

Hope Anthony

Mrs. Maxon Protests



Anthony Hope

Mrs. Maxon Protests

«Public Domain»

Hope A.

Mrs. Maxon Protests / A. Hope — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	19
CHAPTER V	24
CHAPTER VI	29
CHAPTER VII	34
CHAPTER VIII	39
CHAPTER IX	44
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Anthony Hope

Mrs. Maxon Protests

CHAPTER I

"INKPAT!"

"Inkpat!" She shot out the word in a bitter playfulness, making it serve for the climax of her complaints.

Hobart Gaynor repeated the word – if it could be called a word – after his companion in an interrogative tone.

"Yes, just hopeless inkpat, and there's an end of it!"

Mrs. Maxon leant back as far as the unaccommodating angles of the office chair allowed, looking at her friend and counsellor with a faint yet rather mischievous smile on her pretty face. In the solicitor's big, high, bare room she seemed both small and very dainty. Her voice had trembled a little, but she made a brave effort at gaiety as she explained her cryptic word.

"When a thing's running in your head day and night, week after week, and month after month, you can't use that great long word you lawyers use. Besides, it's so horribly impartial." She pouted over this undesirable quality.

A light broke on Gaynor, and he smiled.

"Oh, you mean incompatibility?"

"That's it, Hobart. But you must see it's far too long, besides being, as I say, horribly impartial. So I took to calling it by a pet name of my own. That makes it come over to my side. Do you see?"

"Not quite." He smiled still. He had once been in love with Winnie Maxon, and though that state of feeling as regards her was long past, she still had the power to fascinate and amuse him, even when she was saying things which he suspected of being unreasonable. Lawyers have that suspicion very ready for women.

"Oh yes! The big word just means that we can't get on with one another, and hints that it's probably just as much my fault as his. But inkpat means all the one thousand and one unendurable things he does and says to me. Whenever he does or says one, I say invariably, 'Inkpat!' The next moment there's another – 'Inkpat!' I really shouldn't have time for the long word even if I wanted to use it."

"You were very fond of him once, weren't you?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders impatiently. "Supposing I was?" Evidently she did not care to be reminded of the fact, if it were a fact. She treated it rather as an accusation. "Does one really know anything about a man before one marries him? And then it's too late."

"Are you pleading for trial trips?"

"Oh, that's impossible, of course."

"Is anything impossible nowadays?" He looked up at the ceiling, his brows raised in protest against the vagaries of the age.

"Anyhow, it's not what we're told. I only meant that having cared once made very little difference really – it comes to count for next to nothing, you know."

"Not a gospel very acceptable to an engaged man, Winnie!"

She reached out her arm and touched his coat-sleeve lightly. "I know, I'm sorry. I'm longing to know your Cicely and be great friends with her. And it's too bad to bother you with the seamy side of it just now. But you're such a friend, and so sensible, and a lawyer too, you see. You forgive me?"

"I'm awfully glad to help, if I can. Could you give me a few – I don't want a thousand and one, but a few – instances of 'inkpat'?"

"That wouldn't be much use. Broadly speaking, inkpat's a demand that a woman should be not what she is, but a sort of stunted and inferior reproduction of the man – what he thinks he would be, if he were a woman. Anything that's not like that gets inkpatted at once. Oh, Hobart, it is horrible! Because it's so utterly hopeless, you know. How can I be somebody else? Above all, somebody like Cyril – only a woman? It's absurd! A Cyrilesque woman! Oh!"

"I don't know him very well, but it certainly does sound absurd. Are you sure you haven't misunderstood? Can't you have an explanation?"

"Inkpat never explains; it never sees that there is anything to explain. It preaches, or lectures, or is sarcastic, or grumbles, or sulks – and I suppose it would swear, if Cyril didn't happen to be so religious. But explain or listen to an explanation – never!"

She rose and walked to one of the tall windows that looked on to Lincoln's Inn Fields. "I declare I envy the raggedest hungriest child playing there in the garden," she said. "At least it may be itself. Didn't God make me just as much as He made Cyril?"

It was high summer, and the grate held nothing more comforting than a dingy paper ornament; yet Hobart Gaynor got up and stood with his back to it, as men are wont to do in moments of perplexity. He perceived that there was not much use in pressing for his concrete cases. If they came, they would individually be, or seem, trifles, no doubt. The accumulation of them was the mischief; that was embraced and expressed in the broad sweep of incompatibility; the two human beings could not keep step together. But he put one question.

"I suppose you've given him no really serious cause for complaint?"

She turned quickly round from the window. "You mean – ?"

"Well, I mean, anybody else – er – making friction?"

"Hobart, you know that's not my way! I haven't a man-friend, except you, and my cousin, Stephen Aikenhead – and I very seldom see either of you. And Stephen's married, and you're engaged. That's a ridiculous idea, Hobart."

She was evidently indignant, but Gaynor was not disturbed.

"We lawyers have to suspect everybody," he reminded her with a smile, "and to expect anything, however improbable. So I'll ask now if your husband has any great woman-friend."

"That's just as ridiculous. I could be wicked enough to wish he had. Let somebody else have a try at it!"

"Can't you – somehow – get back to what made you like him at first? Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I do – and I've tried." Her eyes looked bewildered, even frightened. "But, Hobart, I can't realize what it was. Unless it was just his looks – he is very handsome, you know."

"He stands well at the Bar. He's getting on fast, he's very straight, and I don't think he's unpopular, from what I hear."

She caught his hint quickly. "A lot of people will say it's my fault? That I'm unreasonable, and all in the wrong?"

"You'd have to reckon with a good deal of that."

"I don't care what people say."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked quietly. "It's a pretty big claim to make for oneself, either for good or for evil."

"It's only his friends, after all. Because I've got none. Well, I've got you." She came and stood by him. "You're against me, though, aren't you?"

"I admit I think a wife – or a husband – ought to stand a lot."

"It's not as if my baby had lived. I might have gone on trying then. It wouldn't have been just undiluted Cyril."

"That makes some difference, I agree. Still, in the general interest of things – "

"I must be tortured all my life?" Her challenge of the obligation rang out sharply.

With a restless toss of his head, he sat down at his table again. She stood where she was, staring at the dingy ornament in the grate.

"Life the other way mayn't turn out particularly easy. You'll have troubles, annoyances – temptations, perhaps."

"I can face those. I can trust myself, Hobart. Can he prevent my going if I want to?"

"No."

"Can he make me come back?"

"No. He can, if he chooses, get a formal order for you to go back, but it won't be enforced. It will only give him a right to a legal separation – not to a divorce, of course – just a separation."

"You're sure they can't make me go back?"

"Oh, quite. That's settled."

"That's what I wanted to be quite clear about." She stepped up to his chair and laid her hand on his shoulder. "You're still against me?"

"Oh, how can I tell? The heart knows its own bitterness – nobody else can."

She pressed his shoulder in a friendly fashion; she was comforted by his half-approval. At least it was not a condemnation, even though it refused the responsibility of sanction.

"Of course he needn't give you any money."

"I've got my own. You got it settled on me and paid to myself."

"It's very little – about a hundred and fifty a year. I want you to look at all sides of the business."

"Of course you're right. But there's only one to me – to get away, away, away!"

"It's just about five years since you came here with your mother – about the marriage-settlement. I thought it rather rough you should come to me, I remember."

"Mother didn't know about the – the sentimental reason against it, Hobart – and it doesn't matter now, does it? And poor mother's beyond being troubled over me."

"Where will you go – if you do go?"

"I am going. I shall stay with the Aikenheads for a bit – till I'm settled on my own."

"Have you hinted anything about it to – him?"

"To Cyril? No. I must tell him. Of course he knows that I'm silly enough to think that I'm unhappy."

"It'll be an awful facer for him, won't it?"

She walked round the table and stood looking at him squarely, yet with a deprecatory droop of her mouth.

"Yes, it will," she said. "Awful! But, Hobart, I not only have no love left, I've no pity left. He has crushed a great deal in me, and he has crushed that with the rest."

Gaynor's hands played feebly with his big pad of blotting-paper.

"That it should happen to you of all people!" he mumbled. His air expressed more than a lament for unhappiness; as well as regretting sorrow, he deplored something distasteful. But Winnie Maxon was deaf to this note; she saw only sympathy.

"That's your old dear kindness for me," she smiled, with tears in her eyes. "You won't turn against me, anyhow, will you, Hobart?"

He stretched out his hand to meet hers. "No, my dear. Didn't I love you once?"

"And I do love your dear round face and your honest eyes. Yes, and the nose you used to be unhappy about – because it was a pug – in those very old days; and if my ship gets wrecked, I know you'll come out with the life-boat. Good-bye now, I'll write to you about it."

The tender note struck at the end of their talk, old-time memories, the echo of her soft pleading voice, availed for some minutes after his visitor's departure to blind Hobart Gaynor's shrewd eyes to the fact that she had really put before him no case that could seem at all substantial in the eyes of the

world. To her, no doubt, everything might be as bad, as intolerable and hopeless, as she declared; he did not question her sincerity. But as the personal impression of her faded, his hard common sense asserted forcibly that it all amounted to no more than that she had come not to like her husband; that was the sum of what the world would see in it. May women leave their husbands merely because they have come not to like them? Some people said yes, as he was aware. They were not people whom he respected, nor their theory one which he approved. He was of conservative make in all things, especially in questions of sex. He was now uneasily conscious that but for her personal fascination, but for his old tenderness, her plea would not have extorted even a reluctant semi-assent. The next moment he was denying that he had given even so much. Certainly the world in general – the big, respectable, steady-going world – would not accord her even so much. Talk about being "crushed" or having things crushed in you, needs, in the eyes of this world, a very solid backing of facts – things that can be sworn to in the box, that can be put in the "particulars" of your petition, that can be located, dated, and, if possible, attested by an independent witness. Now Mrs. Maxon did not appear to possess one single fact of this order – or surely she would have been eager to produce it?

Comedians and cynics are fond of exhibiting the spectacle of women hounding down a woman on the one hand, and, on the other, of men betraying their brethren for a woman's favour. No exception can be taken to such presentments; the things happen. But when they are not happening – when jealousy and passion are not in the field – there is another force, another instinct, which acts with powerful effect. The professed students of human nature call it sex-solidarity; it is the instinct of each sex to stand together against the other. This is not a matter of individual liking or disliking; it is sex politics, a conflict between rival hosts, eternally divided. With personal prepossessions and special relations out of the way, the man is for the man, the woman for the woman. As minute followed minute after Mrs. Maxon's departure, it became more and more probable to Hobart Gaynor that Cyril Maxon had something to say for himself. And was not Hobart himself a prospective husband? Too much in love to dream of a like fate befalling his own marriage, he yet felt a natural sympathy for the noble army in which he was so soon to enlist.

"Well, right or wrong, I promised to stand by her, and I will," was his final thought, as he drove himself back to the current business of his office day. Sympathy for Mrs. Maxon mingled in it with a certain vexation at her for having in some sense involved him in so obscure and troublesome a matter. He felt, without actually foreseeing, difficulties that might make his promise hard to keep.

The tendency of personal impressions to lose their power when personal presence is withdrawn did not occur to Mrs. Maxon. As she drove home to Devonshire Street, she comforted herself with the assurance that she had not only kept a friend – as she had – but also secured a partisan. She thought that Hobart Gaynor quite understood her case.

"Rather wonderful of him!" she reflected. "Considering that I refused him, and that he's at this moment in love with Cicely Marshfield."

Her heart grew very warm towards her old friend, so loyal and so forgiving. If she had not refused him? But the temper of her present mood forbade the soft, if sad, conclusion that she had made a mistake. Who really knows anything about a man until she is married to him? And then it is too late. "Don't marry a friend – keep him," was her bitter conclusion. It did not cross her mind that friendship too – a friendship that is to be more than a distant and passive kindliness – must make reckoning with incompatibility.

CHAPTER II

A CASE OF NECESSITY

Mrs. Maxon's memory of the evening on which she administered to her husband his "awful facer" was capricious. It preserved as much of the preliminary and the accidental as of the real gist of the matter. They dined out at the house of a learned judge. The party was exclusively legal, but the conversation of the young barrister who fell to her lot did not partake of that complexion. Fortune used him in the cause of irony. Much struck by his companion's charms – she was strung up, looked well, and talked with an unusual animation – and by no means imputing to himself any deficiency in the same direction, he made play with a pair of fine dark eyes, descanted jocularly on the loneliness of a bachelor's life, and ventured sly allusions to Mr. Cyril Maxon's blessed lot.

"I hope he knows his luck!" said the young barrister. Well, he would know it soon, at all events, Winnie reflected.

In the drawing-room afterwards, a fat gushing woman gave the other side of it. "We must be better friends, my dear," said she. "And you mustn't be jealous if we all adore your clever, handsome, rising husband."

Such things are the common trivialities of talk. Both the fat woman and the young barrister had happened often before. But their appearance to-night struck on Winnie Maxon's sense of humour – a bitter, twisted humour at this moment. She would have liked to cry "Oh, you fools!" and hurl her decision in her husband's face across the drawing-room. Compliments on our neighbour's private felicity are of necessity attended with some risk. Why are we not allowed to abide on safe ground and say: "I beg leave to congratulate you on the amount of your income and to hope that it may soon be doubled"? Only the ruined could object to that, and treading on their corns is no serious matter.

On the drive home – the judge lived in a remote part of Kensington – Cyril Maxon was perversely and (as it seemed to his wife) incredibly fertile in plans for the days to come. He not only forecast his professional career – there he was within his rights – but he mapped out their joint movements for at least three years ahead – their houses for the summer, their trips abroad, their visits to the various and numerous members of the Maxon clan. He left the future without a stitch of its dark mantle of uncertainty. Luckily he was not a man who needed much applause or even assent; he did not consult; he settled. His long, thoroughly lawyer-like, indisputably handsome and capable profile – he had a habit of talking to his wife without looking at her – chained the attention of her eyes. Was she really equal to a fight with that? A shadowy full-bottomed wig seemed even now to frame the face and to invest it with the power of life and death.

