

Braddon Mary Elizabeth

Mount Royal: A Novel.

Volume 1 of 3



Мэри Элизабет Брэддон

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CHAPTER I

THE DAYS THAT ARE NO MORE

"And he was a widower," said Christabel.

She was listening to an oft-told tale, kneeling in the firelight, at her aunt's knee, the ruddy glow tenderly touching her fair soft hair and fairer forehead, her big blue eyes lifted lovingly to Mrs. Tregonell's face.

"And he was a widower, Aunt Diana," she repeated, with an expression of distaste, as if something had set her teeth on edge. "I cannot help wondering that you could care for a widower – a man who had begun life by caring for somebody else."

"Do you suppose any one desperately in love ever thinks of the past?" asked another voice out of the twilight. "Those infatuated creatures called lovers are too happy and contented with the rapture of the present."

"One would think you had tremendous experience, Jessie, by the way you lay down the law," said Christabel, laughing. "But I want to know what Auntie has to say about falling in love with a widower."

"If you had ever seen him and known him, I don't think you would wonder at my liking him," answered Mrs. Tregonell, lying back in her armchair, and talking of the story of her life in a placid way, as if it were the plot of a novel, so thoroughly does time smooth the rough edge of grief. "When he came to my father's house, his young wife had been dead just two years – she died three days after the birth of her first child – and Captain Hamleigh was very sad and grave, and seemed to take very little pleasure in life. It was in the shooting season, and the other men were out upon the hills all day."

"Murdering innocent birds," interjected Christabel. "How I hate them for it!"

"Captain Hamleigh hung about the house, not seeming to know very well what to do with himself, so your mother and I took pity upon him, and tried to amuse him, which effort resulted in his amusing us, for he was ever so much cleverer than we were. He was so kind and sympathetic. We had just founded a Dorcas Society, and we were muddling hopelessly in an endeavour to make good sensible rules, so that we should do nothing to lessen the independent feeling of our people – and he came to our rescue, and took the whole thing in hand, and seemed to understand it all as thoroughly as if he had been establishing Dorcas Societies all his life. My father said it was because the Captain had been sixth wrangler, and that it was the higher mathematics which made him so clever at making rules. But Clara and I said it was his kind heart that made him so quick at understanding how to help the poor without humiliating them."

"It was very nice of him," said Christabel, who had heard the story a hundred times before, but who was never weary of it, and had a special reason for being interested this afternoon. "And so he stayed a long time at my grandfather's, and you fell in love with him?"

"I began by being sorry for him," replied Mrs. Tregonell. "He told us all about his young wife – how happy they had been – how their one year of wedded life seemed to him like a lovely dream. They had only been engaged three months; he had known her less than a year and a half altogether; had come home from India; had seen her at a friend's house, fallen in love with her, married her, and lost her within those eighteen months. 'Everything smiled upon us,' he said. 'I ought to have remembered Polycrates and his ring.'"

"He must have been rather a doleful person," said Christabel, who had all the exacting ideas of early youth in relation to love and lovers. "A widower of that kind ought to perform suttee, and make an end of the business, rather than go about the world prosing to nice girls. I wonder more and more that you could have cared for him." And then, seeing her aunt's eyes shining with unshed tears, the girl laid her sunny head upon the matronly shoulder, and murmured tenderly, "Forgive me for teasing you, dear, I am only pretending. I love to hear about Captain Hamleigh; and I am not very much surprised that you ended by loving him – or that he soon forgot his brief dream of bliss with the other young lady, and fell desperately in love with you."

"It was not till after Christmas that we were engaged," continued Mrs. Tregonell, looking dreamily at the fire. "My father was delighted – so was my sister Clara – your dear mother. Everything went pleasantly; our lives seemed all sunshine. I ought to have remembered Polycrates, for I knew Schiller's ballad about him by heart. But I could think of nothing beyond that perfect all-sufficing happiness. We were not to be married till late in the autumn, when it would be three years since his wife's death. It was my father's wish that I should not be married till after my nineteenth birthday, which would not be till September. I was so happy in my engagement, so confident in my lover's fidelity, that I was more than content to wait. So all that spring he stayed at Penlee. Our mild climate had improved his health, which was not at all good when he came to us – indeed he had retired from the service before his marriage, chiefly on account of weak health. But he spoke so lightly and confidently about himself in this matter, that it had never entered into my head to feel any serious alarm about him, till early in May, when he and Clara and I were caught in a drenching rainstorm during a mountaineering expedition on Rough Tor, and then had to walk four or five miles in the rain before we came to the inn where the carriage was to wait for us. Clara and I, who were always about in all weathers, were very little worse for the wet walk and the long drive home in damp clothes. But George was seriously ill for three weeks with cough and low fever; and it was at this time that our family doctor told my father that he would not give much for his future son-in-law's life. There was a marked tendency to lung complaint, he said; Captain Hamleigh had confessed that several members of his family had died of consumption. My father told me this – urged me to avoid a marriage which must end in misery to me, and was deeply grieved when I declared that no such consideration would induce me to break my engagement, and to grieve the man I loved. If it were needful that our marriage should be delayed, I was contented to submit to any delay; but nothing could loosen the tie between me and my dear love."

Aunt and niece were both crying now. However familiar the story might be, they always wept a little at this point.

"George never knew one word of this conversation between my father and me – he never suspected our fears – but from that hour my happiness was gone. My life was one perpetual dread – one ceaseless struggle to hide all anxieties and fears under a smile. George rallied, and seemed to grow strong again – was full of energy and high spirits, and I had to pretend to think him as thoroughly recovered as he fancied himself. But by this time I had grown sadly wise. I had questioned our doctor – had looked into medical books – and I knew every sad sign and token of decay. I knew what the flushed cheek and the brilliant eye, the damp cold hand, and the short cough meant. I knew that the hand of death was on him whom I loved more than all the world besides. There was no need for the postponement of our marriage. In the long bright days of August he seemed wonderfully well – as well as he had been before the attack in May. I was almost happy; for, in spite of what the doctor had told me, I began to hope! but early in September, while the dressmakers were in the house making my wedding clothes, the end came suddenly, unexpectedly, with only a few hours' warning. Oh, Christabel! I cannot speak of that day!"

"No, darling, you shall not, you must not," cried Christabel, showering kisses on her aunt's pale cheek.

"And yet you always lead her on to talk about Captain Hamleigh," said the sensible voice out of the shadow. "Isn't that just a little inconsistent of our sweet Belle?"

"Don't call me your 'sweet Belle' – as if I were a baby," exclaimed the girl. "I know I am inconsistent – I was born foolish, and no one has ever taken the trouble to cure me of my folly. And now, Auntie dear, tell me about Captain Hamleigh's son – the boy who is coming here to-morrow."

"I have not seen him since he was at Eton. The Squire drove me down on a Fourth of June to see him."

"It was very good of Uncle Tregonell."

"The Squire was always good," replied Mrs. Tregonell, with a dignified air. Christabel's only remembrance of her uncle was of a large loud man, who blustered and scolded a good deal, and frequently contrived, perhaps, without meaning it, to make everybody in the house uncomfortable; so she reflected inwardly upon that blessed dispensation which, however poorly wives may think of living husbands, provides that every widow should consider her departed spouse completely admirable.

"And was he a nice boy in those days?" asked Christabel, keenly interested.

"He was a handsome gentlemanlike lad – very intellectual looking; but I was grieved to see that he looked delicate, like his father; and his dame told me that he generally had a winter cough."

"Who took care of him in those days?"

"His maternal aunt – a baronet's wife, with a handsome house in Eaton Square. All his mother's people were well placed in life."

