

MISS BETTY



Andrew
Thompson




MISS BETTY

BY
BRAM STOKER
2



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To
MY WIFE

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

"UNDER THE SUNSET."

"THE SNAKE'S PASS."

"THE WATTER'S MON."

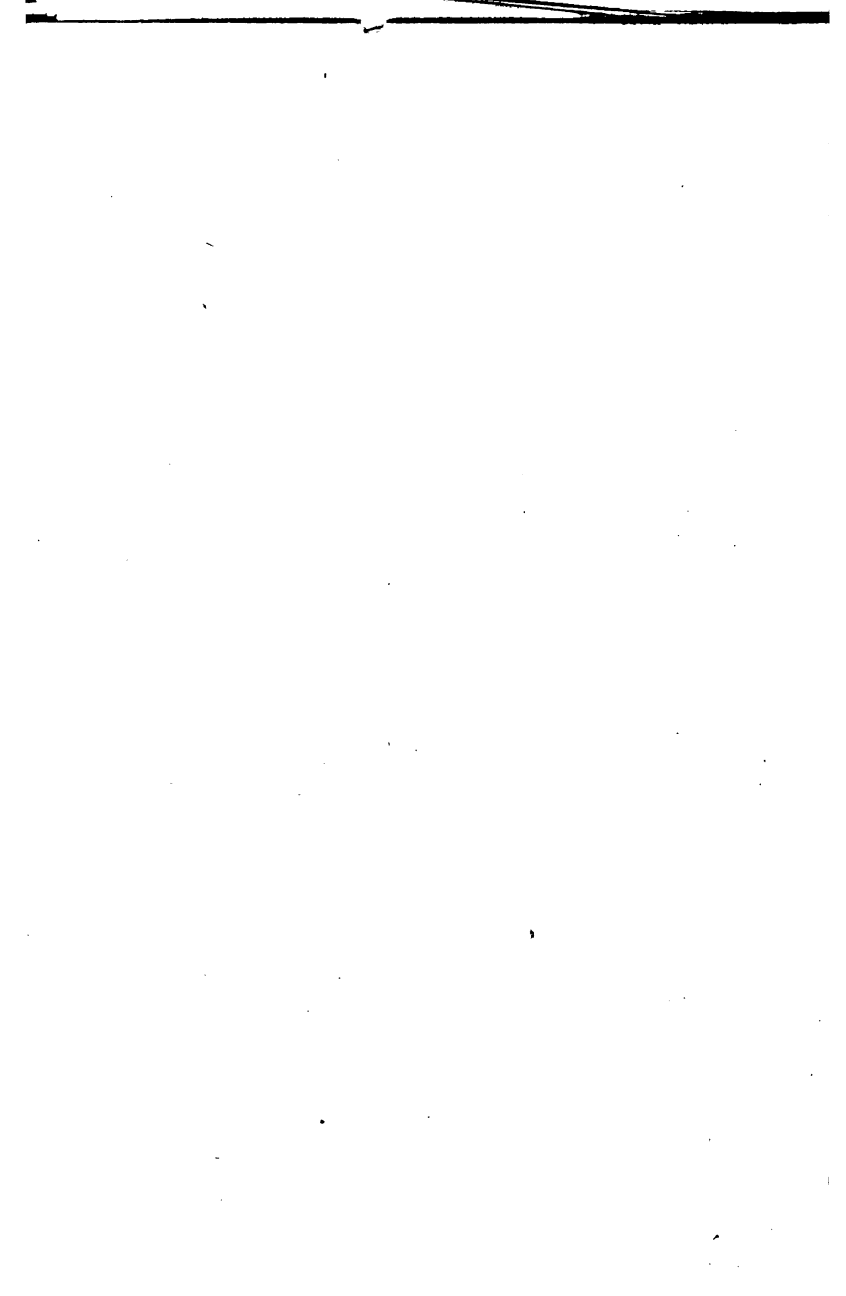
"THE SHOULDER OF SHASTA."

"DRACULA."

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER I.	
	PAGE
GRANDFATHER'S STORY	I
CHAPTER II.	
DOGGETT'S COAT AND BADGE	23
CHAPTER III.	
THE GOLD BUTTONS	43
CHAPTER IV.	
RAFE'S OPPORTUNITY	67
CHAPTER V.	
IN THE DEAD WATCH OF THE NIGHT	91
CHAPTER VI.	
PREPARATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY	115
CHAPTER VII.	
NEAR MUCH HADAM	136
CHAPTER VIII.	
IN FINSBURY SQUARE	159
CHAPTER IX.	
AT CHEYNE WALK	184



MISS BETTY



CHAPTER I

GRANDFATHER'S STORY

OF all the incidents of her early life none had so great or lasting an effect on Betty Pole as those of that evening in Cheyne Walk on which she had been accused of breaking the blue china jar. This was one of those beautiful pieces, brought from Holland, which had been given to her grandfather by the Dutch Minister when on some diplomatic mission to King William III. Great store had been set on it by the household generally, and Betty's mother had often, during her lifetime, enjoined on the children special care of the beautiful piece of oriental china. She always said that it was to be looked upon as a sort of heirloom in the family.

The charge against Miss Betty was made by

Abigail, she coming right into the back sitting-room after supper, when the dusk was beginning to fall through the trees in the garden of the King's House in Chelsea. Abigail's manner was at all times a pronounced one, for all her kindness of heart ; but she was not feared so much by the children, who knew the softness as well as the weight of her hand, as by the two men whom she controlled in the despotic manner which purely domestic women assume to lonely men — men who have not wives to protect them. Abigail had in the motherless household the honour and privileges of one whom the mother had trusted, and who by faithful service had earned the trust. As a rule she was a just woman, but on this occasion the violence of her demeanour almost implied to those who knew her that she was herself not quite blameless in the matter. They all knew that she would not wilfully and deliberately lie, but they felt that the occasion was a grave one, and one in which no one would willingly be under the imputation of guilt if it could be avoided. Some of them, face to face with the charge, would have held it justifiable to have deflected the current of public thought if they could not on such an occasion have stemmed it. The young people,

one and all, with wonderful unanimity, denied the charge which had at first been made in the general form of 'one of the children.' The two men were concerned, as men ever are regarding the breakages of things they value. Betty's father, Charles Pole, was as near anger as his gentle nature and the sorrow of his too recent loss would let him be. He spoke severely of the need of care, and reminded the children that their dear mother had ever told them to be careful of this thing that she loved; and then the sight of their little black clothes seemed to smite him and he stopped speaking, for he knew that to that mother's heart one moment of any of his children's happiness was dearer than all the vessels which had ever grown under the potter's hand. She had accepted on her marriage the motherhood of the four children of her husband's first wife, and treated them all just as she afterwards treated her own little Betty, her only child.

After a spell of silence Betty's grandfather, Dudley Stanmore, spoke—

"I am sorry that the jar, which had for me very dear memories, has been broken; but we must not forget to be just. Tell me, children; which of you broke it?"

There was no answer. Then the old man

spoke again, this time more sternly ; his voice was grave and strong, despite his ninety and odd years—

“ Let whoever did this, own to it ! ” All were still silent. For a few seconds the old man’s face looked very stern ; but then came a smile and a sigh of relief, and he said quietly—

“ Well, Mistress Abigail, that is all right ! I am glad that none of the children did it.” This was more than Abigail could brook, so she answered hotly—

“ Oh yes ! saving your presence, but they did ; ” and turning to the children added : “ Ye know, children, that God hates a liar, and that liars stand without the Gates and go into the burning Pit. Now, tell me, which done it ? ”

Marjory, who though not the eldest had pertness beyond the level of her years, answered—

“ None of us did it, Abigail ! Did you ? ”

“ Me ! Me ? you wicked Miss. You ! Miss Betty. You were last in the room—what do you say to it ? ”

Betty, who was sitting in her usual place on a little stool at her grandfather’s knee, said gently, in her sweet, old-fashioned way—

“ I know nothing of it, Abigail ! When I was in the room I was reading.”

"Take care, Miss Betty, take care! now take care!" said Abigail hotly, as she raised a warning finger. "Tell the truth."

"But I am telling the truth," said the child. Here her grandfather joined in :

"My word for Betty's truth! She would not speak falsely! Would you, dear?" The child looked up, turning her head so that the wrinkled hand which he had laid on it slipped down on her shoulder.

"Oh no, grandfather!" she answered quietly; "how could I?"

"Old master always sticks up for Miss Betty," said Abigail tartly, "just because she is his kin, I suppose—and so like him!" she added, with a touch of feminine causticity.

The likeness was remarkable, despite the gulf of more than fourscore years that lay between them. The old man's face was wrinkled, his hair fell in thin, straggling flakes of snow, his eyes were dim, and his tall form was bowed with years, whilst the child's hair was golden-brown, her eyes were sapphire, and her skin had the freshness and the warm glow of youth. But there was in each the same inward calm, the same line of profile, the same delicacy of nostril, the same resolution of mouth; and, beyond all else, that something

which can hardly be put in words—the capacity of exaltation.

Betty's father now spoke reprovingly—

“Abigail Hood, you forget yourself when you so address Mr. Stanmore. Greater respect is due to him! And beside, he would say nothing but what is true. If Betty is like him, then I thank God that it is so; for her life should be pure and strong and true, like that of her dear mother.”

Abigail was prepared to do battle only up to a certain point, and as there was nothing here to be argued she used with deadly effect her purely feminine arms. Taking up the corner of her apron and holding it to her eyes, she withdrew. Mr. Stanmore then rose, and taking Betty's hand in his, said—

“Come! We will go and see the broken jar and find out, if we can, what is the cause of it.”

The other children followed, and they all passed up the wide staircase into the drawing-room overhead. At the back of the house the dusk was now more marked, and the trees and their shadows were mixed; but in the front the sunset still struck the summer clouds high overhead and made a sort of after-glow which gave light enough to survey the damage.

Truly the jar was broken, but it had evidently been lifted from its place and had been overturned. When the old man saw it he said—

“Why, Betty could not have done it. She could not have lifted it if she had tried. We must find out something more about it.”

As he spoke there was a sound of sobbing outside. The door opened and Abigail entered, pushing before her a maidservant who held her apron to her eyes.

“Here she is! Here is the hussy what broke the jar. I taxed her with it, and she can't deny!”

“If you please, master, I am main sorry, but the jar was on the floor where Mrs. Abigail put it for me to put out the old popery and put the new rose-leaves in; and then I was called away. When I came back I forgot all about it, and when I was dusting round knocked it over.” Here she made a vain effort to fall on her knees to her master, and her further utterances became undistinguishable.

“Get up, girl! Get up!” said the old man. “Don't insult the Creator by kneeling to men. There, run away now, and be more careful in future. Your crying won't mend broken china!” and, still sobbing, she was

incontinently hustled out of the room by Abigail. The old man lifted the broken jar and put it again in its old place, and then taking Betty by the hand, led the way back to the room below.

When they had resumed their old places, the room being now in a deep twilight, one of the boys said: "Tell us a story, grandfather." The old man paused, and then said—

"I will tell you something, my dears, which comes back vividly to my mind to-night. Mrs. Abigail said how like my dear little Betty is to her grandfather, and I said myself that I knew she was true. Perhaps it is these two things together that take my mind back seventy years and more—further than the span of a man's life. It was when I was brought before the great Cromwell, not long after the King had been martyred."

As he spoke the last words the old man's voice was instinct with reverence, and he stood up. As he paused one of the boys said—

"'Great Cromwell!' He wasn't great. He was a traitor." The old man answered—

"Traitor or no traitor, he was a great man. Sometimes when I look back through the dimness of my age I wonder where, in time

to come, the measure of his greatness shall be set. But we will not talk of this now. Suffice it that in the days I speak of the world called him great. He was the victorious general of a conquering army. He was the head of the State—in the eyes of some; the head of the Parliament and the general of the Parliament's forces, and his iron will was felt throughout the land. I had been an officer of the King's household, and had some knowledge of usage in foreign matters; but when the Parliament slew the King I refused to serve longer under those who made him a martyr, and so I went away from London and stayed in Much Hadam, where my great-aunt had her home. Not very many days had passed when a letter came demanding my presence in London. To this I replied, respectfully but still firmly, that inasmuch as my services and my faith had been those of my King, I could not now give to others the fealty which had been his."

"And was there any answer?" said Betty, nestling closer to his knee and looking up into his face with her earnest eyes.

"Any answer! My faith, child, but there was an answer! Before another day had passed it came in the shape of a troop of

soldiers, who arrived covered with dust and with their horses foaming, for they had ridden from London during the night. They had a warrant for my arrest, signed by Cromwell himself; and they, only waiting to bait their horses before starting, took me back to London. They treated me civilly enough. They said their orders were to show me a due respect, and they were a fine set of fellows, I warrant—tall men and strong, and earnest and grave in their ways and bearing. Aye, children, they were earnest men, those old Ironsides, whatever any one may tell you now; and, my faith! but they spoke and fought as though they believed in the righteousness of their cause."

"Oh fie! grandfather," said Marjory, in her pert way, "to speak for traitors—and you a King's man!"

"Nay, child," said the old man gravely, "it is no shame to speak truly of any man. The truth is a purging fire that cleanses all it touches, and it would be shame to me, and you might well cry 'Fie!' upon me if any malice on my part bore down truth. And moreover, my dear, I was a King's man then, and a King's man when his son came to his own again, and a King's man in the

old succession till James tampered with our faith, and made me a King's man to Dutch William and his English Queen. And a Queen's man am I now—and shall be whilst good Queen Anne is spared to rule. All these different Kings, and there be many who hold that the Crown of England should rest on another head; yet you cry not 'Fie!' upon those who bled with the King when he fought against the King. But there! these things are beyond you, I fear. You will know more and understand better hereafter."

"Well, but go on, grandfather! Tell us of the soldiers," said one of the boys. "Go on! Don't mind Marjory; she's always interrupting. Keep quiet, you Marjory, and don't trouble us!" he added, in the dictatorial way of brothers.

"Well, we never drew rein till we rode into Whitehall, and then and there, all booted and spurred as I was and white with the summer dust, I was taken before Cromwell himself. He received me standing, and put his questions simply and directly. I listened in silence, and after a pause spoke—

"Sir, I may not answer. When the evil time came and my King was butchered, I who held loyal service as his due, resigned

my place and sought that solitude which should be the right of every Englishman—if England is, as you boast her to be, free. Whereat the hands of the grim Ironsides around me instinctively sought their sword—and I tell you that for all my brave words—and I meant to die for them if need were—my heart beat quick and heavy. But Cromwell looked me steadily in the face and spoke out—

“Well said, young sir! That is the speech of a true Englishman, and God forbid that I or those who hold with me should deem it ill on thy part to do thy duty boldly—even though our duty to follow it were to send thee to the gallows for it. But think, young sir! mayest thou not have a higher duty than even the loyalty of doing nothing in memory of a dead man? Hath England no claim upon thee? Hast thou no duty to her? Is there no work in the present to which the hand of a loyal Englishman can be turned? It is a grave question that thou hast to answer; and yet thou thinkest it meet to be silent. Thou hast much knowledge of certain matters; and even earnest men, for lack of such help as thine, may blunder into rougher ways of

statecraft than were needed. Nevertheless thou shalt go free, for I cannot see in thy face other than the look of a true man. Stand back there, and let him pass! I am of Essex stock myself, and know his home and lineage. There is naught but truth in his blood; and England never needed true men more than now. Bethink thee, in the future, sir, when the time comes for other grave choice, that thou hast chosen blind obedience to a dead fancy rather than the call of living England—that England for whom men like these have shed their blood!’ and with a grave sweep of his arm he took in the whole ranks of soldiers and statesmen who stood around him. I turned to the door, feeling of such small worth that though I had risked my very life in the boldness of my words, I knew that my going was without dignity. No one else moved to the extent of a hair; I opened the door, passed out, and closed it again.

“And then, hardly had I crossed the threshold, than there came over me such an overwhelming sense of duty undone that I almost reeled. Who and what was I that I should hold my hand or my tongue, when England, in the very throes and stress of

civil war, might need me? What was duty that I should deny its call? What was truth? And, my dears, in that instant the answer rose before me as if, like Belshazzar's doom, it had been written in fire upon the wall—that truth and duty were one, and that both must be obeyed at all sacrifice of self. My duty seemed then a simple thing enough. I had no more right to hold back my doing than to refuse to risk my life. The duty must be done, whatever the risk, whatever the pang.

“And then I turned and opened the door again, and walked in silence into that room with head erect—I had left it with downcast head. And then the great Captain stepped forward to meet me, and took me by the hand and said: ‘Well done, thou good and faithful servant!’ and it seemed to me that truth and duty, though strong together, were imperfect but that with faith the perfect trinity appeared. But this is all over your heads. Run away to bed now, children! Good-night!” And the old man sank back into his chair, as though the full weight of his ninety years had come upon him all at once.

As she gave her good-night kiss Betty murmured in her grandfather's ear—

“I think I know, grandfather! Faith and

"Duty and Truth are like three candles with but one light," and she walked gravely away, whilst the old man's eyes followed her lovingly.

When the children were all in bed and Betty's father had gone to work in his study, her grandfather went up to the nursery and tapped softly at the door. Mrs. Abigail came quickly and opened it. She was about to make some remark, when the old man held up a warning finger and said softly—

"Is Betty asleep? Please look into her room and see. I do not want to disturb her if she is." Abigail, with an inaudible protest against disturbing people when they were going to bed after a hard day's work, softly opened the door of Betty's room. The child was not asleep, for she spoke at once. Abigail beckoned to the old man. He entered the room, and the nurse shut the door softly and went back to her own room, but without protest of any kind this time, for there was something so grave in the old man's face—something so sweet and yet so earnest—that it awed her a little, and unconsciously her womanhood admitted the dominance of the man.

As he entered the room the child said, in a most natural way—

"I knew you would come, grandfather."

The old man was a little startled, for such visit was a rare thing indeed on his part, and the subject had not been mentioned between them. Indeed his own intention to come had been formed long after she had said good-night. And yet there was something so genuine and unforced in the utterance, as though it was the natural conclusion of a train of thought, that the old man was strangely moved ; and as he sat beside the little cot he said brightly—

“Why Betty, my dear, you seem to know things by instinct.”

“Oh, I don't know, grandfather ; but sometimes when I am told things, or see or hear them, other things come into my mind all at once.”

Then, as the child took his great hand in her little ones and drew it to her breast and nursed it, visions of other faces rose before him and mingled with hers, so that the past and the present—the living and the dead—became embodied in the one sweet childish presence. The story of his thought was so well written in his face that the child, looking into his eyes, whispered softly—

“Tell me, dear grandfather ; what are you thinking of?—tell me all.” After a pause the old man spoke to her in a low, solemn voice.

It was a strange, albeit so sweet and peaceful a scene. The lamp which the old man carried was laid on the table at the foot of the cot so that its light might not dazzle the eyes of the child, and the two were in shadow, deep save for the reflected light from the walls of the room and the dim echo of the moonlight through the yellow curtains. The child's face was framed in her little white muslin cap, with just here and there a stray tangle of her sunny brown hair peeping through. Her sapphire eyes were grave and earnest, and the likeness of the child to the old man was more strangely great even than before.

"My child, it seems strange of me to talk of such things, but there is a spell upon me to-night. Mayhap that the old memories are awake and are growing stronger still as the end draws nearer." The child held his hand tighter and closer to her breast, but said not a word, though a tear gathered in each eye and rolled slowly down her cheeks as she lay. "For the end must come some time, my dear," he added, as he saw the tears. Stooping, he kissed her forehead, and then, with his silk handkerchief, wiped the tears from her sweet little face. "All the faces I have loved seem gathered in yours to-night. The face of my

mother, who, when a child like you, stood with her mother on the heights of Portland Bill and saw the great Armada sweep up the Channel and watched the beginning of the fight that ended in its annihilation. My mother it was who taught me to be true above all things and not to fear to do that which my conscience told me. And I see, too, the face of my wife, whom I had known when she was scarcely bigger than you are, and who grew up to love me as I had loved her all along; who counselled me ever in the way that was most honourable and most true; who mourned when my master suffered at the hands of his foes; who, when I saw the work of that Cromwell who had taught me my duty to England pass away, told me I had been right to choose even death for my conscience' sake, and to act on it when it showed me a new path; and who, alas! left me with my little daughter when God's time came for her to go home to Him. And I see, too, the face of that little one—so like you, my dear, that half a century seems gone and that I see her lying in her little cot, what very time the Great Plague was on us that the Great Fire later purged away." The child held his hand closer and tighter still. "And I see, too, the face of her daughter."

it. "That's me, grandfather!" said the child brightly. The old man shook his head.

"Nay, nay, my dear. Time runs more quickly than you think. I speak of your mother, my child, who stood with me in the streets of London and saw Dutch William enter. Your mother, my child's child; for Betty, dear, you are my great-granddaughter, though we always call you granddaughter. But that is naught to me, my dear," he added, earnestly and quickly, seeing a look of disappointment crossing the child's face. "You are all the more dear for the years that have elapsed, and for all the love and the sweet memories that go to mould you in my heart. Nay, I can say with all truth that as my life ebbs away and I come nearer to the time when I shall meet my dear ones who have gone before, I love best of all the little one whom I must leave and whose love I shall bear to them when we shall meet. But these are sad thoughts for a child, and I must leave you to rest; nevertheless I want to tell you, Betty dear, something which I always intended you to know. When I have passed away all that I have is to be yours; it is in the hands of trustees; what this means you will know later. But there is one sum which is kept apart and

which is to be yours and yours alone, and which you are to deal with when you please and how you please. I want to ask you not to use that money lightly. Keep it till you feel that there is real want of it; that it can do some good thing such as your heart tells you is good—when it can avert some calamity. It is a trust given to me long, long ago by one who had sinned deeply and had greatly atoned, and who knew the value of help given freely and at the right time. I have never had cause to use it, and I want to pass over the trust to the nearest of my own kin. You will keep it for me, Betty, will you not?"

"I shall do as you wish, grandfather," said Betty gravely, and added: "Please God!"

Then the old man went on: "And now, my child, good-night. We are not likely to speak of this again; in the morning I shall not allude to it, but I wanted you to know it! Good-night, my child, and God keep you in His sight and His heart of hearts, so that you may walk in His ways all the days of your life!" and he bent over and kissed her forehead.

Then the deep love of the child's heart spoke out. She rose in her cot and flung her arms round the old man's neck and kissed him. The tears ran down her cheeks as she sobbed out—

"Good-night, great-grandfather—and grandfather too!" She lay back on her pillow and choked down her sobs while the old man once more dried her eyes and bid her cheerily good-night.

When the footsteps sounded in the passage, Abigail came out and asked him if he wanted anything. He shook his head, nodded her a kindly good-night, and passed into his own room.

In the morning Abigail came into Betty's room and dressed her herself; when the child had knelt at her knees and said her prayers, the woman said to her quietly—

"Don't rise yet, Betty dear; I have something to tell you, but you must not be frightened." To her astonishment Betty answered gravely—

"Don't fear, Abigail, I am not afraid; grandfather is dead!"

