WANDERFOOT

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(The Dream Ship)

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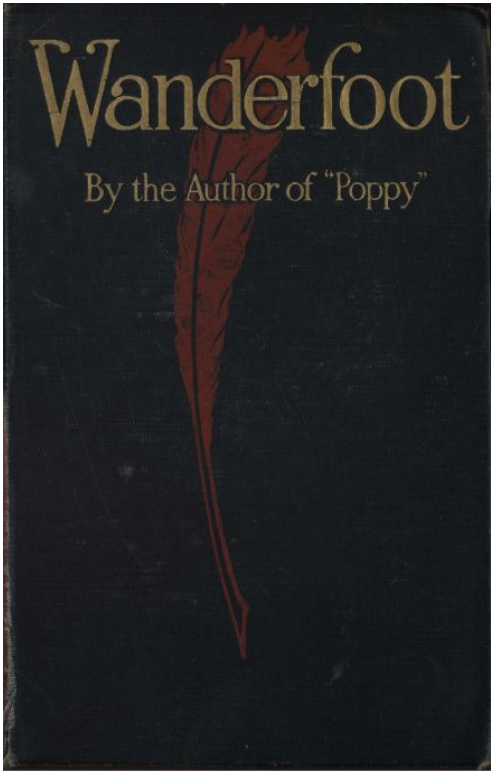
(THE DREAM SHIP)

BY

CYNTHIA STOCKLEY

AUTHOR OF "POPPY," "THE CLAW," ETC



Cover

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Cynthia Stockley

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TO
MY DAUGHTER
DOROTHY

”O Beauty, I have wandered far;
Peace, I have suffered seeking thee:
Life, I have sought to see thy star,
That other men might see.

And after wandering nights and days,
A gleam in a beloved soul
Shows how life’s elemental blaze
Goes wandering through the whole.”

CONTENTS

PART I

AMERICA

PART II

JERSEY

PART III

FRANCE

Part I

America

CHAPTER I

SECRET PALACES

"Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion."

The *Bavaric* had been four fine September days at sea, and it was time for the vague pain and melancholy that always haunted Westenra after leaving Ireland to pass; yet it stayed with him as never before it had stayed. The voice of the Atlantic sang a dirge in his ears, and looking at the long grey rollers he thought of his mother's hair which he would never see again, of the mists that enveloped *Inishaan* as Ireland passed from sight, of the ghosts of Raths, and all grey things; and life looked grey before him and dull. It was as though the mists and shadows of his land lay upon his spirit and would not be lifted. More than ever he was lonely, more than ever an exile, for now there was none but the dead left to him in the land of his birth; the last root had gone, the last frond been cut away. His mother had died on the day he sailed from New York to pay her his annual visit, and long before he reached Queenstown she had been laid away to rest by his father's side in the fair valley of Glendalough.

For awhile he had roamed about Ireland with something of the aimlessness of a wounded creature, choosing wild solitary places where the sorrowful beauty of lake and forest and mountain, so unique, so different in its wistful allurement to any other scenery in the world, had seemed to brood with him in his grief and lay with mysterious hands some healing spikenard in his heart. But the shadow of loneliness had not been lifted from him.

He had never spent more than a few weeks of his yearly holiday with his mother, and the rest of the two months in different parts of Europe, but always he had felt her in his life; sitting by her fireside in her beautiful little Carlow home she had constituted his bit of Ireland, his share of the world. Now he was a lonely man without home or kin. The ache of emptiness was in his heart as he stared at the few pale early stars that had ventured forth into the evening sky.

Nothing was left in his life now except a child and a woman; but the child was not even his own, and the woman was only a vision. For years she had come to him in his dreams, so many years that he could not remember the first time, but usually she appeared when he was in Ireland or coming away from it, never in America; and because he was fresh from Ireland, and the supernatural element that is in the Celtic nature had been recently renewed so that supernatural things

still seemed to him the real things of life, he thought of her now as if she were a real woman, and wondered why it was so long since he had seen her flickering through the night in her pale grey gown with fine lace at the throat and a chain of luminous beads swinging before her neck. He tried to recall the strangely Oriental face, but, as always it eluded him, and he could only remember the wistful lurking sadness that divined in her something of the Irishry, the knowledge of sorrow and longing for far places in her eyes; the subtle suggestion of mourning for some lost land, like an echo of Goethe's song:

> "Kennst Du das Land wo die Citronen blühn?
> Im dunkeln Laub die Goldorangen glühn,
> Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht
> Die Myrte, still und hoch der Lorbeer steht."

There were other things that troubled him too: dark shadows hovering about

her, flecks of mud and blood upon her bare feet, and the weary look of one who has come a long way upon a bad road. But what was sweet to his lonely heart was that she seemed so unquestionably to belong to him, so wholly and inevitably his.

The Irish boy who never loved has never lived, and Westenra cherished with characteristic ardour the remembrance of one or two youthful romances, but apart from these and his great love for his mother there had been no woman's influence in his life. He had been too busy to let women in.

Though he was only thirty-three, America had heard of him as a surgeon, and that is no slight triumph in a land of many clever surgeons. What was dearer to him was the fact that in Medical Science the "other fellows" knew of him–the big, silent men beating their way by inches along the hampered road of Progress–they recognised him as one of themselves, a worker not for money nor personal glory, but for humanity.

Skill with the knife, being at its best no more than a fine collaboration of hand and eye, never yet sufficed a brilliant intellect, and it had not sufficed Westenra. His keen mind, not content to follow on the lines laid down by other men, craved for higher work in the discovery and formulation of new principles of treatment in diseases that defied the surgeon's knife; and it was in the laboratory that he had won the triumphs he most valued. In spite of a heavy hospital and private practice, he had found time to do some unique experimental work in connection with the intestinal canals, while on the subject of locomotor ataxia he was already considered something more than an expert. But the diseases that lured him most were those in which surgery failed to give the relief hoped for, and one such he had specially starred out for laborious investigation. He knew

when he determined to devote himself to the subject of the metabolic disorders underlying diabetes, that years, perhaps a lifetime, of experiment and ardent unpaid labour lay before him, but he faced the prospect boldly, for he doubted not that in the end he would have as great a gift to bestow upon the world as even Lister, Metchnikoff, or Pasteur.

Not much time in such a life of planned hours, tasks, and duties to think of women. And, indeed, except as cases, he had not definitely thought of them. But, like all Celts, he had an inner world of his own in which he walked sometimes, and did not walk alone. A mystical subtle knowledge was his that somewhere in the universe a woman was waiting for him–the woman with the pale Oriental face and the grey gown. And in his heart he listened for the delicate approach of footsteps from out the distance and the Future.

"Dear, were your footsteps fast or slow?
One look or none did you bestow
When carelessly, as strangers go,
You passed my door?"

He understood the listener in those lines with the imagination of one who

in a city office or hospital can hear the sounds of birds and insects, and feel the wind of the moors on his face and see the gloom of trees. The dark waves of the Atlantic had often seemed to him symbolic of the Irish nature; dark and sad to the outward view, but when the wind ruffles the surface showing light and beauty beneath, secret inner palaces of green crystal.

But to-night his loneliness oppressed him as never before. It seemed to him he had waited too long in a land of dreams and shadows. He left the sea and stars at last and went to his cabin.

At dinner for the first time since the boat sailed the seat next his own was occupied, though he scarcely noticed the fact until he found himself sitting beside a woman. A young woman he saw at once by her hands, all that he could see of her very well, for however curious a man may be it is difficult for him to take the bearings of a person with whom he is seated cheek by jowl. Westenra was not at all curious, but even when he was the dreamiest of Irishmen he was also a trained observer, and to take notes on the people with whom he came in contact whilst apparently absorbed in his own affairs was as natural to him as breathing. He could almost make a diagnosis from a hand, and the next deductions he drew from the slim ones of his neighbour were not all so pleasing as the first. For one thing he saw that she was an intensely nervous woman, even though she spent so much time out of doors, ungloved, that her hands were burnt to a pale brown

tint. They were more like a boy's hands than a woman's, except that they were so nervously febrile and covered with rings. The rings called for attention. They were odd and barbaric, and of far greater beauty than value, for most of the stones were semi-precious, and their charm lay in their quaint settings and brilliant colouring. There were miniatures surrounded by amethysts, marquise rings of blue and green enamel with devices in rose-diamonds, olivines and sardonyx set with seed-pearls and an Angelica Kauffman under a crystal. On the thumb of her right hand she wore a very fine black scarab heavily set in platinum, and on the index finger of the same hand a silver ring of rough workmanship made in the shape of a V with a stone like an uncut ruby imbedded in the point of the letter. Nothing so commonplace as a wedding ring was to be observed amongst this eccentric collection. The forefingers of her left hand were faintly tinted with the amber of nicotine.

"Smokes too much," thought Westenra, and might have supposed her left-handed but for a worn, hard little mark on her right middle finger. "Writes, and smokes while she 's writing," he deducted, and thought none the better of her for that. When she ordered a brandy-and-soda to drink with the sardine she was dissecting he liked her still less.

"She won't be in the game long at that rate," he estimated grimly. "With *her* nerves I 'll give her another two years at most." He hated to see women drink. Experience had taught him that few of them can do it long without going to pieces morally. And here was one who would certainly go to pieces physically as well. On this conclusion he felt no further inclination for observations. But that did not prevent him from hearing what she had to say. She had struck up a little conversation with the man on the other side of her, speaking in a nervous contralto voice that, without being throaty, contained a curious husky tremor giving almost the suggestion that she wore a veil over it. Without the assistance of his previous deductions Westenra would have known it at once for the voice of a temperamental woman, as well as that of a woman of the world; and was the more astonished therefore, at her free *bon camarade* manner with her neighbour, a French Jew with a mean expression on a clever face–a financier or dealer in jewels Westenra judged, and a none too scrupulous one at that. They talked about the ice on the table and where it had come from. The Jew was not sure whether it was Norwegian ice or manufactured on the boat, but was full of information about the New York supply and the great frozen lakes from which it was cut in enormous blocks.

"I must go and see them!" said the woman eagerly, "and the far solitary tracts of ice and snow in Alaska! I *must* see them."

She talked like a woman who had fever in her veins.

"You like cold places?" asked the Jew curiously.

”No! No! I hate cold, but I like wide, solitary, empty lands and countries I have never been to. I would love to wake up every morning of my life in afresh place.”

Westenra admired reserve in a woman, and was thoroughly astounded at such a lack of it. There was worse to come. Her friendly candour revived the French heart of the Jew to a corresponding friendliness which by some persons might have been considered impertinent, but did not seem in the least to offend this one.

”Excuse me, mad’moiselle, but I never saw such original bracelets. Might one ask what they are made of?”

”Ivory,” she answered pleasantly. ”I got them in Central Africa. They were cut green from an elephant’s trunk.”

”Elephant’s trunk!” murmured the Jew, and even Westenra had to smile.

”Oh! tusk I mean, of course. And the red things imbedded in them are garnets from De Beers’s Mine in Kimberley. I think they are ever so much nicer than diamonds, don’t you?”

The Jew tried to look as if he did, and succeeded fairly well.

”Here is another in my silver ring. A Zulu made this ring for me in Natal, out of a half-crown. I gave him the garnet to put in, and another half-crown for making it.”

If the Jew were outraged at the idea of any lady wearing such cheap jewellery, he concealed his feelings under a silky smile.

”Then you know Africa, mad’moiselle?”

”I know every country except America,” she said. ”But I think Africa is the only one in the world that I could stay in always without getting bored.”

”Ah! Is it Johannesburg you like?”

”Oh, no–Rhodesia–Zululand–the Drakenberg Mountains–the open veldt.”

The Jew stared.

”For a lady you have been to very unusual places,” he commented, and if the words were ambiguous the tone was not lacking in courtesy.

”I love to travel,” she said, ”and it is my business to see things and places. I am a journalist.”

”Indeed!” said the Jew, and stared again, for she was quite unlike any journalist he had ever met or heard of. But she gave him no time for any further astonished questions.

”I must go,” she said abruptly. ”This saloon is too hot.” Smiling pleasantly at him she drank up her brandy-and-soda and departed, the Jew rising up also and bowing her out of her seat in a way that Westenra considered officious, yet could not but notice that with a courteous smile on him the fellow was not so mean-looking after all. The Irishman gave a glance after the figure of his late

neighbour. She was tall and slight with a firm light walk, but as she went down the aisle made by two long dining-tables the ship rolled gently, and she put out her pale brown hands here and there touching a chair back.

Proceeding with his dinner, which had as yet only reached the second course, Westenra reflected that it would be difficult for any woman, even with a bet to win, to give herself and her affairs away more thoroughly in a short space of time than his late neighbour had done.

"With both hands she did it–and her tongue," he mused cynically. "In no longer a time than it took to dine off a brandy-and-soda and the outline of a sardine!"

After sitting next to her for a matter of twenty minutes he knew all there was to be known of her tastes, her profession, her temperament, her habits. She had travelled, she wrote for the newspapers,–sensational stuff probably, her head was too small for a thinker's head,–she was entirely modern, cursed with nerves, restlessness, and dissatisfaction; she was unreserved, unreposeful, uncontrolled, undisciplined; she drank, she smoked. He really could not think of anything about her, except her charming voice, which of course she could not help, that was not in violent opposition to his every idea of what a woman should be, and the fact filled him with resentment born of a kind of chivalrous discontent that any woman should be so far from the ideal standard. He entirely withdrew his earlier supposition that she was a woman of the world, in spite of the evidence of travel and experience.

"A woman of her type could never contend with any kind of social life. The way she let that Jew draw her was childish."

At that moment something happened that thrilled through his nerves and veins like an electric shock, and left him mentally stunned.

The woman of whom he had been thinking was coming back down the long saloon, her delicate hands put out to the chair backs in the same little frond-like movement as before. For the first time he saw her face clear and full; and he did not have to look twice to recognise it. Though it had always eluded his memory in waking hours he knew it now that he saw it as well as his own. *It was the face of the woman he had dreamed of for years.* He knew her hair, her eyes, her mouth, the grey gown she had on, the deep collar of fine lace ivoried by age that turned away from the base of a long throat that had fine ivory tints of its own. He even knew the necklace of luminous grey-green beads that swung to her waist. The wistfulness of the Irishry that he remembered so well lurked elusively about her eyes and mouth, and the touch of Orientalism was there too, though it was hard to tell of what it came, for if her hair was black and her skin Arab-pale, her sad eyes were not dark but of a curious smoky blue. As she came nearer she looked straight at him, her glance for a moment seeming to rest in his, and he saw that

like the eyes of many clever people hers possessed a slight defect; they were different in shape and expression; one seemed to be long and sleepy and almost cynical looking, the other, rounder, held an eager inquiring glance that suggested great vitality and ardour. This was Westenra's fleeting impression, there was no time for more, and he was almost too aghast for clear thought; but a glance of his eye went a good deal further than most people's, and in this instance his vision was sharpened by the strange circumstances of his dream.

It appeared that she had come back to her seat to fetch a little silk bag of the kind that women were then using to carry about their handkerchiefs and purses. She spoke to no one, only leaned over the back of her seat, took her bag and went away, and it was all over in two or three seconds. But in those few seconds a man's life had been changed. The world would never look the same again to Garrett Westenra. Obliged to add to all his scornful opinions of the woman who had sat next to him outraging his ideals, the astounding knowledge that she was the woman of his dreams, the living presentment of the vision that had for years so mystically haunted his life, he was shaken to the Celtic roots of him. He felt as a man feels who has lost something precious and irreplaceable. Something was broken and gone from his life. The beautiful spun-glass globe of illusion he had carried so secretly was shattered in the dust. In that moment of bitter realisation he was not a surgeon and scientist from New York, but a primitive man from Ireland keening in silence for a nameless sorrow. The desert grief of his race welled up from the depths of him, and the taste of his waters was as the taste of the waters of Marah.

————

There were few people on deck. The wind was chill, and the stars burned with the brilliant sapphire pallor of electric light. There was a special spot where Westenra always stood to smoke, because it gave him a leaning place against the rail where he could command the length of the deck, and yet get an uninterrupted view of the grey waves with their pale sea palaces. Close beside him in a canvas-sheltered corner stood his deck chair. He lit a cigar, but he might have been smoking seaweed for all the aroma there was in it for him. Abstractedly he stared at the phosphorescent waves, but his attention was on the door of the companion-way, and presently, as he had felt sure she would, the woman in grey came through it with her swaying movements and her hands put out a little. She had wrapped herself in a long silky cloak that gleamed in the starlight, and as she strayed up and down the deck like a grey ghost, the wind took hold of it and flicked it about her making it crack like a silken sail. It took fronds of her hair too and made them into lashes that beat her face and blew above her head. She

laughed a little to herself as she was blown this way and that, and for the first time that night she pleased Westenra, for he loved the wind, and it seemed to him that she loved it too. He stood very still listening to the tap-tapping of her heels, thinking of–

"Dear, were your footsteps fast or slow...?"

and of how long he had listened in office and hospital for the sound of a woman's feet coming towards him. He remembered the bare broken feet of the woman in his dream, though he had always dimly recognised that the mud and blood were symbolical of the rough paths she had walked. These that tapped the deck near him were daintily shod in grey *suède*, but from her own telling they had strayed in far places of the earth and echoed in lonely spots before they came his way, as they were coming now. Would they halt when they reached him? Resentful, antagonistic, and disillusioned as he was, something in his fatalistic Irish nature responded, some bird sang in a pale green palace when she stood still beside him, and spoke:

"Do you think I might sit in this nice sheltered corner?" She looked at the chair and then at him, with a boyish *bon camarade* smile that banished all the sadness and shadows from her face.

"I 'm sure you might–please do."

He moved forward swiftly and arranged the chair for her. She sat down, and as he did not move away began to talk to him in the same friendly easy way as she had used to the Jew, and he found himself, like the Jew, answering her if not eagerly at least with interest. However they touched only on generalities. She did not tell him nearly so much as she had told the Jew and he found in that too something to resent. Possibly she missed the French receptivity, or with the quicksilver sensitiveness of some women divined antagonism, for something like a little note of appeal came presently into her voice: it was as though she were trying to soften his heart towards her. In answer to some observation of his with regard to travelling she said rather wearily:

"Yes; one discovers these things when one has knocked about the world long enough."

"Knocking about the world" was not a process that usually enhanced a woman's charm, in his eyes at least; but he soon became aware that all charm was far from being knocked out of this one. Charm came out of her like a perfume, and stole towards him. But he steeled his heart against it and against her, so that a glint of the steel presently came into his eyes and seemed to ring in his voice. Certainly something in him chilled the little tendrils of good fellowship and friendliness that she seemed inclined to extend. At last shivering slightly

and drawing her cloak about her, she stirred in her chair, preparing to go. But he stayed her with an odd and unexpected question.

"Do you always wear grey?"

She laughed and turned to look at him curiously.

"Now I wonder what makes you ask such a strange question?"

Enraged with himself, resentful of her, he was far from any intention of telling her his real reason.

"It hardly seems to be your colour." He spoke abruptly and realised immediately that he was being rude. But she was not offended at the wry compliment. Whatever her faults might be she seemed at least to be untroubled by that one paramount in most women–vanity.

"Are you an artist?" She leaned forward and looked at him with the free curiosity of a child.

"No."

She waited an instant as though expecting to hear him supplement his curt answer, but her frank impulsive methods waked no answering echoes, and she sank back with a little sigh. He felt ashamed of his churlishness. Never before had he been so unresponsive to friendly advances; but apart from his instinct not to allow this woman to probe him, it had always been a principle with him never to disclose his profession to fellow-travellers. When he came abroad it was to rest, and he had found that the best way of doing so was to keep his identity dark from the world at large. However, his taciturnity if it chilled her could not make her change her manners and customs.

"You are quite right," she said at last, speaking as though there had been no awkward interlude. "Grey is not my colour. I always wear blues and reds and oranges–anything bright and Oriental: not only because I am pale but because I love vivid colours. If when I am unhappy I put on something crimson it seems to warm and cheer my heart like a fire. Don't you think the robin is happier for his red breast?"

Westenra said nothing. She had switched his mind off oddly to the things he loved in his boyhood–birds hopping in the garden, the robin's note–a rabbit flashing past through the dewy grass.

"If ever you are in deep despair and can see a field of poppies all glad and aflare under the blaze of the sun—-"

She appeared to have forgotten him and to be talking to herself. He too was away amongst the dews and tender sunshine of Ireland. He knew no blazing fields of poppies, but remembered them gay amongst the corn in the long fields.

"Or sunlight on fields of glowing corn," she said softly, "green land growing right down to the blue sea–trees turning to red and gold in the autumn–a bank of purple irises–gilded aloes spiking against the sky."

There was a strange little dreaming silence.

"I never had a grey gown in my life until now," she said suddenly.

Westenra looked pale in the starlight; there seemed almost to be in his skin a tinge of the colour she mentioned. Her words switched him back too suddenly from Ireland to a remembrance of her unwarranted likeness to his dream woman. She had even gone so far as to talk in the way that woman might have done! To pretend that she cared for the things that woman would care for!

"What made you get one now?" He knew not what fatalistic curiosity prompted the question.

"I got several," she said quietly. Her manner was still friendly, but there had come into it a certain graveness that he thought might be intended by way of rebuke, until he heard the end of her sentence. "You will never see me in any other colour on this ship. I am wearing grey as a sort of mourning for my husband."

"I beg your pardon," he said slowly, startled, astounded, and puzzled. A widow! Oh! She *could n't* be the woman he had dreamed–the whole thing was ridiculous! Grey for mourning? That was new to him. But perhaps the fellow had been dead a long time, and she was just going out of mourning? As if in answer to his thoughts she made another of her curious statements.

"We had been such bitter enemies that I felt it would be hypocritical to go into real mourning for him. But he died a fine death, and in honour of that I thought I might at least absent me awhile from the felicity of bright colour."

She rose to say good-night, and as she stood there looking at him for a moment with her elusive Irish smile and her Oriental air, he saw that, tell himself what he might, widow or no widow, hers was indeed the face he knew so well. The long shadows thrown by the lights behind her fell about her feet recalling the vulture shadows of his dream. Her cloak flickered round her like a silken sail, and the beads about her neck swung and softly clicked as dice might click in the hands of Fate.

CHAPTER II

GREY AND GOLD

"Two shall be born the whole wide world apart,

And speak in different tongues, and have no thought
Each of the other's being, and no heed;
And these, o'er unknown seas to unknown lands
Shall cross, escaping wreck, defying death;
And all unconsciously shape every act
And bend each wandering step to this one end–
That one day, out of darkness they shall meet,
And read life's meaning in each other's eyes."

There are few men who in thinking ahead, however vaguely, to the time when they will share life with a woman do not expect to find their ultimate kingdom in the heart of some girl with a face like the morning and a nature fresh and unspoiled as an opening rose. With the freshness faded from his own heart and the "songs of the morning" long forgotten, this modest instinct to allot to himself the beautiful and the ideal remains deeply rooted in the best and worst of men. Of Irishmen it should be said in extenuation that they are usually greater idealists than the generality of men, and possess the instinct of worship more strongly. They do not always make fortunes nor gain fame; but they make shrines. And deep in the nature of every one of them sits fast the belief that the finest woman in the world is surely for him because he has the finest shrine ready for her. If she does not fit, it is not the fault of the shrine, which is composed of the very best materials–that stuff of which dreams are made.

Garrett Westenra had all the bigoted simplicity of the man who has never loved and been deceived. There is nothing like a wrecked shrine or two for getting rid of unworkable notions about the uses of women as idols; but no woman had ever deceived him, so he had kept all his faith and bigotry and generous beliefs to bestow upon the one woman–a golden apple with a bitter core perhaps, for it is not always fair to the woman to have too much in this line to bestow. Being a citizen of the world he did not of course suppose that fine qualities and a beautiful nature are only to be found in the opening-rose type of woman, but certainly he had unconsciously or otherwise assigned to the woman of his dreams all the traditional virtues and graces of character and bearing. He had come of fine simple people: one of the old Irish families who through poverty and misfortune had lived for generations with the simplicity and austerity of peasants, but whose men had never lost their breeding and bearing, and whose women were strong and fearless without breaking the laws of their religion.

One of his ancestresses had eloped with a Westenra, and pursued by her disapproving brothers, the pair had swum a river abreast; later, when having fought one brother after the other the bridegroom, wounded in the legs, was un-

able to walk, his wife carried him on her back for miles to a place of safety–not that he was small and weak (no Westenra was ever that), but that she was big and strong and fine; her wedding ring, a thin thread of gold, had come down through generations to Garrett Westenra and fitted his third finger easily. His great-grandmother, daughter too of an old but impoverished family, had not disdained to rebuild with her own hands the house in which she afterwards lived and died. These were the single-hearted, simple, faithful women,

"Strong and quiet like the hills,"

from whom Westenra had sprung. Tradition dies hard when it is rooted in such firm ground. Small wonder that dismay blotted out delight when he recognised at last the romantic face of the woman he had waited for, only to find it allied to the strange, rootless, roving, almost vagrant personality of Valentine Valdana.

Even if every one on the ship except himself had not appeared to know that she was Mrs. Valdana *the* journalist, he could not long have remained in ignorance of her name for "Val Valdana" in writing so illegible as to invoke curiosity was written on everything she possessed, and she left her possessions everywhere. She was the most careless woman in the world. She lost and mislaid books, cushions, papers, and rugs; her shoes were frequently undone, and her hair almost always on the point of coming down. Yet she never looked untidy because her feet were pretty and her hair was of the feathery kind; and in the matter of her lost possessions she preserved entire calmness, for some one was always obliging enough to find them for her and bring them back. Once she left on deck a book full of audacious sketches and notes about the passengers, and the wind ruffling the leaves of it dispersed scraps of paper in every direction. One of these displayed a pair of love-birds sitting beak to beak on a branch, but the birds possessed the life-like features of two cranky old maid passengers who were continually squabbling in public; beneath was the scribbled legend: "*If we comfort not each other, Who shall comfort us in the dark days to come?*" ... Another entitled "*La planche*" was the portrait of an enormously fat lady passenger grown extraordinarily slim and pretty. A little pink hard-shelled woman with a habit of making up to people only to say something extremely unpleasant to them was cartooned as a crab reaching out and nipping everything within reach. A moony-looking individual with a wry neck, peering eyes, and a loud brown check suit had lent his individuality to the sketch of a tortoise pottering curiously about the deck. A newly-married couple who were always sipping egg-nog together had been pilloried as the Siamese twins joined by a large egg.

Yet when the cartoonist came on deck the victims of her pencil were all ready to smile at her, and return her property without resentment. It was so

patent somehow that malice was the one thing absent from the mental make-up of Mrs. Valdana.

Another day soon after their first meeting, Westenra found her in her deck chair with one slim foot twisted round to inspect what is sometimes known as a "potato" in the heel of her stocking.

"Isn't it amazing how holes in one's stockings arrive?" she remarked to him pleasantly. "I would n't mind only I 've got such tender heels."

Impossible for a thoughtful man who has known poverty and carried memories of his mother's fingers worn with darning to imagine such a woman as a wife and mother. Plainly the shrine Westenra had built for the woman of his dreams could never be occupied by this one. No shrine could keep for long so restless a heart, nor fireside and cradle detain such wandering feet! As the days went by the likeness in fact that he had seen in her to his vision became blurred and faded. It was not difficult at last to persuade himself that his recognition of her had been a fantasy of his brain. Once the thought dismissed of any mystical bond between them, he could not help liking the incompetent, careless creature and finding pleasure in her society. She was a good companion: not gay herself so much as the cause of gaiety in others. She rarely said witty things, but it was surprising how witty others became in her company. Her art was of the kind that seems to underlie rather than break through the surface of conversation, leaving the best points for others to make. But sometimes when things were at their dullest she would suddenly send up a little sparkling rocket that lit the mental horizon and thrilled the surroundings with colour.

Westenra, whose native wit and eloquence needed little sharpening, was at his best with her, and he became his pleasant and extremely engaging self while enjoying to the full that charm in her that from the first he had not denied. Her ardent feeling for the ideal and the original was a spur to his intellect, and not only re-awoke his natural gaiety, but set stirring all his altruistic dreams. For there was greatness smouldering in Westenra, that needed only the right woman's hand to fan it into flame.

No one observing Mrs. Valdana listening, almost thirsting for all he had to say, would have guessed that as far as actual experience of life went, hers had been far wider and greater than his, for the usual results of experience–callous indifference or a calm philosophic outlook–were amazingly absent from her. She was vividly interested in life, and the more she saw of it, the less *blasée* she became; and because ideas interested her even more than experience she was deeply interested in Westenra.

If the latter had ever lived in England he would infallibly have recognised the name of Valentine Valdana as being that of one of the foremost women journalists in the world. Even had he been in the habit of reading those American

Sunday journals whose overseas cables in a surprisingly small space manage to mention the doings of everyone of importance, he would have realised that so far from being the "small-headed, yellow journalist" he supposed, she occupied a unique and enviable position in the newspaper world. But he had never concerned himself with the doings of European journalists. America is a big country, with big enough personalities and interests of its own to absorb such attention as a man wrapped up in his work and the great scientific facts of life has to give to public affairs. Thus it came to pass that he did not know there was one thing Mrs. Valdana, with her odd eccentric gowns and ornaments, a hole in the heel of her stocking, and her black hair endlessly coming down, was not careless about, and that one thing was her work–and that because of her work she was famous.

Certainly she was not the person to tell him, being as reticent about the astonishing things she had done as she was childishly frank about her picturesque tastes and fancies. She would show her ivory bracelets cut green from the tusks of an elephant in Central Africa, or howl in the moonlight like a jackal, or dance like a Somali warrior (as she did at the concert got up for the sailors' benefit), or describe the orchids that hang like glowing lamps from the trees in the deep steaming forests of the Congo; but she would say nothing of her articles on sleeping sickness and Congo atrocities, or how she had nearly lost a foot on a terrible march in Somaliland, but turned out an amazing Odyssey on the manners and customs of a little known people. She always forgot to mention that it was she who had shot the elephant from whose tusks the bracelets came, and that her knowledge of jackal music was acquired in a lion-infested part of Bechuanaland, where she had got lost from her party and spent a sinister night up a tree.

Next to Africa she loved India best in the world, and could discourse alluringly on the subject of *phul-karries*, and silk embroideries from Delhi, of sunsets seen across the plains when the buffaloes and the goats are being herded home in a mist of golden dust; of paddy-birds standing in shallow grey pools, and the grace of the swathed women coming from the wells. Chanting through her nose a thin monotonous wail, while with three fingers and her thumb she made a measured thrumming tattoo on the table, she could conjure up the very heart-throb of the Indian Bazaar until the never-ending rhythmic torment of the East dragged at the heart of those who listened. She could tell too every kind of amusing story and scandal about Anglo-Indian society; but she would never mention that she had been sent out in '97 to get for her paper the truth about the Tochi rising–and had got it; that she was at Simla when the English were waiting breathlessly for news from their men at the front, knowing that any serious reverse in the Tirah might possibly mean an attempt at a general rising and massacre in the plains and hill stations of the Punjab, and that she was one of those women who had gone out as usual to balls, and laughed and jested with sickening fear in their

hearts, under the keen eyes of the native servants–and afterwards had sat in her room hour after hour sorting and classifying her facts, embodying them in the strong vivid articles that a few weeks later made England "sit up" for awhile and realise that all was not peace and fair contentment in the Indian Empire.

There were lots of other interesting things Mrs. Valdana never told. She had been in Russia on a mission for Mr. Stead, and in Turkey to probe out the affair of a secret concession for turquoise searching granted by the Sultan to an English Member of Parliament. She had interviewed De Witte, the Red Sultan, and Paul Kruger, and stayed at Groot Schuur as Cecil Rhodes's guest. But all these things were part of her work, and of her work (except to other journalists) she never spoke. It spoke for itself.

Though she had done special work for many of the big London papers she was a free lance and under bonds to no journal. No inducement that could be held out to her was strong enough to lure her from her ways, which were the ways of a literary vagabond who came and went at no man's bidding, but achieved her best work by wandering only where she listed, and writing only what her heart urged. This might have been fatal to financial success, but that it was allied to an instinct that amounted to genius for the big vivid things that take hold of the public imagination. Every good journalist has a nose for news; Valentine Valdana had the added gift of an "eye for colour"; she saw it across continents, recognised it overseas, followed it as her star; and what she wrote concerning it editors were pleased to scramble for. If one disapproved of her "stuff" another was only too glad to embrace it. She revised and blue-pencilled for no man. Her creed was Byron's when he wrote to Murray: "Cut me up in the *Quarterly*, rend me in the Reviews, do unto me as did the Levite unto his concubine, but do not ask me to revise, for I cannot and I will not." She would not either, and she did not have to. Enough that her stuff was signed with her well-known nom-de-plume "Wanderfoot" for it to sell like hot cakes. In fact, in her own line Valentine Valdana was famous; and Garrett Westenra did not know it.

Nor would he have been greatly impressed if he had known. He was entirely opposed to that kind of fame for a woman.

All Irishmen, whatever their rank or situation, are at bottom profound lovers of nature, virtue, and simplicity; and from this great quality of the heart springs the singular charm that makes them the most attractive people in the world; but it has a defect in its almost peasant standardising of women. Lack of money in Ireland has created in the Irish an eternal oversense of the value of riches; but though there has never been any lack of women in Ireland they are not undervalued on this account (in fact, as has been shown, they are given shrines to occupy). Still there is a secret and peculiar hatred in the Irishman's nature for any change in the status of women, moral or intellectual, since the time

of Mother Eve or the beloved Madonna. The wife-and-mother is the ideal, and very rightly so, but she is a meek and submissive and gentle wife-and-mother, and she sits eternally by the fireside with a child on her knee. Yes, though in his heart he will crown her with a golden crown and burn incense before her, that is where an Irishman always sees the ideal woman–by the fireside, with a child on her knee. No true Irishman will ever be a suffragist.

Considering these things it was surely unwise of Garrett Westenra, very much an Irishman, to linger day after day by the deck chair of a vagabond woman, who, from all accounts and appearances, had never possessed a fireside of her own, nor was ever likely to appreciate one. Yet linger he did, and day by day her charm wrought upon him and wound itself round him and penetrated him until it seemed to become part of him. By no effort of hers was the thing done. She grew strangely silent as the voyage drew towards an end, sitting in her chair with still eyes and hands, like a woman in a dream drifting down a dream river. Once more she began to resemble the woman Westenra knew so well–the mystery woman with whom he had walked for many years in his secret garden. And when he came on deck and did not find her in her place, the deck and the ship and the world seemed to become suddenly empty–with an appalling emptiness.

But always when alone in his cabin he made the same observation to himself.

"This thing has got to stop. It is rank foolishness. What do I know of her? God knows what her life has been. She is not the woman I have dreamed of. She is not within a hundred miles of the kind of woman I could spend my life with.... A reckless, careless vagabond! Good-hearted, yes, full of fine impulses ... full of charm! But when the glamour has gone ... what then?"

He had that gift and curse of his race of seeing too far–the worthlessness of the prize at the end of the race, the rotten core inside the rosy apple. Perhaps why Irishmen achieve so little, is that nothing which can be got seems to them worth while getting!

So he said to himself firmly:

"This thing has got to stop."

He said it and meant it right up to the last night of the voyage–a night when they stayed late in their deck chairs under a glorious moon that transformed the sea into a golden harvest of promise. Many other couples sat along the deck laughing and jesting, announcing their intention to stay up until the Statue of Liberty hove in sight, but well aware that the purser would be prowling along the deck at about half-past ten with hinting scowls for all loiterers. Long before the purser came, however, the keen air had driven most people below, and there was no one left except Westenra and Mrs. Valdana, and a far couple in the shadow of the bridge.

A silence had fallen upon Westenra and his companion, one of those silences that have lips to speak and hands to caress. A little wind blew past them carrying a snatch of her hair across his lips. He had never before felt a woman's hair on his lips! Her pale hand nervous and lonely lay outside the rug in which she was wrapped.

"That hand looks cold lying there," he said, and taking it drew it under a fold of his own rug, and held it fast. It lay in his without response like a little stone hand, but through his palm he could feel her pulse beating wild and uncertain, and that stirred him strangely, yet awoke the doctor in him too. He remembered the brandy-and-soda she had drunk the first evening, and every evening since. He remembered too his own cynical thought, and repeated it now, though his voice held little cynicism.

"I 'll give you two years longer to live if you keep on at this rate."

"What rate?" she asked in surprise.

"Drinking, smoking, taking drugs. What drug is it you take?"

"You seem to know all my vices," she said laughing a little tremulously. She was leaning back in her chair looking very pale. "I have to take veronal sometimes to make me sleep."

"You would sleep naturally if you gave up smoking and drinking, and lived a quiet natural life."

"But then I could n't write."

"Well, you must give up writing."

"But then I could n't live," she said laughing. "You don't seem to know that I write for my living–it is my work."

"Your work is a curse to you if it makes you do these things."

"It is all I have," was her strange answer.

He turned in his chair and looked at her. In her face was none of the bitter humiliation of the woman whose weaknesses are suddenly exposed and condemned. She was smiling a little, a smile with a twist to it, like the smile of a child who is determined not to weep. And her smoke-coloured eyes, bright and sad with tears, and exile, and lost joys, and all the sorrow of the Irishry, were the eyes of the woman who had been given him in a dream. While he looked at her she closed them and sat very still. At last he knew that there was no question of fleeing from Fate. He leaned forward and laid his lips on her sad smiling mouth, and found there the answer to many a question.

Yet when he spoke it was to ask another.

"Now will you leave writing?"

"Yes, Garrett," she said simply. "I will leave everything for you; I think it

was written so in the beginning of things."

CHAPTER III

FATE'S WINDING PATHS

"Does the road wind uphill all the way?
Yes, to the weary end."

With Westenra's kiss still warm on her lips Valentine Valdana knelt in her cabin, elbows plunged in the low plush-covered lounge, eyes closed, lips slightly parted, her upturned face resting in the palms of her hands as still and rapt as the face of a visionnaire, and indeed it was in visionary scenes that her mind wandered: scenes of the past peopled with the absent and the dead. Sometimes her lips moved and she spoke a name–her mother's, her father's, a child's, an old woman's, that of a man who lay by her mother's side in the Durban cemetery–one whom the world had known as a brilliant but drunken journalist, but whom she remembered only as a great heart and loved friend. For she had a great capacity for loving, this woman; she did not know how to merely like people; when she cared at all she loved and gave her best. She loved all the people with whom she was dreaming now, and she loved them still with a love that reached over seas and past the grave; in her radiant new-found happiness her thoughts flew to them wishing that they too might be glad with her.

"Dear Dick ... I am so happy," she said, visualising the drunken journalist, not as others had seen him, a short red-faced man with bright, haggard eyes and a sardonic mouth, but as the big-hearted man of letters who had generously taught a young uneducated girl all he knew of his craft.

In memory she sat again in the stuffy Johannesburg newspaper office with the maps on the wall, tables hidden under a jumble of papers, chairs covered with tobacco ash, books, whiskey bottles, and heard the voice of Dick Rowan pounding "style" into her while the mine batteries drummed outside, and the windows reddened and rattled under the assault of a blinding Rand dust storm. Her thoughts passed to another man who had worked with them, and who lay

now in the little cemetery behind the Primrose Deep; to another sniped in the streets of Mafeking who had written to her by the last post that came from the beleaguered town; to another dead in the shadow of the Himalayas of whom she could not think without remembering the paddy-birds in the rice fields near Benares; another sleeping on the shores of Lake Chad.

