try to look shocked because I don't. Here we are! Oh, do get out! No, you needn't hurry. He's coming up the pavement now. If you get out quick he won't see us – me, I mean!"

This slogging diplomacy was successful. Lord Lindfield got opposite the house exactly as Daisy stepped out of the cab.

"Hullo, Miss Daisy!" he said. "What stupendous luck! Thought I was going into the wilderness to-night like the children of Israel – and here you are! Jove!"

He had taken off his hat, and stood bare-headed as he handed her out of the cab, exposing that fascinating greyness above the temples which Daisy had spoken of. A face clean-shaven and so bubbly good-humoured that all criticism of his features was futile appeared below, but a reader of character might easily guess that if once that bubbling good-humour were expunged, something rather serious and awkward might be left. But the good-humour seemed ineradicable; no one could picture his face without it. In other respects, he was very broad, but of sufficient height to carry off the breadth without giving the appearance of being short. A broken front tooth, often exposed by laughter, completed the general irregularity of his face. The fascinating greyness was accompanied by a tendency to high forehead, due probably to incipient baldness rather than to abnormal intellectual development.

"I don't know what Jove has got to do with it," said Daisy; "but if he is responsible, I think it is delightful of him. I am glad you are here. I thought I was going into the wilderness too. Oh, I think you have met my cousin."

He had met Gladys about a hundred times, so Daisy was quite right, and they shook hands gravely. That ceremony over, he turned to Daisy again without pause.

"Dance, too, isn't there?" he said. "I shan't know a soul. I never do. Do dance with me sometimes, out of pity's sake, Miss Daisy – just now and then, you know."

Daisy gave an altogether excessive florin to the cabman, who held it in the palm of his hand, and looked at it as if it were some curious botanical specimen hitherto unknown to him.

"And one usually says 'Thank you!'" she observed. – "Yes, Lord Lindfield, let's dance now and then."

CHAPTER V

Their dancing now and then chiefly assumed the less violent form of dancing, namely, sitting in as sequestered places as they could find. There was nothing very sequestered, as the house was rather small and the guests extremely numerous, and they sat generally in full view of the whole world, Daisy being occasionally torn away by other partners and being annexed again by him on the earliest possible occasion. In such absences, though the good-humour of his face showed no sign of abatement, he became extremely distraught, failed to recognize people he knew quite well, and took up his stand firmly at the door of the ballroom, where he could observe her and be at hand as soon as she was disengaged again.

Their hostess, Mrs. Streatham, was a very rich and gloriously pushing woman, with no nonsense about her, and but little sense. She was engaged in pushing her way steadily upwards through what is known as the top-crust of society, and if she wanted anybody particularly to come to her house, gave him or her the choice of some six dinners and ten lunches, further facilitating matters by requesting the desired object to drop in any time. It was Lord Lindfield's first appearance at her house, and she was already pinning him down for a further lunch some time next week, with a grim tenacity of purpose that made it difficult to evade her. He did not propose to leave his post of observation at the ballroom door till this dance came to an end; and as she had as good a right there (since it was her own house) as he, it was likely that she would get her way. He had begun – which was a tactical error – by saying he was not free till the end of the week, and this gave her an advantage. She gave her invitation in a calm, decided manner – rather in the manner of a dentist making appointments.

"Thursday, Friday, or Saturday will suit me equally well, Lord Lindfield," she was saying. "I shall have a few people to lunch on all those days, and you can take your choice. Shall we say Friday?"

"It's awfully kind of you," said he, "but I'm really not quite sure about Friday. I rather think I'm already engaged."

"Saturday, then," said Mrs. Streatham, "at one-thirty."

"Very kind of you, but I'm away for the week-end, and shall probably have to leave town in the morning."

"Then let us make it Thursday," said Mrs. Streatham. "And if two o'clock suits you better than half-past one, it is equally convenient. That will be delightful."

At the moment the dance came to an end, and Lindfield, to his dismay, saw Daisy leaving by a further door.

"Very good of you," he said. "I'll be sure to remember. Excuse me."

