Hocking Silas Kitto

A Gamble with Life

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
A STRANGE COMPACT

"Well, of all the hare-brained proposals I ever listened to, this takes the bun"; and Felix Muller adjusted his pince-nez and lay back in his chair and laughed softly.

"But why hare-brained?" asked his companion, seriously. "Singular, I admit it may be; startling if you like, but I do not see that there is anything in it to laugh at."

"You don't?" and the lawyer's face became suddenly grave. "Do you realise what your proposal implies?"

"I think I do," and Rufus Sterne's face flushed slightly; "but you are thinking of a contingency that will never arise."

"Perhaps I am; but every contingency must be guarded against," and Felix Muller took off his glasses and wiped them meditatively. "You say you are confident of success, and I am bound to admit, from what I know of you and your scheme, I think your confidence is well founded. But you know as well as I do, that nothing is certain in this world but death."

"Well?"

"You may fail. Something may happen you cannot foresee."

"I grant it, as a remote – an exceedingly remote – possibility. But in such an event you will be covered by my life assurance policy."

"But you may live for another fifty years."

Rufus Sterne shook his head and smiled gravely.

"If I fail," he said, "I shall have no further use for life. You need be under no apprehension on that score. The money for which my life is insured will be paid into your hands without any unnecessary delay. I know the company."

"But it would be a direct contravention of the law, and would entitle the company to refuse – "

"My dear sir," Sterne interrupted, sharply, "there are many roads into the land of oblivion. Exits can be arranged, if the parties so desire, in a perfectly natural manner. You need not fear that trouble will arise on that score."

"Nevertheless, I confess I do not like the proposal."

"You seem to have grown suddenly very squeamish," Sterne said, with a slight curl of the lip. "I have always understood that you set no particular value on human life. Indeed, I have heard you argue that a man's life is his own to do as he likes with – to continue it or end it, as seems good in his own eyes."

"I am still of the same opinion. No, I am no sentimentalist. The rubbish talked by parsons and so-called humanitarians makes me ill. All the same I would prefer that someone else – "

"There is no one else," Rufus Sterne broke in, irritably. "You

are my last hope. A thousand pounds now will lead me on to fame and fortune. You have the money. You can lend it to me if you like, and for security I make you my sole legatee."

"But the money is not mine, and must be paid back by the 31st of December of next year without fail."

"That gives eighteen months and more," and Sterne laughed. "My dear fellow, six months or a little more will see the thing through."

"I like to see a man confident," Felix Muller said, a little uneasily. "But there is such a thing as over-confidence, as you know. I should be better pleased if you were a little less cocksure."

"But man alive, I have been working at this thing for years. I have tested every link in the chain, if you will allow me to say so. I have faced every possible contingency. I have gone over the ground so often that I know every inch of the way. I have anticipated every objection, every weakness, every flaw, and have provided against it. All I want now is a thousand pounds in hard cash, and in a year's time I shall be able to repay it ten-fold."

"You hope so."

"I am sure of it; as far as a man can be sure of anything in this stupid world. The more or less unpleasant contingency that you persist in looking at will never occur."

"But it may occur," Muller persisted.

"Well, if it does you will not suffer; and I shall be glad to hide

myself and be at rest."

"You say that now."

"Do you doubt my courage or my honour?" Sterne demanded, sharply.

"No, I doubt neither," Muller said, slowly; "but the instinct of life is strong – especially in the young."

"When a man has something to live for – some great purpose to achieve, or some proud ambition to realise, he naturally wants to live. But take away that something, and life is a squeezed orange which he is glad to fling away."

"People still cling to life when they have nothing left to live for," Muller said, reflectively.

"Sentimentalists and cowards," Sterne broke in, hastily. "Men who have been robbed of their courage by priestly superstitions. But you and I have thrown off the swaddling clothes in which we were reared. Your German philosophers have not reflected and written for nothing."

"I am an Englishman," Muller broke in, hastily.

"I do not dispute it for a moment," Sterne said, with a laugh. "But let us not get away from the subject we have in hand. The question is will you accommodate me or will you not?"

"If I do not you will curse me to-day," Muller said, with a drawl; "and if I do, you may curse me more bitterly eighteen months hence. So it seems to me it is a choice between two evils."

"There you are mistaken," Sterne replied. "I certainly shall curse you if you refuse me, but if you become my friend to-day

I shall never cease to bless you."

"Not if you fail?"

"Why will you persist in harping on that one string? I shall not fail. Failure is out of the reckoning. I am as certain of success as I am of my own existence."

"'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.'"

"Please, Muller, don't quote the Bible to me."

"It is sound philosophy wherever it is taken from. Besides, the Bible is good literature."

"So is Dante's 'Inferno.' But if you were dosed with it morning, noon and night, for the space of fifteen or twenty years, you would be glad to have a little respite. But we are getting away again from the subject in hand. Let's stick to the one point till we've done with it. If you've made up your mind that you won't help me, say so."

"My dear fellow, all that I've been anxious to do is to enable you, if possible, to realise all that such a contract implies."

"Well, if I didn't realise it before, I do now. You've been very faithful."

"And you still wish to enter into the arrangement?"

"Of course I do. What do you take me for?"

"Remember, I am no sentimentalist, and whatever may happen to you, I shall be compelled in the end to claim my bond."

Sterne laughed a little bitterly. "You do not mean to insult me, I know. Nevertheless your words imply a doubt that I cannot help resenting. If the worst comes to the worst, you will have no need

to *claim* your bond. You will get your own back without effort, and with compound interest."

"I have no desire to insult you, certainly. But equally am I desirous of preventing any misunderstanding later on. In a business transaction of this kind one cannot be too explicit. The time-limit I am compelled to insist upon."

"It is quite ample," Sterne broke in, impatiently. "I shall know my fate long before the end of next year."

"I hope you will succeed even beyond what you hope for."

"Let me tell you for the twentieth time that I am bound to succeed. When shall I have the money?"

"The day after to-morrow."

"That will do. Now I am a happy man."

"I hope you will never have cause to regret the bargain."

"You shall not, in any case."

The lawyer smiled, and lowered his eyebrows. "From a professional point of view," he said, reflectively, "it is not, of course, good business."

Sterne looked up suddenly. "I see what you mean," he said, after a pause. "You are not covered against any failure of courage or honour on my part?"

The lawyer nodded assent.

"I appreciate your trust in me," Sterne replied, with a touch of emotion in his voice. "I do indeed. You are lending me the money without any legal security."

"And the money is not mine," the lawyer added.

"I understand; and when the time comes you shall be rewarded," and Sterne rose to his feet and picked up his bowler hat, which had been lying on the floor.

The lawyer rose also, and held out his hand to his client. "The money shall be ready for you the day after to-morrow." So they parted.

Rufus Sterne went out into the street feeling as though all the world lay at his feet. No thought of failure crossed his mind. The thing he had been working for for years was at last to be realised. His invention would not only put money into his own pocket, but it would revolutionise the chief industry of his native county, and find work for thousands of willing hands.

In imagination he saw himself not only prosperous, but honoured and respected and hailed as a public benefactor. He had a long walk over the hills to the village in which he resided, but it seemed as nothing to him that evening. His heart was beating high with hope, his eyes sparkled with eager anticipation.

From the crest of the second hill the wide sweep of the Atlantic came into view, and for several minutes he stood still, with bared head. He had spent all his life in sight and sound of the sea, and he never tired of it. Relatives, friends, acquaintances by the dozen, slept their last sleep far out in its cool embrace. He had a feeling sometimes that he would like, when his day's work was done, to pillow his head among the seaweed and sleep for ever, while the waves sobbed and sang above him.

The sun was slowly sinking in a sea of molten gold. The

window-panes of the scattered farmhouses were flashing back the evening fire. From the valley behind him came the bleating of lambs and the answering call of the mother sheep, and with the cooling of the day a breeze stirred faintly in the tree tops and through the hazel bushes.

He replaced his hat, and was about to continue his tramp when he was arrested by the sound of carriage wheels behind him. A sharp bend in the road hid the vehicle from sight, but he knew it would be on him in a moment. So he stepped aside, as the road was narrow, and waited for it to pass.

The horse came first into sight, and then the Squire's waggonette. Two people sat on the front seat, the coachman and a lady. The back of the vehicle was piled almost to the level of their heads with luggage. The horse came on slowly, which gave Rufus Sterne an opportunity of scanning the face of the lady.

"Evidently a stranger," was his first reflection. "Greatly taken with the view of the sea," his second. After that his reflections were of a very mixed character.

Two or three points, however, stood out in his mind with great distinctness. The first was the lady was young – "not more than twenty if she is a day," he reflected. The second was that she belonged to a type he had never seen before. "She's not Cornish, that's certain," he said to himself. "I question if she is English." The third was that she was most becomingly dressed. Whether she was richly or expensively attired he did not know. He had had no experience in such matters. But that her dress became

her there could be no doubt. The hat she wore might have been designed by an artist for her alone. On some people's heads it might look a fright, but on the head of this fair creature it was a picture.

He stood so far back in the shadow of the hedge that she did not notice him. Besides, her eyes were fixed on the distant sea, which flashed in the sunset like burnished gold.

"Isn't it just too lovely for words?" Whether she addressed the coachman, or whether she was speaking to herself, he did not know. But her words fell very distinctly on his ear, and touched his heart with a curious sense of kinship or sympathy.

"No; she's not English," he said to himself. "An Englishwoman never speaks with an accent just like that. But wherever she comes from she's the loveliest creature I ever saw. I wonder who she is?"

He came out into the middle of the road, and followed in the wake of the vanishing vehicle. After a few minutes it disappeared completely, and he did not see it again.

"I wonder who she is?" The question occurred to him several times as he tramped steadily on in the direction of St. Gaved. It even pushed into the background his recent interview with Felix Muller, and the strange compact he had made.

The twilight was deepening rapidly by the time he reached the cottage in which he rented two tiny rooms. A frugal supper was laid ready for him on the table, but there was no one to give him welcome, no one to say good-night when he retired to rest.

Yet no feeling of loneliness or friendlessness oppressed him. He felt that the day had been an eventful one, and that a future of unmeasured possibilities was opening up before him.

CHAPTER II
DREAMS AND REALITIES

Rufus Sterne awoke next morning with a feeling of buoyancy and hopefulness such as he had never before experienced. The sun was streaming brightly through the little window and gilding the humble furniture of the room with thin lines of gold; the house-sparrows were chirruping noisily under the eaves; the fishermen, early in from their night's fishing, were calling "Mackerel" in the winding street below; whilst the memory of pleasant dreams was still haunting the chambers of his brain – dreams in which his own identity had got mixed up in some curious fashion with that of the fair stranger he had seen the evening before.

Mrs. Tuke, his landlady, laid his breakfast in silence. It was very rarely now that she spoke to him. On her face was a look of injured innocence or pained resignation. She had done her best in days gone by to lead him to see what she called the error of his ways, but without success. Now she had given him over – though not without considerable reluctance – to the hardness of his heart. She sometimes wondered whether she ought to keep as a lodger a man who was claimed neither by church nor chapel, and whose religious opinions not a man in the entire village would endorse.

However, as he paid his bill regularly and gave no trouble,

and as moreover he had no bad habits, and was exceedingly gentlemanly both in manners and appearance, she concluded that on the whole she was justified in giving him shelter and taking his money.

Rufus did not notice Mrs. Tuke's resigned look and pathetic eyes this morning. His thoughts were intent on other things. At last he was on the road to fame and fortune, so he honestly and sincerely believed. To-morrow he would walk into Redbourne and take possession of a thousand pounds. Then life would begin in earnest. He would give up his position at the Wheal Gregory Mine and devote all his energies to the completion of the great scheme, which would take the whole county by surprise.

What a relief it would be to get away from the common-place and humdrum tasks that had filled his hands for the last three or four years – tasks that any young man with a School Board education could discharge without difficulty. He did not despise the work – no honest labour was to be despised. But the work was not of the kind that appealed to him. It was monotonous, mechanical, uninteresting. There was nothing in it to call out latent skill or originality. He might go on doing it till his brain stagnated and the springs of imagination ceased to flow.

He was called the secretary of the mine – a high-sounding name enough – but the name was the only important thing about it. He was time-keeper, clerk, and office-boy rolled into one.

The salary was just enough to keep him in a position of respectable poverty. The only way he could hope to save any

money was by insuring his life until he was a certain age. But there were times when he was half disposed to let his policy lapse. It was such a pinch to find the money to pay the premiums.

At last, however, he believed the struggle was over. His thoughts were going to take tangible shape; his nebulous dreams were to be reduced to concrete form. The lines he had so carefully traced on paper would be seen in brass and steel; the mental travail of years would end in the birth of a great invention.

He walked away from the house humming a popular waltz, and his steps kept time to the music. Wheal Gregory lay over the hill more than a mile away. Taking a field path he skirted the park of Trewinion Hall, the residence of Sir Charles Tregony, the squire of the parish and the largest landowner in the district. It was Sir Charles's waggonette that passed him the previous evening when returning from Redbourne.

He slackened his pace almost unconsciously, and looked over the tall thorn hedge in the direction of the squire's mansion. An opening in the belt of trees brought a portion of the terrace into view, with a strip of lawn and a glimpse of the rose garden. At the moment, however, Rufus saw neither the garden nor the lawn. It was a graceful girlish figure clad in white that arrested his attention. She was flitting in and out among the standard roses with a pair of scissors in one hand and a large bunch of blooms in the other. She stood still at length and looked towards the house, then waved her hand to someone Rufus could not see. Then she turned right about face and looked in his direction. Rufus lowered

his head in a moment and peeped at her between the branches of a tree. It might not be the height of good manners, but he could not help it. She was so fair a picture, so graceful, so piquant and fresh, that he would be almost less than human if he did not make the most of his opportunity.

A few minutes later she was joined by the squire's daughter, Beryl, and together they walked away till the thick foliage hid them from view.

Rufus heaved a little sigh, and then continued his walk in the direction of Wheal Gregory.