For like all women thrown early on the world to make a living she had found her best friends among men, and the very adventurousness of her own life had brought her into contact with adventurous men of the kind whose lives are full and vivid and of sudden ending. Of the men who "did things, and died in far places" she had known a-many, and been proud of their friendship, and with all the ardour of an ardent nature she had loved them every one in her boyish, good-comrade way. And they had all passed on or passed away! But she wanted them to be with her in this hour. She called on every one she had loved, or been loved by, to rejoice with her now. She even laid in thought a flower of amnesty upon the memory of Horace Valdana, but with him she did not linger, for in the memory of her husband was neither beauty nor joy, and in that hour she wished only to remember things that gave no hurt.

For she too believed that the fate which through the open and winding passages of life had been seeking after her had found her at last; that of all the men she had been loved by, and she had been greatly loved, here at last was the one whom her heart and mind had awaited–a real man with something of the lion in the hold of his head and in the quality of his sure glance and careless smile, who "did before the sun and moon whatsoever his heart appointed," and was no man's man but his own. She saw that Westenra was big in mind and spirit, self-trusting, self-reliant; and every woman's heart responds to those iron strings. Every woman hopes to find in the man she loves something big and vast and eternal in which she can become absorbed, and lose herself. For every woman has the secret fear that by herself she is nothing, can be nothing, and has no eternal life except in and through love.

She had loved Westenra from the first with all the wise and foolish reasons a woman will find for putting her hands under the feet of the beloved, for his boyish laugh, and the way his hair grew, his witty tongue, the simplicity of his heart, and the subtlety of his mind; for his big head and broad shoulders, for the grace and strength of him, for his curious personal shyness and his wide, impersonal outlook; for the twist his race had given to his speech, and for his handsome face which was not handsome at all, but the face of a thinker who has been up against the hardest problem in the world–ignorance.

These were the things she knew that she loved him for, but she was aware without going too deeply into the matter that the other and more important ones that she had long sought were there too. Dimly she knew that the maternal

woman in her, the subconscious mother who seeks for greatness in the father of her children, was satisfied with Westenra and that promise of eternity in his eyes. And because of this she was willing to renounce all that her life had been and might be, to change all in herself that he did not like, to become of him and for him. She had always known that a time like this would come, when she would throw all she had worked for and earned to the winds, for the sake of a man who wanted her not because she was a famous journalist, but because she was a woman and the woman for him. But the condition was that he must be the man for her too. She had waited long for that condition to be fulfilled, passing over many a fine heart because her own refused or was unable to give the countersign to his challenge.

And at last the hour had come, as it always does come to those who know how to wait. From the moment she first spoke to Westenra and looked him in the eyes she had felt that mystic stirring of flesh and spirit that comes only once and is so unmistakable. She had realised then that to have this man always in her life would be to touch the highest peaks of the far blue mountains of romance. And the moment she realised it she felt hopeless. For never in her life had she got anything that she ardently desired. Happiness had evaded her and joy had passed her by. To know now at last that Westenra loved her, that the greatest desire in her life was to be fulfilled, seemed too wonderful to be true. The gratitude that filled her was curious in so clever a woman, and one who had had many men at her feet; but a childlike humility concerning herself was one of her sweetest qualities.

In the presence of those she loved she never remembered that she was famous, gifted, travelled, and honoured, and withal young and attractive. It always amazed her that any one should find her clever and charming. And that Westenra, who did not even know or care what she had done as a journalist, should find her desirable just because she was Valentine Valdana and a woman was the most amazing and beautiful thing in the world. It opened life out upon a boundless horizon, and flooded the future with a love great enough to cast out all devils of the past.

She knelt long by her bed, half-praying, half-pondering on sad things gone by and glad things to come. Out of it all came a resolve that the next day she would tell Westenra the whole story of her life of strange adventure and misery.

There were many things that to speak of would cause her wretchedness, but it was not the shameful wretchedness of those who, resisting no temptation, have taken all they wished from life, leaving nothing for the future but regrets. Her sorrows were sweet and untainted. There were many things of which perhaps people of hedged-in lives might think she should be ashamed, but which seemed to her to be natural and simple and nothing. She had gone up and down the

world and seen so much in the way of suffering, known so many complications of love and life, that nothing astonished or even shocked her any more. She had been through the mill and "seen life," as the phrase goes; and whether or not that is a good thing for a woman, and whether or not the spiritual vision gets a little dimmed in the process, and the senses a little dulled, is a matter of opinion. The fact remains that at the age of twenty-six Valentine Valdana still retained such freshness of heart that she could kneel for an hour or two at her bedside in a state of contemplative prayer, unembittered by the past and full of hope for the future.

A witty but unhappy writer whose life proved the truth of his epigram wrote that "good resolutions are cheques which we draw on a bank where we have no account." But at twenty-six Valentine Valdana could still, with serene confidence in her power to honour them, draw cheques upon this bank of the soul: so perhaps after all life had not done so ill by her as might have been supposed.

Her life-story was a curiously unusual one. The touch of Orientalism in her eyes and hair was a legacy from her grandmother, a beautiful Egyptian girl born in a harem and stolen therefrom by an adventurer who was deep in the counsels and intrigues of its lord and owner, her father. The two fled from Egypt to Zanzibar, where, under the protection of the Sultan, they married and lived, the Irishman making himself as useful and necessary to the negro Sultan as he had to the Egyptian chief. The beautiful little harem-born wife from association with her husband and the few Europeans in the place learned to speak English, and her only child, a girl who resembled one of the wonderful tropical flowers she lived among, was brought up in European fashion by an Irish nurse sent for from Ireland. In time the Egyptian mother died, and the Irishman, fallen on evil days through Court intrigues and an affliction of the eyes, was obliged to flee from Zanzibar and make for the only country where he and his child could keep warm and live cheaply–Italy. There, the girl, Iolita, learned to perfect a gift of dancing she had always delighted in, and when later her father became totally blind and penniless, it was she who bravely maintained the affair of living for both of them by dancing at the theatres and the opera until she danced her way into fame.

Child of a passionate love-marriage it was only natural that Iolita too should follow her heart. In London, at the very zenith of her success and just when Fate was unrolling before her a vista of luxurious years, she proved the heritage of her blood by eloping to Africa with the youngest son of an English peer, a being as romantic and irresponsible as herself.

Gay Haviland had tried his hand at most things, from Shakespearean acting in London to horse-breaking in Mexico, before he found his true *métier* as a transport-rider on the South African veldt. The home to which he took his

eager-hearted bride was an ox-waggon drawn by a span of twenty magnificent red bullocks, which earned their living and his by carrying loads of wool and grain from the Free State and the Transvaal to the Cape. It was on a St. Valentine's Day from the tent of that waggon as it lay under the shadow of the Catberg Range, that little Val first saw the light, and the same tent was the only home she knew, except for occasional sojourns in Dutch towns, for the first nine years of her life. From a child's point of view it was an ideal existence, full of beauty and variety as far at least as scenery was concerned, adventures with big game, long days of camping on the banks of wild rivers or in the shade of purple mountains, and an absolute absence of the tasks and training common to children brought up in the ordinary way. It is true that at camping times the dancer amused herself by teaching little Val to read and write in Italian, while the transport-rider successfully imparted to the child, together with his poetical if vagabond views of life, a very real love and knowledge of Literature. For if ever scholar turned gipsy it was Gay Haviland, and though the book he loved best was Nature, and his library the Open Road, his waggon-boxes were always well stocked with works of classical and modern writers.

Val imbibed his tastes and vagabond creeds as a flower imbibes dew, but for the rest she was as free and idle as a little wild buck prancing across the veldt in the wake of its mother, and as unthinkingly happy.

With Haviland's tragic death from snake-bite, however, the veldt life came to a sudden end and passed for ever into the realms of memory, seeming to Val in the hard years that followed to have been a wonderful dream, yet remaining always the most poignant and cherished part of her existence.

Poverty showed its jagged teeth to the beautiful dancer, frightening her back to Europe, where she essayed to gain her living once more with flying seductive feet. But her dancing was not what it had been. Ten years of idle and ideal love on the veldt had spoiled her art, or perhaps the wife and mother had absorbed it. At any rate she was unable to step back into the vacancy created when as Iolita Fitzpatrick she had left the stage for love of Gay Haviland. Other stars had arisen, and the public had forgotten her. Engagements were difficult to find, and when found were at best of the second-rate order. Neither help nor sympathy was forthcoming from the proud English family who, having always detested poor Gay Haviland's *mésalliance*, absolutely repudiated any connection with the dancer or her child.

Years of arduous struggle followed during which the two trailed from one great continental city to another, often miserably poor and in desperate straits, sometimes perilously near starvation, but thanks to the generous Freemasonry of Art, and grace to their own happy charm in good and evil times, never quite without friends, or some last resource. It may truly be said that Val's education

was received in the school of Life, for she never attended any other; but the love of books inculcated by her father stayed with her, and because book lovers will always, whatever their straits, get books, Val was able to educate herself as many another has done, and done well, by reading. Then, too, with the open mind of the untaught she received and retained all the beauty and colour and picturesque event of their wandering Bohemian life, finding even in their grimmest adventure food for thought and amusement.

When she was fourteen, and Iolita still astonishingly beautiful in spite of poverty and defeat, an engagement took them to the Argentine Republic, but ending up disastrously left them stranded and almost penniless at Buenos Aires. Things were at their darkest when good luck dawned once more in the shape of Dick Rowan, an old friend of Haviland's, and who together with the latter had adored the dancer in the days when she was a star. Rowan was a brilliant but eccentric man of letters, afflicted by the wanderlust. His adventurous temperament, irked by life in cities, had driven him forth as a journalist to far lands, where he had become as famous for his war and political correspondence as for his dissipated ways and generous heart. He was an expert on the political situation of various Colonies and smaller Powers, and whenever little wars were on the carpet there also was Rowan. In times when wars were not, he occupied himself with the internal wranglings of Colonial governments. Wherever he could force his way in he made himself felt. It was not for nothing he was known as "Gadfly" Rowan. At the period of his re-meeting with Iolita he was interesting himself in the Transvaal with the affairs of Paul Kruger and the Uitlander, up to his eyes in political intrigue, and editing a Johannesburg journal with Imperialistic leanings. His presence in the Argentine on some business of his own was the veriest accident, but a happy one for Iolita, for, faithful to his early passion, he was overjoyed to find her again, and asked nothing better than to take her burdens upon his shoulders and be a father to Gay Haviland's daughter. Iolita, on her part, had always felt a great affection for the journalist. It seemed a pleasant end of weariness to consign her fate into his eager if improvident hands. So they were married, and the family of three sailed for Africa, where for the next two years they spent a busy, happy, and erratic existence together, surrounded by journalists, politicians, and all the quick wits of the Rand. From the first Val showed a keen liking which Rowan was swift to foster for newspaper writing. He took her as his secretary, and taught her on broad lines all that is most useful for a journalist to know. None knew better than Dick Rowan how to direct a natural talent for journalism, and in Val he recognised splendid material, a born vocabulary, a keen sense of observation, love of phrase, and a knowledge of books and places. Above all, she was full of ardour for the work. Nothing lacked but training to apply her genius, and this Rowan, erratic and irresponsible in all things

but his profession, was the best person in the world to give her.

From being his amanuensis she soon became his assistant. A great devotion sprang up between the stepfather and daughter. Later, when Iolita, visiting Durban, died and was buried in that beautiful seaside town, the two drew closer in their loneliness and sorrow. Val was eighteen then, and Rowan ageing rapidly, for he always lived every moment of his life, and always he "poured spirits down to keep his spirits up." Because of this his energy and brain were both beginning to fail; and here the value of the hand and head he had trained was proved. Work was offered to him that he would never have been able to accept but for Val. It was she who urged him on, worked with him and for him, repaying her own and her mother's debt by unwearying devotion. A commission to proceed to Somaliland, a splendid opportunity for glory, came from a great London Daily, but Rowan's initiative would never have been equal to it without Val. She not only made him go, but went with him, and when he fell ill there, and the newspaper correspondence devolved upon her, as well as the nursing of her stepfather, so well did she accomplish both, that Rowan got well and she reaped recognition. For Rowan, rigid as all good writers about the identity of work, insisted on the authorship of the letters being known. Shyly she appended "Wanderfoot," the nom-de-plume she had chosen, to her first unaided work. It looked like a special effort on the part of the god of irony that before the end of the expedition she nearly lost her feet through inflammation caused by overwalking.

After Somaliland, commissions came to her singly, but from a sense of loyalty she would do nothing except in connection with Rowan; so they worked and travelled together going to different parts of Africa from the Cape to Egypt, until one day landing in Durban to make a flying visit to the Transvaal, Rowan paid with dramatic suddenness the penalty for burning up his brain and liver for years with whiskey and the best wines.

Val found herself alone in the world, though not helpless, for her own and Rowan's efforts had given her a weapon with which to fight for and hold her place among the journalists of the day. But she was only twenty, and as hopelessly impractical as the conditions of her life and Rowan's happy-go-lucky methods could make her. He was one of those who knew no use for money except to make it fly faster than it came, living gaily ahead of his income to the tune of the old saw:

"Happy-go-lucky,
Penny loaf for twopence,
Got no shoes go without."

Val's journalistic intelligence had been developed at the expense of her prac-

ticability for everyday purposes. She could already make money, but she had no sense of the value of it. A number of things she had gathered hi the course of her vivid life could not be tabulated, for they were intangible, nor valued, for they were priceless; but of common or garden prudence and horse-sense she possessed no single jot or iota.

What she did possess and wear for all the world to recognise was a disquietingly attractive appearance, and the fascination that hangs about the personality of one who is able to *do* something, and that something well. To this was now added the wistful charm that sorrow stamps upon her elect. All those whom Val had loved had left her one by one. She began to believe herself doomed to loneliness–that she had but to love to suffer the bitterness of loss. The cerebral hemorrhage with which Rowan had been smitten had left him a few merciful clear hours before death, and during that time he had impressed upon her the wisdom of going straight to England and making the most of his literary connections there. But, in spite of this injunction, she had lingered on from day to day in the expensive Durban hotel where he died. She could not drag herself away from the two graves that lay in the heart of the town, sheltered by palms and feathery trees, with the naked feet of Zulus pattering past up and down the Berea hill, and ricksha bells echoing between the marble crosses and headstones of the dead. She shrank and faltered from turning her face towards a new life empty of love.

That was a propitious moment for Horace Valdana to step upon the scene.

Handsome, with the marks of race on him, and no outward sign of his dark heart, he was of the exact type to attract a romantic girl's interest. Val, lonely, impulsive, but lacking in judgment, fell in love with the man she believed him to be, and without hesitation placed her fate in his hands. There was no one to warn her (and if there had been it is doubtful whether she would have believed that he was a thorough-paced blackguard, whose family, sure by bitter experience that he would some day openly disgrace an old and honoured name, and deciding that it were better for him to do it in the Colonies than at their door, had financed him to go abroad and stay there. Africa is full of such–"remittance boys," ne'er-do-wells, men who have left their country for their country's good. Most of them, when they arrive at least, have good manners, often the stamp of a public school on them. Nearly all possess the charm and guile that are special attributes of the professional black sheep.

Valdana was a perfect example of this professional black sheep–whom novelists and playwrights have encouraged into existence–the man who talks rather sadly about his family never having seen any good in him, but who, by "carving out a career" for himself means to show them some day that he is "not such a waster after all!" Any woman of the world would have seen through him in a

very short time; but poor Val was no woman of the world, only a gifted, romantic girl, with all the worldly stupidity and shortsightedness of her kind. It should, perhaps, be counted to Valdana's credit that he married her instead of playing some trick upon the innocence of which her varied life had not yet robbed her. But trickery would have meant plotting, and Horace Valdana was too lazy to plot. Besides, he was well informed enough to know that Val had value as a wife who could make money. So Val got a real marriage certificate, and became a real wife, and in a very short time knew the meaning of real misery. Until then the hard luck and misfortunes which Fate had dealt her had at least been shared by loyal hearts and faced with courage and gaiety; but now it was her lot to discover how bitter sordid poverty can be when shared with a mean and vicious nature that exacts all and gives less than nothing in the great give-and-take game of marriage. Valdana darkened life for her and blotted out the stars. He walked on her illusions and hopes, and threw down her idols. She sometimes felt as if he had wiped his boots on her soul. Wretchedness and a child were the outcome of the ill-starred marriage. Still soft and pliable with youth, she might have forgiven the first for the sake of the last, but her husband, utterly bored by her innocence and uselessness, very soon decamped leaving her to shift for herself and the child as best she might.

It was quite true as has been told that she was utterly useless in the ordinary way. She had received absolutely no training in the practical things of life, except of the most rough-and-ready kind. She could light a camp-fire with any one, and shoot something to cook on it afterwards, but she was far from knowing as much about domestic life as even an ordinary Boer girl, and quite unfit to be a poor man's wife in Africa or anywhere else. The one thing she could do well was to write up big picturesque events for the newspapers; but such things have to be sought first and written of afterwards, and now she had a baby to bind her hands and stay her wandering feet.

There came another dreary era of struggle. Freed of the cankering taint of Valdana's presence, the young mother plucked up enough courage and money to get back to England, where she judged her best chance lay of making a living. But the connections and introductions she had counted on using there were in the end of very little use to her, for the reason that she could not now continue her special line of work. There were still things happening in out-of-the-way parts of the world, but Val could not leave her young child to go and write about them, and after one or two offers had been made to her and declined she got no others. As for the conditions of English life and journalism she knew nothing of them. Besides, a place in the London journalistic world has to be worked and waited for on the spot; outsiders are not encouraged, and have a bad time while trying to push in. When at last she realised that all she could hope for was an ignominious

place in the queue among the hack writers, the girl proudly buried the name made memorable by collaboration with Dick Rowan, and disguised under that of Valdana, took what she could get to keep the wolf from the door. For herself, travelling on a dark road where all the stars had gone out, she would have cared little if at this time starvation and an end had come; but the tiger maternity was awake in her and cried out for the preservation of little Carmen.

From the first the child had doubled her anxieties by being delicate, and in England its health did not improve. Many a time in the weary London months the mother tripped up the journalist just as the path looked a little clearer or was smoothening out to a surer footing. Many a promising opportunity of regular work had to be passed by because of some baby illness that needed all the careful nursing Val could give. But youth and courage were still on her side; and in her heart the secret conviction which thrills every mother–that her child is an important link in the chain of generations, that a woman's career and ambitions are as nothing compared to the keeping alight of the little flame which may some day become a beacon to humanity. What mother's heart has not trembled to this illusion? How many babies would ever reach maturity if this secret religion did not hold sway in women's hearts, urging them to sacrifice, pain, drudgery, and self-abnegation?

And after all the struggle was in vain. The baby died, and Val, more lonely and alone than ever before, wished that she too might die, for it seemed that life was never to hold anything for her but work. And oh! the weariness of work that has not love for its compelling force! Oh! the longitude and lassitude of life without loved ones in it!

Fortunately, something occurred at this time which not only took her away from the scene of her loss, but occupied her every thought for a considerable period. The Jameson Raid in the Transvaal shook England to the heart with various emotions, and called for a great deal of information that could only be acquired at the scene of operations. The Editor of the Imperialistic Daily, which had employed Dick Rowan, found himself keenly regretting the "Gadfly" and his deep knowledge of the internal workings of the Transvaal Government, then remembered "Wanderfoot" and her application of a year or so back. A search was instituted, and within a week Val was sailing for Africa full of instructions that gave her little time in which to remember the emptiness of her heart and the dull ache of loss, or anything but the affair she was sent upon–to get speech of both President Kruger and the members of the Reform Committee who lay in Pretoria Gaol.

The series of brilliant articles sent by her from Johannesburg dealing with the reign of terror at that time exercised by Transvaal Boers over the betrayed and despairing English population; the history, written in terse, mordant, heart-

wringing phrases of that famous trial, when four of the Reform Committee were sentenced to death, and the rest to "two years' rotting" in a foul prison; these constituted the first steps in the ladder by which Valentine mounted alone and unaided, rung by rung, to journalistic fame. After that no more need to seek work; it sought her. There were commissions to India, Turkey, Russia, and Mexico, and with each new adventure were fresh laurels, for her work improved as the work of a writer can only improve when she gives it her heart and soul and serves no other god.

Thus, after struggling and climbing practically from the age of fourteen up the craggy hillside of Fame, she had in her twenty-sixth year reached a point nearer the top than do most women. True, it was not universal fame, but the fact remains, that to any one who read with understanding the British newspapers, her name stood for work both brilliant and sound, a fine temperament and a great future.

When success first began to come her way, Valdana cropped up again, smiling and ready to step back into her life. But sorrow had taught Val a few things and opened her eyes to the real worthlessness of her husband's character. She recognised coldly and clearly at last just what he was–a lazy, unscrupulous scoundrel. Even more unforgivable was the fact that he had not cared a rap whether his child lived or died of starvation: that she could never forget. Therefore, though she gave him money, even unto the half of her income, she refused to return to him or allow him to come back into her life. He became so troublesome, however, that she was on the point of seeking legal protection from him, when the Boer war broke out, and in the urgent interests of her newspaper she was obliged to put private affairs aside, and start immediately for Africa. After a year there of unceasing work and travel, she succumbed to a bad illness, resulting from overtaxed energy, and it was while she lay ill in Cape Town that Valdana made a fresh move in the game.

It must be mentioned that before his people, realising his lack of all moral sense, and fearful of future dishonour, had decided to despatch him to Africa, he was intended for the army, and had been educated and trained to that end. His parents' decision was a bitter blow to him, for the picturesque side of army life appealed to him greatly, and he chose to believe and to frequently air the modest opinion that in him a very gallant soldier had been lost to England. Now, when in England's dark hour she called for men to volunteer their services in Africa, came his chance, and with a promptness he only exhibited in his own interests, he applied for a commission in one of the corps raised in London. His application was at first refused, because there were plenty of good men of tried experience to fill such posts; but a clever use of his wife's name and work got him into the limelight. He did not even disdain to make use of her illness, and the fact that she

had been brought almost to death's door in the service of the public. So finally he got his commission and sailed for the front in a glow of publicity.

Then, for a blackleg and a ne'er-do-well whom no one wanted, he did an extraordinary and unheard of thing–he died! And not content to merely die, he did the thing well; nobly and heroically he did it, in company with a dozen or so men of his troop. They were isolated in a farmhouse, surrounded by a large number of Boers, and refusing to surrender were cut up to a last man, and the house set afire over their wounded bodies. Some grudging curmudgeon had invented a tale to the effect that one of the band had slunk out, and, deserting his wounded comrades, escaped. But no one had ever been able to prove the lie, and even the Boers themselves gave evidence of the splendid courage of the little band, and especially of their leader, the last to die with a laugh upon his lips. All England rang with Horace Valdana's name. Val, already bright in the public eye, had the added lustre of her gallant husband's glory shed upon her. Shoals of sympathetic letters and telegrams reached her in Cape Town, and, on the occasion of her return to England, having been rigidly forbidden by the doctors to continue her war correspondence, she was met by crowds and cheered to the echo. But both sympathy and cheers were wasted upon her. She received them coldly and silently, without tears and without a widow's desolate mien. When it was presently observed that she also dispensed with the habiliments of wo, and went about in London as if nothing had happened, she was severely criticised, and people began to dislike her. Moreover, a mangled history of the unhappy marriage got out; it was soon known that there had been great faults on one side or the other. Tales with a tang to them of Valentine's friendships abroad with well-known men were told in the clubs, and as the men concerned had mostly died or disappeared, there was no one on the spot interested or well informed enough to dispute the truth of them. What was worse, an entirely cruel and untrue version of her relation to Dick Rowan during their travels and exploits together was bruited about, though always so carefully that the victim of the scandal only caught dim echoes of it, and was never able to seize and nail the lie to the mast. In the end, needless to say, the woman paid. "Gallant Horace Valdana" got more than the benefit of the doubt as far as the unhappy marriage was concerned, and his widow was sent to social Coventry.

Little she cared. The world meant nothing to her. She had wrestled too bitterly with life to set any undue value on the approval of society, even had she not possessed a congenital carelessness amounting to indifference to the opinions of any except those she loved. As long as those few knew the truth–as they could not help doing, knowing her–and their love loyally remained unaffected, she gave little heed to calumny; it was enough for her to realise that she was free at last of Valdana. She tried not to rejoice too much at that, but rather to weed out from

her heart the last blade of bitterness and scorn of the dead man, so that the rest of life might be lived unpoisoned by hateful memories.

At this period of vague mental unrest and retrospection, the offer to her from a famous newspaper to visit America on its behalf came pleasantly *à propos*. Sick of London and the arid memories it contained for her, she was thankful to shake its dust from her feet for a time at least and turn her face to a new and unknown horizon.

And now, during the process of getting into her soul once more the dew of forgiveness and loving-kindness, Westenra had come marching into her life, and her heart cried out as the heart of Iole cried out when they asked her how she knew that Hercules was a god:

"Because I was content when my eyes fell upon him."

CHAPTER IV

A SKELETON AND A SHRINE

"The heart of a pure man is a deep vase."

And while Valentine stayed on her knees thanking God for the happiness that had come to her, Garrett Westenra was pacing the darkened decks with misgiving in his heart. The misgiving was not regret. When you are of those who stand by your given word you do not waste time in anything so idle as regret. Besides, what had come to pass between Valentine Valdana and himself seemed a thing so predestined and inevitable, so unsought by either of them, that it would have been as vain to regret it afterwards as to have fought against it at the time.

Some one once said of the Irish that they appear to be impulsive, but are really the most deliberate people in the world. They know long beforehand what they are going to do, though they perform it at a given moment with all the appearance of impulse. This was true in a way of what had happened between Westenra and Valentine. He had known from the first what was going to happen even when he said in his cabin, "this has got to stop." He had really put up a hard struggle with Fate, for while he was certain that Val was the woman originally intended for him, it seemed that something had gone wrong with the plan. Some-

how she had got lost on her way to him, and life had changed her until she was no longer the woman he wanted and had dreamed of, though she still resembled her. He felt as if there was a hole in his nature, in his life, that only she could fill, that must go unfilled for ever unless he let her in, yet he wished to keep her out! So he had fought against the thing, but as a man fights who knows he must be overwhelmed in the end by superior force. It was that force, something outside himself and far bigger and stronger, that had been at work when he turned so deliberately and kissed Valentine's lips. The moment had possessed an extraordinary enchantment. Never had he known such a magic, glowing sweetness as surged through his being when she surrendered her lips to his. And a little later she had strangely said:

"I think this was written from the beginning of things!"

It was indeed so written. None knew better than he who for years had been haunted by her face. He told her so, or the something that was outside himself and greater than he told her so.

"I have known you all my life, Valentine. For years I have seen your face in my dreams. I recognised it the moment I saw you. I always knew you were somewhere in the world, coming towards me, for me."

And yet he could not feel sure that he loved her! Every word they said bound them closer. He was as much hers as she was his. Never again could they be nothing to one another. And yet ... and yet ... was this love? No answer among the stars nor in the phosphorescent water flashing past. And if his heart knew the answer it would not speak, but lay strangely still and sad in his breast. With a mental jerk he forced his mind to another matter, and one that urgently called for consideration. In those few magic moments of sweetness drawn from a woman's lips, the whole current of his life for the next few years had been changed. The plans he had built up were thrown down and broken. The big thing starred out for his own special contribution to medical science had been pushed far back into the future where he could only reach it after years–instead of going right straight to it now, as he had meant when he started on this voyage!

Vaguely he had known it must be so if he let Valentine into that empty place which no woman had ever occupied. The knowledge that he must sacrifice that ideal of his, must leave following the star to which he had hitched his car for something else–something of which he did not know the value, or if it had any value at all–was one of the reasons that had urged and compelled him in his cabin to fight against that force which was stronger than himself.

Well! It was over now. The die was cast. All that remained to do was to rearrange certain circumstances in his life in accordance with this new plan. The circumstances resolved themselves into the bitter ungarnished fact that he was not rich enough to marry and still carry on his fight for science. As a bachelor

living with a simplicity that amounted to austerity, his income, the savings of unceasing labour for ten years, sufficed. It was not enormous, but it served to relieve him from the wear and tear of general practice, and allowed him many hours of leisure in his laboratory. The only hospital appointment he had retained, on giving up his practice, was one where facilities were afforded for studying the disease in which he was specially interested. Thus the main part of his life was spent between the hospital and his laboratory. He scarcely practised medicine at all in the ordinary way, except as a consultant on the diseases in which he had specialised. But now he must return to the old routine of visits and office hours. Marriage demanded an income, so the laboratory must be pushed into the background, and a scheme for money-making take the boards!

However, he had realised from the first that marriage entailed this sacrifice, and with the sweetness of Val's lips, he accepted the condition. It was too late now to look back to his waiting laboratory, and unflinchingly he shut down on the thought. That phase of life was finished with–for some years. He had no right to ask a woman to accept life in a bachelor's quarters on a bachelor's income just because his laboratory held for him a dream that might some day crystallise into Fame. He told himself with gloomy stoicism that women want nearer and dearer things than fame glimmering at the end of a long vista of years. He must return to the arena of money-making, beat up his old practice, get back into the harness he had thrown off little more than a year ago. It would be difficult at first, but he was not afraid of difficulties. He flung back his head a little at the thought. Then his mind fell suddenly busy on a plan that had been suggested to him just before leaving New York by a clever young physician named Godfrey, a fellow-student at Columbia. Godfrey had a scheme for a nursing home, and wanted Westenra to stand in with him on it. The idea was to take a large house near Central Park, equip and furnish it as a private hospital with plenty of bedrooms and a good operating-room. There Westenra could perform all his operations and hand over his patients afterwards to Godfrey's care, while Godfrey could in like manner hand over his surgical cases to Westenra. Thus the two would work into each other's hands in a perfectly legitimate manner, and double their incomes. It is a favourite method of money-making with New York medical men, but it had no appeal for Westenra, and he had smilingly told Godfrey that he was not the man for the business.

"But you are," urged the physician. "You are 'It.' There is no other fellow in New York to whom I would hand over my cases so fearlessly. And then, there are very few who could return me such a *quid pro quo* as you can."

Which was perfectly true. Westenra's practice when he renounced it had been very large. Few surgeons had one like it. Certainly it lay among the working classes. But it is the people of the working classes in New York who pay their

doctors' bills more conscientiously than any other. Godfrey's practice, on the other hand, lay among the leisured class and was of a more precarious nature, bringing in large sums at one time and at another very little. Combining the two practices would undoubtedly regularise and increase the incomes of both men. Many medical men far less successful and well-known than Godfrey and Westenra were making fortunes by this method. However, Westenra, with ambitions very different to Godfrey's taking shape in his mind, had not thought twice about rejecting the offer. Now he wondered if it were still open, and determined to go and see Godfrey instantly on his return.

It was after midnight when he finished his deck-pacing and pulled up at the smoke-room with the idea of getting a light for a final smoke before turning in. Being the last night of the voyage many of the men passengers had stayed up later than usual making merry. However, all had retired now except a party of four lingering over drinks at a table. One still shuffled a pack of cards though the game was plainly at an end; two others smoked idly; all were listening to the gossip of the fourth, a certain Reeder–a narrow-nosed, cynical fellow who had something to do with the publishing world, and whose specialty was retailing scandal about the private lives of writers. He was pleasantly occupied with his favourite topic when Westenra quietly entered.

"Clever woman, yes. I should say she had cracked or broken most of the commandments except the eleventh in the course of her career.... I 'll swear no woman could live with Dick Rowan without chipping the seventh–even if she did call herself his stepdaughter. Certainly Valdana was a rotten scamp ... but no doubt he had his little cross to bear while she was gadding the earth with half a dozen other fellows.... Journalists are gay dogs! ... I remember hearing of her—-"

He glanced up to find Westenra staring at him with ice-cold eyes, and for a moment he faltered, changing colour. The other men's facial expressions varied from apprehension to a certain degree of jeering amusement. They were all aware of Westenra's constant companionship with the most attractive woman on the boat. For days the matter had been a topic for speculation among the first-class passengers. However, Reeder was not without a dash of cur-dog pluck, and with an effort regained his composure and essayed to continue his story, though now he was wise enough to employ a certain amount of discretion.

"I remember hearing of the lady of whom we were speaking—-"

"Be good enough to leave that lady out of your vile smoke-room scandals," said Westenra quietly–so quietly that a pistol shot could not have been more effective.

Reeder moistened his lips.

"Indeed! And why?"

"Because otherwise I shall be obliged to knock your lies back down your

throat."

"Lies?"

"Yes, lies!" Westenra came close and bulked over him, ready to eat him up if he said another word. He would have liked to beat the fellow's brains out on the spot. But Reeder like a wise man climbed down hastily, ate up his scandal, apologised with profusion, and slunk away. In a few moments Westenra had the smoking-room to himself. But he could not breathe in it–even when he returned to the deck and his pacing, with all the winds of the Atlantic at his disposal, there did not seem sufficient air for him to breathe with ease. His tongue was dry and the taste of life was bitter in his mouth.

Now he knew why his heart lay still in his breast and gave no answer when he had asked if this were love! The empty place in his nature, in his life, in his heart, was a shrine–and Valentine Valdana could never fill a shrine. She was charming and delightful, she called for pity and for chivalry, she might be a bright comrade on a weary way, there was a magic sweetness in her lips ... but she would never fill a man's shrine!

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A few hours later the big ship slid peacefully into home waters, the pale gold sunlight of a September morning flickering delicately on the waves, piercing the lavender-tinted land mists and gilding the torch in Liberty's upraised hand.

Westenra, somewhat haggard-eyed, paced the deck once more, but he was not alone. Mrs. Valdana, fresh as the morning itself, looking rather like a wild violet in a swathed purple cloak and velvet hat of the same colour crushed down on her hair, took the deck with long gliding steps beside him.

With the exception of an old lady sitting huddled in rugs by the companion-way, and a stony-eyed New Yorker gazing fixedly over the taffrail at the approaching shores of "God's own country," they were alone. Every one else seemed to be hustling luggage or busy downstairs with the port officers.

In her hand Mrs. Valdana swung her rope of luminous beads. They were queer pale green things almost as large as the ordinary "white alley" marble; too delicate and light to be of stone, there was yet something so natural about them it was impossible to suppose them a composition. They reminded Westenra a little of his pale sea-palaces, seeming to be lighted from within by some pearly luminous light, soft yet strong. Each bead had on it a perfect little picture painted with the minute and exquisite art of the Chinese. On one a flight of tiny blue birds, on another a delicate spray of mimosa, a branch of peach blossom, a snow-peaked mountain, a scarlet-legged flamingo, a still blue lake, a volcano, a tree bursting into bud, a line of sapphire hills. One could spend a day examining them, for

there were a hundred and fifty, each more wonderful than the others. Westenra, who had never seen her without them round her neck, asked her now why she was not wearing them.

"I hope never to wear them again," she said. "They are my comfort beads, and only to be worn in time of unhappiness. An old exiled Russian gave them to my mother in Spain saying, 'If ever you or your children are in great misery these beads will help you.' And it was quite true. She always wore them when she was in deep trouble and they gave her comfort. Mr. Bernstein, that nice French Jew who sits the other side of me at table asked me the other day to let him know if I ever want to sell them. But I shall never want to–they are so beautiful, aren't they?" She drew them rippling through her fingers. She said "aren't" like the people of his country, an inheritance from her Irish grandfather perhaps, together with the superstition that assigns to inanimate things the power to do good or ill!

"I should n't be too certain of not wearing them again," said Westenra, smiling a little grimly, for vaguely he knew that the woman who married him might very well at times have need for comfort.

"I know," she said gravely. "It is only when one loves that one realises how one may fall upon misery at any moment. The world seems suddenly to turn into a place of pits and precipices. Oh, Garrett! oh, Garrett! If ever I were to lose you now I have got you–!" She turned burning eyes to him and in them a glance that held little of the conventional and much of some primeval element. It warmed Westenra through to his heart and loosened the grip of an icy hand that had held him all night. After all there was something of greatness in this woman's love!

Suddenly the brightness slipped out of her face. She touched his hand a little tremulously, and her eyes took on the vague far-seeing look of the Celt. She hated to open up those sad graves of the past on this sunny morning–the happiest of her life. But she must carry out her resolution made the night before. Afterwards the bright breeze would blow her words away and drown them far behind in the deep Atlantic, where they would be forgotten for ever.

"Garrett."

He put his hand on hers.

"You must call me Joe. It was always my home name."

Curiously enough, it was a name very dear to her. One of the few women she had loved, Lily Hill, had been by her nicknamed "Joe" and always so called.

"I am so glad. I love that name. And you must call me Val, Joe."

"Val," he said gently.

"I want to speak to you, Joe–to tell you things about myself. You know so little of me–it is good of you to take me on trust like this–but I must tell you all about my wandering, vagabond life, my wretched marriage."

His arm stiffened under her hand. They had reached the stern-end of the deck, and instead of turning again he drew her to the taffrail; they stood facing the vast waste of heaving violet waters that lay in their awake.

"Leave it all behind you, as we are leaving that troubled sea," he said quietly. He seemed to have grown paler, and his mouth looked hard for all his gentle words.

"If you wish it?" she faltered.

"I do wish it."

"Oh, how glad I should be! There has been much in my life that I loved, Joe–my work has been dear to me and my wanderings. But there have been bitter things–and my sorrows–they hurt, they hurt–it makes me sick to drag them up from their graves, like sad little corpses into the sunlight of our happiness."

It made him sick too. It was bitterer to him than death that in the life of this woman of his dreams there should be such graves that feared the light. He too feared the miserable process of exhumation. God knew what ghastly unforgettable bones might be turned up! He did not realise that through this very cowardly fear he was building up a skeleton to stand between them, clanking its bones in their dearest moments.

"Leave them all, Val," he spoke violently. "God knows I want to know nothing–only to make the condition with you that you forget all your life until we met–that you pull up every old root–burn every boat?"

"Yes, yes, I will, Joe–and leave the ruins of them behind us in that troubled sea, while you and I sail on in this ship with our love and our dreams bound for the Islands of the Blest."

Her eyes full of hope glimmered up into his.

"You must never give a backward glance," he said harshly. "Never want to return to journalism or meet again the people who have been in your old life. That is my condition. *You must leave all for me.* Is it too much to ask?"

"No! No!"

Perhaps he forgot Who it was that first made that command to men and women alike, and Who with eternity to offer found few to accept.

The "all" life has meant to a woman of twenty-six is not so easy to leave behind, however much she may wish to desert and forget it. You cannot leave experience behind nor fill the holes it has made in your heart. You cannot desert the scars life has given you, nor divest yourself of her compensating gifts. Moreover, Valentine was a woman who had triumphs to brandish as well as sorrows; laurels and hard-wrung victories to flag over the graves of defeat. Yet none more ready than she to believe that it could be done, that love could wipe out suffering and scars and make the face of life to shine anew like the face of a little child. For love she was ready to forswear Art, her profession, her friends, her past,

and forget that she ever had a career. Westenra could not ask too much of her. Gladly she turned her back upon the past, and her face to the future, and gladly she embraced the conditions Westenra attached. As she walked the decks of her dream ship America seemed to her to beckon with the fair alluring hand of the unknown. The grim, undecorative buildings on the Hudson's banks were faintly veiled in a delicate haze composed of lilac smoke and autumn sunshine, and for the moment New York's lack of resemblance to an Island of the Blest was not too pronouncedly marked.

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Westenra's plan was that she should marry him at once. He would not even discuss the idea of her going back to London to arrange her affairs and collect her possessions. She must have no affairs from thenceforth but his, no possessions except those he bestowed. He was afraid of any trace or shadow of that past life of hers on their future together–afraid (though he hardly acknowledged it in thought) of the mud from the old paths, the vulture-like shadows that had hovered about the woman of his dream. In the magic discovery of their mutual attraction he had forgotten these things for a while, but too long had he lived with them for them not to recur and haunt his memory. Already the skeleton, whose sketchy outline had appeared to him in the smoke-room of the *Bavaric*, and been filled in later on the decks of the same ship, was beginning to clank its bones! But Val had no suspicion of its existence. She only thought Westenra jealous with the natural jealousy of a man for the life he has not shared with the beloved. She could love with fierce jealousy herself, and so understood. Entering into the spirit of the thing, she cast from her with all the ardour of the unpractical every possession of the past, every memory sweet or bitter he had not shared. She made, by letter, all arrangements for the letting of her London flat, until such time as her lease would have run out and her property could be sold. But apart from some good curios and beautiful things she had picked up in her travels, she owned very little. As always, she was living up to every penny of her income, and her assets were practically nil. Her name was her chief asset, and she could never use that more.