Mrs. Streatham was quite ready to excuse him now, since she had her hook in him, and went on to Gladys, who was just passing out.

"Miss Hinton," she said, "do lunch with me on Thursday next. Lord Lindfield is coming, and, I hope, a few more friends. Or Friday would suit me equally well. I hope Miss Hanbury will come too. Would you ask her? – or perhaps it is safer that I should send her a note. Thursday, then, at two. – Ah! Lord Quantock, I have been looking for you all evening. Pray lunch here on Thursday next. Lord Lindfield and Miss Hinton, and that very pretty Daisy – let me see, what is her name? – oh, yes! – Daisy Hanbury are coming. Or, if you are engaged that day, do drop in on Friday at the same time."

Lord Lindfield meantime had found Daisy and firmly taken her away from her partner. Before now, as has been said, the affair was a matter of common discussion, and her engagement believed to be only a matter of time; to-night it looked as if the time would be short.

"And I'm coming down to Bray this week-end," he said, going on at the point at which their conversation was interrupted. "It was so good of Lady Nottingham to ask me. You've got such nice aunts! I expect that accounts for a lot in you. Ever seen my aunts, Miss Daisy? They've got whiskers, and take camomile."

"It sounds delicious, and I'm sure I should love them," said Daisy. – "So sorry, Mr. Tracy, but I seem to have made a mistake, and I'm engaged for the next. So very stupid of me. – I know, Lord Lindfield; isn't Aunt Alice a darling? But, although I adore her, I think I adore Aunt Jeannie more. Do you know her – Mrs. Halton?"

Lindfield gave a little appreciative whistle.

"Know her? By Jove! I should think I did. So she's your aunt, too! I never heard such luck! But she's a bit young to be an aunt, isn't she?"

Daisy laughed.

"She began early. She was my mother's sister, but ever so much younger. She was an aunt when she was eight. My eldest sister, you know – "

"Didn't know you had one."

"Very likely you wouldn't. She died some years ago, and before that she didn't live in England. She was married to a Frenchman. But Aunt Jeannie – isn't she an angel? And she came back from Italy, where she has been for a whole year, only to-day. It's the nicest thing that has happened since she went away."

"You mean that was nice?"

"Oh, don't be so silly! It is quite clear what I mean. You'll see her next week; she is coming down to Bray."

"Wonder if she'll remember me? The people I like most hardly ever do. Rather sad! I say, Miss Daisy, I'm looking forward to that visit to Bray like anything. I don't know when I've looked forward to anything so much. Are you good at guessing? I wonder if you can guess why?"

The room where they sat had somewhat emptied of its tenants, since the next dance had just begun, and something in his tone, some sudden tremble of his rather deep voice, some brightness in those merry grey eyes, suddenly struck Daisy, and just for the moment it frightened her. She put all her gaiety and lightness into her reply.

"Ah, but clearly," she said, "it is quite easy to guess. It is because you will see Aunt Jeannie again. You have told me as much."

"Not quite right," he said, "but pretty near. Bother! Here's that woman coming to ask me to lunch again."

The good humour quite vanished from his face as Mrs. Streatham came rapidly towards them. She had so much to think about with all her invitations that she very seldom remembered to smile. And it was without a smile that she bore rapidly down upon them.

"Oh, Miss – Miss Hanbury," she said, "do come to lunch on Thursday next at one-thirty – or is it two, Lord Lindfield? Yes, two. Lord Lindfield is coming, and I hope one or two other friends."

"Why, that is charming of you," said Daisy. "I shall be delighted."

"And do persuade Lady Nottingham to come, will you not?" continued Mrs. Streatham. "She is your aunt, is she not?"

Somehow the moment had passed, but Daisy, as she stood talking, felt that something new had come to her. She had seen Tom Lindfield for a moment in a new light: for that second she felt that she had never known him before. He struck her differently, somehow, and it was that which momentarily had frightened her, and caused her to make that light, nonsensical reply. But next moment she saw that it was not he who had altered, it was herself.