"I wonder if people who live in big houses, and have lovely gardens and lawns and all the other pleasant things of life are happier than ordinary folks," he said to himself. "I wonder if that girl is happy. I wonder if she knows how pretty she is? I wonder where she came from? I wonder who she is? I wonder if she has come to stay?"

He laughed at length quite loudly, for no one was near to listen. It was strange that he should be interested in anyone who had come to stay at the Hall. Sir Charles was one of the proudest and most exclusive men in the county. There was no one in the parish of St. Gaved, excepting perhaps the vicar, that he considered good enough to associate with, and Sir Charles's visitors were generally as exclusive as himself.

The rattle of the "fire stamps" down in the valley called him back at length to more mundane affairs. It was nothing to him who the new visitor at the Hall might be, and whether she stayed

a week or a year was no concern of his. He had his own work to do, and just now that work would fill his thoughts night and day.

He did his best to give all his attention to his ordinary duties, but it was no easy matter. He had lost all interest in Wheal Gregory Mine. His resignation as secretary would be handed in on Saturday morning: for the future he would live on another plane, and more important issues would claim his thought and attention.

The day seemed interminably long, but it came to an end at length, and he turned his face towards St. Gaved with a light heart. Every day now would shorten the period of his exile and inactivity. He was eager to get his own great enterprise under weigh, eager to show the people among whom he lived the stuff of which he was made.

On the following day he opened a banking account with a thousand pounds to his credit, and the day following that he handed his resignation in as secretary of Wheal Gregory Mine.

He walked homeward slowly in the glow of the evening's sun, taking a wide sweep round by the coast. The sky was almost cloudless, but the warmth was tempered by a cool breeze from the West. A pathway skirted the edge of the cliffs which was rarely used by anyone after sunset, for the cliffs were treacherous and a false step might mean instant death.

On one of the highest points he sat down on the spongy turf and looked westward. The sun was sinking in a lake of burnished gold. The sea was like glass mingled with fire. He could not

help wondering if these bright days and glorious sunsets were an augury of his own future.

As yet no cloud dimmed the brightness of his vision, no thought of failure flung a shadow across his path. He was as confident of success as he was that the Atlantic was rolling at his feet. It was this confidence that had blinded his eyes to the moral obliquity of his contract with Felix Muller.

"If I fail," he had said, "you shall have my insurance money," and he had said it in the most light-hearted fashion, for he never suspected for a moment that he would fail.

Moreover, if he did fail the defeat would be so crushing that he was quite sure he would not want to live. And as he had lost the faith of his childhood, and death meant only an endless and a dreamless sleep, dying gave him no concern.

But there was one thing he had never considered, and that was the rights of the insurance company. He did not see that it was a felony he proposed in case of failure. The idea had never crossed his mind. He had laid stress on his honour in making his appeal to Muller, and he failed to see that in case his schemes came to nothing he was proposing an act of deliberate dishonesty. He would save his honour at the expense of his honesty.

It was not of failure, however, he thought, as he looked towards the sunset. The future was opening out before his imagination in widening vistas of success.

"I shall astonish everybody," he said to himself, a bright, eager smile spreading itself over his face. "Muller believes in me, but

he has no idea how great my scheme is. I don't see the end of it myself, for one thing will lead to another. Oh! I shall have a crowded life; for one success will beget other successes, and so I shall go forward – never idle – till my day's work is done."

He was roused from his pleasant reverie by a light footstep near him, and looking round quickly he saw the fair stranger who had interested him on two previous occasions. She did not hesitate for a moment in her walk, but came briskly forward till she was directly opposite where he sat.

"Pardon me," she said, in a voice that was distinctly musical in spite of its unfamiliar accent, "but can you tell me if there is a path anywhere hereabouts leading down to the beach?"

He was on his feet in a moment, and raising his hat he said, with a smile, "The nearest point is down Penwith Cove; that is at least half a mile further on."

"And is the path easy?"

"Quite easy."

"Not dangerous at all?"

"Not a bit," he answered, with a smile.

"You will excuse me speaking, won't you?" she said, with a mirthful light in her eyes. "I'm not at all sure that it's a bit proper. Sir Charles has read me several lectures already about speaking to people I don't know, but if I only speak to people I know I shall never speak at all when I'm out of the house."

"You are a stranger in St. Gaved?" he questioned, nervously.

"I come from across the water," she answered, with delightful

frankness. "I never saw your country till four days ago."

"And do you like it?" he questioned.

"Well, yes – up to a certain point. I shall get used to it in time, no doubt. But at present it seems a bit dull and slow."

"You've lived in a city, perhaps?" – he was astonished at his boldness, but her whole manner seemed to invite conversation.

"That's just it," she replied. "And after New York this place seems a trifle dull and quiet."

"I should think so," he said, with a laugh. "Why, even natives like myself find it almost insufferable at times."

"Then why do you stay here? Why don't you go right away where the pulse of life beats more quickly?"

"Ah! that question is not easy to answer," he said, looking out over the fire-flecked sea. "Our home is here, our work lies here. Beyond is a great unknown. Many have gone out and have never returned."

"Got lost, eh?" she questioned, with a musical laugh.

"Lost to us who have remained," he answered. "Some have prospered, I have no doubt. Some have failed, and died in obscurity and neglect. Better, perhaps, endure the ills we have than fly to others we know not of."

"Well, yes, I guess there's truth in that," she answered, raising frankly her soft brown eyes to his. "Yet there's always fascination in the unknown, don't you think so?"

"No doubt of it."

"That's the reason, I expect, why I'm just aching to explore

these cliffs, and the caves of which Sir Charles says there's any number."

"That won't take you very long," he answered, "though it would hardly be safe for you to go alone."

"That's what Sir Charles says; but would you mind telling me just where the danger comes in?"

"Well, you see, the rocks are often slippery. And if you are not acquainted with the tides you might get caught."

"Ah! that would be interesting."

"Well, scarcely. Strangers have been caught and drowned before now."

"They could not swim?"

"It would take a very strong swimmer to clear St. Gaved Point and get into the harbour."

She turned her eyes in that direction and looked grave.

He studied her face a little more closely and allowed his eyes to wander over her graceful and well-knit figure. She was very simply dressed, without ornament of any kind. A large picture hat shaded her pale face. Her eyes were large and dark, her forehead broad, her nose straight, her lips full and red.

She caught him looking at her and he blushed a little. "I don't think I could swim that distance," she said, turning her eyes again in the direction of St. Gaved Point.

"I don't think you would be wise to attempt it." Then he blushed again, for she turned on him a swift and searching glance, while her lips parted in a smile that seemed to say, "I did not ask

you for advice."

For a moment there was silence, then she said, "Do you know the sea has been calling me ever since I came."

"Calling you?" he questioned.

"Well, I mean it fascinates me, if you understand. I want to get close to it, to paddle in it. It is so beautiful. It looks so cool and friendly. Beryl says she cannot bear the sea; that it is not friendly a bit; that it is cruel and noisy, and treacherous."

"Ah! she has lived near the sea most of her life."

"And yet you can scarcely see it from the Hall."

"But it can be heard on stormy nights, and when a westerly gale is raging its voice is terrible."

"You have lived here all your life?" and her lips parted in the most innocent smile.

"Here, and in a neighbouring parish," he answered, frankly.

"And do you like the sea?"

"Sometimes. On an evening like this, for instance, I could sit for hours looking at it, and listening to the low murmur of the waves. But in the winter I rarely come out on the cliffs."

"I have never seen the sea real mad," she said, reflectively; "but I expect I shall if I stay here long enough."

"Do you expect to stay long?" he questioned. If she asked questions he did not see why he might not.

"Well, I guess I shall stay in England a good many months anyhow," she answered slowly, and with an unmistakable accent; and she turned away her eyes, and a faint wave of colour tinged

her pale cheeks.

He would have liked to have asked her a good many other questions, but he felt he had gone far enough.

"I fear I shall have to go back now," she said at length, without looking at him, "or they'll all be wondering what has become of me."

"You could not easily get lost in a place like this," he said, with a laugh.

"No, nobody would kidnap me," she said, arching her eyebrows.

"No, I don't think so," he answered in a tone that was half-mirthful, half-serious.

She raised her eyes to his for a moment in a keen searching glance, then, with a hasty "Good evening," turned and walked away in the direction she had come.

He stood and watched her until she had passed over the brow of the hill in the direction of Trewinion Hall. Then he slowly resumed his journey towards St. Gaved.

That night he awoke from a dream with a feeling of horror tearing at his heart. He dreamed that his great scheme had proved a failure, and that Felix Muller stood over him demanding the immediate fulfilment of the contract.

So vivid had been the dream that, for the moment, he seemed powerless to shake off the impression. He sat up in bed, and stared round him, while a cold perspiration broke out in beads upon his brow.

For the first time he realised, in any clear and vivid sense, the nature of the compact he had entered into. The possibilities of failure had seemed so infinitely remote that he had never seriously tried to realise what failure would mean.

Now that awful contingency forced itself upon his heart and imagination in a way that seemed almost to paralyse him. It was as though some invisible but powerful hand had pushed him to the edge of a dark and awful precipice, and compelled him to look over. His knees shook under him, his head seemed to reel, he struggled to get back to safer ground.

The feeling of horror passed away after a few minutes, and he lay down again.

"Of course, I shall not fail," he said to himself. "The contingency is so remote that I need not give the matter a second thought."

And yet the impression of that dream was destined to remain with him in spite of all his efforts to shake it off.

CHAPTER III
THE VALUE OF A LIFE

During the next few weeks Rufus Sterne was kept so busy that he had very little time for either retrospect or anticipation. His great complaint was that the days were all too short for the work he wanted to crowd into them. He had told Felix Muller that six months would see his scheme well on its way to completion. But he had not been at work many weeks before he began to fear that twelve months would be much nearer the limit. Contractors were so slow, workmen were so careless, and accidents – none of them serious – were so numerous, that delays were inevitable, and the days grew into weeks unconsciously.

He maintained, however, a brave and hopeful spirit. Delays and disappointments were, no doubt, inevitable. No one ever carried out a great scheme without encountering a few disappointments. Later on, when victory was assured, they would seem as nothing, and would be quickly forgotten.

He saw no more of the beautiful stranger who had so much interested him. For several days he kept a sharp look out, and wondered if by any chance he would cross her path. Then he heard that Sir Charles and all his family had gone to London till the end of the season, and he assumed that she had gone to London with them.

He had had a second interview with Felix Muller, which had left an impression that was not altogether pleasant. Muller was in his most cynical and ungenerous mood. He had not a word of encouragement to give to his client. On the contrary, he appeared to take a delight in pricking Rufus with pointed and unpleasant suggestions.

"It is well, no doubt, to hope for the best," he said to Rufus; "but it is equally well to be prepared for the worst."

"I really think you would not trouble much if I should fail," Rufus said, in a tone of irritation.

"Then you do me an injustice," was the suave and tantalising answer. "If you were to fail I might have trouble in getting my own."

"You mean that I would back out of the contract at the last?"

"No, I don't mean any such thing. I know you are not only a man of honour, but a man of courage; but if you should bungle – "

"Look here, we need not go any further into details," Rufus said, impatiently. "My point is you are not a bit troubled about me as long as you get your money back."

"Oh, but I am! I would rather you prospered than that you failed, any day. Still, if in the order of chance you should fail – well – ," and he shrugged his shoulders, "It would be in the eternal order, that's all."

"You would not fret, of course?"

"My dear fellow, why should I? We must all pass out into the great silence sooner or later. And now, or next year, or next

century for that matter, matters little. You and I have got beyond the region of sentiment in such things. Nature sets no value on human life. We take our place among the ants and flies, and the human is treated as remorselessly as the insect. The wind passeth over both, and they are gone."

"Yes, that is true enough," Rufus answered, looking out of the window.

"Besides," Muller went on, as if he read his thoughts, "in the business of life we are bound to take risks."

"You mean money risks?"

"Not only money risks. A man who drives to market, who explores a mine, who crosses the sea in the interests of commerce, who fights for his country, not only risks his property, but he risks his life."

"Not always intentionally."

"Well, not always, perhaps. But in the greatest and noblest enterprises, yes. And what is more, it is counted to a man an honour when he risks his life in a great cause. If you become a martyr for a great ideal I shall revere your memory."

Rufus winced, and looked uncomfortable. "I am not risking my life in the public interest," he said, "but in my own."

"It all amounts to the same thing," Muller said, cynically. "You are part of the public, and anything that benefits a part benefits, more or less, the whole. I am taking risks myself on the same chance of doing good."

"Doing good to whom?"

"To myself in the first place. Charity should always begin at home."

"And don't you think also that it should stop there?"

"Well, in the main, I do. I am no sentimentalist, as you very well know. Every man for himself is the first law of life."

"So while Nature sets no value on human life, you think that each individual should set great value on his own?"

"No, I don't. Everything depends on the individual, or on his circumstances. If a man thinks his life is worth preserving, well, let him preserve it by all means. But if he thinks it is worthless, why should he not let it slip?"

"There seems no particular reason," Rufus answered, reflectively.

"There's no reason at all," Muller went on, dogmatically, "while a man is doing something, something useful I mean, something that is of benefit to himself and to others, he ought to keep agoing as long as he can. But when he is a failure, when he becomes a burden to himself and his neighbours, it is cowardly to hang on, and why should anybody fret because he makes himself scarce?"

"You mean this as a little homily to myself?" Rufus questioned.

"Oh, not a bit of it! I am not afraid of you not doing the right thing! Besides, you are not going to fail," and he laughed, cynically.

"No, I am not going to fail," Rufus answered, rising from his

seat; "I am going to succeed."

"That's right. I hope you will. But don't forget that there is nothing certain in this world but death," and he smilingly bowed Rufus out of the room.

In the street Rufus purchased an evening paper, that he might get the latest news of the war. He did not open it until he got into the quiet lanes outside the town. There had been another big battle in which there had been an appalling loss of life. The work of extermination was going on rapidly. Modern civilisation was showing what it could do in preventing the too rapid growth of the human race.

