

Meade L. T.

A Life For a Love: A Novel



L. Meade

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CHAPTER I

The time was July, and the roses were out in great profusion in the rectory garden. The garden was large, somewhat untidily kept, but it abounded in all sweet old-fashioned flowers; there was the invariable tennis-court, empty just now, and a sweet sound of children laughing and playing together, in a hay-field near by. The roses were showering their petals all over the grass, and two girls, sisters evidently, were pacing up the broad walk in the centre of the garden arm-in-arm. They were dark-eyed girls, with chestnut, curling hair, rosy lips full of curves and smiles, and round, good-humored faces. They were talking eagerly and excitedly one to the other, not taking the smallest notice of the scene around them – not even replying when some children in the hay-field shouted their names, but coming at last to a full stand-still before the open window of the old-fashioned rectory study. Two men were standing under the deep-mullioned window; one tall, slightly bent, with silvery-white hair, aquiline features, and dark brown eyes like the girls. He was the Rector of Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, and the man he was addressing was his only son, and the brother of the eager bright-looking girls.

"I can't understand it, Gerald," he was saying. "No, don't come in at present, my dears;" he waved his white, delicate hand to his daughters. "We'll join you in the tennis-court presently. Yes, Gerald, as I was saying, it seems the most incomprehensible and unheard-of arrangement."

The girls smiled gently, first into their brother's face, then at one another. They moved away, going through a little shrubbery, and passing out into a large kitchen garden, where Betty, the old cook, was now standing, picking raspberries and currants into a pie-dish.

"Betty," said Liliias, the eldest girl, "has Martha dusted our trunks and taken them upstairs yet? And has Susan sent up the laces and the frilled things? We want to set to work packing, as soon as ever the children are in bed."

"Bless your hearts, then," said old Betty, laying her pie-dish on the ground, and dropping huge ripe raspberries into it with a slow deliberate movement, "if you think that children will go to bed on the finest day of the year any time within reason, you're fine and mistook, that's all. Why, Miss Joey, she was round in the garden but now, and they're all a-going to have tea in the hay-field, and no end of butter they'll eat, and a whole batch of my fresh cakes. Oh, weary, weary me, but children's mouths are never full – chattering, restless, untoward things are children. Don't you never go to get married, Miss Marjory."

"I'll follow your example, Betty," laughed back Marjory Wyndham. "I knew that would fetch the old thing," she continued, turning to her sister. "She does hate to be reminded that she's an old maid, but she brings it on herself by abusing matrimony in that ridiculous fashion."

"It's all because of Gerald," answered Liliias – "she is perfectly wild to think of Gerald's going away from us, and taking up his abode in London with those rich Pagets. I call it odious, too – I almost feel to-night as if I hated Valentine. If Gerald had not fallen in love with her, things would have been different. He'd have taken Holy Orders, and he'd have been ordained for the curacy of Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, and then he need never have gone away. Oh. I hate – I detest to think of the rectory without Gerald."

"Oh, Liliias," replied Marjory, "you really are – you really – you really are –"

"What, miss? Speak out, or I'll shake you, or pinch you, or do something malicious. I warn you that I am quite in the mood."

"Then I'll stand here," said Marjory, springing to the other side of a great glowing bed of many-colored sweet-williams. "Here your arm can't reach across these. I will say of you, Liliias

Wyndham, that you are without exception the most contradictory and inconsistent person of my acquaintance. Here were you, a year ago, crying and sobbing on your knees because Gerald couldn't marry Valentine, and now, when it's all arranged, and the wedding is to be the day after to-morrow, and we have got our promised trip to London, and those lovely brides-maid dresses – made by Valentine's own express desire at Elise's – you turn round and are grumpy and discontented. Don't you know, you foolish silly Liliias, that if Gerald had never fallen in love with Valentine Paget he'd have met someone else, and if he was father's curate, those horrid Mortimer girls and those ugly Pelhams would have one and all tried to get him. We can't keep Gerald to ourselves for ever, so there's no use fretting about the inevitable, say I."

Liliias' full red lips were pouting; she stooped, and recklessly gathering a handful of sweet-williams, flung them at her sister.

"I own to being inconsistent," she said, "I own to being cross – I own to hating Valentine for this night at least, for it just tears my heart to give Gerald up."

There were real tears now in the bright, curly-fringed eyes and the would-be-defiant voice trembled.

Marjory shook the sweet-william petals off her dress.

"Come into the house," she said in a softened tone. "Father and Gerald must have finished that prosy discussion by now. Oh, do hark to those children's voices; what rampageous, excitable creatures they are. Lilly, did we ever shout in such shrill tones? That must be Augusta: no one else has a voice which sounds like the scraping of a coal-scoop in an empty coal-hod. Oh, of course that high laugh belongs to Joey. Aren't they feeding, and wrangling, and fighting? I am quite sure, Lil, that Betty is right, and they won't turn in for hours; we had better go and do our packing now."

"No, I see Gerald," exclaimed Liliias. And she flew up the narrow box-lined path to meet her brother.

CHAPTER II

Gerald Wyndham was not in the least like his rosy, fresh-looking sisters. He was tall and slenderly made, with very thick and rather light-brown hair, which stood up high over his low, white forehead – his eyes were large, but were deeply set, they were grey, not brown, in repose were dreaming in expression, but when he spoke, or when any special thought came to him, they grew intensely earnest, luminous and beautiful. The changing expression of his eyes was the chief charm of a highly sensitive and refined face – a face remarkable in many ways, for the breadth of his forehead alone gave it character, but with some weak lines about the finely cut lips. This weakness was now, however, hidden by a long, silken moustache. Liliias and Marjory thought Gerald's face the most beautiful in the world, and most people acknowledged him to be handsome, although his shoulders were scarcely broad enough for his height, and his whole figure was somewhat loosely hung together.

"Here you are at last," exclaimed Liliias, linking her hand in her brother's arm. "Here, take his other arm. Maggie. Oh, when, and oh, when, and oh, when shall we have him to ourselves again, I wonder?"

"You little goose," said Gerald. He shook himself as if he were half in a dream, and looked fondly down into Liliias' pretty dimpled, excitable face. "Well, girls, are the trunks packed, and have you put in plenty of finery? I promise you Mr. Paget will give a dinner-party every night – you'll want heaps of fine clothes while you stay at Queen's Gate."

Marjory began to count on her fingers.

"We arrive on Wednesday," she said. "On Wednesday evening, dinner number one, we wear our white Indian muslins, with the Liberty sashes, and flowers brought up from the dear old garden. Thursday evening, dinner number two, and evening of wedding day, our bridesmaids' toggery must suffice; Friday, dinner number three, those blue nun's veiling dresses will appear and charm the eyes. That's all. Three dresses for three dinners, for it's home, sweet home again on Saturday – isn't it, Liliias?"

"Of course," said Liliias, "that is, I suppose so," she added, glancing at her brother.

"Valentine wanted to know if you would stay in town for a week or ten days, and try to cheer up her father," said Gerald. "Mr. Paget and Valentine have scarcely been parted for a single day since she was born. Valentine is quite in a state at having to leave him for a month, and she thinks two bright little girls like you may comfort him somewhat."

"But we have our own father to see to," pouted Marjory; "and Sunday school, and choir practising, and the library books –"

"And I don't see how Valentine can mind leaving her father – if he were the very dearest father in the world – when she goes away with you," interrupted Liliias.

Gerald sighed, just the faintest shadow of an impatient sigh, accompanied by the slightest shrug of his shoulders.

"Augusta can give out the library books," he said. "Miss Queen can manage the choir. I will ask Jones to take your class, Liliias, and Miss Peters can manage yours with her own, Marjory. As to the rector, what is the use of having five young daughters, if they cannot be made available for once in a way? And here they come, and there's the governor in the midst of them. He doesn't look as if he were likely to taste the sweets of solitude, eh. Marjory?"

Not at that moment, certainly, for a girl hung on each arm, and a smaller girl sat aloft on each square shoulder, while a fifth shouted and raced, now in front, now behind, pelting this moving pyramid of human beings with flowers, and screaming even more shrilly than her sisters, with eager exclamation and bubbling laughter.

"There's Gerry," exclaimed Augusta.

She was the tallest of the party, with a great stretch of stockinged legs, and a decided scarcity of skirts. She flew at her brother, flung her arms round his neck and kissed him rapturously.

"You darling old Gerry – don't we all just hate and detest that horrible Valentine Paget."

"Hush, Gussie," responded Gerald, in his quiet voice. "You don't know Valentine, and you pain me when you talk of her in that senseless fashion. Here, have a race with your big brother to the other end of the garden. Girls," turning to his elder sisters – "seriously speaking I should like you to spend about a fortnight with the Pagets. And had you not better go and pack, for we must catch the eleven o'clock train to-morrow morning. Now, Gussie – one, two, three, and away."

Two pairs of long legs, each working hard to come off victorious in the race, flew past the group – the rector and the little girls cheered and shouted – Marjory and Liliias, laughing at the sight, turned slowly and went into the house; Gerald won the race by a foot or two, and Gussie flung herself panting and laughing on the grass at the other end of the long walk.

"Well done, Augusta," said her brother. "You study athletics to a purpose. Now, Gussie, can't you manage to give away the library books on Sunday?"

"I? You don't mean it?" said Augusta. Her black eyes sparkled; she recovered her breath, and the full dignity of her five feet five and a-half of growth on the instant. "Am I to give away the library books, Gerry?"

"Yes, I want Liliias to stay in London for a few days longer than she intended."

"And Marjory too?"

"Of course. The girls would not like to be parted."

"Galuptions! Won't I have a time of it all round! Won't I give old Peters a novel instead of his favorite Sunday magazines? And won't I smuggle Pailey's Evidences of Christianity into the hand of Alice Jones, the dressmaker. She says the only books she cares for are Wilkie Collins 'Woman in White,' and the 'Dead Secret,' so she'll have a lively time of it with the Evidences. Then there's 'Butler's Analogy,' it isn't in the parish library, but I'll borrow it for once from father's study. That will exactly suit Rhoda Fleming. Oh, what fun, what fun. I won't take a single story-book with me, except the 'Woman in White,' for Peters. He says novels are 'rank poison,' so he shall have his dose."

"Now look here, Gussie," said Gerald, taking his sister's two hands in his, and holding them tight – "you've got to please me about the library books, and not to play pranks, and make things disagreeable for Liliias when she comes back. You're thirteen now, and a big girl, and you ought to act like one. You're to make things comfortable for the dear old pater while we are all away, and you'll do it if you care for me, Gussie."

"Care for you!" echoed Augusta. "I love you, Gerry. I love you, and I hate –"

"No, don't say that," said Gerald, putting his hand on the girl's mouth.

Gussie looked droll and submissive.

"It is so funny," she exclaimed at length.

"You can explain that as we walk back to the house," responded her brother.

"Why, Gerry, to see you so frightfully in love! You are, aren't you? You have all the symptoms – oh, before I –"

"I love Valentine," responded Gerald. "That is a subject I cannot discuss with you, Augusta. When you know her you will love her too. I am going to bring her here in the autumn, and then I shall want you all to be good to her, and to let her feel that she has a great number of real sisters at Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, who will be good to her if she needs them, by-and-bye."

"As if she ever could need us," responded Gussie. "She'll have you. Yes, I'll do my best about the books – good-night. Gerald. Good-night, dear old darling king. That's Miss Queen's voice. Coming, Miss Queen, coming! Good-night, old Gerry. My love to that Val of yours. Oh, what a nuisance it is to have ever to go to bed."

Gussie's long legs soon bore her out of sight, and Gerald stepped into the silent and now empty study. To an initiated eye this room bore one or two marks of having lately witnessed a mental storm.

Close to the rector's leather armchair lay a pile of carefully torn-up papers – the family Bible, which usually occupied a place of honor on his desk, had been pushed ruthlessly on one side, and a valuable work on theology lay wide open and face downwards on the floor. Otherwise the room was in perfect order – the only absolutely neat apartment in the large old house. Not the most daring of all the young Wyndhams would disturb a volume here, or play any wild pranks in the sacred precincts of the rector's study. As Gerald now entered the room and saw these signs of mental disquiet round Mr. Wyndham's chair, the pleasant and somewhat cheerful look left his face, his eyes grew dark, earnest and full of trouble, and flinging himself on the sofa, he shaded them with his white long fingers. There was an oil painting of a lady over the mantel-piece, and this lady had Gerald's face. From her he inherited those peculiar and sensitive eyes, those somewhat hollow cheeks, and that noble and broad white brow. From her, too, came the lips which were curved and beautiful, and yet a little, a little wanting in firmness. In Mrs. Wyndham the expressive mouth only added the final touch of womanliness to a beautiful face. In her son it would have revealed, could it have been seen, a nature which might be led astray from the strictest paths of honor.