All this was very faint and undefined in her own mind. But it was there.

CHAPTER VI

Jeannie Halton, going up to her bedroom that night, felt very keenly that ineffable sense of coming home which makes all the hours spent in alien places seem dim and unreal. She could hardly believe that it was she who had been so long away from so many friends, still less that it was she who, a year ago, tired and weary, had gone southwards in search of that minimum of health and peace which makes existence tolerable. Yet that time abroad could never have become dim to her, since it was there, in the winter spent in Rome, that her old friendship with Victor Braithwaite had ripened into intimacy and burst into love. Rome would always be knit into her life.

It was not only in affairs of the mind and affections that her perception was acute. Like most highly-organized people, her body, her fine material senses, were vivid messengers to her soul; and as she went upstairs she contrasted with a strong sense of content her purely physical surroundings with those in which she had lived for the last forty-eight hours. For two days and nights she had been hurried across Europe, over the jolt and rattle of the racing wheels; by day the blurred landscape, wreathed in engine-smoke, had streamed by her; by night she had seen nothing but the dull, stuffed walls of her sleeping compartment, and it was an exquisite physical pleasure to have the firm, unshaken floor underfoot, to be surrounded by the appointments of a beautiful house, to be able to move of one's own volition again, and not to be taken like a parcel in a van from one end of Europe to the other. And how delicious also it was to be clean, to have revelled in soap and water, instead of being coated and pelted at by dust and coal-grime! On the surface of life this was all pleasant; it all added to her sense of security and well-being.

She had enjoyed a charming evening, which was not nearly over yet, since Alice was coming to her room for a talk – no little talk, no few good-night words, but a real long talk, which should wipe off the arrears of a twelve months' abstinence. Alice had demurred at first, saying she knew that journeys were fatiguing things, but Mrs. Halton had truthfully said that she had never felt less tired. For when one is happy there is no time to be fatigued; being happy engrosses the whole attention. It was early yet also, scarcely after ten, for two or three old friends only, a party of women, had dined, and these had gone away early, with the fatigue of the traveller in their minds. Mrs. Halton had let that pass; the fact was that to-night she wanted above all things to talk to Lady Nottingham. There was one thing – a very big one – which she meant to tell her, and there was also a great deal she wished to learn.

Lady Nottingham followed her after a minute or two; and a maid bearing a tray with an enormous jug of hot water and a glass followed Lady Nottingham, for she was one of those people who seem to keep permanently young by always doing the latest thing. Just now there was a revival of hot-water drinking, and with avidity (as if it tasted nice) Lady Nottingham drank hot water.

"Excellent thing, Jeannie," she said. "Can't I persuade you to try? You dear person, I don't know that I will even attempt to. It might have some effect on you, and I don't want anything to have any effect on you. I prefer you exactly as you are. Now I want to make myself quite comfortable, in order that I may enjoy myself as much as possible, and then you shall tell me all that has happened to you this last year. – No, Hendon, you needn't wait up. Yes; plenty of hot water. Go to bed."

"Let me pull the blinds up and open the windows," said Jeannie; "I want to let London in. Ah! Clip-clop! Clip-clop! Girls and boys going to dances, and falling in love with one another, and keeping the world young. God bless them!"

She leant out into the soft warm night a moment, and then turned back into the room again, her face so brimming with happiness and youth that Alice for a moment was almost startled.

"They or something else seems to have kept you young, you dear!" she said. "And now sit down and tell me all about yourself from the crown of your head to the sole of your foot. You are so tall, too, Jeannie; it will take a nice long time."

Jeannie sat down.

"So it is 'me next,' is it, as the children say?" she asked. "Very well, me. Well, once upon a time, dear, a year ago, I was an old woman. I was twenty-nine, if you care to know, but an old woman. For the measure of years is a very bad standard to judge by; it tells you of years only which have practically nothing to do with being old or young. Well, the old woman of twenty-nine went away. And to-day she came back, a year older in respect of years, since she is thirty now, but, oh! ever so much younger, because – Do you guess at all?"