Rufus hurriedly glanced down the columns, then folded the paper and put it into his pocket. "Yes, Muller is right," he mused. "Nature sets no value on human life, neither do governments, and neither does religion. I wonder how many thousands of human beings have been sacrificed during the last few weeks, and who gives to the matter a second thought. Religion accepts it as inevitable and even meritorious. Governments approve and applaud, and make provision for slaughter on a larger scale in the future. Nature, not to be outdone, tries her hand at earthquakes, or famine, or disease. It is only the individual who thinks his own life is of value, and he, of course, is a conceited prig."

He paused when he reached the hill-top from which the sea came into view. The days were beginning to shorten a little. The light of the sun was less brilliant, and the green of the fields had given place to harvest gold.

"It is curious that we should cling to life so much for its own sake," he said, reflectively. "Curious that the law should label a man a criminal who takes his own life when he has no longer any use for it. What hypocrites men are, especially those who make our laws. The weaklings and worthless they preserve, the able-bodied and useful they destroy. The single life, however pitiful, must be protected. The crowd is mowed down like grass to gratify some coward's insatiable ambition. The creatures who talk about the glory of dying for one's country are careful to keep out of the danger line themselves. The man who fails, after an heroic struggle, and takes his own life rather than be a burden to others, they brand as a coward or dub insane; while he who grows rich by trafficking on the weakness or vices of his fellows is made a Right Honourable, or given a seat in the councils of the State. It is all very sickening, and I refuse to be bound by such traditional falsehood and hypocrisy."

He hurried on at a more rapid rate, as if to get away from his thoughts, but his brain persisted in working in the same groove. The possibility of failure obtruded itself with obstinate persistency.

"I'm glad Muller does not doubt either my courage or my honour," he went on. "And really if I fail it will not matter to anyone but myself. I have no ties, neither father nor mother, brother nor sister, wife nor child. I am happy in that – "

Then he moved to the side of the road for a closed landau drawn by a pair of horses to pass him.

"Going to fetch the Hall people from the station very likely," he said to himself, and he turned and looked after the retreating vehicle.

"I wonder if she will return?" and a far-away expression came into his eyes. "I should like to see her again," he went on, "she is wonderfully fresh and natural."

For the rest of the way home he walked very slowly. Now and then he paused, and turned his head, and listened. But the sound of wheels, which he expected to hear, did not break the evening's stillness, nor did he see the face that he hoped to see.

It was nearly a fortnight later that he went out one afternoon on the cliffs alone. A somewhat difficult and complicated problem had unexpectedly presented itself to him, and he fancied he would be better able to see his way through it in the open air than in his workshop or study. Generally speaking, he could think best on his feet, and the sights and sounds of nature, instead of distracting him, soothed him.

It was a warm, drowsy afternoon. The wind slept, and a soft impalpable haze imparted a new mystery to the sea. The tide was coming in slowly and imperceptibly, and rippling like silver bells on the shingly beach. The distant landscape was an impressionist picture in which all the sharp outlines melted into space. The sunshine filtered through a veil of gauze. Half-way to Penwith Cove he sat down on a ledge of rock on the very edge of the cliff, and looked seaward. He saw nothing distinctly, heard no song of the sea. He was too intent on the problem that was baffling his

brain.

Suddenly he started and opened his eyes wide. Was it a human voice he heard, or was it merely fancy? He looked round him swiftly in all directions, but no one was in sight. "It was only the cry of a sea-gull, I expect," he said to himself, and he half closed his eyes again. The next moment he was on his feet and staring round him in all directions. "Surely that was a cry for help," he said, and he looked over the edge of the cliff and swept with his eyes the narrow stretch of sand, but there was no one in sight in any direction.

For a moment or two he stood irresolute, listening. "There it is again," he said, with blanched cheeks, and he lay flat on the ground and dragged himself forward slowly till his head and shoulders overhung the cliff.

"Help! oh, help!" came a feeble voice from the abyss below.

"Where are you? What is the matter?" he called, searching in vain for any sign of life.

"Oh, save me!" was the quick response. "I cannot possibly hold on much longer."

"Have you fallen over the cliff?" he called.

"No, no. I tried to climb up, and I cannot get back again."

"Then shut your eyes and hold tight," he called. "I'll be round in a few minutes."

"Oh, do be quick, for I'm getting faint."

"If you faint you're lost," he called. "Hold on like grim death and don't look down. I'll be with you directly."

It was a long way round by Penwith Cove, but there was no nearer way. He ran like a man pursued by wild beasts. The path was narrow and uneven, and followed the irregularities of the cliffs. A dozen times he came within an ace of breaking his neck, but he managed to keep on his feet. The question of his own safety never once occurred to him. Someone was in deadly peril, and a moment later or earlier might be a matter of life or death.

The path into the cove was by a series of zigzags; but he took a straight cut in most instances to the imminent risk of life and limb. A few cuts and bruises he did not mind. His clothes might not be fit to wear again. Tobogganning without a toboggan might not be elegant, but it was certainly exciting, and if it did nothing else it would find work for his tailor.

He was never quite certain whether he reached the beach head foremost or feet foremost. He found himself stretched full length on the sand, bleeding from innumerable cuts and quite out of breath.

There was no time, however, to make an inventory of his own hurts. Indeed, he was scarcely conscious that he had received any damage whatever. Picking himself up, he began to run with all his remaining strength. He limped a good deal, but he was not aware of it; neither did he make any attempt to pick his way. He swept eagerly the face of the cliff as he ran, and feared that he was too late.

At length he caught a glimpse of something white perched high above the beach.

"Good heavens; how did she get there?" he said to himself; and pausing for a moment he drew in a long breath, then shouted: "Hold tight, I'm coming!" though even as he spoke his heart failed him.

How was he to get to her, and even if he succeeded in reaching her side, how was he to get her down? The face of the cliff was almost perpendicular, the footholds were few and treacherous. Empty-handed, he might climb up and back again without very much difficulty; but with a half-fainting woman in his arms the descent would be practically impossible.

He was still running while these thoughts were passing through his mind, his breathing was laboured and painful, his bruised limbs were becoming stiff and obstinate.

He came to a full stop at length, and the fear that had haunted him from first hearing the cry became a certainty.

"Can you hold on a little longer?" he called.

"I guess I'll have to try," came the cheery answer, though there was the sound of tears in her voice. It was evident she was making a desperate effort to keep up her courage.

"Don't lose heart," he said, with a gasp, "and keep your eyes shut."

Then he shut his teeth grimly and began the ascent. "I'll save her or die in the attempt," he said to himself, with a fierce and determined look in his eyes.

Then something seemed to whisper in his ear: "Why trouble about a single life? One life more or less can make no difference.

If people like to fling away their life in foolish adventures, let them do it; why should you worry?"

But his philosophy found no response in his heart just then. His own life might be of little consequence, but this fair creature must be saved at all costs.

He made his way up the face of the cliff surely and steadily. "It is easier than I thought," he said. Then he came to a sudden stop, while a groan escaped his lips.

"I cannot do it," he gasped; "nobody can do it. Without ropes and ladders she is doomed."

CHAPTER IV
PAYING THE PENALTY

When Madeline Grover got used to the cliffs they did not seem nearly so forbidding or dangerous as at the first. Exploring the caves and crannies for sea shells and lichen and gulls' eggs became a favourite pastime of hers. To stay within the precincts of Trewinion Park she declared was like being in prison. To wander across the level lawns, or through the woods by well-kept paths, was an exercise altogether too tame and unexciting. She loved something that had in it a spice of adventure. To do something that nobody else had ever done was very much more to her taste.

Sir Charles took her to task gently on several occasions. It was not quite the proper thing to go out alone and unattended. She would need to put a curb on her exuberant and adventurous spirit. She would have to remember that she was no longer in America, where, in his judgment, girls had far too much freedom. She must learn to fall into English ways and customs, with a good deal more to the same effect.

Madeline always listened patiently and good-humouredly to all Sir Charles had to say, and even promised him that she would be all he could desire; but she generally forgot both the lecture and the promise five minutes later. She had been used all her life

to go her own way. At home, in America, she received her own friends of both sexes without reference to her father or mother. A liberty of action had been allowed her that seemed almost shocking to Sir Charles and Lady Tregony, and now that she had come to live in England for an indefinite period it was all but impossible for her to drop into English ways at once.

As a matter of fact, she did not try very much. She told Beryl Tregony that she had no desire to be a tame kitten, and since she was responsible to no one, she followed in the main the prompting of her own heart.

It was by no means difficult to slip away unobserved, and to be absent for hours on the stretch without being missed. She had her own rooms at the big house, and often when she was supposed to be quietly reading somewhere, she was out on the cliffs or down on the shore searching for rare flowers or shells, or else talking to the fishermen.

She found life terribly dull after her return from London. Yet, on the whole, she was not unhappy. The great sweep of the Atlantic had an unfailing attraction for her. The cliffs were glorious, and offered infinite scope for adventure. While the people of St. Gaved – particularly the fishermen – caught her fancy amazingly, and she became a prime favourite with them all.

Here was a young lady of the upper circle, a distant relative of the squire, who was not in the least exclusive or proud; who went in and out among the ordinary toiling folk as though she was one of them, and who had always a smile and a cheery word for the

humblest. It was so different from the Tregony tradition, that it took their honest hearts by storm.

Rufus Sterne considered himself particularly unfortunate that when she came into St. Gaved he always missed her. Three or four times he heard of her being in the town – it was really only a big village, but the St. Gavedites all spoke of it as a town; but he was either in his workshop or away directing the operations of others; consequently, she came and went without giving him a chance of renewing their acquaintance.

"Not that it mattered," he said to himself. She was nothing to him. She belonged to a circle far removed from his. Yet for some reason he was curious to look again into her bright, laughing eyes, and listen to her naive and unconventional talk. Moreover, when he heard people talking about her, and praising her good looks and charming freeness of manner, he had a feeling that he had been cheated out of something to which he was justly entitled.

What added to the interest excited by the pretty young American was the fact that nobody had been able to find out the exact relationship in which she stood to the Tregony family. Neither had anybody been able to discover why she had come, or how long she intended to stay.

Any number of guesses had been hazarded, but they were only guesses at best. Some said she had been sent to England by her parents simply to learn society ways and manners. Others, that her parents were dead, and that her mother being related to Sir Charles, the latter had taken her out of charity. Mrs. Tuke, who,

in the one glimpse she got of her, had been greatly impressed by the richness of her attire, ventured the opinion that she was an heiress in her own right, and that Sir Charles, who was not noted for his generosity, had not undertaken to be her guardian for nothing. But all these guesses lacked the essential thing, and that was authority. Sir Charles was as close as an oyster about his own family affairs. Moreover, he would no more think of talking to anyone in St. Gaved about his visitors than of taking a journey to the moon. And if he thought they were so impertinent as to desire to know, that would be a double reason why he should, under no circumstances, allude to the matter.

Madeline might have given the information desired if her new acquaintances had had the courage to question her. But they were a little shy in her presence as yet; in some instances they were completely over-awed. She was so bright, so quick, so confident, that she almost took their breath away. They felt like fools in her presence.

This was how matters stood when Rufus discovered her on a narrow ledge of rock high up the cliffs, unable either to advance or retreat. She had slipped away from the Hall unobserved after going to her own room ostensibly to write letters. Consequently, she had not been missed, and was not likely to be until the family met for dinner.

As usual the sea had been "calling her," as she expressed it; and after a short ramble on the beach she turned her attention to the serrated cliffs that loomed high above her. A sea-gull first

attracted her attention, then a large patch of lichen, then a path that seemed to zig-zag to the top of the cliff.

Wise people think first and act afterwards, but wisdom comes with experience and experience with age. Madeline was quite young, and made no pretension to wisdom, hence she frequently reversed the recognised order, and acted first and did the thinking afterwards.

Seeing the path she began to climb. It was an exhilarating ascent. Had it been free from danger it would have been humdrum and fatiguing. And yet it was neither so dangerous nor so difficult as to frighten her away. Indeed, the higher she got, the less dangerous it seemed, and the more she was fascinated by the adventure. She did not think of looking back. Had she done so she might have been warned in time.

Looking up, the rim of the cliff came perceptibly nearer, and she conceived the wild idea of reaching the top. Why not? Because nobody had ever done it that was no proof that it could not be done. If fifty feet could be scaled, why not a hundred? Besides, it would be an achievement to be proud of. If she could do what never had been done before she would become something of a hero in her own eyes, and perhaps in the eyes of other people.

The path took a horizontal turn at length along the uneven face of the cliff. She was higher up than she knew, and the foothold was less secure than she suspected. It was all over in a moment. She had not time even to scream; before even her thoughts could

take shape she was brought up with a jerk, and when she dared turn her head she discovered that she was perched on a narrow ledge of rock with the cliff shelving away underneath her. For a moment she felt sick and faint, and was in imminent danger of falling off the ledge, which would mean almost certain death.

After a while she made an effort to regain her feet and reach the path from which she had slipped, but almost with the first movement her head swam and a mist came up before her eyes that blotted out everything. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to remain perfectly still until she had recovered her nerve.

But every minute seemed an hour as she lay perched on that dangerous ledge, and yet every time she opened her eyes and looked into the yawning gulf below, her heart failed her, and she became more and more convinced that she would never get down alive. Instead of her nerve steadying she got increasingly excited and terrified.

She had plenty of time for reflection now, but her reflections brought her no satisfaction. She discovered – what most people discover sooner or later – that it is easy to be wise after the event.

"Oh, how foolish I have been," she said to herself. "Why did I refuse to take advice? Sir Charles warned me, and that handsome young man I met on the cliffs told me how dangerous they were. Now I am paying the penalty of my foolishness and obstinacy."

She became so terrified at last that she screamed for help at the top of her voice, but the only answer that came was the weird and plaintive cry of the gulls startled from their perches.

She began to wonder, at length, how long her strength would hold out, and whether, if consciousness left her, she would roll off into eternity. The ledge was so narrow that she dared not move in any direction, and she was becoming stiff and cramped from remaining so long in one position.