"Then the year after I really do mean to take you to Palestine and Damascus."

Not an idea that even of Cyril Maxon the rude gods might make sport!

"Who knows what'll happen three years hence?" she asked in gay tones, sharply cut off by a gasp in the throat.

"You've a cold?" he asked solicitously. He was not lacking in kindly protective instincts. Yet even his solicitude was peremptory. "I can't have you taking any risks."

"It's nothing," she gasped, now almost sure that she could never go through with her task. Even in kindness he assumed a property so absolute.

The brougham drew up at their house. "Nine-fifteen sharp to-morrow," Cyril told the coachman. That was no less, and no more, certain than Palestine and Damascus. He went through the hall (enlivened with prints of Lord Chancellors surviving and defunct) into his study. She followed, breathing quickly.

"I asked the Chippinstalls to dine next Wednesday. Will you send her a reminder to-morrow morning?" He began to fill his pipe. She shut the door and sat down in a chair in front of the fireplace.

There had always seemed to her something crushing in this workshop of learning, logic, and ambition. To-night the atmosphere was overwhelming; she felt flattened, ground down; she caught for her breath. He had lit his pipe and now glanced at her, puzzled by her silence. "There's nothing else on on Wednesday, is there?"

"Cyril, we're not happy, are we?"

He appeared neither aggrieved nor surprised at her sudden plunge; to her he seemed aggressively patient of the irrational.

"We have our difficulties, like other married couples, I suppose. I hope they will grow less as time goes on."

"That means that I shan't oppose you any more?"

"Our tastes and views will grow into harmony, I hope."

"That mine will grow into harmony with yours?"

He smiled, though grimly. Few men really mind being accused of despotism, since it savours of power. "Is that such a terrible thing to happen to my wife?"

"We're not happy, Cyril."

"Marriage wasn't instituted for the sole purpose of enabling people to enjoy themselves."

"Oh, I don't know what it was instituted for!"

"You can look in your Prayer Book."

Her chin rested on her hands, her white sharp elbows on her knee. The tall, strong, self-reliant man looked at her frail beauty. He was not without love, not without pity, but entirely without comprehension – nor would comprehension have meant pardon. Her implied claim clashed both with his instinct and with his convictions. The love and pity were not of a quality to sustain the shock.

"I wish you'd go and see Attlebury," he went on. Attlebury was, as it were, the keeper of his conscience, an eminent clergyman of extreme High Church views.

"Mr. Attlebury can't prevent me from being miserable. Whenever I complain of anything, you want to send me to Mr. Attlebury!"

"I'm not ashamed of suggesting that you could find help in what he represents on earth."

She gave a faint plaintive moan. Was heaven as well as this great world to be marshalled against her, a poor little creature asking only to be free? So it seemed.

"Or am I to gather that you have become a sceptic?" The sarcasm was heavily marked. "Has a mind like yours the impudence to think for itself?" So she translated his words – and thereby did him no substantial injustice. If his intellect could bend the knee, was hers to be defiant?

"I had hoped," he went on, "that our great sorrow would have made a change in you."

The suggestion seemed to her to be hitting below the belt. She had seen no signs of overwhelming sorrow in him.

"Why?" she asked sharply. "It made none in you, did it?"

"There's no need to be pert."

"When you say it to me, it's wisdom. When I say it to you, it's pertness! Yes, that's always the way. You're perfect already – I must change!"

"This is becoming a wrangle. Haven't we had enough of it?"

"Yes, Cyril, enough for a lifetime, I think." At last she raised her head, and let her hands fall on her lap. "At least I have," she added, looking at him steadily.

He returned her glance for a moment, then turned away and sat down at his writing-table. Several letters had come by the late post, and he began to open them.

He had made her angry; her anger mastered her fears.

"I was brought up to think as you do," she said. "To think that once married was married for ever. I suppose I think so still; and you know I've respected my – my vows. But there are limits. A woman can't be asked to give up everything. She herself – what she owes to herself – must come first – her own life, her own thoughts, her freedom, her rights as a human being."

He was reading a letter and did not raise his eyes from it.

"Those are modern views, I suppose? Old-fashioned folk would call them suggestions of the Devil. But we've had this sort of discussion several times before. Why go over it again? We must agree to differ."

"If you would! But you don't, you can't, you never will. You say that to-night. You'll begin drilling me to your march and cutting me to your pattern again to-morrow morning."

He made no reply at all. He went on reading letters. He had signified that the discussion was at an end. That ended it. It was his way; if he thought enough had been said, she was to say no more. It had happened thus a hundred times – and she had inwardly cried "Inkpat!"

Well, this time – at last – she would show him that the topic was not exhausted. She would speak again, and make him speak. Malice possessed her; she smiled at the grave-faced man methodically dealing with his correspondence. For the first time there came upon her a certain satisfaction in the actual doing of the thing; before, she had dreaded that to her heart, however much she desired the freedom it would bring. To hit back once – once after five long years!

"Oh, about the Chippinstalls," she said. "You can have them, of course, but I shan't be here."

He turned his head quickly round towards her. "Why not?"

"I'm going to the Stephen Aikenheads' to-morrow."

"It's not been your habit to pay visits alone, nor to arrange visits without consulting me. And I don't much care about the atmosphere that reigns at Aikenhead's." He laid down his letters and smiled at her in a constrained fashion. "But I don't want to give you a fresh grievance. I'll stretch a point. How long do you want to be away?"

He was trying to be kind; he actually was stretching a point, for he had often decried the practice of married women – young and pretty married women – going a-visiting without their husbands; and he had just as often expressed grave disapproval of her cousin, Stephen Aikenhead. For him a considerable stretch! Her malice was disarmed. Even a pang of that pity which she had declared crushed to death reached her heart. She stretched out her slim arms to him, rather as one who begs a great boon than as the deliverer of a mortal defiance.

"Cyril, I'm never coming back."

For a full minute he sat silent, looking steadily at her. Incapable as he was of appreciating how she had arrived at, or been driven to, this monstrous decision, yet he had perception enough and experience enough to see that she was sincere in it and set on it; and he knew that she could give effect to it if she chose. In that minute's silence he fought hard with himself; he had a mighty temptation to scold, a still mightier to flout and jeer, to bring his heavy artillery of sarcasm to bear. He resisted and triumphed.

He looked at the clock. It was a quarter-past twelve.

"You'll hardly expect me to deal with such a very important matter at this hour of the night, and without full consideration," he said. "You must know that such separations are contrary to my views, and I hope you know that, in spite of the friction which has arisen, I have still a strong affection for you."

"I shan't change my mind, Cyril. I shan't come back."

He kept the curb on himself. "I really would rather not discuss it without more consideration, Winnie – and I think I have a right to ask you to give it a little more, and to hear what I have to say after reflection. Is that unfair? At least you'll admit it's a serious step?"

"I suppose it's fair," she murmured impatiently. She would have given the world to be able to call it grossly unfair. "But it's no use," she added, almost fierce in her rejection of the idea that her determination might weaken.

"Let us both think and pray," he said gravely. "This visit of yours to the Aikenheads' may be a good thing. It'll give you time to reflect, and there'll be no passing causes of irritation to affect your

calmer judgment. Let us treat it as settled that you stay with them for a fortnight – but treat nothing else as settled to-night. One thing more – have you told anybody about this idea?"

"Only Hobart Gaynor. I went and asked him whether I could do it if I wanted to. I told him I meant to do it."

"He'll hold his tongue. Mention it to nobody else, please."

"I won't till – till it's settled." She smiled. "We've actually agreed on one or two things! That's very unusual in our wrangles, Cyril."

He came up to her and kissed her on the forehead. "For God's sake, think! You don't in the least know what it means to you – or to me either."

She drew her head quickly back; a bitter retort was on the tip of her tongue. "Yes – but I know what life with you means!" She did not utter it; there was a pinched weariness in his face which for the moment disarmed her. She sighed disconsolately, turned away from him, and drifted out of the room, her shoulders bent as though by great fatigue.

She had suffered one or two transient pangs of pity; having feared a storm, she had experienced relief at his moderation, but gave him no credit for it. She did not understand how hard it was to him. She was almost inclined to hold it a device – an exhibition (once again exhibited) of how much wiser, more reasonable, and more thoughtful he was than the happy-go-lucky being to whom he was mated. She carried her grievances out of the room on her bowed shoulders – just as heavy as ever, just as insupportable.

The handsome, clever, rising man was left face to face with what he feared and hated most in this world – a failure. He had fallen in love with the pretty body; he had never doubted that he could shape and model the malleable mind. Why not? It was in no way a great or remarkable mind. She was not very talented, nor exceptionally strong-willed, nor even very obstinate. Nor ungoverned, nor ultra-emotional, nor unmoral. She was a woman more than ordinarily attractive, but hardly more than ordinary in other respects. And, looking back on five years, he realized the enormous and constant pains he had taken with her. It had been matter of conscience as well as matter of pride; when the two join forces, what is left to fight them? And they constantly form an alliance. Defeat threatened even this potent confederation – defeat at the hands of one whom he counted little more than a charming wilful child.

Charming? Softer emotions, offspring of memory, suffered a resurrection not in the end charged with much real import. He was of the men who satisfy emotion in order to quiet it; marriage was in his view – and in the view of authorities in which he believed – better than being in love as well as different from it. In the sense appropriate to voluptuaries, he had never been in love at all. What remained, then, to combat his profound distaste and disapproval for all she now advanced, her claims, pretensions, and grievances? In the end two disparate, yet closely allied forces – loyalty to a great cause and hatred of personal defeat. Let him make himself champion of the cause: the two became one. Could heaven and he conjoined succumb to any onslaught?

He faced his theory logically and boldly. "She is my wife. I'm as responsible for her as I am for myself. She may deny that – I can't."

For good or evil, for joy or pain, one flesh, one mind, one spirit, *usque in æternum*. There was the high uncompromising doctrine.

His wife did not consciously or explicitly dissent from it. As she had told him, she was bred to it. Her plea was simply that, be it right or be it wrong, she could not live up to it. She could observe the prohibitions it implied – she had kept and would keep her restraining vows – but she could no longer fulfil the positive injunctions. If she sought at all for an intellectual or speculative justification, it was as an afterthought, as a plea to conciliate such a friend as Hobart Gaynor, or as a weapon of defence against her husband. To herself her excuse was necessity. If she had given that night the truest account in her power of what she felt, she would have said that she was doing wrong, but that she could not help it. There were limits to human endurance – a fact of which Divine Law, in other

matters besides that of marriage, has not been considered by the practice (as apart from the doctrine) of Christendom at large to take adequate account.

CHAPTER III

'IN SOLUTION'

"Well, you see, things are rather in solution just now."

Most people have a formula or two by which they try to introduce some order into the lumber-room of the mind. Such a lot of things are dumped down there, and without a formula or two they get so mixed. The above was Stephen Aikenhead's favourite. Many of his friends preferred to say "in transition." That phrase, he maintained, begged the question. Perhaps, after all the talk and all the agitation, nothing would be changed; the innovators might be beaten; they often had been; the mass of mankind was very conservative. Look at the ebb and flow of human thought, as history recorded it – the freedom of Athens and the licence of Rome followed by the Dark Ages – the Renaissance tamed, if not mutilated, by the Counter-Reformation on the one hand and the rigours of Puritanism on the other. Certainly the foundations of all things were being, or were going to be, examined. But it is one thing to examine foundations, a different one to declare and prove them unsound. And even when the latter process has come about, there is the question – will you shore the building up or will you pull it down? The friends who favoured "transition" often grew impatient with this incurable doubter; they were as convinced that the future was going to be all right and going to come very soon as they were certain that the present was all wrong and could not possibly resist the assault of reason for many years more. They were sanguine people, apt to forget that, right as they undoubtedly were (in their own opinion), yet the Englishman at least accords his support to progress only on the definite understanding that it shall be slow. "Put the brake on!" he urges, envisaging innovation as a galloping downhill. Stephen's friends pathetically pictured it as a toilsome ascent – toilsome, yet speedily to be achieved by gallantly straining horses. No need of brakes, though! Argument by metaphor is perilous either way.

In this case the formula was administered to Winnie Maxon, within the space of two hours after her arrival at Shaylor's Patch. Stephen's pretty house in Buckinghamshire – it lay Beaconsfield way – took its unassuming title presumably from a defunct Shaylor and certainly from a small plot of grass which lay between two diverging roads about a hundred yards on the way down to the station. The house was old, rambling, and low – a thoroughly comfortable dwelling. The garden was fair to see with its roses, its yews, and its one great copper-beech, with its spread of smooth lawn and its outlook over a wide-stretching valley.

"A home of peace!" thought Winnie, relaxing weary body (she had packed that morning for more than a fortnight's absence) and storm-tossed mind, as she lay on a long chair under the shade of the copper-beech.

Stephen sat opposite to her, a tall man of three and thirty, fair, inclining to stoutness, with a crop of coarse, disorderly, mouse-coloured hair; always and everywhere he wore large horn-rimmed spectacles. He had inherited a competence more than merely sufficient; he had no profession, but wrote articles when the spirit moved him and had them published more rarely. At twenty-two he had married. It was before the days when he began to doubt whether people ought to – or anyhow need – marry, and his union had been so happy that the doubt could not be attributed to personal experience. His wife was not pretty, but pleasant-faced and delightfully serene. She had very strong opinions of her own, and held them so strongly that she rarely argued and was never ruffled in argument. If anybody grew hot over a discussion, she would smile at him, and hand him a flower, or at appropriate moments something nice to eat. They had one child, a girl now ten years old, whom they had just sent to a boarding-school.

It was in connexion with little Alice's being sent to the boarding-school that the formula made its appearance. Winnie had expressed the proper wonder that her parents "could bear to part with her." Stephen explained that they had been actuated by a desire to act fairly towards the child.