Wyndham sat motionless for a few moments, then springing to his feet, he paced restlessly up and down the empty study.

"Everything is fixed and settled now," he said, under his breath. "I'm not the first fellow who has sold himself for the sake of a year's happiness. If my mother were alive, though, I couldn't have done it, no, not even for Valentine. Poor mother! She felt sure I'd have taken Holy Orders, and worked on here with the governor in this sleepy little corner of the world. It's a blessing she can't be hurt by anything now, and as to the governor, he has seven girls to comfort him. No, if I'm sorry for anyone it's Liliias, but the thing's done now. The day after to-morrow Val will be mine. A whole year! My God, how short it is. My God, save and pity me, for afterwards comes hell."

CHAPTER III

The human face has been often spoken of as an index of the mind. There are people who boldly declare that they know a man by the height of his forehead, by the set of his eyes, by the shape of his head, and by the general expression of his countenance. Whether this rule is true or not, it certainly has its exceptions. As far as outward expression goes some minds remain locked, and Satan himself can now and then appear transformed as an angel of light.

Mortimer Paget, Esq., the head and now sole representative of the once great ship-broking firm of Paget Brothers, was one of the handsomest and most striking-looking men in the city. On more than one occasion sculptors of renown had asked to be permitted to take a cast of his head to represent Humanity, Benevolence, Integrity, or some other cardinal virtue. He had a high forehead, calm velvety brown eyes, perfectly even and classical features, and firm lips with a sweet expression. His lips were perfectly hidden by his silvery moustache, and the shape of his chin was not discernible, owing to his long flowing beard. But had the beard and moustache both been removed, no fault could have been found with the features now hidden – they were firmly and well-moulded. On this beautiful face no trace of a sinister cast lurked.

Mortimer Paget in his business transactions was the soul of honor. No man in the city was more looked up to than he. He was very shrewd with regard to all money matters, but he was also generous and kind. The old servants belonging to the firm never cared to leave him; when they died off he pensioned their widows and provided for their orphans. He was a religious man, of the evangelical type, and he conducted his household in every way from a religious point of view. Family prayers were held night and morning in the great house in Queen's Gate, and the servants were expected each and all to attend church twice on Sundays. Mr. Paget had found a church where the ritual was sufficiently low to please his religious views. To this church he went himself twice on Sundays, invariably accompanied by a tall girl, richly dressed, who clung to his side and read out of the same book with him, singing when he sang, and very often slipping her little hand into his, and closing her bright eyes when he napped unconsciously during the prosy sermon.

This girl was his only child, and while he professed to be actuated by the purest love for both God and his fellow creatures, the one being for whom his heart really beat warmly, the one being for whom he could gladly have sacrificed himself was this solitary girl.

Valentine's mother had died at her birth, and since that day Valentine and her father had literally never been parted. She was his shadow, like him in appearance, and as far as those who knew her could guess like him in character.

The house in Queen's Gate was full of all the accompaniments of wealth. It was richly and splendidly furnished; the drawing-rooms were spacious, the reception rooms were all large. Valentine had her own boudoir, her own special school-room, her own bedroom and dressing-room. Her father had provided a suite of rooms for her, each communicating with the other, but except that she tossed off her handsome dresses in the dressing-room, and submitted at intervals during the day with an unwilling grace to the services of her maid, and except that she laid her bright little curling head each evening on the softest of down-pillows, Valentine's suite of rooms saw very little of their young mistress.

There was an old library in the back part of the house – an essentially dull room, with windows fitted with painted glass, and shelves lined with books, most of them in tarnished and worm-eaten bindings, where Mr. Paget sat whenever he was at home, and where in consequence Valentine was to be found. Her sunny head, with its golden wavy hair, made a bright spot in the old room. She was fond of perching herself on the top of the step-ladder, and so seated burrowing eagerly into the contents of some musty old volume. She devoured the novels of Smollett and Fielding, and many other books which were supposed not to be at all good for her, in this fashion – they did her no harm, the bad

part falling away, and not touching her, for her nature was very pure and bright, and although she saw many shades of life in one way or another, and with all her expensive education, was allowed to grow up in a somewhat wild fashion, and according to her own sweet will, yet she was a perfectly innocent and unsophisticated creature.

When she was seventeen, Mr. Paget told her that he was going to inaugurate a new state of things.

"You must go into society, Val," he said. "In these days the daughters of city men of old standing like myself are received everywhere. I will get your mother's third cousin, Lady Prince, to present you at the next Drawing-room, and then you must go the usual round, I suppose. We must get some lady to come here to chaperon you, and you will go out to balls and assemblies, and during the London season turn night into day."

Val was seated on the third rung of the step-ladder when her father made this announcement. She sprang lightly from her perch now, and ran to his side.

"I won't go anywhere without you, dad; so that's settled. Poor old man! – dear old man!"

She put her arms round his neck, and his white moustache and beard swept across her soft, peach-like cheek.

"But I hate going out in the evening, Val. I'm getting an old man – sixty next birthday, my dear – and I work hard all day. There's no place so sweet to me in the evening as this worm-eaten, old armchair; – I should find myself lost in a crowd. Time was when I was the gayest of the gay. People used to speak of me as the life and soul of every party I went to, but that time is over for me. Val; for you it is beginning."

"You are mistaken, father. I perch myself on the arm of this wretched, worm-eaten, old chair, and stay here with you, or I go into society with you. It's all the same to me – you can please yourself."

"Don't you know that you are a very saucy lass, miss?"

"Am I? I really don't care – I go with you, or I stay with you – that's understood. Dad – father dear – that's always to be the way, you understand. You and I are to be always together – all our lives. You quite see what I mean?"

"Yes, my darling. But some day you will have a husband. Val. I want you to marry, and have a good husband, child; and then we'll see if your old father still comes first."

Valentine laughed gaily.

"We'll see," she repeated. "Father, if you are not awfully busy, I must read you this bit out of Roderick Random – listen, is not it droll?"

She fetched the volume with its old-fashioned type and obsolete s'es, and the two faces so alike and so beautiful, and so full of love for one another, bent over the page.

Valentine Paget had her way, and when she made her *début* in the world of fashion she was accompanied by no other chaperon than her handsome father. A Mrs. Johnstone, a distant relative of Valentine's mother had been asked to come to drive with the young lady in the Parks, and to exercise a very mild surveillance over her conduct generally, when she received her visitors at five o'clock tea, but in the evenings Mr. Paget alone took her into society. The pair were striking enough to make an instant success. Each acted as a foil and heightener to the beauty of the other. Mortimer Paget was recognized by some of his old cronies – fair ladies who had known him when he was young, reproached him gently for having worn so well, professed to take a great interest in his girl, and watched her with narrow, critical, but not unkindly eyes. The girl was fresh and *naïve*, perfectly free and untrammelled, a tiny bit reckless, a little out of the common. Her handsome face, her somewhat isolated position, and her reputed fortune, for Mortimer Paget was supposed to be one of the richest men in the city, soon made her the fashion. Valentine Paget, in her first season, was spoken about, talked over, acknowledged to be a beauty, and had, of course, plenty of lovers.

No one could have taken a daughter's success with more apparent calmness than did her father. He never interfered with her – he never curbed her light and graceful, although somewhat eccentric,

ways; but when any particular young man had paid her marked attention for more than two nights running, had anyone watched closely they might have seen a queer, alert, anxious look come into the fine old face. The sleepy brown eyes would awake, and be almost eagle-like in the keenness of their glance. No one knew how it was done, but about that possible suitor inquiries of the closest and most delicate nature were instantly set on foot; and as these inquiries, from Mr. Paget's point of view, in each case proved eminently unsatisfactory, when next the ardent lover met the beautiful Miss Paget, a thin but impenetrable wall of ice seemed to have started up between them. Scarcely any of Valentine's lovers came to the point of proposing for her; they were quietly shelved, they scarcely knew how, long before matters arrived at this crisis. Young men who in all respects seemed eligible of the eligible – men with good names and rent-rolls, alike were given a sort of invisible *congé*. The news was therefore received as a most startling piece of information at the end of Valentine's first season, that she was engaged, with the full consent and approval of her most fastidious father, to about the poorest man of her acquaintance.

Gerald Wyndham was the only son of a country clergyman – he was young, only twenty-two; he was spoken about as clever, but in the eyes of Valentine's friends seemed to have no one special thing to entitle him to aspire to the hand of one of the wealthiest and most beautiful girls of their acquaintance.

It was reported among Mr. Paget's friends that this excellent, honorable and worthy gentleman must surely have taken leave of his senses, for Gerald Wyndham had literally not a penny, and before his engagement to Valentine, the modest career opening up before him was that of Holy Orders in one of its humblest walks.

CHAPTER IV

Wyndham before his engagement was one of the most boyish of men. All the sunshine, the petting, the warmth, the love, which encircled him as the prime favorite of many sisters and an adoring father at Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, seemed to have grown into his face. His deep grey-blue changeable eyes were always laughing – he was witty, and he said witty and laughable things by the score. The young man had plenty of talent, and a public school and university education had developed these abilities to a fine point of culture. His high spirits, and a certain Irish way which he inherited from his mother, made him a universal favorite, but at all times he had his grave moments. A look, a word would change that beaming, expressive face, bring sadness to the eyes, and seriousness to the finely curved lips. The shadows passed as quickly as they came. Before Wyndham met Valentine they were simply indications of the sensitiveness of a soul which was as keenly strung to pain as to joy.

It is a trite saying that what is easily attained is esteemed of little value. Valentine found lovers by the score; in consequence, the fact of a man paying her attention, looking at her with admiration, and saying pretty nothings in her ear, gave her before her first season was over only a slightly added feeling of ennui. At this juncture in her life she was neither in love with her lovers nor with society. She was younger than most girls when they make their entrance into the world, and she would infinitely have preferred the sort of half school-room, half nursery existence she used to lead. She yawned openly and wished for bed when she was dragged out night after night, and when fresh suitors appeared she began really to regard them as a weariness to the flesh.

Gerald Wyndham did not meet Valentine in quite the ordinary fashion.

On a certain hot day in July, she had been absolutely naughty, the heat had enervated her, the languor of summer was over her, and after a late dinner, instead of going dutifully upstairs to receive some final touches from her maid, before starting for a great crush at the house of a city magnate near by, she had flown away to the library, turned on the electric light, and mounting the book-ladder perched herself on her favorite topmost rung, took down her still more favorite "Evelina," and buried herself in its fascinating pages. Past and present were both alike forgotten by the young reader, she hated society for herself, but she loved to read of Evelina's little triumphs, and Lord Orville was quite to her taste.

"If I could only meet a man like him," she murmured, flinging down her book, and looking across the old library with her starry eyes, "Oh, father, dear, how you startled me! Now, listen, please. I will not go out to-night – I am sleepy – I am tired – I am yawning dreadfully. Oh, what have I said? – how rude of you, sir, to come and startle me in that fashion!"

For Valentine's light words had not been addressed to Mr. Paget, but to a young man in evening dress, a perfect stranger, who came into the room, and was now looking up and actually laughing at her.

"How rude of you," said Valentine, and she began hastily to descend from her elevated position. In doing so she slipped, and would have fallen if Wyndham had not come to the rescue, coolly lifting the enraged young lady into his arms and setting her on the floor.

"Now I will beg your pardon as often as you like," he said. "I was shown in here by a servant. I am waiting for Mr. Paget – I was introduced to him this morning – my father turns out to be an old friend, and he was good enough to ask me to go with you both to the Terrells to-night."

"Delightful!" said Valentine. "I'll forgive you, of course; you'll take the dear old man, and I'll stay snugly at home. I'm so anxious to finish 'Evelina.' Have you ever read the book? – Don't you love Lord Orville?"

"No, I love Evelina best," replied Gerald.

The two pairs of eyes met, both were full of laughter, and both pairs of lips were indulging in merry peals of mirth when Mr. Paget entered the room.

"There you are, Val," he said. "You have introduced yourself to Wyndham. Quite right. Now, was there ever anything more provoking? I have just received a telegram." Here Mr. Paget showed a yellow envelope. "I must meet a business man at Charing Cross in an hour, on a matter of some importance. I can't put it off, and so. Val, I don't see how I am to send you to the Terrells all alone. It is too bad – why, what is the matter, child?"

"Too delightful, you mean," said Valentine. "I wasn't going. I meant to commit high treason to-night. I was quite determined to – now I needn't. Do you mean to go to the Terrells by yourself, Mr. Wyndham?"

"The pleasure held out was to go with you and your father," responded Wyndham, with an old-fashioned bow, and again that laughing look in his eyes.

Mr. Paget's benevolent face beamed all over.

"Go up to the drawing-room, then, young folks, and amuse yourselves," he said. "Our good friend, Mrs. Johnstone, will bear you company. Val, you can sing something to Wyndham to make up for his disappointment. She sings like a bird, and is vain of it, little puss. Yes, go away, both of you, and make the best of things."