"Poor boy! hard to have neither father nor mother. It was twelve years ago when you spent that season in London with the Squire," said Christabel, calculating profoundly with the aid of her finger tips; "and Angus Hamleigh was then sixteen, which makes him now eight-and-twenty – dreadfully old. And since then he has been at Oxford – and he got the Newdigate – what is the Newdigate? – and he did not hunt, or drive tandem, or have rats in his rooms, or paint the doors vermilion – like – like the general run of young men," said Christabel, reddening, and hurrying on confusedly; "and he was altogether rather a superior person at the university."

"He had not your cousin Leonard's high spirits and powerful physique," said Mrs. Tregonell, as if she were ever so slightly offended. "Young men's tastes are so different."

"Yes," sighed Christabel, "it's lucky they are, is it not? It wouldn't do for them *all* to keep rats in their rooms, would it? The poor old colleges would smell so dreadful. Well," with another sigh, "it is just three weeks since Angus Hamleigh accepted your invitation to come here to stay, and I have been expiring of curiosity ever since. If he keeps me expiring much longer I shall be dead before he comes. And I have a dreadful foreboding that, when he does appear, I shall detest him."

"No fear of that," said Miss Bridgeman, the owner of the voice that issued now and again from the covert of a deep armchair on the other side of the fireplace.

"Why not, Mistress Oracle?" asked Christabel.

"Because, as Mr. Hamleigh is accomplished and good-looking, and as you see very few young men of any kind, and none that are particularly attractive, the odds are fifty to one that you will fall in love with him."

"I am not that kind of person," protested Christabel, drawing up her long full throat, a perfect throat, and one of the girl's chief beauties.

"I hope not," said Mrs. Tregonell; "I trust that Belle has better sense than to fall in love with a young man, just because he happens to come to stay in the house."

Christabel was on the point of exclaiming, "Why, Auntie, you did it;" but caught herself up sharply, and cried out instead, with an air of settling the question for ever.

"My dear Jessie, he is eight-and-twenty. Just ten years older than I am."

"Of course – he's ever so much too old for her. A *blasé* man of the world," said Mrs. Tregonell. "I should be deeply sorry to see my darling marry a man of that age – and with such antecedents. I should like her to marry a young man not above two or three years her senior."

"And fond of rats," said Jessie Bridgeman to herself, for she had a shrewd idea that she knew the young man whose image filled Mrs. Tregonell's mind as she spoke.

All these words were spoken in a goodly oak-panelled room in the Manor House known as Mount Royal, on the slope of a bosky hill about a mile and a half from the little town of Boscastle, on the north coast of Cornwall. It was an easy matter, according to the Heralds' Office, to show that Mount Royal had belonged to the Tregonells in the days of the Norman kings; for the Tregonells traced their descent, by a female branch, from the ancient baronial family of Botterell or Bottreaux, who once held a kind of Court in their castle on Mount Royal, had their dungeons and their prisoners, and, in the words of Carew, "exercised some large jurisdiction." Of the ancient castle hardly a stone remained; but the house in which Mrs. Tregonell lived was as old as the reign of James the First, and had all the rich and quaint beauty of that delightful period in architecture. Nor was there any prettier room at Mount Royal than this spacious oak-panelled parlour, with curious nooks and cupboards, a recessed fireplace, or "cosy-corner," with a small window on each side of the chimney-breast, and one particular alcove placed at an angle of the house, overlooking one of the most glorious views in England. It might be hyperbole perhaps to call those Cornish hills mountains, yet assuredly it was a mountain landscape over which the eye roved as it looked from the windows of Mount Royal; for those wide sweeps of hill side, those deep clefts and gorges, and heathery slopes, on which the dark red cattle grazed in silent peacefulness, and the rocky bed of the narrow river that went rushing through the deep valley, had all the grandeur of the Scottish Highlands, all the pastoral beauty of Switzerland. And away to the right, beyond the wild and indented coast-line, that horned coast which is said to have given its name to Cornwall – Cornu-Wales – stretched the Atlantic.

The room had that quaint charm peculiar to rooms occupied by many generations, and upon which each age as it went by has left its mark. It was a room full of anachronisms. There was some of the good old Jacobean furniture left in it, while spindle-legged Chippendale tables and luxurious nineteenth-century chairs and sofas agreeably contrasted with those heavy oak cabinets and corner cupboards. Here an old Indian screen or a china monster suggested a fashionable auction room, filled with ladies who wore patches and played ombre, and squabbled for ideal ugliness in Oriental pottery; there a delicately carved cherry-wood *prie-dieu*, with claw feet, recalled the earlier beauties of the Stuart Court. Time had faded the stamped velvet curtains to that neutral withered-leaf hue which painters love in a background, and against which bright yellow chrysanthemums and white asters in dark red and blue Japanese bowls, seen dimly in the fitful fire-glow, made patches of light and colour.

The girl kneeling by the matron's chair, looking dreamily into the fire, was even fairer than her surroundings. She was thoroughly English in her beauty, features not altogether perfect, but complexion of that dazzling fairness and wild-rose bloom which is in itself enough for loveliness; a complexion so delicate as to betray every feeling of the sensitive mind, and to vary with every shade of emotion. Her eyes were blue, clear as summer skies, and with an expression of childlike innocence – that look which tells of a soul whose purity has never been tarnished by the knowledge of evil. That frank clear outlook was natural in a girl brought up as Christabel Courtenay had been at a good woman's knee, shut in and sheltered from the rough world, reared in the love and fear of God, shaping every thought of her life by the teaching of the Gospel.

She had been an orphan at nine years old, and had parted for ever from mother and father before her fifth birthday, Mrs. Courtenay leaving her only child in her sister's care, and going out to India to join her husband, one of the Sudder Judges. Husband and wife died of cholera in the fourth year of Mrs. Courtenay's residence at Calcutta, leaving Christabel in her aunt's care.

Mr. Courtenay was a man of ample means, and his wife, daughter and co-heiress with Mrs. Tregonell of Ralph Champernowne, had a handsome dowry, so Christabel might fairly rank as an heiress. On her grandfather's death she inherited half of the Champernowne estate, which was not entailed. But she had hardly ever given a thought to her financial position. She knew that she was a ward in Chancery, and that Mrs. Tregonell was her guardian and adopted mother, that she had always

as much money as she wanted, and never experienced the pain of seeing poverty which she could not relieve in some measure from her well-supplied purse. The general opinion in the neighbourhood of Mount Royal was that the Indian Judge had accumulated an immense fortune during his twenty years' labour as a civil servant; but this notion was founded rather upon vague ideas about Warren Hastings and the Pagoda tree, and the supposed inability of any Indian official to refuse a bribe, than on plain facts or personal knowledge.

Mrs. Tregonell had been left a widow at thirty-five years of age, a widow with one son whom she idolized, but who was not a source of peace and happiness. He was open-handed, had no petty vices, and was supposed to possess a noble heart – a fact which Christabel was sometimes inclined to doubt when she saw his delight in the slaughter of birds and beasts, not having in her own nature that sportsman's instinct which can excuse such murder. He was not the kind of lad who would wilfully set his foot upon a worm, but he had no thrill of tenderness or remorseful pity as he looked at the glazing eye, or felt against his hand the last feeble heart-beats of snipe or woodcock. He was a troublesome boy – fond of inferior company, and loving rather to be first fiddle in the saddle-room than to mind his manners in his mother's pink-and-white panelled saloon – among the best people in the neighbourhood. He was lavish to recklessness in the use of money, and therefore was always furnished with followers and flatterers. His University career had been altogether a failure and a disgrace. He had taken no degree – had made himself notorious for those rough pranks which have not even the merit of being original – the traditionary college misdemeanours handed down from generation to generation of undergraduates, and which by their blatant folly incline the outside world to vote for the suppression of Universities and the extinction of the undergraduate race.