She was obliged to wring from Westenra permission to write to Branker Preston, her agent through whom she conducted all business affairs and signed her contracts. Consent was only gained by the fact that if Preston were not communicated with in order that he might propitiate the London Daily, in whose interests she had come to America, something very unpleasant and public might happen in the way of a lawsuit for a broken contract. As such an affair would have been highly obnoxious to Westenra, he gave in, but his dogged and bitter

opposition revealed to Val how deeply he felt on the subject of her past life, and stayed her from making a further request that was very urgent in her heart.

She had a woman friend, Harriott Kesteven, who was very dear and near to her, and she felt a great longing to let Harriott know of her changed life. She possessed a keen appreciation of the claims and rights of friendship, and it hurt her deeply to think how Harriott would suffer over her mysterious disappearance from the known paths of her old life. It was very feminine, too, that longing to share the secret of her happiness with another woman, though it was only with Harriott that she wished to do it. To let any one else into the wonder and beauty of it all would have meant to spoil what was only for Westenra and herself. However, she resisted the longing to communicate to Harriott even indirectly what had happened. After all, that Westenra wished for secrecy was reason enough to pit against a whole world of anxious and loving friends!

And so they were married in a passionate hurry, and went away to spend a few days together before starting the affair of house-hunting. Westenra, whose vacation was already over, could not afford the time for a honeymoon in the Adirondacks which he would have loved Val to see in all the glory of autumn. They went no farther afield than a little house on the edge of Bronx Park, whence, favoured by mild and lovely weather, they adventured forth daily into the beautiful natural woods that skirt this northern point of New York.

To Val at least those were flawless days. For once in her life she had got what she wanted, and the gift had not turned to dust and ashes in her hand. Happiness and gaiety radiated from her, and Westenra, caught in the rays, reflected them back, so that no one would have guessed that he was not so happy as she. Though, indeed, for a man who has the perilous gift of seeing through life's red and golden apples to the little spot of decay at the core, he was extraordinarily content. And at last now that she was his wife he took her into his confidence about his life and profession. Only to a certain extent, however, for he was a deeply reserved man, and constitutionally unable to lay his heart and inner thoughts bare (allowing that such a thing were desirable) to even the best beloved of eyes. That he hid this intense reserve behind frank manners and a witty tongue was a characteristic of his race. The Irish are the jesters of the world, but their laughter is a screen for their hopeless hearts and the deep melancholy of their souls.

Marriage is full of surprises, and not always happy ones. This barrier of reserve that she soon divined in her husband was one of the things that amazed Val. Her own heart was a book ready to open at the touch of love. True, some of its pages were scrawled and scribbled, blotted too in places and stained with tears; but there it was, ready to fly open to a trusted hand. It was not her fault that Westenra had refused to turn up those pages, but rather at his wish that they

had been sealed and locked away. Well! that was the book of yesterday. She had begun another since they met, and there, at least, he might turn the pages when he listed and read without misgiving.

But she longed and wished that he would trust her wholly too. Would let her, if not into the secret chambers of his heart, then at least past its outer portals. Spite of his frank, gay ways with her she knew well by the subtle and winding paths in which the minds of women travel, that behind his deep grey-green eyes there was another Garrett Westenra whom she had not yet reached. The knowledge amazed her but did not daunt her. Neither did it spoil her honeymoon. Her faith in love was of the quality that moves mountains. In the meantime life was passing dear and sweet.

But it was characteristic of each of them that until the first days in New York Val did not even know that Westenra was a surgeon. It sounds absurd and improbable and everything that is unpractical; but Val was all of these things, and the fact is she had never given the matter five minutes' thought. She knew he could do something and do it well: that was written all over the man, and that was the only thing of importance.

Once or twice, struck by his logic and extraordinary faculty for stating cases briefly and clearly, she had vaguely wondered if he were a lawyer. It might perhaps be supposed that after her unhappy experience with Valdana she would have exercised a certain caution in the choice of a second husband. Not so– Valentine's was a nature that could never learn caution. What she had learned, however, was a better judgment of men, and she could not have been imposed upon twice by a man of Valdana's stamp. Years of intimate friendship with men who "did and dared" had taught her to know unerringly a "good" man when she met him, meaning by "good," a man who worked with his brain and heart at some business, or even game, in which his principles and honour were involved. In Westenra she recognised the type instantly. This was no man shirking the battle of life and seeking a woman to support him!

Therefore, if Westenra had announced his profession as that of a travelling tinker, she would have been quite undismayed. Indeed, life as the wife of a travelling tinker whom she happened to love would have suited her very pleasantly.

As for Westenra, it has been stated that one of his principles was never to give to fellow-travellers information about himself that did not concern them; and on the ship, right up to the last night, he had essayed to look upon Val as nothing more than a fellow-traveller; therefore, his profession was no concern of hers. Afterwards, when it was so swiftly settled that she was to become his wife, the information did concern her, he made her free of it. She accepted it as she accepted all things concerning him, with ardour and pride. It seemed to her that she could not have chosen any more desirable profession in the world for her

man. She had known several doctors abroad, clever and delightful men, but none of them had happened to be married, so she had no idea as to what the special functions and duties of a doctor's wife might be. Whatever they were she was quite ready to tackle them with a stout heart for the sake of Garrett Westenra.

He had taken her to see his bachelor quarters in the deeps of the city where for years he had lived and worked. They were simple almost to bareness, but Val liked them well. They reminded her of her own quarters in London, and she foresaw that with one good maid she would be able to run her little home without the risk of Westenra's ever finding out what a bad housekeeper he had married. It came as a shock to hear that he was considering the matter of leaving these rooms to take a house somewhere else, near Central Park for choice, where he could have a fine operating-room and good accommodation for cases after operation. It must of necessity be a very large house, with an efficient staff of servants and nurses attached. The idea of collaboration with Godfrey had been rejected. He had decided to stand or fall on his own merits.

"Would you mind very much, dearest?" he asked, somewhat diffidently. "I know it is too bad to ask you to make your home in a sort of hospital, but it is for both our sakes. The only way surgeons can really make good on the money side is by having their own place for operations."

Something in her dismayed glance made him add slowly:

"But if you dislike the thought, we can have a home apart from it...."

"No, no," she said quickly. "Of course I don't dislike it. I want to be right in your life, Joe, whatever you undertake."

Nevertheless her heart sank into her boots. Not for lack of courage, but from a thorough knowledge of her own inefficiency for so responsible a position as she might presently find herself occupying.

It was their last day in the woods. The late afternoon sunlight flickered on them through the half-stripped trees, and leaves fluttered and rustled all about the open glade where they sat. Val, with her camping instinct, had lighted a little fire of twigs, just for the pleasure of the sweet pungent odour of green burning and the sight of smoke curling blue against the silver sky. This sudden news of Westenra's sounded in her ears like the knell of all camp-fires, and sunshine in woods and wild places. Panic seized her vagabond soul.

"Does the money side matter so much, Joe?" she faltered.

He smiled a little grimly. It had never mattered much to him, but she could not know that.

"It has to matter in New York. The man who does n't rustle for the dollars, and rustle successfully, gets left."

She looked at him wistfully. It seemed to her that she did not know this rustler for dollars very well. It must be part of his hidden self that he would not

let her reach.

"I am not a rich man, Val. I told you that from the first, did n't I?" He spoke coldly. "I cannot afford to disdain the opportunity that my reputation affords for money-making,"–he had almost added "now," but bit back the word in time. He was far from intending her to realise what a change his marriage involved, what a sacrifice of plans and principles it meant for him to be emerging once more from the laboratory to take part in the scramble for dollars.

CHAPTER V

SQUIRREL IN A TRAP

"Do not thou make answer to an angry master."

"O speak that which is soft while he is uttering that which is of wrath." *Maxims of Art.*

The first thing, then, after leaving their honeymoon woods, was to find a suitable house for the new venture. In the press of work that greeted him on his return, Westenra found it impossible to give much time to house-hunting, so this business practically devolved upon Val. Behold her, then, utterly inexperienced in the conditions of American life, and without a glimmering of intuition as to the requirements of an up-to-date nursing home–whose ideal was a life in the wilds, sharing the sunshine or the shade of a tree with her beloved, whose domestic requirements vaguely included a pot and a blanket, who would have been more at home on the veldt tracking a buck for dinner–rushing from one end to the other of the most neoteric city in the world, inspecting houses with "every modern improvement," weighing the advantages of furnace-heating as compared to steam-heating, examining "open-work plumbing" and "bathroom extensions," peering into kitchen ranges and domestic offices, interesting herself in the things from which all her life instinct had bade her fly, and from which she had fled!

But love was hers and a whole-hearted devotion to Westenra's interests that even he could not quench, though he did his best. Nowhere could she discover a house that pleased him. Every time she found something she thought ideal, he would emerge for a few hours from his office and completely demolish her

hopes. Picking her find to pieces point by point, he would thereafter retire and leave her to commence the search anew.

Few things are more wearing to body and soul than a prolonged course of house-hunting in a large city. There is nothing in the process to feed the soul and everything to tire the body. At the end of a month Val's spirits were several degrees below zero, and though her smile was undaunted, there were signs of physical fatigue on her that did not escape her husband's practised eye. He rarely saw her now except in the evenings, for always with the resolution to shut down firmly on his old life and its (for the moment) vain aspirations, he decided against going back, even temporarily, to his bachelor quarters and letting her share them, and had instead taken quiet rooms uptown, near the locality in which he hoped to find a house. Here he sought her whenever he could escape from the practice which he was now nursing with assiduity, but it was nearly always late at night, and at such times she was nearly half dead with fatigue, although she tried to disguise the fact under a gay air. Westenra's heart was sore for her, but he could not quite understand the position. He had realised that, in spite of her nerves, she was anything but a delicate woman, and it puzzled and vaguely disappointed him that she should knock under so soon. He knew nothing of the wandering dryad in her nature with whom she struggled in the house-hunt, trying to school it to the prospect of life in a nursing home; how the clang and clamour of New York's street cars, railways, and fire-bells dazzled and wearied her; how the actual effort to bear with these things and keep her trouble to herself wore her down. In a very few weeks more, however, a reason that sufficed him for her fatigue was made clear. She told him one night as they drove home from the Metropolitan Opera House. They had locked up the house-hunting problem for a few hours and forgotten it in the enchantment of a Beethoven concert. With the glamour of the 17th Sonata still on them, making stormy echoes in their hearts, she leaned her face to his in the darkness, and gave him the dear and wonderful news.

"Since when?" he asked, thrilling into tenderness and some other poignant sense he had never known in all his life.

"Since the first moment, I think," she whispered laughingly–"an impetuous Irishman anxious to get into the thick of the fight!"

"How can you be sure it is n't an Irish girl?"

"Oh, I know–I know. God will give me a son, Joe."

After that, however important the matter of his private hospital, it was far more important that the arduous house-hunt should come to an end. Besides, they were both sick to death of the whole thing. So, in a kind of despair at last they decided on a house which, though it had a very charming exterior, was inferior in many ways and less suitable to their purpose than some of those rejected earlier in the search. A five-story residence, it stood towards the Broadway end

of 68th Street, and had a beautiful flight of marble steps leading up to its front door–which was something to the good; but there was a great deal in the way of alteration to be done before it was suitable for a hospital, and the cost of this had to come from Westenra's private purse. However, Val seemed to be drawn to it for some vague, mystic reason. Fortunately, Westenra could not look into her mind, or he would have discovered that she was congratulating herself on the bird songs they would hear in the early mornings from Central Park close by. That might have irritated Westenra, for, though he loved birds as much as any one, he did not allow them to sway his destiny.

Of course, being two thoroughly unpractical and inexperienced people, they were entirely at the mercy of that most astute person in the world, the American Real Estate Agent, and got the worst possible terms. The arrangement about reparations was unsatisfactory, the lease too long, the rent higher than any one else would have paid. Dimly they knew this, and dimly they knew it would always be so, and that it was a pity that one or other of them was not practical and clever in a worldly sense. Brilliant people often feel this helpless sense of foolishness, and it irritates them so much that they long to stab somebody for it (and they usually stab the person they love best, with the cruel little knives lovers keep specially for each other!). Val remembered that Westenra in the early days on the ship had told her that the happiest marriages he had known of in America were between Irish and Germans, the Teuton common sense and equability acting as ballast to Celtic flightiness. And the remembrance vexed her. She saw that as ballast she was of no more use than a red robin. She wondered if Westenra realised it, and one day when the painful affair of furnishing was going forward she could not help saying:

"Oh, Joe; if I were only a nice, stolid, lumpy German, I should know by instinct what to buy for the dining-room and kitchen."

Joe froze slightly. Prescribing wives for your compatriots is one thing; taking the same prescription is another, and as it happened he was antipathetic to Germans. Nevertheless, since Val had put the idea in his head, he did think that a little *hausfrau* knowledge of what was fitting furniture for a doctor's dining-room and kitchen would not have been out of place in a doctor's wife, and he said somewhat dryly:

"Could n't we try and strike a note somewhere between stolid and fantastic?"

He was thinking of the furniture, but Val received the impression that her taste was being indicted. She took the little dagger to her breast with a quivering smile, and it hurt her deeply because she knew that her ideas on furnishing were indeed fantastic, though beautiful. Unfortunately they were all she had, and she was obliged to use them, for Westenra had none at all. He only knew

there was something wrong with the furnishing of the living rooms in his private sanatorium. Had he ever lived in the Bohemia of big cities he might have recognised that his drawing, dining, and reception rooms looked like a series of charmingly arranged *ateliers*. But, fortunately, he did not know it. He only saw that the bills were amazing, and that was bad enough, for the fact that nothing but the most modern and expensive appliances and fittings would satisfy him for his operating-room had already accounted for a large outlay of money. The house needed a good deal of renovating before it could be used, and by the time they were settled in their new home there was a hole in his capital large enough to sail a ship through, and several rents and tears in the magic veil of comradeship with which the two had hoped to wrap themselves from the world.

Then began a weary search through guilds and registries and bureaus, for a staff of capable servants. This, of course, was Val's exclusive affair. Westenra neither could nor would be beguiled into it, so alone she wrestled with the problem, and made acquaintance with false references and all the guile and tricks of the servant class. For the American domestic, who is not American at all, but of every other nationality under the sun, is truly the worst in the world. When she is honest she is a fool; when she is competent she is a knave. The mistress takes not her choice but her chance of one or the other; and in either case she pays.

After a long series of "weekly trials" which usually ended in a day or two with a demand for unearned wages, impudence, and vulgar insults from the "weighed and found wanting," a *ménage* was eventually established, comprising a red-haired cook, who, under a bland and benevolent exterior, was a calculating robber of the most cold-blooded description, and who, while despising her mistress for a "soft fool of a greenhorn," congratulated herself on the circumstance and resolved to take full advantage of it; a couple of housemaids one of whom was raw from minding goats on the Kerry hills, and the other recommended herself by a modest demand to be allowed to go to confession every Friday night. (The last had subsequently to be dismissed in spite of her holiness because, according to her story, she had been "ordered by her dochtor" to take an egg in brandy for her breakfast every morning and several times during the day, and faithfully followed the prescription except that she omitted the egg.) There was also a furnace and general utility man who fought with both cook and maids, and in the end stole Westenra's bicycle from the cellar; and a laundry woman who by arrangement "took two dollars a day," and appeared to spend most of her time seated at the kitchen table taking heavy meals as well.

Fortunately event and sequence rarely occur together, so that Val was not flooded out all at once by these disquieting things; they fell upon her from day to day like the gentle drips of water that wear away the stone. But life began to press and gibber in a strangely nightmare fashion round the vagabond journalist, and

sometimes there would creep into the smoke-coloured eyes that loved so much to look upon colour and wide spaces, and "watch the silences," an expression slightly reminiscent of a wild thing caught in a trap–a trap full of pots and pans and daily menus, and weekly bills, and fighting cooks and shirking housemaids, and domestic problems,–such a trap as almost every woman finds herself caught in when she engages upon the career of wife to a professional man, and one in which few find success unless specially endowed with an ability for management, economy, and order. Poor Val's endowments were not of this kind. Well she knew it, but would not admit the fact even to herself.

She had dreamed of a little space of time between the date of their settling in with their servants about them and the opening of the hospital–a little space like the clearing in the midst of a tangled forest, where she could pitch a tent and rest for awhile with the thought of her wonderful happiness that Westenra's child was to be hers. She meant to recapture into their lives the magic air of that happy week in the Bronx woods. Once more they would adjust and gather about them the fabric of comradeship and love that was to be the veil between themselves and the world, and that somehow in the last few weeks of rushing turmoil had been mishandled and torn.

But the dream was vain. No sooner did the domestic mechanism of the house begin to work, creaking and straining like an old ship with an amateur hand at the wheel, when cases for operation were hurried in, the place was filled with nurses, other doctors and students bustled up and down the stairs, and there were endless comings and goings of patients' friends. The strangely disquieting scent of ether came stealing down like a living presence from the upper floor into the atmosphere of home Val was trying to establish in the rooms she and her husband occupied in the big house. It seemed to her, too, that other shadows came in and lingered around; that when operations were in progress pain-troubled spirits wandered through the house, hiding in corners, waiting fearfully. In the fight against these illusions, as well as with the complicated problems of housekeeping and management, life began to resolve itself into something very like Swinburne's "Ballad of Burdens."

The burden of fifty-dollar-a-week nurses, rude and arrogant and of a self-reverence amazing, who fought like cannibals with the servants, and made turmoil all round them except in the splendid silence of the sick room. The burden of telephone bells that sounded from morning till night with the injurious sayings of waiting patients. The burden of bitter cold, as the winter came on, and Val suffered as only a tropical bird or flower can suffer in a bleak climate–the grim December dawns when the quiet of three feet of snow lay on the city, unbroken save by the jingle of the bells on the milkman's sleigh, or the shriek of the first car upon the frozen metals! The burden of the elevated railway in the avenue

close by; the hideous rush of it through the night, like some monstrous winged beast on a ceaseless quest for its prey–the ferocity of its approach, the sinister melancholy of its receding cry! The burden of "bathroom extensions" where the water-pipes burst every night, dislocating the business of the house for hours–of frozen cisterns, and New York plumbers! Of a cellar furnace that would not heat the house, or, acting on some æsthetic principle of its own turned the bathrooms into ovens, while the patients were in cold-storage and in the operating-room the sponges froze to the tables! The burden of snow on the sidewalk, and policemen knocking at the front door to say it must be cleared, or that some one had fallen down and broken something, and compensation would have to be paid later by the householder!

The burden of a beloved man who, when things went wrong in office or operating-room, came roaring like a tiger in pain to his mate. For alas! Garrett Westenra was no Angel in the House! That was one of the strangest of all burdens to be borne, for Val always wanted to laugh at it, and yet she knew it was no laughing matter. Westenra at work and Westenra at play were two very different persons.

Val had been aware from the moment of their return to New York of a great nervous change in her husband's mentality. It seemed to her that as soon as they got into their new home he became all nerves and torment, and difficult and exigeant as a child. It had not taken her long to find that he possessed all the easily roused devils of the easy-going Irishman. At first she was amazed by this discovery, then confused, but in the end she loved him the better for it. Only it always seemed to her madly funny that a man with such width and height of mind should be no better than a cross-grained baby about some of the ordinary vexing trifles of everyday life. It was hard to believe that a medical scientist of the first water could fall into a state of fury over a wrongly entered telephone message, a mislaid stethoscope, or because a careless housemaid had misplaced something in his office; that a man who had nothing small or mean about him should swear vividly over the fact that some one had put a used tampon into his waste-paper basket instead of burning it or thrown a burnt-out match into his fireplace.

There was a dumb-waiter that travelled on a rope up and down between Val's sitting-room on the first floor and a little surgery at the back of Westenra's consulting-room, and never a day passed but that rope was rattled violently for Val to come to her little opening and receive some furious complaint concerning a negligent maid or a stupid nurse. Many a time and oft Westenra's special swear–a peculiar combination of his own–rang up the shaft.

"Hell's blood and blazes! What has that girl from the Kerry hills done with my stethoscope? How dare she touch it? She must have touched it–it's not on

my desk.–Where are those No. 1 bandages?–Who has moved my note-book?–Will you find out from Nurse Soames why there are no tampons made?–Hell's bells!–Is this a doctor's house?–What kind of a doctor's house?"

The dumb-waiter travelled no farther than Val's room, and she issued orders that no one was to answer the rattle of the rope but herself. She realised that it was Westenra's safety-valve in moments of intense irritation. It gave her a spasm of painful merriment, even in the midst of her greatest weariness and worries, to hear her signal to come to the shaft and receive the storm. Later, when the stress of the day was over, she might laugh at him, and he, first furious, then ashamed, would finally laugh himself and beg her pardon like a generous and hot-tempered boy. But at the time she always gravely listened, and without comment put the trouble right as swiftly as she could. She realised only too clearly that the hospital was on his nerves as well as her own, and that his irritation came from a multiplicity of cares pressing on him, rather than from the one small incident that caused the explosion. Indeed, life was pressing hard on Westenra. He was working like a dog, and the dollars were rustling in, but the sound of their rustling gave him no great joy. His heart was elsewhere, in other work which must stand still, or perhaps, which was worse, be done by some one else. The hospital hemmed him in it too. He, quite as much as Val, felt caged. His work, his private life, all his interests for the moment seemed narrowly centralised into one street, one house, an affair of grubbing within four walls. Something in him rebelled at that, and not less because he himself had so arranged it. It irked him terribly to be mixed up with the machinery of this hospital, and his reserved nature chafed under the lack of privacy in the place that should have been his home. There were nurses everywhere. Val and he were never together for five minutes without being intruded upon by some one wanting something. Val had no control over the nurses; they did and said what they chose, having fear of no one but the doctor. He knew she had trouble with them every day, but he would not go into the matter. It was not his province to wrangle with women; he had told her so from the first when she came to him for advice. She must manage that part of the scheme by herself, he said; he had his own share of trouble and could not undertake hers as well. She had recoiled wonderingly before his unsympathetic attitude, but never again worried him about anything in the house. But he was aware that she was having a stiff time, and from his heart he pitied her. But what was to be done? They were in it now for loss or gain. His fortune was pledged to this thing and they had got to do or die by it. And he did not mean it to be die! Westenra was no quitter. It hurt Val to see the way he worked. She had never realised before what a dog's life is a doctor's. Her husband was at every one's beck and call but her own, and never could be sure of a peaceful hour to himself.

In her own way she worked even harder than he, and it was a heart-

breaking thought that with it all she was not making a success of the place. Though money was coming in fast, it flowed out still faster through her incompetent fingers. The problem of how to make things pay was a black beast which she fought by day and wrestled with in nightly dreams, and the more she fought and wrestled the more it grinned and dug its malignant claws into her heart. Even courage and ardour cannot overcome inexperience and triumph over disability. Despair came often to sit with her and whispered that this was not her place, and *here* would never be laurels for her. But she did not want laurels for herself–only for Westenra; and the more despair filled her the more she loved her big difficult Irishman, whose nerves and torment and prevision for the rottenness of life's rewards nearly drove her crazy.

Bills were another burden heavy in the bearing. Like all good men, Westenra was "tight with money." He never said a word when Val with heaving heart produced her weekly pile, large as a roll of drugget, but what he left unsaid during the short interval between sighting the sum total and producing his cheque-book would have filled a library.

They were always double what they should have been, those bills, and triple what they would have been with an experienced woman at the head of things: he knew it and she knew it; and they thought of the stolid, lumpy German, and sometimes they spoke of her and of red robins that were no good as ballast! And she felt as if she were drawing his heart's blood, and so did he. Not that he was mean–far from it; only he realised that his was not the money-making head, and he suffered from the fear all brain-workers know–that their money-making capacity may give out at any time.

"Simple people like you and me can never make fortunes, Val," he would say sadly, "the only thing for us is to hang on tight to what we have come by so hardly." But when he adjured her earnestly to "try and economise," her face became as haggard as if he had thrust a dagger into her, so that he made haste to add:

"I know you do, darling. It is only that I 've got into the habit of saying it–forgive me!"

She forgave him gladly, and lay awake more than ever thinking out impractical plans for economising. She hated to take the dollars that he had sweated for as only doctors and treadmill prisoners can sweat, to bestow them on insolent cooks who stole, housemaids who drank and shirked their duties, tradesmen who took advantage of her "English accent" to charge her twice as much as they would charge other people.

When she found that almost every good American housekeeper defeats the dishonesty of servants by doing her own marketing, she shouldered the business too, and made acquaintance with Baumgarten's Market, a huge place where ev-

erything save groceries could be obtained for household consumption. Some of the darkest hours of her life were spent at Baumgarten's. It was there, sitting upon a high chair before the meat and poultry counter awaiting her turn to be served, that she most keenly realised her defeat. All around her, good American wives were examining the grain of beef and the breasts of chickens. Poor Val could never understand how they extracted information from the process. She herself always got the toughest meat and the oldest birds for the highest prices. She knew nothing of the breasts of chickens and never would know anything. She, who could write a mile long passage from the classics and never forget a poet's inspired word, found it impossible to remember from day to day the price of sugar, and how much she ought to pay for butter. Information like that simply passed through her head like an express train through a tunnel. She never got the bargains other women got. She was the victim of every sharper, and was "done" on every side. On a desert island she would have been a treasure. In a civilised city, battling with extraordinary conditions on a professional man's income, she was a failure, and the knowledge deepened day by day and was bitter as gall. She fought on with the courage of the desperate and the doomed, but despair was in her heart and her eyes, and sometimes Westenra saw it there, and thought she hated this life to which he had brought her. He saw that she was a round peg in a square hole, and the last woman in the world for the practical life she pursued with the ardour of a doomed squirrel. The knowledge never interfered with his affection for her, but it sometimes interfered with his nerves. It was a bad dream from which they only woke up at night, for then together for a few hours a natural reaction from the strain of the day took place, and they would laugh like two children over the cares and problems of the day. The night nurses, passing up- and down-stairs, often wondered what it was the doctor and his wife found so amusing when they were shut up in their rooms together. The fact was that in the practical affairs of life they were no more than children, either of them, for all their brains and experience. It is often so with gifted people. Of course, Westenra knew his business as a doctor–none better, but the business of being a practical and responsible husband and head of a household was a sealed book to him, just as the problem of how to become the successful manageress of a private nursing home was one that Val would never solve. But if she could not defeat the cares that the day brought, she could at least be extremely humorous over her mistakes and failures, and the valiant spirit of her that was ready to get up from one day's knock-out blows and face the same round next morning, could not but

appeal to the chivalry in Westenra, as well as awaken his own sense of humour.

CHAPTER VI

KISSES AND CROSSES

"For 'Im and 'E and 'It
(An' Two an' One makes Three)."
KIPLING.

Acquaintance with a further element in her husband's life to which she had

so far been a stranger was reserved for Val when at Easter his adopted child, Haidee Halston, came home to 68th Street. Westenra, it is true, had told her all the circumstances, and no one was better qualified than Val to appreciate that sense of responsibility towards the helpless and unprotected which had prompted him to take upon himself the entire support and education of a friend's child. Westenra and Pat Halston had been friends from boyhood. The same county in Ireland had been their birthplace, they were at Carlow College together, and, sailing for America within a year of each other, met again in New York, and graduated together from Columbia University, where they obtained their medical degree. Later, launched upon the same profession but inspired by very different ambitions, the paths of the two friends had diverged somewhat. Halston, greatly gifted and of a magnetic personality, aimed for a fashionable practice that would bring him social success as well as a fortune with which to pursue further aims– in fact, like many another he meant medicine to serve him only as a step to the more lucrative and exciting profession of politics, wherefore he followed it only when it led him into the highways of the rich and influential. Westenra, on the other hand, inspired by a racial thirst for knowledge, as well as for eminence in his profession, did not disdain the by-ways, even when they led him into the lowest slums of New York. It was natural, in the circumstances, that the two men should see little of each other, but the bond of boyhood held good, and when "Death and Dismay" all too swiftly and unforeseen came to Halston, it was to Westenra that he turned at the last. Poor Halston had, unfortunately, put

a spoke into his own wheel of ambition by marrying a lovely, but very flighty English girl, who came to America as a governess in the family of one of his fashionable patients. Halston adored his pretty wife, but she made ducks and drakes with his money and brought him to the verge of bankruptcy through her extravagance. When death by septic poisoning swooped suddenly down on him, she was within a short period of giving birth to their only child, and the thought of this darkened the dying man's vision until Westenra, with a firm hand on his friend's, gave his promise that the welfare of Mrs. Halston and her child would be his most sacred task. Within a few weeks Mrs. Halston joined her husband in the great beyond, and Westenra found himself the sole guardian of the little baby girl fancifully called by its dying mother–Haidee. That was ten years before, and now Haidee was a beautiful, arrogant slip of a girl with deep dark eyes, a deep dark cave or two in her soul, and the manners of a cowboy. The school at which she had been educated for several years, to the extreme detriment of Westenra's banking account, was one of those highly modern institutions where at the most expensive rates girls are encouraged to "develop their individuality," and Haidee, a hoyden by nature, had developed hers along the cowboy-brigand line. Her idea of argument with servants or other children was to push them down-stairs or administer a hack on the shins with one of her extremely useful-looking feet.

These unsatisfactory reports had for a long time troubled the peace of Westenra, whose sense of responsibility to Pat Halston's child was perhaps a slightly exaggerated one. A vague idea had occurred to him of sending her to a convent to see what the gentle influence of nuns could do for her, but Haidee jibbed like a mule at the mention of nuns, and declared darkly that if he sent her to a convent *he would see.*

When he spoke to Val of his worries on the subject she said, ready at once to embrace any project or protégé of his without thought of the fresh tasks entailed:

"Oh, why not have her here for awhile, Joe? A little home life will tame her down, I expect. Look how it has tamed even such a wild ass of the desert as I," she added, with a gay smile in which there was more than a touch of wistfulness. But Westenra said a trifle abruptly that he did not fancy somehow it would be a good plan.

"You have enough worries already," he added, but not quite quickly enough to prevent Val from perceiving that there was some other reason, though she was far from guessing what that reason might be.

In the end, however, by the gift of circumstance, Haidee came to 68th Street after all. For at the expiration of the Easter term the school authorities wrote a brief but eloquent letter to the effect that they wished to be relieved of the care of Westenra's ward. If it did not exactly amount to an expulsion, it certainly could not be looked upon as a certificate of good conduct for presentation at her next

school, and for the moment all thought of the convent had to be dismissed. So Haidee came home from New Jersey, bag and baggage, and utterly unashamed of her peccadilloes. Val, with a heart open for anything or any one loved by Westenra, was eager to mother the motherless creature of whom she had heard so much. But Haidee was apparently not in search of a mother, and received her advances coldly and in a keep-off-the-grass manner that only an American-bred child would have the *sang-froid* to use. More than a hint of hostility, too, was to be found in the deep-set eyes, when they watched Val and Westenra together. The fact was that to find her guardian installed in a house with "a strange woman" had given the girl a great shock. Westenra, following his usual habit of reserve, had prepared her for nothing of the kind when he said, on his return journey from New Jersey:

"I am married now, Haidee."

She never dreamed that such a thing would make any difference to her absolute monopoly of her beloved guardian, and indeed, because Val was generous and he was kind, it would have made but little, if she had not instantly determined to be as obnoxious and tiresome as she could be, in the hope that Val would get tired of her and go away.

From the first she nobly contributed her share towards the business of making life at No. 700 more unlivable than it was already. She fought with the servants, got into the way of the nurses, and disturbed the patients with her noise. A day-school was found for her near at hand, and that kept her energies employed for a certain number of hours, but her new teachers were soon on the war-path after her, and she arrived home daily, flustered with combat, and bringing long accounts of their tyranny and brutality! When it was time for her to go to school in the mornings the house had to be hunted for her from top to bottom by Val or a housemaid. She hated to go to bed, and there was a scene every night before she could be induced to do so; then, on being left alone, she would invariably hop out again, turn up the lights, and amuse herself in some illicit fashion, such as hanging out of the window and dropping things on the heads of patients coming up the front-door steps. Yet in the mornings it almost needed a charge of dynamite to dislocate her from her blankets. She had a rooted aversion to taking baths, and would never brush her teeth unless some one stood over her and saw it done. In fact, she had all the faults and naughtinesses of an ordinary child strongly accentuated, and a sense of perversity extraordinarily developed. Withal she was as clever as paint, and grew prettier every day. What vexed Val most was that everlastingly she broke in upon Westenra, claiming his attention for her troubles, her lessons, her amusements, unless Val were on the alert to prevent it. She would wait outside his office door and slip in "between patients" to relate some woe, and Westenra would listen patiently and in the end the trouble evaporated into

smiles and laughter. But this wasted his time and told upon his temper in some later affair of the day, or brought him up to bed a little more tired than usual.

Presently, too, Haidee's jealousy of Val's place in Westenra's life began to take a more active form, and if it had not been for her disarming innocence of mind where worldly matters were concerned, Val would have almost come to dislike her. Instead of which she felt pity for the child who, in her adoration for Westenra, resented being ousted from the central position in his life. Haidee could not or would not understand why a mere wife should have first claim. She considered that she herself possessed it, because she had been first in Westenra's life.

One night Val, going to her husband's room to see that everything was prepared for him to go straight to rest as soon as he got in from a late consultation, found Haidee in her nightgown, curled up and scowling, on Westenra's bed.

"Haidee! What on earth–? I thought you were in bed and asleep long ago."

"Well, I 'm not, you see," was the surly response.

"But, dear chicken, what are you doing here?"

"I 'm waiting for Garry."

"Oh, Haidee, how silly! When Garry comes home he 'll be dead tired and not want to be bothered. You really must have a little consideration for him, dear–besides, you ought to be in bed and asleep by now."

The child suddenly burst out at her like a tornado:

"Why aren't *you* in bed and asleep, I 'd like to know ... why can *you* wait up for him and not me? ... I know ... you think he belongs to you ... and that you can have him all the time. You are a greedy guts. You have him every night ... why should n't I have him sometimes? You are trying to take him right away from me. Who asked you to come from your rotten old England and take my Garry away from me? Before you came he was all mine ... when I was little he used to let me sleep with my arms round his neck. But now, whenever I ask if I can come and sleep in his bed he laughs and says I have grown too big and active with my hoofs. But your hoofs are not too big, I suppose! Oh, no! ... and he 's not too tired, however late he comes in for *you* to come to his room and talk to him.... Mean pig that you are ... greedy guts! I hate you ... and I *will* sleep with Garry ... I will, I will!"

She burst into a torrent of tears, and Val stood staring at her in amazement that swiftly softened to pity. The trouble with Val was that she could always feel sympathy for another person's point of view, and that frame of mind is very disarming to anger. Immediately she threw her arms round the sobbing creature and began to comfort her.

"Dear old thing, you mustn't feel like that about me. I don't want to take him away from you. I know he is all you have. I only want you to help me as

much as you can to make things easier for him. Think how he works ... for both of us–you and me! And how tired he is at nights.... As for my coming to his room ... dear chick, don't you understand that I am his wife? When you are grown up you 'll marry some nice man ... and you 'll want to be greedy over him too a little bit."

"I 'll never marry anybody. I always meant to marry Garry ... and now *you*– " Vindictiveness came into her voice again, and Val's heart gave a little weary sigh, for she was dead beat, and this was her legitimate time of rest, hard wrung from the day. To have to face this exhausting scene late at night seemed very much like the last straw that was one too many for the camel.

However, it was urgent to get it over and done with before Westenra came in, so she stayed on talking to the unhappy child, trying to beguile her from her misery and once and for all place their relationship on a footing of sympathy and affection. It seemed almost a hopeless task, but in the end the effective thing was that she told Haidee of what so far she had spoken to no one but Westenra– her deep, sweet, secret joy in the thought of the child that was coming. It was Haidee's first glimpse into the workings of nature, and she sat wide-eyed and dumb, searching Val from top to toe for circumstantial evidence, while Val, with a faint flush in her pale face, but serene-eyed and in simple words, following on Carpenter's advice in *Love's Coming of Age*, made all clear to the child. She even, with a touch of guile, let Haidee into the secret of suffering to be endured before the baby could come into the world, believing that to touch the heart of the child to a little sympathy might not be an unwise thing. And she was right: from sympathy to compassion is a natural step, and Haidee went to bed in a glow of good resolution to be as helpful and considerate as possible in the days to come. Indeed, without turning into an angel, or even a moderately good child, she did improve greatly in behaviour during the next few months, while waiting with burning impatience for what was to come when the bleak spring days were over.

June came at last, and brought its gift to Valentine and Westenra–a son. Like an impetuous Irishman, as Val had declared, anxious to get into the thick of the fight, he had practically started their married life with them, and arrived as soon as compatibility with schedule permitted. That was a great day in the Westenra household when the golden head of a baby lit up like a star the gloom of dark and difficult ways. Instead of one baby, indeed, there were three. Two of them haggard and thin, but content and care-free as the third in that glad hour of love made incarnate. Even Haidee softened and turned into a real child as she hung with perpetual curiosity over the cot of the new-comer.

"It's got blue eyes, just like the lion cubs in the Zoo.... Oh, look at it clutching on to me! You are lucky, Val.... I wish I could get one, too. Oh, *could n't* I have it to sleep with me?"

She sulked bitterly when she was not permitted to take charge of it to play with like a doll, and thereafter constantly complained to Westenra of Val's greediness.

"You 'd think it was all hers–and how can it be if it is half yours? And if it is yours it belongs to me too," was the burden of her complaint.

When Val got up and resumed life again, the question of a name for the baby arose. Val was all for Patrick.

"Patrick seems to stand for Ireland, and he is our link with Ireland, Joe."

"It is an unlucky name with us," Westenra objected. "My father was crazy for sons, but three he called Patrick died one after the other. When I came they took no more risks, and gave me an old family name. Choose another, Val."

"Well," she said shyly, after a little thought, "would you mind Richard?"

"Richard?" he mused.

Val had long yearned to talk to Westenra of Dick Rowan, only the ban he had placed on all past things had so far prevented her. But that the day must come when no subject would be taboo between them, she felt confident.

"We could call him Dick," she said. "I once cared very much—-"

Westenra turned on her like a flash, white to the lips.

"Is that the way you burn your boats?" he said, in a low, hard voice, and looked at her with furious eyes she did not know. While she stared at him in pain and amazement he rose abruptly and left the room. Slowly her eyes filled with tears. She made no further reference to the matter. She did not know what to say. It seemed she could not refer to that time and tell him who Dick was, and how good he had been to her without giving pain. Therefore it was better to be silent. On the day of the christening itself he said:

"We 'll call him Bran if you like, Val–one of Ireland's old savage kings. I think that son of yours will be some one fine some day," he added with a boyish, lovable smile, that had something of pride in it, and something of humility too, and for those words Val forgave him and was happy again. And the baby was baptised into the Holy Catholic Church under the pagan and kingly name of Bran.

CHAPTER VII

MORE WINDING PATHS

"There is a crack in everything God has made."
EMERSON.