"The best of things is to remain here," said Valentine. "I hate the drawing-room, and that dear, good Mrs. Johnstone, if she must act chaperon, can bring her knitting down here. I am so sorry for you, Mr. Wyndham, but I don't mean to sing a single song to-night. Had you not better go to the Terrells?"

"No, I mean to stay and read 'Evelina,'" replied the obdurate young man.

Mr. Paget laughed again.

"I will send our good friend, Mrs. Johnstone, to make tea for you," he said, and he hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER V

This was the very light and airy beginning of a friendship which was to ripen into serious and even appalling results. Wyndham was a man who found it very easy to make girls like him. He had so many sisters of his own that he understood their idiosyncrasies, and knew how to humor their little failings, how to be kind to their small foibles, and how to flatter their weaknesses. More than one girl had fallen in love with this handsome and attractive young man. Wyndham was aware of these passionate attachments, but as he could not feel himself particularly guilty in having inspired them, and as he did not in the slightest degree return them, he did not make himself unhappy over what could not be cured. It puzzled him not a little to know why girls should be so silly, and how hearts could be so easily parted with – he did not know when he questioned his own spirit lightly on the matter that the day of retribution was at hand. He lost his own heart to Valentine without apparently having made the smallest impression upon this bright and seemingly volatile girl.

On that very first night in the old library Wyndham left his heart at the gay girl's feet. He was seriously in love. Before a week was out he had taken the malady desperately, and in its most acute form. It was then that a change came over his face, it was then for the first time that he became aware of the depths of his own nature. Great abysses of pain were opened up to him – he found himself all sensitiveness, all nerves. He had been proud of his rather athletic bringing-up, of his intellectual training. He had thought poorly of other men who had given up all for the sake of a girl's smile, and for the rather doubtful possession of a girl's fickle heart. He did not laugh at them any longer. He spent his nights pacing his room, and his days haunting the house at Queen's Gate. If he could not go in he could linger near the house. He could lounge in the park and see Valentine as she drove past, and nodded and smiled to him brightly. His own face turned pale when she gave him those quick gay glances. She was absolutely heart-whole – a certain intuition told him this, whereas he – he found himself drivelling into a state bordering on idiotcy.

Almost all men have gone through similar crises, but Wyndham at this time was making awful discoveries. He was finding out day by day the depths of weakness as well as pain within him.

"I'm the greatest fool that ever breathed," he would say to himself. "What would Lilius say if she saw me now? How often she and I have laughed over this great momentous matter – how often we have declared that we at least would never lose ourselves in so absurd a fashion. Poor Lilius, I suppose her turn will come as mine has come – I cannot understand myself – I really must be raving mad. How dare I go to Mr. Paget and ask him to give me Valentine? I have not got a halfpenny in the world. This money in my pocket is my father's – I have to come to him for every sixpence! I am no better off than my little sister Joan. When I am ordained, and have secured the curacy of Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, I shall have exactly £160 a year. A large sum truly. And yet I want to marry Valentine Paget – the youngest heiress of the season – the most beautiful – the most wealthy! Oh, of course I must be mad – quite mad. I ought to shun her like the plague. She does not in the least care for me – not in the least. I often wonder if she has got a heart anywhere. She acts as a sort of siren to me – luring me on – weakening and enfeebling my whole nature. She is a little flirt in her way, but an unconscious one. She means nothing by that bright look in her eyes, and that sparkling smile, and that gay clear laugh. I wonder if any other man has felt as badly about her as I do. Oh, I ought to shun her – I am simply mad to go there as I do. When I get an invitation – when I have the ghost of a chance of seeing her – it seems as if thousands of invisible ropes pulled me to her side. What is to come of it all? Nothing – nothing but my own undoing. I can never marry her – and yet I must – I will. I would go through fire and water to hold her to my heart for a moment. There, I must have been quite mad when I said that – I didn't mean it. I'm sane now, absolutely sane. I know what I'll do. I won't dine there to-night. I'll send an excuse, and I'll run down to the old rectory until Monday, and get Lilius to cure me."

The infatuated young man seized a sheet of notepaper, dashed off an incoherent and decidedly lame excuse to Mr. Paget, and trembling with fear that his resolution would fail him even at the eleventh hour, rushed out and dropped the letter into the nearest pillar-box. This action was bracing, he felt better, and in almost gay spirits, for his nature was wonderfully elastic. He took the next train to Jewsbury, and arrived unexpectedly at the pleasant old rectory late on Saturday evening.

The man who is made nothing of in one place, and finds himself absolutely the hero of the hour in another, cannot help experiencing a very soothed sensation. Valentine Paget had favored Gerald with the coolest of nods, the lightest of words, the most indifferent of actions. She met him constantly, she was always stumbling up against him, and when she wanted him to do anything for her she issued a brief and lordly command. Her abject slave flew to do her bidding.

Now at Jewsbury-on-the-Wold the slave was in the position of master, and he could not help enjoying the change.

"Augusta, wheel that chair round for Gerald. Sit there. Gerald, darling – oh, you are in a draught. Shut the door, please, Marjory. Joan, run to the kitchen, and tell Betty to make some of Gerald's favorite cakes for supper. Is your tea quite right, Gerry; have you sugar enough – and – and cream?"

Gerald briefly expressed himself satisfied. Liliias was superintending the tea-tray with a delicate flush of pleasure on her cheeks, and her bright eyes glancing moment by moment in admiration at her handsome brother. Marjory had placed herself on a footstool at the hero's feet, and Augusta, tall and gawky, all stockinged-legs, and abnormally thin long arms, was standing at the back of his chair, now and then venturing to caress one of his crisp light waves of hair with the tips of her fingers.

"It is too provoking!" burst from Marjory, – "you know, Liliias, we can't put Gerald into his old room, it is being papered, and you haven't half-finished decorating the door. Gerry, darling, you might have let us know you were coming and we'd have worked at it day and night. Do you mind awfully sleeping in the spare room? We'll promise to make it as fresh as possible for you?"

"I'll – I'll – fill the vases with flowers – " burst spasmodically from Augusta. "Do you like roses or hollyhocks best in the tall vases on the mantel-piece, Gerry?"

"By the way, Gerald," remarked the rector, who was standing leaning against the mantel-piece, gazing complacently at his son and daughters, "I should like to ask your opinion with regard to that notice on Herring's book in the *Saturday*. Have you read it? It struck me as over critical, but I should like to have your opinion."

So the conversation went on, all adoring, all making much of the darling of the house. Years afterwards, Gerald Wyndham remembered that summer's evening, the scent of the roses coming in at the open window, the touch of Marjory's little white hand as it rested on his knee, the kind of half-irritated, half-pleased thrill which went through him when Augusta touched his hair, the courteous and proud look on the rector's face when he addressed him, above all the glow of love in Liliias' beautiful eyes. He remembered that evening – he was not likely ever to forget it, for it was one of the last of his happy boyhood, before he took upon him his manhood's burden of sin and sorrow and shame.

After tea Liliias and Gerald walked about the garden arm-in-arm.

"I am going to confess something to you," said the brother. "I want your advice, Lilly. I want you to cure me, by showing me that I am the greatest fool that ever lived."

"But you are not, Gerald; I can't say it when I look up to you, and think there is no one like you. You are first in all the world to me – you know that, don't you?"

"Poor Lil, that is just the point – that is where the arrow will pierce you. I am going to aim a blow at you, dear. Take me down from your pedestal at once – I love someone else much, much better than I love you."

Liliias' hand as it rested on Gerald's arm trembled very slightly. He looked at her, and saw that her lips were moving, and that her eyes were looking downwards. She did not make any audible sound, however, and he went on hastily: —

"And you and I, we always promised each other that such a day should not come – no wonder you are angry with me, Lil."

"But I'm not, dear Gerald – I just got a nasty bit of jealous pain for a minute, but it is over. I always knew that such a day would come, that it would have to come – if not for me, at least for you. Tell me about her, Gerry. Is she nice – is she half – or a quarter nice enough for you?"

Then Gerald launched into his subject, forgetting what he supposed could only be a very brief sorrow on Lili's part in the enthralling interest of his theme. Valentine Paget would not have recognized the portrait which was drawn of her, for this young and ardent lover crowned her with all that was noble, and decked her with attributes little short of divine.

"I am absolutely unworthy of her," he said in conclusion, and when Lili shook her head, and refused to believe this latter statement, he felt almost angry with her.

The two walked about and talked together until darkness fell, but, although they discussed the subject in all its bearings, Gerald felt by no means cured when he retired to rest, while Lili absolutely cried herself to sleep.

Marjory and she slept in little white beds, side by side.

"Oh, Lil, what's the matter?" exclaimed the younger sister, disturbed out of her own sweet slumbers by those unusual tokens of distress.

"Nothing much," replied Lili, "only – only – I am a little lonely – don't ask me any questions, Maggie, I'll be all right in the morning."

Marjory was too wise to say anything further, but she lay awake herself and wondered. What could ail Lili? – Lili, the brightest, the gayest of them all. Was she fretting about their mother. But it was seven years now since the mother had been taken away from the rectory children, and Lili had got over the grief which had nearly broken her child-heart at the time.

Marjory felt puzzled and a little fearful, – the evening before had been so sweet, – Gerald had been so delightful. Surely in all the world there was not a happier home than Jewsbury-on-the-Wold. Why should Lili cry, and say that she was lonely?

CHAPTER VI

On Monday morning Wyndham returned to town. His father had strained a point to give his only son the season in London, and Gerald was paying part of the expenses by coaching one or two young fellows for the next Cambridge term. He had just concluded his own University course, and was only waiting until his twenty-third birthday had passed, to be ordained for the curacy which his father was keeping for him. Gerald's birthday would be in September, and the rectory girls were looking forward to this date as though it were the beginning of the millennium.

"Even the cats won't fight, nor the dogs bark when Gerald is in the room," whispered little Joan. "I 'spect they know he don't like it."

Wyndham returned to London feeling both low and excited. His conversation with Lilius and the rather pallid look of her face, the black shadows under her eyes, and the pathetic expression which the shedding of so many tears had given to them, could not cure him nor extinguish the flame which was burning into his heart, and making all the other good things of life seem but as dust and ashes to his taste.

He arrived in town, went straight to his lodgings, preparatory to keeping his engagement with one of his young pupils, and there saw waiting for him a letter in the firm upright handwriting of Mortimer Paget. He tore the envelope open in feverish haste. The lines within were very few: —

Dear Wyndham.

Val and I were disappointed at your not putting in an appearance at her dinner-party last night, but no doubt you had good reasons for going into the country. This note will meet you on your return. Can you come and lunch with me in the City on Monday at two o'clock? Come to my place in Billiter-square. I shall expect you and won't keep you waiting. I have a matter of some importance I should like to discuss with you. — Yours, my dear Wyndham, sincerely,
"Mortimer Paget."

Wyndham put the letter into his pocket, flew to keep his appointment with his pupil, and at two o'clock precisely was inquiring for Mr. Paget at the offices of the shipping firm in Billiter-square.

Mortimer Paget was now head of the large establishment. He was the sole surviving partner out of many, and on him alone devolved the carrying out of one of the largest business concerns in the city.

Wyndham never felt smaller than when he entered those great doors, and found himself passed on from one clerk to another, until at last he was admitted to the ante-room of the chief himself.

Here there was a hush and stillness, and the young man sank down into one of the easy chairs, and looked around him expectantly. He was in the ante chamber of one of the great kings of commerce, the depressing influence of wealth when we have no share in it came over him. He longed to turn and fly, and but that his fingers, even now, fiddled with Mr. Paget's very pressing note he would have done so. What could the great man possibly want with him? With his secret in his breast, with the knowledge that he, a poor young expectant curate, had dared to lift up his eyes to the only daughter of this great house, he could not but feel ill at ease.

When Wyndham was not at home with any one he instantly lost his charm. He was painfully conscious of this himself, and felt sure that he would be on stilts while he ate his lunch with Mr. Paget. Nay more, he was almost sure that that astute personage would read his secret in his eyes.

A clerk came into the room, an elderly man, with reddish whiskers, small, deep-set eyes, and thin hair rapidly turning white. He stared inquisitively at young Wyndham, walked past him, drew

up the blinds, arranged some papers on the table, and then as he passed him again said in a quick, half-frightened aside:

"If I was you, young man, I'd go."

The tone in which this was said was both anxious and familiar. Wyndham started aside from the familiarity. His face flushed and he gazed haughtily at the speaker.

"Did you address me?" he said.