"Lord have mercy on us!" said the woman, startled, "but how did you know it, Miss? We only learned it half an hour gone, and I came right here lest you should be shocked to hear it sudden. Who learned you of it?"

"No one, Abigail; I seemed to know. Last night he spoke to me as if he was going away. (Oh, grandfather! dear, dear, grandfather!)" For a moment the child broke out into a

paroxysm of weeping ; but as suddenly she stopped, and, drying her eyes, said—

“ May I see him, Abigail ? I shall be very good.”

“ Yes, Miss,” she answered, after a pause, “ but not yet—not till after—not till this afternoon.”

Then Betty went and sat in the window-seat and cried quietly all to herself till the time had come.

CHAPTER II

DOGGETT'S COAT AND BADGE

IN the ten years that had elapsed after her great-grandfather's death Betty Pole had many subjects for after-remembrance. Queen Anne had passed away; Marlborough had won glorious victories, had been a traitor twice told and had fallen; the royal vultures had gathered round the deathbed of the Queen, and the hopes of the Stuarts had been for ever shattered. King George had come, and ruled in London a German Court by German ways. In Betty's own family, too, there had been many changes. Her father had been dead more than six years, and his sister who had come to take his place still waged a pretty even battle with Abigail. The latter had grown fatter and greyer, but her heart was as stout as of old and her tongue as sharp. Many a hard knock Miss Priscilla had had

to take in the way of words; but she was a just, shrewd woman and knew Abigail's worth and fidelity too well to quarrel with her for a show of temper. She never failed, however, to have her revenge, and in time Abigail came to know that she had met more than her match in the patient, well-tempered woman who bided her time and gave a home-thrust when that time came.

The elder children had all gone their own ways. One of the boys had become a midshipman and was away with the Southern fleet, and the other had just been gazetted a cornet in the Green Horse Dragoons. Marjory, the pert, had married a Scotch Writer to the Signet and was at present engaged in nursing her first baby in Edinburgh, whilst her elder sister, Lucy, lay beside her baby and her husband too in the deep sea beyond the Dogger Bank where the *Queen of Sheba* went down with all hands.

Betty was now an heiress to a considerable fortune, for during her long minority the money and estate which her great-grandfather had left her had been used to great advantage by her trustees. Every year the account in Mr. Child's bank grew larger. Even the nation wanted money badly at times, and the most active

trustee, the shrewd merchant, Mr. Fenton, of Finsbury Square—Betty's cousin on her father's side—who advised the dealings with her money, knew well how to open his hand and when to close it; and each year's end found that his judgment in such matters was always right. He was a somewhat hard, stern man, this Mr. Fenton, now a London alderman, and to some he seemed of an icy temperament; but in his own way he loved his gentle, high-bred cousin, and was proud of her. He would often confide to his cronies that some day she should have such a fortune as would show the world what a London merchant could gather in the span of one life. His sister, who lived with him, shared his love for Betty, who well knew that there was always a loving welcome for her from the stern old pair in the City.

There was only one point on which the old merchant was unsatisfied, and that was the sum of one thousand guineas which, by Mr. Stanmore's will, lay in the hands of Mr. Child to be paid only to Miss Betty Pole on her own order, when and how she would—all wishes even of her trustees to the contrary notwithstanding. Once he spoke to her about it and she listened in silence whilst he spoke—

“It is a shame, lass, I tell ye; simply a

shame to let a sum like that lie idle. I could turn it over and over again in a year and make each guinea into ten. Why, what with their fancy stocks, their South Sea schemes, and their East India Companies and the like, these fools run mad in the hunt for the shadow of wealth ; and men who know what money and business mean look on and keep their heads cool till the time comes. I could use this sum alone in such a way that if ye had naught else in the world it would let ye hold up your head with Miss Mendez herself. What with this and your youth and beauty you might pick a husband from the heirs of the Russells and the Montagus ! Be wise, child, and let me deal with that as I have dealt with the rest !” Then Betty answered very quietly, as she took his hand and held it, as she used to hold her grandfather’s—it was a pretty trick she had and it seemed to become her well—

“Thank you, indeed, dear Cousin Fenton, for all you have done for me. Aunt Priscilla often tells me how good you have been to me, and how well you have dealt with my fortune, and I am not ungrateful. Indeed, indeed I am not ! But my grandfather spoke to me of that money the very last time I saw him—the very night he died—when he told me of his mother

who had seen the Armada, and of his wife who had cried at King Charles's death, and of his daughter who had been through the Great Plague and the Great Fire, and of her daughter, my mother, who had seen King William enter London. And he gave me a trust that I must keep!"

Here Mr. Fenton struck in—

"Oh, if there is any secret——" Betty still held his hand in one of hers whilst she laid the other on his lips.

"No secret indeed, cousin—now do not be angry with me—I am sure that if you knew all you would be the first to tell me that I am right."

The old gentleman yielded at once to her soft influence and stroked her hand, as he answered—

"There, there, my dear, I won't say another word—not one! Do as you please, and if you see any duty, do it. But for the life of me I can't see what duty there is in not multiplying one by ten."

Just then his sister, Cousin Hester, came in, and other matters were spoken of. That night it was arranged that Cousin Hester was to come and stay for a few days in Chelsea at the old house in Cheyne Walk so as to see the

great race amongst the watermen for the orange-coloured coat and silver badge given by Mr. Doggett, the comedian. This race was expected to be a very fine affair ; it was to be held on the 1st of August, in memory of the crowning of King George the year before, and a great company were expected to be on the river that day. The race was to be amongst six young watermen, who were to start from the " Old Swan," near London Bridge, at the ebb of the tide and row up the river as far as the White Swan Inn at Chelsea. All the Livery of the watermen were to be there, all the great City companies were to send their State barges, and many noblemen and gentlemen of quality arranged that their barges and wherries would be out that day. As the barges were sumptuous affairs, gay with bright colours and gold, with canopies of rich stuffs ; and as oarsmen and other servants were glorious with the richest liveries, the sight was expected to be a fine one indeed.

When the day came there was more splendour even than had been expected, for the ministers were wary, and they thought it possible that so great a concourse might afford an opportunity to the enemies of the House of Hanover to make manifest their disfavour. As the German

succession was too recent to allow of any such chance being ignored, it was thought advisable to have a great display of the forces of the Crown—albeit in a purely pacific manner and simply as an addition to the pageant. And so each warship at the Nore and Tilbury and in the docks and at the wharves of London sent some of her boats to the show. Dapper and business-like they all seemed as, in perfect time with flashing oar-blades and steersmen bending double at each stroke, they swept in and out amongst the floating mass. They were everywhere along the whole course, not seeming of set purpose; but from the Tower to Chelsea there was no stretch of water without its navy boat full of alert, swarthy, pig-tailed fellows, cutlass on side and pistol in belt ready for any emergency.

And then again there was another addition, more showy if less effective at a pinch. All the boats of the King's household were out. Indeed, there seemed to have been here some attempt to make as brave a show as possible; for even all those boats whose antique shapes and time-worn timbers seemed to have entitled them to rot away in peace, had been furbished up and sent out, gay with paint and gold, to add to the splendour of the scene. These

royal boats, each carrying the Standard, made a numerous muster, and the scarlet of the royal livery with the great badges of the King's watermen almost as large as breastplate and back-piece, caught the eyes of the multitude.

In each of the royal boats sat some gentleman to represent his King. In some of the great barges were high officers of State, each with a party of ladies and gentlemen, all radiant with rich clothing. Especially noticeable were all those in any way connected with ceremonial or pleasure, the Lord Chamberlain, the Master of the Horse, the Master of the Hounds, the Master of the Hawks. In others were less important personages, and even in the wherries and smaller pleasure boats were some young gentlemen of family or degree, as an overt sign of the magnitude and importance of the Court party. In the great barge of the Company of Drysalters, Alderman Fenton, as was right, had a place. Betty had the boat of four oars which her brothers had used to delight in, made brave for the occasion, and she, with Aunt Priscilla and Cousin Hester, sat on blue cushions in the stern, whilst Mrs. Abigail had a seat all to herself in the bow and looked after the baskets with the dinner, which was to be taken on the water to-day. Every-

thing was astir on the river hours before the race, and all sorts of trials of strength and speed were undertaken, and all sorts of mishaps occurred. The river ran strongly in the reaches between Vauxhall and Battersea, and in such a throng there were many novices. But help was always at hand, and the sun was bright and warm; men and women and girls and boys were on pleasure bent, and all were gay and happy.

Betty's boat took several turns down the river as far as Vauxhall Gardens, and the eyes of its occupants enjoyed to the full the life and rich beauty of the scene.

Several times they were passed, either going up or down the river, by one of the royal boats, which seemed gifted with a divine uneasiness. It was powerfully manned by four splendid oarsmen, whose bronzed faces, tattooed skin, and precision of stroke, showed them to be men-of-war'smen who had donned the royal livery for the occasion—a state of things noticeable to the eye of a keen observer in many of the royal boats. They never seemed to tire, but swept up and down as though to show off their strength. There was only one other person in the boat, a young gentleman who steered. He was a handsome young fellow

with black hair and dark eyes and a proud bearing, and he carried well the elegant dress which he wore. It did not seem to strike either of the elder ladies that there was a method in the constant passing and repassing of their boat ; but Betty seemed to realise it in some way, for she never raised her eyes as the boat swept by—that is, she never raised her eyelids, but looked out between her long eyelashes, as even the fairest and sweetest young women do when a strange young man of elegant appearance is in the immediate foreground.

As for Mrs. Abigail, communing with herself in the solitude amongst the pasties and chickens and bottles, her mind was quite made up. Here at last was the true Prince Charming, whose heart the young mistress whom she idolised was to win. His bright, handsome face, his resolute bearing, his stature and form—for he looked lithe as a panther and strong as steel—his royal surroundings, and the manifest admiration of his glances at Miss Betty as he ran his barge instinctively as close as he safely could, all satisfied the faithful old woman's requirements, and the time seemed impossibly and exasperatingly long until he should formally declare himself. After all is told, what is so enduring, so strong, or so

complete as an old servant's protectorship over the future of the child she has reared? Abigail got more and more impatient as the time went on. The day was hot, for the August sun was blazing, and she took off her hat to fan herself. This hat was a treasure, something that Abigail valued as the apple of her eye. Betty called out to her—

“Take care of your hat, Abigail; if you let it drop you know the current will carry it under some of the boats.”

They were at this time up close to the “Swan,” where a great assemblage was gathering to watch the close of the race, which was now going on. Down the river was heard a roaring which was taken up as the boats passed along. A way was kept clear in the centre of the stream, and to insure this the boats drew right and left. This occasioned some confusion, especially on the left bank, where the current, glancing off the projecting promenade in front of the King's house, drove the boats together.

Betty's oarsmen, who knew the river, kept the boat in her place by judiciously modulated strokes; but some of the other boats were not so well handled, and one of them came swiftly down the current towards the mass of craft.

Some of the men in the other boats called out

—especially the gallant-looking young gentleman in the royal barge, who had taken up his position a little down the stream and out towards the centre, from whence he could see Betty.

Abigail, intent on watching the young gentleman, did not see the coming boat, and when the collision came, though it was not much in itself, it so upset her that she dropped her precious hat to catch the gunwale of the boat, and the current in an instant swept it away. Betty saw it coming by and tried to catch it. It was just beyond her reach, and so, with hand on the gunwale, she leaned over as far as she could and just succeeded in grasping it. But at that instant the colliding boat, fended off at first by the hands of its occupants, again struck Betty's boat. The shock, slight as it was in itself, was much to her in her position of poise, and threw her into the water. There was an instant shout, and then Priscilla and Hester clutched wildly at where Betty's head had been, and many a voice was raised and many a hand stretched out.

But quickest of all the throng was the young gentleman in the royal boat! Hardly had Betty sunk under the water when he had leaped to his feet and dived after her. He

was a strong swimmer and caught her as she rose, and with a few powerful strokes of his right arm took her with the stream, whilst his own men bent to their oars and followed him.

But it is no light task to swim amongst a press of boats in a current, and especially when one has to support two and with only one hand available for the purpose. One or two boats in such a case can be helpful, but a mass of them makes new danger, Oars get entangled, those who should sit quiet stand up, and those who can help are hampered; boats which to be useful should be held still and on an even keel, are rocked to and fro till they themselves become a positive source of danger. So it was on this occasion. The mere multitude of rescuers and their variety of plans, made a small danger into a great one.

So skilful and strong a swimmer as this man evidently was, could have easily held her up till help came; but with the current, the swaying boats, and the closer ingathering mass there was an added danger of being crushed. He took in the situation at a glance, and with a boldness and readiness which commended itself to every man present who could swim, he dived beneath the boats, taking with him Betty, who had not uttered a sound and

who now yielded herself quietly to his guidance. His oarsmen, who, seeing the danger and recognising his course of action, had skirted round the press of boats and were waiting at the other side when he came up, immediately seized him. He gasped out to them: "Take the lady!" and instantly four strong hands raised her and lifted her into the barge whilst he himself clung to the gunwale, panting.

Instantly all those around began to cheer in true British fashion; even those in the mass of boats up and down and across the stream who had not seen what had happened but knew from the struggling and the pressing together of the boats and by the cheers that something unusual had taken place, took up the shout till down the stream the waiting crowd seemed to be in doubt as to which way the race was coming. Priscilla and Hester, both pale as death, held one another's hands tight, and Abigail, with no one to hold on to except the oarsman, clasped her own hands and said her prayers, as a good woman should do in time of danger—and at other times. Close to Betty's boat there was at this time another royal barge with several old people splendidly dressed. One of them, a

man with white hair and the ribbon of the garter, said in Abigail's hearing to the lady beside him—

“By the Lord! splendidly done. I never saw anything better or readier in my life. He is a fine fellow! Who is he?”

“I can tell you,” came the answer, “for I asked just now. His name is Rafe Otwell.”

“Who is he?”

“Oh, the usual thing!—a poor gentleman. Some sort of kinsman of Walpole.”

There was a bitter undertone in the reply—

“Poor! and a kinsman of Walpole! He is a distant kinsman then, of course.”

“Fie, my lord, fie! You politicians are more severe on one another than we ladies—are supposed to be.”

“Well, kinsman of Walpole, near or far though he be—and the farther the better, say I!—he is a gallant fellow, and a ready fellow; in my time such qualities counted for much!”

By this time the boat containing the two rescued people was in mid-stream and the onlookers had forgotten the incident, for the race was now close up and all eyes were directed towards the approaching wherries. Betty's oarsmen cleared the press of boats and drew

to shore, the royal barge following. When they got close in the young gentleman leaped ashore and his men put down a stretcher for Betty to walk to the bank, and she took his hand to steady herself. Sweet and beautiful she looked as she stood there in the brilliant sunshine, though her white dress was sorely draggled and clung to her so that she could hardly walk. The pallor which was consequent on her danger had given way to a bright blush, and as the young man held her hand she tried to thank him. Betty was not good with words when she wanted them, and sometimes those to whom she spoke—and to whom she wrote—thought that the simplicity of her words showed coldness. It was not so, however; the sincerity of their purpose was all-in-all.

“I thank you, sir,” she said simply “I thank you with all my heart!” And, after all, what could she have said nicer had she spoken a volume?

“Nay,” he answered, “the thanks are mine that I have been permitted the honour of serving you!”

Further talk was cut short by the embraces of her aunt and cousin, who had gained the bank and now wept over her and rejoiced

in physical contact, to the great detriment of their costumes. Abigail too came up and embraced her and finished an outpouring of rejoicing at her mistress's safety and of anger towards herself for causing the accident, with the following—

“And, God save us, if the darling child hasn't kept the hat all the time!”

Betty looked down; she had quite forgotten the hat, which she held in her hand dripping many-coloured tears. The young gentleman said gallantly—

“Such faithfulness is indeed strange!”

Abigail instantly capped his speech—

“You wouldn't think it strange if you knew Miss Betty, sir.”

“Hush, Abigail!” said Betty.

Then Aunt Priscilla spoke—

“Sir, we do not know how to thank you. This dear child's life is more to us than we can say; but, indeed, we are very, very grateful.” She held out her hand, and the young gentleman took it; but to his surprise and indeed to his consternation she stooped and kissed his hand.

“No, no!” he said, “not that, Madam—not that!”

“Sir, I must show my gratitude somehow!

Were I younger or you older I might take a different way! But come, sir," she added, "our home is yonder in Cheyne Walk. Come with us and dry your clothes."

"No, no!" he answered, "it is nothing; I shall be less wet presently and a ducking does no harm."

By this time Betty was moving off, but on hearing him refuse she stopped.

"At least, sir," she said, "you will not refuse to let us make you welcome!"

He said nothing but bowed, and they all moved off towards Cheyne Walk.

Betty was hurried to her room by Abigail, who rushed about getting cordials which she insisted on her taking, and wept and laughed over her; whilst the stranger, after being duly dosed with cordial—which he did not refuse—was shown into another room where was the whole wardrobe of Betty's father. He made his choice of clothes, and presently appeared in the drawing-room. Here he formally introduced himself to the two ladies, Betty not yet having appeared.

"Ladies, allow me to introduce myself, since good fortune for me, though bad for——" he looked from one to the other of the elderly ladies, as if in doubt—"for your young sister,"

the ladies here smiled not displeased, "has taken the place of social usage. My name is Rafe Otwell. I am a gentleman of the Temple, though I regret to say as barren of law as I am of means. I am a kinsman of Sir Robert Walpole, who promises me a place as soon as I have been called to the Bar. I am a sometime scholar of Cambridge, and my home, when I had one, was in Cheshire."

To which Miss Pole replied—

"Sir! you may be poor—Providence rules in lesser matters of the world as in greater things—but you are a gallant gentleman and have played a ready as well as a brave part this day, and if my dear brother, Betty's father, were here, he would thank you better—than I—than I can——" and here the poor lady's emotion overcame her and she burst into tears.

"Don't cry! there Mistress, don't cry!" said the young man, all his ceremonial stiffness gone in a moment. "There is nothing to cry for. She is alive and well! All is well! There now, don't cry!" In the midst of this, when the young gentleman was half embracing the elderly lady at his side, in well-meant efforts to comfort her, Betty entered the room. She instantly became the objective point of all the

embracings and all the tears; and for awhile rejoicing, in the form most objectionable to a person not in the game, was rampant. Suddenly Hester said—

“Those men who picked you up were not even thanked. I will go and thank them,” and she went down to the edge of the river opposite where the royal barge still hung on her oars, though the mass of boats save those clustered around the landing at the “Swan” were on their way back to London.

“We have come to thank you,” said Miss Fenton; and with an inspiration added: “Won’t you have something to drink?” Their answer was unmistakably and decidedly in the affirmative.

“Come to the house yonder,” she said.

“Not for worlds, Miss. We daren’t go ashore without leave.”

Here, however, Betty appeared, followed by Abigail and a blushing maid who carried four tankards.

‘God bless you, Miss,’ said the sailor who was spokesman for the rest. “You should be an Admiral’s lady.”

CHAPTER III

THE GOLD BUTTONS

R AFE'S introduction of himself was followed by a more formal one, for amongst his few friends was a lady of Ware, to whom Betty Pole was of course known from her estate at Much Hadam, and the young people met at a kettledrum at her house. By this time he was head over ears in love with Betty; he would have declared himself but for that restraining sense of his own unworthiness which Providence has been good enough to implant, for the protection of young maidens, in the hearts of young men. But this sense lies latent only until such time as a true attachment manifests itself, whereupon it asserts all its strength. This force, however, like all great forces, is active and reactive; and, like other forces, what it loses in strength, it gains in direction, and *vice versâ*. For the timorous young maiden when she feels assured

that her lover holds back through some strange weakness which is alien to feminine nature—and her heart never fails to tell her when this is so—takes heart of grace and gives freely, if not ostentatiously, that which timid self-consciousness fears even to ask. *Si la jeunesse savait!* Well, if it did, the young would cease to be young. The decadence of old age came into the world at the first bite of the apple, and wrinkles formed an appropriate punishment for the sin of Eve.

Betty's course of thought was masked by her habitual direct simplicity. She made up her mind on the necessary points, and took all the rest for granted. Indeed, had she done anything foolish—which she did not—it would have been excusable. Here was a young gentleman, only a few years older than she was, handsome, stalwart, brave, of gallant bearing, and of high connections—and to whom she owed her life. His only disqualification in the eyes of the world did not matter in her case; for if he was poor, she had enough for both, and it would be only an added sweetness to say to him when the time came—if it ever did come—"I give you all I have, Rafe! And yet how little! You gave me your name—a woman has none worth having in our English

law ; my life is yours already," and so forth. The day-dreams of a young maid are very tender ; and somewhere at base of them is ever some such idea of self-sacrifice.

But though these young people met often—by premeditated chance—such meetings were not often enough for them, and Rafe took to calling at Cheyne Walk more frequently than the strict rules of ceremony demanded. Aunt Priscilla was not, however, a very fiery dragon, and the only effect of his frequent visits was to keep her in a state of constant expectation. As he might at any time come she thought it well to be always ready for such a contingency, and so the requirements of a small household of two women became gradually enlarged to meet the needs of a third person, that person a man and a stranger. Abigail never grumbled, and we may be sure the maids did not, at all the extra trouble.

The meetings of the young people became more full of eloquent silence than they had been. Betty and Rafe did not speak even so much as had been usual at first, for as they grew to understand each other better, fewer words sufficed. Occasionally they walked together on the path by the riverside, up and down, up and down before the house, never

further than the eyes of Aunt Priscilla could follow them as she sat in the window of the drawing-room embroidering. For worlds Betty would not have gone beyond this limit—not that she feared Aunt Priscilla or the proprieties, but she was a resolute young person when her mind was made up, and she had set this limit for herself. Often they watched the sun set up the river and saw the shadows grow darker and darker over the hill that rose away to Clapham and Wandsworth. At such moments no speech at all was necessary, for the hearts of the two beat as one heart, and though nothing had been spoken they knew that they loved. Their only doubt on earth was of their own worthiness of each other.

At last one evening when Rafe called there was a certain air of resolution manifest on him, awkwardly borne, but which made the heart of Abigail rejoice for she knew by instinct what was coming. He used generally to ask for Miss Priscilla, but to-day his request was to see Miss Pole, and he was shown into the drawing-room. Whenever he had called previously he had usually found Betty alone, or if she was not in the room, she came alone and was shortly followed by Miss Priscilla; but to-day, after a delay, Betty came in accompanied by

her aunt. To accomplish this there had been a little skirmishing, for Betty declared that she would not go in alone.

How Betty did talk that afternoon—she that was usually so silent! She did not allow the chatter to flag for a moment. Every topic of conversation that could be imagined she exhausted; and her aunt sat in amazement, secretly bridleing at this unwonted vivacity. As Betty chattered and as Aunt Priscilla's back got stiffer and stiffer, so also Rafe's temper seemed to give way a little. His answers grew more monosyllabic and a sort of cloud settled on his brows. But the more glum and dour he became, the brighter grew Betty. She teased and rallied him till Priscilla grew indignant and began to take his part; whereupon she grew more merry still, and, making an excuse, slipped out of the room and rushed up to her own chamber. There, after locking the door, she threw herself face down on the sofa and began to cry.