There is a saying that during the hot weather every one in New York, except doctors and cats, leave the city. Westenra, with his yearly habit of pulling stakes and heading for Europe at the first hint of heat, had always been an exception to this rule, and he invariably advised other men that his was the only possible way to keep fit after nine months' hard work. But now, though the brazen heat beat down on to the city and burnt up through the pavements as if Pluto had lighted a special furnace under New York, Westenra laughed at his own advice and made no move to get away. Val knew why, and the knowledge etched new shadows under her salient cheek-bones. In spite of his working like a bee from morning till night, the Sanatorium being constantly full, and operations always in progress, Westenra was harassed for money. The venture did not pay. An experienced woman at the head of things could have made it pay. The stolid, lumpy German with a good hospital training grafted on to a knowledge of household affairs would have made a roaring success of it, and coined money for all concerned. Even an ordinarily good manager with free hands and no nerves might have achieved a margin of profit. The vagabond journalist not only could not make it pay, she was turning it into a dead loss. Every day good money went cantering after bad.

What Westenra should have done, even at that eleventh hour, was to engage a capable, working matron to manage the place, while Val devoted her loving fervour to the baby and himself. But he felt doubtful as to the success of such an arrangement, first because Val would probably not like to live elsewhere; secondly, because he had managed hospitals before, and knew all about trouble with matrons. Experience had taught him that in America women rarely work well except in the interests of some one with whom they are in love. This rule applies very pertinently to American nurses, who are usually middle-aged Germans intent on marrying a doctor; but it may very well be applied to women all the world over, though Westenra was not aware of the fact. What he did know was that a managing matron would probably work for her own hand and not for his. Even if she made a roaring success of the place, later there would surely come the subtle introduction of other methods and other interests than his, into his own hospital. Worst of all would be the fact of strangers within his gates spying out the secrets of his reserved nature, bearing witness to his moods and nerves, all the irk of daily contact with people who were making a business out of his brains. This idea of outsiders being "let in on him," of alien eyes coming close enough to look over the wall behind which he kept his conflicting tempers and emotions

from the world, was peculiarly irritating to him. Only Val, privileged by love, must have the gift of a share in his torment, the right to hear his swears. With all others he smiled and smiled and hid his heart, and put distance between himself and them. And Val, because she was a true lover, understood and faithfully gave of her body and soul to pad the bumps of life for him. Whatever else she failed in, she failed not in playing the buffer between him and the strangers who went to and fro in his house. He little knew what it cost her in peace of mind and serenity of spirit, this jarring with natures so unlike her own, and jangling with those who were making a business of life. He only knew that in spite of her impracticability and extravagance there was no one like her, and that the place in her incompetent hands was dearer by far than it could ever be in surer hands that were strange. It was beginning to dawn in his heart, with the exquisite promise of the skies, all that she was to him, this woman who walked by his side never faltering, smiling gallantly in defeat. It was beginning to whisper through his senses like the haunting echo of bells whose cadence he had known all his life that defeat after all did not matter so much since he shared it with her–that it might in fact become a form of victory. In any case he meant to struggle on with things as they were, hoping and working for the best.

Unfortunately, his nerves after the year of extraordinary strain were in rags. He really needed the rest and change that was due to him. His body and brain clamoured for it, and his fine athlete's skin took into itself a putty tint that was neither healthy nor becoming. In vain did Val implore him to take ship for his native land. He laughed and refused to go unless she and the children went too. But she knew what the cost of such an exodus would mean, and sat tight as an eagle in her eyrie; and her little brood pecked at her heart as though determined to get at her life-blood. Haidee grew wickeder every hour, and Bran was the naughtiest baby in the world, sleeping all day and howling all night, withal drinking away his mother's strength and blooming on it like a pink rose.

Valentine grew pale as a wraith and Westenra's old, haunting fear that his brain would give out ate him by night and day; but neither of them was a quitter. Both possessed that stupid and over-estimated kind of courage that does not know when it is beaten. At last Fate, like an overtried mother who is sick of giving gentle hints to unheeding children, brought down her hand heavily upon them. First she smote the man. In the blasting heat of late August, Westenra went down as only the big and the strong can go down–like a felled oak. The brilliant colleague whom Val hastily and fearfully summoned to her husband's bedside expressed his diagnosis in the argot of the day.

"His nerves have run out and his stomach has gone back on him. If he does n't slip up on us it will be a near thing, Mrs. Westenra."

And it was a near thing. If it had not been for Val, Westenra would have

found eternity sooner than he expected. But it was a bad time for her. In addition to nursing her husband, she had to manage the rampageous Bran, a domestic crisis brought about by a servant strike, and an ice famine. Fortunately, there were no patients but one in the house at the time, and the nurse in attendance happened to be an exceptionally good one, who did all she could to relieve the strain. She was an English woman, a Miss Holland, with an able brain behind a pretty, calm face. She would willingly have undertaken the nursing of Westenra besides her own patient, but he was so frequently delirious that Val was afraid to let any one share in the nursing of him. She knew how he would hate any stranger to hear his tormented ramblings, but she did not realise for a long time that it would perhaps have been better at any cost that another than she should have heard them. For all that he had hidden from her came out now in broken snatches and groans, half dream, half delirium. She learned of his longing for his laboratory, of the sacrifice it had cost him to abandon it, of his despair about the Sanatorium, money worries, all the irk domestic life held for him. What was more terrible, she gleaned in broken fragments, halting and disjointed, as though even in his delirium he had an instinct to hide it, something of the way he had struggled with himself to evade her coming into his life, of his mental resistance until the last, of the pity which rather than love had moved him to ask her to marry him, of his dread of her past, and fear for their future. Oh! bitter and bleak were the things that came to her ears in scraps and broken whispers and heavy sighs, and that pieced together by her weary yet quickened brain made a clear writing on the wall. All was plain to her at last: all that he had succeeded in keeping dark from her, the secret of his torment and his pain in the struggle. To her the upholding joy in the darkest hour had always been that the man was worth it, she loved him and considered him worthy of every sacrifice she could make. She saw now that he had had no such thought to uphold him. Though he had been too loyal to acknowledge the fact even to himself, the bitter drop in his cup must have been his belief that the woman was not worth the sacrifices marriage had entailed!

Sighs and dark mutterings told her why he had shrunk at first from Haidee's coming to 68th Street–some duty he had to Halston, to keep his child only among those whose lives had been pure and unspotted by the world. The meaning of his fury at Val's suggestion for his son's naming came whispering forth from fever-broken lips.

"Dick! ... How *could* she? A dissipated brute .... no woman safe from ... and she ... my woman, alone with him for months ... wild places ... lonely places."

She could not know where he had heard that scandalous tale. She could only bow her head and take the sword to her heart.

When she heard him muttering to his mother, explaining that she was his

dream woman, that it had to be.... 'She is not like you, mother, but she came to me in dreams ... *it had to be* ... and now she is Bran's mother ... you must love my Bran's mother," she thought her heart would break for bitter aching. It seemed to her in that dark hour that nothing could ever hurt her any more. She defied Fate to do her any worse hurt. An unwise thing to do. Fate was in fact sitting in wait with a worse clout in her hand.

There came an afternoon when Westenra was so much better that he could talk a little, softly, if a trifle vaguely to Haidee who had crept in to hold his hand. His eyes, seeming to have grown lighter in his thin, strongly-featured face, travelled incessantly round the room, resting here and there as though they recognised landmarks in some country he had not visited for years. They rested on Val writing at a table near by, and noted the wraithlike face, pale as a bone, the weary lean of her against her own supporting arm, the droop of her lips and her shoulders. When she came over with the medicine, he said quietly:

"You should go out for a little while, dearest. Haidee will take care of me."

She had indeed a longing that was almost active pain for air and the sight of sky and green things, and needed little persuasion, seeing that he was really better. She did not even stop to change her frock, which was old and unfashionable, and in her haste caught up an ancient school-hat of Haidee's, trimmed with a shabby bow of silk ribbon, and more than slightly bent out of shape about the brim. She felt it mattered little how she looked, so long as she could escape into the outer air. Her head ached violently.

As she hurried down the front-door steps, a man walking up the street looked at her curiously, and something in her peculiar walk brought a flash of amazement to his eyes and quickened his steps. He was tall and well-dressed, with traces of breeding, and a certain dashing handsomeness about him, but there was a green tint in his ravaged cheeks, and the straight figure under the well-cut coat was gaunt and shrunk. His eyes lacked lustre, and one of them jerked and winked mechanically at irregular intervals. The man was a nervous and physical wreck. As he passed the house from which Val had come, he looked up and noticed its number and the name on the door-plate. A moment later he caught up with the slight, hurrying figure, gave a swift glance at her profile and the shabby hat above it, then, in the quiet drawling tones of the man about town, he said politely:

"How do, Val?"

She swung round with the wild jerk of a lassoed creature and faced him. Then he was not so sure after all that it was Val. The grey-faced woman, with all the life gone out of her eyes, sunken cheeks and blanched lips, was certainly not the Valentine Valdana of other days. The figure, the walk was hers; but the face was the face of some strange woman–some woman in trouble, too, and that was

a bore. He was a man who always avoided women in trouble. On the point of lifting his hat, with a slight apology and walking away, her words detained him.

"*You!*" Her voice was the voice of Valentine Valdana with all the music gone from it: harsh and grinding as stone on stone.

"Yea, verily," said he, and stared sardonically into her fearful eyes. They stood so for a moment staring at each other. Then the man laughed; but it was not a pleasant laugh.

"You don't seem as pleased to see me as you ought to be!"

"You!" she stammered again. It seemed all she was able to say.

"Yes, *me*, my very dear Val," he repeated with something like a snarl. "Time appears to have dimmed your excellent eyesight, as well as robbed you of your gift of repartee!"

She answered strangely, speaking vaguely like a woman in a nightmare, but her words struck home like little, sharp knives, and the blood mounted high in his dark cheeks.

"So *you* were the slinker in the bush!–the skulker!–the deserter of comrades and men!–*I might have known*!"

Rage flashed out of his bloodshot eyes, and for a moment he looked as if he could strike her. Then he laughed again the jeering sardonic laugh of the cynic, whose bones hard words have no power to break, the coward who fears nothing but death.

"Be damned to you!" he said pleasantly. "I had as much right to save my skin as any one else."

"*No one else saved his skin.*"

"That was their lookout," he remarked with grim facetiousness, but her silent, terrible stare, so full of indictment, disconcerted him horribly. He essayed to change the unpleasant subject.

"So you are in New York! No one could make out where the deuce you had got to."

That detached her from the sinister question of his conduct on the South African veldt. But still she stared deep into him as if seeking in his soul the key to some problem she could not solve; and he was embarrassed, for he wished no one to search in his dark soul–there were things hidden there that even he was afraid to look upon. As for the situation, surely it was clear enough. He that should have been dead was alive, and that was all there was to it. He had been looking for her to let her know, and that he had found her by accident was so much to the good. It had a better appearance than if he had hunted her down (as he would have done if he had possessed any clue to work on). After all, he argued to himself, he had a right to her sympathy. Also he needed help in the shape of money pretty badly. He was sick of hiding in America, and longed to

get away to the cheap comfort of Europe. Unfortunately, she did not look as if she could help his financial situation very much. He had, in fact, never seen her look so shabby since she ceased to occupy the proud position of wife and slave to Horace Valdana, Esq. The thought that he might not be able to levy a loan from her after all moved him to venom.

"I fear you have come down in the world, my poor Val! If I did not know what a brilliant woman of letters you are, I might almost think you had turned into a housemaid. What were you doing at Number 700?"

Then she realised he had seen her come out of the house. That was the key she had sought. Now she knew just where she stood, and what she must do.

"Yes," she said slowly, "you are quite right, I have come down in the world, and I am a housemaid–at that house I have just come from."

He burst out laughing. It seemed to be the funniest news he had heard for a long time.

"Indeed! Perhaps you will invite me to call and have some supper with you and the cook some evening?"

"We are not allowed to have callers. I don't get on with the cook. I am under notice to quit." She made her statements quite gravely.

"But this is great!" He began to laugh again uproariously. "So you have got the sack! And now you will have to go back to the career of famous journalist. But why have left it, my dear girl? Is it a joke, or some new craze for getting copy?"

Steadily, calmly, with pale lips and toneless voice, she lied on–for Bran's sake, for Garrett's sake, for the sake of all she held dear. What better reason can a woman have for lying her soul away!

"No, no joke, no craze: stern necessity. I can't write any more, that is all. I had brain fever, and when it was all over I found that I could n't put another sentence together. I am done for as a writer. So I just dropped out of the old life and disappeared. The only thing I can do now is work with my hands."

"But"–he stammered. "But it will come back–all you want is time, rest–"

"Never," she said firmly. "Never. It is finished. My brain is gone. I am Alice Brook now–Alice Brook, housemaid. I shall never be anything else."

"Good God!" He gazed at her aghast. There was no glimmering of doubt in his mind as to the truth of her story. It seemed almost too extraordinary to be true, but he had never known Val to lie. He was aware, in fact, from painful experience that she despised liars, and held a creed that nothing worth a lie was to be found in the world. It was not for him to know that she had at last found something she considered worth lying for. Besides, she so thoroughly looked the part. Thin, hollow-eyed, and badly dressed, with the hopeless lines unhappiness had sketched about her lips, she was the picture of an overworked slave who

worked too much by day, and got too little rest at night.

"Good God!" he repeated blankly. "And I was going to touch you for my fare home."

It was her turn to laugh now, and she did it silently, rocking from side to side, holding one hand over her heart as if afraid it might burst from her body in its wild mirth. Valdana considered her with shrewd, savage eyes. He had never known her guilty of such a thing as a fit of hysterics, but it looked uncommonly as if she meant to indulge in one now, and he was not anxious to assist in anything of the kind.

"Don't be a fool, Val," he said sharply. "Pull yourself together. Come along into the Park and we 'll discuss things."

Val's laughter was over except for a strange little sobbing sound that escaped from her lips from time to time, as she walked slowly by his side towards the Park. Sometimes she swayed a little and put out her hands as if to keep herself from falling–as though the earth were rocking under her feet.

————

There is a story told in Africa of a Dutch woman, who, during one of the early Kaffir wars, escaped from an attacked township, and with her family of six little children hid in the bush. They concealed themselves in a deep swamp overhung with bushes and seething with poisonous gnats; and there, while all round them human beasts beat the bush seeking for prey, the little band crouched low, nothing but their heads protruding from the filthy ooze, fearful almost to breathe lest they should be heard and dragged forth to torture and death. Unfortunately, the baby, sick and too young to understand the terrible situation, whimpered endlessly at the bites of the insects, and all its mother's fearful hushing could not quiet it. With the howls of blood-drunken Kaffirs in her ears, and before her eyes the five tragic, terror-stricken faces of her other children, the distracted mother found no other thing to do than clasp her hands about the little loved, whimpering throat that would betray them all, and still its cries for ever.

Long after Valdana had left her Val sat on in the Park, trying not to think, trying to get control over herself. Her overwrought brain felt like a struggling, tortured thing, determined to burst from her head and run brandishing its frenzy and pain to the world; while some other part of her strove for calm, hushing and pacifying the tortured thing as the Dutch mother had hushed the child that would betray them all; and she felt that if she could not still its frenzied cries she must kill it. Better that she should die than that Westenra and little Bran should suffer. But she did not want to die; she knew she could not be spared at that time. The mother of a little child can never be spared. Westenra, lying weak and ill, seemed

to her no more than a little child too, and one that she must care for and protect from trouble. Dazed and shocked as she was, with her world in pieces about her, the mother sense alert in her warned her to get control of her nerves; that it would be fatal to fall ill now; that everything depended upon her deliberate action. She had seen with Westenra what happened when the brain was sick, and she knew she could never hope to keep the truth from him if such an illness overtook her. She was resolute to keep it from him. He had suffered enough. He was sick and broken with suffering, and all through her. But his pride and joy in Bran was still left him; and of that, if she could help it, he should not be robbed. His son! Heir to an old and honoured name if to no great fortune. What would befall if he found that his son was nameless–heir to nothing but shame and sorrow. Ah! some day he might have to hear the truth and bear it–but not now, not now. She must take herself in hand strongly, force herself to calmness, plan how to outwit Valdana, and save her loved ones.

She looked at the card Valdana had given her with an address written on it:

MR. JOHN SEYMOUR,

Shrapp's Hotel, ***West 19th Street,*** *New York.*

He was there under an assumed name, skulking, as he had skulked in the bush. His mother, the only person whom he had enlightened as to his being alive, was secretly sending him money. She dared not let his father, an old man dying of an incurable disease, know, for fear it would hasten his end, and she was ashamed to tell her other sons and daughters; they were all honourable, upright people whose heads would be lowered to the dust under the blow. With a mother's unselfish love she wished to spare them the truth–that the man whose gallant death all England had mourned was alive and skulking in hiding, a coward who had deserted his comrades! But for Val she had no such feeling, and it was she who had given him the news of Val's sailing for America and paid his fare to do the same, counselling him to find her out and get her help. She said it was Val's duty to stand by him, and he, pleased with such comfortable counsel, had been in New York six months hoping to come across his wife. At the last moment he had chanced upon her by accident!

He had left her in the Park; it was with the understanding that she was to meet him in two days' time at Shrapp's Hotel. But she had no intention of keeping the appointment. First of all it would be extremely difficult for her to get away from home without lying, and then there was a possibility of Westenra finding out where she had gone, and suspecting something strange. She meant

to take no risks where Westenra was concerned. Secondly, she hated to meet Valdana. Quite apart from the horrible turmoil his reappearance caused in her life, she was shakingly revolted by his presence. The sight of him alive when he should have been where the world believed him–among the heroic dead–made her physically sick.

"*As much right to save his skin...*" she repeated blankly, and the blood seemed to turn to water in her veins. "Oh, I might have known ... I might have known! Mean souls do not suddenly become heroic! *To save his skin!*"

And it was the name of such a man that she bore by law! For such a one her little Bran must be branded illegitimate. She ground her teeth in rage and despair, and gave out a little moan.

Around the black morass that surrounded her there showed only one small glimmer of light–it was the remembrance of that faint gleam that kept her from going mad. He had offered it as a sort of propitiation for the fact of his being still alive, and she shuddered at her own heartless catching at it. She might not have believed but for the bleak tint of his skin.

"It won't be for long, anyway. I 'm booked, Val. I have the same trouble as my father–cancer of the liver. Nothing can save me. It's only a matter of a few months ... a year at the outside." She had looked into his face keenly at that and recognised the possibility of his words being true. That strange hue in his cheeks might easily be the hue of death foreshadowing the atrocious malady from which his father suffered.

He had gone on to tell her that all he asked was to be allowed to live in peace, out of the world's sight, until his hour came. The truth must never be known, he said. Even he was not so dead to decency that he could not recognise that. He owed something to his family after all–to say nothing of his country! These had a right to expect silence from one who should have been dead. And he was willing enough to be silent. The gnawing at his vitals had killed in him, he said, all taste for gaming and dissipation. He only wanted peace in some quiet country place, anywhere but America, which he hated with the fierce hatred of the waster surrounded by active energetic men. He had, it appeared, sought Val in the pretty certain belief that she could and would assist him to the quiet life he longed for, and when he found she could not he was more inclined to curse than to sympathise because her brain had "given out." She smiled a tortured smile at that. Her brain had indeed given out. That part at least of the story was true; and that she would never be able to write again as in the old days she knew was true too. There is nothing like a year's tussling with domestic problems for dulling the wits. She felt that to earn a sure million she could not have produced the energy or material for one of her old gay vivid articles salted with wit and scented with the breeze. The power had gone from her. Wifehood had absorbed it. Maternity

had eaten and drunk it up! Like Alice Brook, she could only work with her hands now; and, like Alice Brook, she was sadly incompetent even with these. For there really was a housemaid called Alice Brook at No. 700; an inefficient English girl who could not get on with the cook, and was without the faintest notion of her duties. As Val had no time to train her she was obliged to give her notice, and the girl was in fact leaving the house that night. This was why Val had felt so safe in her story.

When Valdana found out that she did not mean to meet him again, he would probably, as discreetly as he dared, make inquiries at No. 700 for Alice Brook. But Val would be prepared for him.

She sat still on that bench in Central Park until she had formed her plan. She would write to him within the next two days saying that nothing was to be gained by their meeting; that she had left 68th Street, and that if he did not worry her and try to find her, she would help him all she could with money, and from time to time send him, through his mother, such sums as she could earn. There was no question, of course, of her earning at present, but she possessed jewellery upon which she could raise certain sums. She would pawn some at once and send him fifty pounds for his passage to England, thus ridding herself of his vicinity at least, and gaining untainted breathing space in which to decide upon the next move. There must, she knew, be a terrible reconstruction of her life with Westenra, but as yet she was too weary and shocked to see far ahead. She only knew that she must go warily, like

”Ate Dea, treading so soft—-”

Full of schemes that it revolted her to formulate, feeling a conspirator and traitor to all she loved, she at last retraced her steps homeward.

CHAPTER VIII

WOUNDS IN THE RAIN

”What will you do, love?

When I am going
With white sail flowing,
The seas beyond?
What will you do, love?
When waves divide us
And friends may chide us,
For being fond?"
SAMUEL LOVER.

Recuperation set in at last with Westenra, and he began to return to health almost as swiftly as he had departed from it, and with health came a full tide of love and gratitude to the woman who had so devotedly nursed him back to life. But in the wraith at his bedside he hardly recognised Val. She had strangely changed, yet poignantly recalled to him that grey lady of long ago, whom in the past months of pain and fevered rush he had almost forgotten. Shadows seem to hang about her as in his dream. Almost it seemed as if she, instead of he, were returning from the Valley of the Shadow. He was struck to the heart by her worn and weary look. But when he put out hands of gratitude and compassion to her, she seemed like the dream woman to elude them without moving. A long, long distance came between them. The old sad ache of lost lands was in her eyes and lingered about her lips. Consciousness came upon him suddenly that he loved this woman deeply, that she was the very heart of his heart ... then why should he have that sense of fear that she was escaping from him?

She smiled at him with exile in her eyes when he took her hand, and kissing it, thanked her for all her goodness to him.

"Bless you, dearest and best ... I am ashamed of myself for getting sick like this ... to have had you half-killing yourself nursing me ... what should I have done without you? What would I ever do without you ... Brannie's mother?"

Was it his fancy that her hand seemed to grow a little rigid in his? That a shadow passed over her face? He had called her the sweetest thing he could think of, one that meant so much to him, the symbol of their love, the treasure saved from the rocks that had broken and wrecked them–the treasure with which they would build a new ship in which to sail the stormy seas. He could not know that ever since the days of delirium she had been yearning for some little word of *personal* love, some little name that was all for her as lover, not mother only. Once more the sense of distance between them came to him. She seemed suddenly to be a long way off. In effect, he had loosed her hand and she had moved away to the window. He did not see the heavy tears that scorched her eyes, but he noticed the droop of her shoulders and reproached himself.

"I 'm killing her," he thought sombrely, "and she is sick of it! Sick of nursing me, and of her life here! How can one blame her! I only wonder it did n't come sooner. How could I ever have hoped to keep a woman like her ... to make a slave of ... in a doctor's commonplace home!"

He closed his eyes again and the swift despondency of the invalid welled up in him. When she came back to his sofa the old moody shadow was on his face, the look of strain back about his brows. Timidly, and with her face turned from the light, so that he might not see the trace of her tears, she said:

"Is there anything you would like, Joe?"

"No, thank you, dear ... I have you!" He spoke gently, and put out his hand to her without opening his eyes. A moment later his sombre thought escaped from him almost involuntarily.

"I have you–though God knows for how long!" Then he waited for the touch of her lips on his, the rush of tender reproach for his unfaith. He did not indeed know how passionately hungry he was for those words–until they did not come! Nor how his lips ached for the touch of hers–until that long, still moment of waiting! Nothing happened; nothing came. No kiss, no word of protest. He could scarcely believe it at first. If he had not still been holding her hand, he might have supposed that she had risen and gone away. For he had not opened his eyes, but lay waiting as sometimes one waits with eyes closed for the coming of a beautiful thing. The knowledge flashed upon him suddenly that it was a long while since Val had kissed him. So long, that he could scarcely remember when. Was it before his illness? No: looking back down the vista of burning days of fever and discomfort, he could remember that before unconsciousness came upon him her fresh mouth was often laid like a rose upon his dry one and at the memory he longed again for its fragrance as a thirsty man in the desert longs for a cup of cold water. He was aware that when at last she did bend over him he would bind his arms round her, and holding her fast to his heart devour and consume her, and never let her go from him again. But in the same moment he was seized with the torment all true lovers know, the agonising knowledge that however much the lips may devour and the arms bind, and the heart strain to hold there is a limit to the reach of human love, a door to which the key will never be found, a barrier beyond which the aloof and lonely soul of the beloved sits stern and contemplative, for ever lonely in its secret place. This is the torment of all earthly love. No true lovers but have sought in each other's eyes the key of that implacable door, striven to drag the secret from each other's lips, known the darkness and desolation of that outer place! Lying there, waiting for his wife's kiss, Garrett Westenra suffered this torment for the first time.

It was characteristic of him that when at last he understood that she meant to make no response either by word or deed to the cry of his heart so thinly veiled

beneath the sadness of his words, he did not question or upbraid her. He only lay very still, turning over and over in his mind the cruel fact that she was weary of him and of their life together. Between his half-closed lids he observed her, silent and white, looking down at the hand which, tightly held by his, lay on her knee. He realised then how fierce his grip had been, and relaxing it gently drew away his hand. What good to grip the casket so close when the jewel it had held for him was gone!

"What do you think we had better do, Val?" he said at last, speaking out of his pain, and meaning "with the rest of life." He did not expect so quick and definite a response as she made.

"I think that as soon as you feel well enough to travel you should go out West, and stay until you are quite strong again."

"You and the children too?"

"Oh! no, no!" she cried hastily–too hastily with so keen a listener intent on her. She saw her mistake and tried to cover it with calm reasoning words. "What change would it be for you with us everlastingly at your heels? Bran rampaging, Haidee worrying–and I–oh, of course, it would not do at all. You must see that." Her arguments might have sounded silly but for their urgency to convince, and her pleading eyes. He stared straight before him, but missed no single shade of her face or voice.

"We will stay at home and mind things," she continued, "and be quite all right, until—-"

"Until?"

"Until you come back...."

"And then?"

She knew she ought not to let him draw her on, that it would be better to wait until he returned, but she was an honest creature by nature, and though circumstances were plunging her deep in duplicity, she had not yet learned to conceal and wait. Besides, she wanted to get the pain over, the thing settled and done with, past recanting. If he were cold and angry so much the better for her. It would be easier to bear than if he tried to detain her with kind words.

"Then," she stammered, "Garrett, I think, we–the children and I–ought to go away for awhile ... to England, or France perhaps–some place where living is more reasonable than here, and I can get strong again, and be of some use to you...."

No word from him. He did not even raise his eyes. So she stumbled on hopelessly, embittered by his silence and misunderstanding, longing to have him see how much she cared, how it broke her heart to make such a suggestion, yet fearing that he would combat it.

"You know, Garrett, that I am no good in this place ... never have been.

Later perhaps when I am strong again I may be of some use ... when Bran is older.... You must see for yourself ... I cannot manage the house at present–(I have always mismanaged it)–with Bran wanting so much attention. It would be best to get one of your good nurses to take charge ... anybody could do it better than I...."

So she had it all planned out! She had arranged for "the rest of life" without consulting him! All the time he lay sick she had been plotting to escape. Small wonder he felt the return of her old elusiveness, had become aware of distance between them.

Separation! That was to be the end of the voyage in the dream ship–of his life with the dream woman. Had it all been a dream perhaps? ... a dream full of dark places, with thorns for the flesh and pits for the feet ... but always–that was good to remember in this dark hour–always stars overhead. The stars had never before failed though they were dying out now. So she was a quitter after all! A deserter! Unfaithful to the post she had chosen. Somehow he could never have believed it except from her lips. It was hard to believe, looking at that face softly hollowed by weariness and worry, the faithful deep eyes, the tender lips, the hands grown diaphanous in his service. Nothing had been too hard or base in his household for those hands to strive with, he knew that. And how she had nursed him! That he owed his life to her was certain. And now, so soon, so soon, she nullified all, her tenderness and devotion, the precious unhappiness, the sacred sacrifices–the wonderful bonds that trouble shared can make, everything was broken and rendered void by this act of desertion!

It must be remembered that he came of a race of women who had, so to speak, habitually lived heroic lives. The men of his family, never able to offer ease to their women folk, expected heroism and self-sacrifice of them, and no Westenra woman had ever failed the expectation–*until now*! Yes, that was a thought that hurt. That ate like acid in an open wound. Val was not one of *them*! His wife, the woman on whom he had staked his honour and belief, was not of the stuff of which Westenra wives were made! Until that hour, spite of failure, trouble, and disappointment, he could have sworn away his soul on her loyalty–what did the mere failure of plans, or lack of money matter, when they had each other, were content to tread the same road together, the same ideals in their hearts, their eyes fixed on the same stars! And by God he could have sworn ... but what was the use! She had proved his judgment wrong, that was all. She was just the ordinary woman, sick of her job, anxious to get away from it. "Lots of women like her in America," he reflected sardonically. No one who knew the circumstance could blame her. He least of all would blame her. Only–his soul was sick within him! But, as always, he hid his wound from her. Not a sign of what he felt when at last he spoke, quietly, reflectively, almost it sounded to her,

approvingly.

"No doubt it would be a very wise arrangement."

She had been twisting her hands in nervous agitation, her beautiful, strange eyes full of the ardour that had always been like wine to him, though he had never told her so. Now a rush of words came from her lips, she was almost incoherent in her gratitude.

"Oh, Joe! ... if you think so ... if you won't mind ... it will not be for long ... only six months or so–a year perhaps."

He stared at her in bitter astonishment. (Only a year perhaps! Why not ten years–twenty years–the rest of life?)

"I will take such care of your Brannie for you.... I 'll never let him forget you for a moment ... and I 'll come back so different ... ready to tackle any problem ... you 'll see what a clever housewife I will be."

(He did n't want a clever housewife. He had believed he did, but now he knew that all he wanted was Val. He had arrived at desiring nothing better than her fantastic housekeeping and gipsy camping-out methods. She had spoilt him for comfort and set rule.)

"We must get some one to take charge of the place ... Miss Holland is a splendid woman.... I know she will make a success of it ... and before I go I will find you a good housekeeper who will look after you well."

(Before she went! Oh! damn it, why should she look at him like that, as though it were for his happiness she was arranging instead of her own? As though planning loyalty instead of desertion–treachery! How could she smile–gladly, gratefully, when she was taking herself out of his life, robbing him of the light of his son's golden head!)

"And if you will let me have Haidee? ..." she spoke more diffidently now. "I fear she will be a care to you. I would do my best for her—-"

"No!" he interrupted sharply, "if you take Bran I must console myself with Haidee. I should think you could spare me her, at least!"

She turned white as death. Haidee to take Bran's place with him! Their son–her love-baby–to be exiled from his father's heart as well as from his home! Of what use then all her plotting, her secret grief and suffering endured, that father and son might be spared.

"Oh, Joe! Oh, Joe!" was all she could say.

He stared at her incredulously. He had no idea she was so fond of Haidee. It seemed indeed as if she could be fond of any one but himself! He was thankful that Haidee herself made an end to the miserable discussion by bounding in at the moment and embracing him boisterously.

"And can I bring Bran in?" she cried, as soon as she had finished hugging him. "He 's just on the stairs. Nurse has brought him home from his walk ... he

looks such a duck in his new pink pelisse."

"Yes, bring him in," said Westenra, heavily, but a moment later, when his son was sprawling on the bed thrusting fat fists into his father's eyes, exploring his father's nose and ears, moodiness departed from that father, and he began to laugh like a boy.

"Just feel that leg, Haidee ... muscle–sheer muscle. I tell you this fellow is a hot number. He 's going to make the athletes sit up and take notice; are n't you, old man? Hi! that's my nose!"

"He smells like a nice ripe peach! Oh, would n't I love to eat him!" shrieked Haidee, and hugged him until Val had to call out a warning not to crack his ribs. She stood watching them, unshed tears scorching her eyes. They were so dear, so very dear, that man and child; and Haidee too was dear for loving them so well. It was pain even to look at them. Their dearness burnt like flame. She felt that if she stayed in the room a moment longer she must fling herself down by them, cry out the truth to Westenra, tell him she could never leave him, nor rob him of his son. But that way madness lay. Sorrow and shame, worse things than separation for a time, must come of that. No, she must bear it alone. Her hand was to the plough and she must not turn weakly back. Even now there was that to do that was part of the plot, and she must leave the dear ones to go and do it.

"I think they can spare me for a little while," she thought, not without a certain tender irony, for the crowd on the bed were so very wrapped up in their own performances. Unnoticed, she slipped from the room, and went to Westenra's office to typewrite a letter.

When she did not keep the appointment at Shrapp's Hotel with Valdana, he had, as she foresaw, called at No. 700 in search of Alice Brook. On hearing that she had left, he asked for an interview with Mrs. Westenra. Fortunately, Val had not been with Garrett, but in her room resting with a bad headache, when the new maid, a Wicklow girl of good type, who had developed a great devotion for her mistress, brought in the card. By an effort Val had managed to control herself and look with calmness upon the inscribed name.

"Mr. John Seymour! Who is he? What does he want, Mary?"

"I don't know, ma'am, he did not say, but sure it's a sick man he is by the colour av him."

"Go down and find out. If he is a patient, tell him the doctor is very ill and will not be able to see patients for a month or two at least. If he is in a hurry he had better go to Dr. Dillon, who is seeing all Dr. Westenra's patients at present."

This gave her time, and would she thought allay Valdana's suspicion, if he had one, of any connection between herself and Alice Brook. But she was sick with apprehension and lay white on her pillow when the maid reappeared; the answer was as expected: the gentleman's business was not with the doctor, but

with the mistress of the house.

"Sure, it's the character of the last housemaid he wants, ma'am. He 's afther engaging her," Mary announced and Val's heart gave a great jump of fright. The next moment she realised that this was most likely a ruse, a mere excuse for finding out what he wanted to know of her whereabouts.

"The character of Alice Brook?" she said mechanically.

"Yes, ma'am. And I took the liberty of telling him, ma'am, that you could not be plagued with such affairs now, and you destroyed nursing the doctor and all, and he 'd better be afther writing for what he wants."

Val could have embraced the kindly creature, but she gave no sign, only said quietly:

"You did quite right, Mary. But to save time you may tell this gentleman, Mr.–," she looked at the card–"Mr. Seymour, that as far as character goes Alice Brook was quite a good girl–honest, sober, an early riser, diligent (she could not forbear a wry smile to think that in the last three points at least the formula applied equally to herself); her chief defect was that she was quite ignorant as to the duties of a housemaid, and I had no time to train her. I cannot think of anything further that it is necessary for him to know, but if there should be he can write."

As the maid was leaving the room, she added thoughtfully:

"Don't let him linger asking questions, Mary. It seems a curious thing for a gentleman to be occupying himself with a housemaid's references. He may not be what he professes at all, but some scamp—-"

She knew that upon that hint Mary would polish him off without ceremony, and she felt no compunction in giving it. Could any one indeed be a worse scamp? What was he there for but to spy out and blackmail, and cause ruin and dismay to her and her loved ones? She trembled with rage and terror when she thought of him being in the same house with Garrett and Bran. But for an accident she might have been seen by him, or his card brought up to her at Westenra's bedside! There was no reason for him to have come to the house at all. True, she had not kept the appointment, but she had kept faith with him in the matter of money, had sold a greater part of her jewels, and sent him the proceeds by registered post. At the same time she had written him a letter telling him firmly that there was nothing to be gained by their meeting. She reminded him that all question of their being anything to each other was over many years past, and that certainly the circumstances of his reappearance did not incline her to renew any kind of intimacy with him. In consideration of his health she promised she would do her best for him, and spare him any money she could.

"But it is no use hounding me," she wrote, full of the cold fury of a mother robbing her loved ones to give to a wolf, for the money gained on her jewels

would have paid many a bill hanging over the household at the moment. "You must not forget that I too need to live. And you are not to torment me. If ever I make money again I will let you have all I can, but I do not hold out any great hope. In the meantime take this, and leave America with it. If I have anything to send you I will do so through your mother. But leave me alone–surely you have caused me enough sorrow! All I ask is to be left alone."

Thus she had written in her agony and desperation, and sent with the letter the sum of one hundred and ten pounds. Yet a week later he was on the doorstep intent on tracking her down! Well, she had cut the ground from under his feet by her message through Mary. With the information he had asked for concerning Alice Brook he had no further pretext for calling at the house, or even writing. Not that she relied on that. Horace Valdana had failed in all honourable things, but never in lies, pretexts, and inventions. She could hardly suppose he would do so now. As the event proved, she was right. For two weeks there was silence. Almost she had begun to hope when there came a letter, polite but formal, asking if Mrs. Westenra would have the kindness to oblige the writer with the home address of her late housemaid, Alice Brook.

"She had been in my service for ten days or so" (ran the letter), "but went out one day and never returned. I am much troubled, and should like to communicate with her friends. I feel sure that you will give me such assistance as you can in the matter. If you do not know her home address, perhaps you can tell me from what agency you originally engaged her? I may in that way be able to trace her.

"**With apologies for troubling you**, "**Believe me**, "**Very truly yours**, "JANE SEYMOUR."

"*Jane Seymour!*" She could imagine with what a cynical smile he produced that tag of history from the rag-bag of his memory, and made it serve his purpose as a nom-de-plume. For though the name of good King Hal's third queen might or might not have been borne by one of America's fair daughters, the writing was the writing of Horace Valdana! It was one more attempt to get on to the trail of his victim.

The address at the top of the letter was Number 439 West 19th Street–the same number in fact as Shrapp's Hotel; but of course Mrs. Westenra would not know this. She was to suppose it the number of the private house occupied by Mrs. Jane Seymour! No doubt Mr. John Seymour would be on the lookout for Mrs. Jane's correspondence!

This was the letter to which she now typed the following answer on her husband's typewriter:

"MADAME,–I beg to state that I can give you no information concerning the whereabouts of my late housemaid, Alice Brook. When I have once supplied a discharged servant with a formal reference, I feel that my responsibility to her is at an end. I must, therefore, request you to relieve me of all further inquiries upon a subject in which I have neither the time nor inclination to interest myself."

This missive, designedly as rude and arrogant as she knew how to make it, she signed with a hieroglyphic signature in which might be discovered after careful study some resemblance to "Anne Westenra" (her second name was Anne), but that was quite unlike any signature ever put on paper by Valentine Valdana.

In the end she almost spoiled all by one of those absent-minded mistakes that sometimes betray the best laid plots and plans. She addressed the envelope in her natural handwriting. She had stamped and closed it and risen to ring for Mary to take it to the letter-box at the end of the street (for since her *rencontre* with Valdana she had not dared go out), when, with her hand on the electric button, some bell in her brain rang a warning that something was wrong. She stared at the letter in her hand for a full minute before she recognised her *bêtise*, then the shock sent her back to her seat half fainting, pale as a witch.

"What an escape! What an escape!" she muttered with dry lips. "I must be going mad! My brain is giving way! Oh, if I had posted it!"

Valdana would have been quick to recognise her writing and see through the whole thing–*that she was Mrs. Westenra.* All would have been lost!

"But I would have torn down the letter-box–set fire to it–blown it up–rather than he should have got the letter," she muttered fiercely. In that moment she knew herself one of those who in the cause of love are capable of crime; that there was not anything she would not do to save her son from being branded illegitimate and Westenra from shame. But she was shaken to the depths by her narrow escape, and the thought that any moment her overtried brain might betray her. It was clear that she must depart as soon as possible from New York. Her presence there was a danger. The moment she reached England she could communicate with Valdana's mother, and once he found she had gone from America, he too would make for Europe.

From that day forward a gulf yawned between Westenra and his wife–a gulf into whose depths every sweet memory they had ever shared seemed to have disappeared. The only things that could have bridged it over were confidence

and love, but he no longer believed in her love, and she could not give him her confidence. Desperate and dismayed, she saw the chasm widening day by day between them, but though her spirit held out arms to him imploring his love and belief in her loyalty, and in her eyes she could not quench the light of tenderness, she stayed firm to her purpose.