"I did, young man, don't say nothing, for the good Lord's sake, don't say nothing. My name is Jonathan Helps. I have been here man and boy for close on forty years. I know the old house. Sound! no house in the whole city sounder, sound as a nut, or as an apple when *it's rotten at the core*. You keep that to yourself, young man – why I'd venture every penny I have in this yer establishment. I'm confidential clerk here! I'm a rough sort – and not what you'd expect from a big house, nor from a master like Mr. Paget. Now, young man, you go away, and believe that there ain't a sounder house in all the city than that of Paget, Brake and Carter. I, Jonathan Helps, say it, and surely I ought to know."

An electric bell sounded in the other room. Wiping his brow with his handkerchief as though the queer words he had uttered had cost him an effort, Helps flew to answer the summons.

"Ask Mr. Wyndham to walk in and have lunch served in my room," said an authoritative voice. "And see here. Helps, you are not to disturb us on any excuse before three o'clock."

Shutting the door behind him, Helps came back again to Gerald's side.

"If you don't want to run away at once you're to go in there," he said. "Remember, there isn't a sounder house in all London than that of Paget, Brake and Carter. Paget's head of the whole concern now. Don't he boss it over us though! Oh, you're going in? – you've made up your mind not to run away. Surely in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird. Good Lord, if that ain't the least true word that David ever writ. Well, here you are. Don't forget that this house is sound – sound as an apple when it is – Mr. Wyndham, sir."

"You seem to have got a very extraordinary clerk," said Gerald, when he had shaken hands with his host, who had expressed himself delighted to see him.

"Helps?" responded Mr. Paget. "Yes, poor fellow – has he been entertaining you – telling you about the soundness of the house, eh? Poor Helps – the best fellow in the world, but just a little – a very little – touched in the head."

"So I should think," said Gerald, laughing; "he compared me to a bird in the fowler's net, and all kinds of ridiculous similes. What a snug room you have here."

"I am glad you think it so. I have a still snugger room at the other side of this curtain, which I hope to introduce to you. Come along and see it. This was furnished at Val's suggestion. She comes here to have lunch with me once a week. Friday is her day. Will you come and join us here next Friday at two o'clock?"

"I – I shall be delighted," stammered Wyndham.

"She has good taste, hasn't she, little puss? All these arrangements are hers. I never saw any one with a better eye for color, and she has that true sympathy with her surroundings which teaches her to adapt rooms to their circumstances. Now, for instance, at Queen's Gate we are all cool greys and blues – plenty of sunshine comes into the house at Queen's Gate. Into this room the sun never shows his face. Val accordingly substitutes for his brightness golden tones and warm colors. Artistic, is it not? She is very proud of the remark which invariably falls from the lips of each person who visits this sanctum sanctorum, that it does not look the least like an office."

"Nor does it," responded Gerald. "It is a lovely room. What a beautiful portrait that is of your daughter – how well those warm greys suit her complexion."

"Yes, that is Richmond's, he painted her two years ago. Sit down at this side of the table, Wyndham, where you can have a good view of the saucy puss. Does she not look alive, as if she meant to say something very impertinent to us both. Thanks, Helps, you can leave us now. Pray see that we are not disturbed."

Helps withdrew with noiseless slippered feet. A curtain was drawn in front of the door, which the clerk closed softly after him.

"Excellent fellow, Helps," said Mr. Paget, "but mortal, decidedly mortal. If you will excuse me, Wyndham. I will take the precaution of turning the key in that door. This little room, Val's room, I call it, has often been privileged to listen to state secrets. That being the case one must take due precautions against eaves-droppers. Now, my dear fellow, I hope you are hungry. Help yourself to some of those cutlets – I can recommend this champagne."

The lunch proceeded, the elder man eating with real appetite, the younger with effort. He was excited, his mind was full of trouble – he avoided looking at Valentine's picture, and wished himself at the other side of those locked doors.

"You don't seem quite the thing," said Mr. Paget, presently. "I hope you have had no trouble at home. Wyndham. Is your father well? Let me see, he must be about my age – we were at Trinity College, Cambridge, some time in the forties."

"My father is very well, sir," said Gerald. "He is a hale man, he does not look his years."

"Have some more champagne? I think you told me you had several sisters."

"Yes, there are seven girls at home."

"Good heavens – Wyndham is a lucky man. Fancy seven Valentines filling a house with mirth! And you are the only son – and your mother is dead."

"My mother is not living," responded Wyndham with a flush. "And – yes, I am the only son. I won't have any more champagne, thank you, sir."

"Try one of these cigars – I can recommend them. Wyndham, I am going to say something very frank. I have taken a fancy to you. There, I don't often take fancies. Why, what is the matter, my dear fellow?"

Gerald had suddenly risen to his feet, his face was white. There was a strained, eager, pained look in his eyes.

"You wouldn't, if you knew," he stammered. "I – I have made a fool of myself, sir. I oughtn't to be sitting here, your hospitality chokes me. I – I have made the greatest fool of myself in all Christendom, sir."

"I think I know what you mean," said Mr. Paget, also rising to his feet. His voice was perfectly calm, quiet, friendly.

"I am not sorry you have let it out in this fashion, my poor lad. You have – shall I tell you that I know your secret, Wyndham?"

"No, sir; don't let us talk of it. You cannot rate me for my folly more severely than I rate myself. I'll go away now if you have no objection. Thank you for being kind to me. Try and forget that I made an ass of myself."

"Sit down again, Wyndham. I am not angry – I don't look upon you as a fool. I should have done just the same were I in your shoes. You are in love with Valentine – you would like to make her your wife."

"Good heavens, sir, don't let us say anything more about it."

"Why not? Under certain conditions I think you would make her a suitable husband. I guessed your secret some weeks ago. Since then I have been watching you carefully. I have also made private inquiries about you. All that I hear pleases me. I asked you to lunch with me, to-day, on purpose that we should talk the matter over."

Mr. Paget spoke in a calm, almost drawling, voice. The young man opposite to him, his face deadly white, his hands nervously clutching at a paper-knife, his burning eyes fixed upon the older man's face, drank in every word. It was an intoxicating draught, going straight to Gerald Wyndham's brain.

"God bless you!" he said, when the other had ceased to speak. He turned his head away, for absolute tears of joy had softened the burning feverish light in his eyes.

"No, don't say that, Wyndham," responded Mr. Paget, his own voice for the first time a little shaken. "We'll leave God altogether out of this business, if you have no objection. It is simply a question of how much a man will give up for love. Will he sell himself, body and soul, for it? That is the question of questions. I know all about you, Wyndham; I know that you have not a penny to bless yourself with; I know that you are about to embrace a beggarly profession. Oh, yes, we'll leave out the religious aspect of the question. A curacy in the Church of England is a beggarly profession in these days. I know too that you are your father's only son, and that you have seven sisters, who will one day look to you to protect them. I know all that; nevertheless I believe you to be the kind of man who will dare all for love. If you win Valentine, you have got to pay a price for her. It is a heavy one – I won't tell you about it yet. When you agree to pay this price, for the sake of a brief joy for yourself, for necessarily it must be brief; and for her life-long good and well-being, then you rise to be her equal in every sense of the word, and you earn my undying gratitude. Wyndham."

"I don't understand you, sir. You speak very darkly, and you hint at things which – which shock me."

"I must shock you more before you hold Valentine in your arms. You have heard enough for to-day. Hark, someone is knocking at the door."

Mr. Paget rose to open it, a gay voice sounded in the passage, and the next moment a brilliant, lovely apparition entered the room.

"Val herself!" exclaimed her father. "No, my darling. I cannot go for a drive with you just now, but you and Mrs. Johnstone shall take Wyndham. You will like a drive in the park, Wyndham. You have got to scold this young man, Val, for acting truant on Saturday night. Now go off, both of you, I am frightfully busy. Yes, Helps, coming, coming. Valentine, be sure you ask Mr. Wyndham home to tea. If you can induce him to dine, so much the better, and afterwards we can go to the play together."

CHAPTER VII

On a certain evening about ten days after the events related in the last chapter, Valentine Paget and her father were seated together in the old library. Good-natured Mrs. Johnstone had popped in her head at the door, but seeing the girl's face bent over a book, and Mr. Paget apparently absorbed in the advertisement sheet of the *Times*, she had discreetly withdrawn.

"They look very snug," soliloquized the widowed and childless woman with a sigh. "I wonder what Mortimer Paget will do when that poor handsome Mr. Wyndham proposes for Val? I never saw anyone so far gone. Even my poor Geoffrey long ago, who said his passion consumed him to tatters – yes, these were poor dear Geoffrey's very words – was nothing to Mr. Wyndham. Val is a desperately saucy girl – does not she see that she is breaking that poor fellow's heart? Such a nice young fellow, too. He looks exactly the sort of young man who would commit suicide. Dear me, what is the world coming to? That girl seems not in the very least troubled about the matter. How indifferent and easy-going she is! I know *I* could not calmly sit and read a novel when I knew that I was consuming the vitals out of poor dear Geoffrey. But it's all one to Val. I am very much afraid that girl is developing into a regular flirt. How she did go on and amuse herself with Mr. Carr at the cricket match to-day. Adrian Carr has a stronger face than poor young Wyndham – not half as devoted to Val – I doubt if he even admires her, and yet how white Gerald Wyndham turned when he walked her off across the field. Poor Val – it is a great pity Mr. Paget spoils her so dreadfully. It is plain to be seen she has never had the advantage of a mother's bringing up."

Mrs. Johnstone entered the beautifully-furnished drawing-room, seated herself by the open window, and taking up the third volume of a novel, soon forgot Valentine's love affairs.

Meanwhile that young lady with her cheeks pressed on her hands, and her eyes devouring the final pages of "Jane Eyre," gave no thought to any uncomfortable combinations. Her present life was so full and happy that she did not, like most girls, look far ahead – she never indulged in day-dreams, and had an angel come to her with the promise of any golden boon she liked to ask for, she would have begged of him to leave her always as happy as she was now.

She came to the last page of her book, and, drumming with her little fingers on the cover, she raised her eyes in a half-dreaming fashion.

Mr. Paget had dropped his sheet of the *Times* – his hand had fallen back in the old leathern armchair – his eyes were closed – he was fast asleep.

In his sleep this astute and careful and keen man of business dropped his mask – the smiling smooth face showed wrinkles, the gay expression was succeeded by a careworn look – lines of sadness were about the mouth, and deep crow's-feet wrinkled and aged the expression round the eyes.

The mantle of care had never yet touched Valentine. For the first time in all her life a pang of keen mental pain went through her as she gazed at her sleeping father. For the first time in her young existence the awful possibility stared her in the face that some time she might have to live in a cold and dreary world without him.

"Why, my father looks quite old," she half stammered. "Old, and – yes, unhappy. What does it mean?"

She rose very gently, moved her chair until it touched his, and then nestling up close to him laid her soft little hand on his shoulder.

Paget slept on, and the immediate contact of Valentine's warm, loving presence, made itself felt in his dreams – his wrinkles disappeared, and his handsome lips again half smiled. Val laid her hand on his – she noticed the altered expression, and her slightly roused fears slumbered. There was no one to her like her father. She had made a mistake just then in imagining that he looked old and unhappy. No people in all the world were happier than he and she. He was not old – he was the personification in her eyes of all that was manly and strong and beautiful.

The tired man slept on, and the girl, all her fears at rest, began idly to review the events of the past day. There had been gay doings during that long summer's afternoon, and Valentine, in the prettiest of summer costumes, had thoroughly enjoyed her life. She had spent some hours at Lords, and had entered with zest into the interest of the Oxford and Cambridge Cricket Match. She lay back in her chair now with her eyes half closed, reviewing in a lazy fashion the events of the bygone hours. A stalwart and very attractive young man in cricketing flannels mingled in these dreams. He spoke to her with strength and decision. His dark eyes looked keenly into her face, he never expressed the smallest admiration for her either by look or gesture, but at the same time he had a way of taking possession of her which roused her interest, and which secured her approbation. She laughed softly to herself now at some of the idle nothings said to her by Adrian Carr, and she never once gave a thought to Wyndham, who had also been at Lords.

CHAPTER VIII

"Val, child, what are you humming under your breath?" said her father, suddenly rousing himself from his slumbers and looking into his daughter's pretty face. "Your voice is like that of a bird, my darling. I think it has gained in sweetness a good deal lately. Have you and Wyndham been practising much together. Wyndham has one of the purest tenor voices I ever heard in an amateur."

"Oh, what a worry Mr. Wyndham is," said Valentine, rising from her seat and shaking out her muslin dress. "Everybody talks to me of his perfections. I'm perfectly tired of them. I wish he wouldn't come here so often. No, I was not thinking of any of his songs. I was humming some words Mr. Carr sings – 'Bid me to Live' – you know the words – I like Mr. Carr so much – don't you, dad, dear?"