Lady Nottingham put down her hot water.

"Ah! my dear," she said, "of course I guess. Or rather I don't guess; I know. There is somebody. It is only Somebody who can interfere in our age and our happiness. Who is it?"

"No; guess again," said Jeannie.

But again it was hardly a case of guessing. Lady Nottingham knew quite well who it was, who in those years of Jeannie's married life had been her constant and quiet support and stand-by, and who had found his reward in the knowledge that he helped her to bear what had to be borne.

"Victor Braithwaite," she said, without pause. "Oh, Jeannie, is it so? You are going to marry him? Oh, my darling, I am so glad. What a happy man, and how well he deserves it!"

Lady Nottingham was stout and comfortable; but with extraordinary alertness she surged out of her chair to kiss Jeannie, and upset the table on which was her glass and her boiling water, breaking the one and deluging the carpet with the other – a perfect Niagara of scalding fluid. She paid not the least attention to the rising clouds of steam nor to the glass which crashed on to the floor and was reduced to shards and exploded fragments.

"My dear, how nice!" she said. "And he has been in love with you so long! He will have told you that now, but I insist on the credit of having seen it also. He behaved so splendidly, and was such a good friend to you, without ever letting you see – for I will wager that you did not – that he loved you."

"No, I never knew until he told me," said Jeannie, simply.

"Of course you didn't, because he is a nice man and you are a nice woman. Oh, Jeannie, don't you hate those creatures who keep a man dangling – wives, I mean – who like knowing that a man is eating his poor silly heart out for them, who don't intend to lead – well, double lives, and yet keep him tied to their apron-strings? Such vampires! They put their dreadful noses in the air the moment he says something to them that he shouldn't, and all the time they have been encouraging him to say it! They are flirts, who will certainly find themselves in a very uncomfortable round of the Inferno! I should torture them if I were Providence! I am sure Providence would prefer – Dear me, yes."

Alice kissed her again.

"Isn't it so?" she demanded, vehemently.

"About flirts? Why, of course. A flirt is a woman who leads a man on and leads him on, and then suddenly says, 'What do you mean?' Surely we need not discuss them."

Lady Nottingham went over to the window-seat.

"No, I know we need not," she said. "I was led away. Darling, Victor Braithwaite is coming to Bray on Saturday. Did you ever hear of anything more apt? Till this moment I was not sure that you would ever marry him, though I longed for you to do so. You shall have a punt all to yourselves – a private particular punt – and he shall – well, he shall punt you about. Oh, Jeannie, I too love the youth of the world."

Jeannie drew her chair a little nearer to the window-seat, in which Lady Nottingham had taken her place after the catastrophe of the hot water.

"I know. He told me he was coming to Bray to-day."

"Oh, he met you at Victoria?" she asked.

"No, dear; a little further down the line – at Dover, in fact. Yes, Alice, his was the first face I saw as we came alongside. And how my heart went out to him! What a good homecoming it has been, and how absolutely unworthy I feel of it! You have no idea how I used to rebel and complain

in – in those past years, wondering what I had done to have my life so spoilt. Spoilt! Yes, that was the word I used to myself, and all the time this was coming nearer."

"Tell me more, dear."

"About him?" asked Jeannie.

"About him and you."

"Well, all the autumn I was on the Italian lakes. Oh, Alice, such dreadful months, and all the more dreadful because of the maddening beauty of the place. I looked at it. I knew it was all there, but I never saw it; it never went inside me, or went to make part of me. I was very sleepless all that time, and depressed with a blackness of despair. And as I got stronger in physical health, the depression seemed more unbearable, because, in all probability, so many years lay before me, and nothing in life seemed the least worth while. I often thought of you, and often – every day – of Daisy, longing, in a way, to see you both, but knowing that it would be no use if I did, for you would have been to me like the corpses, the husks of what I loved once. And I did not see any possibility of getting better or of getting out of this tomb-like darkness. It was like being buried alive, and getting more alive from week to week, so that I grew more and more conscious of how black the tomb was. Every now and then the pall used to lift a little, and that, I think, was the worst of all."