And Westenra felt the spirit arms entwining him, and saw the beacon in her eyes, and cursed her for a false trifler, a juggler with the arts and tricks of women. For when he approached her, lured by the beacon, she retreated, subtly intervening between them that sense of distance. And she was cold as death to his touch. Her hand, if he took it, lay like a stone in his, her lips eluded him. They were to all intents and purposes strangers to each other. She had never kissed him since he came back to the world of consciousness! What could he suppose but that her love for him was worn out.

All her kisses were for Bran it seemed. She would at times almost violently snatch the child from his arms, and kiss it feverishly, hungrily, just where he had kissed it, as if to drag the flavour of his lips–or as Westenra bitterly thought, remove all trace of them–from the little face.

He was a proud man, and his pride sustained him in this dark and incomprehensible crisis of their life together. With extraordinary self-control, born of his pity for her, he refrained from reproach or any violent sign of his inward rage and pain; but often a sort of primitive savagery in him ached to smite the eyes that mocked him with their false tenderness, and there were moments when he longed to take her by the throat and kill her, while he kissed the lips she withheld from him.

Life was in fact an active wearing misery to them both.

He was once more sound in health. His plan was to go softly under the stars for awhile and perform no serious operations, but he felt quite equal to taking up the ordinary threads of his practice again. His main worry was Val. Her resolution to go to Europe meant not only the *bouleversement* of home and hospital, but of their whole future life. He was far from wishing to keep a woman who did not care for him tied to his side. But he retained a kind of ungrounded hope that after she rested awhile from the heavy strain his illness had entailed, she would gradually return to her old, ardent generous self and give up the fantastic plan for leaving America. He saw very well that she must go somewhere. Her physique was in rags. She had grown so fragile that her bones almost pierced her skin, and her face was the face of a ghost. His heart was wrung with pity for her. None more anxious than he that she should go away and rest, and to use his last cent for the purpose if need be. What hurt was that she should want to go so far and for so long; that she should have planned it all so eagerly while he lay sick, and hold fast to it so resolutely now that he was well. Once so pliant to all his

wishes she was firm as a rock in this, and he had no will to oppose her. His heart was always tender for the sick, and it was plain to the dullest eye that she was a sick woman. He schooled himself to believe at last that her strange coldness was a result of this sickness. He had half-killed her with overwork and worry, small wonder that she hated him! It was not treachery, not the quitting spirit, but the whim of a sick and weary child. The generous thing was to bear with her unreproaching, and at whatever cost to himself, humour her wish. It was in this spirit that he told her to pack up, and he would, when she gave the word, take steamer tickets for her and the children. He arranged for Mary, the Wicklow maid, to accompany her too. He would have offered to go himself, though he knew the hospital needed him, but that he could feel her projecting a very stone wall of opposition to such a purpose. He had almost to insist on her taking Haidee at the last, for she seemed now to hang back from the idea, looking at him with strange eyes when he said that Haidee would be better in her care than any one else's. How could he know that his delirium had betrayed to her old doubts of his, which in sane moments he would himself have been ashamed of harbouring, and which had long since been banished from his mind by her bright gallantry. He had come to believe, indeed, that Haidee was better with Val than with any one. Further, he did not in the least want Haidee with him. She would not for one moment comfort him for the loss of Bran and his wife. He had only said the thing in that first bitterness of heart. Rather he looked upon Haidee's going as a safeguard to his own happiness, for if Val's illness grew worse, the child would be able to give him the news at once. Mary was going only for the voyage, and on arriving at Southampton would go straight on to Ireland where her mother needed her.

When he found at last that Val's reason for lingering in New York was that she was not satisfied with the people she was leaving behind to take charge of the house and his comfort, he summarily, even savagely, turned on her and told her he was well able to take care of himself. Indeed, he considered this anxiety for his welfare somewhat forced and unnecessary. Well she knew what he needed for his welfare–that it was neither a good cook, nor a housekeeper, nor a matron for his hospital–and, knowing it, she still went from him, betook herself out of his life, put the ocean between them!

And so at the last, on one grey day late in the year, it was almost in bitterness they parted, haggard and broken, hiding their hearts from each other.

As the White Star liner steamed down the river he stood on the dock and waved farewell to the little group that now made up his dear portion of life; Haidee, all long tags of hair, yelling boisterously; Mary holding up Bran pink and shining; Val, wraith-like in her long grey silk cloak, seeming among her veils to be floating rather than leaning from the side of the ship, her hands put out at the

last in an involuntary gesture as of entreaty–for what? Forbearance, forgiveness, understanding?

"God knows what is in her strange heart!" thought Westenra.

A gleam of light struck on something bright she wore–he recognised the beads of her weird necklace. The comfort necklace! He had never seen her wear it since the day she had swung it in her hand as they walked the deck of the *Bavaric*.

Poor Val! was she too in need of comfort then?

Was she thinking of the dream ship on which she had sailed so confidently into this very port not two years gone?

He turned heavily away.

Part II

Jersey

CHAPTER IX

NEW ROADS TO FORTUNE

"God delights to isolate us every day, and hide from us the past and the future."–EMERSON.

Jersey, a small and smiling island set amidst the boisterous seas of the English Channel, is reputed to enjoy more winter sunshine than any seaside place in Great Britain. Be that as it may, for the first few months of Val's residence there, it wrapped itself so perpetually in soft warm shawls of mist, that she sometimes thought of writing to Rudyard Kipling and calling his attention to a place where the sun never so much as rose on the English flag. However, it is one of the cheap-

est spots in the world, and that is why Val chose it for her six months of waiting before she could tell Westenra the truth. The six months might possibly resolve themselves into twelve, one never knew! She was not hard-hearted enough to wish that Valdana would hurry his departure from the world, she only wished not to think about it at all. Jersey seemed to promise both peace and solitude in which to pull herself together after the strain of the last few months in New York.

They had sailed there straight from Southampton, and after a week's hunt, found a little furnished house out in the country, pitched high above St. Brelade's Bay. It was isolated and lonely, standing in the midst of its own wide fields and garden. The owners, army people who had used it for a sort of pleasure farm or summer residence, were now in India, and the property having remained unlet for some time was in a neglected condition. The house was scantily furnished, but against this fact the low rent was an offset.

Jersey is considered extraordinarily picturesque, but Val, spoilt by the wild scenery of Africa, majestic even in its barest, bleakest places, found the scenery pigmy though pretty. However, there was always the grandeur of the sea, beating in fury against the rugged, red coast, and the gracious misty emptiness of sky-line and horizon. She loved, too, to stand in the garden, dreaming of the lost land that lies sleeping under the water between Jersey and Brittany–that land of past centuries, which, before the sea in some strange empyrean convulsion swept over it, included forests in which were hordes of wolves, the "city of a hundred churches," and that wonderful cathedral in which, according to an old Breton manuscript the scarlet mantles of forty Lords of the Church could be counted at Mass every Sunday. At the great neap tides Jersey fishermen, far out, looking down from their boats into the clear depths, say they can still detect foliage that is not sea-weed swaying amid the branches of mighty forest oaks; and from the Brittany side, on still days keen eyes have detected, far down on the sea floor, the walls and ruined towers of the city of St. Ys.

But there was little time for dreaming at Cliff Farm. Val, with a resolution to cost Westenra as little as possible, did nearly all the work of the place herself, only employing a woman two or three times a week to do rough cleaning. But not content to economise only, she thrilled with a scheme to augment their slight income. A yearning to found a successful poultry and rabbit farm seized her soul. Haidee, bitten by the same mania, fostered the ambition, and with heads together over a poultry journal they read rapturously of fortunes to be made in this direction.

The first and vital thing, however, was to regain health and get the children well. Travelling had not agreed with Bran the pagan. On the ship he had been dreadfully sick and lost all his plumpness and lovely colouring, but in the mild mists of Jersey and Channel breezes, fresh and unpolluted by the microbes

of cities, he began to bloom again. Haidee, too, pallid when they first arrived, changed under the spell of the country. Like all persons who had been held long in cities she felt the joy of the open, of trees, and grass, and living things, and began to blossom and smile into a different creature. The old savage Haidee was still there under the skin, ready to come forth if scratched; but reasons for kicking physically and jibbing mentally were wonderfully absent in the simple farm life. Her only grievance was that she had to go in daily to school at a convent in St. Helier, from whence she invariably returned ornamented with scowls. But these passed as soon as she got back to the work of digging and delving in the garden. It was the out-of-door work that put Val right, too, painting a faint colour in her thin cheeks, and laying dew on her jaded nerves. The kitchen garden, practically a field, was heavily infested with couch grass, but by noble efforts they cleared it and began in time to have their own vegetables for the table.

Val had told Westenra that she did not know how much life would cost her, and indeed with her vague ideas about money, she could not tell until she had tried. He had given her five hundred dollars, and the arrangement was that she would make that last as long as she could, and then write for more. Alas! it did not last very long. By the time travelling expenses were cleared, the hotel bill paid for their week's stay in St. Helier while they were seeking a house, Haidee's school fees advanced, and the little farm stocked with necessaries, there was not much of the five hundred dollars in sight.

Some of it, too, had been used in erecting houses and runs for the hens and rabbits that were to bring in a fortune! Val, with the amateur's delusion that after the initial expense all is profit, rushed into the usual mistake of overstocking.

"Every fowl is an asset," she told herself, and bought fowls by the dozen, regardless of age, pedigree, or laying qualifications, until pulled up at the round turn by an article in the poultry journal on the importance of good breeding stock. Thereafter, she and Haidee decided to keep all the early purchases for "laying purposes only," and buy a special pen of thoroughbreds for breeding chickens. Earnestly they studied the advertisement columns of the poultry journal. Prices for breeding pens were high.

"We can't afford to pay such sums, Haidee–but there is the exchange column! What about that?"

The exchange column was rich in proposals from philanthropists who apparently desired nothing better than to stock the British Isles with the best breeds of poultry at a dead loss to themselves. Pens of five, seven, and nine fowls of the purest pedigree were proffered for things patently not half the value of the poultry. Nothing but the most profound altruism, for instance, could have prompted the offer from an English rectory of "A magnificent prize-pen of Black Langshans for breeding purposes (four hens and a cock) in exchange for clothing, provisions,

or *anything useful*." If a sinister significance lurked in the last sentence the Cliff Farm enthusiasts possessed not the ungenerosity of soul to suspect it. Portraits of Black Langshans in the poultry book discovered them to be birds of a grace and elegance astonishing and the text declared them splendid layers of lovely pink eggs.

The pink eggs decided the matter. Val flew to make out a list of all she would give in exchange. Provisions they had none, but she possessed clothes to spare in so good a cause.

(1) A Liberty ball gown of old-gold satin.

(2) A motor coat made by Paquin, with a great hood of orange velvet.

(3) A pair of bronze evening shoes, embroidered with emerald butterflies.

(4) A pair of old-paste buckles set in silver.

"It seems a shame to send them," said Haidee, stroking the orange velvet hood, the dawn of femininity in her eye. "They 're so awfully nice. I 'm sure they 're worth more than a pen of Langshans, Val."

"Yes, I know," said Val, gazing at the ball gown wistfully. "But where could I sell them, Haidee? One can't go hawking clothes for sale round Jersey. And we *must* have the fowls and we *must n't* spend Garry's money on experiments. Besides it is better to get rid of things like these, they only make one think of balls and motors and frivolous things that don't matter a bit."

Haidee looked at her curiously.

"Just fancy *you* ever having gone to balls, Val–and ridden in motors! I would never have believed it! I can't think of you in anything else but your big grey overall aprons."

Val flushed painfully. The grey overalls were a concomitant feature of life in New York only, but Haidee was not to know that.

"At any rate we 'll send the things. Now let us see what we can dig out in exchange for this pair of Belgian hares–they say they are the best kind for increasing and marketing. Oh, Haidee! perhaps we shall be able to make quite a lot of money!"

If they did not it would not be the fault of either of them, for they threw themselves heart and soul into the affairs of the farm. Val fed the fowls at early dawn, made hot mashes for them on cold mornings, cleaned out nests perpetually, ground up old china to make grit, and set broody hens on several dozen eggs, so as to have chickens ready for the spring markets. There was nothing she and Haidee disdained to do.

On cold winter nights when Bran was asleep they would sit curled over the fire calculating the fortunes they were going to make out of their chickens and computing the large sums that would presently come rolling in when the breeding pen was in full swing, the spring chickens hatched, and all the hens laying simultaneously. To make money at poultry farming seemed as easy as rolling off a log.

"It will be almost a shame to give it up," said Val, with brooding eyes. "A paying concern like this! When the time comes for us to go back to America we shall have to instal some one to take charge. We may even some day be able to buy the farm out of our profits, Haidee! If we do, it shall be yours and Bran's, because you work like a little brick at it."

"I shall then buy up Scone's field and go in for Plymouth Rocks and Faverolles only," announced Haidee.

(Scone was their nearest neighbour, a farmer whose land adjoined their own.)

This was their method of calculation.

"We have fifty hens now: six broody hens are sitting on twelve eggs, and when they hatch out we shall have seventy-two chickens; fifty of those we will fatten and send to market at half-a-crown each (that will bring us in six pounds). The other twenty-two we will keep for laying purposes next year; added to the fifty hens we now have that will make seventy-two hens laying eggs, which we will sell for at least a shilling per dozen."

It seemed a shame to take the people's money!

The spell of hens was on them. When at last a few chickens of shamefully mongrel breed were hatched out, they might have been offspring of the dodo from the way the family crooned and gloated over them, warming them at the fireside, feeding them with wonderful concoctions, sitting in the open yard for hours to watch their antics. The ways of the elder hens also enchanted them, and each of the fifty had a Christian name bestowed by reason of some peculiar charm or quality. There were: Grey Lady, Eagle, Crooktail, Favvy, Blind Eye, Johannesburg Moll, Flirt, Long Tom, Felix, and The Lady with the Fan, etc.

The rabbits too were spell-binders. Two respective litters were heartlessly gobbled and mutilated by does driven off their mental reservation by the sight of human beings fondling their new-born offspring. After the occurrence of these horrible tragedies, a book on rabbit-rearing was bought, and the knowledge acquired that rabbit babies should not be touched or even looked at until they creep from the hutch and show themselves. As a result of this information later litters were successful, and during the winter there were wonderful wet nights when dozens of tiny rabbits were brought for the sake of warmth and dryness into the kitchen, and the furry things with their bright wild ways popped and gambolled

to the sheer delight of every one–until the morning came with the business of cleaning up after the circus!

The first disappointment came with the arrival of the prize-pen of Black Langshans. Their rectory home was in Hampshire, so the railway journey had not been long, but the sea-voyage appeared to have affected their health. They staggered forth from the battered poultry basket–four old black hags of hens, bulky and bleary as washerwomen, hoary of ear and scaly of leg, followed by a tall slender cock more like a phantom ostrich than a fancier's bird. He had a wild, red eye, and appeared to be suffering from a mysterious affliction in the legs, which caused him to fall fainting at every few steps he made. Haidee cheerfully dosed him with the peppercorns which were left over from the time when the chickens had pip. But nothing could rouse him from his Hamlet-like melancholy.

The hens must have been at least five years old, but happily, neither Val nor Haidee knew enough about the outward signs and symbols of fowl age to realise the trick that had been played upon them. Only, it dawned upon them slowly in the long months to come that they need never expect pink eggs from the grandmotherly old washer-women with good appetites. As for the young cock who was to have been the ancestor of many wonderful chickens for market and prize-pen, for reasons of either ill-health or chivalry, he was celibate from birth, and could never be beguiled into taking any interest in his wives. He spent most of his life in having fainting fits, or fleeing on staggering legs from younger and lustier birds. At other times he dreamed on one leg, his melancholy head plunged into his bosom.

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Haidee got on well at school. Far from being troubled by lack of intelligence she was an exceedingly clever girl; but she hated study, and much preferred cleaning out rabbit-hutches or putting fresh straw in the hens' nests. Her passion was for a pony. There was a little governess-car in the Stable-house, and permission with the tenants to use it. Only there was nothing to pull it. But three months after their arrival Haidee looked up from a letter from Westenra, and announced the receipt of twenty pounds for the purchase of a pony. Val stared.

"You did n't ask for it, did you, Haidee?"

"Oh, no; I just mentioned that there was a cart, and how nice it would be if there was a horse, and how I would do all the looking after it myself, and we need n't have to pay a man at all," said Haidee airy and unblushing.

Val did not reproach her, but she felt vexed that Westenra should be asked to hand out money when she, though hard-pressed, abstained to ask for anything but the price of everyday necessities. However, the pony was a great joy to

Haidee, and she had an excuse at last for the stable-boy airs she loved to assume. Nothing pleased her better than to take off her skirts, and donning knickers and long boots, clean out the stable. She would swagger and swing her shovel and shout "Gittap!" and "Hey thar!" as though she had been brought up in a farmyard. Val's unconventional soul was hard to shock, but even she sometimes wondered what Westenra, who admired Vere-de-Vere repose in a woman, would say if he could hear his adopted child at her labour of love in Joy's stable. A compensating feature was that the girl was in superb health, and fortunately, there were no prim people at hand to be shocked. Indeed, as far as society was concerned Cliff Farm might have been situated at the Antipodes. No one came to call, and not a soul in the island suspected that the well-known writer, "Wanderfoot," was living peacefully among them, feeding bran mashes to a pony and setting broody hens.

The only people who interested themselves in the occupants of Cliff Farm were the louts from the neighbouring farm, and their interest could very well have been dispensed with. When they looked over the hedge, and found Haidee in long boots and knickers, whistling as she cleaned out the stable, they stood sniggering; and when Val took pot shots with her rook rifle at the crows that picked the buds from the fruit-trees, they made it their business to find out if she had a gun licence. The genus lout is of much the same kidney all the world over. In Jersey the farmers have a great objection to "gentlemen farmers," and as Val seemed to come under that heading, they disliked her accordingly. Little she recked as long as they did not openly interfere. But she and Haidee were sometimes nervous in their lonely house, and Val would often get up in the night and fire a shot out the window, just to let stray loafers know that they were not afraid. Eventually they got a couple of dogs, and were more at ease.

Their nearest neighbour, Scone, was a gross-looking man, with coarse ears and little pig-eyes; yet apparently he had the best kind of heart inside his ungainly body, for he was all good advice and helpful words to the occupants of Cliff Farm. He advised Val to keep a pig to eat her "waste," and incidentally volunteered to supply her with one from a litter of his own. Later he offered to take her chickens and eggs to market on condition that she bought her butter and milk from him.

It was not until long afterwards that she discovered what mean advantage had been taken of her trusting belief in the inherent decency of man. These farming people disliked her. She was not one of them, and that was enough to call forth all their malice and ill-will. Scone had charged double what a pig would have cost at the market, and jested with his cronies on the subject. Also through his kind ministrations she was paying a penny more per quart for milk than any one in the island and receiving twopence less per dozen for her eggs.

However, this knowledge came later. For the time Farmer Scone was all

unction and good advice, and Mrs. Scone came often to the house to give Val the benefit of her knowledge of chickens. She was a common little woman, with a mouth full of decayed teeth, and a purple nose, but Val looked upon her as a type, and she never disdained to know types. Besides, Mrs. Scone was an oracle on chickens, or so she professed. Certainly most of her statements as to food, etc., were at variance with the poultry journals, but she sounded very practical and convincing, and Val had never had experience of people who from sheer malice give wrong advice, and was far from suspecting the depths of meanness that can lie in an ignorant mind.

It was Mrs. Scone who advised her to rear capons for the market. Said she:

"*That's* the thing to do with your cockerels. I have no time to try it myself, but you are so clever, Mrs. Westenra, and would be sure to make it pay. Turn your cockerels into capons. It is the most profitable business going."

"Capons?" said Val, vague-eyed. "I always thought capons were fish, and that monks ate them for Friday's dinner."

"Oh, dear me, no, they are not fish, though monks will eat them fast enough if they get the chance–any one will, they 're delicious. You 'll get from seven shillings and sixpence to ten shillings for them any day in the week," averred Mrs. Scone, and proceeded to explain to the open-mouthed Val and Haidee the process of caponising.

"So simple. Just cut a small slit above the wing of each bird with a pair of special scissors which you buy; then you hook up and remove the two little glands that lie along the backbone, and there you have your capon!–instead of a young cockerel that is always tearing about the run fighting and eating his head off without putting on any fat."

Val was deeply intrigued. Cockerels had become one of her problems. More than half the chickens upon which she had counted for spring eggs had either succumbed to the pip, or never hatched out at all; of the remainder the larger proportion had turned out to be of male sex. Rose-coloured dreams of getting into touch with the Jesuit College on the hill above St. Helier and doing a flourishing business with the monks now floated through her mind. But she shivered at the thought of the caponising operation. She was physically incapable of cutting anything, even the head off a dead fish.

"Oh, I couldn't," she said, "at least I don't think I could."

"A pity!" said Mrs. Scone. "There's a fortune in it for them as will do it–a mint of money."

This gave Val pause. Had she, just because she was a coward about cutting things, any right to reject a scheme that had a mint of money in it? Was it fair to Westenra? After profound consideration, and much guileful persuasion by Haidee, always eager for experiments, she decided to at least give the idea a fair

trial. So, on an afternoon, twelve of the finest cockerels were enthusiastically chased and captured by Haidee, aided by one of Farmer Scone's farm boys kindly lent for the occasion, and put under a rabbit-hutch to await their fate. A packing case constituted the operating table and the instruments of torture lay beside it– Val had sent for a little case from London (price thirty shillings). Mrs. Scone and Haidee held the first bird on the table, and Val under the direction of the former, with white face and trembling lips, made the first slit. The cockerel at the prick of the instrument screamed like a banshee, and Val's unnerved hand fell to her side.

"Oh! how brutal it seems!" she faltered.

On the urgent advice of the others she attempted to finish the operation (with her eyes closed), but the cockerel objected strenuously, blood flew in every direction and heart-rending shrieks tore the air. White as ashes the operator let the scissors fall and staggered to the door. Mrs. Scone, purring solicitously, supported her into the open air.

"Dear me, dear me! What a good heart you have, to be sure, Mrs. Westenra!"

Later, leaving Val sitting outside very sick, she returned to the operating theatre, and she, and Haidee and the farm hand between them performed on the rest of the cockerels with such vigour that three of them died the same night, and two more a few days later; four, after a long convalescence, recovered, but stayed languid and appetiteless for the remainder of their existence; while the rest, after a week or two recovering their usual sprightly temperament, fought, pursued each other, and ate up all the food as gaily as before.

That was the end of the caponising business. The great scheme for supplying fat capons to the Jesuit College (not for Friday's dinner, of course, but as an article of nourishment proper to monasteries) never materialised.

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Westenra in the meantime was writing grimly, and not often. From his letters Val gathered something of the strain of life at No. 700 West 68. The place was paying better now under Miss Holland's management, but, as she had foreseen, he hated to live in such close communion with people who were nothing to him. After the first few weeks he had gone into bachelor quarters once more, not his old ones in the city, but rooms near the sanatorium. Operations were coming in well, but there were big gaps in his banking account made by the fateful year of experiment. A note of weariness often crept into his letters–and when he wrote:

"So glad you are happy–*at last*–with your fowls and rabbits. Do not let them absorb you altogether," it sounded to her very like a reproach. Often he said,

"I envy you–with the children about you." But for the most part he rejoiced that the conditions of her life should be so ideal for health and happiness. Sometimes to Haidee he would cry out boyishly:

"How I would like to be with you and Bran in the windy fields, running after the rabbits."

Like every man whose boyhood has been spent in the country, he loved fields, and rabbits, and birds–all wood and hedge creatures; could describe the eggs and whistle the note of every bird in the British Isles. Haidee wrote him long accounts of the life at Cliff Farm, and when she began to make a collection of eggs by very carefully taking only one from a nest of four or five, if ever she had any doubt on the subject of parentage Westenra was never too busy to clear up the matter by return mail.

He was obliged to economise narrowly, and the consciousness of this drove Val into a state of frenzy if obliged to spend an unexpected sou. But never having been trained in economy she had not the faintest notion of how to practise it, except by doing without personal things herself. No gowns; no new hats; no clothes at all, for herself. Yet somehow that did not make any difference to the bills. There was always the awful food problem, and the boot problem, and the problem of how to make hens lay without paying large grain bills, and a dozen other incidental problems!

Like a good many people, Val had supposed that fowls fed themselves. Her brain had pictured them actively pursuing worms, and insects, and wild seeds during the intervals of laying. She found instead that they were like children in the matter of meals, always there on time. At dawn and eve, to say nothing of mid-day, she would find them standing dolorously at the back door with eyes cocked expectantly at whoever came out. Only after a good meal did they go forth to promenade, and then it was to lay their eggs in some distant hedge where nobody could find them.

When the grain bills began to come in she realised that in the poultry business there was an output, as well as an intake, and that all her small profits were eaten up by the fowls.

CHAPTER X

WORRY-BELLS

"Tout homme digne de ce nom
A dans le coeur un Serpent jaune
Installé comme sur un trône,
Qui, s'il dit: 'Je veux!' répond: 'Non!'"
BAUDELAIRE.

As the months went by and the first exhaustion of body and spirit in which she had left New York passed, Val's imagination once more woke up, and began to torment her nights, undoing the good effect of days spent in healthy occupation. In the soft, kind climate of Jersey her body must soon have regained all its old nervous strength if the spirit had not begun once more to chafe and wear its scabbard. Had she been a woman merely separated for a while from the man she loved with the certain hope of swift reunion, how happy she could have been in the thought of his joy in finding Bran so lovely and sturdy, Haidee strong and handsome, herself recovered! If only all had been well! But all was not well, and the realisation of this fact began to push serenity from her mind, waking up old aches and hungers she had believed long since extinguished–the longing to pack a knapsack and depart for the horizon, to bathe her soul in the Lethe of a distant sunset, and arise renewed and free of the cares and conventions of life. Her feet tingled to travel. The sky-line began to pull at, and "play" her as if it had a hook in her very vitals. With every ship that disappeared over the brim of the world went some shade of her inmost being. The song of the rolling stone sang in her veins:

"I have a love for other lands,
Which thro' my home life dogs my way.
My very soul scarce understands
The love I have for other lands."

She got into the way of sitting on a rabbit-hutch staring before her at the empty sea until she saw it no longer, nor the sea-gulls that wheeled in circles, but only the wide veldt empty of all but a line of kops and a great berg to be passed on the morrow–changing pictures round an out-spanned waggon–oxen with heads bent, moving gradually onwards, the tinkling of a cattle-bell, evening fires lighted–Haidee and Bran bounding about examining new flowers, strange insects, the spoor of wild creatures–Westenra with a gun–problems gone out of his eye, the rustle of dollars forgotten–just a simple, primitive vagabond like herself. Ah! Vain day dreams! Even while she dreamed she could feel the wretched

truth stirring at the back of her mind, waiting like some horrible yellow viper with head reared ready to strike.

Sleep became rare with her. However hard the day's work, she never had more than an hour or two of the dead slumber of exhaustion. Then, regular as an alarm, a little worry-bell would ring in her brain, dimly at first, then more and more insistent and clamorous. At last she would be as widely awake as if some one had taken her by the shoulders and shaken her out of sleep to hear some terrible and significant news.

"Wake up, Val Valdana, you have slept long enough! There is the little affair of Garrett Westenra's happiness to consider–and Garrett Westenra's son–and Horace Valdana's lease of life! There are several other affairs also, which in the daytime you are apt to consider of minor importance, but which you can see clearly in these small still hours are very important and pressing indeed–the affair of that grain bill for which you have not the ready money!–those new shoes Haidee requires!–the young cockerels eating off their heads–and how are you going to raise more money for Valdana?"

Ah! that yellow viper that sits in the human heart and haunts the human brain, crying *yes* when we cry *no*, and *pleasure* when we cry *duty*, and *duty* when we cry *pleasure*, and *wake* when we cry *sleep*–Val lay with it through the hours of many a weary night!

Only once had definite news come to her of Valdana, and that was about two months after she had settled in Jersey: a letter from his mother in answer to one Val had written telling of the *rencontre* in New York came through the medium of Val's agent in London. Old Mrs. Valdana's letter was dismal in tone and matter.

"Yes, Horace is indeed with us still, but not for long. Can you not be kind to him, Val?" was the cry from her mother-heart; but the same instinct in Val hardened her to the cry. She, too, was a mother, and in most women the mother-love comes before wife-love and friend-love, and even lover-love. Nature thus decrees it, that life may go unfalteringly on. So Val could not be kind to Valdana because it meant being hurtful to her son. Besides, what was the kindness asked? Of any affection for her he was utterly devoid, he desired nothing but money, which she did not possess. Her jewels were exhausted save a few rings, beautiful in colour and form, but of no great value, and her "comfort necklace," which she now wore continually under her dress. The best she could do was to write asking Branker Preston to take her furniture and possessions out of storage and put them up to auction. But she directed him to first ask her great friend, Harriott Kesteven to go through all trunks and drawers on a destructive expedition, burning all old letters, photographs, etc. Mrs. Kesteven complied with this request but not literally. Instead of burning them she had all papers and photographs, together with

many personal things, precious though not intrinsic, packed up and sent to Val. There were sketches of places she had visited, a few ivories, books, draperies, curios, and some specially charming Japanese chintzes. When Val opened packages, her eyes darkened with tears. It seemed so long since she had lived with these things about her, and a heart comparatively care-free. A moment later she caught Bran to her breast.

"You are worth it all. You are my ivory, my roses, my fine gold, the best article I ever wrote. I have made my travels and my troubles into a vase of living porphyry."

Haidee took the things and arranged them about the farm sitting-room, transforming it. But Val could not rest until she had sat down and written to Westenra, telling him how the thing had occurred.

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When, as the summer crept on, Westenra in his letters began to make tentative remarks about his coming vacation, Val's yellow viper was roused to high effort.

There are certain dark days on the calendar of every life; days when everything goes wrong, when things are lost and broken, mistaken words said, fatal promises made. One such day dawned for Val. She arose haggard from a sleepless night to attend to her household duties. It was a servantless interval, and there was the fire to make and breakfast to prepare. After waking Haidee, she put on an old dressing-gown, more notable for its warm lining than for its youth and beauty, and hurried down-stairs to feed the fowls who, "carking" bitterly at the back-door, were liable to wake Bran before his time. It affronted her furiously to open the door upon Farmer Scone and one of his labourers passing down her yard. He knew that it annoyed her to have him make this short cut across her grounds to reach one of his pasture fields, but he had done it repeatedly since she discovered his dishonesty in the marketing of her eggs, and discontinued dealing with him. If there had been a man at Cliff Farm he would never have dreamed of thus invading private property. But Val being alone he felt safe, and his mean nature rejoiced in taking advantage of a woman, whom he had discovered did not like to be rude to any one.

On this particular morning, however, neighbourly courtesy could no longer keep down just wrath. What infuriated Val was that she should be seen in her disreputable old gown. It always seemed like an affront put upon Garrett if she allowed any one to see her looking unkempt and untidy. A still greater offence was that these common oafs, who saw and judged only surface things, should so discover her.

"Good marning!" said Farmer Scone, affably familiar, but without raising

his hand to his cap. The dislike and contempt she had long felt for the man rose in Val like a wave, and would no longer be contained. She drew herself up and, looking at him, as a queen might look at an insolent groom, said cuttingly:

"Please understand, Scone, that I do not care to have my yard used as a pathway. You must in the future go round by the road."

Scone's little pig-eyes regarded her with venom, then he laughed impudently.

"Great Galumps!" Not quick-witted, he was obliged to grope in the depths of his mind for a moment or two to see what he could produce to hurt the pale, proud woman, who looked at him as if he were less than dust. The best he could drag up from those dim depths was a sneer at her looks–she looked old that morning, poor Val, after her vigil with the *serpent jaune*, and there are some mean natures that love to taunt a woman with age. He turned to his labourer.

"By Jarge, Tom! The old woman got out of her bed wrong side this marning," said he, and the two burst into senseless guffaws, and marched on down the path. A further delicate witticism connecting the "old woman's" temper with the absence of "an old man" added to a grossly-expressed doubt as to whether she owned an "old man" at all, came back across the field. Val heard it and turned white.

"This is what I have come to!" she cried to herself in wrath and unhappiness. "A lonely, wretched woman whom pigs may insult! the victim of every base-tongued wretch—-!"

She turned back into the house, and sat down in utter dejection by the kitchen table.

"They insult me because they see I have no husband to protect me," she mused bitterly. "I who have two!"

The sound of Bran crowing his little morning crow up-stairs helped her to recover, and she made the fire and put the kettle on for breakfast. A few moments later the postwoman knocked at the door, and handed in two letters. By the delicate irony of the god of black days the letters were from her two husbands! She sat down and began to laugh.

Far from being lonely and undesirable she was, it seemed, highly desired by each. Westenra's letter was somewhat cold, it is true, but the burden of it was quite clear: he intended sailing from New York within six weeks, and wished her to make preparations to return with him.

Valdana, writing from Berlin, via his mother and Val's agent, sent news that was plainly meant to be inspiriting. After a consultation held on his case by German specialists he was able to announce that his complaint was not cancer at all, but merely liver trouble induced by the South African climate, and over-exertion (the last was his own invention and took the place of the words "alcoholic ex-

cess" in the doctors' diagnosis). Moreover the specialists had given him every hope of a long life if he would set out for a country with a bracing climate, and he cheerfully handed on the hope to Val, as though it were some golden gift. The ultimate burden of his letter came to much the same thing as Westenra's. He wanted her with him. His mother was prepared to make a special sacrifice of certain securities to give him a fresh start in Canada. Would Val give him a fresh start too, and come with him?

And this was the woman whom pigs insulted because she had no husband to protect her! She laughed convulsively, as one might laugh who felt the first twinge of the rack, and when she had finished laughing she sat on reading and dully re-reading, her hands pressed to her temples. Suddenly a vibrating spasm of agony shot through her teeth and flew up like veins of red-hot fluid into her cheeks and eyes. Neuralgia, that torment of the troubled, had for weeks been lurking behind its friend and ally the yellow viper, and now chose this propitious moment to lay its scorpion claws upon her. All that day, and for many days after, she almost forgot the terrible problem of her marriage in the agony of her nerves.

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Val had never professed a religion or belonged to any faith. She had just been taught to say her prayers and put her trust in God; no forms; no church. She supposed she must have been baptised as a child, but could not be sure. Her mother was a Catholic who loved the smell of incense, but never went to confession.

Thus she had grown up with an open mind for all faiths and no faith of her own. Yet, though she was not pious, religion had always attracted her, and sometimes at rare moments she had seen the vision of a Light beyond the world. At other times all forms of religion she knew of seemed a mere wearisome routine of duty and custom. But when in New York she had come into touch with practised Catholicism she felt the strong appeal of its Eternal beauty and the power of that wonderful faith to direct and hold emotional impulsive natures like her own from casting the soul after the heart. And she recognised at once that it was the only religion for her and for any child of hers who inherited her nature. So, at odd intervals in the rush and tear of the early days at No. 700 she had been preparing herself for baptism by trying to get a hold with her mind on the dogmas for which she cared nothing, but of which a knowledge is essential to any one wishing to enter the Catholic Church.

When her child was born there was an altar in her room with flowers on it and a *veilleuse* burning before the Sacred Heart, for it was the month of June. When Bran was baptised she desired greatly to enter the church with him, but her instruction was not complete, and her reception had been put off from day

to day. Then came Westenra's sickness and Valdana's resurrection, putting an end to all thoughts of the kind. She had something to hide, and those who have such things to hide cannot enter the Catholic Church. Westenra supposed she had changed her mind, and thought none the better of her for it.

As a matter of fact she had at that juncture felt more need than ever for the help of religion in her life. She longed for the advice of grave good men.

And now again she felt that longing. Her own *will* to do right did not seem enough; and indeed reflect and analyse as she would she could not decide what was the right thing to do. What was it? Her sick brain put the question over and over again. Was it right to go back to Valdana? If so, *why* was it right when her heart and soul and every instinct in her fought against such a verdict? It could not be right to return. Valdana deserved nothing of her, had deserted her and her child, had done without her for years, had exploited her for the money she made, was a coward and a brute with whom association could only bring degradation. To go back to him would be to desert her child, for she could never let Bran come within his radius.

Ought she then to desert her child–her contribution to the world, her link in the golden chain of generations, her one word in the great eternal Sonnet?

Never! Though Westenra might be a devoted father Bran would never, without a mother, grow up to be the man she hoped. No little child can spare its mother,–though many, alas! by the hard decree of death, and oftener the cruel decisions of life, have to do so. There is something a mother gives a child which no one else in the whole wide world can give. Val had a curious belief too that just as no woman possessed a soul except through the man she loved and the child she passed on, so no son ever came to the full possession of his soul except through the love of a mother. From what strange fields of mental and physical suffering she had garnered those beliefs it would be difficult to determine, but they sat fast in her heart and she lived and breathed by them. Emerson seemed to her to share something of the belief when he wrote: "In my dealing with my child my Latin and Greek accomplishments and my money stand me nothing; but as much as I have of soul avails."

Apart from that she was sure that no boy ever yet came to the physical perfection his babyhood promised without a mother to brood and guard over his growing years. Who else but a mother will compute the effect of an extra blanket on a little sweating body, or the lack of one in winter? Will study the heart and mind and nerves and stomach of a child all through that period when each year of full content and harmony and health assures five years of strength and well-being later on?

Never, never could she leave Bran. Ought she then to tell Westenra? What a relief it would be to share the dreadful truth, have his support to face it. Half

the terror of the situation was in the attitude she was obliged to assume towards him. Yet a kind of mother-love for him too–that crooning, protective mother-love that every woman feels for a beloved man cried out against this solution. She did not want him to suffer. She did not want to wound and shame him as he would be wounded and shamed if he found himself not married to her, and his son illegitimate. She longed to save him from that pain. But now she saw plainly that if Valdana were recovering Westenra would have to know. He could not be kept for ever in the dark, suffering through her enigmatic coldness. Ah! What misery was before them all; for Garrett wifeless and childless; for Bran fatherless; for herself lonely and separated from the man she loved.

For Valdana she felt no pity, for she knew that if he suffered it would be only through his external senses, never through his heart. There was no susceptivity, in that callous heart for any but himself.

It came into her head once or twice that she would throw morality to the winds, conceal the truth from Westenra for ever, or at least until she was found out, and returning to America get all the joy she could out of life with him and her son. How desirable *now* looked the vision of life at 700 West 68!—beautiful as some far coral island with waving palms and blue lagoons to the eyes of a drowning sailor! Yes, almost she could make her mind up to do this thing; to accept the remote chance of being found out, to embrace love and life with both arms; to "take the Cash and let the Credit go."

But–*she could not.* Morality sprang up where she denied it. Not the morality of family training nor church teaching, but of years of instinctive choice between right and wrong, and attention to that still, small voice whose judgment is so unfailingly sure. It had nothing to do with convention, this decision. She had no sense at all of the power of infallibility of social laws. It was just the law of the soul that forbade it. Even had she not possessed this morality of the soul, there was one other thing that would have held her back. Ever since Bran came to her she had hugged to her heart a little phrase that cut into her while she pressed it there.

"No man can be truly great who had not a great mother."

And great mothers are made by great sacrifice. Not that she aspired to be anything within a hundred miles of greatness. How unlucky Bran had been in his choice of a mother only she, conscious of her defects and failings, could know. But from the first she had sworn to give him every chance that sacrifice of herself

could bestow. And here was the time for her to make good the resolution.

CHAPTER XI

A SHIP ON THE ROCKS

"Love is not always two Souls picking flowers."–MASEFIELD.