For the most part she kept her eyes tightly shut, and tried to forget the yawning gulf beneath her. Every time she looked down her head grew dizzy. It scarcely seemed possible to her that she had climbed to such a height.

She began to count her heart-beats so that she might get some conception of the flight of time. The Tregonys dined at half-past seven; until that hour the chances were she would not be missed. Then a search would be made through the house and grounds – that would take up the best part of an hour. By the time anybody reached the cliffs it would be well on to nine o'clock, and too dark to see a single object.

"I shall never hold out till then," she said to herself; "never! I believe I am slipping nearer the edge all the time. I wonder if the fall will kill me outright?"

She clutched at the rough wall of rock with desperation, and at length found a narrow crevice into which she thrust her hand and held on with the tenacity of despair. The fear of falling off the ledge was less for a little while, but in time her arm and hand began to ache intolerably, and the old terror came back with redoubled force. So appalling was the situation that she was severely tempted to end it at once and for ever. The deep below

fascinated while it terrified. She shrank back with horror from the brink of the ledge, and yet the abyss seemed to draw her like a magnet. If she opened her eyes she felt certain that no power of will she possessed would keep her from falling over.

She called at intervals for help, but her voice became as feeble as that of a tired child. Then suddenly the blood began to leap in her veins and her heart to throb with a new hope. From the heights above an answering voice came to her cry – a strong, resolute voice that seemed to beat back her fears and to assure her of deliverance. She recognised the voice in a moment, and the warm blood surged in a torrent to her neck and face.

She could be patient now. She lay quite still and waited. How her deliverance was to be effected she did not know. She did not trouble to debate the question. She gave herself up unconsciously to a stronger will and a stronger personality. He had heard her call and *he* was coming to save her.

Who the *he* was she did not know. She had seen him only once. She did not even know his name. But she felt instinctively that he was a brave man. He had a strong face, a stern yet tender mouth, and kind and sympathetic eyes.

The task might be difficult, but, of course, he would succeed. He was strong of limb as well as resolute in purpose. Moreover, a face like his bespoke a resourceful mind. He was no common man. She felt that the moment she saw him; her instinct told her also that he was an honourable man, or she would never have dared to speak to him. Women know without being told when

they are in the presence of bad men.

She had thought of him scores of times since their one and only meeting. Had wondered who he was and what he was, and had speculated on the chances of meeting him again. He was the only man she had met since her arrival in England who had impressed her. She had enjoyed her conversations with the fishermen and the farmers and the small shopkeepers, had sampled the curate and the vicar and the few county people who had called at the Hall; but her second thought and her third thought had been given to the lonely man who sat on the cliffs, with his big dreamy eyes fixed on the sunset.

She was glad for some reason that it was he who had found her, and not Sir Charles. Sir Charles would fume and scold and declare there was no possible way of saving her. The "lonely man" might not talk very much, but he would act.

It seemed a long time since he had responded to her cry, but she was not in the least impatient. Confidence was coming steadily back into her heart, and the fascination of the abyss was slowly passing away. She did not dare open her eyes yet. She would wait till the stranger called her again. Her hand and arm were very cramped; she was uncomfortably near the lip of the ledge. Her strength – in spite of the new hope – was a steadily diminishing quantity, but she was quite sure she would be able to hold on a good many minutes yet.

Then clear and distinct came the voice again – from below this time, instead of from above. How wildly her heart throbbed

in spite of all her efforts to be calm, but she flung her answer back as cheerily as possible. She would not make herself appear a greater coward than she really was.

"How did you get there?" The question was abrupt, and the voice sounded almost close to her ears.

"My foot slipped and I fell," she replied.

"You fell?" he questioned, in a tone of incredulity, and he swept the face of the cliff above her.

"Oh! I see," he went on a moment later. "You took a path further to the south."

"Cannot you reach me?" she called with an undertone of anxiety in her voice.

For a moment he did not answer. He was anxious not to discourage her, and yet he could see no chance of getting her down alive.

"Can you hold on much longer?" he asked at length.

"Not much," she replied, frankly. "I guess I'm near the end."

"No, don't say that," he said, encouragingly; "keep your heart up a little longer. I must try another tack."

"You cannot reach me?" the question ended almost in a cry.

"Not from this point," he answered, cheerfully. "But we've not got to the end of all things yet," and he began to retrace his steps.

"Are you leaving me?" she called, feebly.

"Never," he answered, and there was something in his tone that made her heart leap wildly.

"I see the path you took," he said a moment later, but though

he spoke cheerfully he had no real hope of saving her.

CHAPTER V
A PERILOUS TASK

Rufus reached a point at length from which he was able to look down on the prostrate figure of Madeline Grover. She was lying almost flat on her face, with her right hand thrust into a cleft of the rock.

For several minutes no word had passed between them. She was afraid to ask any more questions lest she should hear from his lips that her case was hopeless. He was afraid to buoy her up with empty words that would end in nothing.

She could hear distinctly the sound of his footsteps as he threaded his way in and out among the pinnacles of rock, she could even hear his breathing at times. She knew when he stood above her without being told.

That there was peril in his enterprise she knew. He was risking his life to save hers. He, a stranger, upon whom she had not the smallest claim. It was a brave and generous thing to do, and she began to doubt whether she ought to allow him to take such risk.

His life was of infinitely greater value than hers – at least, so she told herself. He was a man and might accomplish something great for the race. She was only a girl, and girls were plentiful, and a good many of them useless, and she was not at all sure that she did not belong to the latter class. At any rate, she had never

done anything yet, had as a matter of fact, never been expected to do anything, and if she lived till she was a hundred she was not sure that she would ever be able to do anything that would be of the least benefit to the world.

She was the first to break the silence. "Don't risk your life for my sake," she said, and she managed to keep all trace of emotion out of her voice.

"And why not?" he asked.

"I am not worth it," she replied. "I had no business to get into danger."

"You did not know the risks you ran," he replied, kindly.

"I might have known; I had been warned often enough."

"We have all to learn by experience," he said, with a short laugh. "Now let us get to work."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Get on to your feet, if possible. Don't open your eyes, and keep your face towards the cliff. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand, and I will try."

"Take your time over it," he said, cheerfully. "I expect you feel pretty stiff, don't you? Slip your right hand up the crevice. I will be eyes for you, and tell you what to do."

She obeyed him implicitly. His firm, resolute voice gave her courage. The nearness of his presence imparted strength and determination. If she felt a coward she would not let him see it. He might not feel any great admiration for her, that was not at all likely, since she had acted so foolishly, but she hoped he would

not feel contempt.

She stood at length upright with her face against the cliff.

"Now don't open your eyes," he said, "and please do what I tell you."

"I am in your hands," she replied.

"You will be directly, I hope," he answered, with a laugh, "but in the meanwhile move slowly in this direction."

"That's right," he continued, a little later. "Come on, I will tell you when to stop."

She sidled on steadily inch by inch, while he watched her with fast-beating heart.

"That will do," he said at length. "Now reach out your left hand as far as possible."

She obeyed at once, and a moment later he held it in his own firm grasp.

The colour came into her face when she felt his fingers close round hers, and her heart beat perceptibly faster.

"So far, so good," he said, cheerily. "Now the next step is not with your hand, but with your foot. It will be a very long stride for you, but you've got to do it. Don't open your eyes. And in the first place lean as far as you dare in this direction."

She obeyed him instantly. "That will do," he called. "Now just on a level with your chin is a hole in the rock. Get your right hand into it, if you can, and hold tight."

"That's right," he said, brightly. "Now for the long stride."

She began very slowly and carefully. Her heart was thumping

as though it would come through her side. She knew that beneath her was empty space.

"That's right," he went on, "just a little farther – another inch – a quarter of an inch more; there you are! Don't speak and don't open your eyes. When you are ready let me know. Push your foot a little farther on the ledge if you can – that is it. It will be a big effort for you, but I have you fast on this side. Bend your body forward as much as you can. When you are ready, say so, and give a lurch in this direction, letting go with your right hand at the same moment. Do you understand?"

"Yes." The answer came in a whisper.

It was an awful moment for both. She drew a long breath, and cried "now." For a second she seemed poised in mid-air.

"Lean forward," he almost shrieked.

She clutched eagerly at the bare rocks in front of her, but there was nothing she could grasp.

Rufus felt his heart stop.

"Open your eyes," he cried, "and spring." It was her last chance, the last chance for both, in fact, for if she fell she would drag him with her.

Her confidence in him was absolute. She did in a moment what she was told. He pulled her towards him with a jerk that nearly dislocated her shoulder. Then both his arms closed round her, and he sank back into a deep and safe recess behind a large pinnacle of rock.

For several minutes she lost consciousness. Her head drooped

upon his shoulder, her cheeks became as pale as the dead.

He would have given all he possessed at that moment to have kissed her lips. It was the strongest temptation that ever came to him. It was the first time in his experience that so beautiful a face had been so close to his own, and the impulse to claim toll was all but irresistible; but he fought the temptation, and conquered. He felt that it would be a cowardly thing to do.

His reverence for women was one of the strongest traits in his character. Felix Muller had told him more than once in his cynical way that he reverenced women because he did not know them. Rufus admitted that it might be so; but his reverence remained. It was nearly all that was left of his early religious faith – a remnant of a complicated creed, but it influenced his life more profoundly than he knew.

He watched the colour come slowly back into Madeline's pale face with infinite interest. How beautiful she was, how finely pencilled were her eyebrows, how perfect the contour of her dimpled chin. Her hair had become loose, and a long rich tress sported itself over the sleeve of his coat. The slanting sunlight played upon it, and turned it to bronze, and then to gold.

Her eyelids trembled after a while, then she opened them slowly, and looked up into his face, with a wondering expression, then her lips parted in a smile. A moment later she sat up, while a wave of crimson mounted suddenly to her face.

"I am so sorry to have given you so much trouble," she said, hurriedly.

"Let us not talk about that until we get safe down from this height," he said, with a smile.

"Oh! I was forgetting," she said, with some little confusion. "But the rest is comparatively easy, isn't it?"

"Comparatively," he replied. "But there are several very awkward places to be negotiated."

"It was wicked of me to put any one to so much trouble and risk. I do hope you will forgive me," and she looked appealingly up into his face.

"I hope you will not talk any more about trouble," he answered. "To have served you will be abundant compensation."

"It is kind of you to say nice things," she answered, looking at the yellow sand below; "but I feel very angry with myself all the same. You told me when we met on the top weeks and weeks ago that the cliffs were very dangerous. I don't know what possessed me to think I could climb to the top."

"You are not the first to make the attempt," he answered. "A visitor was killed at this very point only last summer."

"A girl?"

"No, a young man."

"I shall never attempt to do anything so foolish again, and I shall never forget that but for you I should have lost my life. It was surely a kind providence that sent you; don't you think so?"

"Do you think so?" he questioned, with a smile.

"I would like to think so, anyhow," she answered, seriously. "And yet it sounds conceited, doesn't it? If I were anybody of

importance it would be different. I don't wonder you smile at the idea of providence interfering to save a chit of a girl after all."

"I don't know that I smiled at the idea," he answered, turning away his head. "If there is any interference or any interposition in human affairs, why should not you be singled out as well as anybody else?"

"Well, you see, it would presuppose, wouldn't it? that I was a person of some value, or of some use in the world?"

"You may be of very great use in the world."

"Ah! now you flatter me. What can an ordinary girl do?"

"I do not know," he answered. "We none of us can tell what lies hidden in the chambers of destiny. You may be – "

"What?"

"I cannot say."

"But you were going to mention something."

"Second thoughts are sometimes best," and he turned his head, and smiled frankly in her face.

"Now you are tantalising," she said, with a laugh; "but I will not find fault with you. I cannot forget how much you have risked for my sake."

"Had we not better try and complete the journey?" he questioned. "We are not out of the wood yet, and the tide is coming in rapidly."

She rose slowly to her feet, and steadied herself against the cliff. She was very stiff and cramped, and a good deal bruised.

He followed her example with a hardly suppressed groan.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, looking at him eagerly.

"Not at all," he answered, gaily. "A few scratches, but nothing to speak of. Now let me walk in front, and you can lean on my shoulder."

Neither spoke again for a long time. Rufus picked his way with great caution, and she was too frightened to run any more unnecessary risks.

They were within a dozen feet or so of the beach, and he with his back to the sea was helping her down a slippery bit of rock, when suddenly a stone gave way beneath his foot, and he was precipitated to the bottom. Feeling himself going he let go her hand, or he would have dragged her with him. With a little cry of alarm she sat down to save herself, while he disappeared from sight.

She was on her feet, however, in an instant, and scrambled quickly down to his side. He was lying on a broad slab of rock with his right leg doubled under him.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, eagerly and excitedly.

"A little," he answered with a pitiful smile.

She came and knelt by his side, and took his hand in hers. "Cannot I help you to get up?" she inquired.

"I am not sure," he said, pulling a very wry face. "I'm very much afraid I shall have to lie here until you can get assistance. You see it is my turn now."

"But what is the matter?" she asked, eagerly.

"I fear my leg is broken," he said, knitting his brows, as if in

pain. "Something went with a snap, and I'm afraid to move."

"But you cannot lie here," she said, "for the tide is coming in. Oh! let me help you to get up. Do try your best."

"I will, for your sake," he answered, and he smiled at her in a way she never forgot.

"Oh, I shall never forgive myself," she said, chokingly, and the tears filled her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks. "All this comes of my stupid folly!"

"No, you must not blame yourself," he insisted. "You could not help the stone giving way. Now give me your hand. How strong you are! There, I'm in a perpendicular position once more," but while he spoke he became deathly pale, and the perspiration stood in big drops on his brow.

"Lean on me," she said; "lean all your weight on me."

He smiled pitifully, but he could not trust himself to speak.

He put his right arm about her neck, and used her as a crutch. This was no time to stand on ceremony. But the pain was too intolerable to move more than a few steps. With a groan he fell against the sloping foot of the cliff. "You must leave me here," he said, with a gasp.