The instant that Betty was out of the room her aunt changed her tactics, and began to make excuses for her. The dear child had not been quite herself lately; the weather seemed to affect her, and so forth. Rafe was not slow to acquiesce in these excuses; his real love for

her, and his somewhat ruffled vanity both came to his aid, and the atmosphere began to clear. In the midst of this process Betty returned, but without a sign of tears upon her face. She was one of those women whose beauty tears do not mar. It is well for some women that it is so, and that in this way the wind of adversity is tempered to them. Betty was in a mood not quite the same but very slightly different; she was not less cheerful, but she did not tease; Rafe felt the sunshine of her presence again begin to glow around his heart.

By some feminine diplomacy which has no match in the nature of man, Betty so arranged matters that she was not left alone with Rafe for a single moment. When Priscilla made an effort to leave in order to get a book for Mr. Otwell, Betty started up and insisted that she should get it. When Abigail came to the door and craved the elder lady's presence for a moment it was the younger one who went. And all the while she was so sweet and winning that Rafe loved her better than ever for his defeat.

Presently, as a last resource, he asked her if she would not walk on the river bank and watch the sunset. Betty at once acquiesced and ran off to get her hat and wraps. She

came back with two hats and two wraps, Priscilla's and her own, and insisted, then and there, that her aunt should share the pleasure. Rafe, secretly chafing but all the while amused, could of course only acquiesce, and the three took a series of prim promenades along the river bank under the trees. Betty so manœuvred that her aunt was always in the middle ; if in the course of turning to retrace their steps this arrangement became upset, she with some deft movement restored it again.

Rafe did not enjoy that walk. Things somehow seemed to be running the wrong way. Had he been older!—*Si la jeunesse savait!* The burden of the old saw is ever the same, and its application is eternal!

When they came back to the house Betty was as sweet as usual, with the exception that she would not allow Rafe an instant's opportunity of love-making or even of being alone with her. When he asked her to sing something for him she sat down to her harp and sang in a manner of enchanting archness a little song which whilst it provoked her lover made him more in love than ever. As she bent over to the harp in one of the most graceful attitudes that woman can assume, and swept the strings till they trilled in sympathy

with her arch merriment, she looked towards Rafe bewitchingly, but in such wise that she seemed to look through and beyond him—a fact which, through all his love, inflamed that jealousy which is possible to all men.

“What will you sing?” Rafe had asked.

“‘Love at play’!” she answered, and straightway began—

“He is not dead—nor sleeping !
The playful Boy pretends to die—
See ! see ! he peeps with laughing eye,
He tests the lover’s truth with weeping.

“Love is naught but lying.
Its wiles are jests to earnest carried,
When Cupid smiles on lovers married,
The thought that troubles least is dying.

“Lovers be happy toying !
Still be children whilst ye may !
Ye will be grave in coming day.
Youth, not age, is the season of enjoying.”

When the song was done Betty rose quickly and sat down primly close beside her aunt ; she was silently demure during the whole time that Rafe remained. Seeing that he could get no further with his suit, Rafe, concealing his chagrin as well as he could, took an early leave.

When Betty was alone with her aunt the latter took her to task gravely.

"Betty dear, don't you think you were a little hard on that young gentleman?"

Betty opened her eyes wide in seeming surprise as she answered artlessly—

"Hard, aunt! how do you mean?"

"How do I mean, my dear? Eyes don't grow as old as mine without being able to understand what they do see. That young gentleman is just breaking his heart for you."

"For me, aunt?" This was spoken with an exquisite softness.

"Yes, my child. Can't you see—or won't you see—that he is head over ears in love with you?"

"Oh no, aunt; that cannot be."

"Can't be! What do you mean, child?"

Betty answered, with a strange mixture of shyness and drollery: "He never told me so."

"Upon my word, young lady, you are too bad! You are—you are—just like other girls!"

"And besides, aunt, I am not sure of the worthiness!"

"Indeed, my dear, I am sure he is worthy. True, he is poor; but, my dear, you are rich enough to please yourself; and, my dearest

Betty"—this was said very gravely—"do not trifle with the best part of a man, the sincerity of his heart. A good man, dear, is a very great and noble thing, and worth a woman's love."

"But indeed, aunt, I did not mean that he was unworthy. Oh no! oh no! oh no!" and the deep, dark blue eyes filled with tears.

"Who, then?"

"It is I who am not worthy!" and she threw herself into the arms opened to receive her.

Aunt Priscilla understood all, and comforted her.

The very next day Master Rafe called again. This time he was not nervous, for he had made up his mind that though he would wait for a suitable opportunity he would seize the very first which might come. He found Betty in the drawing-room alone, and she received him very sweetly, so sweetly that he felt that he was at one with her, and then and there blurted out what he fondly thought was his secret.

"Oh, Betty, I love you with all my heart! Won't you take me? I shall be a true and loving husband to my life's end!" Betty sat silent for a moment, for it was too sweet a

pleasure to shorten, and so he went on : " I have been so miserable, Betty, since last night that I have never slept. I came here yesterday to propose to you, but somehow I never got a chance. Tell me, Betty—tell me, dear, that you love me, or I shall be miserable all my life."

Betty raised her earnest eyes, and looked him full in the face, as she put her two hands in his, and said, with a shy sweetness that made his heart thrill—

" Do not be miserable, Rafe, ever any more !"

He caught her in his arms, and their lips met in their first kiss. The first kiss is a holy thing. It should be the symbol of spiritual marriage—of the union of two souls ; the youth and maiden who feel this can never really love, at least the same way, again.

Priscilla waited as long as she thought proper, and then, with a little flutter in her heart, opened the door and walked in with the commencement of an apology on her lips. That apology, however, was never completed, for the lovers, who had been holding each other's hands, drew apart instinctively, and Betty, blushing rosy red, jumped up and ran over to her aunt and kissed her, and then laid her head on her bosom. Rafe rose up and

took one of her hands, and with an old-fashioned gallantry stooped and kissed it, and Priscilla, too, blushed. Blushing on such occasions is the first preliminary to feeling at ease, so presently all three sat on the sofa, Rafe leaning back very happy and with an all-conquering air about him which both women secretly admired. Priscilla held one of Betty's hands in hers, and stroked and smoothed it lovingly, whilst the other lay emptily in her lap, Rafe being too new a lover to dare to take it in his—openly.

Supper that night was a glorious meal. They were all merry and light-hearted, and Abigail herself waited on them, to the chagrin of the maids who wanted to see for themselves how things went whilst the news was very new indeed.

Betty had rushed upstairs for a moment to tell Abigail, but had had no need to speak; the news was written plain in the radiance of her face, and the old woman threw her arms around her and sat down and took her on her knees as she used to do when she was a child. Indeed, that evening Abigail seemed to have gained a new importance. She behaved exactly as usual, but in a more genial way; she excused everything that went wrong, unless it bore on

the proper entertainment of the guest. When parting time came Aunt Priscilla had a message to give to Abigail who was waiting to receive orders, and as this took some time to get through and required much talking in a loud tone, so that the impossibility of immediate disturbance was made manifest, the young people had a full and satisfactory opportunity of parting—as newly plighted lovers should have. It is but just to say that they availed themselves of it.

When he came next day—and his visit was much earlier than ever before—Rafe had presents for all the women. To Aunt Priscilla he ventured to give a souvenir of his deep appreciation of her many virtues, in the shape of an exquisite little gold patch-box shaped like two hands clasping, which, when open, showed each hand complete in itself. To Abigail he gave a large silver money-box, shaped like a German peasant's hat, for he said that it was her original loss in the shape of her hat which was the occasion of his great gain, and he had ventured to put within a something wherewith to purchase another hat. Abigail, having admired its external appearance, and having put off looking within as long as seemliness required, opened it and found within ten bright

guineas, and went off at once to fill the maids with wonder and envy at the beauty and worth of her gift. Strangely enough, Aunt Priscilla had on his coming perforce to withdraw herself on household duties, which she did with a needless elaboration of apologies. Then, when he and Betty were alone, and when they had taken by a common instinct their old seats on the sofa, he gave Betty her present. It was an Indian ruby set in brilliants—evidently an heirloom—and when he had put it on the third finger of her left hand, he kissed the finger, and said that it was now his and that he was the very happiest person on all the earth. This assertion Betty, as she nestled close to him, doubted ; but she did not then proclaim herself, for the love of her heart was as yet like the green corn when it timidly puts its head above the earth—not like the same in the autumn, when its ripening time has come, and it rustles as it waves its head openly in the sunshine that it loves.

Betty's life had been so retired that she had not many friends whom it was necessary to tell of her betrothal, but such as there were had to be duly informed, although it was thought wise to say as little as possible about the engagement, since so long a time must elapse

before its fulfilment. All this involved much letter-writing, and kept her very busy ; not, however, too busy to have a delightful time with her lover when he came, which was pretty well every day. The guardians were of course informed very soon ; and although they grumbled a little, and said that a young lady of Miss Pole's fortune and prospects might have done much better, when they came to know that their ward really and truly loved, they consented to the engagement. They insisted, however, on the stipulation mentioned in her great-grandfather's will, that she should not be married till she was of full age. This was two years and three months off, and it seemed to both the young people to be a cruelly long time to have to wait. As, however, they were not forbidden to meet as often as they would, their engagement was a delightful time.

It was, perhaps, a foolish thing of Rafe not to have gone at once to his kinsman, from whom he expected so much, and have told him. This he often felt ; but as at first he had not done so, he dreaded more and more the hard inquiry that would infallibly come : " And pray, sir, why did you not inform me of this at the first ? Am I no one that I should be thus ignored ? "

One day he was sent for by his kinsman, now the virtual ruler of England, since he controlled both the Treasury and the Exchequer. When the interview commenced Walpole told him that he would shortly place him in a great position, as the time had come when he, Sir Robert, should consolidate his power by all means possible, and that he wished to have allied to himself a certain great house that might be dangerous in opposition.

"You," he said, "are to marry the Lady Mary. It is true that she is no longer young; but you have youth and good looks for both, and I warrant me she will not complain of those qualities in you! You do not seem elated with the opportunity," for Rafe's face had fallen and his feeling was only too plain, "but be good enough to remember, young sir, that though you have youth and a fair presence, these comprise all your present possessions. When you go into the market with a full purse you may pick and choose, but when your purse is a slim one—if purse you have at all, or wherewithal to put in one—you must take what you can get. Understand me plainly: I am willing to help my kinsmen, and you amongst the number, but in turn they must help me. If you will not do as I want, then you cannot expect that I will

do as you want. When you can come to tell me that you are willing to carry out my project I shall appoint you forthwith to the post I spoke of ; but time does not stand still, and lacking you, I must choose some other suitor for my Lady Mary, and his must be the reward I reserved for you."

Rafe was ushered from his presence with a very formal and distant bow.

As we know, Rafe did not lack physical courage ; in face of all dangers to life and limb he was a brave man. But his moral courage had not been tested ; had it been, he might have spoken out at once to the Minister, and told him of his betrothal to the young heiress. Had he done so he would doubtless have found new favour in the eyes of his kinsman, who had a shrewd head and knew the worth of such an alliance ; and his interests in life would have been advanced in some other way. So Rafe went home and fretted and fumed and cursed his luck, for by this time he had nearly come to the end of his resources.

He had much wished to make Betty a present, but he had hoped that his nomination to a place would have come at once, and that he would then be better able to give something worthy of the acceptance of a young lady who

had so much of her own already. Now he found his chance of place gone—for the time at all events—and but a small store of guineas remaining of his inheritance. So it was with a somewhat saddened joy that he took his way to Chelsea that afternoon.

There was a source of interest in the household which, however, he did not share. Betty's brother had come up on leave of a few days from his regiment, then quartered at York, and naturally the household was full of his presence. Rafe, who only knew of him as Betty's half-brother, was not any too delighted, and held himself somewhat stiffly, though for Betty's sake he tried to be as cordial as he could. Robert Pole, too, seemed to have some slight holding back from his sister's suitor. He had a vague idea that the latter was in some sense an interloper ; and as he had a special design in his own visit, not unconnected with certain debts incurred since the receipt of his commission, and which could only be removed through the agency of a rich sister, he wished, perhaps not unnaturally, to have that sister to himself as much as possible. With every minute he began to jar more and more on Rafe. There was with his sister a sort of taken-for-granted superiority, and an almost rudeness of

manner which their having been children together made possible, but which in the jealous eyes of the lover—for such thinks no refinement sufficiently worthy for his beloved—seemed coarse and intolerable. Lovers have many crosses to bear in the time of their probation, and not the least of them are placed on their shoulders by the brothers and sisters of their beloved, whose familiarity seems a trifling with a sacred thing.

Betty could not but be conscious of the state of feeling between the two young men, and tried to keep the peace between them. Rafe felt that she was an angel, and loved her more than ever. He loyally strove to further her wishes, and would not see or understand when some specially caustic remark was aimed at him. Now and again he and Betty exchanged glances which showed that they understood each other, and in this silent sympathy he found a great reward for his forbearance. Aunt Priscilla was sublimely unconscious of all that was going on and took an early opportunity to whisper to Betty—

“How delightful it is that they understand each other so well. They have become great friends already.”

Once Betty feared there would be a scene.

Robert, with a brother's freedom, took Betty's hand in his, and noticing the ring, said—

“Hallo! this is something new. I wonder at your wearing such a beggarly thing among those fine ones.”

Betty blushed up to the roots of her hair, for she felt, as did Rafe, that an insult to the latter's gift was intended, but as she did not wish to foment a quarrel she smiled with what heart she could and kissed the ring, saying—

“Never mind, brother, let who will have the rest—this is good enough for me!”

“Indeed but it's not,” he answered, with a sneer; “I have given a better to an innkeeper's daughter!”

Betty's heart sank within her, but Rafe's look reassured her. Then, as she had a shrewd idea as to what Master Robert's visit was really due, she thought of a way—albeit one that seemed a little ungenerous—to make him at least behave with decorum. Master Robert wanted a lesson, and he should have it! So she answered—

“Oh! Robert, how can you be so extravagant! Surely it is not a necessity of being in the Green Horse that you should be so lavish! I did not know that a cornet's pay allowed such openhandedness!”

Robert felt that he had gone too far. He knew that he had yet to explain the disposal of the fifty guineas sent to him not long before in answer to an urgent request, and beyond this again that another hundred at the present time would hardly suffice to meet his more present needs. So he determined on a discreet measure of silence, and tried to change entirely the whole current of conversation. After a moment's thought he jumped up, calling out—

“Come, Betty! put on your hat, and we'll all go pay a visit to Don Saltaro and see his museum. I haven't seen a mummy or a mermaid, or a whale's tooth since I left for York!”

Betty was glad of the change, and as she looked pleased, Robert was pleased to be out of the difficulty of his own creation. So in a good humour the three young people adjourned to Don Saltaro's museum before the afternoon should have become too late for the presence of ladies in the coffee-house. They admired everything, and the Don, who thought much of his aristocratic neighbours, came himself and explained everything to them. With great ceremony he took down from its hook on the wall a splendid old Spanish sword,

beautifully hilted and of immense length. This, he told them, had belonged to a captain of the Armada, and was evidently an heirloom.

"Look!" he said; "see here are the arms, and there a writing on it in the Spanish tongue. Young lady, your eyes are better than mine. Do you please to read it, that these young gallants may learn how the old Spaniard loved!"

Betty, blushing brightly, took the sword and read the legend on the blade—

"'El Amor del infiel es como la Espada destemplada.'"

"Can any of you construe it?" asked the Don. "No! Then is it to me, to whom are many tongues. 'The Love lacking faith is as a sword untempered.' What think you of that, young lady?"

"It is true," said Betty gravely. "There is a lesson in the sword of that old Spanish gentleman which every man and every woman should take to heart!" The Don cried: "Bravo! Bravo!" and Robert applauded, whilst Rafe looked his acquiescence.

Rafe did not return to supper, for he felt that it would be easier for Betty if he were not present to notice—and perhaps to cause—her brother's rudeness. So at the gate he

said farewell, not in his usual style but in a ceremonious way befitting a public occasion, and went back to the Temple in a waterman's wherry.

The legend on the sword had given him an idea. He would have it worked out in some jewel for Betty! And as he was rowed down the river with the ebbing tide his idea took a definite form. He would have wrought, by some cunning goldsmith, a set of buttons in gold of some old Spanish device, such as that which embellished the sword, and on each should be graven a word of the legend. Then he bethought him whether it would be better in Spanish or English, for the wording of the sentence allowed either; and the happy idea came to him that he would have each button to contain a word of Spanish and a word of English, but in such a way that the sentence should run the reverse way, the last of one series being the first of the other.

The perfecting of his idea pleased him, and he forgot all the disagreeable part of his meeting with Betty's brother; and so he landed at the stairs at Westminster and sought the sign of the "Golden Ball" at Windmill Street in the Haymarket. There he confided

to Paul de Lamerie, the Crown goldsmith, his wishes. He rejoiced that the latter liked the idea, and would therefore produce something which should be a pleasure to Betty.

CHAPTER IV

RAFE'S OPPORTUNITY

RAFE paid one more visit during Robert's stay, for he did not wish it to appear as though he avoided the house on account of Betty's brother ; but he was secretly rejoiced when, on his following visit, Abigail told him that Master Robert had gone back to York. The young gentleman had returned to his regimental duties somewhat richer in worldly goods than when he had come ; but he was also richer in certain caution and advice of a sisterly kind which rankled in his breast during the whole of the journey between London and York. Betty had impressed upon him the necessity of at least some measure of prudence in his expenditure, lest he should have to end his military duties before they were well begun ; she had also, but in a more

guarded way, made it perfectly plain to him that his attitude to his new brother-in-prospect was not such as to insure in the family that peace and affection whence bounty for the prodigal had its only possible source.

"In fact," summed up that fairly shrewd young gentleman, "I have made a cursed fool of myself, and Betty sends me packing with a flea in my ear!"—a conclusion which, though somewhat coarsely expressed, did infinite credit to his judgment. Henceforth he passes out of our story. He loved his life while it lasted; and his calls on Betty's liberality became so extravagant that had he not had the misfortune to challenge a more expert and soberer swordsman than himself, it might have become necessary for her guardians to interfere. His one touch with Rafe had been truly but a slight one, but it had the consequence that the mind of the latter was made up to bestow on his lady a gift worthy of her, though at an expense which, when the goldsmith had received his payment, left only a few lonely guineas in the treasury of the kinsman of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Rafe kept the buttons in a case in his pocket, waiting for a suitable opportunity of giving them to Betty; and when he found that

the house was rid of the embarrassing presence of Robert he knew that the time had come.

That evening, when the sun was going down in the west, he asked Betty to come with him to the river bank and watch the sunset. She put on her hat, and they went out together. They walked by the rows of trees opposite the King's House, and, passing up the marshlands, came to the jutting bank whence they could look over the watery waste and see the sunset mirrored in every bend of the river, every little tidal stream, and every stagnant pool.

Here there was a grove or clump of trees, and passing through these they stood on the edge of the bank with the full tide brimming right up to their very feet. All the pools and rivulets of the marshes of the opposite bank to right and left were full of water, and the marsh-land looked as if shot with gold or silver as the water caught the glow of the sunset or showed cold without it. The sun sank slowly down towards the far-off bend of the river, where the willows fringed the banks between Wandsworth and Putney and the river blazed in a glory.

The rise of the ground towards Clapham and Wandsworth seemed bolder than in a

colder light, and on the further edge rose the gibbet, black and grim, which marked the winding of the Portsmouth road. As she pointed out the beauties and answered Rafe's queries Betty had a strange pleasure, for it was sweet beyond measure to be able to instruct her lover ; but she shuddered when, in answer to his query, she told him of the black gibbet.

Then, as the sun sank, he took the case with the golden buttons from his pocket and handed them to her and told her, with sweet words and a look that was an anthem, that he had tried to get something which she would like and which might be worthy of her. When she opened the case and saw the buttons she gave a cry of delight and kissed his gift ; then she took out a button and saw that there were words on it in Spanish and English, and at once she guessed at the legend and read it right through both ways. Then she turned to Rafe, and, secure that the grove of trees hid them from the gaze of any prying wanderer, put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth and told him that she would value his dear gift till her dying day.

And so the sun sank into the water in a last flood of crimson and gold ; and then in an instant the whole colour of the scene changed,

the gold of the sunshine turning to the silver of the moonlight. The air seemed colder as the lovers retraced their steps to home, where they found Priscilla looking anxiously for them, for they had never been out so long together before. That evening, before he began to say good-night, Betty said to him very gravely, after a painful and manifest hesitation—

“Rafe dear, there is something troubling me. May I speak of it to you? May I ask you a question?”

“My darling, there is nothing in all the wide world that you may not say to me.”

“Thank you, Rafe dear; you are kind to help me in what I want. Rafe, I know you are not rich. Can you really afford to give me so valuable a present? My love, I fear lest my brother's taunt may have worried you.”

“How do you mean?” asked Rafe, for he hardly knew what to answer.

“Rafe, you will forgive me, but perhaps they”—and here she laid her hand on her bosom, wherein she had placed her lover's gift—“may come to more than you calculated, and indeed something cheaper will suit me as well.”

Rafe drew a long breath. He saw a way

of answering without lying and without committing himself to the truth.

"Betty dear," he said, "the buttons are already paid for, and with my own money—a part of my inheritance." Then, wishing to divert her thoughts, he started up and said—

"Come, I shall sing you a song," and forthwith burst out the following in a rich baritone voice—

"Let Gallants pledge in wine their loves
And all such other trumpery !
But faith ! not I—no toasts for me—
My Heart and I are company.

"In gory fields good fellows rot—
And all for love of Country !
No fields for me, save furrowed ones—
And my old Heart for company.

"Your loves and wars alike bring tears,
And naught care I to pump any !
My quiet laugh sufficeth well—
And my old Heart for company.

"And yet, and yet when wars were on
And frightened maids would run to me,
I never shirked the blows a jot
Or shunned the maidens' company.

"Perhaps my Heart remembers well,
Adds up and reads the sum to me,
And pleasure's stores are spread again
When bygone days are company.

"So pass I on my way—alone,
 Till Death shall sound his trump to me.
 Nor doubt I then my weary Heart
 Shall find him right good company!"

Despite Rafe's resolute bearing and the strong, masculine roundness of his voice, which is so comforting to a woman, Betty felt full of sadness as the last note of her lover's song died away. Looking at him through the dimness of her own eyes, she saw that some subtle emotion had so wrought upon him that his eyes too were full of tears. So she tried to comfort him—and succeeded. The rest of the evening was very sweetly and peacefully happy.

When he had said good-night, not in the ceremonious but in the usual fashion, Rafe Otwell took himself back to his chambers in the Temple, a man of about as desperate fortunes, in so far as the present and the immediate future were concerned, as any between London and Westminster.