His mother had known and suffered all this, yet still loved her boy with a fond excusing love – ever ready to pardon – ever eager to believe that these faults and follies were but the crop of wild oats which must needs precede the ripe and rich harvest of manhood. Such wild youths, she told herself, fatuously, generally make the best men. Leonard would mend his ways before he was five-and-twenty, and would become interested in his estate, and develop into a model Squire, like his admirable father.

That he had no love for scholarship mattered little – a country gentleman, with half a dozen manors to look after, could be but little advantaged by a familiar acquaintance with the integral calculus, or a nice appreciation of the Greek tragedians. When Leonard Tregonell and the college Dons were mutually disgusted with each other to a point that made any further residence at Oxford impossible, the young man graciously announced his intention of making a tour round the world, for the benefit of his health, somewhat impaired by University dissipations, and the widening of his experience in the agricultural line.

"Farming has been reduced to a science," he told his mother; "I want to see how it works in our colonies. I mean to make a good many reformatations in the management of my farms and the conduct of my tenants when I come home."

At first loth to part with him, very fearful of letting him so far out of her ken, Mrs. Tregonell ultimately allowed herself to be persuaded that sea voyages and knocking about in strange lands would be the making of her son; and there was no sacrifice, no loss of comfort and delight, which she would not have endured for his benefit. She spent many sad hours in prayer, or on her knees before her open Bible; and at last it seemed to her that her friends and neighbours must be right, and that it would be for Leonard's good to go. If he stayed in England she could not hope to keep him always in Cornwall. He could go to London, and, no doubt, London vices would be worse than Oxford vices. Yes, it was good for him to go; she thought of Esau, and how, after a foolish and ill-governed youth, the son who had bartered his father's blessing, yet became an estimable member of society. Why should not her boy flourish as Esau had flourished? but never without the parental blessing. That would be his to the end. He could not sin beyond her large capacity for pardon: he could not exhaust an inexhaustible love. So Leonard, who had suddenly found that wild Cornish coast, and even the long rollers of the Atlantic contemptibly insignificant as compared with the imagined magnitude of Australian downs,

and the grandeurs of Botany Bay, hurried on the preparations for his departure, provided himself with everything expensive in gunnery, fishing-tackle, porpoise-hide thigh-boots, and waterproof gear of every kind, and departed rejoicing in the most admirably appointed Australian steamer. The family doctor, who was one of the many friends in favour of this tour, had strongly recommended the rough-and-tumble life of a sailing-vessel; but Leonard preferred the luxury and swiftness of a steamer, and, suggesting to his mother that a sailing-vessel always took out emigrants, from whom it was more than likely he would catch scarlet-fever or small-pox, instantly brought Mrs. Tregonell to perceive that a steamer which carried no second-class passengers was the only fitting conveyance for her son.

He was gone – and, while the widow grieved in submissive silence, telling herself that it was God's will that she and her son should be parted, and that whatever was good for him should be well for her, Christabel and the rest of the household inwardly rejoiced at his absence. Nobody openly owned to being happier without him; but the knowledge that he was far away brought a sense of relief to every one; even to the old servants, who had been so fond of him in his childhood, when the kitchen and servants' hall had ever been a happy hunting-ground for him in periods of banishment from the drawing-room.

"It is no good for me to punish him," Mrs. Tregonell had remonstrated, with assumed displeasure; "you all make so much of him."

"Oh, ma'am, he is such a fine, high-spirited boy," the cook would reply on these occasions; "'tesn't possible to be angry with him. He has such a spirit."

"Such a spirit" was only a euphemism for such a temper; and, as years went on, Mr. Tregonell's visits to the kitchen and servants' hall came to be less appreciated by his retainers. He no longer went there to be petted – to run riot in boyish liveliness, upsetting the housemaids' work-boxes, or making toffy under the cook's directions. As he became aware of his own importance, he speedily developed into a juvenile tyrant; he became haughty and overbearing, hectored and swore, befouled the snowy floors and flags with his muddy shooting-boots, made havoc and work wherever he went. The household treated him with unfailing respect, as their late master's son, and their own master, possibly, in the future; but their service was no longer the service of love. His loud strong voice, shouting in the passages and lobbies, scared the maids at their tea. Grooms and stable-boys liked him; for with them he was always familiar, and often friendly. He and they had tastes and occupations in common; but to the women servants and the grave middle-aged butler his presence was a source of discomfort.

Next to her son in Mrs. Tregonell's affection stood her niece Christabel. That her love for the girl who had never given her a moment's pain should be a lesser love than that which she bore to the boy who had seldom given her an hour's unalloyed pleasure was one of the anomalies common in the lives of good women. To love blindly and unreasonably is as natural to a woman as it is to love: and happy she whose passionate soul finds its idol in husband or child, instead of being lured astray by strange lights outside the safe harbour of home. Mrs. Tregonell loved her niece very dearly; but it was with that calm, comfortable affection which mothers are apt to feel for the child who has never given them any trouble. Christabel had been her pupil: all that the girl knew had been learned from Mrs. Tregonell; and, though her education fell far short of the requirements of Girton or Harley Street, there were few girls whose intellectual powers had been more fully awakened, without the taint of pedantry. Christabel loved books, but they were the books her aunt had chosen for her – old-fashioned books for the most part. She loved music, but was no brilliant pianist, for when Mrs. Tregonell, who had taught her carefully up to a certain point, suggested a course of lessons from a German professor at Plymouth, the girl recoiled from the idea of being taught by a stranger.

"If you are satisfied with my playing, Auntie, I am content never to play any better," she said; so the idea of six months' tuition and study at Plymouth, involving residence in that lively port, was abandoned. London was a far-away world, of which neither aunt nor niece ever thought. That wild northern coast is still two days' journey from the metropolis. Only by herculean labour, in the way

of posting across the moor in the grey dawn of morning, can the thing be done in one day; and then scarcely between sunrise and sunset. So Mrs. Tregonell, who loved a life of placid repose, had never been to London since her widowhood, and Christabel had never been there at all. There was an old house in Mayfair, which had belonged to the Tregonells for the last hundred years, and which had cost them a fortune in repairs, but it was either shut up and in the occupation of a caretaker, or let furnished for the season; and no Tregonell had crossed its threshold since the Squire's death. Mrs. Tregonell talked of spending a season in London before Christabel was much older, in order that her niece might be duly presented at Court, and qualified for that place in society which a young lady of good family and ample means might fairly be entitled to hold.

Christabel had no eager desire for the gaieties of a London season. She had spent six weeks in Bath, and had enjoyed an occasional fortnight at Plymouth. She had been taken to theatres and concerts, had seen some of the best actors and actresses, heard a good deal of the finest music, and had been duly delighted with all she saw and heard. But she so fondly loved Mount Royal and its surroundings, she was so completely happy in her home life, that she had no desire to change that tranquil existence. She had a vague idea that London balls and parties must be something very dazzling and brilliant, but she was content to abide her aunt's pleasure and convenience for the time in which she was to know more about metropolitan revelries than was to be gathered from laudatory paragraphs in fashionable newspapers. Youth, with its warm blood and active spirit, is rarely so contented as Christabel was: but then youth is not often placed amidst such harmonious circumstances, so protected from the approach of evil.

Christabel Courtenay may have thought and talked more about Mr. Hamleigh during the two or three days that preceded his arrival than was absolutely necessary, or strictly in accordance with that common-sense which characterized most of her acts and thoughts. She was interested in him upon two grounds – first, because he was the only son of the man her aunt had loved and mourned; secondly, because he was the first stranger who had ever come as a guest to Mount Royal.

Her aunt's visitors were mostly people whose faces she had known ever since she could remember: there were such wide potentialities in the idea of a perfect stranger, who was to be domiciled at the Mount for an indefinite period.