"Leave you here?" she cried. "Why you will drown."

"We shall both drown if you stay," he answered.

"It doesn't matter about me a bit," she wailed, and she brushed away the blinding tears with her hand. "But you – you – oh! you must be saved at all costs."

"Perhaps, if you make haste you will be able to get help before

it is too late," he said.

"But how? Oh! I will do anything for you. Tell me what I can do for the best."

"Make your way into town as fast as you can. Tell the first man you meet how I am situated. Let one party come round here with a boat, and another party come over the cliffs with a stretcher. Everything depends on the time it takes."

"Oh! I will fly all the distance," she said, with liquid eyes; "but who shall I say is hurt? I do not even know your name."

"Rufus Sterne," he answered. "Everybody in St. Gaved knows me."

She looked at him for a moment, pityingly, pleadingly, then rushed away over the level sand in the direction of Penwith Cove. She forgot her bruises and stiffness, and did not heed that every step was a stab of pain.

Rufus Sterne was lying helpless – helpless because he had risked his life to save her from the consequences of her folly. And all the while the tide was coming in, and he would be watching it rising higher and higher, and if help did not reach him before the cold salt water swept over his face, he would be drowned, and she would be the cause of his death.

How she climbed the zig-zag path out of Penwith Cove she never knew. She ran and ran until she felt as though she could not go a step farther even to save her life, and if her own life only had been at stake she would have lain down on the cliffs and taken her chance.

But it was *his* life that was in jeopardy, and to her excited imagination his life seemed of more value than the lives of a hundred ordinary people.

She had read of heroes in her girlhood days, and thrilled over the story of their exploits, but no hero of fact or fiction had ever so touched her heart as this lonely man who was lying helpless at the foot of the cliffs, watching with patient and suffering eyes the inflowing of the tide.

"Oh! he must be saved," she kept saying to herself, "for he deserves to live. And I must be the means of saving him."

She stumbled into St. Gaved rather than ran. Her hat had disappeared, her glorious hair fell in billows on her shoulders and down her back, her eyes were wild and tearless, her lips wide apart, her breath came and went in painful gasps. She nearly stumbled over one or two children, and then she pulled up suddenly in front of a policeman.

Constable Greensplat stared at her as though she had escaped from Bodmin lunatic asylum.

"There's – not – a – moment – to – be – lost," she began, and she brought out the words in jerks. "Rufus Sterne is lying with a broken leg at the foot of the cliffs half-way between here and Penwith Cove."

Then she staggered to a lamp-post and put her arm round it. A small group of people gathered in a moment.

"How did he break his leg?" Greensplat asked, putting on an official air.

"He slipped over a rock," she answered; "but there's no time for explanations. The tide is coming in, and if he's not rescued quickly he'll be drowned. He told me to ask that one party go round with a boat, and the other go over the cliffs with a – a stret – " But she did not finish the sentence. The light of consciousness went out like the flame of a candle before a sudden gust of wind. She reached out her hands blindly and appealingly, staggered toward the nearest house, and before anyone could reach her side she fell with a thud, and lay in a dead faint on the floor.

CHAPTER VI
FAITH AND PHILOSOPHY

Rufus watched the rising tide with as much composure as he could command. It was the first time in his life that his philosophy had been put to the test, and the strain brought it near to breaking-point. He found it easy enough to pick holes in the creed in which he had been reared, and had rather prided himself that he had shaken himself free from what he called the bondage of ecclesiastical superstition. But there was something that still remained and which he was scarcely conscious of until now – something which he could not very well shape into words; something for which he could find no name.

His landlady, Mrs. Tuke, called him an unbeliever, and he accepted the description without demur; but a negative implies a positive. Unbelief in one direction means belief in the opposite. He certainly did not believe the dogmas his grandfather insisted upon with so much passion and vehemence. He had laughed to scorn the thunderings of the little Bethel to which he had been compelled to listen as a lad. He had torn the swaddling clothes of orthodoxy into tatters, and cast them from him as though they were unclean. He had wandered for three or four years in the realm of pure negation, scorning all creeds and denying all religion. Yet now, when life seemed narrowing to its final close,

he discovered as in a sudden accession of light, that the last word on the subject had not been spoken.

For the first time in his life he realised that religion is not a creed, nor an ordinance; that it is not something apprehended by the exercise of the mind, and that it is only remotely related to ecclesiasticism. Its roots went deeper. It is instinct; it is of the very substance of life.

He had drawn himself as far up the shelving cliff as possible, though every movement was torture, and with steady eyes he watched the tide rising higher and higher. There was something fascinating in its steady approach. It was not an angry tide, breaking and foaming and struggling to reach its prey. It came on with slow and tranquil movement. There was scarcely a ripple on its surface. Far out in the line of the sinking sun it was like a great sheet of gold. Its voice was a low monotone, as it washed the pebbles in a slow and languid way. Here and there it raised itself like a sleeping monster taking in a long breath, but the swell never broke into sound or foam.

And yet to Rufus Sterne it never seemed more relentlessly cruel. Its stealthy creep and crawl seemed positively vindictive. Its voice was no longer the tinkle of silver bells, but the cynical laughter of fiends.

He made a desperate effort to pull himself still higher up the cliff, but that proved to be impossible. He could only lie still and wait. When the tide reached its flood it would be a dozen feet above where he lay. Would he sleep soundly or would dreams

disturb his rest?

He had very little hope of being rescued alive. It was a long way round by Penwith Cove to St. Gaved, and even if the beautiful girl he had rescued – he did not know her name – ran all the distance, and men with the stretcher ran all the way back, it seemed scarcely possible that they could reach him in time.

He would like to live. The desire for life was never stronger than now. It was not so much that he was afraid of death – he was a *little* afraid of it, he was compelled to be honest with himself – but two things seemed to intensify his desire for life. The first was his great invention, which was now in process of being perfected; and the other was —

Well the other was an indefinable something which he was not able to shape into words. Something vaguely connected with the sweet-eyed girl whom he had that afternoon rescued from death. He did not understand what subtle influence had been set in motion; did not comprehend the nature of the spell, but the fact remained that the world seemed a brighter place since she came to the Hall, and life a richer inheritance.

It was not a matter that he could discuss even with himself. It was too shadowy and elusive. To attempt to reason the matter out would be to destroy a sweet illusion – for that it was illusion he had no doubt. And yet the illusion, or the impression, or the sensation, or whatever it might be, was so delightful that he had not the courage to touch it.

Life had not possessed so many pleasures for him that he

could afford to scorch with the white flame of logic even the faintest and most shadowy of them. He had had a hard and unloved childhood, a youth from which all sympathy had been excluded, and a manhood of badly compensated toil and unrealised ambition. And now when life's stern and dusty way seemed opening out into the green pastures of success, and there had strayed across his path a sweet-eyed stranger whose very smile breathed hope and peace, it was not at all surprising that the desire for life burned with an intenser flame than ever.

He counted his heart beats, and watched the tide creeping higher and higher. The nearer it came the swifter appeared to be its approach. The gold on the sea was giving place to grey, the fire was dying out of the Western sky, a chill wind sprang up and whispered in the crevices of the cliffs. The gulls circled high above his head, and cried in melancholy tones. He shivered a little, perhaps with fear, perhaps because the evening was growing cold.

Did he regret saving the stranger's life and losing his own in doing it? On the whole, he did not think he did. It was surely a noble thing to save a human life.

"But why?" The old question pulled him up with a suddenness that almost startled him.

"Wherein lay the nobleness?" Nature set no store on human life – earthquake, tempest, pestilence, famine, swept human beings into the jaws of death by the thousand and tens of thousands. And mankind was as contemptuous of human life as

nature herself. It's professed regard was but a hollow sham.

Was not the first law of life that every man should look after himself? What had he gained by the sacrifice? What had the world gained? Was not the life sacrificed of infinitely greater value than the life saved? His great discovery would now never see the light, the toil of years would be wasted, the travail of his brain would end in darkness and silence, and in return a foolish girl would dance her heedless way through life.

But in the great crises of life logic perpetually fails, and philosophy proves but a broken staff. Neither logic nor philosophy comforted Rufus in that solemn and trying hour. He could not reason it out, but deep down in his soul he felt that death was far less terrible than being a coward. Better die in the service of others than live merely for self.

The tide had reached his feet, and was beginning to creep round his legs. He drew up the foot that he still had the use of, for the water felt icy cold. All the gold had gone out of the sky by this time, and the sea was of a leaden hue. Moreover the monster seemed as if waking from his sleep. Here and there the long swell broke into a line of foam, and the waves began to leap over the low-lying rocks.

He began to talk to himself; perhaps to keep his courage up, for it was very weird and lonely lying under the dark cliffs, while the cruel sea crept steadily higher.

"I wonder if dying will be so very painful," he said. "I wonder if the struggle will last long, and when it is over, and I am

lying here with the cold waves surging above me, what then? Of course, I shall know nothing about it, for there is nothing beyond. Science can find nothing, and pure reason rejects the suggestion. I shall be as the rocks and the seaweed."

He shuddered painfully and tried to drag himself higher up the cliff, then with a groan he laid his head against the rock and closed his eyes.

It was foolish to struggle. He had better meet his fate like a man. The tide was rising round him rapidly now. The cold seemed to be numbing his heart. The struggle could not be long at the most.

"She will think of me," he said to himself, and a smile played round the corners of his mouth. "I have earned her gratitude and she is not likely to forget. Not that her gratitude can do me any good. And yet – "

He opened his eyes again and looked out over the darkening sea.

"If one were only sure," he said, with a gasp. "Why does my nature protest so violently? Why this instinctive looking beyond if there is nothing beyond which can respond to the look? Why this longing for reunion, for vision, for immortality?"

His lips moved though no sound escaped them. Creeds might be false, and yet religion might be true. The Church might be a sham, and yet the Kingdom of God a reality. Prayer might be degraded or its meaning misunderstood, and yet it might be as natural and as necessary as breathing. Philosophy might be

an interesting hone on which to sharpen one's wits, but utterly useless in the crucial moments of life.

He swept the horizon with a despairing glance, then closed his eyes once more.

Meanwhile St. Gaved was in a state of considerable excitement. Madeline Grover's breathless story had set every one on the *qui vive*, and for several minutes everyone was wondering what all the rest would do.

Several clumsy, though willing pairs of hands carried the unconscious girl into Mrs. Tuke's cottage, which happened to be the nearest at hand. The policeman hurried down to the quay, to convey the news to the fishermen, after which he made for the police-station and fished out from a lumber room an antiquated ambulance. All this took considerable time, and Madeline had nearly recovered consciousness again when the little procession started out over the cliffs in the direction of Penwith Cove.

Madeline might have remained in a state of faint much longer than she did, but for Mrs. Tuke's extreme measures. Sousing the patient's face with cold water appeared to produce no effect. But when she placed a saucer of burnt or burning feathers under her nostrils the result was almost instantaneous.

Mrs. Juliff, who assisted in the operation, declared it was enough to make a dead man sneeze, and there was reason for the remark. Madeline came to herself with violent gaspings and splutterings, and stared round her with a look of terror and perplexity in her eyes.

"There, my dear, I hope you feel better now?" Mrs. Tuke said, encouragingly, giving the patient another sniff of the pungent odour.

"Better," Madeline gasped. "Why you suffocate me," and she made an attempt to reach the door.

"No, no, don't try to walk," Mrs. Tuke said, soothingly. "You can't do no good to nobody by being flustered."

"But Mr. Sterne is drowning by slow inches," she cried, "and I promised – "

"Yes, my dear," Mrs. Tuke interrupted, "and everything is being done as can be done. I'm terribly upset myself. But I always feared evil would befall him."

"Why did you fear that?" Madeline asked, in a tone of surprise.

"Well, my dear, it's a serious thing to remove the ancient landmarks, to deny the faith, and to put the Bible to open shame as it were."

Madeline could hardly help smiling in spite of her anxiety, as Mrs. Tuke further enlarged on Rufus Sterne's moral and spiritual decadence.

"Not that I wish to bring against him a railing accusation," Mrs. Tuke said, pulling herself up suddenly; "far be it from me to judge anyone."

"But you appear to have judged him very freely," Madeline said, a little indignantly.

"But not in anger, my dear, but only in love. He is a good

lodger in many ways, pays regular and keeps good hours. But the Sabbaths! Oh, my dear, it cuts me to the heart, and he the grandson of a minister."

"He is a very brave man, anyhow," Madeline said, warmly, "and I owe my life to him. Oh, I do hope he will be rescued before it's too late."

"And I hope so, too. It will be terrible for him to go unprepared into the other world, and as a lodger he would not be easy to replace."

Madeline darted a somewhat contemptuous glance at Mrs. Tuke, then made for the door again. "I cannot stay here doing nothing," she said, "while he may be drowning," and she rushed out into the rapidly-growing twilight.

She wondered why she should feel so weak and exhausted, forgetting that she had tasted no food since lunch. In spite of weakness, however, she hurried on back over the cliffs. She could not rest until she knew the best or the worst. She felt acutely the burden of her responsibility. She was the cause of all the trouble. If she had not run in the teeth of everyone whose advice was worth taking this would not have happened. It was hard that the penalty of her foolishness should be paid by another, and if this young man were drowned, she believed she would never be able to forgive herself to the day of her death. Away in front of her the cliffs were dotted with people who had come out from St. Gaved on hearing the news. Some were standing still and looking seaward, others were hurrying forward in the direction

of Penwith Cove. A few were crouched on the edge of the cliff and were peering over, to the imminent risk of life and limb.

Several fishing boats were rounding St. Gaved's Point, and some were hugging the shore so closely that they could not be seen unless one stood on the very edge of the cliff.

Madeline's lips kept moving in prayer as she walked. Her chief concern was lest the burden of this young man's death should be upon her soul. There were other considerations no doubt. She would be sorry in any case for a life of so much promise to be so suddenly cut off. But as she had seen him only twice she would soon get over a very natural regret, so long as no blame attached to her.