It was still nearly two years to Betty's majority, and how Rafe was to live in the interim he did not know. The Law was ever a waiting profession, and the Services were denied him as he had no money and he could therefore only join in the humblest ranks;

moreover such would take him from Betty, the mere thought of which he could not endure. He had no knowledge of Commerce and no capital to embark in it. He had thoughts, desperate though they seemed, of asking the advice of the Alderman ; but the remembrance of the stern bearing of the latter made them seem chimerical, for the old gentleman had thought it right, as Betty's trustee, to always assume an additional gravity in his intercourse with the younger man. Moreover, the thought that if the trustees should know how really penniless he was they might forbid the marriage altogether, created a new fear. Rafe was not a fortune-hunter. He loved Betty dearly and truly, and he only regarded her fortune in so far that it might become a help or a bar to his happiness. Having turned in his mind over and over again every means of earning at least a living, and having brooded on the difficulty, day by day and through sleepless nights, he made up his mind that he would once more consult his kinsman.

When he made known to the great man his wish to see him, he received a courteous though curt summons, and on the afternoon of the same day was ushered into the spacious apartment where Sir Robert controlled the destinies

of England. He had evidently given some special orders, for on Rafe's entrance the two secretaries, who sat before masses of State papers, withdrew silently.

Sir Robert looked after them till he saw that the door was shut ; then he bowed to Rafe, smiled, and pointed to a chair and sat down himself. For a moment or two he eyed Rafe keenly, and then, leaning over, to his intense astonishment laid his hand on his shoulder—a piece of condescension and familiarity which he had never before even approached.

“Courage, kinsman,” he said kindly ; “it is not so bad as this. You look quite woe-begone ! 'Fore Gad, Lady Mary will want to see more sunshine, or the matter may not be so easy as I thought.”

Rafe felt a sort of paralysis creeping over him. Sir Robert had evidently taken it for granted that he had made up his mind to fall in with his scheme of marriage. He did not know how to get out of the difficulty, and so remained silent ; his want of moral courage had never stood him in worse stead. Walpole went on—

“You see, I have sent away my secretaries. This matter concerns you and me alone ; and let me tell you this : With such an alliance

your fortune may yet be a greater one than you think. You and I will be brought into very close relations, and many secrets of State, hidden—and of necessity most carefully—from men so young as you are, must become known to you. Knowledge is power, young man; and nowhere is it more patent than in the world of politics. I feared from the first that you had not sufficient ambition for public life; but I am glad to find that my fears were false. Moreover, I am personally well pleased that you have fallen in with my views, for there is none other of my kinsmen, distant or near, that I could count on for such an alliance. Without you one of the greatest strokes of my life cannot be accomplished. You see I speak frankly—more frankly perhaps than a statesman in my position should speak; but inasmuch as you are to fill, and very shortly, a high office and one in close confidence with myself, it is well that you should know it at once."

Here Rafe, who found that every word uttered was putting him in a more difficult position, tried to speak. He felt that a confidence so given and unjustified by facts would turn a useful friend into an implacable enemy.

“Oh! sir,” he began, “your ideas of me are not correct; indeed they are not.”

Sir Robert smiled. “The ingenuousness of your youth palliates the folly of your self-depreciation. When you enter the political world, my dear young friend, you must put such modesty in the lumber-room with your childish toys. Take all you can get, and ask for more. Never thank any one as though you were satisfied. Be willing to assume the responsibility of the whole Government. That is the statesman’s attitude in these troublesome times! Now to business. Here is your appointment to a secretaryship of State subject to his Majesty’s approval, and only waiting to be dated. For this you must have a seat in the House. This shall be done within the week, and then, Mr. Secretary, I shall have the honour of introducing to the Lady Mary, under the best auspices, my young kinsman Rafe Otwell, Member of Parliament—the rising hope of the Whig party. Thenceforward your fortune rests in your own hands!” Having so spoken Sir Robert leaned back in his chair, holding his finger-tips together with an indescribable air of friendly patronage.

Rafe now began to grow desperate—in fact so desperate that he straightway abandoned

the idea of asking for a more modest post. He grew red and stammered, and altogether so bore himself that the shrewd statesman guessed his conclusion, though not the reason of it. Standing up he said, with withering sarcasm—

“Have I then been so mistaken in you that I have told you what I would have told no other living man? I thought there was better metal in you than I find there is!”

As a matter of fact he had not been mistaken as to the metal of the man. Rafe had, like other young men, his ambitions and adaptability; and but for the fact of his engagement to Betty, Sir Robert would have had little difficulty in engaging him to such an enterprise as he contemplated. His very lack of moral courage would have been an aid to the ambitious statesman, who would have moulded him to his will. For answer Rafe blurted out the truth straightway—

“Sir, I have every desire to meet your wishes in all ways I can. Indeed I am in a desperate plight, and unless I can get some place soon I am ruined; but I cannot marry the lady you had destined for me, as already I am betrothed to another lady.”

Without a word Sir Robert rang the bell

that stood on his table and a servant appeared. But in the instant a new thought had come to the statesman, and instead of ordering him to show Rafe out he simply gave a trivial direction as to the time at which his chair was to be in waiting. Sir Robert's idea was a wise one enough, for it struck him that he had to a degree placed himself in the young man's power, and he knew well how, had the circumstances been his own, he would have availed himself of such a knowledge. This young gentleman should perhaps be dealt with gently! He should be encouraged to hope for awhile, so that his intentions should have time to manifest themselves harmlessly; and then, if need be, he could be shelved by presentation to some minor appointment. It was not for nothing that the English Minister had fixed the Civil List on the occasion of the Hanoverian succession at £700,000 per annum.

Sir Robert walked up and down the room two or three times, and then stopping opposite Rafe again regarded him intently. This scrutiny seemed in some measure to satisfy him, for his face cleared. After some more turns he stopped and said, with a seeming geniality—

"I will not deny that this unexpected attitude of yours has thwarted my plans gravely. However, we must see what can be done. You said that without office you would be a ruined man; I presume therefore that you are without friends—of course I mean friends able to help you!"

"That is so."

"Then you must in the meantime let me arrest the impending ruin—from this cause at any rate." And then and there he wrote an order on his banker for the sum of one hundred guineas. As he handed this to Rafe, he said—

"Now, of course, it is understood between us that your acceptance of the money binds you, were you not already bound in honour, to keep absolutely secret the plan of your advancement which I broached to you in ignorance of your inability to concur with my views. I shall try if I can obtain for you some post to meet your permanent wants; but I need not tell you that such posts as suit quite neutral persons who can receive from a party but yield nothing to it are few in number and are much sought after. You must husband the sum I have had the pleasure of lending you, for months must elapse before

you can be suited. Indeed, I fear that there is little hope within a year." Then he rang the bell again; the servant appeared and Rafe was dismissed with a wave of the hand.

As the door closed Sir Robert sank into his seat with a smile upon his face such as is not as a rule calculated, if seen by those causing it, to beget confidence, and murmured to himself—

"We shall see! we shall see! A little pinching of the shoe, my dear young kinsman! A few jovial friends now and then, just to ensure a fair amount of debt, and these I shall make it my care to have provided for you; a proper spell of waiting and hoping—just long enough to make the existing young lady, whoever she may be—and for my part I don't want to know for I am freer to act without such knowledge—seem a rock ahead in life. And then another chance. Lady Mary need not despair of a young husband yet!"

That day Rafe went down to Chelsea and found Betty sweeter and more amiable than ever. She was very grave and evidently had something on her mind. When it was growing towards the twilight she asked him to come for a walk by the river bank, and then, when they were quite away from the possibility of interruption, she opened the subject at heart.

"Rafe dear, you know that you and I are to be husband and wife." With a man's, and especially a young man's, wish to seize the occasion for an amatory episode, he made as though to kiss her; but she motioned such an idea aside and took his hand in hers and looked him in the face.

"No, Rafe!" she said, "I don't mean that; that is all true already. I mean that whatever affects me affects you, and whatever troubles you troubles me."

"Yes, Betty, that is so."

"I have been thinking, Rafe, that you may have many expenses to meet. You will forgive me, I know dear, for speaking of such matters, but they must be spoken of sometimes! Must they not?"

"There is nothing, Betty, that you may not speak of to me."

"I feel that, dear. Now, of course, when we are married"—here he squeezed her hand; she blushed but did not withdraw it—"all I have will be yours; and then I shall be easy in my mind, for I shall know that you have all that you want. But I sometimes think that until then you may have occasion for more money than you have at your command. I know, dear, that you are expecting a place, but

until that place comes you must live, and living is expensive for young men. Oh yes, I know. Robert proves that to me pretty well; and I want you to feel how glad I should be, and how proud, if you will let me do as I wish. You know my guardians allow me ever so much more money than I can use. Oh, Rafe, won't you help me out? Don't let me have to say such things all myself. You know what I mean."

"I do know what you mean, Betty, and I know that you are a little angel and that I shall never be able to be good enough for you. Now let me tell you something. To-day I saw Sir Robert, and he has promised me a post as soon as he can get one for me; and in earnest of it he has given me this"—and opening his pocket-book he showed her Sir Robert's order on his bankers.

Rafe's weakness was here again manifested. He hoped and intended to make the money last till his marriage; and strong in the security of his self-belief, wished to hide from Betty the disagreeable truth of Sir Robert's proposal. After a pause Betty said—

"But, dear, this will not last for ever; and indeed, Rafe, I feel almost jealous of Sir Robert. He can give you what he likes——"

"But, sweetheart, this is an advance."

"And that is all that I propose."

"But, dear, how can I explain? I cannot take a gift. I am a gentleman! This is a loan, and must be returned. It is to last me if needs be a whole year, until I get my place."

Betty's logical power was not sufficient to see the fine distinction which her lover drew. One part of it only was to her as clear daylight—"I am a gentleman, and cannot take a gift!" This touched some subtle chord of honour in her own breast, and she was glad and proud that her lover had so spoken. So she simply said—

"I am so glad, Rafe, that my fears were groundless. But you will forgive, will you not? It was because I love you that I spoke."

For answer Rafe simply lifted her hand and kissed it. Then they went back to supper, and Rafe was in his heart glad that he did not have any occasion to say more of his interview with the great Minister, or he would have had to keep a secret from Betty.

Thus he persuaded himself; for he kept the secret from her all the same. It was the appearance of keeping a secret from her that he dreaded, and not the fact.

Time went on happily enough with both the young people for a few months. They both had hope and they loved each other; and under such conditions life goes smoothly enough and evils that are not vital are not hard to bear. It was at this time of quiet, easy-going prosperity that the difference of the two natures became most apparent. Betty developed new and finer phases of character. Always thoughtful, she now became blessed with a sweet gravity—that gravity which so becomes the wife potential, the one whose self is forgotten in the needs of others. She also became more tolerant. True the stern rule of right and wrong which she had set for herself was never relaxed, and the standard of Duty was ever before her, her pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. She more than once sent money unasked to Robert, and when his brief career was cut short by the rapier of his antagonist she had all the debts which he owed, and they were many, paid without ever even appearing in the matter. At this sad time Rafe was of much comfort to her, and the truly generous and manly side of his character never came out better than in the way he spoke of the dead man and did all in his power to mitigate the grief of his half-sister.

But the period of rest or quiescence told not favourably on Rafe's character. The need of thought and the fear of consequences being out of the range of his immediate vision, he began to get more careless. His imagination began to run away with him; everything was of such rosy colour that it seemed hard or impossible to believe that it could change. He did not husband his small means as he should have done; and one day he woke to the fact that of Walpole's loan not a fifth part remained. Then he grew careful, but not quite in a satisfactory way. True that he husbanded his resources; but it was only ready money that he was careful about. He got into debt and found, as others do, that debt is an expensive process and that one does not get full money's worth for the promise of money—that it is not possible to go minutely into questions of cost when we are not prepared to pay. Thus it happened that when, some three months after his last interview, he got a summons from his powerful kinsman he was down almost to his last shilling.

The interview was not altogether a pleasant one. Sir Robert was much more courteous than on the former occasion. He asked him a number of questions as to his prospects, and

seemed generally to look on him as a man on whom time was exerting a requisite pressure. Rafe felt this and it galled him ; but he did not dare to find fault, for his affairs were now in such a plight that his only hope was in the patronage of his powerful kinsman. He felt that he had in his selfish carelessness thrown away the advantage which had been put into his hand. Sir Robert gently, and as if casually, alluded to the fact that the Lady Mary's hand was still unwon. He might have added "unsought," but this excess of candour was no part of his programme. He very soon made up his mind that Rafe was not yet at all events ripe for his scheme ; and after mentioning the circumstance of his former debt in such a way as to impress his hearer of iron possibilities in his nature if he should be a hostile creditor, sat down and drew a draft on his banker for fifty guineas. This he handed to Rafe with all protestations of goodwill.

Rafe was at first a little more careful with this money ; but very soon the logic of his careless nature began to assert itself. This second rescue was unexpected ; therefore other unexpected things might happen. What can be more fallacious than to depend on, and expect, the unexpected ! It never occurred to

him that the unexpected things might happen in opposite direction to his wish. Once or twice he brought trifling presents to Betty, little inexpensive things which she received with delight, frankly telling him that she was glad to see he was prudent. It is always a delight to a woman to get presents from the man she loves; and these things, since unaccompanied by any fear, made Betty very happy.

So another couple of months elapsed; and then a great temptation began to assail Rafe. His means were down at the lowest ebb. His credit was running low and he feared daily, hourly, lest wind of such should get to Betty or her guardians. He had a sort of feeling that Sir Robert had him in his power and meant to mould him to his will. He was now so tangled in various ways that he could see no opening anywhere. Betty had offered him her purse, but he had told her that a gentleman could not accept a gift. Sir Robert held out hopes of all his ambition could dream of. Debt pressed him on every side, and a debtors' prison was not a place to be yearned for in the early days of King George. Such legal study as he had had taught him that much. What if, after all, he should be com-

pelled to fall into Sir Robert's plans? It would be well enough except for one thing—Betty. No! he could not bear the thought of parting from her or of giving her up. Should he go and tell her his dilemma? He knew well that she would help him and forgive him. But then such would involve his telling her a whole host of other matters which he had kept concealed, and so he might lose her esteem and appear in her eyes as one who did not tell—or who hesitated to tell—the truth. His pride, or vanity, would not allow of this.

Whilst thus pondering he got a hurried line from Sir Robert asking him to call on him, this time at his private house. He went at once and was kept waiting for some time in the ante-room. During his wait many persons kept coming and going, and he could easily see that there was some excitement in the air. At last he was summoned, and found Sir Robert alone in the midst of a chaos of torn papers. The Minister motioned him to take a seat, and then plunged into his subject—

“I have sent for you, not this time on my own account but on yours. To-day I send in my seals”—Rafe's heart sank within him; his hopes were gone—“but I have still a thought for you. You can answer me ‘yes’ or ‘no’

just as you wish, the choice is now your own. If you will choose to wed the Lady Mary your future, whatever may happen, is secured ; and if it should be that I return again to power the highest honours can be yours. Quick ! make your choice, for time presses. If you say 'yes' I shall aid you with my purse to make a fit and proper appearance for the sake of our kinship. If not——" he paused, and Rafe, with all the firmness he could muster, answered—

"Not !"

"In that case, my young friend, you may go to the devil. I don't suppose he is so busy to-day as I am, and may have time to make terms to suit you. Good-day !"

CHAPTER V

IN THE DEAD WATCH OF THE NIGHT

SEVERAL weeks elapsed before Rafe again called at Cheyne Walk. Betty got a letter from him saying that he had to go to the North on some family business, but that so soon as he returned he would come and gladden his eyes with the sight of her sweet face ; with much other matter of the same kind, tedious to third parties. The early Georgian love-letter was of much the same tone and tendency as that of earlier—and of later—years ; and its recipient gave it the same sweet and trustful welcome as was usual before—and after—that epoch.

Whilst Rafe was away Betty busied herself about household matters and in works of charity ; began to think of her housekeeping when her majority should have come, and other things should have happened. So the

time sped by quickly enough, and it did not seem so very long to look back upon when Rafe appeared at the door. Betty flew to meet him, and no lover, however exacting, need have been disappointed with the warmth of her greeting. When they reached the drawing-room, a measure of decorum having been restored and they holding each other's hands, Betty held him at arms' length and gazed at him lovingly. He seemed taller and more robust, but there was something about him, she could hardly say what it was, that disappointed her. All his timidity in her presence seemed gone, and there was something boisterous—reckless—she knew not what to call it—which certainly she had never before noticed. All this was, of course, vague and shadowy. To say she thought it, would be hardly correct, for the idea was spontaneous and evanescent. It was rather a food for afterthought than thought itself. But whether such thoughts were on solid base or baseless as the air, they did not disturb Betty's happiness. Rafe was home again, and she was content! She half hoped that after a while he would tell her something of his journey, or of why he went away, and where he went to and what he saw, and whom he met, and his adventures—for of

course he had adventures. But Rafe did not touch on such topics, and Betty feared to ask him lest he should think it inquisitive to speak of things that he himself had not thought right to mention.

Had she had a mother it would have been different, for the mother would have known the wishes of her child and would have so wrought the conversation that the betrothed girl's most natural curiosity should have been satisfied. As the evening wore on there were several little shocks to Betty's delicate trust, her very ignorance making shadowy fears. Before he left Rafe put his hand in his pocket and took out a little box, which he handed to Betty and told her he hoped she would value it for his sake. Betty took it with joy in her face and kissed him, before Aunt Priscilla too, and told him how sweet it was of him to remember her when he was away. But when she opened the box and found a little pair of diamond buckles lying on the white silk that lined the box, her face grew very grave, and she said, in a voice not without reproof—

“No, Rafe dear, I cannot accept so valuable a present. You have not got your place yet, and it would ill become me who love you to be the means or the motive of such extravagance.

Dear, you will let me keep this box, will you not? But take these," and she handed him back the buckles. He did not attempt to force them upon her, but put them in his pocket with a light laugh that somewhat jarred upon her.

When he had taken leave she ran up to her own room and, raising a tiny corner of the curtain, watched her lover as he walked away. To her surprise he did not go in the usual direction towards Swan Walk so as to gain the King's Road, where he was accustomed to leave his horse, but walked with head down towards the river bank.

He stood there a moment and then put his hand into his pocket, and taking out something therefrom hurled it with an angry gesture far into the river. Betty saw a white flash in the moonlight as the water was struck, and then as Rafe strode angrily away she dropped the curtain and slipped away quickly and went to bed in the dark. With her head under the bedclothes she sobbed herself to sleep.

Rafe came every day that week to see her, and as the time wore on he came back nearer and nearer to his old self. There was still a certain masculine dominance in his manner; but to this she did not object. What woman ever did object to such a quality in her lover? It was

sweet to be asked to do things, but in such manner that the doing was expected as a matter of course; but sweeter still to be told rather than asked to do anything, but in a way which did not wound.

Things seemed to have prospered somehow of late with Rafe. His clothes were of the very finest, though this alone was not strange, for he was always somewhat of a dandy. But he now had a barge and a wherry all of his own—very spruce ones too, with his men in his own livery; and when he rode down, which was pretty often, he was always splendidly mounted. These things gave Betty many a pang, for she feared he might have been getting into debt or gambling, and either supposition was pain to her. She did not like to broach the subject, but fondly hoped that some day, not far off, Rafe would take her into his full confidence. But as days and weeks wore on it became evident to her that Rafe had no such intention. Sometimes he would be absent for two or three days, and when he came there would be something of that new self-assertive manner which she partly disliked and partly feared; but after a few days this would all wear away and he became more the old Rafe again.

One day Alderman Fenton came to drink a

dish of tea with Betty and Aunt Priscilla, and afterwards took his cousin out for a walk along by the river bank. Here, after some preliminary hum-ing and ha-ing, for the subject was a difficult one, he began to speak of Rafe and his doings.

"My dear," he said, "I thought I'd better come and speak to you first, for I feared I might make some trouble if I did the wrong thing. You won't be angry with me, Betty, will you?"

Betty's heart sank within her, for she dreaded some confirmation of her fears; nevertheless she answered lightly—

"I promise you, cousin, that whatever it is you tell me, I shall not be angry with you. I know that whatever you think for me is out of your kindness."

"That's true, Betty, my dear. Quite true! I have no chick or child of my own, and all the care I have in the world is for you. Now I want to talk about this young gentleman of yours."

"About Rafe, cousin?" she interrupted.

The old gentleman pinched her cheek as he answered—

"Who else, puss? There's only one that I know of!"

"Or I either!" she answered demurely, with a sweet, half shy, half arch, and wholly adorable upward look at him.

"Well! I have been minded many times of late to go and talk with him about matters. You see, from what I am told, he's taken to more extravagant ways than he had; keeps more company, and ruffles about with all the young bloods in the town; boats, horses, and all the rest of it; and draws his sword as readily as may be. Wherever there is money being spent there he is, spending with the best of them. Nay, he seems to keep all companies; for he sits also in the taverns and coffee-houses with the merchants and adventurers and talks much with them. He is quite clever too; and that is part of the pity of it, for with his knowledge of what is going to happen, gathered from statesmen and secretaries and young gallants and old merchants, he might make a fortune in no time. But alack! he prefers to royster with the bloods of the town."

"I am very sorry, cousin, to hear this," faltered poor Betty with her face as white as a sheet.

"And not more sorry than I am to tell you, my dear," said the old gentleman, more moved than he thought possible by the sight of the

maid's silent distress, "and if it lay with me such ill tidings would never come a-nigh you ; but I have thought the matter over for some time, and I have concluded that the least harmful thing I could do would be to consult you. You see, my dear," he added confidentially, "young men of his kind are not like us plain city folk, and have their own proud ideas and their own quick-tempered ways ; and as for us, we don't quite understand either of them. I'm often minded to think that the sweeping out of the shop which we have had to do in our 'prentice days is a mighty chastening exercise for the spirit. It somehow makes us think more of our work and less of ourselves, than the breeding of these young gallants teaches them."

After a little pause the old gentleman went on, but very gently and suppressing all his personal feelings, for he was touched deeply by the maid's white face—

"So the other day I made opportunity to speak with him ; and as I thought so old a man as I might take such a liberty with a younger one, I began by offering, though I fear but clumsily, to be of such service as an old man and a London merchant might with his advice or his purse."

Here Betty interrupted a moment by an eloquent, grateful look and a squeeze of her hand ; the old man smiled and spoke more cheerfully as he went on—

“ At the first, my dear, I did think that he was grateful, for there was a look in his face that you would have loved to see there ; but an instant after it was lost in a very sad look—a white, sad look, my dear, that made me think that he has some trouble that he is bearing all by himself. My heart opened to him as though he was a boy of my own. It was partly for your sake, Betty, and I was in hopes that hereafter he and I might be more to each other. But in an instant after he broke out into a hard laugh that dried me up like a touch of the east wind and he said, as coolly and as insolently as ever I heard words spoke, but, my dear, with all his own elegance of word and manner : ‘ Thank you much, good sir, but when I want advice or money I shall not fail to apprise you of the fact.’ I suppose he saw my disappointment in my face, for after a pause he said : ‘ Do not think me rude or ungrateful, dear sir, but in such matters I am apt to be proud and hard. I have so long had to advise myself and to provide for my wants in my own way, that I am perhaps too wishful to stand alone

and to continue in my own course.' And so, Betty, sure I am that the young man has some trouble that he wraps up in his pride away from the eyes of others; and so I am come to advise with you."