"Suppose we don't like him?" she said, speculatively, to Jessie Bridgeman, Mrs. Tregonell's housekeeper, companion, and factotum, who had lived at Mount Royal for the last six years, coming there a girl of twenty, to make herself generally useful in small girlish ways, and proving herself such a clever manager, so bright, competent, and far-seeing, that she had been gradually entrusted with every household care, from the largest to the most minute. Miss Bridgeman was neither brilliant nor accomplished, but she had a genius for homely things, and she was admirable as a companion.

The two girls were out on the hills in the early autumn morning – hills that were golden where the sun touched them, purple in the shadow. The heather was fading, the patches of furze-blossom were daily growing rarer. Yet the hill-sides were alive with light and colour, only less lovely than the translucent blues and greens of yonder wide-stretching sea.

"Suppose we should all dislike him?" repeated Christabel, digging the point of her walking-stick into a ferny hillock on the topmost edge of a deep cleft in the hills, on which commanding spot she had just taken her stand, after bounding up the narrow path from the little wooden bridge at the bottom of the glen, almost as quickly and as lightly as if she had been one of the deeply ruddled sheep that spent their lives on those precipitous slopes; "wouldn't it be too dreadful, Jessie?"

"It would be inconvenient," answered Miss Bridgeman, coolly, resting both hands on the horny crook of her sturdy umbrella, and gazing placidly seaward; "but we could cut him."

"Not without offending Auntie. She is sure to like him, for the sake of Auld Lang Syne. Every look and tone of his will recall his father. But *we* may detest him. And if he should like Mount Royal very much, and go on staying there for ever! Auntie asked him for an indefinite period. She showed me her letter. I thought it was rather too widely hospitable, but I did not like to say so."

"I always say what I think," said Jessie Bridgeman, doggedly.

"Of course you do, and go very near being disagreeable in consequence."

Miss Bridgeman's assertion was perfectly correct. A sturdy truthfulness was one of her best qualifications. She did not volunteer unfavourable criticism; but if you asked her opinion upon any subject you got it, without sophistication. It was her rare merit to have lived with Mrs. Tregonell and Christabel Courtenay six years, dependent upon their liking or caprice for all the comforts of her life, without having degenerated into a flatterer.

"I haven't the slightest doubt as to your liking him," said Miss Bridgeman, decisively. "He has spent his life for the most part in cities – and in good society. That I gather from your aunt's account of him. He is sure to be much more interesting and agreeable than the young men who live near here, whose ideas are, for the most part, strictly local. But I very much doubt his liking Mount Royal, for more than one week."

"Jessie," cried Christabel, indignantly, "how can he help liking *this*?" She waved her stick across the autumn landscape, describing a circle which included the gold and bronze hills, the shadowy gorges, the bold headlands curving away to Hartland on one side, to Tintagel on the other – Lundy Island a dim line of dun colour on the horizon.

"No doubt he will think it beautiful – in the abstract. He will rave about it, compare it with the Scottish Highlands – with Wales – with Kerry, declare these Cornish hills the crowning glory of Britain. But in three days he will begin to detest a place where there is only one post out and in, and where he has to wait till next day for his morning paper."

"What can he want with newspapers; if he is enjoying his life with us? I am sure there are books enough at Mount Royal. He need not expire for want of something to read."

"Do you suppose that books – the best and noblest that ever were written – can make up to a man for the loss of his daily paper? If you do, offer a man Shakespeare when he is looking for the *Daily Telegraph*, or Chaucer when he wants his *Times*, and see what he will say to you. Men don't want to read now-a-days, but to know – to be posted in the very latest movements of their fellow-men all over the universe. Reuter's column is all anybody really cares for in the paper. The leaders and the criticism are only so much padding to fill the sheet. People would be better pleased if there were nothing but telegrams."

"A man who only reads newspapers must be a most vapid companion," said Christabel.

"Hardly, for he must be brim full of facts."

"I abhor facts. Well, if Mr. Hamleigh is that kind of person, I hope he may be tired of the Mount in less than a week."

She was silent and thoughtful as they went home by the monastic churchyard in the hollow, the winding lane, and steep village street. Jessie had a message to carry to one of Mrs. Tregonell's pensioners, who lived in a cottage in the lane; but Christabel, who was generally pleased to show her fair young face in such abodes, waited outside on this occasion, and stood in a profound reverie, digging the point of her stick into the loose earth of the mossy bank in front of her, and seriously damaging the landscape.

"I hate a man who does not care for books, who does not love our dear English poets," she said to herself. "But I must not say that before Auntie. It would be almost like saying that I hated my cousin Leonard. I hope Mr. Hamleigh will be – just a little different from Leonard. Of course he will, if his life has been spent in cities; but then he may be languid and supercilious, looking upon Jessie and me as inferior creatures; and that would be worse than Leonard's roughness. For we all know what a good heart Leonard has, and how warmly attached he is to us."

Somehow the idea of Leonard's excellent heart and affectionate disposition was not altogether a pleasant one. Christabel shuddered ever so faintly as she stood in the lane thinking of her cousin, who had last been heard of in the Fijis. She banished his image with an effort, and returned to her consideration of that unknown quantity, Angus Hamleigh.

"I am an idiot to be making fancy pictures of him, when at seven o'clock this evening I shall know all about him for good or evil," she said aloud, as Jessie came out of the cottage, which nestled low down in its little garden, with a slate for a doorstep, and a slate standing on end at each side of the door, for boundary line, or ornament.

"All that is to be known of the outside of him," said Jessie, answering the girl's outspoken thought. "If he is really worth knowing, his mind will need a longer study."

"I think I shall know at the first glance if he is likeable," I replied Christabel; and then, with a tremendous effort, she contrived to talk about other things as they went down the High Street of Boscastle, which, to people accustomed to a level world, is rather trying. With Christabel the hills were only an excuse for flourishing a Swiss walking-stick. The stick was altogether needless for support to that light well-balanced figure. Jessie, who was very small and slim and sure-footed, always carried her stout little umbrella, winter or summer. It was her *vade-mecum*— good against rain, or sun, or mad bulls, or troublesome dogs. She would have scorned the affectation of cane or alpenstock: but the sturdy umbrella was very dear to her.

CHAPTER II

BUT THEN CAME ONE, THE LOVELACE OF HIS DAY

Although Angus Hamleigh came of a good old west country family, he had never been in Cornwall, and he approached that remote part of the country with a curious feeling that he was turning his back upon England and English civilization, and entering a strange wild land where all things would be different. He would meet with a half-barbarous people, perhaps, rough, unkempt, ignorant, brutal, speaking to him in a strange language – such men as inhabited Perthshire and Inverness before civilization travelled northward. He had accepted Mrs. Tregonell's invitation out of kindly feeling for the woman who had loved his father, and who, but for that father's untimely death, might have been to him as a second mother. There was a strong vein of sentiment in his character, which responded to the sentiment betrayed unconsciously in every line of Mrs. Tregonell's letter. His only knowledge of the father he had lost in infancy had come to him from the lips of others, and it pleased him to think that here was one whose memory must be fresher than that of any other friend, in whose mind his father's image must needs be as a living thing. He had all his life cherished a regretful fondness for that unknown father, whose shadowy picture he had vainly tried to recall among the first faint recollections of babyhood – the dim dreamland of half-awakened consciousness.