The thought crossed her mind at length that her prayer was a very selfish one. She was concerned only for her own peace of mind. The welfare of Rufus Sterne apart from her own responsibility was not a matter that troubled her.

Then a question slowly entered her brain, and the warm blood mounted in a torrent to her neck and face.

The next moment all the people on the cliff began to run in the direction of Penwith Cove. She stood still and pressed her hand to her side to check the violent throbbing of her heart. She felt as though she could not walk a step further, even if her life depended upon it.

"They have found him," she whispered to herself. "I wonder whether alive or dead."

And she sank down on the turf and waited. The sea was

surging among the rocks below with a dirge-like sound, the stars were coming out in the sky above, the distant landscape was disappearing in a sombre haze.

A little later her attention was caught by the sound of running feet, and looking up she saw the people who, a few minutes before, were hurrying in the direction of Penwith Cove, were now retracting their steps with all possible haste.

She rose slowly to her feet and waited. A swift-footed lad had out-distanced all the rest.

"Have they found him?" she questioned, eagerly, as he drew near.

"No, Miss," he answered. "The tide is too high; there's no getting along under the cliffs."

"Then he's drowned," she said, with a gasp.

"Well, it looks like it unless a boat has got to him in time. I want to get down to the quay to see," and without waiting to answer any further questions he hurried away at the top of his speed.

CHAPTER VII
THE NICK OF TIME

On the return journey to St. Gaved Madeline lagged painfully behind. Her strength was completely spent. She was as eager as any of the others to know if the fishermen had rescued Rufus Sterne, but her limbs refused to render obedience to her will. But for her intense desire to know the fate of the man who had rescued her, she would have laid down on the spongy turf, fearless of all consequences.

What her friends at the Hall might think of her absence had never once occurred to her. The events of the afternoon had been so painful and startling that all minor matters had been driven out of her mind. Hence when the voice of Sir Charles sounded close to her ear she looked up with a start of mingled inquiry, and surprise.

"Madeline, Madeline," he exclaimed. "What have you been doing with yourself? We've been hunting all over the place for you."

"Oh, I am so sorry," she answered, wearily. "I'd forgotten all about you. I've had such a – a – such a terrible adventure."

"Such a terrible adventure," he exclaimed, with a note of alarm in his voice. "Has anyone dared – "

"No, no," she interrupted. "No one would molest me in these

parts, but I have come near losing my life," and she sank to the ground, feeling she could not go a step further.

Sir Charles blew a policeman's whistle which he carried in his pocket, and a few minutes later several of the Hall servants came running up.

"Miss Grover has met with an accident!" he explained. "One of you go and fetch the brougham at once, and another run into St. Gaved and fetch the doctor."

Madeline was too exhausted to protest. She was barely conscious where she was or what had happened. The events of the afternoon seemed more like a dream to her than a reality. She heard other voices speaking near her, Beryl's among the rest, but she was too utterly exhausted to pay any attention. She found herself lifted into a carriage at length, and after that she remembered no more until she opened her eyes and discovered that she was lying snug and warm in her own bed.

Meanwhile the little quay had become black with people waiting the return of Sam Tregarrick's boat. Sam had been the first to grasp the purport of Constable Greensplat's message, and without waiting to ask questions or consult with his neighbours, he and his son Tom had bent to their oars and pulled with all possible haste in the direction indicated.

Rounding St. Gaved point they hugged the coast as closely as possible, keeping a sharp look out all the time for any moving figure on the dark line of rocks. The beach was completely under water by the time they had rounded the point.

"It's us or nobody, father," Tom said to his father, as he gave to his oar a swifter stroke.

"What do you mean by that, sonny?" Sam asked, staring hard at the coast line.

"I mean that those who've gone over the downs will never be able to get round Penwith Cove way in time."

"It looks like it, sartinly," Sam answered.

"Why the tide is two foot up the cliffs already," Tom protested. "And Greensplat ain't the sort to wet his feet, if he knows it."

"Fortunately there ain't no sea running," the elder man remarked after a pause. "So if he can drag hisself up the rocks a bit, he may come to nothing worse than a bit of a fright."

"Rufus Sterne ain't the sort of chap they make cowards of," Tom replied, doggedly. "And if he's got to drown he'll drown, and he won't make no fuss 'bout it, nuther."

"Nobody wants to drown, sonny, afore his time," Sam answered, mildly. "It's aisy enough to talk 'bout dying when you're safe and sound and out of danger; but when you're face to face with it – well, a man is on'y a man at best."

"I say nothing agin that, father," Tom answered; "but heaps of folks squeal afore they're hurt, and send for the parson to pray with 'em afore the doctor's had time to feel their pulse. But Rufus Sterne don't belong to that class."

"I fear he wouldn't send for the parson in no case," Sam answered, thoughtfully; "but do you see anything, sonny, just to the right of that big rock?"

Tom slackened his oar for an instant; then he shouted at the top of his voice, "Ahoy there! Ahoy!"

A moment later a white handkerchief was fluttered feebly for an instant, and then allowed to drop.

"It's he sure 'nough," Tom said, excitedly; "but he's got to the far end. If we don't pull like blazes, father, we shall be too late."

From that moment father and son wasted no more of their breath in talk. They felt as though they were engaged in a neck to neck race with death. The distance seemed no more than a stone's throw, and yet though they pulled with might and main it appeared to grow no less. Tom was stroke, and the elder man bravely kept time.

The wide Atlantic swell rocked them gently. Now the grey speck on the face of the cliffs disappeared as they sank into a hollow, and now it came into full view again as they rose on the gently heaving tide.

"Ahoy!" Tom called once or twice as they drew nearer, but there was no response, and both men began to fear that they were too late. Moreover, as they neared the cliffs they had to pick their way. Hidden rocks showed their dark pinnacles for a moment in all directions.

There was no time, however, for excess of caution. If they were to succeed they must be daring, even to the point of recklessness.

They could see Rufus now, reclining against a rock; he appeared to be clutching it tightly with both hands. Now and then

the swell of the tide surged almost up to his neck.

"Pull like blazes, father," Tom shouted, excitedly, and they ran the boat, defying all risks, close up to Rufus' side.

"Hold tight, mate," Tom called, encouragingly; "father and I'll do the job, if you keep a steady nerve."

"I'll try," was the feeble response.

"Leave the getting him in to me, dad," Tom said, turning to his father. "You keep on this side, or we shall capsize in two jiffeys."

The elder man obeyed. The boat drifted almost broadside on. Tom laid his oar aside and watched his opportunity. It was clear enough that Rufus had no strength left. Nevertheless his brain was clear still.

Tom explained the *modus operandi* which he proposed, and Rufus smiled approvingly. It was a ticklish operation, the boat was not large, and an inch too near the rocks might prove the destruction of all.

At a signal from Tom, Rufus let go his hold of the rocks and reached out his hands to his rescuer. The next moment he felt himself floating on the tide. Sam, with his oar, pushed into deeper water, and then began the delicate operation of getting a half drowned man, handicapped by a broken leg, into the boat.

To Rufus it was torture beyond anything he had ever felt or imagined. He felt so sick that he feared he would lose consciousness altogether; even pain at that moment was better than oblivion. Now that life was in sight again, the passion for existence seemed to burn with a stronger flame than ever.

Tom dragged him over the side of the boat as tenderly as he was able. It was a breathless moment for the two fishermen. The little craft came within an ace of being capsized, and nothing but the skill of the older man saved her from turning turtle. Rufus was too far gone to realise the danger. The sickening torture was more than he could endure, and unconsciousness mercifully intervened.

Father and son laid him in as easy a position in the bottom of the boat as they knew how, then they took their oars again and pulled for home. It was growing rapidly dark by this time, and a cool and grateful breeze was sweeping across the wide expanse of sea.

They saw the little harbour black with people when they rounded the point, accompanied by a dozen other boats that had come too late upon the scene to be of any service.

A shout went up that could be heard at the far end of the village when it became known that Rufus Sterne had been rescued alive, for though many people regarded him as "a cut above his station," as they expressed it, yet he was with the majority of the villagers exceedingly popular.

Besides, it had got to be known by this time that the accident which had brought him into a position of such imminent peril had been caused by trying to save the life of another.

In what that effort consisted was as yet by no means clear. But sufficient had been told by the lady visitor at the Hall to leave no doubt that it was through helping her he had met with his

accident. Hence, for the moment, Rufus was regarded in the light of a hero, and some people went so far as to suggest that if there was such a thing as gratitude in the world, Sir Charles Tregony would do something handsome for him.

It was fortunate, perhaps, for Rufus that he heard none of the irresponsible chatter that went on round him while he was being conveyed from the quay to Mrs. Tuke's cottage. Momentary glimmers of consciousness came back to him, but accompanied by such insufferable torture, that his very brain seemed to stagger under the shock.

Dr. Pendarvis had just returned from a long round in the country, and was listening to a more or less incoherent story told him by his wife, when there came a violent ring at the surgery bell.

"You say that Chester has gone to the Hall to see Miss Grover?" the Doctor questioned.

"That is as I understand it," his wife replied; "though I confess the story is a bit complicated."

"In which way?"

"Well, late this afternoon Miss Grover rushed into the town considerably dishevelled and in a state of breathless excitement, and told the first man she saw, which happened to be Greensplat, that Rufus Sterne was lying at the foot of the cliffs near Penwith Cove with a broken leg, and that if he wasn't rescued quickly he would be drowned."

"And has he been rescued?"

"I don't know. But some considerable time after one of the Hall servants came hurrying here for you, saying that you were wanted at once as Miss Grover had met with an accident, and as you were not at home, of course, Mr. Chester went."

"I don't see how the two things hang together," Dr. Pendarvis said, with knitted brows.

"Neither do I," replied his wife; "but there goes the surgery bell again."

Five minutes later Dr. Pendarvis was hurrying down the long main street in the direction of Mrs. Tuke's cottage. He found Rufus in a state of collapse, and with the broken limb so swollen that he made no attempt to set the bone.

"We will have to get the swelling down first," he explained in his old-fashioned way. "Meanwhile, we must make the patient as comfortable as possible."

What he said to himself was, "This is a case for Chester. These young men, with their hospital practice and their up-to-date methods, can make rings round the ordinary G.P."

When he got back to his house he found his assistant waiting for him.

"So you have been to the Hall, I understand?" he questioned. "Nothing serious, I hope?"

"Oh, no! an attack of nerves mainly. A few cuts and bruises, but they are scarcely more than skin deep. She's evidently had a narrow squeak though."

"Ah! I tried to get something out of Sterne, but he's in too

much pain to be very communicative."

"What was troubling Miss Grover most when I got there," Chester replied, "was the fear that he had not been rescued."

"An attachment between them already?" the elder man queried, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I don't think so," was the reply, "though naturally if a man saves a woman's life she becomes interested in him."

"Unless he happens to be a doctor, eh?"

"Oh! well, doctors do not count," Chester said, with a laugh.

"Perhaps women have no faith in our ability to save life," Dr. Pendarvis questioned.

"Oh, yes, I think they have," the younger man replied, slowly; "but then you see, we do it professionally. There is no touch of romance about it, and we are not supposed to take any risks."

"We take the fees instead," the older man laughed.

"When we can get them. But do you know in what relationship Miss Grover stands to the Tregony family?"

"Not the ghost of an idea. Sir Charles is as close as an oyster on the subject, and as far as I can make out, the girl is not in the habit of talking about herself."

"She's distinctly American," Chester said, thoughtfully.

"And therefore piquant and interesting?"

"I prefer English girls myself; that is, in so far as girls interest me at all."

"You think you are proof against their wiles?"

"I hope I am, though it is a matter on which one does not like

to boast."

"Better not," Pendarvis laughed, "better not. I've heard many men boast in my time, and seen them go down like ninepins before the whirlwind of a petticoat."

"It's a bit humiliating, don't you think?"

"It all depends on how you look at it. You see, we have to take human nature as it is, and not how we would like it to be. It is just because we are men that women triumph over us."

"Then you admit that they are our masters?"

"Not the least doubt of it. Of course, we keep up the pretence of being the head and all that. But a woman who knows her business can twist a man round her finger and thumb."

"I believe you, and for that reason I do not intend to get entangled in the yoke of bondage."

"Be careful," the older man laughed. "There are bright eyes and pretty frocks in an out-of-the-way place like St. Gaved. But let us get back to something more practical. I want you to call round and see Sterne first thing to-morrow morning."

"He has broken his leg, I suppose?"

"I fear it's a very bad fracture, and being tumbled about so much since the accident has not tended to mend matters. I hope by to-morrow morning the swelling will have subsided."

"It seems very unfortunate for him, for I understand he has some big scheme on hand which he is labouring to complete."

"So it is said. But I have no faith in these big schemes. Young men should keep to their legitimate work. It may be a mercy for

him if his scheme is knocked on the head." Saying which he bade his assistant good-night and retired to his own room.

CHAPTER VIII
THE SOUL'S AWAKENING

Two people did not sleep at all that night. Pain kept Rufus Sterne awake – an active brain banished slumber from the eyes of Madeline Grover. Possibly some subtle and intractable current of sympathy ran between the cottage and the mansion – some occult and undiscovered movement of the air between brain and brain or heart and heart, some telepathic communication that science had not scheduled yet. Be that as it may, neither Rufus nor Madeline could woo a wink of sleep. All through the long hours of the night they lay with wide-open eyes – the one weaving the threads of fancy into all imaginable shapes, the other fighting for the most part the twin demons of pain and fear.

Madeline lived through that fateful afternoon a thousand times. She recalled every incident, however trivial it might be. Memory would let nothing escape. Things that she scarcely noticed at the time became hugely significant. Simple words and gestures seemed to glow with new meanings.

She was not superstitious – at least she believed she was not. Neither was she a fatalist, and yet she had a feeling that for good or ill, her life was in some way or other bound up with this stranger. It was not his fault that he had come into her life. He had not sought her. The beginning of the acquaintanceship was

all on her side. She had made the first advance, and the whirligig of chance or the workings of an inscrutable providence had done all the rest.