Both were silent for a little while. Betty had now taken the old gentleman's arm and was leaning on it heavily enough. Poor child! her knees seemed to have grown weak, and it was a comfort to her to have something to lean on in her distress. Presently she said—

"What can I do, cousin? What can I do?"

"I thought that so gay and gallant a young gentleman would listen with more patience to so sweet a young lady as you are, and whom he loves so fondly"—Betty was grateful for this, though she doubted the Alderman's sincerity in making the statement, and smiled at him as he went on—"than he did to an old merchant like myself. These young bloods seem to forget that we are men like themselves, and that we feel passion even if we do not show it, or wear swords with the intention of using them on our kind."

Betty could not but feel that the successful man of business had a little class jealousy rankling in his mind, and somehow it raised

Rafe in her esteem. She did not, of course, show any of the feeling ; indeed, she was too distressed to show any feeling but the one—her concern regarding Rafe. Alderman Fenton went on—

“ You know, my dear, that when your engagement was told us, we trustees made inquiries, and found that Mr. Otwell had realised his patrimony and had come into the Temple ; so now when he spends money in the way he does I cannot but think that there is something wrong. There is so much gambling nowadays, and so many young men like him fling away their fortunes over the dice that maybe he picks up some of what their folly loses. In any case it is but a poor thing ; and if it be so, we had better look to it lest the happiness of your life be thrown away. A gambler, my dear, is but a sorry mate for such a girl as you.”

Again Betty's heart seemed to stop. Here was almost a confirmation of her worst fears, but, hoping against hope, she pleaded once more for her lover—

“ Oh ! I trust this is not so. It cannot be ! May not there be some other way, cousin, by which Rafe can get such money as he spends ? ”

"There may," said the merchant. "He can borrow money. There are sharks who prey on the needs of youngsters like him, and lend a little that they may take back a deal. But the debtors' prison lies that way. Nay! Betty, my dear, do not be frightened! Sit ye down awhile. There, dear heart, you are all right now. Why, rather than see him in a prison I would for your sake pay away half my fortune. I fear, my dear, that I have done wrong to tell you so much; but, truth to tell, I did not know which way to turn."

Before Betty's eyes had all along been the face of her lover as he had refused her offer of help: "I cannot take a gift; I am a gentleman!" She thought that she understood Rafe's pride, and how it dominated him in his interview with the Alderman, in whose eyes he wished, of course, for her sake, to appear at his best; and in her eyes his pride was his best. So she answered the old man very tenderly—

"Indeed, cousin, you have done quite right. I will find out these things direct on the next occasion that may be; and then I will consult with you. You will forgive me being so—so weak, will you not? I do not feel very strong lately. I think I want change of air, and shall

presently go to Much Hadam and rest awhile. The air there always seems to do me good."

"My dear girl, I am sure you want a change. But you must be careful how you go; these quiet times seem to have grown a new crop of highwaymen, and but few of our roads are safe. Indeed, the Cambridge road seems infested, for of late there have been many daring robberies; and when you go through Essex and Hertford you must be more than careful."

"Oh, I don't fear highwaymen, cousin. It is not people like me whom they stop; they prefer your rich city folk whose purses are like those of the Fortunate Prince!"

Thus they talked and rallied each other, and came back to the house in a somewhat less unhappy frame of mind; but Betty's face was still white and drawn.

It was nearly a week after this evening that Rafe paid Betty a visit; and then he was in one of his most aggressive moods. His under eyelids looked somewhat swollen, and with a pang Betty came to the conclusion that he had taken a part in some drinking bout. Drunkenness did not in those days inspire such disgust in refined womankind as it did later on; but still the change in

Rafe seemed all downward and not upward. Betty, however, was very resolute when her mind was made up, and notwithstanding that Rafe's mood was not one she would have chosen in which to attack him upon the subject of his faults, she steadfastly adhered to her intention. At the earliest moment when they were alone she began her task—

“Rafe, I want you to tell me something. You must not make light of it, for I am very serious and have of late had much unquiet in my mind about you.”

Rafe's face turned a sort of livid green; he answered, however, boldly enough, although the ring of his voice was loud rather than true: “All right, Betty dear! Go on; I am all attention.”

Face to face with the difficulty, Betty's hardihood began to melt away. Her heart beat fast, and she had that trembling of the knees that had of late come to her on such occasions. Nevertheless she did not falter, but went on with outward calm—

“It is because I love you, Rafe! Remember, dear, that we are soon to be married, and I shall then have a right to ask you such questions. You will let me forestall that time, won't you?”

"What questions?" Rafe's voice was rather hollow.

"I want you to tell me, dear, two things. I know you have recently been spending much money, and I know you had lately but very little. Do you gamble, Rafe? or are you in debt?"

The words were spoken with a shy, sweet sincerity that should have melted the heart of any man. It was all out now, and the hardihood was quite gone. Betty felt it was well she was sitting down and could lean back, or else she might have fallen to the floor. To her surprise and joy Rafe laughed, though she did not quite like the tone of the laugh, and said heartily and with a sort of boisterous buoyancy—

"Neither the one nor the other, little one. See here! that for my owing money!" and he opened a pocket-book and showed her quite a handful of gold and bankers' orders. "And as for gambling, I swear I have not touched the dice since I knew you."

Betty drew a long breath, and was just beginning to follow up these answers with another question as to where he got the money he spent; but he saw it coming and stopped it with an irritated protest—

"More questions! Why, what can have come over you, Betty? You used not to be like this. Come! you think too much of my affairs, and the thinking has robbed the roses from your cheeks. As a punishment I here promise and vow that I shall not answer you any more questions concerning money till I can hold you in my arms and call you mine."

"I am yours already, Rafe!" said Betty simply; but she turned the conversation and asked no more questions.

When Rafe was going away that night he told Betty that it would be some days before he could come again as he had to await certain dispatches coming through Portsmouth. "A private affair," he added, seeing new questions in her eyes. So Betty said good-night and went to bed, hoping that some day Rafe would give her all his confidence.

A few days after this the Alderman paid a visit to Cheyne Walk. He was concerned about Betty's health, and wanted to cheer her up a bit. So he paid a long visit, staying for supper, and told her all the news of the town. How the new waterworks of the New River and the Lea were progressing, and how good this was for her, since her trustee held for her some adventurers' shares in the under-

taking, and of the great moneys being spent on the works and the many men employed. He explained to her how every Saturday a great sum had to be sent down from London to pay the men; but as they feared the paymaster might be traced and robbed the Board had determined to send the next consignment of money on the Friday evening to Ware, and to send it by a roundabout way through Bishop's Stortford so as to avoid the danger, and by a messenger who could not be suspected. In fact he hinted that the messenger would be disguised as a woman. Then seeing that such talk upset her a little he turned the conversation, and, so well as he could, he told her of the new fashions; for he had made it his business to have a chat with the Lady Mayoress only the day before, so that he would be properly learned in such matters. And then he told her of all the Court gossip that had reached the city, and of the great marriages arranged, and all the presents given; of the quarrels amongst the bloods, and who had fought whom, and the thousand and one little pieces of everyday gossip which were so much to quiet folk in the days before newspapers. Finally he told her of the great robbery two days before, when the coach from Ports-

mouth was stopped at Ockham with great treasure being brought up to London from my Lord Baltimore for the Southern Department. That it was a most daring robbery, for the highwayman was alone and rode so boldly and carried himself so fearlessly that all in the coach were awed and yielded to him without firing a shot. Then he went on to tell her how the robber had left the coachman and the guard and all the passengers bound, so that it was not until many hours afterwards that they were discovered and released by the down mail. That the authorities were on the alert, and that the hue and cry was out for the robber, and that if he were caught it would be a sorry case for him. And as he told her the story Betty's heart went out in thankfulness that no lives were lost; and above all one life most dear to her, for it might have been that Rafe was in that very coach. Had it so been, then for sure the robber had not got off full-handed or without a fight for it. And as she thought of her lover's peril she grew so pale, and as she thought of his courage—for could she ever forget that day on the river!—she grew so rosy again that her elderly cousin rubbed his hands with delight at his success as a story-teller, and said to her—

"Hey Betty, my lass, but you've got white and red like the apple and the candle twirling at Halloween. You take such things too much to heart, my dear. It can't be good for you to be so earnest over things that don't touch you or yours."

So Betty, she being a little shamefaced about her great love which made such fears, was silent about Rafe, and thanked her cousin for all his kind interest in her and for all his entertaining conversation, and bade him come again soon. The stern old Alderman, when his carriage came round for him, rode back to town again, pleased that he had come, but sad at heart that he had not just such another daughter to gladden his hearth and to keep his heart and memory green.

When next Rafe came he was in great spirits, and spoke of the time, drawing closer, when he was to call Betty his own. There was a jubilation about him which was infectious, and Betty's spirits rose with his; when they were alone she sat at the spinet and played and sang the sweet old airs that she loved; but he sat very silent the while. The dusk came on, and the shadows of the evening fell heavier and heavier. At the spinet Betty still sat, with her white dress showing through the

gathering gloom ; Rafe, on a low chair, bent his head down on his knees and lost himself in thought, so that when Betty's hands moved slower and slower over the keys and her voice died away in a deep, low chord in which spoke the happiness and the hope of her heart, he never stirred. Then Betty came closer to him and laid her hand on his head. He started up suddenly, like one who is hunted and stands at his defence, with an oath on his lips and his hand instinctively seeking his sword-hilt. Betty was somewhat afraid, but her fears were laid when she saw that his cheeks were wet with tears. She would like to have said something very tender and sweet to him, but he brushed the tears aside so angrily and seemed so savage with himself—though not with her—for his forgetfulness, that she thought it better not to take notice of his emotion. But he was not the same Rafe any more that evening. His buoyancy became boisterous, though of an indifferent kind, and Betty closed the spinet ; she sang no more that night. Before he left Rafe told her that he would come again in four days—that he could not come before as he had an engagement that must take him towards Cambridge, but that when this engagement was over he hoped to come oftener ;

every day, till the time would come when they should part no more. Altogether the evening, despite its unpleasant episode, was a very, very happy one for Betty, and when going to bed she remained a long time on her knees in thankfulness and prayer, and fell asleep thinking of Rafe and the coming time.

What Betty dreamed that night she could never remember. It seemed to be that her sleeping thoughts had at first been happy enough, but that such dreams as she had were not all about Rafe. Suddenly, however, she found herself broad awake, sitting up in bed with her hair damp with terror and a scream frozen on her lips. It was as though all her vague thoughts of months past had suddenly become clear—that her fears had found their source, and that henceforth there was nothing more left in the world that could give her new pain. And that source—Rafe!

“Rafe!”

She understood now his determination; his growing restlessness; whence came the money he lavished so freely. She pieced together the fragments of her fears on each occasion when her lover had gone away, and when he had returned. She understood now the motive of that visit to the North, and of that “private

affair" which had taken him along the Portsmouth road at such a fatal time; and with a terror and pain unspeakable she realised the import of that coming journey towards Cambridge when the treasure of the New River Company was to be taken to Ware by way of Bishop's Stortford which was on the Cambridge road. All had come to her as if revealed in a moment, as one sees through after years of blindness the figures standing stark in the last-seen terrible glare of the lightning-flash. She wondered how she could ever have been so blind as not to have seen all long ago; for there was no doubt now, and it seemed to her, in the anguish of her excited mind, that there never had been any.

She would have given worlds to have been able to confide her troubles to any one; but such a thing was impossible—no human being must ever know. The horror and the shame must be hers alone; and further evil must be averted at all cost. There was no doubt in her mind; no flickering ash of a hope. No voice of the unseen could persuade her that her conclusion was untrue. "Would to God it were!" she thought, in a blind anguish. Ah no! it was all so clear, as though written in fire on the wall by that same hand which of

old had swept the gaiety from Belshazzar's feast.

Betty rose and knelt beside her bed. She threw her white arms stretched out in front of her and hid her face in the snowy napery. She prayed till her eyes seemed full of fire and she thought that her heart would break with anguish. Claspings her hands above her head she looked up as though her vision could pierce through the roof and the sky beyond so that God Himself might see her anguish and have pity on her and send her help. But these wild bursts of passionate prayer gave no sensible relief; her arms fell by her side, and her sweet face lay on the white counterpane like snow on snow, till the light of the morning stealing in through the curtains of her chamber window caught the beautiful Greek lines of her profile and lit the deep, earnest eyes with the resolve of action that comes with the waking day.

Betty did not realise it then, but perhaps for all she knew her silent cry of anguish did pierce through the roof and sky and come as a sweeter gift than any burnt offering before the Throne of the Most High. The burnt offering of charred flesh is poor indeed before the renunciation of the soul that pain has burned

and purified and made a worthy gift to the Creator of mankind!

“Thou delightest not in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt Thou not despise.”

CHAPTER VI

PREPARATIONS FOR THE JOURNEY

IN the long vigil of that night Betty's course was resolved upon. She seemed to see her duty clear before her. She would go forth herself and reclaim the man she loved—the man whose heart seemed to beat in her own breast and who carried with him all her love. Unworthy though he had proved, she loved him still; and as even he had given her life to her, so if need be should that life be given for him in return. She thought over the whole matter; and as she thought, the way seemed to open to her. Every detail of the coming trial rose before her mind, so that ultimately she was satisfied as to where she should go, what she should do, and how she should bear herself so as to keep her purpose hidden.

It was now the morning of Wednesday, and no time was to be lost. When she came down to breakfast her aunt noticed how pale she was and was much concerned for her. As a rule Betty did not yield to small ills but turned them aside and battled through them in her own quiet way; but to-day she acquiesced in the alarm of her aunt. The latter said presently—

“You must have change of air, Betty. I will write to my sister at Much Hadam and tell her to prepare for us; and next week we will go there to stay for a month or two.”

To which Betty replied—

“Oh! Aunt Priscilla, I have been longing to see the dear old house and the trees and all. I know it will do me so much good. I want to go at once; let us go to-day.”

“Lord-a-mercy child!” said the elder lady, “how can we go at once, when I have arranged for Monday to have the painters here to choose the colours for the repainting?”

“Then let me go, aunt! I am sick to go.”

“How could you go alone, child?”

“Why, aunt,”—and Betty smiled—“it is only a part of a day’s ride. I shall take Robin with me, and shall stay the night with Cousin Hester at Finsbury Square. I can then do

some shopping, and go in the morning to Much Hadam."

"I fear to let you go all alone, my child. Remember all these terrible things of footpads and highwaymen, that have been going on of late."

"Not more than usual, aunt! Those wicked folk have never ceased their ways that I have heard tell of. But I have no fear of footpads or highwaymen, and we go an open way with many travellers to Bishop's Stortford. Thence it is only a step, and through byways where it is never worth a highwayman's while to stop. He would starve for all the travellers there!" Aunt Priscilla was not convinced; but she saw no way to an effective answer, so she said—

"Well, as you will, child! But when would you go?"

"I thought in the morning."

"Dear me! dear me! but that leaves little time to prepare."

"But, aunt, I want to go! My mind is made up, and it will fret me if I am disappointed."

This settled the matter. Aunt Priscilla looked at the sweet, pale face, and came over and kissed her, and said—

"Please God, dear, the change will do you good. You shall have your wish, and go in the

morning," and she hurried off to consult with Abigail as to the preparation of Betty's valise.

Though she had conciliated her aunt, Betty was not yet free from domestic obstruction—Abigail had still to be reckoned with ; but this she expected and was prepared for. With the freedom and directness of an old servant, Abigail entered on her task. She burst into the room, almost at the charge, and began—

"What's all this nonsense, Miss, that Miss Priscilla tells me about your going to Much Hadam all by yourself, and all at once, like this, without a stitch of clothes to your back ready, and not so much as a valise even aired ! What are things coming to, I wonder?—though why should I wonder, when young ladies nowadays do just as they like and as their mothers wouldn't have ventured to have done in my time? and why should you keep such a thing in your mind away from the nurse that loved and reared you and took you from the arms of your dear dead mother and did for you ever since? And now you put this on her that she don't know no more of your movements and intentions than the maids themselves. I'm astonished at you, Miss Betty ! That I am, sure and true ; and sorry I am this day !" and the good soul burst out into tears,

refusing for a while to be comforted. Betty had let her run on till she had said her say, for this she knew to be not merely the wisest but the only plan. Now she made her answer in her own way. The beginning was purely pacific. She went over to Abigail and put her arms round her and nestled close to her, and with her own pocket-handkerchief wiped away her tears. This Abigail resented at the first, and then wouldn't allow, saying sobbingly that she wasn't worthy to have her eyes dried by her young mistress—a young lady that was so great that she couldn't see any differ betwixt the maids and them that had to keep them in order. But Betty persevered, and the summer shower was soon past. Then Betty made her sit down, and sat on her knee and asked her if she remembered when she, Betty, was a little child and used to come and sit on her, Abigail's, knee and be comforted. So what could the old woman do but hug her close to her, and tell her again how well she recalled those days? And then, remembering to be depressed at something, she added that such times were all past now, and that young children had grown up to be fine ladies, and made as though to put her off her knees and to rise respectfully—but all the time holding

her tighter than ever. So Betty put her face against hers and said—

“Abigail, I am a little child again, and I want to go away in the morning. Long ago, when I wanted anything and was denied it, I came to you ; and you never denied me. And now when I want to go in the morning, and to go peacefully, for I am feeling ill and in low spirits, and will be miserable if I leave you all discontented behind me, I ask you, Abigail, to help me again ! You must help me, dear, and cheer me up. Look at me, Abigail, and let my old nurse say if I am not ill and do not want a change.” So Abigail looked, and suddenly caught her in her arms and told her how her poor, pale face made her miserable ; and that she should go away that very hour if she wished it, if she, Abigail, had to work her fingers to the very bone to enable her to do so. And so the old accord was established, and one more willing heart and two more willing hands aided in all love in furthering Betty’s wishes.

All that day Betty went as one in a dream—that is, so far as her own conscious thought was concerned, for to all the others she was as usual, only that there was an added sweetness in her every act and thought. To-day everything with her was an impulse, a spontaneous

carrying out of a settled purpose—something already ordained and quite outside herself. Part of the day she spent in the drawing-room busy at her *escretoire*, reading old letters and tearing up many of them, the pieces of which she afterwards burned. Now and then she sat at the spinet and sang over some of the old songs that she loved, and that Rafe said he liked to hear ; but they gave her no pain now, and though she sang all the most touching of them she did not shed a tear. Last of all her work in the drawing-room, she wrote out a paper, very short and evidently the result of much thought. This she sealed carefully and put away in an interior drawer which had a lock of its own. In her bedroom she went through her dresses with Abigail and chose out a few, a very few, to carry in her valise ; the rest she said were to follow when Aunt Priscilla and Abigail came on to Much Hadam. In the afternoon she laid down for awhile and slept ; in the cool of the evening she went out for a walk by herself on the river bank. One by one she visited all the spots associated in her mind with Rafe ; the place above the Swan Inn where he had saved her life, and then where he had helped her on shore ; the little peninsula where the great trees grew, where

they had walked and sat and exchanged thoughts and silences ; and the grove of trees near the marshes where he had given her the gold buttons with the legend that she so loved wrought on them. Here she remained for a long time, standing still as if carved out of stone. The red glare of the sunset fell full upon her smiting her pale face and snowy garments till from head to foot she looked as if dipped in blood. Her thoughts were very peaceful ; her mind was made up, and all that remained to her was the doing of her task.

And so once again the sun dropped into the far reaches of the river beyond the marshes, and the silver and gold of the stream and pools grew grey in the shadows of the evening, and the chill of the coming night crept over the river and its banks ; and Betty went home.

Abigail had tested for supper that evening all the powers of the kitchen. She had determined that Miss Betty should not lack choice of such things as she generally liked, so that there was a rare display of tasty dishes on the table. Betty tried to acknowledge her thoughtfulness, and took from many of the dishes ; and so, although feeling no relish for her food, made in the end a hearty meal. Then she said good-night to her aunt and thanked her for all her

goodness, and also Abigail, till the two elderly women thought that she was getting afraid of the journey before her, and once more urged her to wait or to have a proper escort. But she laughed their doubts aside and told them she had no fear; that she only said goodbye at all because she was going on a journey and should have to leave them even for a short time. All at once Abigail asked—

“But when Master Rafe comes, Miss Betty, what am I to tell him?”

To which she answered—

“Of course you will tell him that I have gone to Much Hadam to rest awhile and have change of air, and that if he should see well to ride down, my Aunt Edith will be most delighted—and that I shall be glad too!” and Betty slipped away to her room and locked her door.

Then she opened the valise that Abigail had so carefully packed, and took out one of the dresses that was ready in it—a beautiful dress of figured Italian silk. This she put away in one of the wardrobes, under some other clothes, so that Abigail's sharp eyes should not notice it at once, and in its stead she packed the white lawn dress which she had worn that day on the river when Rafe had rescued her. It had been

so carefully washed that it was just as it had been and as fair as then. She made two other additions to the mail, hiding them amongst the things already packed lest some chance should reveal them. One was the box containing the gold buttons, and the other a short, sharp dagger in a shagreen sheath which had always used to lie on the dressing-table of her great-grandfather to serve, if required, as an arm against thieves. Lastly, she made the packing complete so that only a few toilet articles used in the morning would have to be added before the time for strapping up came. Then having undressed, she knelt and prayed for a long, long time, and arose and went to bed, where she at once fell asleep and slept well all through the night.

All this time she appeared to have no concern, no mental disturbance or perturbation of any kind, and there never seemed to come into her mind even the shadow of a doubt as to Rafe. Truly the intuition of a woman is a divine thing, and complete with the calm perfection of things beyond earth. Each act of the day seemed to have its definite and fore-appointed plan—to be part of a scheme of things already arranged. When she slept she lay with her hands meekly folded over her breast, just as a saint or a martyr—who is the best of saints—

is represented in stone. Very sweet and very pure she looked, and the pallor and repose of her face seemed like peaceful death ; the white drapery of her bed lay in classic folds to suit the antique beauty of her profile. Only the golden brown hair, which Praxiteles himself could not have chiselled, the eyelids drooped in sleep, and the gently heaving bosom, showed her to belong to the real world and not already to the land of dreams.

She awoke with the first ray of sunrise which stole into the room, and after praying long and earnestly and having made her toilet, finished the packing of her valise. Then she strapped it ready for travel, so that when Abigail came up herself earlier than had been intended, that there should be nothing left undone which her young mistress should want, she was amazed to find her ready for the journey.

"Dear heart!" she ejaculated, "you never strapped and all, Miss Betty, instead of lettin' me see to it. And I'll be bound to say that you've forgotten something."

"No, Abigail dear, I think not. I have with me all that I want." But the old woman was not yet quite satisfied, and would have unstrapped the valise and gone through it all afresh had not Betty diverted her attention by

asking her to brew for her a dish of tea before she started on her journey. Abigail hurried off to attend herself to such an unwonted order as a dish of tea in the early morning. In 1717 tea was not a common luxury, and its preparation was not to be lightly entrusted to any one of minor importance in the household. Then for awhile Betty was idle, but the idleness did not distress her at all. She seemed to take the necessary waiting as a part of the work which she had in hand and to be quite content to exercise her patience. By and by Aunt Priscilla joined her, and, as she had an infinity of questions to ask and directions to give, the time flew till breakfast.