He had frankly and promptly accepted Mrs. Tregonell's invitation; yet he felt that in going to immure himself in an old manor house for a fortnight – anything less than a fortnight would have been uncivil – he was dooming himself to ineffable boredom. Beyond that pious pleasure in parental reminiscences, there could be no possible gratification for a man of the world, who was not an ardent sportsman, in such a place as Mount Royal. Mr. Hamleigh's instincts were of the town, towny. His pleasures were all of an intellectual kind. He had never degraded himself by vulgar profligacy, but he liked a life of excitement and variety; he had always lived at high pressure, and among people posted up to the last moment of the world's history – people who drank the very latest pleasure cup which the Spirit of the Age – a Spirit of passing frivolity – had invented, were it only the newest brand of champagne; and who, in their eagerness to gather the roses of life, outstripped old Time himself, and grew old in advance of their age. He had been contemplating a fortnight in Paris, as the first stage in his journey to Monaco, when Mrs. Tregonell's letter altered his plans. This was not the first time she had asked him to Mount Royal, but on previous occasions his engagements had seemed to him too imperative to be foregone, and he had regretfully declined her invitations. But now the flavour of life had grown somewhat vapid for him, and he was grateful to any one who would turn his thoughts and fancies into a new direction.

"I shall inevitably be bored there," he said to himself, when he had littered the railway carriage with newspapers accumulated on the way, "but I should be bored anywhere else. When a man begins to feel the pressure of the chain upon his leg, it cannot much matter where his walks lead him: the very act of walking is his punishment."

When a man comes to eight-and-twenty years of age – a man who has had very little to do in this life, except take his pleasure – a great weariness and sense of exhaustion is apt to close round him like a pall. The same man will be ever so much fresher in mind, will have ever so much more zest for life, when he comes to be forty – for then he will have entered upon those calmer enjoyments of middle age which may last him till he is eighty. But at eight-and-twenty there is a death-like calmness of feeling. Youth is gone. He has consumed all the first fruits of life – spring and summer, with their wealth of flowers, are over; only the quiet autumn remains for him, with her warm browns and dull greys, and cool, moist breath. The fires upon youth's altars have all died out – youth is dead, and the man who was young only yesterday fancies that he might as well be dead also. What is there left for him? Can there be any charm in this life when the looker-on has grey hair and wrinkles?

Having nothing in life to do except seek his own pleasure and spend his ample income, Angus Hamleigh had naturally taken the time of life's march *prestissimo*.

He had never paused in his rose-gathering to wonder whether there might not be a few thorns among the flowers, and whether he might not find them – afterwards. And now the blossoms were all withered, and he was beginning to discover the lasting quality of the thorns. They were such thorns as interfered somewhat with the serenity of his days, and he was glad to turn his face westward, away from everybody he knew, or who knew anything about him.

"My character will present itself to Mrs. Tregonell as a blank page," he said to himself; "I wonder what she would think of me if one of my club gossips had enjoyed a quiet evening's talk with her beforehand. A dear friend's analysis of one's character and conduct is always so flattering to both; and I have a pleasant knack of offending my dearest friends!"

Mr. Hamleigh began to look about him a little when the train had left Plymouth. The landscape was wild and romantic, but had none of that stern ruggedness which he expected to behold on the Cornish Border. Deep glens, and wooded dells, with hill-sides steep and broken, but verdant to their topmost crest, and the most wonderful oak coppices that he ever remembered to have seen. Miles upon miles of oak, as it seemed to him, now sinking into the depth of a valley, now mounting to the distant sky line, while from that verdant undulating surface of young wood there stood forth the giants of the grove – wide-spreading oak and towering beech, the mighty growth of many centuries. Between Lidford and Launceston the scenery grew tamer. He had fancied those deep ravines and wooded heights the prelude to a vast and awful symphony, but Mary Tavy and Lifton showed him only a pastoral landscape, with just so much wood and water as would have served for a Creswick or a Constable, and with none of those grand Salvatoresque effects which he had admired in the country round Tavistock. At Launceston he found Mrs. Tregonell's landau waiting for him, with a pair of powerful chestnuts, and a couple of servants, whose neat brown liveries had nothing of that unsophisticated semi-savagery which Mr. Hamleigh had expected in a place so remote.

"Do you drive that way?" he asked, pointing to the almost perpendicular street.

"Yes, sir," replied the coachman.

"Then I think I'll stroll to the top of the hill while you are putting in my portmanteaux," he said, and ascended the rustic street at a leisurely pace, looking about him as he went.

The thoroughfare which leads from Launceston Station to the ruined castle at the top of the hill is not an imposing promenade. Its architectural features might perhaps be best described like the snakes of Ireland as *nil* – but here and there an old-fashioned lattice with a row of flower-pots, an ancient gable, or a bit of cottage garden hints at the picturesque. Any late additions to the domestic architecture of Launceston favour the unpretending usefulness of Camden Town rather than the aspiring æstheticism of Chelsea or Bedford Park; but to Mr. Hamleigh's eye the rugged old castle keep on the top of the hill made amends. He was not an ardent archæologist, and he did not turn out of his way to see Launceston Church, which might well have rewarded him for his trouble. He was content to have spared those good-looking chestnuts the labour of dragging him up the steep. Here they came springing up the hill. He took his place in the carriage, pulled the fur rug over his knees, and ensconced himself comfortably in the roomy back seat.

"This is a sybaritish luxury which I was not prepared for," he said to himself. "I'm afraid I shall be rather more bored than I expected. I thought Mrs. Tregonell and her surroundings would at least have the merit of originality. But here is a carriage that must have been built by Peters, and liveries that suggest the sartorial excellence of Conduit Street or Savile Row."

He watched the landscape with a critical eye, prepared for disappointment and disillusion. First a country road between tall ragged hedges and steep banks, a road where every now and then the branches of the trees hung low over the carriage and threatened to knock the coachman's hat off. Then they came out upon the wide waste of moorland, a thousand feet above the sea level, and Mr. Hamleigh, acclimatized to the atmosphere of club-houses, buttoned his overcoat, drew the black fur

rug closer about him, and shivered a little as the keen breath of the Atlantic, sweeping over far-reaching tracts of hill and heather, blew round him. Far and wide as his gaze could reach, he saw no sign of human habitation. Was the land utterly forsaken? No; a little farther on they passed a hamlet so insignificant, so isolated, that it seemed rather as if half a dozen cottages had dropped from the sky than that so lonely a settlement could be the result of deliberate human inclination. Never in Scotland or Ireland had Mr. Hamleigh seen a more barren landscape or a poorer soil; yet those wild wastes of heath, those distant tors were passing beautiful, and the air he breathed was more inspiring and exhilarating than the atmosphere of any vaunted health-resort which he had ever visited.

"I think I might live to middle age if I were to pitch my tent on this Cornish plateau," he thought; "but, then, there are so many things in this life that are worth more than mere length of days."

He asked the names of the hamlets they passed. This lonely church, dedicated to St. David – whence, oh! whence came the congregation – belonged to the parish of Davidstowe; and here there was a holy well; and here a Vicarage; and there – oh! crowning evidence of civilization – a post-office; and there a farmhouse; and that was the end of Davidstowe. A little later they came to cross roads, and the coachman touched his hat, and said, "This is Victoria," as if he were naming a town or settlement of some kind. Mr. Hamleigh looked about him, and beheld a low-roofed cottage, which he assumed to be some kind of public-house, possibly capable of supplying beer and tobacco; but other vestige of human habitation there was none. He leant back in the carriage, looking across the hills, and saying to himself, "Why, Victoria?" Was that unpretentious and somewhat dilapidated hostelry the Victoria Hotel? or the Victoria Arms? or was Royalty's honoured name given, in an arbitrary manner, to the cross roads and the granite finger-post? He never knew. The coachman said shortly, "Victoria," and as "Victoria" he ever after heard that spot described. And now the journey was all downhill. They drove downward and downward, until Mr. Hamleigh began to feel as if they were travelling towards the centre of the earth – as if they had got altogether below the outer crust of this globe, and must be gradually nearing the unknown gulfs beneath. Yet, by some geographical mystery, when they turned out of the high road and went in at a lodge gate, and drove gently upward along an avenue of elms, in whose rugged tops the rooks were screaming, Mr. Hamleigh found that he was still high above the undulating edges of the cliffs that overtopped the Atlantic, while the great waste of waters lay far below, golden with the last rays of the setting sun.