In some respects it was scarcely pleasant to feel that she was so much in debt to a stranger. Whatever might happen in the future, or wherever her lot was cast, she would never be able to get away from the feeling that she owed her life to this Rufus Sterne. To make matters all the worse, he was suffering considerable pain and loss on her account. How much this accident might mean to him she had no means of knowing. All his immediate prospects might be wrecked in consequence. For a young man dependent on his own exertions to be incapacitated for two or three months might be a more serious matter than she could guess.

Sometimes she wished that some homely fisherman or ignorant ploughboy had rescued her. She might in such a case have given material compensation, and it would have been accepted with gratitude, and her obligation would be at an end.

But Rufus Sterne was a gentleman – that fact was beyond all dispute – and doubtless he had all the pride that generally attaches to genteel poverty. The obligation, therefore, would have to remain. There was, as far as she could see, no possible way of discharging it. To speak of compensation would be to insult him.

Behind all this there was another feeling: What did he think of her? Did he resent her intrusion into the quiet sanctuary of his life? Did he wish that she had never crossed his path? Was his thought of her at that moment such as her cheeks would redden

to hear? She wished she knew what he thought of her – what in his heart he felt. It would be humiliating if he regarded her with contempt, or even with mild dislike.

She would not live to be regarded by him even with indifference. Her cheeks grew hot when she made this confession to herself. If he had been a fisherman or a ploughboy it would not have mattered, and she would not have cared. But he was one of the most noticeable men she had ever seen. A man who would win a second look in any crowd. A man who – given a fair chance – would make his mark in the world.

She hoped that he was not very angry with her, that he was not writing her down in his mind as a foolish and headstrong girl. She would like, after all, to have his good opinion – like him to think that in saving her he had saved a life that was worth saving. It might not be true in fact, but she would like him to think so all the same.

To what end had he saved her? As she looked at her life stretching forward into the future she saw nothing great or heroic in it. It had all been mapped out for her, and mapped out in a very excellent way. The exhortation "take no thought for the morrow," was not needed in her case. Everything was being settled to everyone's satisfaction, her own included. She had only to fall in with the drift and current of events and all would be as she would like it to be.

Other women might have to plan and struggle, and labour and contrive; but in the scheme of her life such unpleasant things had

no place. All contingencies had been provided against. She did not need to take any thought for to-morrow.

"I'm not sure that my life was worth saving after all," she said to herself, a little bit fretfully. "It seems an aimless, selfish kind of thing as I look at it now. A poor woman who inspires her husband to do some great deed, even if she is incapable of any great deed herself, surely lives a nobler life than that which seems marked out for me."

Her cheeks grew red again. How proud she would be if she could be the inspiration of some great achievement! To give hope to some great soul struggling amid adverse circumstances would be an end worth living for. To stand by the side of a man she could look up to, and help him to win in the hard battle of life – that would be the crown of all existence.

She began to wonder, after a while, why such thoughts came to her. Why the future should look different from what it had always done. Why a thread of a different hue should show itself in the pattern that had been woven for her. Why a doubt should arise in her heart as to whether the absolutely best had been marked out for her.

Until to-night she had been quite content to take things as she found them. Of course, she had had her troubles, like other girls. It was a trouble to her that she had never known the love of her mother, a trouble that she had never been able to get on with her step-mother, a trouble when her father died – though, as she had seen very little of him for seven years previously, the sense of

loss was not so keen as it might have been. It was a trouble to her to say good-bye to her schoolfellows and friends, and cross the seas to a new home in England.

Of course, the last trouble had its compensations. To an American girl whose forebears were English, "The Old Country," as it is affectionately termed, is the land of romance, the home of chivalry, the cradle of heroes and of history. To see the things she had read about in her childhood, to visit spots made sacred by the blood of the heroic dead, to tread on the ground where kings have stood, to pay homage at the shrine of poets and seers – that would be worth crossing a thousand oceans for.

It is true she had been more than a little disappointed. Trewinion Hall was so far away from everywhere, and the people who visited it from time to time were very little to her taste. She would have liked to live in London always. Life and colour and movement were there. Its very streets were historic. Many of its public buildings were hoary with antiquity, and "rich with the spoils of time." The men and women of rank and name and power moved in and out amongst the crowd. History was being made from day to day in its Halls of Assembly.

St. Gaved seemed to her like a little place that had got stranded in the dim and distant past. The rest of the world had run away from it. It lived on its traditions because it had no hope of a future. Like the granite cliffs that stretched north and south, it never changed. Its business, its politics, its morals, its religion, were what they had been from time immemorial. A man who

said anything new, or advanced an opinion that was not strictly orthodox, was regarded with suspicion.

St. Gaved had its charm, no doubt. The charm of antiquity, the charm of leisureliness, the charm of immobility. Moreover, it was beautiful for situation. The cliffs were magnificent beyond anything she had ever dreamed. The great ocean was a never-failing source of interest. The valleys that cleft their way inland, the streams that lost themselves in tangled brakes of undergrowth, the hillsides rich in timber, the hedgerows that were masses of wild flowers, the moorlands yellow with gorse – all these things were a set off against its dull and slow-moving life.

Then, besides all that, life would not always be dull. Gervase was returning from India in the spring, and a great many things might happen then.

Gervase was Sir Charles' only son, and heir to the title and estates. He was a handsome soldier of the genuine military type, tall and straight, and not over-burdened with flesh. His hair was pale, his complexion ruddy, his voice harsh, his manner that of one born to command.

Madeline had met him three years before at Washington, and as he was in some far-off and round-about way related to her, he had escorted her to any number of receptions, and danced with her more times than she could count. She thought him then the most handsome man she had ever seen, especially in his uniform. She liked him, too, because he was so dogmatic and masterful;

there was nothing timid, or feeble, or retiring about him. He was a man who meant to have his own way, and generally got it.

His courage and daring also touched her heart and imagination. His talk had been mainly about shooting dervishes in Egypt and hunting tigers in India, and some of his exploits had thrilled her to the finger-tips. It puzzled her that he could talk so light-heartedly about the slaughter of human beings, even though they were Arabs and Hindoos, but then he was trained to be a soldier, and soldiers were trained to kill.

It was one of those things she had looked forward to with the greatest interest in coming to England. She would see Gervase Tregony again. It seemed to her like a special providence that Sir Charles Tregony should be her trustee until she was twenty-one, and of course nothing could be kinder than that he should invite her to stay at the Hall as long as she liked – to make her permanent abode there if she chose to do so.

She was glad to accept the invitation for several reasons. In the first place, it was impossible to live with her step-mother, who for some reason appeared to resent her very existence. In the second place, she longed, with all a school-girl's longing, for change, and to see England and Europe had been the very height of her ambition. And in the third place – and this was a secret that she safely guarded in her own bosom – she would the sooner see Captain Tregony; for if she were in England she would be among the first to give him welcome on his return from India, and she imagined with a little thrill at her heart how his face would light

up and his eyes sparkle when he saw her standing behind the rest, waiting to give him the warmest welcome of all.

This little secret added a peculiar charm and zest to life, and all the more so because every arrangement had been made respecting her future, as though Captain Tregony had no existence. She imagined sometimes that her father had been under the guidance of a special providence when he made Sir Charles Tregony her trustee, that Sir Charles was under the same kindly influence when he accepted the responsibility and took her to the shelter of his own home.

Had she known the scheming and manœuvering that went on at an earlier date, her faith in providence would have been rudely shaken. But she had no idea that she was only a pawn in a game that was being played by others. It was some solace to John Grover, even when dying, that his only child would mix with the English aristocracy and probably become "my lady" before she had finished her earthly course.

To John Grover, who had started life with empty pockets, who had struggled through years of grinding poverty, who had "struck oil," as he termed it, in middle life and made a huge fortune before he was fifty – to such a man the thought of his daughter marrying an English officer who was also heir to a baronetcy was a distinction almost too great to be shaped into words.

To have married the President of the United States would have been nothing comparable to it. It was a proud day for John Grover when he discovered that his first wife, the mother of Madeline,

was remotely connected with the Tregonys of Trewinion Hall, Cornwall. He wrote claiming relationship with Sir Charles on the strength of it, much to the Baronet's annoyance and disgust. But several years later, when John Grover had become a millionaire, Sir Charles decided to hunt him up. A penniless man was one thing, a man with a million was another.

Sir Charles himself was as poor as a church mouse, that is taking his position into account. His son and heir, Gervase, was a young man of very expensive tastes and very lax notions of economy. Hence if their ancestral hall could be refurnished by American dollars, and Gervase's debts paid off out of the savings of this John Grover, it would be a happy and an ingenious stroke of business.

Of course, diplomacy would be needed, and diplomacy of the most delicate and subtle kind. Sir Charles took Gervase into his confidence, and Gervase confided to his father that he was prepared to marry anybody in reason so long as she had plenty of the needful.

Sir Charles took a voyage to the United States and interviewed his relatives. A few months later Gervase went across and paid court to Madeline, and with remarkable success. Madeline was in her seventeenth year at the time, romantic, inexperienced and impressionable. Then came the death of her father, the discovery that Sir Charles Tregony was her trustee, and the option of spending her minority in Trewinion Hall.

So far everything had happened as anticipated. There had

been no hitch anywhere, and to all appearances the little scheme would be brought to a successful issue.

Sir Charles kept Gervase well posted up as to the course of events.

"She has not the remotest idea that we have any designs upon her," he said, in one of his early letters. "If she got the smallest hint I fear she might jib. She has grown to be a remarkably handsome girl, high spirited and intelligent. There is nobody here to whom she will lose her heart, and I am keeping her as secluded as possible till you return. I trust to you to put as much warmth in your letters to her as you think advisable. At present she thinks the world of you. I am sure of it. You impressed her mightily when you were in the States. She regards you as a sort of saint and hero rolled into one. She thinks also that you are immensely clever. Hence it is rather a difficult *rôle* you will have to play. By letter you can do a great deal between now and the new year. Keep up the idealism. She is very puritanic in some of her notions. Don't shock her, for the world. If you can arrange an engagement before you return so much the better. A long courtship, I fear, might spoil everything. She has sharp eyes; and yet you have to guard against being too precipitate. So far, I flatter myself we have both handled the matter with great delicacy. A few months more, and – with care and judgment, you may snap your fingers at the world."

Sir Charles had rightly estimated her character in one respect. If Madeline had had the smallest suspicion that he and his son

had designs upon her – that a deliberate plot was being hatched – her indignation would have known no bounds.

But her own little secret had been, perhaps, the best safeguard against any such suspicion. To her ingenuous mind the world was the best of all possible places. Her friends had so arranged her life and her lot that everything appeared to be working together for the best. She had not to worry about anything. The Captain's letters had as much warmth in them as she could desire. Her future, shaped for her without any contriving of her own – shaped by friends and by Providence, left nothing to be desired.

It was clear what the Captain wished. It would have pleased her father had he been alive, it would be satisfactory to Sir Charles, it would fit in with her own conception of life. So she would dance along the primrose way without a want, without a care, without a responsibility. There would be gaiety, and mirth, and music, balls and crushes, and social functions of all sorts and kinds. She would get into social circles she had never known before, and be "Lady" Tregony before she died.

It was all as straight as a rule, and as clear as a sunbeam.

Why had it never seemed empty and sordid and selfish until to-night? Why did her inward eyes look for a sterner and more heroic way? Why did pleasure look so uninviting and duty wear such a noble mien? Why was all her future outlook changed as in a flash?

These were questions she was debating with herself when a new day stole into the room.

CHAPTER IX
THE CAPTAIN'S LETTER

A few days later, Madeline received a letter from Captain Tregony, which contained a carefully-worded, though very definite, proposal of marriage. Gervase had been only too pleased to carry out his father's suggestion. The prospect of fingering at an early date a few of her surplus dollars was a very tempting one. He was not particularly in love with her. He had got through the sentimental age, so he believed. Moreover, he had seen so much of life and the world, and had had such a wide and varied experience of feminine kind that he was not likely to be carried off his feet by a pretty face or engaging manners.

Nevertheless, if he was to marry at all – and since he was an only son and heir to a title and estates, marriage seemed a very obvious duty – then there was no one, all things considered, he would sooner take to his heart and endow with all his worldly goods than Madeline Grover. She was very young, very pretty, very sweet-tempered, and, best of all, very rich; and he knew no one else who possessed such a combination of excellencies.

It had been a great relief to him when he went out to America to make the acquaintance of John Grover's daughter, to discover that she was such an unspoiled child of nature. He had been haunted by the fear that she might be ugly or ignorant

or uneducated. Hence, when he found a charming school-girl, ingenuous, unsophisticated, impressionable, he heaved a big sigh of relief, and set to work at once to make a favourable and an abiding impression.

He would have proposed then and there had he considered it politic to do so. His father, however, who was his chief adviser, would not hear of it. "You will spoil the whole game if you do," Sir Charles insisted. "Make a good impression now, and let time and absence deepen it. She will put a halo round your head after a few weeks' absence, and eagerly look forward to the next meeting."

In this Sir Charles showed his knowledge of human nature, especially of feminine human nature.

Gervase had hinted that, if he was not getting old, he was getting distinctly older, that the crows'-feet were very marked about his eyes, and that his hair was getting decidedly thin.

"My dear boy," Sir Charles said, affectionately, "that is all in your favour. If she were eight or nine and twenty, she might cast longing eyes on the youths, but a girl of seventeen always dotes on an elderly man. Always! I don't know why it should be so, but I simply state a fact. Girls have not a particle of reverence or even respect for youths of twenty-one or two. They sigh for a man who bears the scars of years and battle."

So Gervase went away to India, leaving his father to work the oracle for him at home. On the whole, Sir Charles's forecast had proved correct. Things had turned out much as he anticipated

they would.

Madeline read the Captain's letter with a distinct heightening of colour. She was still weak and a little inclined to be hysterical. Her adventure on the cliffs had shaken her nerves to an extent she was only just beginning to realise.