"Adrian Carr – yes," replied Mr. Paget in a slow deliberate voice. "Yes, a good sort of fellow, I've no doubt. I heard some gossip about him at my club yesterday – what was it? Oh, that he was engaged, or about to be engaged, to Lady Mabel Pennant. You know the Pennants, don't you, Val? Have you seen Lady Mabel? She is one of the youngest, I think."

"Yes, she's a fright," responded Valentine, with a decided show of temper in her voice.

Her face had flushed too, she could not tell why.

"I did not know Lady Mabel was such a plain girl," responded Mr. Paget drily. "At any rate it is a good connection for Carr. He seems a fairly clever fellow. Valentine, my child, I have something of importance to talk to you about. Don't let us worry about Carr just now – I have something to say to you, something that I'm troubled to have to say. You love your old father very much, don't you, darling?"

"Love you, daddy! Oh, you know – need you ask? I was frightened about you a few minutes ago, father. When you were asleep just now, your face looked old, and there were lines about it. It frightens me to think of you ever growing old."

"Sit close to me, my dear daughter. I have a great deal to say. We will leave the subject of my looks just at present. It is true that I am not young, but I may have many years before me yet. It greatly depends on you."

"On me, father?"

"Yes. I will explain to you by-and-bye. Now I want to talk about yourself. You have never had a care all your life, have you, my little Val?"

"I don't think so, daddy – at least only pin-pricks. You know I used to hate my spelling lessons long ago, and Mdlle. Lacount used to worry me over the French irregular verbs. But such things were only pin-pricks. Yes, I am seventeen, and I have never had a real care all my life."

"You are seventeen and four months, Valentine. You were born on the 14th of February, and your mother and I called you after St. Valentine. Your mother died when you were a week old. I promised her then that her baby should never know a sorrow if I could help it."

"You have helped it, daddy; I am as happy as the day is long. I don't wish for a thing in the wide world. I just want us both to live together as we are doing now. Of course we will – why not? Shall we go up to the drawing-room now, father?"

"My dear child, in a little time. I have not said yet what I want to say. Valentine, you were quite right when you watched my face as I slumbered. Child, I have got a care upon me. I can't speak of it to anybody – only it could crush me – and – and – part us, Valentine. If it fell upon you, it – it – would crush you, my child."

Mr. Paget rose. Valentine, deadly white and frightened, clung to him. She was half crying. The effect of such terrible and sudden words nearly paralyzed her; but when she felt the arm which her father put round her tremble, she made a valiant and brave effort – the tears which filled her brown eyes were arrested, and she looked up with courage in her face.

"You speak of my doing something," she whispered. "What is it? Tell me. Nothing shall part us. I don't mind anything else, but nothing shall ever part us."

"Val, I have not spoken of this care to any one but you."

"No, father."

"And I don't show it in my face as a rule, do I?"

"Oh, no! Oh, no! You always seem bright and cheerful."

Her tears were raining fast now. She took his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"But I have had this trouble for some time, my little girl."

"You will tell me all about it, please, dad?"

"No, my darling, you would not understand, and my keenest pain would be that you should ever know. You can remove this trouble, little Val, and then we need not be parted. Now, sit down by my side."

Mr. Paget sank again into the leathern armchair. He was still trembling visibly. This moment through which he was passing was one of the most bitter of his life.

"You will not breathe a word of what I have told you to any mortal, Valentine?"

"Death itself should not drag it from me," replied the girl.

She set her lips, her eyes shone fiercely. Then she looked at her trembling father, and they glowed with love and pity.

"I can save you," she whispered, going on her knees by his side. "It is lovely to think of saving you. What can I do?"

"My little Val – my little precious darling!"

"What can I do to save you, father?"

"Valentine, dear – you can marry Gerald Wyndham."

Valentine had put her arms round her father's neck, now they dropped slowly away – her eyes grew big and frightened.

"I don't love him," she whispered.

"Never mind, he loves you – he is a good fellow – he will treat you well. If you marry him you need not be parted from me. You and he can live together here – here, in this house. There need be no difference at all, except that you will have saved your father."

Paget spoke with outward calmness, but the anxiety under his words made them thrill. Each slowly uttered sentence fell like a hammer of pain on the girl's head.

"I don't understand," she said again in a husky tone. "I would, I will do anything to save you. But Mr. Wyndham is poor and young – in some things he is younger than I am. How can my marrying him take the load off your heart, father? Father, dear, speak."

"I can give you no reason, Valentine, you must take it on trust. It is all a question of your faith in me. I do not see any loophole of salvation but through you, my little girl. If you marry Wyndham I see peace and rest ahead, otherwise we are amongst the breakers. If you do this thing for your old father, Valentine, you will have to do it in the dark, for never, never, I pray, until Eternity comes, must you know what you have done."

Valentine Paget had always a delicate and bright color in her cheeks. It was soft as the innermost blush of a rose, and this delicate and lovely color was one of her chief charms. Now it faded, leaving her young face pinched and small and drawn. She sank down on the hearthrug, clasping her hands in her lap, her eyes looking straight before her.

"I never wanted to marry," she said at last. "Certainly not yet, for I am only a child. I am only seventeen, but other girls of seventeen are old compared to me. When you are only a child, it is dreadful to marry some one you don't care about, and it is dreadful to do a deed in the dark. If you trusted me, father – if you told me all the dreadful truth whatever it is, it might turn me into a woman – an old woman even – but it would be less bad than this. This seems to crush me – and oh, it does frighten me so dreadfully."

Mr. Paget rose from his seat and walked up and down the room.

"You shan't be crushed or frightened," he said. "I will give it up."

"And then the blow will fall on *you*?"

"I may be able to avert it. I will see. Forget what I said to-night, little girl."

Mortimer Paget's face just now was a good deal whiter than his daughter's, but there was a new light in his eyes – a momentary gleam of nobility.

"I won't crush you, Val," he said, and he meant his words.

"And *I* won't crush *you*," said the girl.

She went up to his side, and, taking his hand, slipped his arm round her neck.

"We will live together, and I will have perfect faith in you, and I'll marry Mr. Wyndham. He is good – oh, yes, he is good and kind; and if he did not love me so much, if he did not frighten me with just being too loving when I don't care at all, I might get on very well with him. Now dismiss your cares, father. If this can save you, your little Val has done it. Let us come up to the drawing-room. Mrs. Johnstone must think herself forsaken. Shall I sing to you to-night, daddy, some of the old-fashioned songs? Come, you have got to smile and look cheerful for Val's sake. If I give myself up for you, you must do as much for me. Come, a smile if you please, sir. 'Begone, dull care.' You and I will never agree."

CHAPTER IX

It was soon after this that Valentine Paget's world became electrified with the news of her engagement. Wyndham was congratulated on all sides, and those people who had hitherto not taken the slightest notice of a rather boyish and unpretentious young man, now found much to say in his favor.

Yes, he was undoubtedly good-looking – a remarkable face, full of interest – he must be clever too – he looked it. And then as to his youth – why was it that people a couple of months ago had considered him a lad, a boy – why, he was absolutely old for his two-and-twenty years. A grave thoughtful man with a wonderfully sweet expression.

It was plain to be seen that Wyndham, the expectant curate of Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, and Wyndham, the promised husband of Valentine Paget, were totally different individuals. Wyndham's prospects were changed, so was his appearance – so, in very truth, was the man himself.

Where he had been too young he was now almost too old, that was the principal thing outsiders noticed. But at twenty-two one can afford such a change, and his gravity, his seriousness, and a certain proud thoughtful look, which could not be classified by any one as a sad look, was vastly becoming to Wyndham.

His future father-in-law could not make enough of him, and even Valentine caught herself looking at him with a shy pride which was not very far removed from affection.

Wyndham had given up the promised curacy – this was one of Mr. Paget's most stringent conditions. On the day he married Valentine he was to enter the great shipping firm of Paget, Brake and Carter as a junior partner, and in the interim he went there daily to become acquainted – the world said – with the ins and outs of his new profession.

It was all a great step in the direction of fortune and fame, and the Rectory people ought, of course, to have rejoiced.

They were curious and unworldly, however, at Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, and somehow the news of the great match Gerald was about to contract brought them only sorrow and distress. Liliias alone stood out against the storm of woe which greeted the receipt of Wyndham's last letter.

"It is a real trouble," she said, her voice shaking a good deal; "but we have got to make the best of it. It is for Gerald's happiness. It is selfish for us just to fret because we cannot always have him by our side."

"There'll be no millennium," said Augusta in a savage voice. "I might have guessed it. That horrid selfish, selfish girl has got the whole of our Gerald. I suppose he'll make her happy, nasty, spiteful thing; but she has wrecked the happiness of seven other girls – horrid creature! I might have known there was never going to be a millennium. Where are the dogs? Let me set them fighting. Get out of that, madame puss – you and Rover and Drake will quarrel now to the end of the chapter, for Gerald is never coming home to live."

Augusta's sentiments were warmly shared by the younger girls, and to a great extent she even secured the sympathy of Marjory and the rector.

"I don't understand you, Liliias," said her pet sister. "I thought you would have been the worst of us all."

"Oh, don't," said Liliias, tears springing to her eyes. "Don't you see, Marjory, that I really feel the worst, so I must keep it all in? Don't let us talk it over, it is useless. If Valentine makes Gerald happy I have not a word to say, and if I am not glad I must pretend to be glad for his sake."

"Poor old Lil!" said Marjory.

And after this little speech she teased her sister no more.

A fortnight after his engagement Gerald came to the rectory for a brief visit. He was apparently in high spirits, and never made himself more agreeable to his sisters. He had no confidential talks, however, with Lilly, and they all noticed how grave and quiet and handsome he had grown.

"He's exactly like my idea of the god Apollo," remarked Augusta. "No wonder that girl is in love with him. Oh, couldn't I just pull her hair for her. I can't think how Lilly sits by and hears Gerald praise her! I'd like to give her a piece of my mind, and tell her what I think of her carrying off our ewe-lamb. Yes, she's just like David in the Bible, and I only wish I were the prophet Nathan, to go and have it out with her!"

Augusta was evidently mixed in her metaphors, for it was undoubtedly difficult to compare the same person to Apollo and a ewe-lamb. Nevertheless, she carried her audience with her, and when now and then Gerald spoke of Valentine he received but scant sympathy.

On the day he went away, the rector called Lilius into his study.

"My dear," he said, "I want to have a little talk with you. What do you think of all this? Has Gerald made you many confidences? You and he were always great chums. He was reserved with me, remarkably so, for he was always such an open sort of a lad. But of course you and he had it all out, my dear."

"No, father," replied Lilius. "That is just it. We hadn't anything out."

"What – eh – nothing? And the boy is in love. Oh, yes, anyone can see that – in love, and no confidences. Then, my dear, I was afraid of it – now I am sure – there must be something wrong. Gerald is greatly changed. Lilius."

"Yes," said Lilius. "I can't quite define the change, but it is there."

"My dear girl, he was a boy – now he is a man. I don't say that he is unhappy, but he has a good weight of responsibility on his shoulders. He was a rather heedless boy, and in the matter of concealment or keeping anything back, a perfect sieve. Now he's a closed book. Closed? – locked I should say. Lilius, neither you nor I can understand him. I wish to God your mother was alive!"

"He told me," said Lilius, "that he had talked over matters with you – that – that there was nothing much to say – that he was perfectly satisfied, and that Valentine was like no other girl in the wide world. To all intents and purposes Gerald was a sealed book to me, father; but I don't understand your considering him so, for he said that he had spoken to you very openly."

"Oh, about the arrangements between him and Paget. Yes, I consider it a most unprecedented and extraordinary sort of thing. Gerald gives up the Church, goes into Paget's business – early next summer marries his daughter, and on the day of his wedding signs the deeds of partnership. He receives no salary – not so much as sixpence – but he and his wife take up their abode at the Pagets' house in Queen's Gate, Paget making himself responsible for all expenses. Gerald, in lieu of providing his wife with a fortune, makes a marriage settlement on her, and for this purpose is required to insure his life very heavily – for thousands, I am told – but the exact sum is not yet clearly defined. Paget undertakes to provide for the insurance premium. I call the whole thing unpleasant and derogatory, and I cannot imagine how the lad has consented. Liberty? What will he know of liberty when he is that rich fellow's slave? Better love in a cottage, with a hundred a year, say I."

"But, father, Mr. Paget would not have given Val to Gerald to live in a cottage with her – and Gerald, he has consented to this – this that you call degradation, because he loves Val so very, very much."

"I suppose so, child. I was in love once myself – your mother was the noblest and most beautiful of women; that lad is the image of her. Well, so he never confided in you. Lil? Very strange, I call it very strange. I tell you what. Lilius, I'll run up to town next week, and have a talk with Paget, and see what sort of girl this is who has bewitched the boy. That's the best way. I'll have a talk with Paget, and get to the bottom of things. I used to know him long ago at Trinity. Now run away, child. I must prepare my sermon for to-morrow."