They drove, by a gentle ascent, to the stone porch of Mount Royal, and here Mrs. Tregonell stood, facing the sunset, with an Indian shawl wrapped round her, waiting for her guest.

"I heard the carriage, Mr. Hamleigh," she said, as Angus alighted; "I hope you do not think me too impatient to see what change twelve years have made in you?"

"I'm afraid they have not been particularly advantageous to me," he answered, lightly, as they shook hands. "How good of you to receive me on the threshold! and what a delightful place you have here! Before I got to Launceston, I began to be afraid that Cornwall was commonplace – and now I am enchanted with it. Your moors and hills are like fairy-land to me!"

"It is a world of our own, and we are very fond of it," said the widow; "I shall be sorry if ever a railway makes Boscastle open to everybody."

"And what a noble old house!" exclaimed Angus, as he followed his hostess across the oak-panelled hall, with its wide shallow staircase, curiously carved balustrades, and lantern roof. "Are you quite alone here?"

"Oh, no; I have my niece, and a young lady who is a companion to both of us."

Angus Hamleigh shuddered.

Three women! He was to exist for a fortnight in a house with three solitary females. A niece and a companion! The niece, rustic and gawky; the companion sour and frumpish. He began, hurriedly, to cast about in his mind for a convenient friend, to whom he could telegraph to send him a telegram, summoning him back to London on urgent business. He was still meditating this, when the butler opened the door of a spacious room, lined from floor to ceiling with books, and he followed Mrs.

Tregonell in, and found himself in the bosom of the family. The simple picture of home-comfort, of restfulness and domestic peace, which met his curious gaze as he entered, pleased him better than anything he had seen of late. Club life – with its too studious indulgence of man's native selfishness and love of ease – fashionable life, with its insatiable craving for that latter-day form of display which calls itself Culture, Art, or Beauty – had afforded him no vision so enchanting as the wide hearth and high chimney of this sober, book-lined room, with the fair and girlish form kneeling in front of the old dogstove, framed in the glaring light of the fire.

The tea-table had been wheeled near the hearth, and Miss Bridgeman sat before the bright red tea-tray, and old brass kettle, ready to administer to the wants of the traveller, who would be hardly human if he did not thirst for a cup of tea after driving across the moor. Christabel knelt in front of the fire, worshipping, and being worshipped by, a sleek black-and-white sheep-dog, native to the soil, and of a rare intelligence – a creature by no means approaching the Scotch colley in physical beauty, but of a fond and faithful nature, born to be the friend of man. As Christabel rose and turned to greet the stranger, Mr. Hamleigh was agreeably reminded of an old picture – a Lely or a Kneller, perhaps. This was not in any wise the rustic image which had flashed across his mind at the mention of Mrs. Tregonell's niece. He had expected to see a bouncing, countryfied maiden – rosy, buxom, the picture of commonplace health and vigour. The girl he saw was nearer akin to the lily than the rose – tall, slender, dazzlingly fair – not fragile or sickly in anywise – for the erect figure was finely moulded, the swan-like throat was round and full. He was prepared for the florid beauty of a milkmaid, and he found himself face to face with the elegance of an ideal duchess, the picturesque loveliness of an old Venetian portrait.

Christabel's dark brown velvet gown and square point lace collar, the bright hair falling in shadowy curls over her forehead, and rolled into a loose knot at the back of her head, sinned in no wise against Mr. Hamleigh's notions of good taste. There was a picturesqueness about the style which indicated that Miss Courtenay belonged to that advanced section of womankind which takes its ideas less from modern fashion-plates than from old pictures. So long as her archaism went no further back than Vandyke or Moroni he would admire and approve; but he shuddered at the thought that tomorrow she might burst upon him in a mediæval morning-gown, with high-shouldered sleeves, a ruff, and a satchel. The picturesque idea was good, within limits; but one never knew how far it might go.

There was nothing picturesque about the lady sitting before the tea-tray, who looked up brightly, and gave him a gracious bend of her small neat head, in acknowledgment of Mrs. Tregonell's introduction – "Mr. Hamleigh, Miss Bridgeman!" This was the companion – and the companion was plain: not unpleasantly plain, not in any manner repulsive, but a lady about whose looks there could be hardly any compromise. Her complexion was of a sallow darkness, unrelieved by any glow of colour; her eyes were grey, acute, honest, friendly, but not beautiful; her nose was sharp and pointed – not at all a bad nose; but there was a hardness about nose and mouth and chin, as of features cut out of bone with a very sharp knife. Her teeth were good, and in a lovelier mouth might have been the object of much admiration. Her hair was of that nondescript monotonous brown which has been unkindly called bottle-green, but it was arranged with admirable neatness, and offended less than many a tangled pate, upon whose locks of spurious gold the owner has wasted much time and money. There was nothing unpardonable in Miss Bridgeman's plainness, as Angus Hamleigh said of her later. Her small figure was neatly made, and her dark-grey gown fitted to perfection.

"I hope you like the little bit of Cornwall that you have seen this afternoon, Mr. Hamleigh," said Christabel, seating herself in a low chair in the shadow of the tall chimney-piece, fenced in by her aunt's larger chair.

"I am enraptured with it! I came here with the desire to be intensely Cornish. I am prepared to believe in witches – warlocks –"

"We have no warlocks," said Christabel. "They belong to the North."

"Well, then, wise women – wicked young men who play football on Sunday, and get themselves turned into granite – rocking stones – magic wells – Druids – and King Arthur. I believe the principal point is to be open to conviction about Arthur. Now, I am prepared to swallow everything – his castle – the river where his crown was found after the fight – was it his crown, by-the-by, or somebody else's? which *he* found – his hair-brushes – his boots – anything you please to show me."

"We will show you his quoit to-morrow, on the road to Tintagel," said Miss Bridgeman. "I don't think you would like to swallow that actually. He hurled it from Tintagel to Trevalga in one of his sportive moods. We shall be able to give you plenty of amusement if you are a good walker, and are fond of hills."

"I adore them in the abstract, contemplated from one's windows, or in a picture; but there is an incompatibility between the human anatomy and a road set on end, like a ladder, which I have never yet overcome. Apart from the outside question of my legs – which are obvious failures when tested by an angle of forty-five degrees – I'm afraid my internal machinery is not quite so tough as it ought to be for a thorough enjoyment of mountaineering."

Mrs. Tregonell sighed, ever so faintly, in the twilight. She was thinking of her first lover, and how that fragility, which meant early death, had showed itself in his inability to enjoy the moorland walks which were the delight of her girlhood.

"The natural result of bad habits," said Miss Bridgeman, briskly. "How can you expect to be strong or active, when I dare say you have spent the better part of your life in hansom cabs and express trains! I don't mean to be impertinent, but I know that is the general way with gentlemen out of the shooting and hunting season."

"And as I am no sportsman, I am a somewhat exaggerated example of the vice of laziness fostered by congenial circumstances, acting on a lymphatic temperament. If you write books, as I believe most ladies do now-a-days, you should put me into one of them, as an awful warning."

"I don't write books, and, if I did, I would not flatter your vanity by making you my model sinner," retorted Jessie; "but I'll do something better for you, if Christabel will help me. I'll reform you."

"A million thanks for the mere thought! I hope the process will be pleasant."

"I hope so, too. We shall begin by walking you off your legs."

"They are so indifferent as a means of locomotion that I could very well afford to lose them, if you could hold out any hope of my getting a better pair."

"A week hence, if you submit to my treatment, you will be as active as the chamois hunter in 'Manfred.'"