These decisions did not prevent her from spending days and nights in an agony of mental and physical pain. Neuralgia racked her until she thought she must go mad. She became weak and haggard from want of sleep. A longing for veronal seized her. Only, she was afraid of veronal. In the past it had got a hold on her that nothing but Westenra's influence could have broken, and vaguely she knew that one cannot break twice from the same enemy. Westenra's power might not be so overwhelming next time, the hold of the drug would be stronger. Veronal, then, was forbidden; but she had no such feeling about alcohol. She had given up drinking spirits and wine, not because it had any temptation for her, but because Westenra hated women to drink. She was not afraid of the power of brandy over her. And so one day, in a delirium of pain and misery, she sent out the little servant for a bottle of brandy.

Ah! what rapturous repose for a few hours! ... what glorious oblivion from pain ... what a lifting of leaden clouds and rose-tinting of the horizon with hope! When she felt the effect of a strong dose of brandy going off and the scorpion claws beginning to tear at her eyes and temples once more she took another dose. As soon as one bottle of brandy was finished she sent for another. For weeks she forgot in this way both mental and physical trouble, drowning her pain by day and sleeping heavily by night. Then one morning in a blinding flash she realised what she was doing. Going into the pantry she saw four empty bottles standing there. She had seen them before, but now she *recognised* them, and it was she who in one week had emptied them!

"I am taking to drink!" she cried, and the phrase heard so often in jest amongst journalists took unto itself a new and awful significance that made her recoil horror-stricken before the damning evidence. Two full bottles stood by

the empty ones. She had blindly ordered several bottles at once in a panic of fear that pain might come upon her sometime and find her unprepared. Even now the thirsty beast in her was raising its head and crying out for what was at once tonic and narcotic. And she was at one with the beast in its desire. She wanted the brandy, madly desired it for its own sake, longed to feel it warm in her body sending up a glow of comfort and well-being, soothing her pains with velvety hands, dimming her vision of the truth with rosy-pink veils of hope, filling her heart with the careless philosophy of the drinker–that everything turns out well in the end, and "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." Away with dull care and pain! Her hand was already on the bottle, when in her mind, like a little bright sword with which to fight an enemy, a thought beautifully clothed in words presented itself:

"No man can be great who has not a great mother."

It is such phrases as these that help make the world's history. It is thus that beautiful thoughts which have been treasured and loved reward and befriend in times of stress. Val killed her desire for drink with the weapon a writer had forged for her many years before, and that she herself had brightened ready for use.

In a moment she had gathered up all the bottles, empty and full, thrust them into a bag, and was carrying them out of the house. There was no one about. Haidee was at school; the little maid had carried Bran down the fields. She hurried with her burden to a deep dell that lay in the farm grounds–a dell with trees growing round it, and grassy slopes full of primroses and early violets. At the bottom grew a mass of nettles and long rank grass, and into this she flung the bottles in a heap, and hurried away from the sound of the liquid bubbling over the broken glass and the strong spirity scent that rose amongst the weeds.

That was over; a leaf turned; a battle won!

Some terrible days came later. No vice puts in its insidious roots more deeply than the drink vice, or more strongly resents being torn from its chosen place. It clings and burns and aches, leaving scars, as ivy leaves scars on the tree from which it is dragged away. But it was no old deep-seated vice with Val, and victory was to her, though when the battle was over she looked less like victory than defeat. In the end she determined to see a doctor in St. Helier and get a tonic that would pull her together before Westenra came home–an event that might occur any time within the next six weeks.

One afternoon, then, on a day that Haidee had a holiday and could keep an eye on Bran and the little maid, Val walked down to the station and took a train for town. The way was long, and she in no great trim for walking. Added to this unusual effort was a train journey and a weary hunt for the house of the doctor whose address she had forgotten to bring with her. All these things were responsible for the exhaustion which caused her, after the doctor had ex-

amined and prescribed for her, to faint quietly in her chair. When she regained consciousness she was lying down in a shaded room, with the burning taste of brandy in her mouth and the odour of it all about her–they had spilt it on her gown whilst forcing it between her lips.

"What is it? Where am I?" she cried.

"All right; there's nothing very wrong ... you are only a little run down," the doctor soothed her, and the doctor's wife, standing by with sympathetic eyes, said gently: "You must rest a little while, and then have a cab to go home. You are thoroughly overtired."

They insisted on her taking a cab, but she dismissed it at the station, and, after the railway journey, once more made the long walk across the fields. When she reached home at last, very faint and weary, the night had fallen, but the little house lighted up, and as she came up the path she could hear Haidee's laugh ringing out, and Bran's merry crow. How happy they were, bless them!

As she reached the door something new and unaccustomed came out to meet her, some subtle difference in the atmosphere, the tone of the children's voices, and in a flash she knew the truth. Westenra had arrived during her absence!

He was sitting in the big double easy-chair, with Haidee squeezed beside him and Bran in his arms. The room was full of a kind of warm happiness.

"Oh, Joe!" she cried, and running forward, forgot Valdana, forgot everything but her joy in seeing him again, threw herself upon the little group and kissed them all alternately, wildly, like a mad creature.

"Yes, here I am," said Westenra, laughing, and the moment she heard his voice she knew there was something wrong. She had no idea of the strong odour of brandy she had brought into the little room with her, and she did not know until later what had happened during the afternoon. She only realised, with her quick and sure intuition, that Westenra was even more estranged from her than when they had parted in New York. There was a distance in his manner for which his last letter had hardly prepared her.

After the ice-cold misery of the first few moments she was dully thankful for his attitude. It was for the best. If he had ceased to care for her, so much the better for him: so much the less pain to be suffered in separation. She sat down and began to talk mechanically, eliciting details of his journey. It appeared he had arrived in the Island that morning. The steamer docked very late on account of fog. He had just missed a train, and had been obliged to wait for an hour at the station, and then it had taken him a considerable time to find the farm. He had lost his way and come round by an old unused route, which accounted for the fact of his missing Val, for he had arrived only a few moments after her departure. Haidee had shown him everything. They had been over the poultry houses, fed

the rabbits, ridden the pony, and let the dogs loose to hunt the rats—-

At this juncture of the narrative Haidee turned red, and gave a swift embarrassed glance at Westenra. He, however, stared steadily before him, a peculiar steely quality in his stare. Val saw Haidee's glance, and his strange look, but knew the meaning of neither, and was too unhappy to speculate on the subject.

"He 's had a tub, and I 've fixed up his things in the spare room," said Haidee presently.

"You seem to have got along very well without me," was all Val could say, with a pale smile. "I suppose I had better see about dinner now."

A strange evening was passed. Westenra could not conceal his joy at being with the children once more, but if he felt any at seeing Val he concealed it well under a gay cold manner. She on her side felt all her happiness swallowed up in dismay. Love was frozen in her heart.

After supper Bran was bathed before the bedroom fire and put to bed. He had to be admired first, and parade naked across the hearth-rug to show all his little muscles. He was able to walk well now, and was as perfect as only baby children can be before all their soft puppy-dog roundness turns to length. His parents devoured him with their eyes, forgetting their miserable problems for awhile in the joy of so beautiful a possession.

"I tell you this fellow is out to make new figures at the Olympics," said Westenra, who had all an Irishman's madness for athletics. "This is a champion!"

At last the children were in bed, the house silent. Garry and Val sat alone by the sitting-room fire, constrained and far apart.

"They look blooming," he said. "This place suits them better than New York apparently."

(Ah! in his joy at seeing the children blooming he had not noticed her haggard face! Symptoms that in others would have aroused his professional interest in her went unnoticed, or so it seemed. She remembered that she had once heard a doctor's wife quote rather bitterly:

"Shoemakers' children have broken boots; doctors' wives never get treatment.")

"Then you will not mind our going on living here, Joe–for awhile?" she said a little wearily.

"Do you wish it?" She did not answer at once. He looked at her gravely with something pitiful in his glance.

"The children are in great trim ... but you? I don't think it is any good to you to live like this."

(He *had* noticed, then! It had not escaped his keen eye that she was grown old and lined! Should she tell him about her neuralgia and the terrible time she had gone through with her nerves? But how sick he must be of women with

nerves.... New York was full of them .... he had just come on holiday–better wait!)

"Oh, I am all right, Garrett," she said hastily. "A little neuralgic at times—-"

"Ah!"

"But it is nothing ... nothing."

"I don't think you should go on living here. The idea was for you to get strong ... instead you have–" he hesitated, and looked at her gravely with indictment in his glance–"given way to nerves."

She glanced at him guiltily. It almost seemed to her that he had been going to say "given way to drink!" That he knew something of her struggle with the brandy–yet how could he?

"Oh, *nerves*!" she said, and laughed nervously.

"I think the only thing to be done," he continued steadily, "is for you to come back with me to New York."

"Oh, Garrett! ... I don't think.... I can't do that," she stammered desperately.

"You mean you don't want to?"

"It is not a matter of wanting."

He stood up then, stern-faced.

"Don't beat about the bush. This thing has got to be settled once and for all. Will or will you not?"

"I can't, Joe." She looked at him with haunted eyes.

"You can't break loose?"

"Break loose? What do you mean?"

"Never mind ... never mind ... poor Val!" Sternness had gone from him. "Well, that is settled, then–I go back without you." He got up heavily and turned away from the fire.

"I 'm dead-beat and must get rest, Val. Haidee has fixed me up very well in her nice little room; she told me you always meant me to have it."

He turned and looked at her, in his eyes a sudden bitterness and anger born of his longing to take into his arms and crush to him this woman who exiled him from her heart.

"Do you think it is quite fair, Val? Do you think you are playing the game?"

She looked at him with wistful, harried eyes.

"I am trying to, Joe–I—-"

What could she say? Was this the moment to stab him with the truth? While she hesitated wretchedly, he turned away again, walking round the room, looking fiercely at the pictures and chintzes he knew had belonged to her past life.

"Haidee is growing into a nice girl," he said abruptly, switching his mind from a subject that maddened him.

Val, by the fire struggling with her misery and half-formed resolution, looked at him vaguely for a moment. Ah! he was speaking of Haidee–while she was torturing herself with the thought that he wanted her as she wanted him!

"Good-night!" he said harshly, and went his way up-stairs, without attempting to kiss her. She crouched down by the dying fire, and covered her face with her hands. Her heart was in great pain: the great pain of a little child. Footsteps overhead told her that he went first to her bedroom to take a last glimpse of Bran, and low murmurs betrayed the fact that Haidee was not yet asleep. At last his light, firm tread crossed the floor once more, then came the sound of his closing door.

Another hour must have passed when Val, still sitting by the fire, was startled to hear the patter of feet on the bare oak stairs, then to find a slim night-gowned figure beside her.

"Haidee!"

"I wanted to tell you something, Val, and was afraid I 'd be asleep before you came up."

"What is it?"

"Garry found all your empty brandy bottles in the dell; we were hunting the rats there with Billy and King." Her big brown eyes rested commiseratingly on Val. It was evident she felt guilty for having led Westenra to the dell, her very look of guilt had in it something damning to the poor pale culprit sitting there with a sick heart, no trace on her of the victory she had achieved two weeks ago. She had believed her sin as secret as her victory over it. Yet here it rose up against her in Haidee's eyes. The child knew nothing of the victory–only of the vice, though Val had never felt herself observed. And now Garry knew! That was the reason then of their embarrassed looks and averted eyes!

"Of course he didn't say anything. He pretended he did n't notice even. But you should have seen his face." She gazed dismally at Val. It was as though they had offended God. "And you smelt awfully of brandy when you came in–you do still."

"Go to bed, Haidee," said Val at last, sick with humiliation. She had meant to tell of the brandy episode some day, in some dear moment when all was clear between them once more. Now, through being accidentally betrayed, the incident had assumed a horrible aspect. She was afraid to think of what his thoughts on the subject must be. She longed to tell him all. To run up-stairs and cry at his door: "I didn't drink it all, Garry; two of the bottles were full when I threw them away." How silly and puerile that would sound. He would, perhaps, see nothing in her action but the terror of a confirmed drinker found out, might imagine that he had married a secret drunkard! She sat twisting her hands in an agony of

misery. How could she tell him? What was the good? How dared she even kiss him as she had done when she came in? Valdana was alive–she was not even Joe's wife–what to do–what to do? ... How brutal life was!

Suddenly she fell to communing with her dead–those who had loved and believed in her and knew that however much she had failed in the heavy trials and afflictions of the last year, at least she had not been actuated by meanness or mere self-indulgence. *They* knew her as she used to be–fearless and sure of her actions–before love had laid bonds on her spirit, and sorrow and failure crushed her down. They understood, and would not altogether condemn. At last, curiously strengthened, she rose and went up-stairs, the firm purpose in her heart of going to Westenra to tell him everything.

She paused for a moment at his door–doubtless he was sleeping, dead-beat as he said. But that could not be helped. It was more important even than his sleep that all should be put right between them. She owed it to herself as well as to him. Softly she turned the handle of the door, but it did not open to her touch. Westenra had guarded himself against invasion. It was locked.

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At breakfast the next morning he announced that he was due in London in two days' time to deliver some lectures at one of the hospitals. After that he must make a visit to Ireland on a matter concerning some family property. He added vaguely that he should probably come back again to Jersey before very long, but Val took that for what it was–a bone thrown to Haidee, whose face had visibly lengthened and darkened on hearing this horrible news. Bran, smiling in his mother's arms, looked on affably–his father's comings and goings meant little to him as yet, so long as he had Val's soft cheek to rub his own against. She was very pale, but extraordinarily composed, and made no comment on his plans. She had withdrawn herself into some remote and distant land of her own–a land where no birds sang, nor flowers grew! After breakfast she left the others, and went about her household duties. A conference in the garden between Westenra and Haidee resulted in a resolution to walk down to St. Aubin's and hire bicycles for a day's outing. Haidee was strong as a Basuto pony, and Westenra loved nothing better than to be out in the open air. The bicycling is hilly in Jersey, and the two came home tired out in the evening. Haidee announced that they had done their side of the Island from Corbières to Plemmont Caves, and intended next day to visit Bouley Bay, Archirondelle, and the famous breakwater that cost half a million pounds and is of no more use than a load of rotten hay.

After the usual bath parade, at which Bran presided, Val once more had the fireside and her thoughts to herself. Haidee and Westenra, tired out, were glad

to seek their beds.

The next day they started early. While Val was cutting sandwiches for them, Westenra half suggested that she should come too; but she smiled quite naturally, and said that even if there were any one to stay with Bran, it was so long since she had cycled she would only be a drag to them. "But I hope you will not be so tired to-night, Garrett," she finished quietly. "I want to have a little talk with you after dinner."

"Very well," he answered, looking at her curiously. He could not pretend to begin to understand her, or what she meant or wanted. He only knew that he, too, had something to say before he left Jersey the next day. Though outwardly he was composed, and in the company of Haidee even gay, affecting great interest in their excursions, his heart was heavy as a stone in him, and he was brooding over his wrongs as only an Irishman can. As it happened, rain began to fall heavily after lunch, and somewhat early in the afternoon the two cyclists returned wet and cross. Westenra bathed, and immediately began to pack his things for departure by the next morning's boat. The rest of the afternoon was spent with the children.

The sky had cleared by evening, and when after dinner Val and Westenra walked across the fields towards the cliff in the pale, clear, evening light, they could see the tide furling and unfurling its filmy laces of froth on St. Brelade's beach.

Though she had come out with a set purpose she found it hard to begin what she had to say. For all her remote manner and outward calm, her heart, throbbing full, bounded in her breast and beat in her throat until she felt suffocating. It was Westenra who spoke at last very gently, but with something of a requiem note in his words.

"So you see our love was not strong enough after all to weather the storms, Val!"

"Mine was ... mine is," her heart cried out, but she looked at him dully. She knew the futility of such words now. It was his own dead love he was keening, not hers.

"Our ship of dreams has gone to pieces."

"No," burst from her lips almost against her will.

"Yes, Val," his gentle tone became stern. "Face the facts."

They had seated themselves on some rocks near the edge of the cliff. Nothing broke the peace of the evening but the swirr and swish of the gentle tide on the beach below.

"You promised to burn your boats ... never to go back to old habits and possessions ... I find you with your old possessions about you—-"

"Those pictures and chintzes? I wrote and told you how they came," she

interrupted. "They can be burnt for all they are to me."

He moved his hand with a desperate gesture.

"That is nothing to the other. Can you deny that you have returned to one at least of your old habits?"

"Oh!" she cried, and sat up like one who has been struck. But his heart was full of fury, outraged hopes, and disappointment. He could not measure his words because she cried out.

"It was not your boats you burned, but my ship–my ship of dreams!"

He went further, he accused her of breaking his shrine, of succumbing to a vice that he detested and despised with all his soul. He said she had betrayed his love, and destroyed that quality in it which is essential and eternal.

"One *must* look up," he said, and looked down on her as she sat there, her face covered with her hands, very still under the torrent of fierce and cruel words that burst from him in the bitterness of outraged love and pride. Like all reserved people when driven into breaking silence he said too much. Afterwards there was a long silence. A curlew flying inland wailed faintly like a dying thing.

"I don't see what is before us," he muttered. "Everything is finished."

And at last she spoke–very quietly.

"Yes, everything is finished of our life together. But each of us is free to begin again."

"Free!" he echoed ironically, thinking of the mystical fatalistic threads that had bound and tangled them together from the first. "You and I will never be free of each other."

"Oh, yes–we are already. Listen! I want to tell you something that I ought to have told you long ago, only I was afraid of ... Ah! never mind of what I was afraid. But now that it is as you have said all over and finished, now that I see very well that not only do you not love me, but that you never have loved me and want nothing so much as to be free of me, I will tell it you–" and she added fiercely, "with pleasure."

"Tell ahead," he said drearily.

"I am not your wife, and never have been. Horace Valdana is alive–has never been dead!"

In the solemn mute moments that followed the curlew wailed again.

"What are you saying?" muttered Westenra, hoarsely. He had risen to his feet.

Then Val began to laugh, not hysterically, but just soft light-hearted laughter. She really felt light-hearted at that moment. It was as though something very, very heavy had been lifted from her shoulders, and she could stand up straight at last.

"It can't be true!" He was muttering like a man stunned. "How long have

you known?"

"Oh, what does that matter!" she said. "It is *true*–that is all that concerns you." She reflected a moment. "But of course my mere word is of no value to you ... I have proofs in the house ... letters from him asking me to go to Canada with him." She began to laugh again.

"Good God!" muttered Westenra still dazed. "And Bran?"

That sobered her, drying the strange laughter on her lips and in her heart.

"Ah, Bran! ... Yes. My Brannie!" she said softly, her voice in those few low-spoken words expressing all that the woman voice can express of pity, sorrow, and love. It was Bran who would be the victim–Bran who would go fatherless, homeless, nameless–a vagabond like his mother with restless heart and wandering feet!

"He is mine," said Westenra suddenly.

"No, mine," she answered swiftly. They stood staring at each other like two duellists. He lost sight of all she had been to him–of all that she must have suffered. Dazed and horror-struck he only felt that his world was moving away from under his feet, and she was trying to rob him of the last hold, the most dear thing he had ever possessed.

"He is mine too ... I believe by law I could get him."

"Law! Have n't you found out yet that I am lawless?" She came close to him, staring into his eyes, a mocking light in her own. "You forget that I am the woman with no soul, no morals, and no roots, the careless vagabond whom you feared Haidee to come into contact with ... whom you apologised to your dead mother for having married...."

"Val, you are mad!" he said amazed, white to the lips. But she only laughed a little clanking laugh, and her voice that had so often sounded in his ears like the wild far music of his own land was hard now as iron on iron.

"Go your ways, my dear Garrett Westenra. You are free of the woman who burnt your ship!"

CHAPTER XII

CHILDREN OF ISHMAEL

"Life tests a plough in meadows made of stones,
Love takes a toll of spirit, mind, and bones."
MASEFIELD.

Raging he went from English shores. Raging, broken-hearted, more lonely than ever in his life before. Looking backwards to that voyage on which he and Val had first met, he realised that his loneliness then was peace and contentment compared with what he now felt. He had known what it was to share life right down to the core with another human being, and when that has once been, solitude redoubles its sting. A fantastic creature like Val, however uncomfortable she made life, could not be lost out of it without leaving a big, aching gap.

Yet, there he was on his way back to America, while in far Jersey Val sat on her rabbit-hutch staring at the sea with blind eyes, Bran playing unheeded at her knees, in her ears the faint, melancholy cry of the curlew.

After their wretched parting on St. Brelade's Cliffs, Westenra had paced the beach all night. When he reached the farm dawn brightened the sky, but none of the freshness of morning was in his drawn face. Haidee and Val were up, the fire made, breakfast ready. They seemed to take it for granted that he still meant to leave by that morning's boat for England, and indeed he had decided that it was the only thing to do. It would give him time to review the miserable situation and look for a way out of it. But before he went he encompassed a further interview with Val, though he got little of it but pain. She was in that subtle way of hers *éloignée* from him once more, had put immeasurable distance between them.

"I want you to tell me more of this," he said drearily. "I must have details to go on before I can do anything to right the matter."

"You cannot right it," she answered. "It must be left as it is."

"What do you mean?"

"It must never come out that Horace Valdana is alive. One cannot so disgrace England."

Briefly she related the facts as far as she knew them, and he saw that she was right. Impossible to disgrace a country to right a private affair–even if the country were one you hated. But what a situation! There seemed to him to be no way out of it. Val, for a deep reason of her own, withheld from him the fact of Valdana's broken health. She wished him to feel absolutely free of her. She kept repeating that, with sardonic inflexible eyes.

"You see, you are free! What more do you ask?"

He asked much more, but with that mocking smile on her pale lips he would not tell her so.

"I want my son," he said coldly.

"*My* son," she answered, and that found them once more at the pitch at which they had parted the night before, reason withdrawn, cold fury in its place. Only by a great effort had he controlled himself.

"I leave him with you, in trust."

"Because you must," she answered, eyes flickering with bitter triumph. "But will you not take Haidee before ill comes to her?"

He was helpless before the smile that writhed upon her stiff lips. What did she mean by these gibes concerning Haidee and his dead mother, which she flung at him like javelins? How had she read those secrets of his soul that he had never revealed to any one, scarcely acknowledged to himself? Had she with her queer almost clairvoyant instinct known all along and mocked and disdained him in her heart from the first? If he thought of her tenderness to Bran and to himself when he lay ill, her comradeship, her valiant gaiety, he could not believe it. When he looked at her mocking disdainful eyes he could believe anything.

"No; I leave Haidee in trust with you too," he said, then had been obliged to kiss the children hurriedly, and go on his way, or lose the boat.

In spite of his original intention to do so he did not return to Jersey before sailing to America. After black nights of reflection he saw that there was nothing to be gained by facing Val again in the mood that possessed her. The moment they looked into each other's eyes cold reason would once more withdraw from them and the fury of wounded love take its place. It was better to let Time do its work upon their trouble. So he sailed for America without seeing her or the children again, though it hurt him deeply to do it. And his days and nights upon the ship were haunted by the face of the woman in grey. Never since the voyage on the *Bavaric* had he dreamed that dream, but now never a night came without it. Towards the last part of the voyage, when calm had come to him, he wrote her a letter in which he hid the love that still ached in him, but tried to revive a little the old understanding comradeship they had shared.

But there was too much of compassion in that letter, and Val was sick of his compassion. Women *can* get sick of compassion when it leaves no room for self-respect.

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She stayed on in Jersey not because he asked her but because she must. One would call it existing rather than living as far as she was concerned. She felt as though her brain were dead and she had only her body left, that body which, however glad she would be to lay it down, she must conserve and take care of for the sake of Bran. For Haidee, too, she had a kind of responsible mother-feeling, though Haidee never encouraged tenderness in any one. But the case of Bran

was different; the child of two such nervous people could not be otherwise than nervously organised, though of fine build and stamina, and Val knew that under any care but hers he would probably grow up a weakling. No, she must not die! But she tried to let her mind do so for a while, so that she might suffer less. She essayed to turn herself into a kind of vegetable; read nothing, talked to no one but the children, indulged in no kind of mental occupation. Only she worked out in the open as much as possible, with her nervous incapable hands, and at least she got a beautiful flower garden together.

She never saw or spoke to any one but the children. When Haidee got back from school they would all work together in the garden or clean out the stable, or make bran mashes for the pony colic, or run the dogs, and watch the chickens and rabbits in the open, though enthusiasm for this last occupation was distinctly on the wane. The only things any of them cared for now were the bees and the flowers. They did not make money out of these, but then the fowls did not make money either, only pretended to until the grain bill came in.

Bran was always to be found in the vicinity of the beehives, and at first Val had been terrified, but later she came to believe him one of the "band of little brothers" whom bees do not sting. Haidee could take no liberties with the strange, wise insects, and had a holy fear of them, but they were Bran's passionate loves.

As for eggs and chickens, and fat hens that would no longer lay, they were all sick of them as articles of diet. Haidee, who in New York days was used to attack with relish three city eggs of assorted flavours mixed in a tumbler, now turned away in weariness and disgust from the brown-shelled ones fresh from the nest.

And the rabbits were a thorn in the flesh, and a weariness to the sole of the foot! Eternally they were killed by stoats, eaten by rats, stolen, or else dug their way out from under the runs and fled for the open. If these modes of escape all failed, Bran, in his small way, would do what he could for them. When he came toddling indoors to declare with an effulgent smile his love for Haidee she would start up snapping:

"Yes, I know what *that* means. You've let the rabbits out. You always have when you love me. Have you, Bran?"

"Well, by aksdent, Haidee...."

"Oh, I know your aksdents...."

With blank faces she and Val would rush from the house and scoot after the scurrying rabbits. The latter usually got the best of the game and achieved liberty.

The truth had to be faced that there was no money to be made out of the farm. High hopes of a fortune had long since fallen to the dust. Chickens and

rabbits are very charming to watch at their antics in the sunshine, but depending upon them for a living, unless you are an expert poultry farmer, is waste of time. Val realised it at last, and that other ways and means for obtaining money must be reflected upon. She had no intention of accepting another rap of Westenra's for either her own or Bran's support. So one day she sat down and wrote to Branker Preston, asking him if he could find an opening for some "Wanderfoot" articles.

"I cannot travel," she wrote, "but I have a good store of unused material in the cupboards of my mind, and I need money." Preston answered that he would not be long in finding a demand for anything she could supply. When, however, the demand came she found herself curiously unable to cope with it. The task of sitting down to write newspaper articles after a lapse of more than two years into domesticity was not an easy one. As love and maternity had absorbed her mother's art, so in a smaller degree the same things had encroached upon Val's gift. Added to which was a period of unbroken intercourse with chickens and rabbits, enlivened only by digging in the garden or running the pony up and down when he got colic. Such occupations are excellent for the health, and may even induce a good working philosophy, but they do not make the intellect to scintillate like the stars, nor bestow distinction upon that elusive quality in writing which is known as style. She found that when she tried to think connectedly on abstract subjects things slithered out of her mind and left a headache behind. After a few days, in which her brain seemed to act in delirium, and the written results read to her like the ravings of a suddenly liberated lunatic, she threw down her pen in despair.

"It is this brute of an island! I can never write here," she cried desperately. She had suffered too much there, and her instinct was always to flee from places where sorrow had smitten her, to save her soul alive before it was injured beyond aid. Such places seemed to have a power for evil over her. Moreover her feet had long ached to be gone from the small, cramped island. It had served its purpose. The children were healthy and strong, her own body recuperated. Now that she must take up her pen once more, plainly it was time to pull stakes. There was no inspiration for her in Jersey.

For another thing, she began to be afraid that if she remained much longer she might become a serious criminal; that is to say, one upon whom the law would lay hands. It was Farmer Scone who helped her to this conclusion and her final decision to go.

For months he had been making himself unpleasant–a long series of petty vexations and systemised annoyance–stoning her fowls, complaining to the police that her dogs worried his cows, letting his cattle break down her hedges, and encouraging his labourers to annoy Haidee by sniggering over the hedge when

she was busy with the pony. Added to these things he had once more started walking through her grounds by the old disputed "right of way" past the back door.

One morning she and Haidee, just going out to fire at some crows in the fruit garden, ran into him and his grinning labourer carrying their scythes to a far hayfield. Val called him back, and speaking very self-controlledly told him that it must be understood, once and for all, that she would not permit this trespassing.

"Great Galumps!" he responded as usual, "and what will you do to me? Is it your husband from America, who only comes to see you for one day a year, that 'll be punching my head?"

"No," said Val, white to the lips, and raising her rook-rifle. "It is I that will be putting a hole through your large and very unsightly paunch."

"Yes, do, Val, *do.* Take a pot-shot at him–give him one in the tummy!" urged Haidee ecstatically. "Shall I get my revolver too?"

She hopped up-stairs, and Farmer Scone moved on at the double-quick, rather alarmed, for he did not at all like the look in Val's eyes, and to be sure no one knew what such creatures might do! He half determined to go down to the court-house at once and, complaining of menaces, "have the law on them," but reflected in time that as he was not "Jersey-born" he might not get his case, while running a possible risk of being fined for trespassing. He decided that his system of petty annoyance was the best.

In the meantime Val, too, was deciding something. On going into the house she met Haidee coming out, gaily priming her revolver.

"Put it away, Haidee," she said wearily. "Don't you understand I only said that in my rage with the insolent brute. You must never shoot at people. Awful trouble might come of it."

Haidee's face darkened sulkily.

"One can't do anything in this rotten island," she complained.

"We can get out of it," said Val, and Haidee brightened.

"Where would we go?"

"Oh, I don't know ... anywhere ... anywhere where we 'll never see a rabbit or a fowl again. I think I shall go mad if I stay among them another day."

"Me too–I'm sick of the beasts. Look at that cock-eyed eagle staring at us. Sh–sh, you brutes!"

"I wish I 'd never seen a hen in my life," said Val savagely.

"Let's get an axe and slay them all before we go," suggested Haidee. Suddenly her face grew long. "But where are we going to get the money from?"

The financial situation was such that even the children understood its simplicity; though if it had been more complicated Val would never have dreamed of not sharing it with them. Bran was able to tell to a penny how much the family

purse contained, while Haidee as a matter of fact possessed a far finer appreciation of money values than either Westenra or Val.

"We 've got the rent," said the latter thoughtfully, and Haidee looked up quickly. With the lawlessness of youth she immediately jumped to the conclusion that Val meant to skip with the sum that was due to the landlord on September quarter-day, now close at hand. It was only a fourth of thirty-six pounds, but still, when times are hard and a sea voyage in contemplation, nine pounds are not to be despised. Val quickly dispelled this bright notion.

"I 'm not going to rob the landlord. All he will have to do is sell the farm-stock and my pretty London things, which of course we 'll leave. They will more than pay the rent for the rest of the lease, and enough left over to pay the bills we owe. We won't take anything but our clothes and a few books."

"What about Joy? Let's sell him. You know that old Farmer Le Seur offered fifteen pounds for him. I 'll go and tell him this morning, shall I?"

Val reflected a moment, and came to the conclusion that it would be juster to Westenra to sell the pony at that price than leave him to be sold for the small sum they owed, so she gave Haidee the desired permission.

"Oh, hurray! ... Oh, Val, what a lark!" Haidee pranced and capered like a Bashi-bazouk. "Let's go and pack."

They flew up-stairs and woke Bran to the news.

"We 're going away, Brannie Bran ... in a ship!"

Bran, sitting up in bed like a squdgy Japanese idol, took hold of his toes as though they were a bunch of rosebuds.

"Are we going to daddy?" he asked solemnly, and Val hid her face in his flannel nightgown.

"No, my Wing." She added on the spur of the moment, "We 're going to France."

He reflected awhile.

"Oh, dear buck!" he sighed at last (only he said jeer for dear). It was one of his expressions signifying disappointment, and Val felt a pang. But she would not be saddened, and soon had the children as wild as herself, dashing about the house and packing up, so glad was she to be setting out from the place where she had been a vegetable so long, and yet known such keen unhappiness.

Having got together all their trunks, the band of Ishmaelites boarded a cab for St. Helier. No one would have dreamed for a moment that they were setting out for another land. They drove down and spent the night opposite the quay, and sailed the next morning for Granville. Just at the last Val thought of sending Haidee to see if there were any letters at the post-office. As it happened, one had been forwarded by Branker Preston, but she did not read it till they were on board ship.

It was from Valdana, to say that, as she would not come, he was setting forth alone in excellent health to start life anew in Canada.

Part III

France

CHAPTER XIII

THE WAYS OF A LOVER

"For life is not the thing we thought, and not the thing we plan."–ROBERT SERVICE.

March was in like a lamb, and on a fair morning all the windows of Villa Duval stood open, letting in floods of sunlight, gusts of warm sea-scented wind, and the sound of waves crushing and swinging up and down the sandy beaches of Normandy. Perhaps it was because *père* Duval who built it was an old sailor and lighthouse-keeper that the rooms of the Villa were curiously like ship-cabins with their wooden walls and bare deck-like floors. Looking out through the porthole windows at the view of blue waves rippling from the bay up the river it would not have seemed unnatural to find the Villa gently rocking with the incoming tide. Down in the garden *père* Duval hoeing weeds fostered the illusion by croaking the ghost of an old sea song that he had lilted bravely enough forty years before from his fishing boat or when he kept the lighthouse at Les Sept Isles. He had built the Villa with his own hands after the sea and he had done with each other; but not for his own habitation. With its pink and blue tables and chairs made and lovingly painted by himself, beds from the Paris Bon Marché, stout bed-linen that had been part of *mère* Duval's marriage portion, marvellous mirrors and decorated crockery bought with trading coupons that represented many pounds

of coffee from the Café Debray Company, it was considered far too wonderful and shining to be the habitation of a mere Normandy peasant. So the old man and his granddaughter Hortense lived in a couple of rooms beneath the wonder house, which was perched high and reached only by a flight of steps to the front door. The Villa lay nearer to the beach than any other in Mascaret, and for this reason was always one of the first to be taken by summer visitors. But at the end of the previous summer *père* Duval had achieved an extraordinary piece of luck in letting it for the whole autumn and winter to some mad Americans, who were now fixtures for the coming summer also.

The mad Americans had received this title by reason of their eccentric habits and customs, to say nothing of their clothes. They never wore anything, week-day or Sunday, but red woollen sweaters and short skirts, and the girl most shamelessly showed her legs bare to the knee. Also the whole band of three bathed in the sea on the coldest of winter days. Evidently their mental condition was known elsewhere than in Mascaret, for more than once when they were staying at Les Fusains, the villa they had first taken, letters came from America addressed to Les Insains, and the occupants of Les Fusains had received these bland and unblinking from the hands of Jean Baptiste the postman. The postmaster, who understood a little English, had explained the jest to his village cronies, adding that the writing of the eldest mad one so much resembled the writing of a hen, that it was small wonder that mistakes were made over her address. That they were Americans was certain, for every three months American Express money orders came for them, and the eldest Insain promptly changed these for French money *mandats* and forwarded them to the Credit Lyonnais in Paris. These *fantastiques* doings deeply impressed the villagers, and had provided them with many an interesting hour of gossip over their black coffee and cider.

And the "Insane ones" never knew a thing about it. On this mild March morning they were variously engaged in simple and peaceful occupations not unsuitable to those of feeble mind. Upstairs, one of them, a girl of sixteen with bare feet and hair swinging in long brown braids, was swishing the sheets from the beds and flicking all stray garments into corners. She considered that she was being certainly very noble and useful. Her face bore the expression of complacent beneficence assumed by those who are aware that they are doing the work of another person, and doing it ten times better than that other person. She wore a bathing dress that was slightly small for her, made combination-fashion, of twill whose pristine scarlet had long since been bleached by sea salt to a faint shell-pink. It was embroidered by black and white darns of a primitive, not to say aboriginal description. Her bare arms were decorated with some beaten copper bracelets of the New Art school, but her slim legs, brown and very long from the knee down, were innocent of stockings. She was tanned all over with the faint,

transparent, sherry-coloured tan of a woodland nymph, and her delicately curved cheek wore the tint of woodland berries, wine-brown eyes full of sunshine and shadows, long, flickering, silky hair, a red, sulky mouth.

Haidee had grown into a beauty.

She swished the sheets of heavy linen from the beds and cast them in rumpled heaps upon the floor, taking many a glance out at the sea, whistling a tune at one moment, in another echoing with her high-pitched rather husky treble the lay of *père* Duval.

"Le bon Jesu marchait sur l'eau
Va sans peur mon petit bateau."

In the room below, listening to Haidee's rustling feet and the song of the sea, was Val Valdana. Two sheets of the *Paris Daily Mail* were spread upon the table to protect the cloth, while in wistful and desultory fashion she prepared the vegetables for lunch. Her thin brown fingers decked in their strange stones and old enamels were stained with potato juice, and a number of small new potatoes lay dimpling pink at the bottom of an earthenware bowl glazed brown without and pale yellow within. But Val's thoughts were not with the potatoes. She often let her hands fall among the curly peel scrapings on the table, and gazed sombrely, almost sightlessly before her. Shipwreck was in her eyes, and exile, and all the bitterness of bright hopes broken, and talent lying fallow and useless. Her lips looked as if the laughter had been bitten out of them in an attempt to keep within the desperate cry of her heart.

It was as well perhaps that overhead Haidee suddenly decided that helping to get lunch would be more amusing than making beds. Hasty and conclusive sounds denoted that she was "finishing up," directing by means of a few masterly flicks with a bath towel, all scraps of paper, stockings, stray shoes, letters, etc., into a proper and decent seclusion under the beds. Then her feet rustled on the stairs and through the kitchen, stayed for a moment at the front door from whence she threw a laugh and a call to Bran playing in the old boat across the road. A moment later the shell-pink bathing costume became part of the dining-room decoration, and its wearer, seated before the *Daily Mail*, attacked the potatoes with the same nobility of purpose she had used for the bedrooms. Val, leaning back in her chair, her hands listlessly on the table before her, her face full of a moody weariness, had plainly struck work. A silence prevailed broken only by the scratch of Haidee's knife on the potatoes. When she sometimes needed the handle of her knife to delicately scratch the tip of her nose she ceased work for an instant, while she glanced at Valentine, or through the open win-

dow at Bran's head bobbing up and down in the old *Jules Duval*. When her eyes strayed to the blue moving surface beyond she gave a sigh.

"What a day for a sail, Val!"

Val waked from her sombre dream, and looking for the first time with some shade of recognition at her, became aware of the bathing costume.

"I think you want to die of pneumonia, Haidee!"

"Oh, I 'm not cold, and it's so jolly and loose. It makes me feel as though summer is here already. Don't I wish it were June instead of rotten old March!"

She plumped a potato into the bowl and dexterously used the handle of the knife to flick a long streak of hair over her left shoulder.

"I do believe it's warm enough for a second swim to-day, Val ... let's hurry up and go down to the beach, shall we? ... Yes, do, let's."

"Who will get *dèjeuner*?" inquired Val, laconically.

"I could kick that rotten Hortense!" responded Haidee savagely, and all her cowboy instincts came out and sat upon her face. "Do you believe she is really sick?" she asked, in the manner of one propounding a problem in Algebra.

"Of course not.... She's sick of doing housework, that's all.... Any one would be."

Haidee considered this awhile scowling, but her thoughts passed to pleasanter subjects, and her face presently regained its harmony. From the kitchen came a sound like the purring of a man-eater of Tsavo enjoying a full meal, but it was only the boiler, which always purred when the stove was red-hot. Haidee made haste to finish the potatoes though her eyes considered many things. She regarded a brown print of Carlyle on the wall above Val's head, and wondered as often before if he had really gone about London with a hat of that shape! And had he really heaved half bricks at the people he did not like? ... that tickled her cowboy humour and she smiled broadly. How beautifully Mr. Whistler had draped that nice gendarme's cloak over the thin legs of the Sage of Craigenputtock!