It was still early when Robin, with his mistress's valise strapped behind his saddle, stood ready at the gate. He was not kept long waiting, for very shortly Betty with a last hug and kiss to her aunt and her old nurse, was swung into her saddle, ready to depart. Abigail hung round her to the last, adjusting the folds of her habit, seeing that her foot was well in the stirrup, and in every little act of thoughtfulness manifesting her love.

At last she was off, and presently turning in her saddle, as the road debouched at Swan Walk, looked back with one last lingering look

at the old house where so much of her life had been passed, and which had held for her so much hope and joy. The last wrench is not usually the least, and into those few moments was gathered half a lifetime of pain. But this too passed by; she was now in truth fully embarked on her enterprise, whether for good or ill.

In due time she reached Finsbury Square, and filled Hester with surprise and consternation at her unexpected movement. Miss Fenton was old-fashioned to the last degree, and looked upon such a journey as Betty contemplated as little less than a tempting of Providence. She was, however, delighted to see her, and, as usual, made her welcome and tried forthwith to persuade her to prolong her stay for at least a few days. She was more surprised than ever, when, after a short rest, Betty announced her wish to go out into the town to make some purchases, and on volunteering to come with her was gently told that the business she was concerned in was of a very special nature, connected with a wish expressed long before by her great-grandfather. Hester, as Betty had reason to believe, knew nothing of the existence of the trust-money, and the latter thought that such a real excuse for privacy

was better than any fictitious reason which she could invent. So Betty went forth alone, and, having made previous inquiries, found her way at last to the banking house of Mr. Child. She had been there before on various occasions with the Alderman, but had always been driven in a coach or carried in a chair, so that she did not know the various streets and the turnings necessary to take. It was a long walk from Finsbury Square, and she was well tired with both the exercise and the unaccustomed bustle of the streets when she arrived at the house. Having asked to see Mr. Child himself, she was shown into a private room and sat down to wait. The day was intensely hot and the chair soft and enticing, and gradually, as she leaned back, the hum of the city life which floated in through the open windows died away, her eyes closed and she sank into gentle sleep. She suddenly awakened to find Mr. Child standing in front of her, and with him a grave clerk who was concealing behind his extended hand the remains of a surreptitious smile. She was filled with confusion, and her pale face became aglow as she stammered out an apology. The kindly banker, however, at once set her at ease and asked if she were really tired, and would she not rest awhile with

his daughters who had just returned from a row upon the river. Betty thanked him gratefully but declined, and asked him to be so good as not to make mention of the fact of her visit, as she had come in all privacy to withdraw the trust-money in accordance with the wish expressed to her by her great-grandfather. The banker at once fell into her views, and having obtained her formal signature, handed over to her, in notes of the Bank of England, the sum of a thousand guineas. He offered to have the money sent for her where she would by a trusty messenger, but as this would have at once betrayed her plans she refused; whereupon Mr. Child said that he would have her conveyed in his own chair to what place she wished, so that she could regain the Alderman's house, where she told him she was stopping, without any unnecessary fatigue. And so, not late in the afternoon, Betty, having been set down in Finsbury Circus, re-entered the house of the Alderman. Going straight to her room she deposited in her valise the sum of money which she had received, and then went downstairs to sit with Hester. During her absence the Alderman had been at home, and hearing that she had gone out on a matter of private business at once guessed that it was

connected with the trust-money. Without taking Hester into his confidence he hastened away to Temple Bar to try to find her. As he went up Fleet Street she came down it, but neither saw the other. In the evening when he came home he tried to find out indirectly from Betty if his suspicion was correct, but she was on her guard and took care not to betray herself; after a little friendly skirmishing he gave up the contest, for the time, and decided to await the development of circumstances.

Betty retired early, as she was to be ready to start in the morning betimes. She bade an affectionate good-night to both Hester and the Alderman, and again thanked them very tenderly for all their manifold kindnesses to her. When securely locked and bolted in her bedchamber, she opened her valise and took from it the white dress which she had exchanged for the one placed there by Abigail, and also the case with the golden buttons. Then taking her housewife, she proceeded to sew down the front of the dress the set of buttons. She then packed in the valise the dress which she had hitherto worn, and laid out ready to wear in the morning the white dress now so richly adorned, and also the

grey dust-wrap which was to cover it. Lastly, she placed the case of the buttons back in the valise, and taking from the same the old dagger hid it in the pocket of the white dress. This having been done she said her prayers—long and earnest they were—and betook herself to bed and to sleep.

At early morn she was awake, and rising, dressed herself even to the dust-wrap. Having completed her packing and strapped her valise, she sat and waited patiently hour by hour till some of the family should seek her. In the city household the hours were fairly early, and Hester was with her a little after seven. She was once more astonished to see her dressed and ready for the road, and at first rallied her on her hurry, speaking as though she was going to meet her betrothed, and as though the time could not run fast enough to satisfy her. Seeing, however, that she did not blush or become in any way embarrassed, she gave over this pleasantry and asked many questions to make sure of the perfection of all preparation. When she examined the dust-wrap to see that Betty was properly attired for travel, she expressed her amazement at the way in which her cousin had dressed herself for the journey.

“Law, child!” she said, “you never surely put on a white dress to ride through the dusty roads; for what with the drought, they say that out of London the roads be inches deep in dust. And as to wearing your beautiful buttons, it’s simply a tempting of Providence, and of highwaymen; that it is! But there, child, I know it’s no use my scolding you, for what your mind’s set on that you will do, though I argued and barged myself hoarse. But do ’ee be careful and keep yourself well covered, or folk will think you are going to a bridal all unknown to your own kin.”

“Oh, Cousin Hester, surely to wear white is not always to be going to be married!”

“No, child, surely not! It would be foolishness to say so. The dead wear white, so far as that goes; but then you don’t put gold buttons on grave-clothes—and such gold buttons too, and coming from where yours did. Neither do you put on either white or buttons to travel on a lonely road where there have been enough robberies to make one fearsome. Why, my dear, I’d no more put on my gold ornaments for such a journey, and with no more escort than old Robin carrying my valise behind me, than I’d—than I’d dream of going to St. Paul’s to say my prayers alone. Well,

anyhow, if you will have things with you that you oughtn't to have, you ought at least to see that you have with you all that you should have. Are your keys all right? and your housewife? and your purse? and——”

“Oh yes, Hester; I have everything quite right,” interrupted Betty, for she was conscious of that sharp dagger in her pocket as well as the parcel of banknotes, and she feared lest Hester, in her kindly zeal to ascertain that nothing had been forgotten, should make the discovery of either. When they went to breakfast they found the Alderman waiting them. He was full of concern for the journey, and wanted—right or wrong—to send one or two of his apprentices, armed, with Betty, for he said he feared she might have some trouble by the way. The Newmarket road had several times of late been beset by footpads and highwaymen, and it was hardly safe or right for a young lady to go out alone, or with only such attendance as she had. Then Hester spoke of the white dress and the golden buttons; and the Alderman, then and there, announced his intention of going on with her himself rather than see her travel alone on such a journey.

So Betty, beginning to be afraid that some real obstacle to the accomplishment of her

purpose might arise out of their solicitude for her, laid herself out to overcome their fears. She protested that there was no danger; that the journey was only a very short one, a few miles at most, and through roads that were much frequented; that she did not fear any highwaymen; and that, after all, she was going to her own place, where she had passed a large portion of her youth; and that it would seem strange and more than ungracious to the people who had always treated her so well to appear to be afraid to come amongst them alone or without escort; and she knew that neither Hester nor her dear, kind Alderman would like such a thing.

And so, though both the old folk knew that the argument was bad, and were not a bit satisfied as to either the safety or the propriety of the journey, they gave in to her winning gentleness and acquiesced in her going. They comforted themselves with the thought that after all, considering the number of people who travelled, there were very few robberies, that the very fact of Betty's journey being so unusual would disarm their suspicions, and that no man—even a highwayman—could find it in him to rob so sweet and gentle a child as Betty Pole.

As to Betty herself, it was a sore trouble to her to mislead, even to so small an extent, the friends who loved her and whom she loved and trusted. It is one of the penalties of ill-doing, and perhaps not the least, that the innocent that we fain would spare and hold aloof from all evil, suffer and run danger of deterioration, directly or indirectly, for our faults. When the ship goes down, many an atom that else had floated in good time safe to land and survived the wreckage, is sucked into the whirling maelstrom and disappears for ever.

But no matter how prolonged partings may be, the time comes at last ; the forenoon had still some time to run when Betty left the house at Finsbury Square, and, turning back at the corner, saw her friends still waving their hands as they stood in the open doorway.

CHAPTER VII

NEAR MUCH HADAM

IN all her life before, Betty had never been so gentle as she was on that journey ; and old Robin, jogging along on his stout roadster, watched her with affectionate eyes and marvelled. Her love and tenderness seemed to go out to every living thing. For her the summer pervaded all things, and there was in her heart—in one of her hearts—a joyousness that bubbled up perpetually. For she had two hearts now. One which was full of pain and weariness, for which life had all gone by and which was but like the ash of an extinct fire, with naught remaining but sentience and the power to suffer pain. The other heart was new and fresh—such a heart as might be in the breast of one who had been born again in a new and a higher life.

The roads were dusty, and the sun glared

fiercely as the noon drew nigh. The trees and grass were losing the freshness of their green; but there were places of deep shadow where the trees arched over the roadway, and there were many purling rills which made music cool and sweet as the waters gurgled in the chasms of their stony bed or flashed as they fell. In most of these calm, restful places there was ever some life or other to interest the traveller, and she lingered by them so long and so often that Robin began seriously to think it his duty to remonstrate with her on the delay, and to call her attention to the length of the journey still before them. When, however, he saw her look at the cattle or the horses or the very birds so lovingly, and heard her speak to them so prettily—as though they had souls and understandings of their own—he simply admired her innocent sweetness and held his peace. But as the afternoon drew on, and they had still some way to go before reaching Bishop's Stortford, he made up his mind to speak, and stammeringly advised that they should get on a little faster lest the night should close in before they were at Much Hadam.

Betty thanked him sweetly, and said that she would hurry if he wished it, but that it seemed so nice to be in the real country, and the horses

enjoyed it so much more than hurrying on, that she had not the heart to hasten. So Robin made speed to tell his lady that his only dread was that the journey might be so prolonged that some mischance might happen. Then Betty again thanked him for his thoughtfulness, and quickened her pace somewhat, so that before long they arrived at Bishop's Stortford, where she put up for awhile at "The Rayne-deere" and had dinner. As they had arrived some time after the regular dinner-hour, it was necessary to wait till a fresh meal had been cooked; and then the eating of dinner took some little time—for Betty, though not for Robin who got through a very large dinner in a small space of time.

Betty had much talk with the hostess, Mrs. Unsworth, and with many of the servants; and made much inquiry as to what had of late been going on in the place. She even went into the stables where the horses were being baited, taking herself some crusts for them. Whilst there she had talked with the grooms and postilions, making inquiries as to the various parts of the road between Bishop's Stortford and Ware, and incidentally touching on the recent robberies. The men were pleased with so much conversation from so great a lady and spoke freely, so

that ere she went on her way, Betty had some clear idea of the general method in which the robberies had of late been carried out on the Cambridge road. All this made much delay, so that when they had well started on their way the afternoon was drawing to a close.

It was not very far to Betty's house at Much Hadam, and so Robin was not anxious any more, but was content to go as slowly as she wished. One's faithfulness, however much it be, has but little control over one's digestion, and it is a wonderful thing what a different complexion affairs assume after a good meal. It would have been hard for a little while to have fixed on any pace which would have been too slow for old Robin.

But the slowest journey must progress somewhat, and at last they turned into the road leading towards Ware, whence the by-road to Betty's destination took its source. Here Betty suddenly reined up and called Robin who was jogging along a little way behind with his chin sunk on his breast, and evidently more than half asleep. He became fully awake to a great mental confusion, and it took him some few seconds to realise where he was and what was before his mind.

"Lard-a-marcy, Miss Betty," he finally said,

“but ye fairly frightened me! I thought that summat had gone wrong wi’ the saddle, or that some of them——” he paused, for under the circumstance of absence from help, he did not wish to speak disrespectfully of robbers—“some of them——” Again he stopped.

“Of what?” said Betty, with a smile.

“Well, Miss, of some of them highway gentlemen.”

“Oh, Robin, what are you thinking of? I do believe you were asleep and dreaming.”

“Belike I was, Miss,” he added simply.

“Well, Robin, I hope your dreams were pleasant; or perhaps I ought not to hope that or I should have to be sorry for interrupting them, for I find that I left behind me at the hotel my diamond ring with the cameo. It was on the dressing-table where I washed for dinner. You must ride back to Bishop’s Stortford as fast as you can and get it for me. Mrs. Unsworth will give it to you, for I am sure it will have been found by this time.”

“Lard-a-marcy!” said the old man, “what’s to become of you whilst I should go back? You can’t stay here on these roads alone, and niver a soul nigh ye in case ye wanted help.”

“But I don’t want help, Robin. You will not be long gone, and I shall ride slowly on

till you overtake me. Remember, I am close to my own house and near my own people."

"But, Miss Betty dear, I daren't leave ye all alone. Miss Priscilla told me on no account to let ye out of my sight; and as for Mrs. Abigail, why she'd have my life if I were to dare to do such a thing. That she would, and more!"

"Don't fear, Robin," said Betty smiling. "In the first place Abigail will never know, unless you tell her; and I am sure that even Abigail would not say very pretty things to you if I were to lose my beautiful ring because you refused to obey my orders." At this Robin, manlike, gave in, so she went on—

"Now ride back, my good Robin, and get my ring; and you may come after me as quickly as ever you please. Stay! take off my valise and leave it here, so that you can go quicker."

"What, Miss! leave your trunk on the road-side? Oh no! that would never do. 'Tis no weight at all, and 'tis only a little way back. Go slow, Miss Betty, and take care of yourself till I come." The old man, quite awake now, rode back to Bishop's Stortford for the ring.

Betty rode slowly along at a foot's pace till he was out of sight. Then she drew up a moment in the shadow of a hazel grove and

dismounted. She took from her pocket the sharp dagger and laid it bare in her breast where she could grasp it in an instant; then she unbuttoned her grey dust-wrap and threw it back over her shoulders so that her white dress with the golden buttons showed out. The road here was shady and the ground underfoot somewhat damp, so there was no rising dust to mar the spotless fairness of her dress. She drew close to a bank and climbed to her saddle again, and then went on her way. The hoofs of her horse made but little noise on the sand, and the only sound she could hear, save the myriad voices of nature, was the beating of her own heart. For now the two hearts had become one again. The new and joyous heart had somehow ceased to carol, and the fire in the heart of ashes had waked again. The two hearts of this sorely anxious maiden, that spoke of her past and her future, were merged in the one great, human, beating heart which the present needs.

As she went slowly along, every beauty of the scene seemed revealed to her in a manner which she had never felt before, and which it seemed to her would henceforth become a part of her memory and her life.

The road now ran through a valley, deep in

woods, in whose heart was a full stream with waters which flowed in murmuring rills as the valley fell, or widened into dark brown pools which reached to the roadway and which took their colours from the complementary shadows of the green overhead. The undergrowth of beech and hazel was thick and full of dark shadows, dark in the shade which the great oaks and elms already threw along the valley. The sun was setting ; and as it sunk lower and lower on the top of the slope that crowned the valley, the shadows grew larger and larger. And as the shadows grew, so the peace and beauty of the scene won on Betty till her heart ceased its tumult ; and she could go on her way with resolution unchecked, and without any disturbance from within.

Before her there was a space where lay a broad stream of light, for there was a dip in the western slope of the valley, and the sunlight blazed, broad and red, across it. Here the trees grew more lofty than elsewhere, and on the eastern side of the road a dense mass of foliage covered a low bank of grass which rose some four feet above the road. As her eyes lit on this, Betty shivered as though some chill wind had blown upon her. She seemed instinctively to realise that here was the place

she sought—the one spot which answered all the conditions she expected. For an instant she pressed her hand to her heart, and then with a silent prayer passed on her way.

When pacing slowly along, with the hood of her dust-wrap over her head and her face turned to the glory of the sunset, her horse suddenly stopped, so that she almost lost her balance. There was a sudden shout from the copse—

“Stop!” spoken by a ringing voice. On the instant a black horse leaped down the bank to the road, carrying a masked rider who held a pistol at arm’s length.

Then Betty knew that the moment of her life had come. With a sudden spring she threw herself from the saddle and caught the rein of the black horse close to the bridle. As she did this there was a cry from the rider, and his hand fell to his side. Betty felt the horse quiver, and knew that in a moment it would try to dart away, and so cried out quickly—

“Unmask! unless you wish your horse to trample me down!”

The answer came: “Let go the rein! For God’s sake, let go! I shall not harm you.”

“Unmask!” Her tone was of command, and there was in her voice and bearing never a

trace or shadow of fear. The highwayman seemed to recognise it, and, with a groan, drew the velvet mask from his face.

“ Rafe ! ”

“ Betty ! ”

Her tone was full of sad conviction, the simple conclusion of a train of thought: his was of horrified despair. There was a long pause, which Betty was the first to break.

“ Thank God, that it was I, and not another, that came this road to-day ! ”

Then, seeing that Rafe was still silent, she went on—

“ Oh ! Rafe, my heart told me all. I feared ! I feared ! and I have come here all alone that I might save you ! ”

Rafe leaped from his saddle.

“ Save me ! ”

“ Ah yes, Rafe ! to save you from this horrible thing. Oh God ! to think that you—you of all men—should drop so low as to rob on the highway ! ”

Rafe was still silent. Instinctively he had taken his horse's rein through his arm, and the beautiful animal stood patiently in sad contrast—the one, the human animal, in spite of all the high courage of his kind, feeling depraved and degraded more than he had power to express ;

the other animal, full of its own pride, but harrowed by no moral fear.

Betty's brain now began almost to reel. She had so much to say—yet when the moment came she could say nothing. She despised herself for being so overcome—yet she would not have been cold even at the price of the power of coherency.

Little by little, however, the weight which oppressed her seemed to leave her, and the clouds about her brain to pass away. Then all was clear before her, and in a very sweet, grave way she began to tell her lover of her fears for him: how justice was on his track and how his career of crime was likely to be atoned for in a very dreadful way—and here she shuddered. But Rafe did not shudder; on the contrary, the idea of danger of any kind was, in his present condition of overwhelming shame, a restorative. There was something to be fought for, something which he could oppose, some action of the future or the present, rather than the dull, impotent misery of regret; and so the masculinity of him began to awake. As she looked, Betty felt, rather than saw, the change, and so her task became a harder one, though she never faltered in the doing of it. It was a more difficult thing to bring home the

sense of his guilt to the man of prouder bearing than to the man in the depths of despair, seemingly ready to take any step to escape, from his dreadful position.

There is, however, an adaptability in woman's nature, intellectual as well as physical or moral, which always answers when called upon. Betty instinctively abandoned any idea which she might have had of alluding to danger ; but she still pursued her object unfalteringly. As Rafe's bearing was proud, she appealed to his honour.

" Oh ! Rafe, you told me that a gentleman could not accept gifts ; and I would have given you all I had ! God knows what a delight and pride it would have been for me to have had the privilege of doing so. I dreaded, somehow, lest want of any kind, or desperation, should drive you to forget yourself. Would to God that you had listened to me, or that I had had the courage to speak ! "

Here Rafe interrupted her impetuously—

" Betty, surely you are at least without blame. I have sinned, I know, but it has nothing to do with you. "

Betty raised her eyes wonderingly to his.

" Nothing to do with me, Rafe ? and we pledged to be married ! "

A sudden joy shot through Rafe when he heard the words "we pledged to be married," but it was quickly followed by a chill when the sense of his present position flashed across him. It was with a genuine, manly shame that his eyes fell and his head sank upon his breast. His voice was hoarse with an agony of his own as he said—

"To be married, Betty? Alas! that must be all past now. No, no! I am not such a scoundrel as that!"

There was a pathos in his voice as he spoke that had never been there before. He realised his great loss. That was the penalty he had to pay for his wrong-doing.

Betty's face was serene as she looked at him, so straightly and so earnestly that, as if by some mesmeric influence, he raised his eyes to meet hers.

"We are promised to each other, Rafe," she said simply. "God heard our promise, and it is not for us to go back from it, if He so wills it in His good time."

Rafe sprang forward to catch her in his arms, but the horse started a little, and the rein on his arm held him off. There was a sort of grim irony in the situation, which, however, both Rafe and Betty were too agitated to notice.

It was, perhaps, only a natural manifestation of masculine nature, but when the conviction began to dawn upon him that he had not lost Betty's love, the supremacy of the man over the woman began unconsciously to assert itself.

"You had better get on your way, Betty," he said, in an authoritative manner; "the roads are not safe, and it was unwise to come alone."

The speech may seem inconsequent, but both speaker and hearer understood the connection. The silences of lovers, and the habits of such silent understandings, are known to themselves. Then a thought seemed to strike him, and he added, with a horrified expression on his face—

"My God! if it had been some other than me!"

Betty said sadly: "Would to God, Rafe, that it had!"

"But you don't know the danger!"

Here a momentary pang of bitterness swept over Betty's heart, and she answered out of the quickness of her woman's speech—

"Aye, Rafe; you know better than I do the highwayman's mercy!"

Then followed quickly the reaction of her long restraint, and in a burst of passion she poured forth her whole heart, and all that had

been torturing her during the past two days. She ended thus—

“ But, Rafe, it was because I feared it, and dreaded it, that I came. If it were bad for me, an innocent woman, to suffer, what must the guilt be that makes such a fear to you. Oh, Rafe! Rafe! what mattered the danger to me, a dead woman—aye, a dead woman!” for she saw the question in his face. “ What life is in one when the hopes are shattered, and the fire in the heart is quenched? I would have given my life for you, Rafe, as you did for me. Why, then, should I hesitate to run a danger for your sake? ”

Here Rafe interrupted—

“ But, my God! Betty, you don't know the danger. These men are the roughest, the cruellest, the most remorseless wretches that exist! ”

He ground his teeth with passion at the horrible possibilities that rose before his mind. Betty looked at him a moment, and her heart began to beat with a new hope. The lesson of his own shame and ill-doing, and what it meant to her eyes, was coming home to him; out of his very passion might come his reclamation. He would, she reasoned to herself, never have experienced such emotion if he were truly

hardened; and so she felt she could enter on a new phase of her task. Still calmly looking him in the face, she put her hand in the bosom of her dress and pulled out her sharp dagger.

"See!" she said, as she held it out towards him, "I did not come unarmed!"

Rafe smiled a bitter smile, wrung from the depths of his masculine experience.

"A good weapon, child, but of small use against a desperate man. He would have beaten it from your hand with his whip or his pistol-butt before you could have struck a blow."

Betty answered calmly, as she replaced the dagger in her breast—

"It was not for him!"

"Who for, then? Good God! Betty, not for yourself?" he added, as the thought struck him.

"For myself, Rafe! I did not come out on this desperate enterprise without weighing well the consequences. But I saw my duty clear before me, and I had no alternative. Oh, Rafe! Rafe! it was a desperate choice." Here she broke down for a moment, but recovered herself and went on, without even a falter in her voice—

"In any case I must have suffered such a loss—my life or my love, my life or my love!"