"Enchanting – always provided that you and Miss Courtenay will follow the chase with me."

"Depend upon it, we shall not trust you to take your walks alone, unless you have a pedometer which will bear witness to the distance you have done, and which you will be content to submit to our inspection on your return," replied Jessie, sternly.

"I am afraid you are a terribly severe high priestess of this new form of culture," said Mr. Hamleigh, looking up from his teacup with a lazy smile, "almost as bad as the Dweller on the Threshold, in Bulwer's 'Zanoni.'"

"There is a dweller on the threshold of every science and every admirable mode of life, and his name is Idleness," answered Miss Bridgeman.

"The *vis inertiae*, the force of letting things alone," said Angus; "yes, that is a tremendous power, nobly exemplified by vestries and boards of works – to say nothing of Cabinets, Bishops, and the High Court of Chancery! I delight in that verse of Scripture, 'Their strength is to sit still.'"

"There shall be very little sitting still for you if you submit yourself to Christabel and me," replied Miss Bridgeman.

"I have never tried the water-cure – the descriptions I have heard from adepts have been too repellent; but I have an idea that this system of yours must be rather worse than hydropathy," said

Angus, musingly – evidently very much entertained at the way in which Miss Bridgeman had taken him in hand.

"I was not going to let him pose after Lamartine's *poète mourant*, just because his father died of lung disease," said Jessie, ten minutes afterwards, when the warning gong had sounded, and Mr. Hamleigh had gone to his room to dress for dinner, and the two young women were whispering together before the fire, while Mrs. Tregonell indulged in a placid doze.

"Do you think he is consumptive, like his father?" asked Christabel, with a compassionate look; "he has a very delicate appearance."

"Hollow-cheeked, and prematurely old, like a man who has lived on tobacco and brandy-and-soda, and has spent his nights in club-house card-rooms."

"We have no right to suppose that," said Christabel, "since we know really nothing about him."

"Major Bree told me he has lived a racketty life, and that if he were not to pull up very soon he would be ruined both in health and fortune."

"What can the Major know about him?" exclaimed Christabel, contemptuously.

This Major Bree was a great friend of Christabel's; but there are times when one's nearest and dearest are too provoking for endurances.

"Major Bree has been buried alive in Cornwall for the last twenty years. He is at least a quarter of a century behind the age," she said, impatiently.

"He spent a fortnight in London the year before last," said Jessie; "it was then that he heard such a bad account of Mr. Hamleigh."

"Did he go about to clubs and places making inquiries, like a private detective?" said Christabel, still contemptuous; "I hate such fetching and carrying!"

"Here he comes to answer for himself," replied Jessie, as the door opened, and a servant announced Major Bree.

Mrs. Tregonell started from her slumbers at the opening of the door, and rose to greet her guest. He was a very frequent visitor, so frequent that he might be said to live at Mount Royal, although his nominal abode was a cottage on the outskirts of Boscastle – a stone cottage on the crest of a steep hill-side, with a delightful little garden, perched, as it were, on the edge of a verdant abyss. He was tall, stout, elderly, grey, and florid – altogether a comfortable-looking man, clean-shaved, save for a thin grey moustache with the genuine cavalry droop, iron grey eyebrows, which looked like a repetition of the moustache on a somewhat smaller scale, keen grey eyes, a pleasant smile, and a well set-up figure. He dressed well, with a sobriety becoming his years, and was always the pink of neatness. A man welcome everywhere, on account of an inborn pleasantness, which prompted him always to say and do the right thing; but most of all welcome at Mount Royal, as a first cousin of the late Squire's, and Mrs. Tregonell's guide, philosopher, and friend in all matters relating to the outside world, of which, despite his twenty years' hybernation at Boscastle, the widow supposed him to be an acute observer and an infallible judge. Was he not one of the few inhabitants of that western village who took in the *Times* newspaper?

"Well!" exclaimed Major Bree, addressing himself generally to the three ladies, "he has come – what do you think of him?"

"He is painfully like his poor father," said Mrs. Tregonell.

"He has a most interesting face and winning manner, and I'm afraid we shall all get ridiculously fond of him," said Miss Bridgeman, decisively.

Christabel said nothing. She knelt on the hearthrug, playing with Randie, the black-and-white sheep-dog.

"And what have you to say about him, Christabel?" asked the Major.

"Nothing. I have not had time to form an opinion," replied the girl; and then lifting her clear blue eyes to the Major's friendly face, she said, gravely, "but I think, Uncle Oliver, it was very unkind and unfair of you to prejudice Jessie against him before he came here."

"Unkind! – unfair! Here's a shower of abuse! I prejudice! Oh! I remember. Mrs. Tregonell asked me what people thought of him in London, and I was obliged to acknowledge that his reputation was – well – no better than that of the majority of young men who have more money than common sense. But that was two years ago —*Nous avons changé tout cela!*"

"If he was wicked then, he must be wicked now," said Christabel.

"Wicked is a monstrously strong word!" said the Major. "Besides, that does not follow. A man may have a few wild oats to sow, and yet become a very estimable person afterwards. Miss Bridgeman is tremendously sharp – she'll be able to find out all about Mr. Hamleigh from personal observation before he has been here a week. I defy him to hide his weak points from her."

"What is the use of being plain and insignificant if one has not some advantage over one's superior fellow-creatures?" asked Jessie.

"Miss Bridgeman has too much expression to be plain, and she is far too clever to be insignificant," said Major Bree, with a stately bow. He always put on a stately manner when he addressed himself to Jessie Bridgeman, and treated her in all things with as much respect as if she had been a queen. He explained to Christabel that this was the homage which he paid to the royalty of intellect; but Christabel had a shrewd suspicion that the Major cherished a secret passion for Miss Bridgeman, as exalted and as hopeless as the love that Chastelard bore for Mary Stuart. He had only a small pittance besides his half-pay, and he had a very poor opinion of his own merits; so it was but natural that, at fifty-five, he should hesitate to offer himself to a young lady of six-and-twenty, of whose sharp tongue he had a wholesome awe.

Mr. Hamleigh came back before much more could be said about him, and a few minutes afterwards they all went in to dinner, and in the brighter lamplight of the dining-room Major Bree and the three ladies had a better opportunity of forming their opinion as to the external graces of their guest.

He was good-looking – that fact even malice could hardly dispute. Not so handsome as the absent Leonard, Mrs. Tregonell told herself complacently; but she was constrained at the same time to acknowledge that her son's broadly moulded features and florid complexion lacked the charm and interest which a woman's eye found in the delicate chiselling and subdued tones of Angus Hamleigh's countenance. His eyes were darkest grey, his complexion was fair and somewhat pallid, his hair brown, with a natural curl which neither fashion nor the barber could altogether suppress. His cheeks were more sunken than they should have been at eight-and-twenty, and the large dark eyes were unnaturally bright. All this the three ladies and Major Bree had ample time for observing, during the leisurely course of dinner. There was no flagging in the conversation, from the beginning to the end of the repast. Mr. Hamleigh was ready to talk about anything and everything, and his interest in the most trifling local subjects, whether real or assumed, made him a delightful companion. In the drawing-room, after dinner, he proved even more admirable; for he discovered a taste for, and knowledge of, the best music, which delighted Jessie and Christabel, who were both enthusiasts. He had read every book they cared for – and a wide world of books besides – and was able to add to their stock of information upon all their favourite subjects, without the faintest touch of arrogance.