Her glance wandered again to the expanse of blue water sparkling in the sun–the Barleville Bay and the river were both full now, and blue, blue! She wished she could collect all that blueness and put it into a jewel to hang round Val's neck. Val looked lovely with bits of blue on her–like an Arab Madonna, though she could also look like Mary Madgalene. Sometimes when she had Bran on her lap she looked happy and contented, but with far-away hills in her eyes–just like St. Anne in da Vinci's picture where Mary is sitting on her mother's knees while Jesus plays on the floor.

At other times, when she twisted a grey scarf around her hair and ran in the wind Val could look like a Spanish dancing girl, or a mad Malay. Again an artist in the Latin Quarter had done a water-colour of her in which, with her head a little on one side and a wistful inquiring look in her smoke-blue eyes,

she reminded Haidee of a baby lion cub once seen in the Bronx Park Zoo. But to-day Val looked old and sad; her yellow serpent was eating at her heart, and Haidee knew why. The American mail had reached Cherbourg the day before, but no letter had come to Villa Duval. Hardly any letters came from Westenra now, except an occasional one to Haidee and the regular money draft every three months which Val as regularly sent away to a Paris bank and never touched except for paying Haidee's school fees.

"Never mind, Val," said Haidee, half in response to her own thoughts, half in continuation of their brief conversation. "As soon as your play is finished we 'll kick Hortense out" (Haidee's mind still dealt in kicks) "and get a proper *bonne*. We may be able to afford old M'am Legallais, don't you think? They say she can make lovely onion soup."

"The play will never be finished," said Val darkly. "Pots and pans won't let me finish it–they spoil the scenery. I *think* potatoes and cabbages! You can smell garlic and stewed veal in the love scenes. Oh! How can one go on living? If it were n't for you and Bran I would cut my head off."

"Cockerels!" said Haidee, in the same way as a rude boy might say "rats!" "Cut your hair off instead," she counselled unfeelingly, "it is getting awfully thin."

Val sprang up and ran like lightning into the next room, where there was a mirror on the wall. Her hair lay in feathery clouds about her face and forehead, and there seemed to be heaps of it, but it was true that when she came to do it up one small comb at the back held all in place. Yet she remembered the time not long ago when it had fallen to her waist as long and thick as Haidee's own.

"It is this confounded writing plays–and stewing veal!" she murmured, and stared at herself desperately. She had the eyes of the exile who never for one moment forgets his exile; only, it was not one country she mourned but many. Poor Val! she was too, that rare unhappy thing, a born lover. Never for one moment was the man she loved out of her mind; always, always he was there, haunting the rooms of her memory and the *chapelle ardente* of her heart, perfuming every thought, influencing every action. Because of him she cried aloud now:

"I *will* have it cut off, Haidee. Go and tell the barber to come this afternoon. I 'll have it cut close–shaved–so that it *must* grow thick again. I won't be an old woman without hair! Oh, Haidee–an old bald hag whom no one loves!" Desolation crept into her voice, it had long dwelt in her eyes.

"Don't be a silly, Val," said matter-of-fact Haidee. "I love you and Bran loves you and Garry loves you."

"No, no–Garry hates me–he never writes!" She flung herself into a chair, and two of the salt bitter tears that were always lurking in the background, but which she seldom shed, oozed out of her eyes as if they had come from a long distance and gave her great pain. Haidee made no attempt to comfort her, but

presently went out of the house to where Bran was just casting off anchor from the *Jules* in view of a voyage to New York.

"Val 's crying," she said briefly.

"What for?" asked Bran, but immediately letting go anchor and beginning to climb in a business-like way over the side of the boat. The eye that he cocked at Haidee was of the same smoke-blue as his mother's, and held the same wistful lion-cub glance.

"Just the old yellow snake," said Haidee, already on her way back to put on the potatoes, for well she knew that if she did not there would be none for lunch that day.

Bran found Val swiftly, and climbing upon her knees began to kiss her wet eyes. She kissed him back passionately, holding him with such convulsive tightness that he was at last obliged to give a small howl.

"O–h! you're hurting me, Mammie–just a *little* bit."

She kissed him again then, comforting him, reproaching herself, and drying away her tears in his bright hair.

"You know I would n't hurt my little cubby-cub for a million pounds."

"Would you for a million millions?"

"Never!"

"For a ship as big as the *Tu-te-onic*?" Bran adored ships, and could imagine most crimes being committed to acquire one.

"Never, never, *jamais*!"

"Not if some one came and asked you to give me just a *teeny weeny* hurt?"

"If some one came to me and said, 'I 'll give you the whole sea full of ships with all the beautiful things in the world in them, if you just crush your little Bran's finger till he howls,' I would say, 'You get out of here, Beel, or I keel you.'"

Bran gave a joyful prance at the familiar quotation from Stephen Crane's story of Mexico Bill, long since transformed by Val into an exciting game, in which he performed the rô1e of Bill, and she and Haidee were two Mexican braves in sombreros and draped blankets. He was just about to propose a full-dress rehearsal of this drama when Val, reading the inspiration in his eye and feeling quite unfit for any such diversion, headed his mind off in another direction.

"If any one came and offered *you* a million pounds to hurt your mammie, would you do it?"

"No," said Bran, adding darkly, "*but I'd ask him where he lived.*"

"And then?" Val smiled into his hair. There was a pause; at last in a soft whisper spoke Bran the brigand:

"I 'd take a sword and go and pierce him in the night and get his million pounds for you." He embraced her ardently. It was characteristic of her that she did not rebuke him for the lawlessness of his plan. She thoroughly understood

the spirit that could rob, pillage, and even do murder for the sake of a loved one.

They began to laugh and play. Val suddenly fell in love with her plan to have her hair cut off. She arranged a red handkerchief on her head, turban-fashion, to see how she would look. Eventually she decided to wear a fez and return to her habit of cigarette smoking to match her new appearance. Haidee declared that she too would love a fez, so Val sat down and wrote to the Army and Navy Stores for two, on the condition that Haidee went to the village at once to tell the barber to come immediately after lunch. Now that she had decided to have her hair cut the thing could not be done soon enough to please her.

Regretfully Haidee changed her bathing-dress for her navy-blue skirt and scarlet sweater, also a floppy hat of brown *suède* for which Val had paid a pound in Jersey at a time when they were very hard up indeed, just because it suited Haidee's peculiar style of cowboy beauty. Looking like a handsome conspirator, she sallied forth down the road that led to the village, for Villa Duval lay a good half-mile from Mascaret, with nothing between but the blacksmith's shop, a hotel, and a couple of fishermen's cottages.

The blacksmith's wife's brother, known to all the world, including Haidee and Bran, as "*mon oncle*" was whitewashing the outside of the blacksmith's cottage against the day when the rose-tree trained over the door would burst into leaf and large pink roses. A little farther on, in front of the hotel, two men were scattering red brick dust over the long flower beds on the sloping lawns, preparatory to planting out the letters "Grand Hotel de la Mer" in blue and white lobelias, thus combining patriotism with an excellent advertisement of the hotel. When the May excursion boat moored alongside the *digue*, the first thing to greet the eyes of the passengers would be the blue and white lettering on the brick-red beds.

These signs and symbols of approaching summer cheered the heart of Haidee, and she hummed a little song to herself, as she went light-foot along the curving picturesque terrace that led to the village.

Already she seemed to smell upon the air the luscious heavy scent of travellers' joy that would presently hang in waxen bunches from the high walls of La Terrasse and Villa Albert. These were the only two villas on the Terrace, and they pertained variously to a Paris specialist in madness, and the controller-general of a great French bank. Between the two villas lay a large and valuable plot of ground, overgrown and tangled up with creepers, brambles, cabbage stalks, rose bushes, and seeding onions, set in the midst of which was a dilapidated one-room hut. The hut was the fly in the ointment of the specialist in lunacy and the controller-general. They could do nothing to remove this picturesque slum from their gates, for old *veuve* Michel, who lived there and drank two bottles of cognac a day and sang gay ribald songs by night, owned the land by right of some old

French statute, and no one could turn her out for as long as she lived. Haidee and Bran considered *veuve* Michel a very charming person indeed. She was fat and merry and gentle, called them her nice little hens and gave them apples and pears (for she also owned an orchard up the cliff) all through the winter when there was no fruit to be got any nearer than Cherbourg. Naturally they liked and appreciated the old woman. Haidee had a good mind to go in and pay her a visit, but she decided it was better not, as old *veuve* would just be sleeping off her morning bottle of cognac preparatory to starting on the afternoon one; also Haidee remembered that she was hungry, and had better hurry back and help get lunch. Still she could not help stopping once or twice to examine for signs of little pink tips the lower branches of the tamarisk-trees which grew on one side of the Terrace–on the other side was the grey stone river wall with the tide lapping blue against it.

Haidee loved tamarisks with a joy that she was sure was unholy because they looked so wicked and painted somehow when they were all dressed out in their pink feathers. She fancied that Jezebel must have had a bunch of them stuck like an aigrette in her beautifully *coiffée* hair, and the same pink tint on her cheeks when she looked out of the window for the last time. Anyway why were tamarisks the only trees to be found growing in the ruins of Babylon? And why had she read somewhere, that in the days of ancient Rome tamarisks were bound around the heads of criminals? It was a nuisance to have to forsake these interesting meditations to enter the little soap-scented shop of the village barber, but she stayed no longer than to bid him come to the Villa at three o'clock to cut off Madame's hair. Next she called at Lemonier's to command a sack of coal, and noted that Lemonier had evidently been drunk again, for Madame had a black eye. It was funny to think that such a jolly big red man should be so cruel! Haidee meditated on this subject on the return journey, also on the horrible price of coal–sixty-five francs a ton and it disappeared like lightning. No one seemed to know why "Carr-*diff*," as they called it, should be so dear. Hortense, closely questioned on the subject by Val anxious for information, said that it must be because the people in England hated the French and were still angry that Normandy did not belong to them.

"Well, have n't you got any coal mines in your own blessed country?" asked Haidee.

"*Certainement!*" Hortense had replied indignantly. "We have Newcas-sel!"

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The barber arrived at three o'clock, and Val sat trembling before her dressing-table. She had arranged two mirrors so that she could view the whole proceeding,

but as soon as the barber commenced she closed her eyes tight. Bran and Haidee stationed themselves at either side of the table to see fair play.

The barber was frankly amazed at the decision of Madame to cut off her feathery hair. Even at the last moment he asked–holding it up in his hands and shaking it out in sprays:

"Does Madame realise what a change it will make in her appearance? Would it not be better if Madame had it merely cut short, leaving about two inches all round *à la Jeanne d'Arc*, so–?" He stuck his little pudgy fingers out below her ears to show the desirable length.

"No, no, no!" cried Val, without opening her eyes. "Does he think I want to look like a pony with my mane hogged! Cut it off close, it *must* grow long and thick as it used to do. Tell him, Haidee."

Haidee told him as much as it was good for him to know–no mention of ponies.

"*Bon!*" said Monsieur le Barbier agreeably, but he looked doubtful, thinking to himself that hair seldom grew much after the age of thirty, and the lady looked well that. When one side was gone Val opened her eyes and gave a deep cry. If it could have been replaced then, she would have abandoned her idea and made the best of what she had. As it was she closed her eyes again, but during the rest of the operation great tears rolled down her face upon her tightly clasped hands. And when all was over the children were swept from the room and she locked herself in with her heart's bitterness. Even Bran was not permitted to comfort her.

It is true that nothing makes a greater difference to the appearance of a woman than to cut off her hair. The tale of every sin she has committed and every sorrow she has suffered seems to be written bare and unsheltered upon her face for all the world to read. What subtle alleviation there is in a frame of hair round the face of a sinner it is hard to say: but it is a problem whether Mary Magdalene, with all her shining story of repentance would have appealed to the love and chivalry of the world in quite the same way if she had been handed down through the ages without her wondrous hair.

When Valentine Valdana looked in the glass at her pale, oval face with no darkness above it to soften the fine lines of her temples, faintly hollowed cheeks, and sombre eyes whose defect appeared to have become suddenly accentuated, she longed in shame and dismay for a mask. It seemed to her that she had indecently exposed her sorrows to the world; that exile, misery, and all the failures of her life were plainly written for even the most unintelligent eye to read. A curious sense too of having done something disloyal to others in revealing her unhappiness crept into her mind for an instant, but she made haste to dismiss it, and would not even specify the vague "others" to herself. None knew better than

she the power of a beloved hand to strike deepest, to hollow out cheeks, sharpen temples, and put shadows into eyes: but she would never have admitted it. Hers was no accusing heart. She blamed nobody but herself for her failures–not even the Fate that had bestowed on her that double nature of artist and lover which rarely if ever makes for happiness. She only felt the despair of the convict and almost wished herself one, so that she might hide in a cell. At length she sought her gay scarf of asphodel-blue and arranged it over her head like a nun's veil. It was thus that she presented herself to the children in the kindly dusk. Supper already stood upon the table. Haidee displayed unusual tact, but Bran was full of curiosity.

"Are you always going to wear that wale tied on you?" he inquired.

"Until my hair grows long again," said poor Val, biting her lip painfully.

"Sleep in it too?" Val nodded, and Haidee made haste to help Bran to *pommes frites* which he loved.

Next morning, Bran waking up and throwing out an arm for his matutinal hug, encountered something strange to his touch: something round, bumpy, and slightly scrubby, very different to the soft nest he was used to dabble his hand in as soon as he woke. The blue scarf had slipped down while Val slept and her shorn head lay cruelly outlined upon the pillow. Bran knelt up and considered her in consternation mingled with pity, then finding himself in the attitude of prayer, mechanically crossed himself and murmured his morning orison, his eyes still fixed on his mother's head:

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart, take it please, and preserve it from sin."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my soul and my life.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, help me in my last agony.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, grant that I live and die in thy holy company. Amen."

Immediately afterwards humour, that Irish vice, overcame all gentler feelings; like a certain famous Bishop of Down, Bran would lose a friend for a joke. He woke Val with a cruel jest:

"*Bon jour, Monsieur le Curé!*"

The curé of Mascaret was a Breton as rugged as his country, with haggard spiritual eyes and an upper lip you could built a fort on, as the saying is; he intensified his uncomeliness by wearing his hair so close-shaved that it was impossible to say where his *tonsure* began or ended. To be told by her loving but candid son that she resembled this good man was a cruel thrust to Val, and the memory of it darkened life for many days to come. She wrapped herself in gloom and the blue veil, and nothing more was heard of the fez cap and cigarettes except that in good time the Stores forwarded them and the French Customs taxed them. After

once trying on the fez and finding herself the image of a sallow and melancholy Turk, she had cast it from her. Her one instinct was to hide her ugliness from every one. Even at the sight of John the Baptist she would fly and hide, and she never left the house except after dark, when for exercise she would sometimes race Haidee up and down the *digue*, or run along the beach at midnight, her scarf floating behind her in the wind, and her head bare to give her "roots" a chance.

These proceedings gravely annoyed the Customs officers distributed in the little straw-littered watch-huts that line the Normandy coast. Instead of tucking themselves in their blankets for a peaceful night, they were obliged to keep awake for fear the mad American woman meant either to commit suicide or meet a boat full of brandy and cigars from Jersey.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAYS OF LITERATURE

"The voyage of even the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks."

From Jersey Val had made a bee-line for Paris which she knew well, and where she had hopes of renewing her mental energy by the sights and sounds of a great city and association with other brain workers. Autumn removals were in full swing and there was no great difficulty in finding house-room for herself and the children, though she was unprepared to find how Paris rents had risen since the days when she and her mother sojourned in the Latin Quarter. It was to that part of Paris she naturally turned–the only possible part for artists and writers to live, though the rich and empty-headed are fond of calling it the "wrong side" of the river. A studio seemed the most suitable form of residence, for she knew she would not be able to work in a small room, and she hated the sordid construction of a cheap flat. She was fortunate in finding a good *atelier* in a little secluded *rue* on the confines of the Quarter–a big, high room, with kitchen and small bedroom attached, looking out onto a little square yard with clusters of shrubs, ivied walls, and a few old battered statues that lent a picturesque air. Here she had settled down and with resolute energy begun the series of "Wanderfoot" articles for which Branker Preston had obtained a commission. It was an arduous task.

No matter how much material is stored in the mind it is not easy to import the air and colour of far-off lands into a Paris *atelier*. The art of putting things down had not yet been recaptured either. Still, the stimulus of even the short journey from Jersey to Paris had done something for her, and though to her critical eye the articles she achieved seemed but pale echoes of her former work, they at least paid the rent and kept things going in rue Campagne Premiere. The continuation of Haidee's education became a problem needing instant attention; for Val very soon realised that the Latin Quarter with its liberal ideas of morality and its fascinating students was no place for a young impressionable girl. Her own child she would have allowed to stay, for she knew that anything with her nature would come to no harm among these careless, attractive people, to whom she felt herself blood-kin. But Haidee, the child of a pretty flighty mother, was of different stock. Besides, there was a responsibility to Westenra in the matter. There were no convents left in Paris, or indeed, in France. All those lovely homes where girls learned a sweet sedateness and many beautiful arts had been closed by a ruthless government. No more in France may the gentle coifed women impart composure and beauty of mind to English and American girls and train the aristocratic children of France to a love of Church and Country. What the loss is to the sum of the world's harmony can never be computed, but American and English mothers have a slight realisation of it.

It was in Belgium that Val at last found what was needed for Haidee–a little community of French nuns who, refusing to unveil, had been obliged to flee over the border, and there had founded a convent to which many good Catholics in Paris sent their children. It was well within Val's means too, for the living is cheap in Belgium, and the fare in the convent was simple though good. Haidee hated terribly to go, but Val was firm, though she held out the promise of early liberation if Haidee would work well at French and try and pass her *brevet simple*. This was no difficult task, for the girl had been well grounded in French during their sojourn in Jersey. Remained the problem of Bran–and little children are a problem in France to parents of limited means. No one caters for them as in other countries. No one even understands the art of teaching and amusing them at the same time, nor even how to feed them. There are no kindergartens and no milk puddings! Small wonder that French babies are small and sallow and sad! Since the nuns were driven out there are only the public Lycées where strong and weak, rough and gentle, are jumbled together with results that no thinking woman would welcome for her child. From their tenderest years French children are crammed with lessons, pushed ahead to pass exams, while the business of play so necessary for little children is almost entirely suppressed.

Val very certainly had no intention of confiding her son to such institutions. She was therefore obliged to hire a daily governess for him, for though, at his age,

he needed little teaching, he had to be sent out of doors so that she might have silence and solitude wherein to work. Even this was a costly business. In England a nursery governess can be afforded by almost every one, but in France it costs one hundred francs a month to have your child well taken care of and taught his alphabet for a few hours a day.

Val did not grudge it, but what worried her was that Bran did not thrive. Paris was no place for him. The Luxembourg Gardens make a good play-ground for city-bred children, but Bran was Val's own child in his need of air and space and horizon. His bloom faded a little, and he began to look very fair and spiritual. Also his love of the picture and statue galleries seemed to his mother something too wistful and wonderful in a small boy, and brought tears to her pillow in the silence of many a night. Then she took him to Belgium for awhile and left him with Haidee and the good nuns. He was a shy creature, though he hated any one to know it, and believed he hid his secret well behind a set smile and little hardy incomprehensible sayings. When the nuns clustered round him calling him their "little Jesus," a favourite name in France for a pretty child, he disdained to shelter behind Val's skirts, as instinct bade him, but nothing could be got out of him except an enigmatic saying he always kept for strangers:

"The cat says bow-wow-wow, and
The dog says meow, meow, meow."

All the while he smiled his little bright smile and his eyes roving keenly noted every detail of the pale æsthetic faces. Even the tears in the Reverend Mother's eyes did not escape him. Afterward he said to Val:

"I like that one with the floating eyes. I think she wishes she had a nice little boy like me. Her voice was littler than a pin's head when she called me her *petit Jesu*. But why do they nearly all have green teeth?"

When Val kissed him farewell it nearly broke her heart to see the brave smile he maintained, though Haidee was sniffling and snuffling at his elbow, partly with momentary grief but mostly with indignation at being, as she rudely phrased it: "Shut up in a convent with a lot of old pussycats."

Back in Paris the studio seemed desolate and empty. Bran had become so much a part of his mother's being and life that without him she was like a bird from whom a wing had been torn. A month later Haidee wrote:

"I think Bran is fretting. Whenever I speak to him he puts that little fixed grin on his mouth, but you should see his eyes."

Within an hour Val was in the Brussels express speeding for that dear sight. On the journey back to Paris, happy now and healed of her broken wing, she

heard all the history of his lonely nights and the "purply-red pain" that he got in his stomach when he thought of her. Cuddled to her side he wept as he had never wept whilst separated from her, and Val's tears ran down her face too while she listened, registering a vow that she would never part with him again.

So once more he went out with a governess and came home to his mother full of original criticisms of Moreau's pictures and the statues of Rodin, until one morning nearly two years after their arrival in Paris, and just when Haidee had arrived for the summer holidays, Val rose up from her bed with the itch for travel in her feet, and the longing quickly communicated to the children for the sight of a clear horizon. They tore their possessions from the walls, stuffed them into trunks, and shook the dust of Paris from their feet.

"Let's go to Italy and live on olives and spaghetti, "was Haidee's suggestion, but Bran knew the news of the world.

"We might get an earthquake!"

The size of the cheque from Branker Preston, however, was what really decided the affair, limiting them to wandering happily enough in Brittany. But the water and primitive methods of Breton cooks made Val think nervously of typhoid, and after a time she headed for Normandy. Normans are cleaner in their household ways than Bretons, of whom they slightingly speak as "*les pores Bretons*," declaring that they eat out of holes in the table and never wash the holes. Besides, Normandy in winter is milder than Brittany. So, travelling by highways and byways, they happened at last on Mascaret.

It was the tag end of September when they arrived. All the summer visitors were gone and the big silver beach deserted, but summer itself still lingered. They got an entrancing glimpse of the gentle green and gold beauty of the place before the chills of autumn set in. Even then they had been able to bathe and go sailing in the fishing boat of one of *père* Duval's sons, who was now in his turn lighthouse-keeper of Mascaret. For ten sunny October days, too, they had assisted with all the ardour of novitiates at *père* Duval's cider making, becoming acquainted with the secrets of *cidre bouché*, and the grades to be found in *cidre ordinaire* unto the third and fourth watering. They even sampled the latter as drunk by the fishermen and called for at the cafés by the name of *le boisson avec le brulot dedans*: which signifies cider very liberally diluted with French cognac. Then the winter closed in on Mascaret with wild gales and high-flowing tides. On Christmas Eve snow came softly down, so that the walk to midnight mass had been like acting in that scene painted by a Dutch painter where the village folk are seen winding their way through the snow, lanterns and hot-water bottles in their hands, to the distant church with windows full of red light. All the winter interests of the simple village had been sampled and shared by Val and the children, and they had been happier there than ever in France. The children loved the freedom of

the place and the *bonhomie* of the French folk so different to English people of that class. The three went about in their red sweaters and lived a life of absolute unconvention. It was a good place to write a masterpiece in–if one were only a master–was Val's ironical thought, and in spite of her self-directed irony, she did achieve during the first months there a wonderful little curtain raiser, which Branker Preston had no difficulty in disposing of to a London manager. It dealt with Boers and Zulus, and had been well received, but unfortunately the play it had preceded in the bill was a failure and the two were withdrawn together before Val could greatly benefit, but it had brought in five guineas a week for six weeks, and this success had put her in heart for further work of the kind. She had sickened of writing "Wanderfoot" articles from a chair. She could by this time have written some very spirited ones on the subject of France in general and Normandy in particular, but she had her reasons for not wishing to attract attention to her whereabouts, as such articles would surely have done. Preston advised her to write a novel, but she knew she had neither the patience to spin a long story through many chapters to its end, nor the gift of character portrayal. What was hers was a sense for situation, colour, and atmosphere, and it occurred to her that the best vehicle for a display of these qualities was the theatre. Her first little venture had attracted the attention of several managers, and one of them told Preston that he was ready to consider a three-act play by her. It was this play she was busy upon now. But it was sometimes hard to transport the atmosphere of far-away tropical Natal into a little wooden villa facing the English Channel, with a wild spring gale tearing at the windows, and the rollers booming like cannon on the Barleville beach–for the promise of summer had gone as swiftly as it came, and the spring tides were flooding up the river flinging great walls of spray over the *digue* and splashing three feet deep across the Terrasse, right to the steps of the *Hotel de la Mer*, so that the journey to the village had to be made by a path up the cliff.

Val found that the only way to ignore Normandy and the bleak mists of *La Manche* was to sit over a *chaufferette* full of bright red embers of charcoal, letting the heat steal up her skirts and enveloping her whole person from the soles of her feet to her scalp in a lovely glow. Immediately she would begin to write things full of the tropical languor of Africa. In her brain palms waved, little pot-bellied Kaffirs rolled in the hot dirt, sunshine blazed over a blue and green land, the air was filled with the scent of mimosa, and great-limbed Zulus danced in rhythmic lines with chant and stamp and swing of assegai before Cetewayo, the great and cruel king.

Unfortunately, a *chaufferette* is not always an easy thing to manage. Like everything French it has a temperament, and is liable to moods when it will burn and moods when it won't. It is a wooden or tin box, perforated at the top and

open at one side to admit an earthenware bowl full of the charcoal which is called *charbon de bois*–actually calcined morsels of green wood. The baker makes this charbon by sticking green wood branches into his hot oven after he has finished baking his bread, but each baker makes a limited supply only, and will not sell it except to people who buy his bread. Every one uses *chaufferette* in Normandy during the winter, and visitors are given one to put their feet on as soon as they enter a house, though sometimes when the host is rich enough to keep a perpetual fire going, a supply of hot bricks is kept in the oven instead.

Val's *chaufferette* was of most uncertain temper. Hortense always lit it in the morning, and left it by the writing-table. When Val came to it all that had to be done was to gently insert an old spoon under the little ash heap and lift it all round, when a red hot centre of glowing embers would disclose itself. But sometimes an old nail or piece of "Carr-*diff*" found its way by accident into the pot, then the charbon would immediately sulk itself into oblivion, or sometimes for no reason at all after being perfectly lighted it would just go out. Ensued a struggle in which Val and Haidee invariably came off second-best. They would take the pot out of its box and stand it on a window-sill with the window drawn low to make a draught; put it on the front door step and, kneeling down, blow on it until fine ash sat thick upon their noses and their eyes were full of tears; build paper bonfires on it; fan it wildly with newspapers. All to no avail! Usually that was the end of work and inspiration for the day. Val declared that she could not *think* with cold feet. But sometimes old *père* Duval, compassionate for the mad, would send up his wooden box, large enough for two men to warm their feet on, with a great iron saucepan full of glowing charbon inside, and Val would sit toasting over it and write things of a tropical languor extraordinary.

Haidee had passed her *brevet simple*, an exam, about equal to the English Oxford Junior, and the American 6th standard, and was now working for the *brevet supérieure* with a French woman who had been a governess before she married a retired commercial traveller and settled in Mascaret. The discovery of this good woman was a stroke of luck for Val, though certainly Haidee did not consider it so. However, her lessons only took up four hours a day. For the rest she and Bran idled joyous and care-free through life, climbing the cliff, fishing, digging for sand-eels, making long excursions inland, or meeting the fishing boats in the evening when they came in with the day's haul, and all the villagers would be at the *port* to bargain for fish. Haidee usually haggled for and bought a *raie* (dog-fish) for the next day's dinner, and Bran would run a stick through its ribald-looking mouth, and carry the slithery monstrous thing home, to be met by scowls from Hortense, who, stolid as she was, hated the sight of a *raie*, and could not face the business of washing and gutting it without cries of *douleur* and disgust.

"*Ah! C'est craintive! C'est affreux!*"

But meat was too dear for daily consumption, and *raie* the only fish brought in by the boats throughout the winter months, so it had to be eaten, and some one had to prepare it. And after all, wrestling with *raie* was one of the jobs for which Hortense was paid three francs a week. It was her business to come in the morning at seven o'clock, make the fires, and deliver "little breakfast" at each bedside; afterwards she swept and made the beds, then disappeared until just before lunch, when she came to perform upon the *raie* and execute one or two culinary feats that were beyond the scope of Val or Haidee–such as cutting up onions, which neither of them could accomplish without weeping aloud, or putting the chipped potatoes into a pan full of boiling dripping, a business that when conducted by Val made a rain of grease spots all over the kitchen and scalded every one in sight. After washing the midday dishes, and chopping up vegetables for the soup, Hortense would consider her function over for the day, and leave Val and Haidee to grapple as best they might with tea, supper, fires, and the *chaufferette*. The supper was no very great difficulty, merely a matter of putting the cut vegetables into a pot with a large lump of specially prepared and seasoned dripping, and standing said pot on the stove until supper-time, when its contents would be marvellously transformed into *soupe à la graise*, a savoury and nourishing broth eaten as an evening meal by every peasant in Normandy. The fires were the greatest nuisance. The stove in the kitchen either became a red-hot furnace and purred like a man-eater, or else went out; and the stove with an open grate in Val's room, which old man Duval had paid a month's rent for and gone all the way to Cherbourg to fetch, had a way of going out also before any one even noticed that it was low; then there would be much scratching with a poker, searching for kindling wood, pouring out of paraffin, sudden happy blazes that nearly took the roof off, and black smuts everywhere. When all was over, and a beautiful fire roaring after the united efforts of the family, Val would find that her *chaufferette* had gone out! It was hard to even think masterpieces among such distractions, to say nothing of writing them. Tea was easily got. Haidee made the toast on the salad fork, Val buttered it with dripping, Bran laid the table. Then all three sat with their feet on the stove, drinking out of the big coffee bowls, eating every scrap of the delicious smoky toast and licking their fingers afterwards. If Val had written anything funny or dramatic that day she would sometimes read it out to them, but for the most part her instinct was to hide what she wrote. She said she felt as if she had lost something afterwards, and if any one had been even looking at her written sheets they never seemed quite the same to her again–some virtue went out of her work the moment she shared it with any one.

Usually, after tea she settled down for another struggle with her ideas, and

Bran and Haidee went for a prowl on the *digue* in the hope of adventures. Bran, whose mind was as full of fairies as if he had been born in the wilds of Ireland, was always in hope of meeting a giant or a dwarf, but he had learned not to mention these aspirations to Haidee. Anyway, there was always the village gossip to listen to in the *petit port*, where the fishing boats anchored and usually the excitement of watching the *Quatre Frères* come chup–chup–chupping up the river to her moorings. She was a natty and picturesque trawler, with a petrol engine that was the admiration of the village installed in her bowels. Because of this engine she was known as the *Chalutier à petrole*, but at Villa Duval she was called by Bran's translation of her name, *The Cat's Frères*. She never caught anything but *raie*, and of this despised species far fewer than any of the other boats, but she dashed in and out of the harbour with great slam and needed five men to handle her. There was a legend that the petrol engine frightened the fish away. It was known that the four brothers who owned her were anxious to get rid of her. Every one knew that she cost more than she brought in. But Haidee and Bran shared a fugitive hope that Val's play would make them all so rich that they would be able to acquire her as a pleasure boat.

Sometimes strange craft from Granville or a Brittany port would come in for the night, and there was the *St. Joseph*, a great fishing trawler from Lannion, carrying a master and seven hands, that put in when weather was heavy. Her sails were patched with every colour of the rainbow, her decks were filthy, and her years sat heavy upon her–you could hear her creaking and groaning two miles from shore: but to Haidee and Bran she stood for the true romance! She always brought in tons of fish, not only the everlasting *raie*, but deep-sea fish, and as soon as her arrival was heralded all the village sabots came clipper-clopping down the terrace, shawls clutched round bosoms, the wind flicking bright red spots in old cheeks, every one anxious to pick and choose from the mass of coal-fish, red gurnet, plaice, congers, and mullets that was hooked out of the hold and flung quivering ashore. The big weather-beaten fishermen in their sea-boots bandied jests with the carking old village wives and the girls showered laughter. In the end, the villagers departed with full baskets, and the seamen well content adjourned to the *petit café* close by for a "cup of coffee with a burn in it" and a good meal.

CHAPTER XV

WAYS SACRED AND SECULAR

"A gentleman makes no noise: a lady is serene."–EMERSON.

In May, the gentle month of May, the weather cleared up again, and green things commenced to sprout and bloom on the cliff above Villa Duval. The country-side began to bloom and blossom as the rose. From the high coast that lies facing the sea, Jersey could be discerned on clear days etched as if in India ink upon the horizon thirteen miles away. Clots of sea-samphire burst into flower, cleverly justifying its name of *creste marine* by just keeping out of reach of the high tides. The gorse showed dots of yellow amongst its prickles, and little brilliant blue squills stuck up their perky faces and gave out a sweet scent. All along the path to the lighthouse wild thyme came out in springy masses, and the mad Americans often went up that way for the special purpose of lying on it as on a soft, pink silk rug. It seemed to cause them a peculiar kind of joy to put their faces down in it, crying, "Oh! oh! oh!"

The garbage-hole across the road in front of Villa Duval which the dustman had been trying for many summers to transform into a building plot by filling it with empty tins and rubbish from the hotel, and which had been an eyesore all the winter, now suddenly became a place of beauty, for a lot of prickly, thistly-looking plants growing among the jam tins burst into a blaze of red and yellow. It turned out that they were poppies that had been keeping themselves secret all through the winter, and the yellow bright gold of "Our Lady's bedstraw." One day Haidee brought home some long, fragile trails of cinquefoil, one of the first spring things, and Val, worn and haggard under her blue veil, pinned it over her heart because she had read in old Elizabethan days that cinquefoil was supposed to be a cure for inflammations and fevers. She quoted to Haidee what an old herbalist had once written of such cures:

"Let no man despise them because they are plain and easy: the ways of God are all such."

Haidee flushed faintly and retired into awkward silence, shy like most girls of her age at the mention of God. She was going to make her communion the next day with the First Communion candidates, but it was not her first, for that had been made once when she was ill in New York. She was to be confirmed in June when the archbishop of a neighbouring parish intended to visit Mascaret and hold a confirmation service.

It being Saturday afternoon Hortense as well as Haidee was due at the

confessional for the recital of her weekly sins, therefore she bustled over the washing-up, announcing her intention of making a *bon* confession, as though the one she usually made was of an inferior brand.

"What are you going to tell?" asked Haidee, drying plates. She knew very well it was forbidden to talk about your confession, but the subject was a curiously fascinating one. Hortense had a "cupful of sins" for the curé's ear. She had been reading love stories in the *Petit Journal* (a forbidden paper because it is "against the Church"), telling the cards, and consulting her dream book; also she had missed Vespers twice and several meetings of the "Children of Mary," of which body she was a member. She computed that her *pénitence* would be as long as her arm.

"He will scold me well, I know," she said cheerfully, "for he saw me talking with Léon Bourget yesterday."

"What! that awful fisherman with the hump?"

"Yes; but he is not a bad fellow, mademoiselle, only all the fishermen here are wicked towards the curé because, as you know, he would not bury the mother of Jean le Petit, and they had to go and get the mayor to do it."

"Yes; but you must remember that she lived with old man le Petit without being married to him, and that is forbidden by the Church. She would not even repent on her death-bed and receive the Blessed Sacrament. How could the curé bury her after that?"

Haidee knew all about the little scandal, for the storm it occasioned had raged all the winter about the curé's head. The same day he had refused to bury *mère* le Petit he was obliged to go to Paris on Church business. On his return in the dusk of a December evening he was met at the station by all the fishermen in the village partially disguised in home-made masks, each carrying some instrument or implement with which to make hideous sounds; pots, pans, old trays, sheep-bells, and cow-horns had all been pressed into service, and the din was truly fearsome. The curé preserving his serenity was conducted to his presbytery by this scratch band, and on every dark night thereafter it had serenaded him from the shadows near his house. The blare sometimes continued until the small hours of the morning, keeping not only the unfortunate curé, but the whole village awake. The gendarmes from Barleville, the nearest police-station, had made several midnight raids with the stated intention of capturing the offenders, but their efforts were attended by a lack of success so striking as to suggest a certain amount of sympathy, not to say complicity, on the part of the law. At any rate, the curé's music, or "*Mujik de Churie*," as it was popularly pronounced, went on gaily, and there had been some kind of unofficial announcement that it would continue until the curé cleared out. Old *pére* Duval opined, however, that the entertainment was likely to cease with the arrival of the first summer

visitors, for however vindictive the fishermen were they knew which side their bread was buttered on, and were politic enough not to want to drive away trade by their thrilling "mujik."

Having finished drying plates Haidee retired up-stairs to prepare her confession, telling Hortense to be sure and wait for her. She proceeded to write her sins down on a piece of paper. In spite of her good French she stammered so much from nervousness when confessing that the curé had arranged this method with her. She always gave him the piece of paper, which he took away to the sacristy while she waited in the confessional. When he had read her paper he came back, conferred penance and a little scolding, then gave her absolution.

With the aid of a French Catechism, which had a formula for confession in it, she proceeded to write out her sins, her method being to dive into the book first for a question and then into her soul for a sin that corresponded. Eventually the piece of paper contained the following statement:

"Je ne me suis pas confessé depuis trois semaines; j'ai recu l'absolution. Je m'accuse:

"De n'avoir pas fait ma priere du matin beaucoup de fois.

"De n'avoir pas fait ma prière du soir plusieurs fois.

"D'avoir manqué aux Vêpres 4 fois.

"D'avoir été distraite dans l'Église 2 fois.

"D'avoir été dissipée dans l'Église 2 fois.

"D'avoir désobéi à ma mère 2 fois.

"D'avoir manqué de respect envers elle 1 fois.

"De m'été disputée avec mon frère 2 fois.

"D'avoir fait des petits mensonges 4 fois.

"Je m'accuse de tous ces pèches et de ceux dont je ne me souviens pas.

"Je demande pardon de Dieu et à vous, mon père, la pénitence et l'absolution selon que vous m'en jugerez digne."

Whether this list of offences truly represented the burden of her transgressions for the past three weeks it would be hard to say. It is possible that Val could have made out a longer and more comprehensive one for her, as she often threatened to do when Haidee vexed her. Anyway, the latter folded up her piece of paper with a complacency that either betokened a clear conscience or a heart hardened in crime. She computed that her penance would be to recite a decade of the rosary, and she knew that the curé would then speak of the next Church feast, and of the wishes preferred by the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin, tell her to invoke the aid of the Saints when she felt herself tempted to sin, to try always to give a good example to her little brother, and to be very pious so that her mother would be converted and become a Catholic. Both Val and Haidee had long since given up explaining that they were not mother and daughter. They

found that it saved time and a lot of questions just to let people think what they liked.

Putting on her hat Haidee now popped her head out of the window and gave a hoot to Hortense, who was below in the yard cleaning her boots on the garden seat. Just as they were about to start Val came down-stairs and begged Haidee to go to the butcher's shop on her way back, and bring home something for Sunday's dinner.

"What kind of something?" asked Haidee belligerently, for the butcher's shop had no allure for her. There ensued a discussion as to which was the most economical meat to get. Hortense, waiting at the bottom of the steps, piped in with the announcement that every one ought to eat lamb on First Communion Sunday. Val and Haidee looked at each other. Vaguely they knew that the price of lamb was high. But suddenly it came into Val's mind how sick the children must be of *raie*, and stewed veal, and that though funds were low the play was nearly finished. They would have a nice English dinner for once. Roast lamb and mint sauce! She gave Haidee her last *louis* to change.

"Pick some mint from the cliff-side as you come back," she enjoined. French peasants have no use for mint in their cooking. Some English visitors had once planted a root of it in *pére* Duval's garden, but after they were gone he flung it out again on to the cliff-side, where it had increased and multiplied until it was now a large bed.