They were both silent, and then a new thought struck Rafe, and he asked—

“But how did you know you would meet me? The chances were a thousand to one against such a thing!”

“Oh! Rafe, my heart told me.”

“Your heart told you!” said Rafe, with sudden bitterness. “Your heart told you that I was a robber, when you had no grounds even to imagine such a thing. And yet you come here with those gold buttons on your dress. ‘Love without faith’ indeed! And so this was your faith in me! that unheard you condemned me and held me as guilty.”

He became fairly speechless with indignation. Betty was so overwhelmed with this monstrous change of front—this outcome of jealousy and love and vanity, which was so thoroughly masculine in its nature as to be beyond feminine comprehension. She stood silent and hung her head, for the rebuke touched her deeply in her inner nature; she felt the remorse that she might, and would, have felt had her supposition as to Rafe’s misdoing proved untrue. Betty was a girl who seldom cried, and more especially when the tears came from any emotion beginning with herself. Now and again she wept at hearing or reading a piteous

tale or seeing such told in a play, but her tears came gently and passed soon ; but when she wept with cause her tears were very tears of blood. At such times, even before the tears fell, dark circles grew round her beautiful eyes, and the misery of her soul became very pitiful to see. Rafe saw the tears fall from her down-cast eyes, but his anger was hot—jealousy is so hard to efface—and even Betty's tears did not move him at once. Then the anguish of the poor girl's heart found a voice ; in a deep, low tone which smote on his ears with a pang which he never forgot she said—

“ Oh, Rafe ! Rafe ! my lost love ! Would to God that my fears had been untrue ! My life would have been well spent to have learned so sweet a truth ! ”

Then, in an instant, down at her feet fell Rafe, all the man in him rising to the height of his humility. Down into the dust, on his knees, with his face in his hands. The rein slipping from his arm freed the horse which started away, but stopped at once and began quietly to browse the herbage on the bank.

Betty still wept, but her tears were such as angels shed ; and all the sorrow of her heart was turned to instant joy. Rafe was won ! His heart was true, and she felt that there had

come the dawn of a new life. At that moment, as though it were some mysterious presage, the day fell. The sun sank over the hill, and the red light fading left the girl, who stood with her hand on her lover's head, pale and spirit-like. Her dress of white gleamed out beneath the thrown-back mantle of grey, and the golden buttons twinkled like stars in the night.

So they stood for a moment ; but Betty suddenly raised her head and listened, and both the horses raised their ears and listened too. Far away came the quick stroke of a horse's feet on the high-road ; Robin was evidently coming at a gallop—a way that was new to him. Betty said quietly—

“ Robin is returning ; he must not find you here. No living soul but you and I know this sad secret ; and, Rafe dear, it must die with us. You must go away for a time ; it will be best for you, as for us all. Go abroad to the wars, where you can begin life afresh. Think that you go to win back your honour, and so to claim the hand of the wife that waits for you. See here ! I have brought with me money that will keep you from want, and help you in your career,” and she produced the packet that Mr. Child had given her. “ Take it, Rafe ! ”

But Rafe sunk his head lower and lower, and spoke without looking up—

“ Oh ! spare me—spare me this ! ”

“ Nay,” she said, “ Rafe dear, there is nothing to spare. This is not mine to give. I knew you would not receive from me—would to God that your pride had not been so ; but that is past. This is a trust which my dear grandfather left me. He gave it to me the very night he died ; and it is as though he were come from the grave to give it you. Take it, Rafe ! It is a holy trust ; and hereafter, if you may be able to do so, you may yet pass it on to others, so that it can help some in dire straits. Surely, Rafe,” she added, as he still hesitated —“ surely I have won to-day the right to ask you that no such trouble should come upon you again, when with this trust-money we can avert it. Your own heart must tell you that I am right. Quick ! quick ! ” for the gallop sounded nearer.

Rafe put up his hand and took the packet ; then he seized her hand and held it a moment to his lips, and looked up in her eyes as he said solemnly—

“ Betty, as God sees us, this hand shall never sin in such way again. It shall never be less worthy than now when it touches the hand of one of His saints.”

"Oh! hush, hush, Rafe!" said Betty, overwhelmed with emotion.

Rafe sprang to his feet; the manhood of him seemed triumphant again, and all the nobler part of the soul within stood revealed without dross.

"Betty, if I am spared I shall come back to claim you; and if I do so come, I shall feel worthy to ask you to share my life. But living or dying I shall send you word, if I do not bring it, that your faith has been justified. Goodbye! Goodbye!" Betty held out her arms, and he sprang to them, and for an instant enfolded her in a passionate embrace. Then he tore himself away. He paused a second and returned.

"Give me a keepsake," he said. "Something that I can wear over my heart, and which will be with me always as the symbol of your faith and love."

"Take one of the buttons, Rafe; they are dear to us both," she said shyly. He stooped and caught one in his hand—the one nearest the ground.

"Why that one, Rafe?"

"Because it is fittest for me. 'Tis nearest to your garment's hem."

"No, no, Rafe! take this!" Pulling out the

daggar, she severed the third of the buttons, held it an instant to her lips, and handed it to him.

“ ’Tis nearest to my heart.”

Rafe’s breast heaved ; he looked at her one moment, flung himself to the dust, and kissed the hem of her dress ; then, without a word, sprang to his saddle, and with a wave of his hand, leaped up the bank whence he had come.

Betty heard the crash of his passage through the short undergrowth as he started, as the crow flies, towards Harwich, to take that night a fishing-boat to Holland.

As she watched him go, even in the anguish of her parting, Betty gloried in the strength and daring of her lover, in his rapid action, and the vigour of his determination ; and, woman-like, she felt happy because the man was strong.

Then she drew her horse to the bank, climbed into the saddle, and pushed hastily on her way. She did not look back as the coming horseman drew closer, but only turned when she found that the speed did not diminish on his approach. For an instant she was startled as a woman, magnificently mounted, swept by at break-neck speed ; but before horse and rider had dissolved into the shadows of the evening,

she recognised beneath the woman's habit the free carriage of a man. A new gush of thankfulness went up from her heart, for she knew it was the rider with the money of the New River Company. Her heart beat fast at the thought of how close had been the rescue of Rafe, and a new thankfulness filled her soul. However, she proceeded on her way thankfully, so that when presently Robin, riding hot haste, overtook her, she was some distance from the scene of the meeting.

"Dear heart, Miss Betty!" said the honest fellow as he rode up, "but I feared ye would be lost when the night fell. I have the ring; but we must push on, or 'twill be dark before we reach the house. And oh! Miss, when that daredevil woman rode past me like a flash I couldn't but think that mayhap some of those highway gentlemen's ladies had took to the road too! I feared till I saw you safe ahead o' me."

That night when Robin, after his supper, was relating to the servants in the kitchen all the adventures of the day he added—

"And sure I am that the change has done Miss Betty—Lord love her!—good already. She hasn't been so gay for days and days as when I came up to her in the road. She was singing to herself like a bird, and her eyes were like stars."

CHAPTER VIII

IN FINSBURY SQUARE

AS the next five years flew by they saw many changes in many things, but none in the heart of Betty Pole. The new dynasty grew more and more a part of the life and the future of England, and the thunder, which followed ever the hopes of the Stuarts, was but as the far roll of elemental disturbance which makes apparent to all men their own immediate safety. Everything was prosperous with Betty in the way of fortune, and her wealth grew with each year, despite the fact that the many calls on her charity were never unanswered, and that the other members of the family looked to her—and did not look in vain—for countenance in all their aspirations and endeavours. One great loss there was in the household, and only one: Priscilla slept at peace.

From the evening when they had parted on the road to Much Hadam, Betty had never heard from Rafe or of him. He had disappeared as effectually as if the earth had swallowed him. Betty's faith never faltered. She believed that one day he would appear, or that some message from him would reach her, and in that belief she rested serenely. Some time after his disappearance she had taken into her own hands certain large sums of money, much to the chagrin of the vigilant Alderman, who remonstrated with her for withdrawing from active use any money at a time when with decent care it would multiply itself through the rage for public speculation. Betty did not attempt to argue on the subject with him, but told him that it was in the fulfilment of a duty, and begged him not to make a somewhat difficult task into a labour of pain. She spoke to him so sweetly, and withal so warmly, of her gratitude to him for his constant care, that the old gentleman, although somewhat chagrined and jealous as to the cause of her mystery, abandoned the subject except at rare intervals.

Then after a time strange rumours began to be heard. The agents of Lord Baltimore received a mysterious letter saying that if they searched in a certain place in Wandsworth they

would find the money stolen so long before. They sought the place with a select following of servants, and sure enough found an amount in new gold larger than the sum stolen. This strange occurrence was followed at irregular intervals by similar ones, till after a time it was found that quite a number of persons who had been robbed near London in the early half of 1717 had had full restitution made to them. The matter was the subject of comment in the coffee-houses, and many were the surmises as to the cause or means of so unusual a set of circumstances.

All this time Betty lived partly at her house at Much Hadam and partly at Chelsea. She had now many affairs to keep her busy, and she often made calls at the counting-house of Mr. Child and lodged and drew much money from time to time. She went much amongst poor and distressed persons. Sometimes her ministrations of this kind took her to places beyond the Liberties of the city ; but she smiled at warnings against footpads and went on her way. Now and again she paid visits to the prisons ; and although she always went with a sort of dread upon her, and suffered much whilst witnessing the pain and degradation of the poor souls held in durance, she came away as

if cheered and benefited by the accomplishment of her good work.

Once, after the news had been told in the coffee-houses of another mysterious finding of stolen property, the old Alderman came out to pay her a visit. For a time he had been angry and indignant at the disappearance of her affianced husband, and, manlike, had managed, whilst trying to comfort the poor girl, to visit on her head some of his disapprobation. She had borne it all meekly, and had held herself with such a grave manner that her friends had hardly ventured to condole with her on her loss or misfortune—they did not know which to consider Rafe's disappearance.

On this occasion the Alderman did not come in his great carriage with rich hammercloth and with coachman and big servants in gorgeous livery, which he had continued to use on great occasions since he had been Lord Mayor, but in a plain coach with no servant but the driver. Betty was all alone; she was delighted to see her old friend, and made him very welcome. He, however, was manifestly ill at ease and had something on his mind; so when they sat together in the cool drawing-room Betty laid her little hand on the back of his great one and said—

“What is it? I know something is troubling you. Won’t you tell me?”

The Alderman seemed relieved to have the matter commenced, though for the moment his embarrassment increased and he grew red and stammered.

“My dear, I’ll do anything in all the wide world that you wish,” he said; and then added hastily and inconsequently—

“Betty, do you want any money? I mean any large sums.”

Betty was really surprised, and with wide-open eyes she answered—

“No, Cousin Fenton. I have more than I shall ever want.”

“But I mean, my dear, money to deal with—money——” he stammered and stuttered for a second or two and then spoke with grave, frank directness—

“I mean, Betty, my dear, more money—such as you have drawn from us and spent—in your own way.” Betty shook her head; he went on, and there was a tremor in his voice—

“I mean money to deal with as you dealt with that thousand guineas of your grandfather’s. Oh, my dear! my dear! I have been thinking; and somehow I seem to know now.

I take back all I said of money to you, Betty dear! You were right and I was wrong; and now I want you to understand that if you want any more money to do what you will with—even to throw it away—I shall be only too proud if you will let me give it to you. For all I have is, in the end, for you, Betty! And oh! my dear; you were right. You are right in all you do; and how I honour you! All last night I lay awake, thinking of you; and I seemed to see you setting out that day from my door in your pretty white frock and your gold buttons. I didn't know what it all meant, and in my blind obstinacy I must have caused you grievous pain—and more, piled up your troubles and difficulties on you. I'll never get the sight of you on that morning out of my eyes again. And I never want to, my dear, for the good Lord was with you on your journey that day; and if I had only known——”

Here the old man fairly burst out crying, and taking Betty's two hands in his raised them to his lips and kissed them and went on, whilst Betty drawing from her bosom a gold button by its white silk string, kissed it—

“My dear child, when I see you bearing your trouble so bravely, and striving so to do all that is right, I think better of others—of all

others—for your sweet sake ; and I pray that you may yet have the desire of your heart of hearts. I hope and pray God with all my soul that in time to come your life will be blessed with love—that love you hope for : the love of a good and worthy husband, whom you can honour and who will love and honour you as you should be loved and honoured ! ”

Then Betty bent over his great, wrinkled hands and kissed them and raised her eyes to his. He saw the dark marks come round them ; and then she too burst out crying. And so without further words these two great hearts understood all, and they found much comfort in the silent sympathy.

They never spoke of the matter again, either of money or of Rafe, but from that day the old merchant had many inquiries made secretly, and kept watch for any sign of the missing man.

No one ever mentioned Rafe to Betty, or directly or indirectly alluded to marriage. Would-be suitors there were many, for the greatness of her fortune was known ; but, living retired equally at Much Hadam or Chelsea, Miss Pole gave no opportunity of wooing. Now and again there came from the wars, which, here and there, ever convulsed some

part of Europe, rumours of some gallant deed wrought by some unknown soldier; and Betty's hopes grew high. The age was one when soldiers of fortune were not uncommon; and when the tales of the camp-fire had found their way to the hearth and men's blood quickened and women's tears fell fast at the recounting of some heroic deed, Betty's heart would beat at the thought: "That might be my Rafe! 'Twere surely like him;" and there would rise before her inner eye the image of that gallant horseman whom for her Time had purified from his base surroundings. But alas! these gallant heroes either fought their way to fame and the knowledge of the world, or else they perished and were heard of no more; and Betty's hopes grew colder and colder still, though her faith was as warm as ever.

One day—it was the fifth anniversary of the day she had made the journey to Much Hadam—Betty went into the city to pay a visit to her Cousin Fenton. It was not altogether that she wished to see her friends, but she had a hungry longing to go over once again at least a part of that journey which had such dire and sweet results. In the hot afternoon she left Mr. Child's bank, and sending her carriage to the stables of the "Saracen's Head," walked all

the way to Finsbury Square. She intended to surprise her cousin, and so took her way into the garden by the wicket at the back.

The garden was fresh and delicious, for the Alderman loved flowers, and his were well kept and constantly watered. Even on this burning afternoon they all looked sweet and bright; the turf plot was green as emerald with long grass studded with sweet summer flowers, and from the tiny beds rose beautiful turncap lilies and great, heavy-hearted roses, bending from the stakes round which they were twined. Here she wandered for a while, and then climbing the steps, without seeing any of the maids, entered the Alderman's cosy room which looked out on the garden. The room was darkened by the summer blinds; and the heavy Turkey curtains which shut the room off from the great dining-room beyond were drawn. The windows were open, and into the room stole the sweetness of the flowers and the muffled roar of the city without. Betty sat down in a great leather-covered chair, half as big as a sofa, and made up her mind to wait and rest until her cousin should appear. The hum of the bees in the garden and the roar of the city merged in one—and Betty fell asleep.

She was partially awakened by the opening

of a door in the room beyond and the Alderman's heavy footfall. She was just making up her mind to become fully awake and speak to him when there was a knocking at the outer door. Presently the door was opened again and the voice of a maid said—

“It is a gentleman to see you, sir.”

“What name did he give?”

“He asked to be excused giving his name, sir. He said he was wishful to see you alone if he might; that he had waited till he had seen you enter, and that you would know him if you saw him.”

What was it that brought up Betty sitting in the great armchair with extended hands tightly grasping the arms and her eyes glowing? She was all awake now, and though at the first her impulse had been to depart on hearing the stranger's message, she did not now think of moving. She heard the old Alderman say—

“Wishful to see me alone—would know him if I see him; strange! Show him in, Hannah! and if your mistress comes whilst he is here simply tell her that I am engaged.”

The seconds that passed were agony to Betty. She thought—she did not know what; she hoped—she did not know what. She caught sight of herself in a great mirror and

saw the white frock, which she always wore on this day of the year, and noted the gaps left where two of the gold buttons were gone.

The door opened, closed again, and there was a pause. Betty sat like one in a dream and waited, her heart standing still in expectancy. Then came a voice which went through Betty's heart like sunshine, or a note of celestial music. She wondered how any one in the wide world who had ever heard it could fail to know it again. She would have liked to cry out—to sing—to spring to her feet and rush through the curtains and throw herself into the loving arms that she knew would be stretched out to her. But, as people usually are in moments of supreme emotion, she was self-contained and sat silent, though in an ecstasy. She did not go away now; she did not mean to go. She would wait, for wherever Rafe's voice was, she had a right to be there. She had won that right out of her love and patience and belief; and there was none in all the wide world, she was sure, who would wish her to go. Rafe had simply said—

“Mr. Fenton, I would like a word with you if I may be so privileged.”

The Alderman's tone as he answered was non-committal; Betty knew by it that he had not

recognised his visitor, and a wild thrill shot through her as to how Rafe could have become so changed that Cousin Fenton did not know him.

“ I shall be pleased, sir. Pray be seated.”

When Rafe spoke there was a sweet humility in the tone of the answer which brought a quick thought to Betty that the years had not passed in vain—

“ I thank you, sir, for your courtesy ; but there are reasons why I may not be seated in this house, or in your presence, until you are aware of who I am.”

“ Of who you are ! Sir, the room is dark and my eyes are not young !”

There was the sound of a drawn curtain, and then an exclamation—

“ Rafe ! Mr. Otwell ! Sir, this is strange indeed. You have not hurried in your coming !”

Betty could not but be glad that he had pronounced the Christian name first, as though the young man had been in his thoughts ; but it made her wince to hear the later words.

Rafe’s answer went straight to her heart.

“ Ah, sir, you are justified in any words you may use to me. But I fain would ask you not to judge me altogether too hardly for that fault. See here !”

The Alderman's answer explained his reason, as it came in horrified tones—

“The marks on your wrists! Are they of chains?”

“Yes.”

There was a pause, then came the Alderman's remark in a constrained voice—

“When a man comes from prison, there is need to explain——”

“You need not fear, sir. God knows that I have much to answer for; but though I well merited chains and prison, it was not my demerits that set these marks upon my wrists.” Betty listened with a sickening heart, and her one idea was to kiss those maimed wrists; but her eyes flashed as he went on: “They were won for me in battle against the Turks, for Faith and Freedom. For a whole year I wrought in a Turkish galley. But this is not to the point; I deserved to suffer, and I do not dare to repine. I only mention this old pain because I would fain beg a little forbearance, if not a little sympathy. Oh sir, yours is the first face that I have seen of all that I knew in the life here that seems so long ago. Yours is the first of the old voices that I have heard; and it may be the last, for I have come unknown to any, and I may depart the same. I know how

little I deserve from any man, and least of all from you, to whom of old I showed so little courtesy, not knowing then your worth, or perhaps being jealous of it. But there is a hunger in my very soul. I would not forget my manhood—But!—It is in such moments that we remember it.”

Betty longed to fly to him to comfort him, but she waited she knew not how. She had her reward, for they were tears of joy which burst from her eyes as her old cousin said, with a sob in his voice—

“Nay, sir; God forbid that I should be harsh with one who has suffered. There is my hand if you will, and glad I shall be if I can do good to you—for another’s sake if not for your own.”

The clasp of the men’s hands appeared to draw them together, for the voices of both seemed more at ease as they went on. Rafe was the first to speak—

“I have much to say, but a certain duty comes the first. Sir, do you know my sad story—or must I tell all my shame afresh?”

“Go on, sir! Go on! I think I know enough to understand.”

“I have been so long away, and have had no means of knowing aught that has happened.

The long suspense has been a part of my punishment. I have made some gain in the wars, and I have to make some restitution. No man can undo altogether such wrongs as mine, but he can search out and restore."

Here the Alderman interrupted—

"That has been done long ago—I daresay you can guess by whom."

In the silence that followed Betty seemed in her inner eye to see the grave bowing of that erect head. Then Rafe went on, though from the broken voice Betty could tell how much his heart had been troubled—

"Beyond this I wish to place ten times the sum in good hands for the use and benefit of others. I thought that you would accept the trust—for charity's sake, not for mine. I feel it ill to ask even such a thing from you whose hands have always wrought in honour; but with so upright a career as yours you can well afford to minister a charity, though the hands are not clean which entrust it to you."

"I accept it, sir," said the old man, "and with a joy unspeakable."

"And now, sir," said Rafe, with a choking in his voice, "you may perhaps answer me two questions. Is Betty—is Miss Pole alive?"

"She is! Thank Almighty God, she is!"

“God be thanked! And—and—is she married; or has she kept single?”

“She is single still.”

Again there was a long pause, and Betty, looking out straight in front of her, saw her image in the tall mirror. She dared not stir; she might not venture even to put a sheltering hand before her burning face lest the rustle of her dress should betray her presence. It seemed to her that, listening as she was in secret, it was almost immodest to behold even her own image in the glass, and so closed her eyes—and listened. She heard Rafe sob, and each word went beating through her heart like the throb of a giant pulse. With ears strained to every sound she heard the Alderman step close to him and the sound of his laying his hand on his shoulder. And then came his voice full of kindness—

“Nay, lad, don’t cry. Heart, man! There is hope for us all.”

“Thank God for hope! Oh, sir, in the years that have gone by I have found hope such a bitter pleasure that not seldom have I realised what the men of old meant when they said it was the last evil in Pandora’s box. Many a starlit night, when I lay out on the plains or up the mountain slopes, have I thought

and thought that a time might come when I should set foot on this dear English soil again, and that life might begin afresh for me here. But with the hope came dread thoughts that all might come too late. But still God be thanked for hope, for without it many a poor soul—and mine among them—would long ago have succumbed. And now, dear sir, I have one more thing to ask. I ask it as a favour from one man to another, in no wise to take after-responsibility, but only to advise me out of your greater knowledge.”

There was a conscious stiffening of the old man's manner, and a hardening of his voice as he replied—

“Go on, young sir. Let me hear what it is that you wish; then I shall be better able to judge how far I may further your desires.”

Again a long pause; and then Rafe spoke, but this time his voice had a new charm for Betty. It was the old voice, strong and full and mellow; but oh, how refined! Even amid her joy at such a change, Betty's heart was wrung with the thought that so much pain to him must have gone to the refining—

“I come back as poor as I went, for all that I have won is but to restore that which belonged to others, and to make some reparation through

the poor. There is one other sum, a thousand guineas, which has been a trust, and which has done no unworthy work whilst I have been its guardian. Of this I can speak freely and frankly, for it is not from myself but from that sweet saint who sent me out to try to purge my sin and to win honour again. It has freed captives and saved men's bodies, and I humbly trust their souls too. Beyond these monies I have nothing but my personal belongings, and I come to my own land as naked as a babe, to try to win something of the place I lost. Now I want you to tell me something according to your best judgment. I have come to you of all men because I know you to be unflinchingly upright in all ways, and because I know that you are, first of all, a firm and true friend of Betty Pole; that you will not let anything in the wide world come between her and what is most for her good. I know well, sir—as well as any man can know anything—that it would not be for the best, were all things starting from to-day, that such a pure, sweet, noble young thing as Betty should mate with such a stained and sinful man as I am. But I cannot shut out from my reasoning any more than I can from my memory, all the sweet moments when she was pledged to me. She herself

might not wish all the past obliterated ; and hers is the right to choose if she so wills it—most certainly in so far as I am concerned. How, then, should I act so as to deny her no happiness, or to cause her the least pain ? To me she is a living truth, and I cannot take from her acts or her words one little thing and believe that in that she was untruthful when all else was so crystal bright. I believe, as I live, that I am man enough to go away and make no sign, so that she may deem me dead, and so leave her life more free. Nay more, I can go away and have set on foot a rumour of my death, so that she may not be tortured with any hope. You are her friend, her wise and constant friend ; and I shall be deeply grateful if you will aid me with your counsel on her behalf.” He paused, and the rapture of Betty’s face was a joy to the angels.