She closed her eyes after she had put the letter back in the envelope, and tried to think. The Captain's proposal had not surprised her in the least, while the manner of it was just what she had expected. He had used just the right words and said neither too much nor too little.

She admired him for his reticence, and for his strength in holding himself so well in check, and yet there was a passionate earnestness in his well-chosen words that revealed the depth of his affection, as well as his determination to win.

Very adroitly and diplomatically also he had hinted of the good time they might have together. They would not settle down in a sleepy place like St. Gaved. They would have a town house, and perhaps a shooting-box in Scotland, and when tired of the United Kingdom they would travel on the Continent – Paris, Vienna, Monte Carlo, Florence, were delightful places to visit, and to tarry in for a few weeks or months. The common work-a-day world might roar and fret and toil and perspire, but they would live in a serener atmosphere, undisturbed by the jar and strife that went on around them.

It was a very fair and enticing picture that his words conjured up, and one that she had often pictured for herself. This was the

future that her friends, in conjunction with a kindly Providence, had shaped for her. There seemed nothing for her to do but say "Yes." It was all in the piece. Her life had been beautifully planned, and planned without effort or contrivance by anybody. The current had borne her along easily and gently to the inevitable union with Gervase Tregony.

His face and form came up before her again as she last saw him. How handsome he looked in his uniform! How fierce his eyes were when he looked at other people, how gentle when he looked at her! Some people might think his voice harsh and raucous, but there was an undertone of music in it for her. It was the voice of a hero, of a man born to command. Its echoes seemed to be in the air even now.

And yet for some reason her heart did not respond as it once did. Was it that her nerves had been shaken – that she had not quite got over the shock of the adventure? Something had happened during the last few days, but what it was she could not quite understand. The life of pleasure, to which she had looked forward, undisturbed by a single note of human pain, did not appeal to her, for some reason, as once it did. A new ingredient had been dropped into the cup, a new thought had come into her brain, a new impulse had shaken her heart.

Had she looked at death so closely that life could never be the same to her again, or was it that she looked at life more truly and steadily? Had a change come over other people, or was the change wholly in herself? That something had happened she was

certain, but what it was, was a question she could not definitely answer.

Of one thing, however, she was sure. If the letter had come three or four days sooner, it would have found her in a wholly different frame of mind. Hence, whatever the change was, it was compassed by these few days.

Her meditations were disturbed by a knock at the door, and a moment later Dr. Pendarvis entered. "Ah! you are better this morning," he said, in his bright, cheery fashion. "Now, let me feel your pulse." And he drew up a chair and sat down by her side.

"A little inclined to be jumpy still, eh? Ah, well, you had rather a nasty experience. But you'll be all right again in a few days."

"I think I am all right now," she said, with a smile. "Don't you think I might go out of doors?"

"Well, now, what do you think yourself?" he questioned, stroking his chin and smiling.

"I'm just a little shaky on my feet," she answered, "but I guess that would go off when I got into the fresh air."

"And how about the bruises?"

"Oh, they are disappearing one by one."

"And how far do you think you could walk?"

"I don't know, but I do know it's awfully dull being in the house."

"And do you want to go anywhere in particular?" he asked innocently, and he glanced at her furtively out of the corner of his eye.

"Oh, no!" she answered, blushing slightly; "or, at any rate, not just yet. Of course, when I get stronger I shall be glad to walk into St. Gaved again."

"You ran into it last time," he said, laughing. "What a day of adventures you had to be sure!"

"I was compelled to run," she said, averting her eyes and looking out of the window; "he would have drowned if I hadn't."

"Exactly. And it was touch and go by all accounts. He couldn't have held out many minutes longer."

"And is he going on all right, doctor?" She turned her eyes suddenly upon him, and waited with parted lips for his answer.

"Well, about as well as can be expected," he answered, slowly, "taking all the circumstances into account."

"And is he suffering much pain?"

"A good deal I should say. In fact, that is inevitable."

"He must wish me far enough."

"It depends how far that is, I should say," and the old doctor chuckled.

"You've not heard him heaping maledictions on my defenceless head?"

"No, I have not," he answered, with a satirical smile; "but then you see he's not given to expressing his thoughts in public."

"Exactly. I guess his thoughts about me would not bear repeating in any polite society."

"That is possible," the old doctor said, pursing his lips, and looking thoughtful.

"I suppose no one sees him yet?"

"Well, Chester or I myself see him every day – sometimes twice."

"I intend seeing him myself soon."

"You do?"

"Yes I do. There's nothing wrong in it, is there?"

"Why do you ask that question?"

"Because you've got such stupid notions about propriety in this country. In fact, few things seem to be regarded as proper except what is highly improper. I'm constantly stubbing my toes against the notice tablets, 'keep off the grass,' the dangerous places are left without warning."

The doctor laughed.

"Isn't it true what I'm saying?" she went on. "Half the people seem to be straining at gnats and swallowing camels. Directly you propose to do some perfectly innocent thing, if it should happen to be unconventional, you are met with shocked looks and outstretched hands and cries of protest. I'm getting rather tired of that word 'proper.'"

"But Society must have some code to regulate itself by," he said, with an air of pretended seriousness.

"Aren't the Ten Commandments good enough?" she questioned.

"Well, hardly," he said, in a tone of banter. "You see they are a bit antiquated and out of date. Society, as at present constituted, must have everything of the most modern type. And modernity

is not able to tolerate such an antiquated code as the Decalogue."

"What do you mean by Society?" she questioned.

"Ah! now you have cornered me," he said, with a laugh. "But just at the moment I was thinking of the idle rich. Men and women who have more money than they know how to spend, and more time than they know how to kill. The people who have never a thought beyond themselves, who live to eat and dress, and pander to the lowest passions of their nature. Who will spend thousands on a dinner fit only for gourmands, while the people around them are dying of hunger. Who waste in folly and luxury and vice what ought to go for the uplifting of the downtrodden and neglected. It is a big class in England, and a growing class, recruited in many instances from across the water – "

"You mean from my country?" she questioned.

"Yes, from your country," he said, with a touch of indignation in his voice, "they come bringing their bad manners and their diamonds, and they hang round the fringe of what is called the 'Smart Set,' and they bribe impecunious dowagers and such like to give them introductions, and they worm their way into the big houses, and God alone knows what becomes of them afterwards. I have a brother who has a big practice in the West-end. You should hear him talk – "

"If people are rich," Madeline retorted warmly, "they have surely the right to enjoy themselves in their own way so long as they do no wrong."

"Enjoy themselves," he snorted. "Is enjoyment the end of

life? – and such enjoyment! Has duty no place in the scheme of existence? Because people have grown rich through somebody else's toil – "

"Or through their own toil," she interrupted.

"Or through their own toil – if any man ever did it – are they justified in wasting their life in idle gluttony, and in wasteful and wanton extravagance?"

"Extravagance is surely a question of degree," she replied. "A hundred dollars to one man may be more than ten thousand to another."

"I admit it. But your idle profligate, whether man or woman, is an offence."

"What do you mean by profligate?"

"I mean the creature who lives to eat and drink and dress. Who shirks every duty and responsibility, who panders to every gluttonous and selfish desire. Who hears the cry of suffering and never helps, who wastes his or her substance in finding fresh sources of so-called enjoyment, or discovering new thrills of sensation."

"But we surely have a right to enjoy ourselves?"

"Of course we have. But not after the fashion of swine. We are not animals. We are men and women with intellectual vision and moral responsibility. The true life lies along the road of duty and help and goodwill."

"Yes, I agree with you in that. But I do not like to hear anyone speak slightingly of my country people."

"For your country and your people as a whole, I have the greatest respect. But every country has its snobs and its parasites; and it is humbling that our own great army of idle profligates should receive recruits from the great Republic of the West."

When Dr. Pendarvis had gone Madeline sat for a long time staring out of the window, but seeing nothing of the fair landscape on which her eyes rested. She tried to recall what it was that led their conversation into such a serious channel. To say the least of it, it was not a little strange that he should have taken the hazy and nebulous efforts of her own brain, and shaped them into clear and definite speech. The life of ease and pleasure and self-indulgence to which she had looked forward with so much interest and with such childish delight, he had denounced with a vigour she had half resented, and which all the while she felt answered to the deepest emotions of her nature.

She took the Captain's letter from the envelope and read it again. It was a most proper letter in every respect. There was not a word or syllable that anyone could take the slightest exception to. The love-making was intense and yet restrained, the pleading eloquent and even tender, the prospect pictured such as any ordinary individual would hail with delight. What was it that it lacked?

It seemed less satisfying since her talk with the doctor than before.

The Captain pleaded for an answer by return of post. He wanted to have the assurance before he left India for home. He

was tired of roughing it and wanted to look forward to long years of domestic peace. If the engagement were settled now they would be able to set up a house of their own soon after his return.

She put away the letter after reading it through twice, and heaved a long sigh.

"If it had come a week ago," she said to herself, "I should have answered 'Yes' without any misgiving. But now, everything seems changed. Perhaps I shall feel differently when I get out of doors again."

On the following day she took a ramble in the rose garden, and sat for an hour on the lawn in the sunshine. On the second day she strayed into the plantation beyond the park, and on the third day she ventured on to the Downs, and came at length to the high point on the cliffs where she first met Rufus Sterne. Here she sat down and looked seaward, and thought of home and all that had happened since she left it.

The plan of her life which had looked so clear was becoming more and more hazy and confused. Was Providence interposing to upset its own arrangements? Was she to tread a different path from what she had pictured.

The fresh air brought the colour back to her cheeks again, and vigour to her limbs, but it did not clear away the mists that hung about her brain and heart. The Captain's letter remained day after day unanswered.

"If I were engaged to the Captain," she said to herself, reflectively, "It might not be considered proper for me to call

on Rufus Sterne. But while I am free, I am free. He saved my life, and it would be mean of me not to call. So I shall follow my heart"; and she rose to her feet and turned her steps towards home.

CHAPTER X
A VISITOR

Mrs. Tuke came into the room on tip-toe, and closed the door softly behind her. There was a mysterious expression in her eyes, and she began at once to straighten the chairs and re-arrange the antimacassars. Her best parlour had been turned, for the time being, into a bedroom. To carry Rufus Sterne up the steep and narrow staircase was a task the fishermen refused to undertake, especially as Rufus had pleaded to be allowed to remain on the sofa. So a bed had been set up in the parlour – not without serious misgivings on the part of Mrs. Tuke, though she admitted the convenience of the arrangement later on. After Mrs. Tuke had arranged the furniture and antimacassars to her satisfaction, she advanced to the side of the bed.

"A lady has called to see you," she said, in an awed whisper.

"A lady?" Rufus questioned, with a slight lifting of the eyebrows.

Mrs. Tuke nodded.

"To see me or simply to inquire?"

"To see you."

"Do I know the lady?" and a faint tinge of colour came into his cheek.

"I suppose so. You ought to do at any rate. It's that scare-away

American as is staying at the Hall." And Mrs. Tuke turned and looked apprehensively toward the door.

Rufus felt his heart give a sudden bound, but he answered quietly enough: "Is she waiting in the passage?"

"No, I turned her into your room. Are you going to see her?"

"Most certainly. I think it is awfully kind of her to call."

"I suppose being a furrener explains things?"

"Explains what, Mrs. Tuke?"

"Well, in my day young ladies had different notions of what was the proper thing to do."

"No doubt, Mrs. Tuke; but the world keeps advancing, you see."

"Keeps advancing, do you call it. I am thankful that none of my girls was brought up that way." And Mrs. Tuke walked with her most stately gait out of the room.

Rufus waited with rapidly beating heart. For days past – ever since the pain had become bearable, in fact – he had been longing for a glimpse of the sweet face that had captivated his fancy from the first. That she would call to see him he did not anticipate for a moment. That she had made inquiries concerning his condition he knew from his conversations with Dr. Pendarvis. More than that he could not expect, whatever he might desire. Hence, to be told that she was in the house, that she was waiting to see him, seemed to set vibrating every nerve he possessed.

He heard a faint murmur of voices coming across the narrow lobby, and wondered what Mrs. Tuke was saying to her visitor.

He hoped she would not feel it incumbent upon her to unburden her puritanical soul. When Mrs. Tuke was "drawn out," as she expressed it, she sometimes used great plainness of speech. At such times neither rank nor station counted. To clear her conscience was the supreme thing.

On the present occasion, however, Madeline got the first innings. She guessed from the set of Mrs. Tuke's lips that she did not altogether approve. Moreover, she was afraid that on the occasion of her first visit – when Mrs. Tuke revived her with burnt feathers – she had not made a very good impression.

Madeline came, therefore, fully armed and prepared to use all her wiles. She waited with a good deal of trepidation until Mrs. Tuke returned from her lodger's room.

"What a noble, generous soul you must be, Mrs. Tuke," she said, and she looked straight into the cold, blue eyes and smiled her sweetest.

Mrs. Tuke drew herself up and frowned.

"And how lovely you keep your house," Madeline went on, "and what taste you have shown in arranging your furniture."

Mrs. Tuke's face relaxed somewhat, and she gave the corner of the table cloth a little tug to straighten it.

"I think people stamp their character on everything they do, don't you, Mrs. Tuke? If a woman is a lady the house shows it. Look at these flowers how beautifully arranged they are," and Madeline bent down her head and sniffed at them.

"Some people never notice such things," Mrs. Tuke said, in

an aggrieved tone.

"Oh, Mrs. Tuke! how can they help it; I am sure you would recognise taste and beauty anywhere."

"So many of the women hereabouts have no taste," Mrs. Tuke replied. "They keep their houses any fashion. I always say you can tell what a house is like by the window curtains. You need not put your head inside the door."

"I quite agree with you, Mrs. Tuke. May I ask where you send your curtains to be got up so beautifully?"

"I get 'em up myself."

"No?"

"I do, indeed," and Mrs. Tuke smiled upon her visitor most benignantly.

"How clever you must be. Do you know I think we should become quite fast friends? We seem to understand each other so well. Some people never understand each other. Now, if you were like some narrow, uncharitable people you would not approve of my calling to see Mr. Sterne."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.