Lady Nottingham laid her plump, comfortable hand on Jeannie's.

"You poor darling!" she said. "And you would not let either Daisy or me come to you. Why did you not?"

"Because there are certain passages, I think, which the human soul has to go through alone. Dear Alice, you don't know all that went to make up the gloom of those dreadful months! There was one thing in particular that cast a blacker shadow than all the rest. I hope you will never know it. It concerns some one who is dead, but not my husband. It was that which made the darkness so impenetrable. I know you will not ask me about it. But, as I said, when the pall lifted a little, that was the worst of all, because then, for a moment it might be, or for an hour or two, I knew that life and youth and joy were just as dominant and as triumphant as ever in the world, and that it was I who had got on the wrong side of things, and saw them left-handed, and could be only conscious of this hideous nightmare of suffering."

Jeannie paused again, pushing back the thick coils of black hair from her forehead.

"Quite little things would make the pall lift," she said. "Once it was the sudden light of the sun shining on one of those red sails; once it was the sight of a little Italian contadina dancing with her shadow on the white sunny road, all by herself, for sheer exuberance of heart; once it was a man and a maid sitting close to each other in the dusk, and quietly singing some little love-song, so – so dreadfully unconscious of the sorrow of the world. Oh, that was bad – that was dreadful! Just one little verse, and then in the darkness they kissed each other. I knew they were darlings, and I thought they were devils. And once Victor wrote to me, saying that he was passing through on his way to Venice and Rome, and asking if he might come to see me. I did not answer him even; I could not."

"But during all those weeks I suppose I was getting better, and when I went south to Rome in November, though I still could not look forward or contemplate the future at all, I knew better how to deal with the present hour and the present day. There was no joy in them, but there was a sort of acquiescence in me. If life – as seemed the only possible thing – was to be joyless for me, I could at least behave decently. Also a certain sort of pride, I think, came to my help. I felt that it was bad manners to appear as I felt – just as when one has a headache one makes an effort to appear more brilliantly well than usual. One doesn't like people to know one has a headache, and in the same way I settled that I didn't like them to know I had a heartache."

"Victor was in Rome. The manager of the branch of their banking business there had died suddenly, and he had gone to take his place till some one could be sent out from England. The new man arrived there some ten days or so after I did; but he still stayed on, for one morning I saw him in the Forum, and another day I passed him driving. All he knew was that I had not answered the letter

which he wrote to me when I was on Como, and he made no further attempt to see me. But he did not leave Rome. And then one day I wrote to him, as I was bound to do, saying that I had not answered his letter because I believed then that I could not; but that if he would forgive that, and come to see me —

"Oh, Alice, it is being such a long story. But there is little more. He came, and I asked him if he was stopping long in Rome, and he said his plans were uncertain. And then — so gradually that I scarcely knew it was happening — he began to take care of me; and gradually, also, I began to expect him to do so. He tells me I was not tiresome; I can't believe him.

"And then — how does it happen? Nobody knows, though it has happened so often. One day I saw him differently. I had always been friends with him, and in those bad years I had always relied on him; but, as I say, one day I saw him differently. I saw the man himself — not as he struck me, but as he was. That is just it, dear Alice. 'How he struck me' was left out, because I was left out. And then I knew I loved him. And — and that is all, I think."

Lady Nottingham gave a long, appreciative sigh.

"I think it is *the* nicest story," she said — "and it's all true. Oh, Jeannie, I am such a match-maker, and it is so pleasant to be forestalled. I asked him down to Bray simply in order to promote this, and now I find it has been promoted already. But the punt will be useful all the same."

Jeannie joined her friend in the window-seat.

"Yes, just the same," she said.

CHAPTER VII

There was silence for a little while. An hour had passed since they began to talk, but it was still short of midnight, and the hansoms and motors still swept about the square like a throng of sonorous fireflies. Just opposite a big house flared with lit windows, and the sound of the band came loudly across the open space, a little mellowed by the distance, but with the rhythm of its music intact.

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