"If I was sure I was right, and sure the ancients were wrong, I would teach her myself – teach her to believe what I believe and to disbelieve what they believe. But am I sure? What do I believe? And suppose I'm right, or at all events that they're wrong, most people mayn't think so for many years to come. I should be putting her against the world, and the world against her. Is that fair, unless I'm bang sure? Not everybody can be happy when the world's against them. I can't teach her what I can't believe, but why shouldn't she learn it from people who can? She must settle it in the end for herself, but it seems fair to give her her chance of orthodoxy. While things are, as I said, in solution – in a sort of flux, don't you know?"

"What do you mean by things being in solution – or in a flux?"

The daughter of a clergyman, wife of Cyril Maxon since she was nineteen, a devout member of Attlebury's flock, she came quite fresh to the idea. In her life and her world things had seemed tremendously solid, proof against an earthquake!

"I suppose it's really been the same in every age with thinking people, but it's more widespread now, isn't it? It gets into the newspapers even! 'Do we Believe?' 'Is Marriage a Failure?' It's not the answers that are most significant, you know, but the questions."

"Yes, I think I see what you mean – partly." The words came in slow ruminating tones. "Do you go very far?" she went on, in accents drolly apprehensive.

He laughed jovially. "There are no bombs. I'm married to Tora. Is it terrible that I don't go to church very often? Never, I'm bound to add in candour, if I can help it."

"I shall go while I'm here. Do you think it funny that I should suddenly propose myself for a visit?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't think Maxon would come."

"Or that I should come without him?"

"We pictured you pretty extensively married, I confess."

"So I was – so I am, I mean." She remembered her promise; she was not to mention her great resolve. But it struck her that the pledge would be hard to keep. Already the atmosphere of Shaylor's Patch suggested that her position was eminently one to talk over, to discuss with an open-minded sympathetic friend, to speculate about in all its bearings.

"But you mustn't think I'm absolutely hidebound," she went on. "I can think – and act – for myself." She was skirting the forbidden ground.

"I'm glad of it. Is Maxon?" There was a humorous twinkle behind his spectacles.

"Why are we to talk of Cyril when I've just begun my holiday?" Yet there was nothing else that she really wanted to talk about. Oh, that stupid promise! Of course she ought to have reserved the right to lay the case before her friends. But a promise is a promise, however stupid. That certainly would be Cyril's view; and it was hers. Was it, she wondered, the Shaylor's Patch view? Or might a question of ethics like that be to some extent "in solution"?

"He thinks me an awful reprobate?" Stephen asked.

She nodded, smiling.

"So they do down here, but my friends in London call me a very mild specimen. I expect some of them will turn up while you're here, and you'll be able to see for yourself."

"You don't mind being thought a reprobate down here?"

"Why should I? I don't want their society, any more than they want mine. I'm quite well off, and I've no ambitions." He laughed. "I'm ideally placed for defying the world, if I want to. It really needs no courage at all, and would bring me no martyr's crown."

"You mean it would be different if you had to work for your living?"

"Might be – or if I wanted to go in for public life, or anything of that kind."

"Or if you were a woman?"

"Well, if I were a woman who was sensitive about what society at large thought of her. That's one of the reasons why I don't preach my views much. It's all very well for me, but my converts, if any, might end by thinking they were paying too dear, while the prophet got off for nothing."

He had a book, she a newspaper. With an easy absence of ceremony he began to read; but she left her paper lying on the ground beside her, and let her thoughts play as they would on the great change which had come over her life and on what it would mean to her if it persisted, as she was resolute that it should.

"I can think – and act – for myself," she had said. Perhaps, but both would be new and strange exercises. She had walked on lines very straightly ruled; she had moved to orders peremptorily conveyed. A fear mingled with the relief of emancipation. They say that men who have been long in prison are bewildered by the great free bustling world. It may be as true of prisons of the mind as of the Bastille itself.

Stephen interrupted his reading to give another statement of his attitude. "It's like the two horses – the one in the stable-yard and the wild one. The one gets oats and no freedom, the other freedom and no oats. Now different people put very various values on freedom and on oats. And at any rate the wild horse must have fodder of some kind."

His face vanished behind the book again, and she heard him chuckling merrily over something in it. If he did not get oats, he certainly seemed to thrive excellently on such other fodder as he found. But then it was undeniable that Cyril Maxon thrived equally well – successful, rising, with no doubts as to his own opinions or his own conduct. Or had her resolve shaken him into any questionings? He had shown no signs of any when she parted from him that morning. "I shall be glad to see you back at the end of your fortnight," he had said. The words were an order.

Tora Aikenhead, on her way to the rose-beds, with a basket and scissors in her hand, came up to them.

"Resting?" she asked Winnie, in her low pleasant voice.

In the telegram in which she had proposed her visit, Winnie had said that she was a little "knocked up" with the gaieties of town, but she fancied that her hostess's question referred, though distantly, to more than these, that she had discerned traces of distress, the havoc wrought by the passing of a storm.

"Beautifully!" Winnie answered, with a grateful smile.

"Dick Dennehy is week-ending with Godfrey Ledstone, and they're coming to lunch and tennis to-morrow; and Mrs. Lenoir is motoring down to lunch too," Tora went on to her husband.

"Mrs. Lenoir?" He looked up from his book with that droll twinkle behind his big spectacles again.

"Yes. Quite soon again, isn't it? She must like us, Stephen."

Stephen laughed. His wife had not in the least understood the cause of the twinkle. She would not, he reflected. It never occurred to her that any human being could object to meeting any other, unless, indeed, actual assault and battery were to be feared. But Stephen was awake to the fact that it might be startling to Winnie Maxon to meet Mrs. Lenoir – if she knew all about her. Naturally he attributed rigid standards to Mrs. Cyril Maxon, in spite of her proud avowal of open-mindedness, which indeed had seemed to him rather amusing than convincing.

"Ledstone's our neighbour," he told Winnie, "the only neighbour who really approves of us. He's taken a cottage here for the summer. You'll like him; he's a jolly fellow. Dennehy's an Irish London correspondent to some paper or other in the States, and a Fenian, and all that sort of thing, you know. Very good chap."

"Well, I asked no questions about your guests, but since you've started posting me up – who's Mrs. Lenoir?"

"Tora, who is Mrs. Lenoir?"

"Who is she? Who should she be? She's just Mrs. Lenoir."

Tora was obviously rather surprised at the question, and unprovided with an illuminating answer. But then there are many people in whose case it is difficult to say who they are, unless a repetition of their names be accepted as sufficient.

"I must out with it. Mrs. Lenoir was once mixed up in a very famous case – she intervened, as they call it – and the case went against her. Some people thought she was unjustly blamed in that case, but – well, it couldn't be denied that she was a plausible person to choose for blame. It's all years ago – she must be well over fifty by now. I hope you – er – won't feel it necessary to have too long a memory, Winnie?"

"I don't exactly see why it's necessary to tell at all," remarked Tora. "Why is it our business?"

"But Winnie does?" The question was to Winnie herself.

"I know why you told me, of course," she answered. She hesitated, blushed, smiled, and came out with "But it doesn't matter."

"Of course not, dear," remarked Tora, as she went off to her roses.

All very well to say "Of course not," but to Mrs. Cyril Maxon it was not a case of "Of course" at all. Quite the contrary. The concession she had made was to her a notable one. She had resolved to fall in with the ways of Shaylor's Patch in all possible and lawful matters – and it was not for her, a guest, to make difficulties about other guests, if such a thing could possibly be avoided. None the less, she was much surprised that Mrs. Lenoir should be coming to lunch – she had, in fact, betrayed that. In making no difficulties she seemed to herself to take a long step on the road to emancipation. It was her first act of liberty; for certainly Cyril Maxon would never have permitted it. She felt that she had behaved graciously; she felt also that she had been rather audacious.

Stephen understood her feelings better than his wife did. He had introduced himself to the atmosphere he now breathed, Tora had been bred in it by a free-thinking father, who had not Stephen's own scruples about his child. In early days he had breathed the air which up to yesterday had filled Winnie's lungs – the Maxon air.

"I suppose these things are all wrong on almost any conceivable theory that could apply to a civilized community," he remarked, "but so many people do them and go scot-free that I'm never inclined to be hard on the unfortunates who get found out. Not – I'm bound to say – that Mrs. Lenoir ever took much trouble not to be found out. Well, if people are going to do them, it's possible to admit a sneaking admiration for people who do them openly, and say 'You be hanged!' to society. You'll find her a very intelligent woman. She's still very handsome, and has really – yes, really – grand manners."

"I begin to understand why you let her down so easy," said Winnie, smiling.

He laughed. "Oh, well, perhaps you're right there. I'm human, and I dare say I did do a bit of special pleading. I like her. She's interesting."

"And nothing much matters, does it?" she put in acutely enough.

"Oh, you accuse me of that attitude? I suppose you plausibly might. But I don't admit it. I only say that it's very difficult to tell what matters. Not the same thing – surely?"

"It might work out much the same in – well, in conduct, mightn't it? If you wanted to do a thing very much, couldn't you always contrive to think that it was one of the things that didn't matter?"

"Why not go the whole hog, and think it the only proper thing to do?" he laughed.

She echoed his laugh. "You must let me down easy, as well as Mrs. Lenoir!"

"I will, fair cousin – and, on my honour, for just as good reasons."

Stephen had enjoyed his talk. It amused and interested him to see her coming, little by little, timidly, out of her – should he call it sanctuary or prison-house? – to see her delicately and fearfully toying with ideas that to him were familiar and commonplace. He marked an alertness of mind in her, especially admiring the one or two little thrusts which she had given him with a pretty shrewdness. As he had said, he had no itch to make converts; it was not his concern to unsettle her mind. But it was contrary to all his way of thinking to conceal his own views or to refuse to exchange intelligent

opinions because his interlocutor stood at a different point of view. Everybody stood at different points of view at Shaylor's Patch. Was conversation to be banned and censored?

Winnie herself would have cried "No" with all her heart. Revelling in the peace about her, in the strange freedom from the ever-present horror of friction and wrangles, in the feeling that at last she could look out on the world with her own eyes, no man saying her nay, she reached out eagerly to the new things, not indeed conceiving that they could become her gospel, her faith, but with a half-guilty appreciation, a sense of courage and of defiance, and a genuine pleasure in the exercise of such wits as she modestly claimed to possess. She had been so terribly cramped for so long. Surely she might play about a little? What harm in that? It committed her to nothing.

As she got into her bed, she said, as a child might, "Oh, I am going to enjoy myself here – I'm sure I am!"

So it is good to fall asleep, with thanks for to-day, and a smile of welcome ready for to-morrow.

CHAPTER IV

KEEPING A PROMISE

Modern young women are athletic, no doubt with a heavy balance of advantage to themselves, to the race, and to the general joyousness of things. Yet not all of them; there are still some whose strength is to sit still, or at least whose attraction is not to move fast, but rather to exhibit a languid grace, to hint latent forces which it is not the first-comer's lot to wake. There is mystery in latent forces; there is a challenge in composed inactivity. Not every woman who refuses to get hot is painted; not every woman who declines to scamper about is tight-laced. The matter goes deeper. This kind is not idle and lazy; it is about its woman's business; it is looking tranquil, reserved, hard to rouse or to move – with what degree of consciousness or of unconsciousness, how far by calculation, how far by instinct, heaven knows! Of this kind was Winnie Maxon. Though she was guiltless of paint or powder, though her meagre figure could afford to laugh at stays (although arrayed in them), yet it never occurred to her to scamper about a lawn-tennis court and get very hot and very red in the face, as Tora Aikenhead was doing, at half-past eleven on a Sunday morning. (Be it observed, for what it is worth, that in spite of her declaration of the day before Winnie had not gone to church.)

Tora's partner was her husband; she was very agile, he was a trifle slow, but a good placer. Against them Dennehy rather raged than played – a shortish thick-built man of five-and-thirty, with bristling sandy hair and a moustache of like hue, whose martial upward twist was at the moment subdued by perspiration. He could not play anywhere – and he would play at the net. Yet the match was a tight one, for his partner, Godfrey Ledstone, was really a player, though he was obviously not taking this game seriously. A brilliant shot at critical moments, with a laughing apology for such a fluke, betrayed that he was in a different class from his companions.

The game ended in the defeat of the Aikenheads, and the players gathered round Winnie. Dennehy was grossly triumphant, and raged again when his late opponents plainly told him that his share in the victory was less than nothing. He declared that the "moral effect" of his presence at the net was incalculable.

"That quality is certainly possessed by your strokes," Stephen admitted.

Under cover of the friendly wrangle, Winnie turned to Ledstone, who had sat down beside her. She found him already regarding her; a consciousness that she desired his attention made her flush a little.

"How easily you play! I mean, you make the game look so easy."

"Well, if I want to impress the gallery, old Dennehy's rather a useful partner to have, isn't he? But I did use to play a good bit once, before I went into business."

"No time now? I'm told you go to London as much as three days a week!"

"I see Mrs. Aikenhead's been giving me away. Did she tell you anything else?"

"Well, she told me what you looked like, but I know that for myself now."

"Did she do me justice, Mrs. Maxon?" He had pleasant blue eyes, and used them to enhance the value of his words.

"I don't want to put you and her at loggerheads," smiled Winnie.

"Ah, you mean she didn't?"

Winnie's smile remained mysterious. Here was a game that she could play, though she had perforce abstained from it for many many days. It is undeniable that she came back to it with the greater zest.

"I shall ask Mrs. Aikenhead what she said."

"That won't tell you what I think about it."

"Then how am I to find out?"

"Is it so important to you to know?"

"I feel just a sort of – well, mild interest, I must admit." There seemed ground for supposing that lawn-tennis was not the only game that he had played, either.

"Mere good looks don't go for very much in a man, do they?" said Winnie.

"There now, if you've given me anything with one hand, you've taken it away with the other!"

"What is your business, Mr. Ledstone?"

"I draw designs – decorative designs for china, and brocades, and sometimes fans. I can do a lot of my work down here – as Mrs. Aikenhead might have told you, instead of representing me as a lazy dog, doing nothing four days in the week."