"I don't think you can help liking him, Jessie," said Christabel, as the two girls went upstairs to bed. The younger lingered a little in Miss Bridgeman's room for the discussion of their latest ideas. There was a cheerful fire burning in the large basket grate, for autumn nights were chill upon that wild coast. Christabel assumed her favourite attitude in front of the fire, with her faithful Randie winking and blinking at her and the fire alternately. He was a privileged dog – allowed to sleep on a sheepskin mat in the gallery outside his mistress's door, and to go into her room every morning, in company with the maid who carried her early cup of tea; when, after the exchange of a few remarks, in baby language on her part, and expressed on his by a series of curious grins and much wagging of his insignificant apology for a tail, he would dash out of the room, and out of the house, for his

morning constitutional among the sheep upon some distant hill – coming home with an invigorated appetite, in time for the family breakfast at nine o'clock.

"I don't think you can help liking him – as – as a casual acquaintance!" repeated Christabel, finding that Jessie stood in a dreamy silence, twisting her one diamond ring – a birthday gift from Miss Courtenay – round and round upon her slender finger.

"I don't suppose any of us can help liking him," Jessie answered at last, with her eyes on the fire. "All I hope is, that some of us will not like him too much. He has brought a new element into our lives – a new interest – which may end by being a painful one. I feel distrustful of him."

"Why distrustful? Why, Jessie, you who are generally the very essence of flippancy – who make light of almost everything in life – except religion – thank God, you have not come to that yet! – you to be so serious about such a trifling matter as a visit from a man who will most likely be gone back to London in a fortnight – gone out of our lives altogether, perhaps: for I don't suppose he will care to repeat his experiences in a lonely country-house."

"He may be gone, perhaps – yes – and it is quite possible that he may never return – but shall we be quite the same after he has left us? Will nobody regret him – wish for his return – yearn for it – sigh for it – die for it – feeling life worthless – a burthen, without him?"

"Why, Jessie, you look like a Pythoness."

"Belle, Belle, my darling, my innocent one, you do not know what it is to care – for a bright particular star – and know how remote it is from your life – never to be brought any nearer! I felt afraid to-night when I saw you and Mr. Hamleigh at the piano – you playing, he leaning over you as you played – both seeming so happy, so united by the sympathy of the moment! If he is not a good man – if – "

"But we have no reason to think ill of him. You remember what Uncle Oliver said – he had only been – a – a little racketty, like other young men," said Christabel, eagerly; and then, with a sudden embarrassment, reddening and laughing shyly, she added, "and indeed, Jessie, if it is any idea of danger to me that is troubling your wise head, there is no need for alarm. I am not made of such inflammable stuff – I am not the kind of girl to fall in love with the first comer."

"With the first comer no! But when the Prince comes in a fairy tale, it matters little whether he come first or last. Fate has settled the whole story beforehand."

"Fate has had nothing to say about me and Mr. Hamleigh. No, Jessie, believe me, there is no danger for *me* – and I don't suppose that you are going to fall in love with him?"

"Because I am so old?" said Miss Bridgeman, still looking at the fire; "no, it would be rather ridiculous in a person of my age, plain and *passée*, to fall in love with your Alcibiades."

"No, Jessie, but because you are too wise ever to be carried away by a sentimental fancy. But why do you speak of him so contemptuously? One would think you had taken a dislike to him. We ought at least to remember that he is my aunt's friend, and the son of some one she once dearly loved."

"Once," repeated Jessie, softly; "does not once in that case mean always?"

She was thinking of the Squire's commonplace good looks and portly figure, as represented in the big picture in the dining-room – the picture of a man in a red coat, leaning against the shoulder of a big bay horse, and with a pack of harriers fawning round him – and wondering whether the image of that dead man, whose son was in the house to-night, had not sometimes obtruded itself upon the calm plenitude of Mrs. Tregonell's domestic joys.

"Don't be afraid that I shall forget my duty to your aunt or your aunt's guest, dear," she said suddenly, as if awaking from a reverie. "You and I will do all in our power to make him happy, and to shake him out of lazy London ways, and then, when we have patched up his health, and the moorland air has blown a little colour into his hollow cheeks, we will send him back to his clubs and his theatres, and forget all about him. And now, good-night, my Christabel," she said, looking at her watch; "see! it is close upon midnight – dreadful dissipation for Mount Royal, where half-past ten is the usual hour."

Christabel kissed her and departed, Randie following to the door of her chamber – such a pretty room, with old panelled walls painted pink and grey, old furniture, old china, snowy draperies, and books – a girl's daintily bound books, selected and purchased by herself – in every available corner; a neat cottage piano in a recess, a low easy-chair by the fire, with a five-o'clock tea-table in front of it; desks, portfolios, work-baskets – all the frivolities of a girl's life; but everything arranged with a womanly neatness which indicated industrious habits and a well-ordered mind. No scattered sheets of music – no fancy-work pitch-and-tossed about the room – no slovenliness claiming to be excused as artistic disorder.

Christabel said her prayers, and read her accustomed portion of Scripture, but not without some faint wrestlings with Satan, who on this occasion took the shape of Angus Hamleigh. Her mind was overcharged with wonder at this new phenomenon in daily life, a man so entirely different from any of the men she had ever met hitherto – so accomplished, so highly cultured; yet taking his accomplishments and culture as a thing of course, as if all men were so.

She thought of him as she lay awake for the first hour of the still night, watching the fire fade and die, and listening to the long roll of the waves, hardly audible at Mount Royal amidst all the commonplace noises of day, but heard in the solemn silence of night. She let her fancies shape a vision of her aunt's vanished youth – that one brief bright dream of happiness, so miserably broken! – and wondered and wondered how it was possible for any one to outlive such a grief. Still more incredible did it seem that any one who had so loved and so lost could ever listen to another lover; and yet the thing had been done, and Mrs. Tregonell's married life had been called happy. She always spoke of the Squire as the best of men – was never weary of praising him – loved to look up at his portrait on the wall – preserved every unpicturesque memorial of his unpicturesque life – heavy gold and silver snuff-boxes, clumsy hunting crops, spurs, guns, fishing-rods. The relics of his murderous pursuits would have filled an arsenal. And how fondly she loved the son who resembled that departed father – save in lacking some of his best qualities! How she doated on Leonard, the most commonplace and unattractive of young men! The thought of her cousin set Christabel on a new train of speculation. If Leonard had been at home when Mr. Hamleigh came to Mount Royal, how would they two have suited each other? Like fire and water, like oil and vinegar, like the wolf and the lamb, like any two creatures most antagonistic by nature. It was a happy accident that Leonard was away. She was still thinking when she fell asleep, with that uneasy sense of pain and trouble in the future which was always suggested to her by Leonard's image – a dim unshapen difficulty waiting for her somewhere along the untrodden road of her life – a lion in the path.

CHAPTER III

"TINTAGEL, HALF IN SEA, AND HALF ON LAND."

There was no sense of fear or trouble of any kind in the mind of anybody next morning after breakfast, when Christabel, Miss Bridgeman, and Mr. Hamleigh started, in the young lady's own particular pony carriage, for an exploring day, attended by Randie, who was intensely excited, and furnished with a picnic basket which made them independent of the inn at Trevena, and afforded the opportunity of taking one's luncheon under difficulties upon a windy height, rather than with the commonplace comforts of an hotel parlour, guarded against wind and weather. They were going to do an immense deal upon this first day. Christabel, in her eagerness, wanted to exhibit all her lions at once.

"Of course, you must see Tintagel," she said; "everybody who comes to this part of the world is in a tremendous hurry to see King Arthur's castle. I have known people set out in the middle of the night."

"And have you ever known any one of them who was not just a little disappointed with that stupendous monument of traditional royalty?" asked Miss Bridgeman, with her most prosaic air. "They expect so much – halls, and towers, and keep, and chapel – and find only ruined walls, and the faint indication of a grave-yard. King Arthur is a name to conjure with, and Tintagel is like Mont Blanc or the Pyramids. It can never be so grand as the vision its very name has evoked."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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