CHAPTER X

At this period of her life Valentine was certainly not in the least in love with the man to whom she was engaged – she disliked caresses and what she was pleased to call honeyed words of flattery. Wyndham, who found himself able to read her moods like a book, soon learned to accommodate himself to her wishes. He came to see her daily, but he kissed her seldom – he never took her hand, nor put his arm round her slim waist; they sat together and talked, and soon discovered that they had many subjects of interest in common – they both loved music, they both adored novels and poetry. Wyndham could read aloud beautifully, and at these times Valentine liked to lie back in her easy chair and steal shy glances at him, and wonder, as she never ceased to wonder, from morning to night, why he loved her so much, and why her father wanted her to marry him.

If Valentine was cold to this young man, she was, however, quite the opposite to the rector of Jewsbury-on-the-Wold. Mr. Wyndham came to town, and of course partook of the hospitality of the house in Queen's Gate. In Valentine's eyes the rector was old, older than her father – she delighted for her father's sake in all old men, and being really a very loveable and fascinating girl soon won the rector's heart.

"I'm not a bit surprised, Gerald," the good man said to his son on the day of his return to his parish duties. "She's a wilful lass, and has a spirit of her own, but she's a good girl, too, and a sweet, and a young fellow might do worse than lose his heart to her. Valentine is open as the day, and when she comes to me as a daughter, I'll give her a daughter's place in my heart. Yes, Valentine is all right enough, and I'll tell Liliás so, and put her heart at rest, poor girl, but I'm not so sure about Paget. I think you are putting yourself in a very invidious position, if you will allow me to say so, my boy, coming into Paget's house as a sort of dependent, even though you are his girl's husband. I don't like the sound of it, and you won't care for the position, Gerald, when you've experienced it for a short time. However – oh, there's my train – yes, porter, yes, two bugs and a rag – I mean two bags and a rug – Here, this way, this way. Dear, dear, how confused one gets! Yes, Gerald, what was I saying? Oh, of course you're of age, my boy, you are at liberty to choose for yourself. Yes, I like the girl thoroughly. God bless you. Gerry; come down to the old place whenever you have a spare Saturday."

The younger Wyndham smiled in a very grave fashion, saw to his father's creature comforts, as regarded wraps, newspapers, etc., tipped the porter, who had not yet done laughing at the reverend gentleman's mistake, and left the station.

He hailed a cab and drove at once to his future father-in-law's business address. He was quite at home now in the big shipping office, the several clerks regarding him with mixed feelings of respect and envy. Gerald had a gracious way with everyone, he was never distant with his fellow-creatures, but there was also a slight indescribable touch about him which kept those who were beneath him in the social scale from showing the smallest trace of familiarity. He was sympathetic, but he had a knack of making those who came in contact with him treat him as a gentleman. The clerks liked Wyndham, and with one exception were extremely civil to him. Helps alone held himself aloof from the new-comer, watching him far more anxiously than the other clerks did, but, nevertheless, keeping his own counsel, and daring whenever he had the opportunity to use covert words of warning.

On his arrival, to-day, Wyndham sent a message to the chief, asking to see him as soon as convenient. While he waited in the ante-room, for in reality he had little or nothing to do in the place, the door was opened to admit another visitor, and then Adrian Carr, the young man whom Valentine had once spoken of with admiration, stepped across the threshold. The two young men were slightly acquainted, and while they waited they chatted together.

Carr was a great contrast to Wyndham – he was rather short, but thin and wiry, without an atom of superfluous flesh anywhere – his shoulders were broad, he was firmly knit and had a very erect carriage. Wyndham, tall, loosely built, with the suspicion of a stoop, looked frail beside the other

man. Wyndham's dark grey eyes were too sensitive for perfect mental health. His face was pallid, but at times it would flush vividly – his lips had a look of repression about them – the whole attitude of the man to a very keen observer was tense and watchful.

Carr had dark eyes, closely cropped hair, a smooth face but for his moustache, and a keen, resolute, bold glance. He was not nearly as handsome as Wyndham, beside Wyndham he might even have been considered commonplace, but his every gesture, his every glance betokened the perfection of mental health and physical vigor.

After a few desultory nothings had been exchanged between the two, Carr alluded to Wyndham's engagement, and offered him his congratulations. He did this with a certain guardedness of tone which caused Gerald to look at him keenly.

"Thank you – yes, I am very lucky," he replied. "But can we not exchange good wishes, Carr? I heard a rumor somewhere, that you also were about to be married."

Carr laughed.

"These rumors are always getting about," he said, "half of them end in smoke. In my case you yourself destroyed the ghost of the chance of such a possibility coming about."

"I? What do you mean?" said Wyndham.

"Nothing of the least consequence. As matters have turned out I am perfectly heart-whole, but the fact is, the only girl I ever took the slightest fancy to is going to be your wife. Oh, I am not in love with her! You stopped me in time. I really only tell you this to show you how much I appreciate the excellence of your taste."

Wyndham did not utter a word, and just then Helps came to say that Mr. Paget would see Mr. Carr for a few moments. Carr instantly left the room, and Wyndham went over to the dusty window, leant his elbow against one of the panes, and peered out.

Apparently there was nothing for him to see – the window looked into a tiny square yard, in the centre of which was a table, which contained a dish of empty peapods, and two cabbages in a large basin of cold water. Not a soul was in the yard, and Wyndham staring out ought in the usual order of things soon to have grown weary of the objects of his scrutiny. Far from that, his fixed gaze seemed to see something of peculiar and intense interest. When he turned away at last, his face was ghastly white, and taking out his handkerchief he wiped some drops of moisture from his forehead.

"My master will see you now, sir," said Helps, in a quiet voice. He had been watching Wyndham all the time, and now he looked up at him with a queer significant glance of sympathy.

"Oh, ain't you a fool, young man?" he said. "Why, nothing ain't worth what you're a-gwine through."

"Is Carr gone?" asked Wyndham.

"Oh yes, sir, he's a gent as knows what he's after. No putting his foot into holes with him. He knows what ground he'll walk on. Come along, sir, here you are."

Helps always showed Wyndham into the chief's presence with great parade. Mr. Paget was in a genial humor. When he greeted the young man he actually laughed.

"Sit down, Gerald; sit down, my dear boy. Now, you'll never guess what our friend Adrian Carr came to see me about. 'Pon my word, it's quite a joke – you'll never guess it, Gerald."

"I'm sure of that, sir, I never guessed a riddle in my life."

Something in the hopeless tone in which these few words were uttered made Mr. Paget cease smiling. He favored Gerald with a lightning glance, then said quietly:

"I suppose I ought not to have laughed, but somehow I never thought Carr would have taken to the job. He wants me to introduce him to your father, Gerald. He is anxious to be ordained for the curacy which you have missed. Fancy a man like Carr in the Church! He says he never thought of such a profession until you put it into his head – now he is quite keen after it. Well, perhaps he will make an excellent clergyman – I rather fancy I should like to hear him preach."

"If I were you," said Gerald, "I would refuse to give him that introduction."

"Refuse to give it him! My dear boy, what do you mean? I am not quite such a churl. Why, I have given it him. I wrote a long letter to your excellent father, saying all sorts of nice things about Carr, and he has taken it away in his pocket. Her Majesty's post has the charge of it by this time, I expect. What is the matter, Wyndham? You look quite strange."

"I feel it, sir – I don't like this at all. Carr and I have got mixed somehow. He takes my curacy, and he confessed that but for me he'd have gone in for Val. Now you see what I mean. He oughtn't to have the curacy."

Mr. Paget looked really puzzled.

"You are talking in a strange way, Gerald," he said. "If poor Carr was unfortunate enough to fall in love with a girl whom you have won, surely you don't grudge him that poor little curacy too. My dear lad, you are getting positively morbid. There, I don't think I want you for anything special to day. Go home to Val – get her to cheer your low spirits."

"She cannot," replied Gerald. "You don't see, sir, because you won't. Carr is not in love with Valentine, and Valentine is not in love with him, but they both might be. I have heard Val talk of him – once. I heard him speak of her – to day. By-and-bye, sir – in the future, they may meet. You know what I mean. Carr ought not to go to Jewsbury-on-the-Wold – it is wrong. I will not allow it. I will myself write to the rector. I will take the responsibility, whoever gets my old berth it must not be Adrian Carr."

Wyndham rose as he spoke – he looked determined, all trace of weakness or irresolution left his face. Paget had never before seen this young man in his present mood. Somehow the sight gave him intense pleasure. A latent fear which he had scarcely dared to whisper even to his own heart that Wyndham had not sufficient pluck for what lay before him vanished now. He too rose to his feet, and laid his hand almost caressingly on the lad's shoulder.

"My boy, you have no cause to fear in this matter. In the future I myself will take care of Valentine, but I love you for your thoughtfulness, Gerald."

"You need not, sir. I have something on my mind which I must say now. I have entered into your scheme. I have – "

"Yes, yes – let me shut and lock the door, my boy."

Wyndham, arrested in his speech, drew one or two heavy breaths.

He spoke again in a sort of panting way. His eyes grew bright and almost wild.

"I have promised you," he continued. "I'll go through with it. It's a million times worse fate for me than if I had killed someone, and then was hung up by the neck until I died. That, in comparison to this, would be – well, like the sting of a gnat. I'll go through with it, however, and you need not be afraid that I'll change my mind. I do it solely and entirely because I love your daughter, because I believe that the touch of dishonor would blight her, because unfortunately for herself she loves you better than any other soul in the world. If she did not, if she gave me even half of the great heart which she bestows upon you, then I would risk all, and feel sure that dishonor and poverty with me would be better than honor and riches with you. You're a happy man during these last six weeks. Mr. Paget. You have found your victim, and you see a way of salvation for yourself, and a prosperous future for Valentine. She won't grieve long – oh, no, not long for the husband she never loved – but look here, you have to guard her against the possibility in the future of falling in love with another – of being won by another man, who will ask her to be his wife and the mother of his children. Though she does not love me, she must remain my widow all her days, for if she does not, if I hear that she, thinking herself free, is about to contract marriage with another, I will return – yes, I will return from the dead – from the grave, and say that it shall not be, and I will show all the world that you are – what you have proved yourself to be to me – a devil. That is all. I wanted to say this to you. Carr has given me the opportunity. I won't see Val to-day, for I am upset – to-morrow I shall have regained my composure."

CHAPTER XI

Wyndham was engaged to Valentine Paget very nearly a year before their wedding. One of the young lady's stipulations was that under no circumstances would she enter into the holy estate of matrimony before she was eighteen. Paget made no objection to this proviso on Val's part. In these days he humored her slightest wish, and no happier pair to all appearance could have been seen driving in the Park, or riding in the Row, than this handsome father and daughter.

"What a beautiful expression he has," remarked many people. And when they said this to the daughter she smiled, and a sweet proud light came into her eyes.

"My father is a darling," she would say. "No one knows him as I do. I believe he is about the greatest and the best of men."

When Val made enthusiastic remarks of this kind. Wyndham looked at her sorrowfully. She was very fond of him by this time – he had learned to fit himself to her ways, to accommodate himself to her caprices, and although she frankly admitted that she could not for an instant compare him to her father, she always owned that she loved him next best, and that she thought it would be a very happy thing to be his wife.

No girl could look sweeter than Val when she made little speeches of this kind, but they had always a queer effect upon her lover, causing him to experience an excitement which was scarcely joy, for nothing could have more fatally upset Mr. Paget's plans than Valentine really to fall in love with Wyndham.

The wedding day was fixed for the first week in July, and Valentine was accompanied to the altar by no less than eight bridesmaids. It was a grand wedding – quite one of the events of the season, and those who saw it spoke of the bride as beautiful, and of the bridegroom as a grave, striking-looking man.

If a man constantly practises self-repression there comes a time when, in this special art, he almost reaches perfection. Wyndham had come to this stage, as even Liliias, who read her brother like a book, could see nothing amiss with him on his wedding day. All, therefore, went merrily on this auspicious occasion, and the bride and bridegroom started for the continent amid a shower of blessings and good wishes.

"Gerald, dear, I quite forgive you," said Liliias, as at the very last minute she put her arms round her brother's neck.

"What for, Lilly?" he asked, looking down at her.

Then a shadow of great bitterness crossed the sunshine of his face. He stooped and kissed her forehead.

"You don't know my sin, so you cannot forgive it, Lilly," he continued.

"Oh, my darling, I know you," she said. "I don't think you could sin. I meant that I have learned already to love Valentine a little, and I am not surprised at your choice. I forgive you fully, Gerald, for loving another girl better than your sister Liliias. Good-bye, dear old Gerry. God bless you!"

"He won't do that, Lilly – he can't. Oh, forgive me, dear, I didn't mean those words. Of course I'm the happiest fellow in the world."