"I've been led into doing you an injustice," Winnie admitted with much gravity. "Is it a good business?"

"Grossly underpaid," he laughed.

"And I may have eaten off one of your plates?"

"Yes, or sat on one of my cushions, or fanned yourself with one of my fans."

"It seems to serve as an introduction, doesn't it?"

"Oh, more than that, please! I think it ought to be considered as establishing a friendship."

The other three had strolled off towards the house. Winnie rose, to follow them. As Ledstone took his place by her side, she turned her eyes on him.

"I haven't so many friends as to be very difficult about that," she said, with a note of melancholy in her voice.

The hint of sadness came on the heels of her raillery with sure artistic effect. Yet it was genuine enough. The few minutes of forgetfulness – of engrossed satisfaction in her woman's wit and wiles – were at an end. Few friends had she indeed! She could reckon scarcely one intimate outside Shaylor's Patch itself. Being Mrs. Cyril Maxon was an exacting life; it limited, trammelled, almost absorbed. Husbands are sometimes jealous of women-friends hardly less than of men. Cyril was one of these.

Ledstone's vanity was flattered, his curiosity piqued. The hint of melancholy added a spice of compassion. His susceptible temperament had material enough and to spare for a very memorable first impression of Mrs. Maxon. Though still a young man – he was no more than seven-and-twenty – he was no novice either in the lighter or in the more serious side of love-making; he could appreciate the impression he received and recognize the impression he made.

It is to the credit of Mrs. Maxon's instinctively cunning reserve that as they walked back to the house he still felt more certain that he wanted to please her than that he had already done it to any considerable extent. The reserve was not so much in words – she had let her frank chaff show plainly enough that she liked her companion; it lay rather in manner and carriage. Only on the hint of melancholy – only that once – had she put her eyes to any significant use. He was conscious of having made greater calls on his. That was right enough; he was the man, and he was a bachelor. Ledstone could not be charged with an exaggerated reverence for marriage, but he did know that he paid a married woman a poor compliment if he assumed beforehand that she would underrate the obligation of her status.

When they entered the long, low, panelled parlour that gave on to the garden, Mrs. Lenoir had already arrived and was sitting enthroned in the middle of the room; she had a knack of investing with almost regal dignity any seat she chanced to occupy. She was a tall woman of striking appearance, not stout, but large of frame, with a quantity of white hair (disposed under an enormous black hat), a pale face, dark eyes, and very straight dark eyebrows. She had long slim hands which she used constantly in dramatic gesture. Stephen Aikenhead had credited her with a "really grand" manner. It was possible to think it just a trifle too grand, to find in it too strong a flavour of condescension and of self-consciousness. It might be due to the fact that she had been in her own way almost an historical figure – and had certainly mingled with people who were historical. Or it was possible to see in it an instinct of self-protection, exaggerated into haughtiness, a making haste to exact homage,

lest she should fail even of respect. Whatever its origin, there it was, though not in a measure so strong as fatally to mar the effect of her beauty or the attraction of her personality. Save for the hat, she was dressed very simply; nay, even the hat achieved simplicity, when the spectator had enjoyed time to master it. On one hand she wore only her wedding-ring – she had married Mr. Lenoir rather late in life and had now been a widow for several years – on the other a single fine diamond, generally considered to be ante-Lenoirian in date. Lord Hurston was a probable attribution.

Winnie was at sea, but found the breeze exhilarating and was not upset by the motion. She was a responsive being, taking colour from her surroundings. A little less exaction on the part of her husband might have left her for ever an obedient wife; what a more extended liberty of thought, of action, of the exploitation of herself, might do – and end in – suggested itself in a vague dim question on this her first complete day of freedom.

At lunch Dick Dennehy could not get away from his victory at lawn-tennis. He started on an exposition of the theory of the game. He was heard in silence, till Tora Aikenhead observed in her dispassionate tones, "But you don't play at all well, Dick."

"What?" he shouted indignantly, trying to twist up a still humid moustache.

"Theory against practice – that's the way of it always," said Stephen.

"Well, in a sense ye're right there," Dennehy conceded. "It needs a priest to tell you what to do, and a man to do it."

"Let's put a 'not' in the first half of the proposition," said Ledstone.

"And a woman in the second half?" Mrs. Lenoir added.

"That must be why they like one another so much," Dennehy suggested. "Each makes such a fine justification for the existence of the other. They keep one another in work!" He rubbed his hands with a pleasantly boyish laugh.

"I always try to be serious, though it's very difficult with the people who come to my house." Stephen was hypocritically grave.

"Ye're serious because ye're an atheist," observed Dennehy.

"I'm not an atheist, Dick."

"The Pope'd call you one, and that's enough for a good Catholic like me. How shouldn't you behave yourself properly when you don't believe that penitence can do you any good?"

"The weak spot about penitence," remarked Tora, "is that it doesn't do the other party any good."

Winnie ventured a meek question: "The other party?"

"There always is one," said Mrs. Lenoir.

Stephen smiled. "I always like to search for a contradictory instance. Now, if a man drinks himself to death, he benefits the revenue, he accelerates the wealth of his heirs, promotes the success of his rivals, gratifies the enmity of his foes, and enriches the conversation of his friends. As for his work – if he has any — *il n'y a pas d'homme nécessaire*."

"It seems to me it would be all right if nobody wasted time and trouble over stopping him," said Dennehy – a teetotaller, and the next instant quaffing ginger-beer immoderately.

"He would be sure to be hurting somebody," said Mrs. Lenoir.

"And why not hurt somebody? I'm sure somebody's always hurting me," Dennehy objected hotly. "How would the world get on else? Don't I hold my billet only till a better man can turn me out?"

"Yes," said Stephen. "'The priest who slew the slayer, and shall himself be slain' – that system's by no means obsolete in modern civilization."

"Obsolete! It's the soul of it, its essence, its gospel." It was Mrs. Lenoir who spoke.

"A definition of competition?" asked Stephen.

"Yes, and of progress – as they call it."

Tora Aikenhead was consolatory, benign, undismayed. "To be slain when you're old and weak – what of that?"

"But ye don't think ye're old and weak. That's the shock of it," cried Dennehy.

"It is rather a shock," Mrs. Lenoir agreed. "The truth about yourself is always a shock – or even another person's genuine opinion."

Winnie Maxon remembered how she had administered to her husband his "awful facer"; she recollected also, rather ruefully, that he had taken it well. You always have to hurt somebody, even when you want so obvious a right as freedom! A definite declaration of incompatibility must be wounding – at any rate when it is not mutual.

It is an irksome thing to have – nay, to constitute in your own person – an apposite and interesting case, and to be forbidden to produce it. If only Winnie Maxon might lay her case before the company while they were so finely in the mood to deal with it! She felt not merely that she would receive valuable advice (which she could not bring herself to doubt would be favourable to her side), but also that she herself would take new rank; to provide these speculative minds with a case must be a passport to their esteem. Bitterly regretting her unfortunate promise, she began to arraign the justice of holding herself bound by it, and to accuse her husband's motives in extorting it. He must have wished to deprive her of what she would naturally and properly seek – the counsel of her friends. He must have wanted to isolate her, to leave her to fight her bitter battle all alone. To chatter in public was one thing, to consult two or three good friends surely another? Promises should be kept; but should they not also be reasonably interpreted, especially when they have been exacted from such doubtful motives?

Thus straying, probably for the first time in her life, in the mazes of casuistry, the adventurous novice was rewarded by a really brilliant idea. Why should she not put her case in general terms, as an imaginary instance, hypothetically? The promise would be kept, yet the counsel and comfort (for, of course, the counsel would be comfortable) would be forthcoming. No sooner conceived than executed! Only, unfortunately, the execution was attended with a good deal of confusion and no small display of blushes – a display not indeed unbecoming, but sadly compromising. It was just as well that they had got to the stage of coffee, and the parlour-maid had left the room.

Dennehy did not find her out. He was not an observant man, and he was more interested in general questions than in individual persons. Hence Winnie had the benefit of listening to a thoroughgoing denunciation of the course she had adopted and was resolved to maintain. Kingdoms might – and in most cases ought to – fall; that was matter of politics. But marriage and the family – that was matter of faith and morals. He bade Winnie's hypothetical lady endure her sufferings and look for her reward elsewhere. At the close of his remarks Tora Aikenhead smiled and offered him a candied apricot. He had certainly spoken rather hotly.

Stephen guessed the truth, and it explained what had puzzled him from the first – the sudden visit of his cousin, unaccompanied by her husband. He had suspected a tiff. But he had not divined a rupture. He was surprised at Winnie's pluck; it must be confessed that he was also rather staggered at being asked to consider Cyril Maxon as quite so impossible to live with. However, Winnie ought to know best about that.

"Oh, come, Dick, there are limits – there must be. You may be bound to take the high line, but the rest of us are free to judge cases on the merits. At this time of day you can't expect women to stand being sat upon and squashed all their lives."

Godfrey Ledstone had not talked much. Now he came forward on Winnie's side.

"A man must appreciate a woman, or how can he ask her to stay with him?"

"I don't see why she shouldn't do as she likes," said Tora. "Especially as you put a case where there are no children, Winnie."

Mrs. Lenoir was more reserved. "Let her either make up her mind to stand everything or not to stand it at all any more. Because she'll never change a man like that."

Only one to the contrary – and he a necessarily prejudiced witness! She claimed Mrs. Lenoir for her side, in spite of the reserve. The other three were obviously for her. Winnie was glad that she

had put her case. Not only was she comforted; somehow she felt more important. No longer a mere listener, she had contributed to the debate. She would have felt still more important had she been free to declare that it was she herself who embodied the matter at issue.

For such added consequence she had not long to wait. After the guests had gone, Stephen Aikenhead came to her in the garden.

"I don't want to pry into what's not my business, but I think some of us had an idea that – well, that you were talking about yourself, really, at lunch. Don't say anything if you don't want to. Only, of course, Tora and I would like to help."

She looked up at him, blushing again. "I promised not to tell. But since you've guessed – "

"I'm awfully sorry about it."

"At least I promised not to tell till it was settled. Well – it is settled. So I've not broken the promise, really."

Stephen did not think it necessary – or perhaps easy – to pass judgment on this point.

"At any rate it's much better we should know, I think. I'm sure you'll find Tora able to help you now."

She was not thinking of Tora – nor of Dennehy's tirade, nor even of Mrs. Lenoir's reserve.

"Do you think Mr. Ledstone – guessed?"

Stephen smiled. "He took a very definite stand on the woman's side when you put your parable. I should say it's probable that he guessed."

Thus it befell that the secret leaked out, though the promise was kept; and Winnie found herself an object of sympathy and her destinies a matter of importance at Shaylor's Patch. It is perhaps enough to say that she would have been behaving distinctly well if, for the sake of a scrupulous interpretation of her promise, she had forgone these consolations. They were very real and precious. They negated the doleful finality which she had set to her life as a woman. They transformed her case; instead of a failure, it became a problem. A little boldness of vision, a breath of the free air of Shaylor's Patch, a draught of the new wine of speculation – and behold the victim turned experimentalist!

CHAPTER V

THE GREAT ALLIES

Although the Reverend Francis Attlebury was vowed in his soul to celibacy and had never so much as flirted since he took his degree at Oxford twenty-three years ago, he had more knowledge of the mind of woman than most married men pleurably or painfully achieve. Women came to him with their troubles, their grievances, even sometimes their sins; it was no more his business to pooh-pooh the grievances than to extenuate the sins; one does not carry a cross the more cheerfully or, as a rule, any further, because a bystander assures one that it is in reality very light.

He was a tall stout man – a grievance of his own was that he looked abominably well-fed in spite of constant self-denial – and possessed a face of native and invincible joviality. He was looking quite jovial now as he listened to Cyril Maxon, agreed that he had been shamefully used, and concluded in his own mind that if the negotiations were to be carried on in that spirit they might just as well not be initiated at all. The thing was not to prove how wrong she had been in going, but to get her back. She was more likely to come back, if it were conceded to her that she had at least a fair excuse for going. Would Cyril Maxon ever make such a concession – or let somebody make it for him?

The two men were old and intimate friends; moreover Maxon was even eager to acknowledge an authority in Attlebury's office, as well as a confidence in his personal judgment.

"You won't make her think she was always wrong by proving that you were always right, Cyril."

"Am I to say I was wrong where I know I was right?"

"You've probably said you were right already. Need you repeat it?"

"I'm ready to forgive her – absolutely and unreservedly."

"Would you go a little further – do something rather harder? Accept forgiveness?" The diplomatist smiled. "Conditional forgiveness we might call it, perhaps. Forgiveness in case there might be anything for her to forgive?"

Maxon broke out in natural impatience at the incomprehensible. "On my honour, I don't understand what she's got to complain of. I took her from a poor home, I've given her every luxury, she shares my career – I needn't use mock modesty with you, Frank – I've given her absolute fidelity – " He ended with a despairing wave of his hands.

Attlebury neither argued nor rebuked. "Is there anybody who has influence with her – whom she likes and relies on?"

"I should hate anybody else being dragged into it – except you, of course. I asked her to come to you."

"Oh, I know I'm suspect. I should be no good." He smiled contentedly. "Nobody you can think of?"

"Well, the man she consulted about it was Hobart Gaynor." His tone was full of grudging dislike of such a consultation.

"Hobart Gaynor? Yes, I know him. Not a bad choice of hers, Cyril, if she felt she had to go to some one. Not quite our way of thinking, but a very good fellow."

"Why is he to poke his nose into my affairs?"

"Come, come, she poked her pretty nose into his office, no doubt, and probably he'd much rather she hadn't. I've experience of ladies in distress, Cyril. I am, in fact, as the Great Duke said of authors – when he was Chancellor of Oxford, you know – much exposed to them."

"I didn't come here to discuss Hobart Gaynor."