The Alderman blew his nose violently, and said in a choky voice—

“ Young sir, your words are brave ; and on my soul and honour I believe them. But they should be spoken in a young maid’s ear—nay, in the very ear of our young maid herself—rather than to an old loveless and childless man, as I am.”

Then Betty stood up. Her heart had beat

heavily all through Rafe's saying, and, though in her secret heart her mind was made up as to what she should do, she wanted the endorsement of others as to its wisdom in order to complete her happiness. She was only a young maid, after all, and the care of choosing between good and bad is not rightly for young heads and hearts that are not steeled to the ways of the world. But she waited, covering her eyes with her hot hands, and listened a little longer. Rafe's voice came now more eagerly, the hope in his heart was growing; his long penance had done its work in purging his soul, and he spoke now more like a free man—more like the old Rafe—

“Nay, but, sir, will you not help me?—not for my sake, but for Betty's. It is of her that I think, and it is for her that I would act. Will you give me a hint as to what is for her good, or rather for her happiness?”

The old man was evidently troubled in his mind, for he paused. Betty waited in an agony of expectation. But when the Alderman spoke her heart leaped, for he answered in tones that she had seldom heard from him—

“God forbid that I, or such a poor opinion as mine, should stand in the way when the Lord has been doing His own work and leading

back a lost sheep to the fold. But oh! sir, search your own heart. Think of what a terrible responsibility you take upon yourself if you win the right to guard the happiness of that young life. Think what it would be—what it must be—if you were to take even the smallest step backward from the way that you have won. Think of the harrowing anxiety that for many a long year would be in her heart regarding your every step, no matter how well intentioned or well ordered it might be.

“Ah! sir, I see you are moved. That is good. Then let me tell you more—more than I ever dreamed of telling you till now. In my heart I feel—nay, I know—that our dear Betty loves you still. That for all these years she has been watching the hands of the clock as they crawled round the dial. That her thoughts have been of you and for you. And then think how every act or word of yours, if not of the highest, would shatter that high ideal in her mind—nay, would even reveal to her that you are only a man like the rest of us, with a man’s failings, and compact of clay. It would break that tender, loving, patient heart. This is a battle, sir, that a man must fight out alone. Judge for yourself, sir, and may the good God

aid you in the task of judging wisely! Ah! that is right. You can never be wrong, sir, whilst you take counsel like that. Would that Betty might be here to see you on your knees in such a cause!"

Betty, with her eyes still shut, put out her arms instinctively as though to embrace—she did not know which, her lover or the old friend who so comforted him in his trouble. Then Rafe spoke again—

"I shall take your kindly warning, sir, and spend the night in thought. I have looked at the matter hitherto perhaps selfishly and in too great self-belief. To-morrow, if I see that my duty is to go without seeing Betty, I shall send you word; and, if this be the sad result of my thought, then I charge you on your faith and honour that never by word or deed shall you even hint of this day, for its end may be that I shall simply pass away. If I think I am justified in staying, that I have learned sufficiently to trust myself, then I shall go to Chelsea. Whatever be the result, let me say that to the last hour of my life I shall be grateful to you for your attitude to me to-day—you from whom I deserve so little, and on whose loved one I have brought such trouble and such pain."

"Stay, sir! you must not go without some assurance that I shall see you again. You may miscalculate your own strength in this matter, and be driven to some desperate act."

"No, sir; be not alarmed on that score. I have, since we met last, been through too many bitter experiences to do aught rashly. And if it be that you fear that some time I may foredo my own life, again I say, be not alarmed. It is true that I do not fear death. In the years that have gone, I have seen too many souls take flight; I have looked too often into the eyes of Death to fear them. I have come to regard dying only as a means to an end; and with that new insight that end is too holy to be tampered with by any fell act of mine. But if it will give you ease, I promise that I shall not leave England without coming to see you again, without taking hope from your kindness, without bearing comfort and fortitude from the grasp of your honest hand."

"Then when may I expect you, if, indeed, we are to lose you?—and I pray that such may not be."

"At this hour the day after to-morrow. If I feel that I may see Betty and learn her wishes from her own true lips, I shall go to Chelsea in the afternoon of to-morrow. If not,

or, if, as it may be, Betty will not or cannot let all things be as they were before I shut the gates of that Paradise on myself, then I shall see you, as I said, at this hour of the day following; and shall then beg you of your goodness to be my almoner for that sum for charity of which I spoke."

Betty here could stand no more. She felt, now that the torturing fears of her heart were stilled, that she had no right to be an unknown confidant of such secrets. It came upon her with a rush that she had been an eavesdropper, though sure it was that the angels themselves could not have blamed one in her plight. She wished to be away—away anywhere—where she could hide her joy and, in its vastness, this little shame; where she could sink, unchallenged, to her knees and unburden her glad soul to God. In the midst of all the thought was one fixed and dominant idea—that she must not interfere with Rafe's project. This was the struggle, the final struggle and test of his own soul; and it must be wrought out alone. Well she knew that if he failed to know her glad and perfect happiness to take all risks with him, she would herself come to him and tell him to be of good cheer. She knew now where to find him, if there should be need. The doubt was a very

small one, for she seemed to know that the morrow afternoon would see him at Cheyne Walk.

And so she stole away out of the room, trembling lest a rustle of her dress should betray her. Down the steps she went, and out into the garden. The shrubs hid her from the house, and, not stopping to notice the new beauty which had come upon the flowers, she stole, feeling like a guilty thing, through the garden and out noiselessly through the wicket into the quiet lane-way behind the house.

Before long she was at the "Saracen's Head," and having ordered her carriage with all speed, was on her way to Chelsea before the sun began to set.

CHAPTER IX

AT CHEYNE WALK

IN the twilight that night Betty stole out alone, and walked by herself up the path by the river where Rafe had given her the golden buttons. Here, all hidden by the trees, turning to the west where the afterglow was like the rosy blush on her own face, she let out her soul in thankfulness to God. Then she went home. That night she slept like a tired child, and never woke till the glad sun, peering in at her windows, recalled her to what the day might bring forth.

All that morning she moved with the ordered routine of her life, and no one in the household saw enough change to cause a thought.

When, however, the noon had turned, Betty went to her room and made her toilet most carefully. The time since Rafe had seen her seemed so long that she feared it might have

left some stamp upon her, and anxiously she used her glass as every good woman does ; for a good woman is a true woman, and her glass—next to her Bible—is ever her help in self-respect. She put on once again the white dress in which she had parted from Rafe, and the gaps where the two buttons were missing were unmistakable. Then she stole down to the drawing-room and sat in her old place on the sofa where she had used to sit with Rafe. It was many a day since she had sat in the spot, for she had felt that to sit there was to hope too much, and if she hoped too much some tinge of blame might rest on Rafe. But now she was assured, and she need no longer deny herself the sweet luxury.

After a while Abigail came into the room and looked around, but not seeing her mistress in her accustomed seat by the window, turned to go out. Betty called to her—

“ I am here, Abigail ! ”

“ Dear heart alive ! Miss Betty, I never looked for you in that seat. I did but want to ask if you will walk or ride after dinner.”

“ Neither, Abigail. I think I shall sit quiet this afternoon. I had a long day in London yesterday, and I daresay it tired me.”

“ ’Deed, then, Miss Betty, I feared so at

first; but when I saw you come home I thought you never looked less tired in your life. But it's the way with young maids—they're not tired when they are, and when they are they're not!" with which seemingly incomprehensible piece of wisdom she withdrew.

The time seemed to Betty to fly with leaden wings that afternoon. She would not let herself come to any definite conclusion as to what she even hoped, but held surmise, of joy and pain alike, at arm's length. Of one thing she was certain—that she knew what she intended as to the result. The manner of it and the means were all that were left open. After dinner she took her seat in the window, ostensibly reading the last part of Mr. Pope's "Homer"; but the pages were unturned. From her seat she could watch the roadway for some little distance; no one could come near the house without being seen by her, though the screen of flowers which grew in their pots on the window-ledge hid her from strange eyes.

The clock had just struck four when her heart leaped, for her eyes, raised from her book, had lighted on the form she looked for. There was no fear of her mistaking that upright carriage, that swinging gait. She peered between the leaves of the plants, and her

hungry eyes lit on Rafe's face. And then, oh! the tumult of joy in her heart! He was unchanged save in all manly and noble ways. The pain, and suffering, and responsibility, and high endeavour of the years that had passed had only purified and ennobled his face. Her glance well justified the opinion she had formed the evening before from his voice and words. She did not dare to look long, but with a light bound and with noiseless foot flew back to her old seat on the sofa, and waited with the throbbing of her heart stilled by the magnitude of her expectancy. Then came the knock, and Abigail herself flew to open the door. The old woman may have taken some hint from seeing Betty in her old seat, and her intuition grasped the rest; or it may simply have been that she recognised the knock. None ever knew, not even she herself, for none ever asked; but she threw open the door, and recoiled with a half-smothered cry—

“Master Rafe! oh my dear young master!” She threw her arms impulsively round him, and instantly drew back. “Forgive me,” she said, “I forgot my duty.” Then in a louder and more ceremonious voice, and with a certain ominous stiffening of her back which of old the children had come to recognise as a sort of

storm signal, she went on : " The mistress has been looking out for you, sir. She was much distressed that you had not called sooner."

" Looking out for me ! " said Rafe, in amazement, for in his new simplicity of thought, and with his mind concentrated on the last twenty-four hours, he overlooked the longer time. " Looking for me ! Since when ? "

" Only for the last five years, sir ! " said the old nurse, with mingled dignity and sarcasm. A sweet smile broke over Rafe's face as he took her by the hand :

" You are right, my dear, good soul. The time has been long ; but be assured it has not gone quickly with me. I can only hope that you who so love Miss Betty will in time forgive me."

" Dear heart ! but I must go break it to the child that you are come." She retired demurely as far as the foot of the staircase, and then ran with what speed her old legs could make to the drawing-room. Her method of breaking it was her own. She darted into the door and called in a fierce, joyous whisper—

" He is here, Miss Betty ! He is here ! and looking finer than ever. Let me see, darling, that you are looking your best ! " and she eyed her mistress critically for an instant.

Then she retired, seemingly satisfied, as Betty said in grand simplicity—

“Tell him to come up, Abigail dear. You need not announce!”

Abigail flew to the stair-head; and thence coming down with sedateness and decorum, gave her message—

“My mistress will receive you, sir, in the drawing-room. You will excuse me accompanying you, but my orders are that I am not to announce you!”

Rafe smiled at her so sweetly that in her secret heart she forgave him on the spot. Then she stayed silent, keeping a jealous watch lest any of the maids should by any bungling accident make interruption of her mistress.

Betty sat silent—silent and still as death. She heard Rafe’s footsteps on the carpeted stair, and wondered why they were so slow. How she would have flown had she been going to him! But he was a man, and it was her place to await him; the sweetness of the coming moments was not to be forestalled.

The door opened and closed again, and she looked up. Before her stood Rafe, more erect than ever as to his body, for his years of soldiering had perfected his bearing. But his

head was slightly drooped ; the long years of hopes, of fears, of imaginings, told their tale when now he stood in the presence of the woman who had been his very sunlight. There was no need for him to speak. Had she not known already, Betty would have understood by instinct the meaning of that humble bearing. The lesson of her own patient years of hoping and waiting were not lost ; and face to face these two loving hearts realised that for them time had stood still, and the golden days of their lives had even to begin. All Betty's joy and pride and hope and love shone in her sweet eyes as she rose to her feet, and with one glad word—"Rafe!"—whose tone was music to the man who heard, and to the angels who smiled approvingly—fairly leaped to the arms which opened to receive her.

When they sat again in their old place on the sofa, Betty said, as she held his hand and pressed it to her side in the sweet old fashion of her childhood—

"Rafe dear, I have a confession to make ; you must forgive me, for I could not help what I did."

"Granted, my dear one, whatever it may be," said Rafe, and it need hardly be said

he took advantage of the occasion for another kiss.

"I was in Cousin Fenton's study last afternoon!" She paused, for Rafe instinctively stood up. "Nay, you must sit again and be my prisoner!" She held out her hands, and as he extended his to take them his scarred wrists became exposed beneath the ruffles. With a low cry, almost a sob, Betty drew them to her and bent down and kissed them. "Oh! Rafe," she said, "the word is a pang to me, for it wrought these cruel wounds!" Then she smiled through her tears as she went on: "'Tis I who am the prisoner now, but oh how different! for my chains are of light, and music, and flowers and love, whilst these——" and she bent over, despite Rafe's protest, and kissed the scars again.

For an instant Rafe said nothing; then he spoke with a grave solemnity that Betty never forgot all her life long—

"I grieve beyond measure that I must come to you with such a scar. Therefore, oh! my dear one, be most kind to me and turn not against me the arrows of my own conscience. Though it be true that these scars come about from no shameful cause at man's hands, yet I may not forget that they are justly given

at the hands of God. I have come to realise, Betty, something of the wonder of His ways; the sowing and the reaping is all in just measure though men know not or care not at the seed-time what grain it is that they scatter. 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.' These scars shall be warnings to me for all my life; till at the last, if it may be in God's good time, the hands that bear them shall lie folded over a peaceful heart."

Betty took the two maimed hands in hers and held them to her heart as she answered—

"You are right, Rafe: they must be guides to us both. I must share in all things; and then you will truly feel that you have won something for me too out of that bitter time!" Then she went on:

"I had come into the house in Finsbury Square through the garden, and no one saw me. I had fallen asleep in Cousin Fenton's own chair, and I was only awakened by his coming—and yours. I listened to all, Rafe. I could not help it; for at the first I was spell-bound, and then afraid to stir. And then—then, oh! Rafe, when I heard your brave words and knew of the noble doubt that was in your

heart, I did not want to go, for I feared that then any movement might have turned things awry, and I hoped—oh! Rafe, how I hoped!—that your trust in my love would win in that struggle, and that you would come to me as one knowing.”

Here she faltered, and her voice broke. With a silent gush of tears she laid her head on her lover's breast, and her arms went instinctively round his neck. Rafe soothed her and stroked her sunny hair, and when he thought she was not aware of it, kissed the tresses. But this did not pass unknown, though Betty said nothing, in sweet hope that the transgression might be repeated. The years that had passed had changed Betty from a girl into a woman, and though her heart and mind retained all their bashfulness, there was a new yielding to the sweet impulses which came to her, as to all the daughters of Eve. The years had made a new hunger of the heart, and when she felt her lover in her arms, and heard his heart beat close to hers, she wanted something more than the simple assurance that he would not leave her again.

And so the two sat silent till even Abigail at the stair-foot was satisfied that the reconciliation, if there were need of one, was com-

plete, and hurried to the kitchen and the still-room to see that a worthy supper was provided. By and by she went to the drawing-room to learn her mistress's commands ; and though she was delayed by a distressing cough of sudden oncoming, which took her in the hall, and lasted with increasing violence till her hand was on the door, she made her entrance at last. When she saw Rafe and Betty sitting as of old on the sofa—for the sound of her coughing had driven them apart—the tears of gladness rushed unbidden to her eyes ; which seeing, Betty flew to her, and, putting her arms round her, kissed them away. Rafe came over to her, and, taking her hand, said in his old, boyish way—

“ Abigail, I must have a kiss too. For all your loving care of Betty when I was away who should have been at her side ; for all your hope and cheer and belief ; for the tenderness and love and care, you must count me your friend and servant so long as we both shall live ! ” and stooping over her he kissed the old wrinkled cheek which blushed like a maiden's under his caress.

In order to put herself at ease again, Abigail said, in as natural a way as she could manage—

"What are your commands for supper, Miss Betty?"

"All! all! everything!" said Betty, dancing round the room like a happy child. "Kill the fatted calf, Abigail! Kill the whole herd of them. Rafe is come home! Rafe is come home!"

"Dear heart!" said Abigail, looking at her with glad eyes, and taking Rafe into her confidence with a look. Betty suddenly stopped and said—

"And oh! Abigail, lay another cover, for I should not be surprised if Cousin Fenton were to join us at supper."

"La, Miss Betty, surely his lordship wouldn't come out here at this hour all by himself; and him not knowing whether you are at home."

"Perhaps not, Abigail; but I should make ready for him anyway, lest by chance he should come."

So Abigail went off to add to her preparations; for a gentleman who had once been Lord Mayor of London was to her of no small importance. From the day of Mayoralty he had never been to her anything but "His Lordship" or "My Lord."

It was not long before there was another knock at the door, hesitating and unobtrusive,

and Abigail herself flew to open it. Visitors at such an hour were rare enough, and to-night, when there was every reason for keeping strangers at their distance, the faithful guardian would not trust to any less responsible person the answering of queries. Her first thought was that Miss Betty's prophecy was true, and that Alderman Fenton had arrived; but that could not be, for there was no sound of wheels, not even of hoof-strokes, as would have been had he ridden. So it was with a certain curiosity that she opened the door. Her wonder was in no wise lessened when she saw that the guest was none other than the Alderman himself—the late Lord Mayor—His Lordship—all alone and on foot, and looking no more than an ordinary and unofficial man! Abigail's wonder grew, as with admonitory finger on lip he stepped into the hall, and himself closed the door softly behind him. She waited in respectful silence for him to speak, yet not without a secret bridling, which would have manifested itself to any one unsheltered by the memory of Lord Mayoral state. The Alderman asked—

“Has your mistress had any visitors to-day?”

Abigail, under ordinary circumstances, would have blurted out the whole matter; but since

there was a mystery, she felt that she should best help herself to some clue by being as uncommunicative as might be. Out of the very questions put to her she might be able to construe something, so she swiftly answered—

“Yes, my lord!”

Then the Alderman got even more vague.

“Ladies?”

“No, my lord.”

“At what time was the visit paid?”

“After dinner, my lord.”

“At what time did they go?”

“Not yet, my lord.”

“Good! How many gentlemen were there in the party?” Abigail began to see daylight.

“Only one, my lord!”

“Good! Do you know him?”

The old man was manifestly perturbed in his mind as he asked this question. So Abigail's eagerness to tell and her respect for his dignity combined with her liking for him—for he was very dear to Miss Betty and had always been kind to herself—all worked in the direction he wished; putting her mouth close to his ear she whispered exultingly—

“’Tis Master Rafe come home; and oh! my dear lord, this is a joyful house this night!”

The old Alderman sank down on the high-backed settle in the hall and covered his face with his hands.

“Now God be thanked!” he said, and when he took his hands away Abigail saw that his eyes were wet. She too was moved, and as she raised the corner of her apron to her eyes, he bent over, took both her hands, and said—

“Good Mistress Abigail, the faithful friend of that dear child, we old folks, methinks, are those that have the youngest hearts still. Only that we cry with joy when the time has gone by that we can cry at sorrow. I have been so anxious—in such suspense—that I was afraid almost to know the truth I sought. How did she receive him?”

The old woman shook her head :

“That I don’t know, my lord, but I take it that there wasn’t any great quarrel between them, for when I was up there awhile gone they was sitting together on the sofy as they used to sit.”

The Alderman paused, and then with some diffidence he said—

“Do you think now, Mistress Abigail, that I might go up just for a little while?”

“Dear heart, now! but you came that quiet that I quite forgot. Miss Betty told me her—

self to lay a cover for you for supper, for that she wouldn't be surprised if you looked in this evening. To think of it! She must be a witch!"

"Then go and ask her, if you please, Mistress Abigail, if she will care to receive me this evening?"

Abigail departed at once on her errand. A moment later Betty came flying down the stairs, calling out—

"Where is he? He must have come very quietly, for I never heard him!" and she threw her arms round him and kissed him. "Come upstairs," she said. "I was hoping you would come, for I have something to tell you."

Arm in arm they came back to the drawing-room where Rafe was standing at the door. As they drew close, each man extended a hand. Betty, taking them, placed them together and put both her own hands over the clasped ones. The Alderman was about to speak when Betty began, so he waited.

"Cousin Fenton I have a confession to make, and you must let me make it now. I was sitting in your own chair in your study last evening when you talked with Rafe."

His surprise overmastered him. "God bless my soul! I hope you didn't hear——"

"Oh yes, I did! thank God! I did. For I wouldn't for anything miss out of my life that conversation of two men whom I love and honour. Rafe knows what I think of him; or perhaps he knows a little—it will take a longer time to let him know it all!" and she looked at him lovingly. "But you know up to now only that I am an eavesdropper. How am I to thank you? You know what I mean! I know your kindness and your sympathy already—I—I shall try to show you some day," and once again the sweet eyes were filled with tears, but this time they were of pure joy. "My dear old friend, your wish has come true; the good God is giving me my heart's desire."

They all three went and sat on the sofa, Betty being between the two men and holding a hand of each; and the time seemed to have flown by too quickly when Abigail came and announced that supper was served. Betty took her cousin's arm and smiled at Rafe as she did so, saying to the Alderman but so that Rafe could hear—

"A hostess must not be taken down by her husband; and Rafe is not far from that now!" The blush on her face as she spoke was a poem in itself.

That was a happy meal ; and if there was any of the three who sat at meat, or any of those who waited on them, who was not content no sign of the feeling was evidenced. It was not late when Rafe and the Alderman went away together ; for in Cheyne Walk they kept early hours, and the road to London was one which had its own anxieties. Rafe took a little longer to say goodbye than his elder, who did not, however, seem impatient as he stood chatting in the hall with Abigail ; but when he came running down the stairs Betty's sweet "goodbye" followed his footsteps like a blessing.

The Alderman had left his carriage at the inn at Chelsea, and they drove to town together. On the way Mr. Fenton learned where Rafe was staying, and drove straight to the place and took away his belongings. Rafe remonstrated, he feared he might give trouble ; but the Alderman would hear no denial. Willy-nilly he must stay in his house till the happy time came when he would be with Betty.

"Tut man !" he said ; "d'ye think that I would let Betty's husband lie at an inn ? The dear lass ! When she told me to take her to supper and gave her reason I seemed to see

the time come already that please God will come. She and you going through life hand in hand, trusting each other and taking light to guide yourselves and others out of the troubles that are behind. I hope to see you with your children at your knees, teaching them how to grow into good men and women, and making the world the more like what God would have it because you both have lived in it!"

Rafe reverently lifted his hat, and as he raised his hands the back flash of the carriage lamps showed his scarred wrists, and he said—

"God helping us, your vision will be true."

It must be taken that God did help them; for the record of all their lives showed that the old man's insight had not deceived him.

THE END.

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