Gerald turned away, and Liliias kissed Valentine, and then watched with a queer feeling of pain at her heart as the bridal pair amid cheers and blessings drove away.

Gerald's last few words had renewed Liliias' anxiety. She felt restless in the great, grand house, and longed to be back in the rectory.

"What's the matter, Lil?" said Marjory; "your face is a yard long, and you are quite white and have dark lines under your eyes. For my part I did not think Gerald's wedding would be half so jolly, and what a nice unaffected girl Valentine is."

"Oh, yes, I'm not bothering my head about her," said Liliás. "She's all right, just what father said she was. I wish we were at home again, Maggie."

"Yes, of course, so do I," said Marjory. "But then we can't be, for we promised Gerald to try and make things bright for Mr. Paget. Isn't he a handsome man, Lilly? I don't think I ever saw anyone with such a beaming sort of benevolent expression."

"He is certainly very fond of Valentine, and she of him," answered Liliás. "No, I did not particularly notice his expression. The fact is I did not look at anyone much except our Gerald. Marjory, I think it is an awful thing for girls like us to have an only brother – he becomes almost too precious. Marjory, I cannot sympathize with Mr. Paget. I wish we were at home. I know our dear old dad will want us, and there is no saying what mess Augusta will put things into."

"Father heard from Mr. Carr on the morning we left," responded Marjory. "I think he is coming to the rectory on Saturday. If so, father won't miss us: he'll be quite taken up showing him over the place."

"I shall hate him," responded Liliás, in a very tart voice. "Fancy his taking our Gerald's place. Oh, Maggie, this room stifles me – can't we change our dresses, and go out for a stroll somewhere? Oh, what folly you talk of it's not being the correct thing! What a hateful place this London is! Oh, for a breath of the air in the garden at home. Yes, what is it, Mrs. Johnstone?"

Liliás' pretty face looked almost grumpy, and a decidedly discontented expression lurked in the dark, sweet eyes she turned upon the good lady of the establishment.

"Lilly has an attack of the fidgets," said Marjory. "She wants to go out for a walk."

"You shall both come in the carriage with me, my dears. I was coming in to propose it to you. We won't dine until quite late this evening."

"Delightful," exclaimed Marjory, and the two girls ran out of the room to get ready. Mrs. Johnstone followed them, and a few moments later a couple of young men who were staying in the house sauntered lazily into the drawing-room.

"What do you think of Wyndham's sisters, Exham?" said one to the other.

Exham, a delicate youth of about nineteen, gave a long expressive whistle.

"The girls are handsome enough," he said. "But not in my style. The one they call Liliás is too brusque. As to Wyndham, well –"

"What a significant 'well,' old fellow – explain yourself."

"Nothing," returned Exham, who seemed to draw out of any further confidences he was beginning to make. "Nothing – only, I wouldn't be in Wyndham's shoes."

The other man, whose name was Power, gave a short laugh.

"You need not pretend to be so wise and close, Exham," he retorted. "Anyone can see with half an eye that Wyndham's wife is not in love with him. All the same. Wyndham has not done a bad thing for himself – stepping into a business like this. Why, he'll have everything by-and-bye. I don't see how he can help it."

"Did you hear that funny story," retorted Exham, "about Wyndham's life being insured?"

"No, what? – Most men insure their lives when they marry."

"Yes, but this is quite out of the common. At four offices, and heavily. It filtered to me through one of the clerks at the office. He said it was all Paget's doing."

"What a villain that clerk must be to let out family secrets," responded Power. "I don't believe there's anything in it, Exham. Ah, here comes the young ladies. Yes, Mrs. Johnstone, I should like to go for a drive very much."

CHAPTER XII

Some people concern themselves very much with the mysteries of life, others take what good things fall into their way without question or wonder. These latter folk are not of a speculating or strongly reasoning turn; if sorrow arrives they accept it as wise, painful, inevitable – if joy visits them they rejoice, but with simplicity. They are the people who are naturally endowed with faith – faith first of all in a guiding providence, which as a rule is accompanied by a faith in their fellow men. The world is kind to such individuals, for the world is very fond of giving what is expected of it – to one hate and distrust, to another open-handed benevolence and cordiality. People so endowed are usually fortunate, and of them it may be said, that it was good for them to be born.

All people are not so constituted – there is such a thing as a noble discontent, and the souls that in the end often attain to the highest, have nearly suffered shipwreck, have spent with St. Paul a day and a night in the deep – being saved in the end with a great deliverance – they have often on the road been all but lost. Such people often sin very deeply – temptation assails them in the most subtle forms, many of them go down really into the deep, and are never in this life heard of again – they are spoken of as "lost," utterly lost, and their names are held up to others as terrible warnings, as examples to be shunned, as reprobates to be spoken of with bated breath.

It may be that some of these so-called lost souls will appear as victors in another state; having gone into the lowest depths of all they may also attain to the highest heights; this, however, is a mystery which no one can fathom.

Gerald Wyndham was one of the men of whom no one could quite say it was good for him to have been born. His nature was not very easily read, and even his favorite sister Liliias did not quite know him. From his earliest days he was so far unfortunate as never to be able to take things easily; even in his childhood this characteristic marked him. Sorrows with Gerald were never trivial; when he was six years old he became seriously ill because a pet canary died. He would not talk of his trouble, nor wail for his pet like an ordinary child, but sat apart, and refused to eat, and only his mother at last could draw him away from his grief, and show him it was unmanly to be rebellious.

His joys were as intense as his woes – he was an intense child in every sense of the word; eager, enthusiastic, with many noble impulses. All might have gone well with him but for a rather strange accompaniment to his special character; he was as reserved as most such boys would be open. It was only by the changing expression of his eyes that on many occasions people knew whether a certain proposition would plunge him in the depths of woe or raise him to the heights of joy. He was innately very unselfish, and this characteristic must have been most strongly marked in him, for his father and his mother and his seven sisters did their utmost to make him the reverse. Liliias said afterwards that they failed ignobly. Gerald would never see it, she would say. Talk of easy-chairs – he would stand all the evening rather than take one until every other soul in the room was comfortably provided. Talk of the best in anything, – you might give it to Gerald, but in five minutes he would have given it away to the person who wanted it least. It was aggravating beyond words, Liliias Wyndham often exclaimed, but before you could even attempt to make old Gerry decently comfortable you had to attend to the wants of even the cats and dogs.

Wyndham carrying all his peculiarities with him went to school and then to Cambridge. He was liked in both places, and was clever enough to win distinction, but for the same characteristic which often caused him at the last moment to fail, because he thought another man should win the honor, or another schoolboy the prize.

His mother wished him to take holy orders, and although he had no very strong leaning in that direction he expressed himself satisfied with her choice, and decided for the first few years of his life as deacon and priest to help his father at the dear old parish of Jewsbury-on-the-Wold.

Then came his meeting with Valentine Paget, the complete upheaval of every idea, the revolution which shook his nature to its depths. His hour had come, and he took the malady of young love – first, earnest, passionate love – as anyone who knew him thoroughly, and scarcely anyone did know the real Wyndham, might have expected.

One pair of eyes, however, looked at this speaking face, and one keen mental vision pierced down into the depths of an earnest and chivalrous soul. Mortimer Paget had been long looking for a man like Wyndham. It was not a very difficult matter to make such a lad his victim, hence his story became one of the most sorrowful that could be written, as far as this life is concerned. Had his mother, who was now in her grave for over seven years, known what fate lay before this bright beautiful boy of hers, she would have cursed the day of his birth. Fortunately for mothers, and sisters too, the future lies in darkness, for knowledge in such cases would make daily life unendurable.

Valentine and her husband extended their wedding tour considerably over the original month. They often wrote home, and nothing could exceed the cheerfulness of the letters which Mr. Paget read with anxiety and absorbing interest – the rectory folks with all the interest minus the anxiety. Valentine frankly declared that she had never been so happy in her life, and it was at last, at her father's express request, almost command, that the young couple consented to take up their abode in Queen's Gate early in the November which followed their wedding. They spent a fortnight first at the old rectory, where Valentine appeared in an altogether new character, and commenced her career by swearing an eternal friendship with Augusta. She was in almost wild spirits, and they played pranks together, and went everywhere arm-in-arm, accompanied by the entire bevy of little sisters.

Lilias and Marjory began by being rather scandalized, but ended by thoroughly appreciating the arrangement, as it left them free to monopolize Gerald, who on this occasion seemed to have quite recovered his normal spirits. He was neither depressed nor particularly exultant, he did not talk a great deal either about himself or his wife, but was full of the most delighted interest in his father's and sisters' concerns. The new curate, Mr. Carr, was now in full force, and Gerald and he found a great deal to say to one another. The days were those delicious ones of late autumn, when nature quiet and exhausted, as she is after her time of flower and fruit, is in her most soothing mood. The family at the rectory were never indoors until the shades of night drove them into the long, low, picturesque, untidy drawing-room.

Then Gerald sang with his sisters – they had all sweet voices, and his was a pure and very sympathetic tenor. Valentine's songs were not the same as those culled from old volumes of ballads, and selected from the musical mothers' and grandmothers' store, which the rectory folk delighted in. Hers were drawing-room melodies of the present day, fashionable, but short-lived.

The first night the young bride was silent, for even Augusta had left her to join the singers round the piano. Gerald was playing an accompaniment for his sisters, and the rector, standing in the back ground, joined the swell of harmony with his rich bass notes. Valentine and Carr, who was also in the room, were the silent and only listeners. Valentine wore a soft white dress, her bright wavy locks of golden hair were a little roughened, and her starry eyes were fixed on her husband. Carr, who looked almost monastic in his clerical dress, was gazing at her – her lips were partly open, she kept gentle time to the music with her little hand. A very spirited glee was in full tide, when there came a horrid discordant crash on the piano – everyone stopped singing, and Gerald, very white, went up to Val, and took her arm.

"Come over here and join us," he said almost roughly.

"But I don't know any of that music, Gerald, and it is so delicious to listen."

"Folly," responded her husband. "It looks absurd to see two people gaping at one. I beg your pardon, Carr – I am positively sensitive, abnormally so, on the subject of being stared at. Girls, shall we have a round game? I will teach Val some of Bishop's melodies to-morrow morning."

"I am going home," said Carr, quietly. "I did not know that anyone was looking at you except your wife. Wyndham. Good-night?"

It was an uncomfortable little scene, and even the innocent, unsophisticated rectory girls felt embarrassed without knowing why. Marjory almost blamed Gerald afterwards, and would have done so roundly, but Liliias would not listen to her.

At the next night's concert, Valentine sang almost as sweetly as the others, but Carr did not come back to the rectory for a couple of days.

"I evidently acted like a brute, and must have appeared one," said Gerald to himself. "But God alone knows what all this means to me."

It was a small jar, the only one in that happy fortnight, when the girls seemed to have quite got their brother back, and to have found a new sister in pretty, bright Valentine.

It was the second of November when the bride and bridegroom appeared at a big dinner party made in their honor at the house in Queen's Gate.

All her friends congratulated Valentine on her improved looks, and told Wyndham frankly that matrimony had made a new man of him. He was certainly bright and pleasant, and took his part quite naturally as the son of the house. No one could detect the shadow of a care on his face, and as to Val, she sat almost in her father's pocket, scarcely turning her bright eyes away from his face.

"I always thought that dear Mr. Paget the best and noblest and most Christian of men," remarked a certain Lady Valery to her daughter as they drove home that evening. "I am now more convinced of the truth of my views than ever."

"Why so, mother?" asked her daughter.

"My dear, can you not see for yourself? He gave that girl of his – that beautiful girl, with all her fortune – to a young man with neither position nor money, simply and entirely because she fell in love with him. Was there ever anything more disinterested? Yes, my dear, talk to me of every Christian virtue embodied, and I shall invariably mention my old friend, Mortimer Paget."

CHAPTER XIII

"Valentine," said her husband, as they stood together by the fire in their bedroom that night, "I have a great favor to ask of you."

"Yes, Gerald – a favor! I like to grant favors. Is it that I must wear that soft white dress you like so much to-morrow evening? Or that I must sing no songs but the rectory songs for father's visitors in the drawing-room. How solemn you look, Gerald. What is the favor?"

Gerald's face did look careworn. The easy light-hearted expression which had characterized it downstairs had left him. When Valentine laid her hand lovingly on his shoulder, he slipped his arm round her waist, however, and drew her fondly to his side.

"Val, the favor is this," he said. "You can do anything you like with your father. I want you to persuade him to let us live in a little house of our own for a time, until, say next summer."

Valentine sprang away from Gerald's encircling arm.

"I won't ask that favor," she said, her eyes flashing. "It is mean of you, Gerald. I married you on condition that I should live with my father."

"Very well, dear, if you feel it like that, we won't say anything more about it. It is not of real consequence."