"I hope we sometimes do wiser things than we come to do – or what's the good of a talk? Let's discuss Hobart Gaynor in the light of – say – an ambassador, or a go-between. You're looking very

formidable, Cyril. Did you often look at Mrs. Maxon like that? If so, I hope she'd done something really wicked. Because, if she hadn't, you did."

For just that moment the note of rebuke and authority rang clear in his voice. The next, he was the friend, the counsellor, the diplomatist again.

"Let Gaynor go to her with a message of peace. Bygones to be bygones, faults on both sides, a fresh start, and so on."

Cyril Maxon had felt the rebuke; he bowed his head to it. But he fretted terribly.

"I can't bring myself to speak to him about it."

"Let me. She's your wife, you know. If she went wrong, mightn't you feel that some effort of yours would – well, have made the difference?"

"What am I to tell him to say?"

"Let me tell him what to say – you try to honour my draft when it's presented. Perhaps – God knows – we're fighting for her soul, Cyril, and we shall be asked how we've borne ourselves in the fight, shan't we?"

Cyril Maxon was always ready to own that he might have been wrong – to own it to God or to God's representative; he hated owning it to a fellow-creature uninvested with prerogatives. Attlebury had skilfully shifted the venue and changed the tribunal. A man may be sure he is right as against his wife – or *vice versa*. Who dares enter an unqualified 'Not Guilty' before High Heaven's Court? There some count in the indictment is sure to be well laid and well proven.

"I think I know my faults," he said, in a complacent humility.

Attlebury's smile became more jovial still. "O learned gentleman!"

The disciple still held the natural man under control. Maxon smiled, if sourly.

"I may have been exacting."

"You may have been an ass," sprang to the clergyman's lips, but stayed unuttered. "Allowances, Cyril, allowances!" he murmured gently. "We all have to work through allowances."

"Do as you like, Frank. I want the thing put straight. You know I do. I think I ought to have from her an expression of – well, of regret."

"Won't coming back convey it?" Attlebury smiled. "In fact, rather forcibly?"

Left alone, the priest indulged himself in a bout of one of his diversions – the contemplation of the folly of his disciples. Not folly in believing in him and his authority – on that he was unimpeachably sincere. What moved his satiric vein was that they all had to be gulled – and were all gullible. Before they could be made better, they all had to be persuaded that they were better than they were already. Miserable offenders? Certainly. But with "potentialities"? Even more certainly – and to an unusual degree. No question of breaking the bruised reed – it must be put in splinters. And the smoking flax would be revived with a dash of kerosene. That Pope had been entirely wrong about Tannhäuser; he should have told him that his recent doings did not represent his true self. There is joy over a sinner that repenteth. To Attlebury there was excitement in one that might. He knew it, he chid himself for it; the glory was not in him or to him. But the sporting instinct was deep – a cause of sore penitence, and of unregenerate perpetual amusement at himself.

"I'd like to beat these free-thinking beggars!" A.M.D.G.? He prayed on his knees that it might be so – and so exclusively – that the Reverend Francis Attlebury might look for and gain no advancement, no praise, not even the praise of God, but might still say "I am an unprofitable servant," and still believe it.

Besides all this – right down in the depths of his being – came the primitive rivalry of man to man – obstinate in the heart of the celibate priest. "Dear old Cyril is a fool about women. He doesn't know a thing about them." This phase of thought was sternly repressed. It is not a branch of knowledge on which it behoves a man – not even a clergyman – to flatter himself. In the first place it is wrong; in the second – or same – place, dangerous.

Thus great forces began to deploy into line against little Winnie Maxon, holding her assertion of freedom to be grave scandal and offence. There was the Family, embodied in her lawfully wedded husband; there was nothing less than the Church Catholic, speaking inexorably in Mr. Attlebury's diplomatic phrases; the Wisdom of the World, its logic, its common sense, were to find expression – and where better expression? – in the sober friend, the shrewd lawyer, the moderate man Hobart Gaynor. Could she hurl defiance at these great allies? If she did, could she look for anything save utter and immediate defeat? Just one little woman, not very strong, not very wise, with really no case save a very nebulous hazy notion that, whatever they all said, it was too bad that she should be miserable all her life! The allies would tell her that many people were miserable all their lives, but (they would add) nobody need be. Between them they had a complete remedy. Hers was the blame, not theirs, if she would not swallow it.

At Shaylor's Patch, as the summer days passed by in sunshine and warm flower-scented breezes, where she was comforted, petted, made much of, where an infinite indulgence reigned, she was swallowing something quite different from the medicine that the allies proposed for her treatment. She was drinking a heady new wine. She was seeing with new eyes, travelling through new lands of thought and of feeling. Her spirit rejoiced as in a great emancipation – in being allowed, at last, to move, to live, to find itself, to meet its fellows, to give thanks to a world no longer its taskmaster, but the furnisher of its joys and the abetter in its pleasures. Of what should she be afraid in such a mood, of what ashamed? At Shaylor's Patch it seemed that rebellion might not only be admirable, as it often is, but that it would be easy – which it is very seldom.

For the real Great World – that amalgam of all the forces of the three allies, that mighty thing which so envelopes most people from the cradle to the grave that their speculations stray beyond it no more – and often much less – than their actions – this great thing had hardly a representative among all who came and went. These folks belonged to various little worlds, which had got as it were chipped off from the big one, and had acquired little atmospheres and little orbits of their own; from time to time they collided with one another, but nobody minded that – neither planet seemed a pin better or worse for the encounter. Each was inhabited by a few teachers and a body of disciples sometimes not much more numerous; teachers and disciples alike seemed very busy, very happy, and (to be frank) in many cases agreeably self-satisfied. Afraid of the big world – lest they should come into collision with that and be shattered to miserable atoms? Not a bit of it! For, you see, the big world was, for all its imposing and threatening appearance, really moribund, whereas they were young, vigorous, growing. Paralysis had set in in the Giant's legs. He could not catch them. Presently the disease would reach his heart. He would die, and they would parcel out all his possessions. Would they quarrel among themselves, these children of progress? Probably they would, as they cheerfully admitted. What matter? Such quarrels are stimulating, good for brain and heart, illuminating. Nay, in the end, not quarrels at all. The only real deadly quarrel was with the Giant. Would there be no danger of a new Giant coming into being, born of a union of all of them, just as despotic, just as lethargic, as the old? Into this distant speculation they did not enter, and their discreet forbearance may pardonably be imitated here.

On the whole they were probably too hard on the Giant; they did not allow enough for the difficulties involved in being so big, so lumbering, so complex. They girded at him for not trying every conceivable experiment; he grumbled back that he did not want to risk explosion on a large scale. They laughed at him for not running; a creature of his bulk was safer at a walk. They offered him all manner of new concoctions; he feared indigestion on a mighty scale. Some of them he dreaded and hated; at some he was much amused; for others he had a slow-moving admiration – they might be right, he would take a generation or two to think about it, and let them know in due course through his accredited channels.

Of some of Stephen Aikenhead's friends it was a little difficult to think as human beings; they seemed just embodied opinions. Doctor Johnson once observed – and few will differ from him –

that it would be tiresome to be married to a woman who would be for ever talking of the Arian heresy. Mrs. Danford, a bright-eyed, brisk-moving woman, was for ever denouncing boys' schools. Dennis Carriston wanted the human race to come to an end and, consistently enough, bored existing members of it almost to their extinction or his murder. These were of the faddists; but the majority did not fairly deserve that description. They were workers, reformers, questioners, all of them earnest, many clever, some even humorous (not such a very common thing in reformers), one or two eminent in achievement. But questioners and speculators all of them – with two notable exceptions, Mrs. Lenoir and Godfrey Ledstone. These two had no quarrel with orthodox opinion, and a very great respect for it; they would never have thought of justifying their deviations from orthodox practice. They were prepared to pay their fines – if they were caught – and did not cavil at the jurisdiction of the magistrate.

Godfrey Ledstone would have made a fine "man about town," that unquestioning, untroubled, heathenish master of the arts and luxuries of life. Chill penury – narrow means and the necessity of working – limited his opportunities. Within them he was faithful to the type and obedient to the code, availing himself of its elasticities, careful to observe it where it was rigid; up to the present anyhow he could find no breach of it with which to reproach himself.

He was committing no breach of it now. Not to do what he was doing would in his own eyes have stamped him a booby, a fellow of ungracious manners and defective sensibilities, a prude and a dolt.

The breeze stirred the trees; in leisurely fashion, unelbowed by rude clouds, there sank the sun; a languorous tranquillity masked the fierce struggle of beasts and men – men were ceasing from their labour, the lion not yet seeking his meat from God.

"I shall go to my grave puzzled whether the profile or the full face is better."

She stirred lazily on her long chair, and gave him the profile to consider again.

"Beautiful, but cold, distant, really disheartening!"

"You talk just as much nonsense as Mrs. Danford or Mr. Carriston."

"Now let me make the comparison! Full face, please!"

"You might be going to paint my picture. Now are you content?"

"I'm more or less pacified – for the moment."

Stephen Aikenhead lounged across the lawn, pipe in mouth. He noticed the two and shook his shaggy head – marking, questioning, finding it all very natural, seeing the trouble it might bring, without a formula to try it by – unless, here too, things were in solution.

She laughed lightly. "You must be careful with me, Mr. Ledstone. Remember I'm not used to flattery!"

"The things you have been used to! Good heavens!"

"I dare say I exaggerate." Delicately she asked for more pity, more approval.

"I don't believe you do. I believe there are worse things – things you can't speak of." It will be seen that by now – ten days since Winnie's arrival – the famous promise had been pitched most completely overboard.

"Oh, I don't think so, really I don't. Isn't it a pretty sky, Mr. Ledstone?"

"Indeed it is, and a pretty world too, Mrs. Maxon. Haven't you found it so?"

"Why will you go on talking about me?"

"Mayn't I talk about the thing I'm thinking about? How can I help it?"

Her smile, indulgent to him, pleaded for herself also.

"It is horribly hard not to, isn't it? That's why I've told all about it, I suppose."

Stephen Aikenhead, after the shake of his head, had drifted into the house, seeking a fresh fill for his pipe. He found the evening post in and, having nothing in the world else to do, brought out a letter to Mrs. Maxon.

"For you," he said, making a sudden and somewhat disconcerting appearance at her elbow. He puffed steadily, holding the letter out to Winnie, while he looked at his friend Godfrey with a kindly if quizzical regard.

"Good gracious, Stephen!"

"Well, I always like letters worth a 'Good gracious,' Winnie."

"Hobart Gaynor's coming here to-morrow."

"Don't know the gentleman. Friend of yours? Very glad to see him."

"Coming from – from Cyril!"

"Oh!" The little word was significantly drawn out. "That's another pair of shoes!" it seemed to say.

She sat up straight, and let her feet down to the ground.

"To make me go back, I suppose!"

"You could hardly expect him not to have a shot at it – Cyril, I mean."

Her eyes had been turned up to Stephen. In lowering them to her letter again, she caught in transit Godfrey Ledstone's regard. For a second or two the encounter lasted. She swished her skirt round – over an ankle heedlessly exposed by her quick movement. Her glance fell to the letter. Godfrey's remained on her face – as well she knew.

"I must see Hobart, but I won't go back. I won't, Stephen."

"All right, my dear. Stay here – the longer, the better for us. Shall I wire Gaynor to come?"

"Will you?"

Stephen's last glance – considerably blurred by tobacco smoke – was rather recognisant of fact than charged with judgment. "I suppose all that will count," he reflected, as he went back once again to the house. It certainly counted. Godfrey Ledstone was doing nothing against the code. All the same he was introducing a complication into Winnie Maxon's problem. At the start freedom for her had a negative content – it was freedom from things – friction, wrangles, crushing. Was that all that freedom meant? Was not that making it an empty sterile thing?

"You'll be firm, Mrs. Maxon?"

Godfrey leant forward in his chair; the change of attitude brought him startingly near to her. She sprang quickly to her feet, in instinctive retreat.

"I must hear what Hobart has to say." She met his eyes once more, and smiled pleadingly. He shrugged his shoulders, looking sulky. Her lips curved in a broader smile. "That's only fair to Cyril. You're not coming to dinner? Then – good night."

CHAPTER VI

FRUIT OF THE TREE

Hobart Gaynor undertook his embassy with reluctance. He was busily occupied over his own affairs – he was to be married in a fortnight – and he was only unwillingly convinced by Mr. Attlebury's suave demonstration of where his duty lay, and by the fine-sounding promises which that zealous diplomatist made in Cyril Maxon's name. Waiving the question whether things had been all wrong in the past, Attlebury gave a pledge that they should be all right in the future; all that a reasonable woman could ask, with an ample allowance for whims into the bargain. That was the offer, put briefly. Gaynor doubted, and, much as he wished well to Winnie Maxon, he did not desire to become in any sense responsible for her; he did not want to persuade or to dissuade. Indeed, at first, he would undertake no more than a fair presentment of Maxon's invitation. Attlebury persisted; the woman was young, pretty, not of a very stable character; her only safety was to be with her husband. Her old friend could not resist the appeal; he came into line. But when he asked Cicely Marshfield's applause for his action, he could not help feeling that she was, to use his own colloquial expression, rather "sniffy" about it; she did not appear fully to appreciate his obligation to save Winnie Maxon.

He arrived at Shaylor's Patch before lunch. Stephen Aikenhead received him with cordiality, faintly tinged, as it seemed to the visitor, with compassion. Tora's manner enforced the impression; she treated him as a good man foredoomed to failure. "Of course you must have your talk with her," Stephen said. "You shall have it after lunch." He spoke of the talk rather as a ceremony to be performed than as a conference likely to produce practical results.

"I hope you'll back me up – and Mrs. Aikenhead too?" said the ambassador.

The Aikenheads looked at one another. Tora smiled. Stephen rubbed his forehead. At the moment lunch was announced, and, the next, Winnie came into the room, closely followed by Godfrey Ledstone.

When Hobart saw her, a new doubt smote him – a doubt not of the success (he was doubtful enough about that already), but of the merits of his mission. She looked a different woman from the despairing rebel who had come to him in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Her eyes were bright, there was colour in her cheeks; her manner, without losing its attractive quietude and demureness, was gay and joyous. There might be something in what she had said about being "crushed" at her husband's house! It might not be merely a flourish of feminine rhetoric.

"The country has done wonders for you, Winnie," he said, as he shook hands.

"I'm having a lovely rest." To Hobart she seemed to add, "Why need you come and disturb it?"

Another omen unfavourable in the envoy's eyes was the obvious pleasure she took in Ledstone's presence and conversation; and yet another was the young man's unobtrusive but evident certainty that all he said and did would be well received. On Ledstone's fascinating attentions, no less than on the Aikenheads' affectionate and indulgent friendship, he had to ask her to turn her back. For what? A parcel of promises made by Attlebury in Maxon's name! Were they of much more practical value than what godfathers and godmothers promise and vow at a baby's christening? Could they change the natural man in Maxon and avail against his original sin? But, on the other hand, were not indulgent friendships, and, still more, charming attentions, exactly the dangers against which he had come to warn her? She was young, pretty, and not of a very stable character – Attlebury's words came back. The indulgent friendship would mine her defences; then the charming attentions would deliver their assault. No – Attlebury was right, his own mission was right; but it bore hard on poor Winnie Maxon. A reluctant messenger, a prophet too sensible of the other side of the argument (which prophets should never be), he found himself no match for the forces which now moved and dominated Winnie Maxon. She had been resolved when she was only crying for and dreaming of liberty. Would she

be less resolved now that she had tasted it? And was now enjoying it, not amid frowns or reproofs, but with the countenance of her friends and the generally, though not universally, implied approval of all the people she met? Attlebury could make the disapproval of the great world outside sound a terrible thing; sheltered at Shaylor's Patch, Winnie did not hear its voice. Attlebury might hint at terrible dangers; such men thought it "dangerous" for a woman to have any pleasure in her life!

She listened to Hobart kindly and patiently enough, but always with reiterated shakes of her pretty head. At some of the promises she fairly laughed – they were so entirely different from the Cyril Maxon she knew.

"It's no use," she declared. "Whatever may be right, whatever may be wrong, I'm not going back. The law ought to set me free (this was an outcome of Shaylor's Patch!). Since it doesn't, I set myself free, that's all."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Either take a cottage down here or a tiny flat in London."

"I didn't ask where you were going to live, but what you were going to do." Hobart was a patient man, but few people's tempers are quite unaffected by blank failure, by a serene disregard of their arguments.

"Do? Oh, I dare say I shall take up some movement. I hear a lot about that sort of thing down here, and I'm rather interested."

"Oh, you're not the sort of woman who buries herself in a movement, as you call it."

"I can make friends, like other people, I suppose. I needn't bury myself."

"Yes, you can make friends fast enough! Winnie, you're avoiding the crux of the matter."

"Oh, you're back to your dangers! Well, I think I can trust myself to behave properly."

"You ought to be sure of it."

"Are you being polite?"

"Oh, hang politeness! This is a vital question for you."

The colour mounted in her cheeks; for the first time she showed some sign of embarrassment. But the embarrassment and the feelings from which it sprang – those new feelings of the last fortnight – could not make her waver. They reinforced her resolution with all the power of emotion. They made "going back" still more terrible, a renunciation now as well as a slavery. Her eyes, though not her words, had promised Godfrey Ledstone that she would not go back. What then, as Hobart Gaynor asked, was she going to do? The time for putting that question had not come. There was the pleasure now – not yet the perplexity.

She gave a vexed laugh. "Whether it's vital or not, at any rate it's a question for me, as you say yourself, and for me only. And I must risk it, Hobart. After all, there are different – well, ideas – on that sort of subject, aren't there?" Here Shaylor's Patch showed its influence again.

"I rather wish you hadn't come to this house," he said slowly.

"I've been happier here than anywhere in the world. What have you against it?"

"Well, I can't claim to know much about it, but don't some queer people come?"

"Plenty!" she laughed. "It's very amusing."

He smiled, frowned, looked, and indeed felt, a little foolish – as the average man does when he finds himself called upon to take the moral line.

"Rather – er – unsettling?" he hazarded lamely.

"Very stimulating."

"Well, I can say no more. I've done my job. Take care of yourself, Winnie."

"Oh yes, I will; you may be sure of that. Hobart, will you tell Cyril that I'm very, very sorry, and that I hope he'll be happy, and wish him splendid success and prosperity?"

"I'll tell him – if you won't write yourself."

"I couldn't. That would open it all again. I'll write to you, if there's any business to be settled."

Hobart Gaynor, thinking over the conversation on his way back to town, decided that Winnie had got on apace. Well, if she chose to take her life into her own hands, she herself must make the best of it. He did not pretend to feel quite easy – he could not get Godfrey Ledstone out of his head – but he said nothing about such apprehensions when he reported the failure of his mission. He also delivered Winnie's message to her husband. Cyril Maxon's lips set hard, almost savagely, over it. "We shall see," he said. He could not prevent her from doing what she had done, but he would not acknowledge it as setting up a permanent or recognized state of affairs. For the time disobedient, Winnie was still his wife. He would not accept her valediction. His house was still open to her and, after a decent period of penance, his heart.

A plain case of Stephen Aikenhead's "In solution"! What to Cyril was an indissoluble relationship (and more than that), not even temporarily suspended, but rather defied and violated, was to his wife a thing now at last – by her final decision – over and done with so far as it affected her position towards Cyril himself. He was out of her life – at last. She had her life – at last. Not quite entirely free, this life she had won by her bold defiance. She still acknowledged limitations, even while she nibbled at the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that grew at Shaylor's Patch. Yet how incomparably more free than the old life! She was amazed to find with how little difficulty, with how slight a pang, and with how immense a satisfaction she had broken the bond – or had broken bounds, for she felt remarkably like a school-boy on a forbidden spree. What great things a little courage will effect! How the difficulties vanish when they are faced! Why, for five whole years, had she not seen that the door was open and walked out of it? Here she was – out! And nothing terrible seemed to happen.

"Well, I've done it now for good and all," she said to Stephen Aikenhead.

"Oh yes, you've done it. And what are you going to do next?"

"Just what Hobart asked me! Why should he – or why should you? If a woman doesn't marry, or becomes a widow, you don't ask her what she's going to do next! Consider me unmarried, or, if you like, a widow."

"That's all very well – excellently put. I am rebuked!" Stephen smiled comfortably and broadly. "You women do put things well. But may I observe that, if you were the sort of woman you're asking me to think about, you'd probably be living pretty contentedly with Cyril Maxon?"

The point was presented plainly enough for her. She smiled reflectively. "I think I see. Yes!"

"People differ as well as cases."

She sat down by him, much interested. They were, it seemed, to talk about herself.

"Hobart Gaynor's rather uneasy about me, I think."

"And you about yourself?"

"No, I'm just rather excited, Stephen."

"You're a small boat – and it's a big sea."

"That's the excitement of it. I've been – land-locked – for years. Oh, beached – whatever's your best metaphor for somebody wasting all this fine life!"

"Do you suppose you made your husband happy?"

The question was unexpected. But there was no side of a situation too forlorn for Stephen's notice.

"I really don't know," said Winnie. "I always seemed to be rather – well, rather a minor interest."

"I expect not – I really expect not, you know."

"Supposing I was, or supposing I wasn't – what does it amount to?"

"I was only just looking at it from his point of view for a minute."

"Did he make me happy?"

"Oh, certainly the thing wasn't successful all round," Stephen hastily conceded.

"He said marriage wasn't invented solely to make people happy."

"Well, I suppose he's got an argument there. But you probably thought that the institution might chuck in a little more of that ingredient incidentally?"

"Rather my feeling – yes. You put things well too, now and then, Stephen."

"You suffer under the disadvantage of being a very attractive woman."

"We must bear our infirmities with patience, mustn't we?"

She was this evening in a rare vein of excited pleasure, gay, challenging, admirably provoking, exulting in her freedom, dangling before her own dazzled eyes all its possibilities. Stephen gave a deep chuckle.

"I think I'll go in and tell Tora that I'm infernally in love with you," he remarked, rising from his chair.

"It would be awfully amusing to hear what she says. But – are you?"

A rolling laugh, full of applause, not empty of pity, rumbled over the lawn as Stephen walked back to the house.

No, Stephen was not in love with her; that was certain. He admitted every conceivable doubt as to his duty, but harboured none as to his inclination. That trait of his might, to Winnie's present mood, have been vexatious had he chanced to be the only man in the world, or even the only one in or near Shaylor's Patch. Winnie sat in the twilight, smiling roguishly. She had no fears for herself; far less had she formed any designs. She was simply in joyful rebound from long suppression. Her spirit demanded plenty of fun, with perhaps a spice of mischief – mischief really harmless. So much seemed to her a debt long overdue from life and the world. Yet peril was there, unseen by herself. For there is peril when longings for fun and mischief centre persistently round one figure, finding in it, and in it only, their imagined realization.

But was peril the right word – was it the word proper to use at Shaylor's Patch? Being no fool, Stephen Aikenhead saw clearly enough the chance that a certain thing would happen – or was happening. But how should this chance be regarded? The law – formed by this and that influence, historical, social, and religious – had laid upon this young woman a burden heavier than she was able to bear. So Stephen started his consideration of the case. Retort – she ought to have been stronger! It did not seem a very helpful retort; it might be true, but it led nowhere. The law then had failed with the young woman. Now it said, "Well, if you won't do that, at least you shan't do anything else with my sanction – and my sanction is highly necessary to your comfort, certainly here, and, as a great many people believe, hereafter." That might be right, because it was difficult to deny the general proposition that laws ought to be kept, under pain of penalties. Yet in this particular instance there seemed something rather vindictive about it. It was not as if the young woman wanted to rob churches or pick pockets – things obviously offensive and hurtful to her neighbours. All she would want (supposing the thing did happen) would be to behave in a perfectly natural and normal fashion. All she would be objecting to would be a law-enjoined sterilization of a great side of her nature. She would be wronging her husband? If wrong there were, surely the substantial wrong lay in deserting him, not in making the best of her own life afterwards? She might have children – would they suffer? Living in the social world he did, Stephen could not see that they need suffer appreciably; and they were, after all, hypothetical – inserted into the argument for the sake of logical completeness. She would wound other people's convictions and feelings? No doubt, but that argument went too far. Every innovator, every reformer, nay, every fighting politician, does as much. The day for putting ring-fences round opinions, and threatening trespassers with prosecution, was surely over.

Well, then, would she hurt herself? The argument descended abruptly from the general to the particular. It left principle, and came to prudence, asking no longer what she had a right to do, but what she would be wise to do in her own interests. A man may hold a thing not wrong, and yet be a fool if he does it in a place where the neighbours are so sure of its iniquity that they will duck him in the horse-pond. But suppose him to be a mighty man of valour, whom nobody cares to tackle! He can snap his fingers at the neighbours and follow his own conscience or inclination, free from fear and heedless of disapprobation.

"That's as far as I can get," Stephen concluded, rubbing his forehead, as his habit was in moments of meditation. The conclusion did not seem wholly moral, or wholly logical, but it might work out fairly well in practice; government by the law – that is, the opinion of the majority – for the weak (themselves the majority), government by their own consciences and inclinations for the strong. Probably it was a rough statement of what generally happened, if the terms weak and strong might be taken to sum up the complex whole of a man's circumstances and character; both must by all means be considered.

But who are the strong? How can they judge of their prowess until they are in the thick of the fray? If it fails them then, it's too late – and away to the horse-pond! You do poor service to a friend if you flatter him in this matter. When he finds himself in the pond, he will not be so grateful for your good opinion.

Winnie came in, bright-eyed, softly singing, making for upstairs at a hasty pace.

"I shall be late for dinner!" she cried. "I met Mr. Ledstone, and he made me go for a little walk."

"Did you enjoy it?" asked Stephen politely.

"Yes, thank you, Stephen, very much."

She was gone. Stephen sighed. She had only one life – that was the unspoken plea of her youth, her beauty, and her new-born zest in living. Say what you like, the plea was cogent.

CHAPTER VII

A CODE AND A THEORY

To probe Godfrey Ledstone's mind would be to come up against the odd bundle of ideas which constitutes the average young man's workaday morality – the code before mentioned. This congeries of rules, exceptions, compromises, strictnesses, and elasticities may be condemned; it cannot be sneered at or lightly dismissed. It has, on the whole, satisfied centuries; only at rare intervals has it been seriously interfered with by the powers that be, by Church, or State, or Church-ruled State.

To interfere seriously with it is to rouse a hive of questions, large, difficult, so profoundly awkward as to appal statesmen, lay or ecclesiastical – questions not only moral and religious, but social and economic. Formal condemnation and practical tolerance leave these questions sleeping. The code goes on, exercising its semi-secret underground jurisdiction – a law never promulgated, but widely obeyed, a religion with millions of adherents and not a single preacher. Rather a queer way for the world to live? Rather a desperate attempt at striking a balance between nature and civilization? No doubt. But then, of course, it is only temporary. We are all going to be good some day. To make us all good, to make it possible for us all to be good, immediately – well, there is no telling but what that might involve a radical reconstitution of society. And would even that serve the turn?

The code never had a more unquestioning, a more contented adherent than Godfrey. Without theorizing – he disliked theories and had a good-natured distrust of them – he hit just that balance of conduct whereof the code approves; if he had talked about the matter at all (the code does not favour too much talking) he might have said that he was "not a saint" but that he "played the game." His fellow-adherents would understand perfectly what he meant. And the last thing in the world that he contemplated or desired was to attack, or openly to flout, accepted standards. The code never encourages a man to do that. Besides, he had a father, a mother, and a sister, orthodox-thinking people, very fond and proud of him; he would not willingly do or say anything to shock them. Even from a professional point of view – but when the higher motives are sufficient to decide the issue, why need they invoke the somewhat compromising alliance of others purely prudential?