Gerald took a letter out of his pocket, and opening the envelope began leisurely to read its contents. Valentine still, however, felt ruffled and annoyed.

"It is so queer of you to make such a request," she said. "I wonder what father would say. He would think I had taken leave of my senses, and just now too when I have been away from him for months. And when it is such a joy, such a deep, deep joy, to be with him again."

"It is of no consequence, darling. I am sorry I mentioned it. See, Valentine, this letter is from a great friend of mine, a Mrs. Price – she wants to call on you; she is coming to-morrow. You will be at home in the afternoon, will you not?"

Valentine nodded.

"I will be in," she said. Then she added, her eyes filling with tears – "You don't really want to take me away from my father, Gerald?"

"I did wish to do so, dear, but we need not think of it again. The one and only object of my life is to make you happy, Val. Now go to bed, and to sleep, dearest. I am going downstairs to have a smoke."

The next morning, very much to her surprise, Mr. Paget called his daughter into his study, and made the same proposition to her which Gerald had made the night before.

"I must not be a selfish old man, Val," he said. "And I think it is best for young married folks to live alone. I know how you love me, my child, and I will promise to pay you a daily visit. Or at least when you don't come to me, I will look you up. But all things considered, it is best for your husband and you to have your own house. Why, what is it, Valentine, you look quite queer, child."

"This is Gerald's doing," said Valentine – her face had a white set look – never before had her father seen this expression on it. "No, father, I will not leave you; I refuse to do so; it is breaking our compact; it is unfair."

She went up to him, and put her arms round his neck, and again her golden locks touched his silvered head, and her soft cheek pressed his.

"Father darling, you won't break your own Val's heart – you couldn't; it would be telling a lie. I won't live away from you – I won't, so there."

Just at this moment Wyndham entered the room.

"What is it, sir?" he said, almost fiercely. "What are you doing with Val? Why, she is crying. What have you been saying to her?"

"My father said nothing," answered Valentine for him. "How dare you speak to my father in that tone? It is you. Gerald; you have been mean and shabby. You went to my father to try to get him

on your side – to try and get him – to try and get him to aid you in going away – to live in another house. Oh, it was a mean, cowardly thing to do, but you shan't have your way, for I'm not going; only I'm ashamed of you, Gerald, I'm ashamed of you."

Here Valentine burst into a tempest of angry, girlish tears.

"Don't be silly, Val," said her husband, in a quiet voice. "I said nothing about this to Mr. Paget. I wished for it, but as I told you last night, when you disapproved, I gave it up. I don't tell lies. Will you explain to Valentine, please, sir, that I'm guiltless of anything mean, or, as she expresses it, shabby, in this matter."

"Of course, Wyndham – of course, you are," said Paget. "My dear little Val, what a goose you have made of yourself. Now run away, Wyndham, there's a good fellow, and I'll soothe her down. You might as well go to the office for me. Ask Helps for my private letters, and bring them back with you. Now, Valentine, you and I are going to have a drive together. Good-bye, Wyndham."

Wyndham slowly left the room – Valentine's head was still on her father's shoulder – as her husband went away he looked back at her, but she did not return his glance.

"The old man is right," he soliloquized bitterly. "I have not a chance of winning her heart. No doubt under the circumstances this is the only thing to be desired, and yet it very nearly maddens me."

Wyndham did not return to Queen's Gate until quite late; he had only time to run up to his room and change his dress hastily for dinner. Valentine had already gone downstairs, and he sighed heavily as he noticed this, or he felt that unwittingly he had managed to hurt her in her tenderest feelings that morning.

"If there is much of this sort of thing," he said to himself. "I shall not be so sorry when the year is up. When once the plunge is over I may come up another man, and anything is better than perpetually standing on the brink." Yet half an hour later Wyndham had completely changed his mind, for when he entered the drawing-room, a girlish figure jumped up at once out of an easy-chair, and ran to meet him, and Valentine's arms were flung about his neck and several of her sweetest kisses printed on his lips.

"Forgive me for being cross this morning, dear old darling. Father has made me see everything in quite a new light, and has shown me that I acted quite like a little fiend, and that you are very nearly the best of men. And do you know, Gerry, he wishes us so much to live alone, and thinks it the only right and proper thing to do, that I have given in, and I quite agree with him, quite. And we have almost taken the sweetest, darlingest little bijou residence in Park-lane that you can imagine. It is like a doll's house compared to this, but so exquisite, and furnished with such taste. It will feel like playing in a baby-house all day long, and I am almost in love with it already. You must come with me and see it the first thing in the morning. Gerry, for if we both like it, father will arrange at once with the agent, and then, do you know the very first thing I mean to do for you, Gerry? Oh, you need not guess, I'll tell you. Liliash shall come up to spend the winter with us. Oh, you need not say a word. I'm not jealous, but I can see how you idolize Liliash, Gerry."

CHAPTER XIV

At the end of a week the Wyndhams were settled in their new home, and Valentine began her duties as wife and housekeeper in earnest. She, too, was more or less impulsive, and beginning by hating the idea she ended by adopting it with enthusiasm. After all it was her father's plan, not Gerald's, and that in her heart of hearts made all the difference.

For the first time in her life, Valentine had more to get through than she could well accomplish. Her days, therefore, just now were one long delight to her, and even Gerald felt himself more or less infected by her high spirits. It was pretty to see her girlish efforts at housekeeping, and even her failures became subjects of good-humored merriment. Mr. Paget came over every day to see her, but he generally chose the hours when her husband was absent, and Wyndham and his young wife were in consequence able to spend many happy evenings alone.

By-and-bye this girlish and thoughtless wife was to look back on these evenings, and wonder with vain sighs of unavailing regret if life could ever again bring her back such sweetness. Now she enjoyed them unthinkingly, for her time for wakening had not come.

When the young couple were quite settled in their own establishment, Lilius Wyndham came up from the country to spend a week with them. Nothing would induce her to stay longer away from home. Although Valentine pleaded and coaxed, and even Gerald added a word or two of entreaty, she was quite firm.

"No," she said, "nothing would make me become the obnoxious sister-in-law, about whom so much has been written in all the story books I have ever read."

"Oh, Lilius, you darling, as if you could!" exclaimed Val, flying at her and kissing her.

"Oh, yes, my dear, I could," calmly responded Lilly – "and I may just as well warn you at once that my ways are not your ways in a great many particulars, and that you'd find that out if I lived too long with you. No, I'm going home to-morrow – to my own life, and you and Gerald must live yours without me. I am ready to come, if ever either of you want me, but just now no one does that as much as Marjory and my father."

Lilius returned to Jewsbury-on-the-Wold, and Valentine for some days continued to talk of her with enthusiasm, and to quote her name on all possible occasions.

"Lilius says that I'll never make a good housekeeper, unless I bring my wants into a fixed allowance, Gerald. She says I ought to know what I have got to spend each week, and not to exceed it, whether it is a large or small sum. She says that's what she and Marjory always do. About how much do you think I ought to spend a week on housekeeping, Gerry?"

"I don't know, darling. I have not the most remote idea."

"But how much have we to spend altogether? We are very rich, are we not?"

"No, Valentine, we are very poor. In fact we have got nothing at all."

"Why, what a crease has come between your brows; let me smooth it out – there, now you look much nicer. You have got a look of Lilius, only your eyes are not so dark. Gerald, I think Lilius so pretty. I think she is the very sweetest girl I ever met. But what do you mean by saying we are poor? Of course we are not poor. We would not live in a house like this, and have such jolly, cosy, little dinners if we were poor. Why, I know that champagne that we have a tiny bottle of every evening is really most costly. I thought poor people lived in attics, and ate bread and American cheese. What do you mean by being poor, Gerald?"

"Only that we have nothing of our own, dearest; we depend on your father for everything."

"You speak in quite a bitter tone. It is sweet to depend on my father. But doesn't he give us an allowance?"

"No, Valentine, I just take him all the bills, and he pays them."

"Oh, I don't like that plan. I think it is much more important and interesting to pay one's own bills, and I can never learn to be a housekeeper if I don't understand the value of money. I'll speak to father about this when he comes to-morrow. I'll ask him to give me an allowance."

"I wouldn't," replied Gerald. He spoke lazily, and yawned as he uttered the words.

"There's no use in taking up things that one must leave off again," he added, somewhat enigmatically. Then he opened a copy of Browning which lay near, and forgot Valentine and her troubles, at least she thought he forgot her.

She looked at him for a moment, with a half-pleased, half-puzzled expression coming into her face.

"He is very handsome and interesting," she murmured under her breath. "I like him, I certainly do like him, not as well as my father of course – I'm not sorry I married him now. I like him quite as well as I could ever have cared for the other man – the man who wore white flannels and had a determined voice, and now has been turned into a dreadful prosy curate. Yes, I do like Gerald. He perplexes me a good deal, but that is interesting. He is mysterious, and that is captivating – yes, yes – yes. Now, what did he mean by that queer remark about my housekeeping – 'that it wasn't worth while?' I hope he's not superstitious – if anything could be worth while it would be well for a young girl like me to learn something useful and definite. I'll ask him what he means."

She drew a footstool to her husband's side, and taking one of his hands laid her cheek against it. Wyndham dropped his book and smiled down at her.

"Gerry, do you believe in omens?" she asked.

Gerald gave a slight start. Circumstances inclined him to superstition – then he laughed. He must not encourage his wife in any such folly.

"I don't quite understand you, my love," he replied.

"Only you said it was not worth my while to learn to housekeep. Why do you say that? I am very young, you are young. If we are to go on always together, I ought to become wise and sensible. I ought to have knowledge. What do you mean, Gerald? Have you had an omen? Do you think you will die? Or perhaps that I shall die? I should not at all like it. I hope – I trust – no token of death has been sent to you about me."

"None, my very dearest, none. I see before you a life of – of peace. Peace and plenty – and – and – honor – a good life, Valentine, a guarded life."

"How white you are, Gerald. And why do you say 'you' all the time? The life, the peaceful life, and it sounds rather dull, is for us both, isn't it?"

"I don't know – I can't say. You wouldn't care, would you, Val – I mean – I mean – "

"What?"

Valentine had risen, her arms were thrown round Gerald's neck.

"Are you trying to tell me that I could be happy now without you?" she whispered. "Then I couldn't, darling. I don't mind telling you I couldn't. I – I – "

"What, Val, what?"

"I like you, Gerald. Yes, I know it – I do like you – much."

It ought to have been the most dreadful sound to him, and yet it wasn't. Wyndham strained his wife to his heart. Then he raised his eyes, and with a start Valentine and he stepped asunder.

Mr. Paget had come into the room. He had come in softly, and he must have heard Valentine's words, and seen that close embrace.

With a glad cry the girl flew to his side, but when he kissed her his lips trembled, he sank down on the nearest chair like a man who had received a great shock.

CHAPTER XV

"I'm afraid I can't help it, sir," said Wyndham.

Mr. Paget and his son-in-law were standing together in the very comfortable private room before alluded to in the office of the former.

Wyndham was standing with his back to the mantel-piece; Valentine's lovely picture was over his head. Her eyes, which were almost dancing with life, seemed to have something mocking in them to Mr. Paget, as he encountered their gaze now. As eyes will in a picture, they followed him wherever he moved. He was restless and ill at ease, and he wished either that the picture might be removed, or that he could take up Wyndham's position with his back to it.

"I tell you," he said, in a voice that betrayed his perturbation, "that you must help it. It's a clear breaking of contract to do otherwise."

"You see," said Wyndham, with a slow smile, "you under-rated my attractions. I was not the man for your purpose after all."

"Sit down for God's sake, Wyndham. Don't stand there looking so provokingly indifferent. One would think the whole matter was nothing to you."

"I am not sure that it is much; that is, I am not at all sure that I shall not take my full meed of pleasure out of the short time allotted to me."

"Sit down, take that chair, no, not that one – that – ah, that's better. Valentine's eyes are positively uncomfortable the way they pursue me this evening. Wyndham, you must feel for me – you must see that it will be a perfectly awful thing if my – my child loses her heart to you."

"Well, Mr. Paget, you can judge for yourself how matters stand. I – I cannot quite agree with you about what you fear being a catastrophe."

"You must be mad, Wyndham – you must either be mad, or you mean to cheat me after all."

"No, I don't. I have a certain amount of honor left – not much, or I shouldn't have lent myself to this, but the rag remaining is at your service. Seriously now, I don't think you have grave cause for alarm. Valentine is affectionate, but I am not to her as you are."

"You are growing dearer to her every day. I am not blind, I have watched her face. She follows you with her eyes – when you don't eat she is anxious, when you look dismal – you have an infernally dismal face at times, Wyndham – she is puzzled. It wasn't only what I saw last night. Valentine is waking up. It was in the contract that she was not to wake up. I gave you a child for your wife. She was to remain a child when – "

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