By now he was very much in love with Winnie Maxon, but he was also desperately vexed with her, and with all the amiable theorists at Shaylor's Patch. The opportunity had seemed perfect for what he wanted, and what he wanted seemed exactly one of the allowed compromises – an ideal elasticity! Whom would it wrong? Not Cyril Maxon, surely? He was out of court. Whom would it offend? There was nobody to offend, if the affair were managed quietly – as it could be here in the country. And she liked him; though he had made no declaration yet, he could not doubt that she liked him very much.

But the theorists had been at her. When he delicately felt his way, discussing her position, or, professedly, the position of women in general whose marriages had proved a failure, she leant back, looking adorably pretty, and calmly came out with a remark of a profoundly disconcerting nature.

"If I ever decided to – to link my life with a man's again, I should do it quite openly. I should tell my husband and my friends. I should consider myself as doing just the same thing as if I were marrying again. I talked it all over with Tora the other night, and she quite agreed with me."

Agreed with her! Tora had put it into her head, of course, Godfrey thought angrily. The idea had Tora's hall-mark stamped large in its serene straightforward irrationality.

"But that'd mean an awful row, and the – a case, and all that!"

"I hope it would. But Cyril doesn't approve of divorce."

"Then you'd never be able to – to get regular, as long as he lived."

"I think I should be regular, without getting regular," she answered, smiling.

"What's the good of defying the world?"

"Isn't that the only way bad things get altered?"

"It needs a good deal of courage to do things like that – right or wrong."

"I should rely on the man I loved to give me the courage."

Godfrey did not wish to admit that the man whom (as he hoped) she loved lacked courage. The answer irritated him; he sat frowning sulkily, his usual gaiety sadly overcast. Winnie's eyes scanned his face for a moment; then, with a sigh, she looked over the lawn to the valley below. She was disappointed with the reception of her great idea. "Of course the two people would have to be very much in love with one another," she added, with a little falter in her voice.

He found a way out of his difficulty. "The more a man loved a woman, the less likely he'd be to consent to put her in such a position," he argued. His face cleared; he was pleased with his point; it was good, according to the code.

"It would be the only honourable position for her," Winnie retorted.

He rose to his feet in a temper; it was all so unreasonable. "I must go."

"Are you coming to anything to-morrow?"

"No, I shall be in town to-morrow. I dare say I shall stay a night or two." This was by way of revenge – or punishment. Let her see how she liked Shaylor's Patch without him!

She turned to him, holding out her hand; in her eyes was raillery, half-reproachful, half-merry. "Come back in a better temper!" she said.

"I'm a fool to come back at all." He kissed her hand and looked steadily into her eyes before he went away.

Himself at once a poor and a pleasure-loving man, Godfrey had the good luck to own a well-to-do and devoted friend, always delighted to "put him up" and to give him the best of hospitality. Bob Purnett and he were old schoolfellows and had never lost sight of one another. Bob had four thousand a year of his own (though not of his own making), and in the summer he had no work to do; in the winter he hunted. He was a jovial being and very popular, except with the House Committee and the cook of his club; to these unfortunate officials he was in the nature of a perpetual Assize Court presided over by a "Hanging Judge."

He gave Godfrey a beautiful dinner and a magnum of fine claret; let it be set down to his credit that he drank – and gave – fine claret at small dinners. He knew better than to be intemperate. Did he not want to go on hunting as long as possible? Nor was Godfrey given to excess in wine-drinking. Still the dinner, the claret, the old friendship, the liqueur, the good cigar, did their work. Godfrey found himself putting the case. It appeared to Bob Purnett a curious one.

"But it's rot," he observed. "You're married or you're not – eh?" He himself was not – quite distinctly. "Must be very pretty, or she wouldn't expect you to stand it?"

Godfrey laughed. There was a primitive truthfulness about Purnett's conversation. He was not sophisticated by thought or entangled in theory – quite different from the people at Shaylor's Patch.

"She is very pretty; and absolutely a lady – and straight, and all that."

"Then let it alone," counselled Bob Purnett.

"I can't help it, old chap." Again the primitive note – the cry that there are limits to human endurance! Godfrey had not meant to utter it. The saying of it was an illumination to himself. Up to now he had thought that he could help it – and would, if he were faced with theories and irrationality.

"Let's go to a Hall?" Bob suggested.

"I'd like a quiet evening and just a jaw."

Bob looked gravely sympathetic. "Oh, you've got it in the neck!" he said, with a touch of reverent wonder in his voice – something like the awe that madmen inspired in our forbears. Godfrey was possessed!

"Yes, I have – and I don't know what the deuce to do."

"Well, what the deuce are you to do?" asked Purnett. His healthy, ruddy, unwrinkled face expressed an honest perplexity. "Must be a rum little card – isn't she?"

"I can't help it, Bob."

"Dashed awkward!"

In fact these two adherents of the code – may it be written honest adherents, for they neither invented nor defended, but merely inherited it? – were frankly puzzled. There is a term in logic – dichotomy – a sharp division, a cutting in two, an opposing of contradictories. You are honest or not honest, sober or not sober. Rough reasoning, but the police courts have to work on it. So you are regular or irregular. But people who want to make the irregular regular – that is as great a shock to the adherents of the code as their tenets are to the upholders of a different law. The denial of one's presuppositions is always a shock – because one must start from somewhere. It is a "shock to credit" – credit of some kind – and how are any of us to get on without credit?

"Bring two more old brandies, Walter," Mr. Purnett commanded. It was the only immediate and practical step.

"Not for me, old chap."

Bob nodded accordingly to Walter. His face was inconceivably solemn.

"I sometimes feel like cutting the whole thing," said Godfrey fretfully.

"Well, there are other women in the world, aren't there?"

"No, no. I mean the whole thing. What's the good of it?" The young man's fresh face looked for the moment weary and old; he flung his good cigar, scarcely half-smoked, into the fireplace.

Bob Purnett knew better than to argue against a mood like that; one might just as well argue against a toothache.

"Let's go home and have an early bed," he suggested. He yawned, and tried to hide the action. He was devoted to his friend, but his friend had raised a puzzle, and puzzles soon fatigued him – except little ones made of wood, for which he had a partiality.

For three whole days Godfrey Ledstone fought; really trying to "cut the whole thing," to master again the feelings which had mastered him, not to go back to Shaylor's Patch. On one day he went to see his people, the father, mother, and sister, who were orthodox-thinking, and so fond and proud of him. They lived in Woburn Square. The old gentleman had been an accountant in a moderately good way of business, and had retired on a moderately good competence; at least, he was not old really, but, like some men, he took readily, even prematurely, to old age. Everything in the house seemed to Godfrey preternaturally settled; it even seemed settled somehow that Amy would not marry. And it was odd to think that Mr. and Mrs. Ledstone had once married, had (as it must be presumed) suffered from these terrible feelings, had perhaps doubted, feared, struggled, enjoyed. To-day all was so placid in Woburn Square; the only really acute question was the Income Tax – that certainly was a grievance to Mr. Ledstone. Godfrey appreciated the few hours of repose, the fondness, and the pride. It seemed then quite possible to "cut the whole thing" – yes, the whole of it.

Bob Purnett went off on a short visit, leaving his comfortable flat at his friend's disposal. Why not stay in London, do a good turn at work, and see some more of his people in Woburn Square? A good and wise programme. But on the fourth day came a gust that blew the good and wise programme clean out of the window – a gust of feeling like a draught of strong wine, heady and overpowering. He flung down his pencil, crying aloud, "It's no use!"

He was tried beyond that he was able. He laid an indictment, vague and formless, yet charged with poignant indignation, against the general order of things, against what forced a man into folly, and then branded him "Fool" with irons hissing-hot. The old protest, the creature's cry against the injustice of creation! An hour later he was on his way to the country – back to Shaylor's Patch. So far as he was concerned, the thing was settled. He might not realize it; he went, not led by purpose, but driven by craving. But "On my terms if I can, on hers if I must," interprets the confused and restless humming of his brain.

To a man in such case the people he meets as he fares along seem strangely restful, impossibly at peace. The old man with his pipe, the young clerk with his sporting paper, the labourer in the

field, the toddler with its toy, all present an illusion of untroubled existence, at which the man with the gadfly looks in envy and in scorn. They possess their souls – he is possessed. Well might Bob Purnett wear that expression of awe! For some day the normal man must resume possession, and he may find that the strangest pranks have been played by the temporary tenant – furniture smashed, debts incurred, and what not, for all of which dilapidations and liabilities he, unfortunate soul, is held responsible! Happily it chanced, after all not so seldom, that the temporary tenant has made beauty, not havoc, and left behind him generous gifts, to the enrichment of life till life itself shall pass away.

Stephen Aikenhead sat on the lawn with his little girl Alice, newly come home for the holidays. She was reading aloud to him; he smoked his pipe, and now and again his big hand would pass caressingly over the little bowed head with its soft brown hair. The story was about a certain Princess, to whom a Fairy had given the Gift of Eternal Youth on the condition that she never fainted either from fear or from joy. All went well for a very great many years. Generations were born and died, and the Princess was still sweet seventeen. She outlived seventy-seven Prime Ministers. But at last a very handsome groom, who had appeared at the Castle gates rather mysteriously and been taken into the Princess' service without (as it seemed) any "character," was thrown from his horse while he was in attendance on his Royal Mistress, and, lo and behold, the Princess fainted for fear that he might be dead, and fainted again for joy when she found he wasn't! So he revealed himself as the King of the neighbouring kingdom, and they married one another, and lived happily ever afterwards. Only, of course, the Princess lost the Gift of Eternal Youth.

"I love these stories about Princesses, Alice," said Stephen. "Read me another. I wish there were lots more Princesses. There aren't half enough of them nowadays. They're so picturesque, and such jolly things happen to them. Hallo, Godfrey, you back?"

Godfrey had sent the cab on with his luggage, and let himself in by the garden gate. He arrived just in time to hear the end of the story. Reader and listener were close to the parlour door. As his name was spoken, Godfrey heard a little movement from within – the sound of the movement of a woman's skirts. His impressionable nature responded to a new appeal, his readily receptive eyes beheld a new vision. As he looked at the big man and his little girl, so happy in one another, so at peace yet never in tedium, he wished that it – his affair – could be neither on his terms nor on hers – could be neither a deceit nor a defiance, but could be the straight regular thing, the good old-fashioned thing that, after all, served most people's turn well enough. There were failures, but it was in the broad way of nature and broadly successful. Who really objected to it, or questioned it? To whom was the Institution obnoxious? Rips and cranks, he answered in his concise vernacular; really it did well enough for everybody else – with, no doubt, allowances made here and there.

The soft rustle sounded again from within the parlour. Then Winnie Maxon stood in the doorway with shining, welcoming eyes.

"Well, would you like the story of the Princess with the Broken Heart?" asked Alice.

"Anything about a Princess!" said Stephen, with handsome liberality.

"It sounds sad, Alice. If it's sad, don't let's have it," Winnie pleaded.

"Oh, after all the old doctors had tried to mend it, one came, looking much older and much more wrinkled than all the rest – "

"I shall keep my eye on that practitioner, all the same," Stephen interposed. "I'm beginning to know the ropes!"

"And he mended it with an enormous gold ring that he'd cut off the little finger of a giant he had once killed on a walk he took."

"What a fellow!" said Stephen. "Prince in disguise, Alice?"

"Why, father, of course he was!"

Stephen shook his big head and turned his big spectacles up to heaven. "And that fellow Dennehy dares to call himself a republican! Now who – who, I ask you – would give a fig for a President in disguise? Read me some more Princesses, Alice."

They all enjoyed the Princesses. So sometimes, for an hour, a little child shall lead us into peace.

CHAPTER VIII

SUBVERSIVE

Embedded in his own conceptions as in a rock, Cyril Maxon refused to believe that his wife would not soon "have had enough of it." He refused to accept the failure of the envoy through whose mouth he had been induced to make such great concessions and such generous promises. Could they, in the end, fail to move her?

His duty towards her – that inexorable duty from which no act of hers could free him – called upon him for another effort. Attlebury was with him in this view, though now with less hope of a favourable issue; he detected the fact that his disciple's desire for self-vindication was no less strong than his hope of saving Mrs. Maxon, and feared for the result of this admixture of objects. He ventured on a reminder.

"Of course you want to be able to feel you've done all you could, but the great thing is to do it successfully. As we regard it, she has more at stake than you."

"I believe I can persuade her, if I go and see her."

Did he really mean persuade – or did he mean frighten? Attlebury doubted, and, because he doubted that, doubted yet more of the issue. The disciple did not give the cause fair play; a teacher has often to complain of that.

In whatever shape Cyril Maxon may have forecast in his own mind the interview that he proposed, there was no question as to how Winnie received the notice of his intention to seek her out in her asylum at Shaylor's Patch. It filled her with sheer panic; it drove her to what seemed now her only refuge. Her terror must surely make an appeal irresistible alike to the ardour and to the chivalry of her lover? Or he was no lover. Tora and she were at one on the point, though it was not put too bluntly between them.

"I can't see him; I won't," she declared to Stephen Aikenhead, running to the man of the house at last, rebel against male domination as she was.

"Rather difficult to refuse, if he comes here!"

"Then I won't be here when he comes, that's all." Her fright made her unjust. "If you won't protect me – or can't – I must act for myself." She flung out of the room, leaving Stephen no chance of protesting that the bolts and bars of Shaylor's Patch were at her service, and a siege by an angry lawyer all in the day's work.

She was afraid of herself; she distrusted her courage. She wanted to have a motive compulsory in its force; her instinct was to do something which should make a return home irrevocably impossible. Her husband's insistence hastened the crisis, though his patience could hardly have averted it.

Godfrey Ledstone had the news first from Tora Aikenhead. Her calm eyes asked him plainly enough what part it was his to play. Tora had taken her line and at once conceived hesitation to be impossible. His native idea would have been to comfort her before Maxon came, and again after he had gone, and to lie by in snug hiding when he was there. So ran the code, discreet and elastic. By now he knew – only too well – that this was not what these uncompromising people expected of him. In their odd view he had already gone too far for that convenient expedient. Social liberty might, it seemed, be more exacting than social bondage. For if you were always free to do as you liked, it was obviously necessary to be very careful about intimating too unreservedly what it was that you would like to do; since there could be no such thing as pleading impossibility in defence of a pledge unfulfilled.

"She's terribly unhappy. She declares that she must be gone before he comes. She daren't meet him."

"Why not?" he asked sharply. Another feeling was stirred in him.

"Well, he's always dominated her. He might break down her will again."

"You mean she might go back? Cave in, and go back?"

"That seems to be what she's afraid of, herself."

Tora entertained no more doubt of the soundness of her ideas than Cyril Maxon of his. Why should she, she would have asked, merely because hers were new, while his were old? To her mind newness was a presumption of merit in a view, since the old views had produced a world manifestly so imperfect all round. Holding her opinion strongly, she did not hesitate to use the weapons best suited to secure its triumph. If Godfrey's jealousy helped to that end, why was it illegitimate to let it play its part? Never was a woman less afraid of what men call responsibility.

"It's just awful to think of the poor little lady going back to that brute of a fellow," he said.

"Oh, don't abuse him. I dare say he's as unhappy as she is. And he thinks he's right. I'm not sure you don't think he's right, really." Tora smiled over her shrewd thrust. "So you're the last person who ought to abuse him."

"Oh, what does it matter what I think?" he cried impatiently.

There was still enough of his old mood and his old ideas in him to stir a resentment against Tora, to make him feel that she was forcing his hand and constraining him to accept a bigger liability than he had bargained for. Theorists must always be up to that! They seem to take a positive pleasure in proving that you are bound to go to lengths – to all lengths! That the comfortable half-way will never serve! Perhaps they do not enough reflect that the average man is not thereby encouraged to start at all.

But Winnie herself had genuine power to stir his heart – and now, indeed, as never before, since she seemed helpless save for him, and hopeless save in him, yet in and through him both brave and confident – the most profound, the most powerful, flattery from sex to sex. Mere friends could not help now; mere convictions, a naked sense of being in the right, would not avail. These she had, but she must have love too. To this mood all the man in him responded.

"It only needed this final trouble to – to make me speak."

"I don't think I need speak," she whispered, with her delicately quavering smile. "You know it all – all the great thing it is. I'm not ashamed of it, Godfrey. And you won't be ashamed of me, will you?"

The question did not disconcert him now. For the time he had lost that vision of the future which had once disquieted and alarmed him. His phrases might be well-worn, but they were heartily sincere when he told her he would face the world, if only she were by his side.

"It shall all be just as you said you wished it to be, if ever you joined your life to a man's again." He quoted almost verbally, just missing her poetic "link."

Winnie kissed him in warm and pretty gratitude. "That takes away my last doubt," she told him. "I shall be proud now, as proud as any woman! And to-day – just for a few hours – let's forget everything, except that we're plighted lovers." She put her arm through his. "You'll kill the giant, take his ring, and mend the Princess' Broken Heart!"

"I say, are you making me a Prince in disguise, Winnie?"

"Well, don't you feel like a Prince now?" she asked, with the sweet audacity of a woman who knows that she is loved, and for her lover boldly takes herself at her lover's valuation.

Obedient to her wish, the outside world effected one of its disappearances – very obliging, if not of long duration. Even Woburn Square made tactful exit, without posing the question as to what its opinion of the proceedings might likely be. Of course, that point could be held immaterial for the present at least.

For the second time then, in Winnie Maxon's recent experience, with a little courage things proved easy; difficulties vanished when faced; you did what you held you had a right to do, and nothing terrible happened. Certainly nothing terrible happened that evening at Shaylor's Patch. There was a romantic, an idyllic, bit of courting, with the man ardent and gallant, the woman gay but shy; it

was all along orthodox lines, really conventional. He had undertaken that the affair should be carried through on Winnie's lines; this was his great and fine concession – or conversion. He observed it most honourably; she grew more and more gratefully tender.

"Another man than you – yes, even another man I loved – might have wounded me to-night," she murmured, as they parted at the door after dinner.

"I could never wound you – even with my love."

She took his hand and kissed it. "I'm trusting you against all the world, Godfrey."

"You may trust me."

Her heart sang, even while her lover left her.

For what followed in the two or three days during which she still abode at Shaylor's Patch people shall find what names they please, since her history is, of necessity, somewhat concerned with contentious matters. Some may speak of unseemly travesty, some of idle farce; others may find a protest not without its pathos – a protest that she broke with the old order only because she must, that she would fain carry over into her new venture what was good in the old spirit, that her enterprise was to her a solemn and high thing. They were to be man and wife together; he must buy her the ring that symbolised union; they must have good and true witnesses – nothing was to be secret, all above-board and unashamed. There must even be a little ceremonial, a giving and taking before sympathetic friends, a declaration that she held herself his, and him hers, in all love and trust, and to the exclusion of all other people in the world. For ever? Till death did them part? No – the premises peremptorily forbade that time-honoured conclusion. But so long as the love that now bound them together still sanctified the bond which it had fastened. Satisfied in her heart that the love could never die, she defined without dismay the consequences of its death. At all events, she would have answered to an objector, could they be worse than what had befallen her when her love for Cyril Maxon died a violent death by crushing – died and yet was, in the name of all that is holy, denied decent burial?

And yet there were qualms. "Will people understand?" was her great question.

Tora – uncompromising, level-headed – answered that most of them would not even try to, and added, "What matter?" Stephen asked, "Well, so long as your friends do?" Her lover vowed that, whether her action were approved or not, no tongue could wag against her honour or her motives.

The last day came – the day when the pair were to set out together, Godfrey from his summer cottage in the village of Nether End, near Shaylor's Patch, Winnie from her haven under the Aikenheads' friendly roof. A home has been taken in London, but they were to have a week's jaunt – a honeymoon – in North Wales first. Winnie was now putting the finishing touch to her preparations by writing her luggage labels. The name she wrote seemed happily to harmonize personal independence with a union of hearts and destinies – Mrs. Winifred Ledstone.

The sound of a man's footstep made her look up. She saw Dick Dennehy before her. He had come in from the garden, and was just clutching off his hat at the sight of her.

"Mr. Dennehy! I didn't know you were coming here to-day."

"No more did I, Mrs. Maxon, till a couple of hours ago. I found I had nothing to do, so I ran down to see how you were all getting on."

"Some of us are just getting off," smiled Winnie. "You're in time to say good-bye."

"Why, where are you off to? I'm sorry you're going."

With a saucy glance Winnie pushed a luggage label across the table towards him. He took it up, studied it, and laid it down again without a word.

"Well?" said Winnie.

He spread out a pair of pudgy splay-fingered hands and shook his shock-haired head in sincere if humorous despair.

"You're all heathens here, and it's no good talking to you as if you were anything else."

"I'm not a heathen, but if the Church backs up the State in unjust laws –"

He wagged a broad forefinger. "Even a heathen tribe has its customs. Any customs better than none! Ye can't go against the custom of the tribe for nothing. I speak as heathen to heathen."

"Can't customs ever be changed?" Winnie was back at her old point.

"You're not strong enough for the job, Mrs. Maxon." His voice was full of pity.

But Winnie was in no mood to accept pity. "You call me a heathen. Suppose it was A.D. 50 or 100, and not A.D. 1909. I think you'd be a heathen, and I – well, at any rate I should be trying to screw up my courage to be a Christian martyr."

He acknowledged a hit. "Oh, you're all very clever!" he grumbled. "I'll bet Stephen taught you that. That's from his mint, if I know the stamp! Take it as you say then – are you looking forward to your martyrdom?"

Perhaps she was, and in what must be admitted to be the proper spirit – thinking more of the crown than of the stake. "I don't look very unhappy, do I?" she asked radiantly.

"Going off with him to-day, are you?" She nodded gaily. The natural man suddenly asserted itself in Dennehy. He smiled. "It's more than the young dog deserves, sure it is!"

"Oh, well, you're being a heathen now!" laughed Winnie, distinctly well-pleased.

"I'm wondering what Mrs. Lenoir will say about it."

Winnie's pleasure suffered a slight jar.

"Why should Mrs. Lenoir be any judge of a case like mine?" she asked rather coldly.

"Oh, I'm not making comparisons," he murmured vaguely. Still there was a point of comparison in his mind. Mrs. Lenoir, too, had been a rebel against the custom of the tribe, and, though the motives of rebellion differ, the results may be the same. "Well, I'll wish you luck anyhow," he continued, holding out his hand. "I hope he'll make you happy, for you're giving him a lot, by the powers, you are!"

"I hope I'm giving anything like as much as I'm getting."

He grumbled something inarticulate as he passed by her and out of the door into the garden. Winnie looked after him with a smile still on her lips. If this were the worst she had to expect, it was nothing very dreadful. It was even rather amusing; she did not conceive that she had come off in any way second-best in the encounter.

Stephen came in a moment later and, on her report of Dennehy's arrival, went to look for his friend in the garden. But Dennehy was nowhere to be found; he was seen no more that day. He went straight back to London; he could not stop the deed, but he would not be an accomplice.

"Well, if he doesn't agree with what we're doing, I think he's right not to stay," said Tora. Yet Winnie felt a little hurt.

Then came the travesty, or the farce, or the protest, or whatever it may be decided to call it, in which Winnie formally – to a hostile eye perhaps rather theatrically – in the presence of her witnesses, did for herself what the powers that be would not do for her – declared her union with Cyril Maxon at an end and plighted her troth to Godfrey Ledstone. Godfrey would rather have had this little ceremony (if it had to be performed at all) take place privately, but he played his part in it with a good grace. It would be over soon – and soon he and she would set out together.

What of little Alice during all this? She had been sent to play with the gardener's daughter. It would be a portentous theory indeed that forced a child to consider the law of marriage and divorce before she attained the age of eleven. Even Tora Aikenhead did not go so far, and, as has been seen, Stephen's theorizing tendencies were held in check in his child's case.

Then off they went, and, on their arrival in London, they were met by Bob Purnett, who gave them a hearty welcome and a champagne luncheon, where all was very merry and gay. There was indeed a roguish twinkle in Bob Purnett's eye, but perhaps it was no more than custom allows even in the case of the most orthodox of marriages – and in any event Bob Purnett's was not that class of opinion to which Winnie's views could most naturally be expected to appeal. He treated Winnie most

politely and called her Mrs. Ledstone. She did not realize that he would have done just the same if – well, in the case of any lady for whom a friend claimed the treatment and the title.

The next morning two letters duly and punctually reached their respective destinations. All was to be open, all above-board! Winnie had not found hers hard to write, and Godfrey had said nothing to her about how extraordinarily difficult he had found his. One was addressed to Cyril Maxon, Esquire, K.C., at the Temple; the other to William J. Ledstone, Esquire, at Woburn Square. Now in neither of these places were the views of Shaylor's Patch likely to find acceptance, or even toleration. No, nor Bob Purnett's either. Though, indeed, if a choice had to be made, the latter might have seemed, not more moral, but at least less subversive in their tendency. A thing that is subversively immoral must be worse, surely, than a thing that is merely immoral? Granting the immorality in both cases, the subversive people have not a leg to stand on. They are driven to argue that they are not immoral at all – which only makes them more subversive still.

And the dictionary defines "subversion" in these terms: "The act of overturning, or the state of being overturned; entire overthrow; an overthrow from the foundation; utter ruin; destruction" – anyhow, clearly a serious matter, and at that we may leave it for the moment.

CHAPTER IX

NO PROCEEDINGS!

At Cyril Maxon's chambers in the Temple – very pleasant chambers they were, with a view over a broad sweep of the river – the day began in the usual fashion. At half-past nine Mr. Gibbons, the clerk, arrived; at a quarter to ten the diligent junior, who occupied the small room and devilled for the King's Counsel, made his punctual appearance. At ten, to the stroke of the clock, Maxon himself came in. His movements were leisurely; he had a case in the paper – an important question of demurrage – but it was not likely to be reached before lunch. He bade Mr. Gibbons good morning, directed that the boy should keep a watch on the progress of the court to which his case was assigned, passed into his own room, and sat down to open his letters. These disposed of, he had a couple of opinions to write, with time left for a final run through his brief, aided by the diligent junior's note.

Half an hour later Mr. Gibbons opened the door. Maxon waved him back impatiently.

"I'm busy, Gibbons. Don't disturb me. We can't be on in court yet?"

"No, sir. It's a gentleman to see you. Very urgent business, he says."

"No, no, I tell you I'm busy."

"He made it a particular favour. In fact, he seems very much upset – he says it's private business." He glanced at a card he carried. "It's a Mr. Ledstone, sir."

"Oh," said Maxon. His lips shut a little tighter as he took up a letter which lay beside the legal papers in front of him. "Ledstone?" The letter was signed "Winifred Ledstone."

"Yes, sir."

"What aged man?"

"Oh, quite elderly, sir. Stout, and grey 'air."

The answer dispelled an eccentric idea which had entered Maxon's head. If this couple so politely informed him of their doings, they might even be capable of paying him a call!

"Well, show him in." He shrugged his shoulders with an air of disgust.

Stout and grey-haired (as Mr. Gibbons had observed), yet bearing a noticeable likeness to his handsome son, Mr. Ledstone made a very apologetic and a very flustered entrance. Maxon bowed without rising; Gibbons set a chair and retired.

"I must beg a thousand pardons, Mr. Maxon, but this morning I – I received a letter – as I sat at breakfast, Mr. Maxon, with Mrs. Ledstone and my daughter. It's terrible!"

"Are you the father of Mr. Godfrey Ledstone?"

"Yes, sir. My boy Godfrey – I've had a letter from him. Here it is."

"Thank you, but I'm already in possession of what your son has done. I've heard from Mrs. Maxon. I have her letter here."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

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

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