In the butcher's shop Haidee found a number of villagers squabbling over beef-bones, and not a sign of lamb anywhere. The truth was that every portion of the one lamb killed early in the week had been sold, and though there were still one or two customers in need of First Communion lamb, Mother Durand knew better than to offer any of the freshly-killed beast that hung in the back shed. Peasants are well aware that freshly-killed meat should not be cut too early or it will be full of air, soft, flabby, and never tender. Mother Durand, under her calm exterior, was furiously angry with her man for having delayed the killing until now–after to-day there would be no demand for anything but beef-bones and veal until the summer visitors began to arrive. The young American mademoiselle asking guilelessly for lamb was a godsend. Waiting until the last villager had gone from the shop so that there would be no adverse comment on what she meant to do, she turned ingratiatingly to Haidee.

"But certainly, mademoiselle ... there is none in the shop ... but outside I have a lamb that is *superbe* ... just the thing for a *première communion* ... it is not for every one I would cut that lamb, but for such customers as you and your *belle maman* there is nothing I would not do." She returned presently from the back shed. "There, mademoiselle–a beautiful shoulder. Six francs."

Haidee was horrified at the price. Their dinner meat usually cost about one

franc twenty, and she knew that there was much to be accomplished with Val's last twenty-franc piece.

"Could n't you give me a smaller one, Madame Durand? ... and not so dear?"

"Ah, mademoiselle, you should have said to me before that you wanted it small. It is cut now ... and what would I do with the pieces from it? Do you think I could sell them? But no."

So Haidee took the shoulder, and returned home with it tucked under her arm. On arrival as it happened old *veuve* Michel was in the kitchen with Val, having just brought home some odds and ends of family washing.

"What!" she cried, on seeing the lamb. "A shoulder of freshly-killed lamb, full of air and bubbles ... cut off the poor nice lamb while it had yet the hot life in it! Shame on the wretched woman Durand ... to take advantage thus of poor innocent Americans! ... Shame! But then every one knows how she treated her poor daughter who wanted to be a nun. Madame, the stones in the street are not more wicked than that woman Amélie Durand!"

Val, much disturbed by these sayings, examined the shoulder of mutton. Certainly it was very bubbly looking: warm too. She remembered now hearing the cook in New York storm over a piece of freshly-killed meat, declaring that it had been cut too soon and was not fit to eat.

"How ought I to cook it to make the best of it?" she inquired in dismay.

"Cook it!" cried Widow Michel, scarlet in the face from indignation combined with the effects of her afternoon bottle of cognac. "No good to cook it. Better to pluck a rock from the cliff-side and cook it."

"How much was it, Haidee?"

"Six francs."

"*Mon Dieu*! What imposition! Take it back, Haidee dear, and tell her that it is too dear and too fresh ... she must give us a pound of steak instead. We are too poor to buy meat we can't eat, you know, darling. Six francs! Did you pay for it?"

"Why, yes, of course I paid for it. You know I had the *louis*. Oh! blow Val, I don't care much about taking it back."

"But, Haidee, what's the use of talking like that ... we can't eat that bubbly lamb ... think of poor Brannie without dinner! I 'd go myself if I had any hair.... Tell her it 's ridiculous to have given you such meat. I remember now Hortense said that leg we had at Christmas and could n't eat was too freshly-killed–it was soft and tough at the same time, and all slithery when you tried to cut it. Don't you remember–it made you sick to look at it?"

Yes, Haidee remembered well enough, but she did n't like taking the shoulder back just the same. However, *veuve* Michel offered the moral support of her

company, and she returned to Mother Durand. Half-an-hour later she was back at the Villa, the wretched shoulder of lamb still in her hands.

"She won't take it back. She says it 's a rule of the shop never to take back meat that has once gone out of it."

"But it was back within half-an-hour."

"Yes, I told her so–and you should have heard old *veuve* Michel going on at her, but she did n't care two sous. She said, 'Oh, yes, mademoiselle, carrying my lamb up and down the Terrasse in the hot sun–you think that improves the meat. Hein? Well, I don't think so. *Dame*, no!"

"Hot sun! I wish it were hot! They don't know what sun is in this odious climate," cried Val in wrath.

"I know–but she won't take it back." Haidee flung the shoulder despondently upon the table. But Val's monkey was up, and she was determined not to be outdone by the cunning little Norman woman. Also it seemed to her by now that if she offered the children that shoulder of lamb she would be offering them poisoned meat. She hated it. She would rather have eaten sea-sand. With trembling hands she arranged across her forehead the *chi-chi* that M. Poiret had made for her out of her own hair (the first time she had availed herself of it), put on a deep hat, tied a motor veil over all, then with Bran held by one hand and the shoulder of lamb in the other she set out to do battle with Mother Durand. Haidee, though sick of the subject, accompanied the expedition out of curiosity.

The little red-cheeked, hard-eyed woman–a typical shrewd Normandy peasant–was alone in the shop, tidying up her lard-bowls with a large flat knife.

"Madame Durand!" said Val, controlling her voice as best she could. "About this shoulder of lamb....?"

"Yes, madame! What about it?"

"You must take it back ... I do not care for freshly-killed meat...." She began to stumble with her French. "Not good for the stomach .... very hard ... wicked ... no good .... il faut give me back my six francs."

"But not at all, madame ... the meat is good ... *superbe* ... there is nothing the matter with it. I asked mademoiselle if she was willing I should cut from the freshly-killed lamb, and she said yes.... *Alors?*"

"Oh! How can you say so, Madame Durand?" cried Haidee indignantly. "I had no idea you were cutting it from a lamb all hot."

"Mademoiselle finds it very convenient to say that now ... *très commode*! But my husband and daughter were in the shop, and heard mademoiselle ask to have it cut from the lamb."

"Oh, Val! don't you believe it ... the old liar!" Haidee did not pick her words when indignant.

"In any case I will not have it back ... you can take it or leave it, madame,"

the old woman smiled the smile of one who plays a winning game.

"I will leave it then," said Val, losing all calmness. "*Vous est pas juste ... vous est mal honnête ... voleur*! It is because we are strangers that you take advantage of us ...it is the first time I have found such *méchanterie* in this village.... If you will not give me back my money you can keep it and the meat too!" She flung it down and raged from the shop.

"*Comme wus voudrez, madame*," responded Mother Durand, only too delighted with such a plan, and to see the backs of the departing trio. But two minutes later, just as she was removing the paper covering from the offending shoulder, Val returned. Stretching her firm, thin hand across the counter she gripped the meat once more.

"No! I won't let you keep it to sell again. Rather will I take it and give it to the first dog I meet!"

"As you please, madame," repeated Mother Durand blandly, not to be nonplussed, whatever might be her feelings.

Val stalked from the shop, the shoulder now devoid of wrappings in her hand. Haidee and Bran, sympathetic but apprehensive, waited without.

"She shall not have it. Find a dog, Haidee."

"Oh, Val! What's the good? ... keep it ... it will be better than nothing for dinner to-morrow."

"I would rather eat mud," said Val, white to the lips. "Find a dog."

But there was no dog in sight. They marched down the road, a silent band, looking to right and left for something canine. Usually the village was thick with hungry mongrels, but to-day it was as though the earth had opened to receive all flesh-eating quadrupeds. Not even a cat showed its face.

"Perhaps a giant"–murmured Bran. Haidee was congratulating herself that they would get home without further adventure, or that at least Val's fury would presently abate enough for her to abandon her idea, when, just in front of the Café Rosetta a lean liver-and-white pointer with the legs of a bull dog and the ears of a cocker spaniel strolled out. Val held the shoulder towards him.

"Here, boy, here–a good supper for you!"

The "boy" regarded her suspiciously for a moment, then came forward a step. She encouraged him with a kind word, and held the meat nearer, but, suspecting a trick, he backed growling. He had never seen a shoulder of lamb before except in a dream, and did not recognise the pink-and-white thing. He only recognised that they were strangers–probably knew them to be the mad Americans from Villa Duval. At any rate, after one long sniff he turned and walked sadly away. Val in a fury threw the lamb after him, but he never turned. Mournfully he slunk down the slope of the *petit port* to seek the garbage heaps in the river bed. As the three stood staring after him a little red-faced *bonne* came run-

ning out of the café.

"*Qu'est ce qu'il y a, madame?*" she cried. Val pointed to the meat lying in the dust.

"Take that and give it to a dog."

"But yes, madame; thank you, madame."

Smiling all over, she picked up the meat and dusted it carefully. They saw very well she did not mean to give it to a dog.

"It is not fit for human food," stammered Val, still shaking.

"But no, madame; thank you, madame."

She smiled and looked at it with fond eyes. Val could have struck her. On the *Terrasse* Haidee said:

"Val, how could you? It will be all over the town. Even the curé will know."

Val did not answer. Her rage expended, she was wondering what her Brannie was going to have for dinner the next day. Two great tears stole down her face.

When Haidee came back from eight o'clock Mass the next morning she noticed many of the villagers standing about in groups. They were evidently discussing some affair of great interest, but their grave and serious voices subsided into whispers at the sight of her, and while she passed a dead silence prevailed in each group. However, in front of Lemonier's shop an old beldame lifted her voice in the manner of a prophetess and gave forth the dark saying that "it was to be hoped that people who threw good meat to dogs would never live to feel the pangs of hunger!"

Haidee repeated this at home as a great joke, but was sorry she did, for Val turned pale as a condemned criminal, and her eyes searched the faces of both children as if for the outward signs of an inward gnawing at their vitals–but so far both looked plump and composed.

She spent the whole morning juggling with six eggs and a pint of milk, the result being an exceedingly wobbly-looking baked custard which appeared to supplement the meagre midday repast. At the sight of it Bran nearly lost his appetite for the potatoes baked in their jackets which his soul loved, and when pudding-time came he began to squirm and declare he was not hungry. With the name of Bran he appeared to have also inherited that great king's primitive tastes in food, for he cared for nothing except milk, oatmeal porridge, and potatoes with butter.

"Do eat some, Brannie," pleaded the pale and guilty Val. "I made it specially for you. It is lovely."

"Yes, I can see it is lovely," said Brannie, politely, edging away from the table. "But it smells like a pussy cat just after she has been drinking milk."

When Hortense arrived to wash up she reported that the two brothers of

the *bonne* at the Café Rosetta were in the village, having been summoned from Cherbourg by telegraph to come and lunch with their sister on a shoulder of Première Communion lamb.

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The confirmation ceremony was most grand. It was the first time so important a personage as an Archbishop had visited Mascaret, and the villagers, sensible of the honour done them, were inclined to forgive the curé his imagined misdeeds for having arranged it. Not only were all the Premier Communion candidates from other villages present, but a great many of the summer visitors had arrived, and it was an enormous congregation that waited in the stuffy church. The Archbishop's train was late, but at last he came from the sacristy very crumpled and tired-looking in his gold and purple robes, and walking with faltering feet, for his years were heavy on him and he was weary with travelling. Everything about him seemed old, from the rich lace on his aube to his gentle blue eyes, which looked as though they saw visions of far-off places–everything but the small and wonderful white teeth in his sunken gentle mouth. His stole was beautifully painted with lilies, and his mitre of shining white and gold most splendid, but sometimes during the long service his head drooped a little under it and rested on his breast. There was such a weariness about him that Val was glad when she heard a few months later that he had laid aside his heavy and elaborate gold and white panoply of office and gone to rest. He had about twelve priests with him, keen, able-looking men, of a very different type to the simple curés who were herding their flocks from the surrounding villages, and they clustered about him as though to keep the eyes of the world from resting too long upon this venerable representative of the Pope. The *Vicaire-Général*, a splendid looking man with an eagle eye and a strong beaked nose, surveyed the church as a general might the field of battle, while the congregation chanted the Benedictus Dominus. It seemed to Val that when his eye rested on her he saw deep down into her heart and had no pity for her failures, being of the Napoleonic brand of man who has no use for any but the strong ones of earth.

After the Archbishop with crumpled crooked fingers had given his solemn benediction to the people, singing in a trembling yet wonderfully thrilling old voice,

> "Sit nomen benedictum ... Adjutorium Domini ... Benedicat vos omnipotens Deus Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus,"

he sat down just inside the chancel rails, and talkingly questioned the children

on their catechism. Most of them were too shy to distinguish themselves much, though the son of the village milkman, an ugly cross-eyed boy, acquitted himself manfully. Later the Archbishop rested in his chair, his chin on his breast, seeming to sleep, while priests prowled and hovered round him. The Mascaret curé darted about the church giving instructions, and presently the children broke shrilly into the popular hymn:

"Je suis chrétien, voilà ma gloire,
Mon espérance et mon soutien,
Mon chant d'amour et de victoire,
Je suis chrétien! Je suis chrétien!"

The village boys loved this hymn. It lent itself to much lusty shouting in the last two lines of the chorus, and they delighted in it, passing winks to each other as they hurled it from their lungs with something of the same ardour as had served for the "*mujik de churie*." But later when they filed in long lines to where the old Archbishop sat waiting for them, their mien changed. No one could be vicious or violent before that beautiful tired presence waiting with white trembling hands to bless them. They came quietly, one by one, and knelt on the velvet cushion at his feet, the boys bashful and cloddish in their best smocks, the girls wearing the elaborate and top-heavy mob cap of silk and muslins and ribbons that it is the Normandy peasant woman's pride to perch above her harsh features. Haidee, in a white hemstitched muslin frock with a flounce of delicate lace round its edge, walked among them like some woodland sylph escaped from a Corot picture. Her long legs clad in white silk stockings and sandals created something of a scandal amongst the peasant mothers, whose ideas of decency bid them cover up the legs of their girls with the longest and heaviest skirts they can afford. Her headgear, too, was considered characteristic of the madness with which God had afflicted the occupants of Villa Duval, for it was a tulle veil bound about her brow by a wreath of real daisies, gathered and twined by Val and Bran.

Each child carried a tiny slip of paper on which was written the new name which must be assumed at confirmation as in baptism. This paper was handed to a priest who stood on the left of the Archbishop and who, glancing swiftly at it, transposed it into Latin and murmured it into the great prelate's ear. Haidee, who had chosen Joan, was astonished to hear the Archbishop thus address her:

"Joanna! I mark thee with the sign of the Cross, and I confirm thee *par le chrême du salut,* in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Then he gave her a little tap on the left cheek and held out his ring to her; she kissed it fervently and went away uplifted. In passing back a priest on the right stopped

her and wiped away the holy chrism (composed of balm and oil) with a piece of cotton wool, which he let fall into a basket held by a choir boy whose blue eyes vaguely disturbed Haidee's saintly dream. A little farther on another priest intercepted her and wiped her forehead once more, none too gently she thought, with a rather dissipated-looking napkin. The cowboy look came over her face at that, and Val reflected that it was just as well there were no more priests to waylay her before she reached her seat, for that Wild-West scowl was often followed by acts which made up in vigour for what they lacked in dignity.

Val was not able to see the end of the ceremony, for just as the priests closed in on the Archbishop, one with a gilt bowl, another with soap and broidered towel, another to take his ring, Bran whispered to her in a panting whisper:

"Mammie! I 've got the gasps!"

There was nothing for it but retreat to the churchyard, for when Bran got "the gasps" the only cure for them was air and solitude. It was a nervous affliction which often seized him when he was deeply bored or, curiously enough, when he was intensely excited, making him gasp like a chicken with the pip, and Val would feel her heart come into her throat with every opening of his little beak. While he regained his breathing powers in the churchyard, she sat on a stone watching him, thinking how she would have liked the hands of the Archbishop on his precious head too. There was surely some special benediction in such delicate old hands; and though she asked no blessings for herself, she wanted them all for Garrett Westenra's son. And while she sat there musing, out of the sacristy door came the Archbishop himself. He, too, seemed afflicted with gasps, for his mouth opened and closed and his breath came in little pants. None of his priests were with him, only the village curé escorting him to the presbytery, and he seemed somewhat like a child escaped for a moment from his nurses. When he saw Bran's smiling face his own lit up and its weariness was for an instant wiped away.

"A little American Catholic," said the curé, but the old prelate had not waited for an introduction before making the sign of the Cross over Bran's bright head. Val knelt in the dust while the faltering feet passed by. She felt as though a star had fallen from heaven for her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE WAYS OF GIRLS

”Il n’est pas de rose assez tendre
Sur la palette du printemps,
Madame, pour oser prétendre
Lutter contre vos dix-sept ans.”
GAUTIER.

”Did you see the people from Villa Shai-poo?” asked Haidee, as they walked home.

”No, which were they?” Val was away in a land of her own peopling and her eyes were vague.

”An awfully distinguished old man, with a little white goatee and nice American-looking boots; and two boys....” She stopped abruptly. Val’s attention was attracted.

”What kind of boys?”

”Oh, well! I didn’t notice them much. You know all French boys look as if they wear stays. I dare say these are n’t so bad though. Hortense says the eldest is in a regiment *très chic*. The other one failed for the navy last year.” Her manner was meant to suggest pointed indifference.

”They must be more than boys.”

”The one with the greeny-blue eyes is twenty-four and the one with dark blue ones is nineteen and a half,” responded Haidee. Val smiled at this artless testimony of her ”indifference.”

They were passing Shai-poo at the moment; a big, square, roomy-looking house, with those solid grey walls that stand for centuries and are so typical of Normandy, surrounded by a spacious garden full of the charm of careless grace–groups of trees, flowering grasses, little forests of tall bamboos, beds of brilliant flowers that looked as if they had sprung up by happy accident, winding paths, and a tea-house in the form of a Chinese pagoda. A great mainmast rooted from the bowels of a French war-ship of old type was erected in a clear open space that lay almost like a deck around it. From its top lazily floated a silk flag embroidered with the Chinese Royal arms.

”Their grandfather the Admiral must have arrived,” said Haidee excitedly. ”They only put up that flag for him–it is the one he took in the battle of Shai-poo. That is the mast of his old ship.”

”Goodness, Haidee! what a lot you know about them! Who is the man with the goatee and the American boots then?”

”Oh, that’s the father of Sacha, the one in the army. The other boy, Rupert, is a cousin and an orphan.”

”Oh!” Val pondered these things in her heart. It was plain that Haidee

was growing up, and beginning to take an interest in other things than hens and rabbits! Evidently too she had been listening to Hortense's gossip. Val felt guilty somehow, and wished wistfully that poor Haidee could have the society and companionship of a girl of her own age and world.

When they got home they found that John the Baptist had left some letters. One of them was from Harriott Kesteven, asking if Val would mind very much if she came to Mascaret for the summer months, bringing her girl Kitty. It seemed almost like an answer to Val's wish for society for Haidee.

Her only doubt was as to Westenra. Would this, even though he never knew or cared, be treachery to him–a last fire made of the blackened embers of a burnt boat?

It could scarcely be that after all! He had been at great pains these last few years to show her by his silence and coldness how little her doings mattered to him. Apparently on his return to America after the fatal visit to Jersey he had flung himself into work with the result that sometimes occurs in the lives of men; a temple of public success had begun to raise its walls above the grave of his private sorrows. International journals frequently mentioned his name in connection with some wonderful operation performed at his now famous nursing home. Under the ægis of the skilful Miss Holland the house in 68th Street had become something very like a gold mine, as the size of the quarterly cheques (which Val never used) gave proof. Of more importance was the fact that he had advanced with great strides in his scientific work, and the results of his experimental investigations in diabetes were the talk of medical Europe. There were rumours of his nomination for the next Nobel.

Small wonder if in this furious concentration on work and the fame it brought him, personal emotion as far as Val was concerned should be crushed out of his life like a useless, hurtful thing. That at last was the impression she gained from his letters to Haidee, conned and brooded over in the silence of the night when the children slept. True, love for Haidee and his son breathed from every line, but there was never a word in the cold courteous messages to Val that she could lay upon her heart to heal its aching wound. Time and distance had widened the breach between them until now it was a gaping ravine over which the correspondence with Haidee formed the last frail bridge. He had never put foot in Europe since the visit to Jersey, but taken all his vacations in different parts of America. Sometimes he wrote vaguely of coming over to see them all, but Val felt herself left outside his world now, and doubted that he seriously considered making a movement that would bring him back into hers. It seemed almost ironical to be wondering whether she would have his approval or not in allowing Harriott Kesteven to come to Mascaret. It was so patent that he had long since taken advantage of the circumstance that freed his life from hers.

She decided in the end that with a clear conscience she might wire to London the word "come."

"Of course I know there is a hotel in the place, Val," Mrs. Kesteven had written, "but we'd much rather come and picnic and be insane with you on the Dutch-treat plan, each paying our own share. Do let us."

And Val, though she knew her friend had two thousand a year, and was used to every comfort of modern civilisation, felt no hesitation about bidding her welcome. Harriott Kesteven was a woman after her own heart; one who could make herself just as much at home in the little wooden cabins of Villa Duval as in her luxurious London flat; who would rather tramp the desert with the friend of her heart than be borne in the silken litters of a stranger's caravan.

To herself Val could not disguise what a joy it would be to see Harriott again; to show her Bran–the one tangible treasure snatched from the grudging hand of Fate; to open her heart a little to eyes that were lovingly tolerant, and would smile rather than condemn. Friendship should be always such a joy: clear water in sight of a thirsty soul–a tree under which to rest after long travel!

Harriott having speedily wired back that she and her girl were starting at once, via Southampton and Jersey, preparations for their advent set in at Villa Duval. They were not very complicated preparations, however, merely a matter of clearing out the two spare cabins, and storing the boxes and baggage in one of *pére* Duval's lofts. Then a great gathering of wild flowers to stand in jam jars all over the house and a hunting expedition to the village for a *bonne-à-tout-faire*. A middle-aged stony-faced shrew bearing the poetical name of Azalie was captured, and a bargain struck with her to come in from seven in the morning till seven in the evening, for the sum of ten francs fifty a week, bread, coffee, and cider thrown in. Hortense was to act as her *aide-de-camp*.

Then on one afternoon the band of three went across to the *digue* not more than five hundred yards from their door, to meet the steamer from Jersey. It was the first boat of the year, and its arrival quite the event of the season, so all the world of Mascaret was leaning on the ropes put up by the Customs' officers to prevent passengers escaping before declaring themselves innocent of contraband. Val, with her *chi-chi* tied across her forehead, her face swathed in veils, stood biting her lips and trembling with emotion, nervous as a bird at the thought of seeing her friend again. She wondered fearfully if Harriott would find her greatly changed. Haidee, full of curiosity, was scowling under her brigand hat ready to get out all her porcupine-prickles if she did not like the other girl on sight. Bran pranced with excitement at the thought of seeing a big ship once more. Near by were standing the two young men from the Villa Shai-poo, and from behind her veils Val took stock of them and found them goodly to look upon. She liked their loose blue flannel suits, so different from the usual tight correct clothes worn

by young Frenchmen at the seaside. She liked their clear skins and eyes too, and their sleek black heads. In fact, they were not very French-looking at all, but much more like Irish boys. The younger one especially, with his misty violet eyes and rather dreamy face, might easily have been mistaken for a west-of-Ireland lad. The elder and handsomer of the two possessed already the Frenchman's hardy eye for a woman, and Val intercepted several appraising glances cast in the direction of Haidee. The younger fellow contented himself with smiling at Bran, who smiled back in friendly fashion.

"I like that boy," he confided to Val, "he's got a hole 'n his chin and his hair is jet black." Bran decided all his likes and dislikes by colour and smell. His favourite colours were yellow, red, green, and wet-black. This last was very different to ordinary black, which was the colour of toothache. Little rheumatic pains which he sometimes got in his knees were grey. The worst pain you could get was a purply-red one which came when you were sad and gave you the stomach-ache. He had once solemnly stated that the only colour he hated was yellowy-pink, but as he always called yellow pink and pink yellow no one had been able to solve the riddle of this hated colour.

Long before the boat came alongside Val recognised Harriott by the condition of her hat. Mrs. Kesteven's hats invariably looked as though some one had been taking a siesta on them, but the moment she got close enough for her little soft, stern face to be seen no one thought of her hat any more. It was the same with her clothes. She always had an extraordinary stock of last year's gowns to "finish up," but under the thrall of her charming manners no one ever noticed that her skirt was wider than was fashionable and her sleeves the wrong shape. It would have been difficult to compute how many new spring gowns she had contributed that year to youthful poor relations, but she herself was "finishing up" a faded purple linen of weird cut, while the hat of battered violets on her head was certainly not in its first season. But all the glow of friendship and true affection was in her sunny eyes. She flew from the deck of the wheezy old steamer, and in spite of the Customs' officers' efforts to head her off, embraced Val over the ropes. Behind her came Kitty, very fair, pretty, and beautifully dressed. Haidee shot a scowl at her.

"A Smarty-Arty!" was her inward comment, though she was slightly overawed by Kitty's clothes.

"She 's taller than me, but her feet are bigger," thought Kitty.

"And this is my Brannikin, Harry."

"What a duck! ... give me a kiss, Bran."

But Bran retreated behind his mother's skirts murmuring:

"The cat says bow-wow-wow."

"Don't be silly, my Wing. Come on–and say how do you do. This is Kitty."

"*Je sais bien*," said Bran, and handed Kitty a hardy smile. Bran knew all things well–at least that was his favourite response to all remarks. When Val first took him to Notre Dame and they knelt together in the light of the wonderful rose-window, she whispered in his ear:

"Brannie, you are in the most beautiful church in the world."

"*Je sais bien*," he had answered blandly.

They all proceeded to Villa Duval, followed by the speculative glances of the crowd and the grocer's handcart carrying Harriott's luggage. Kitty and Haidee, subtly aware of the admiring eyes of the two young Frenchmen, assumed a demure air mingled with light and not too annihilating scorn.

Harriott expressed herself charmed with Villa Duval and all that therein was, from the rose-tree on the balustrade that bore both pink and white roses as a tribute to *pére* Duval's skill in grafting, to the meat-safe suspended by a chain from the dining-room floor to the cellar below. After inspecting the cabins, peeping out of the windows, and hearkening to the man-eater in the kitchen, she said:

"You don't know how lucky you are, Val, living in peace and simplicity like this. You ought to be a very happy woman."

"So I am–happy as a tomtit on a pump-handle," said Val, smiling gaily, but Harriott, who had the seeing eye, saw the heart-hunger behind the smile, and knew that happiness had eluded her friend once more.

"I 've no right to grumble, Harry. I 've got what I wanted–a son. You know I always felt my life would not be complete without a son–and he is the son of a real man. But, if one had forty sons, there would still always be that little round hole in one's heart which no child can ever quite fill–you know, Harriott."

Yes, Harriott knew. Not for nothing had her beautiful hair turned snow-white at thirty. She, too, had a void in her big, warm heart which neither Kitty nor the dozen impecunious youthful relations to whom she played godmother had been able to fill.

Haidee and Kitty soon became thick as thieves, and, like thieves, distrusted each other thoroughly. Blondes and brunettes nearly always do. Pretending to be quite unimpressed by each other's looks secretly each admired the other's type exceedingly, and in little ways, which they supposed no one noticed, tried to copy each other's good points in dress and style. It was funny to see Haidee, whose hair had always been a shameful sort of mane flying to the winds, now brush it out sleek and straight under a red ribbon (in opposition to Kitty's blue one) bound *à la Grec* above her brow, while Kitty could not rest until she had discarded her stockings and bought herself a pair of canvas sandals at Lemonier's. She was, to her annoyance, however, no more able to imitate the tan which covered Haidee, than the latter could acquire the milky whiteness of Kitty's complexion. They

set each other off well–Haidee with her tall dark beauty, Kitty fair and fluffy as a Persian kitten. It was small wonder that wherever they went attention was focused upon them. The two French boys were always hovering in the vicinity, whether on the beach when the party went to bathe, on the *digue* to watch the Jersey boat arrive–now one of the daily interests–or out walking on the cliff. Often, as they sauntered in the lanes, the girls ahead, Harry and Val loitering and gossiping behind, the sound of bicycles would be heard and the two boys would whirr past, sending swift, hardy glances at the girls, making the occasion an excuse for apologetically lifting their caps.

"I 'm afraid it's neither you behind your blue veil, nor I with 'nearly fifty' scrawled across my features, who is causing such commotion in those two male bosoms," chuckled Harriott to Val.

"It gives one a little shock to feel so out of it!" said Val, laughing a little. "When men's eyes slip past to the girl behind, one begins to realise that one cannot stay in the great game for ever."

"For ever–no," said Harry; "but *you 're* not out of it yet, my dear–you 've only taken the blue veil for a while."

"Oh, Harry, I was out of it the moment Bran came. I got my prize, little as I deserved it, and retired from the arena. Even if I had n't loved my man I could never have continued to amuse myself that way once I had a son."

"That doesn't make the least difference to your attracting power, my dear. You are one of those women who will always have for men the same kind of pull as the moon for the sea."

Val laughed a little mournfully as she reflected that her moonlight quality had not the power to pull just the one man she wanted across the sea to her.

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On the third day after the Kestevens' arrival the Frenchmen achieved acquaintance with Bran on the beach. He came back to his party announcing that "Sacha" and "Rupert" had asked him if he would like to go out sailing with them.

"Come for a walk in their boat they said," he said, grinning gaily at their literal English. "And they asked if my sisters like going out for walks in a boat, too?"

Kitty and Haidee exchanged rapid eye-signals, then looked away at the sea. Harriott frowned.

"Why don't the idiotic creatures come and call on us like honest men, or send their women folk?"

"He's got no women folk but his sister, and she hasn't come from Paris yet," burst from Haidee suddenly.

"Whose sister?"

"Sacha's."

"She 's expected on Thursday," supplemented Kitty. A minute later the two discovered urgent business elsewhere–perhaps for fear of being questioned as to the source of their information.

Val and Harriott gazed at each other stupefied.

"Goodness! they know all about these French fellows. What are we to do?"

"Take no notice, Harry. Let them have their little excitement, dear things. A woman's life is so short. Bran said to me as we lay in bed this morning, 'Mammie, in 120 months, I 'll be fifteen; how old will you be?' And, my dear, I calculated and found it would bring me up to forty-two–and another 120 months to fifty-two, and then another, and life will be done! Have you ever thought of it, dear: that our lives are just a series of months in batches of 120?"

"You need not talk yet," sighed Harriott. "It's the last few batches that are so short. The years fly like greased lightning after forty."

"And the early ones seem so long and weary–until the first love adventure looms in sight. Ah! those first little adventures, how lovely they are! To realise that we are desirable ... that some one wants us ... finds us pretty and charming ... to feel the little wings of womanhood sprouting on our shoulder-blades! Oh, Harry, we mustn't grudge the enchantment of it to our girls! Don't you remember how delightful it was? Was anything that came after half so wonderful?"

"I know," said Harriott, the gentle light of reminiscence in her eye. "But this is a different matter, my dear. These are *Frenchmen*."

"But they are really very Irish-looking," laughed Val, who not being English never could understand the curious aversion that sits deep in almost every Englishwoman's heart for the male species across the Channel. "And those two kids are as happy and excited as larks in the wind. I 'm sure that kind of thing should never be suppressed, Harry."

"I dare say you are right, dear. Only we must make fun of them sometimes so that there shall be no danger of their taking it seriously. I think I 'd rather have Kitty take the veil than take a Frenchman."

That same evening as they all sat playing Bridge in the little wooden dining-room of Villa Duval, a whirr of bicycle wheels was heard without. Then a silence and the sound of some one walking softly over the glass and broken china with which the other side of the road was freely decorated. Under the table Haidee handed Kitty a hack on the shins, but their faces remained bland, their interest in the game unabated. It was a black night and to look out of the window availed nothing. A few moments later came the sound of bicycles in retreat. At bedtime the two girls stayed whispering and speculating long in Kitty's room, which overlooked the road, but the mystery of the bicycles was unexplained–until the next

morning. Bran, standing on Val's bed, as was his pleasant custom when dressing, suddenly shouted–and a shout in Villa Duval could be heard through every room in the house.

"*What's that red thing in my 'Jules Duval'?*"

The *Jules Duval*, as has been explained, was *pére* Duval's old fishing boat, which had been fixed-up and painted to be the special joy and plaything of Bran. He adored boats and everything to do with the sea, and spent all his days in the *Jules* going imaginary voyages.

"There 's something red fastened to the mast," he shrieked excitedly, and upstairs two necks were craned to cracking point from Kitty's bedroom window. Insufficiently clothed as he was Bran tore out to the boat, and came back bearing in triumph an enormous cabbage rose–full blown, and rather tired from being up all night. Both girls put out their hands for it. Bran looked at them in surprise.

"Why, it was in *my* boat! Perhaps an angel put it there for me..." The girls turned away in wrath. Later they were each seen to go separately to the *Jules* and give a sort of casual glance into the bottom of it. It was possible, of course, that Bran might have overlooked something!

"Only one rose! How clever of those young scamps!" chuckled Val, and Harriott with joyful malice pinned the flopping rose to the breast of Bran's red sweater, where it drooped its life away.

The girls were constrained with each other all day. The tide was low and there was no excuse to go to the beach. Perhaps that was why the two took books and sat in the *Jules* all the morning pretending to read, but with a keen lookout on the road and all stray cyclists. Bran, greatly delighted to have passengers, took them several voyages to New York and back. Harry and Val, professing to be busy inside the Villa, cast many an intrigued glance from the windows. Nothing happened.

Next morning a basket of figs was found in the boat–beautiful, luscious, purple figs. Now the only fig-trees in Mascaret grew in the garden of the Admiral of Shai-poo!

Val and Harriott went to early Mass, and returning ran into the two heroes coming up from the river. They had been for an early morning sail, and wore a pleasantly disreputable air in their blue fisherman jerseys and turned-up coat collars. They cast sheepish glances at the two ladies, and the younger had the grace to blush.

"They really are nice-looking boys," Harriott admitted, but at the breakfast table a few minutes later she expressed herself differently.

"We met those two Romeos from the Villa Shai-poo as we were coming from Mass," she announced. "Seedy-looking fellows. One of them looked as if a tub might do him good."

The girls bristled like Irish terriers.

"Which one?" they demanded in one breath.

"The one with the drunken blue eyes," said Val, aware that this was sheer malice.

"Oh, that's Rupert!" Relief burst from Haidee. But Kitty's appetite was gone. She assumed a dark and menacing expression of countenance that her mother declared reminded her of Mendelssohn's *Spring Song*.

"It makes me want to prance and leap like Cissie Loftus imitating Maude Allen when I see you look like that, Kit," she said. But Kit remained cross as a cat and would not smile.

"And where did these figs come from?" asked Val in amaze.

"They are Bran's," quoth Haidee demurely. "An angel left them in the *Jules* for him."

It may have been religious fervour which then seized the girls or it may merely have been a fervour for going in the direction of Mascaret, at any rate they patronised both High Mass and Vespers and seemed to be discontented that there were no further services to attend.

In the evening, as it was Sunday, there were letters to write instead of the usual game of Bridge. Every one appeared to be deeply occupied, but a listening look was so apparent on two faces that Harriott could not resist a mischievous remark to Val.

"I wonder if the cabbages have come yet?" As if by some magical arrangement with fate there came on the instant the usual whirring sound followed by the crackling underfoot of broken crockery which had strayed from the garbage hole.

"What's that?" cried Bran nervously from his bed in the next room.

"Hush, my Wing! I expect it's only a basket of eggs arriving in the *Jules*," soothed his mother.

"Soon we shall not have to go to market, Val," remarked Harriott; "all that we need will be found in the boat. I wonder if it's a Customs' officer or a gendarme who is so kind?"

"I think a delicate attention on our part would be to tie a return bouquet on to the mainmast," said Val thoughtfully. "Should we go out and gather some, Harry–just to show that we enjoyed the figs?"

"Oh, no! Val," burst out Haidee, "you 'll spoil everything."

"Spoil?" said Val with wondering eyes. "*Everything*? Surely a little gratitude...? Old *père* Duval has some nice sunflowers."

But the girls had burst from the room in a rage. Val and Harriott, exploding with laughter, went for a walk down the *digue* in the mild darkness.

"Poor kids!" said Harriott. "Perhaps we really ought not to torment them

so much."

"My dear, it is the proudest moment of their lives," laughed Val. "Their first conquest! At such times mothers are always looked upon as sort of ogresses anyway–we may as well be amused ogresses."

They had an adventure all to themselves that night. A little party of people passed them talking French, and bound like themselves for a stroll to the end of the breakwater. There were two ladies and two men, and in the latter Val felt certain she recognised the boys from Shai-poo. Behind them, at a little distance, smoking a deliciously fragrant cigar and humming cheerfully after the manner of a Frenchman who has just enjoyed a good dinner, strolled a third man, evidently belonging to the party, for he called out an occasional remark to the others. All disappeared into the blackness at the far end of the pier, where a lamp and storm-bell were built into a little chapel-shaped shelter. Val and Harriott, deciding not to walk farther, seated themselves by dint of a certain amount of physical exertion upon the high wall which runs beside the *digue*, their legs dangling, the sea below, the cool black night all round them. By and by the French party returned in the order of their going, the last man still lagging behind. He had perhaps lingered longer than the others to watch the seas dashing against the bulky end of the pier, for the advance party passed some five minutes before his cheerful humming was heard. As he came along a pale streak of gold from the far lighthouse swept over him, revealing him an elderly, distinguished man of the *Légion d'honneur* type. Val immediately recognised in him the man whom Haidee had pointed out as General Lorrain, the father of Sacha: he of the American boots and pointed goatee.

"Ah! Le phare est très chic ce soir!" He called out suddenly. He had seen them in the same sweeping line of light, but it never occurred to them that he mistook them for the ladies of his party until he came up and gave Harriott an affectionate squeeze on her ankle, repeating his remark:

"*N'est ce pas*, Comtesse–it gives a very *chic* illumination to-night, the light-house?"

Mrs. Kesteven gave a very *chic* gasp, and almost leaped from the wall into the sea below. And Val, realising what had happened, hastily leaned forward and in her bad French, always ten times worse when she was excited, cried:

"*Mais–vous faisez une erreur, monsieur.*"

The poor man, horrified as Mrs. Kesteven herself, blurted out a throaty:

"*Parr-don! Je vous demands parr-don, mesdames,*" and fled.

Val said her French did it–that wonderful phrase "*faisez une erreur*," quite unknown to the French grammar. But Harriott declared her suspicion that the quality of her woollen stockings was the cause of the poor man's panic.

"I imagine the French Comtesse whom that pinch was meant for is not

much addicted to Jaeger and flannel lingerie," she said with a grim glint of humour in her eye. "Anyway it is a lesson to us not to sit out alone on dark nights."

Next morning there was a basket of grapes in the boat.

"This is really beginning to go a little too far," declared Val. "Either some one is robbing the Admiral's garden and wants to drag us into the affair as accomplices, or else there is an impression abroad that we are in need of food and clothing."

She and Harriott gravely discussed the point as to whether it would be better to put up a public notice by the wayside, or call in the gendarmes.

"Oh, mother!" cried Kitty in a voice of mingled consternation and impatience, and wriggled Mrs. Kesteven into her bedroom where she could harangue her without ribald interruption from Val. The minute Haidee got Val alone she said furiously:

"Oh, Val, you are a silly ass! You know quite well it 's *them*!"

"*Them?*"

"Those Lorrain boys. Do leave off rotting."

"Rotting?"

"Och! *you!*" cried Haidee in a black rage, and flung out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WAYS OF BOYS

"For every grain of wit a grain of folly."

All the same, Val and Harry were beginning to say to each other, "What next?"

It was a great relief that the Lorrain boys, most correctly dressed and apparently laced in their best corsets, came very ceremoniously to call that afternoon. They were accompanied by two ladies. One was Mademoiselle Celine Lorrain, the other the Comtesse de Vervanne, who had come to spend part of the summer with them. Upon being introduced to the latter, Val and Mrs. Kesteven, who knew what they knew about a *chic* lighthouse and a lady's ankle, exchanged a fleet glance that was not without humour.

Celine Lorrain, the sister of Sacha, was a girl of twenty-five, with eyes of

Mediterranean blue in a rather broad sweet face. The boys had monopolised all the beauty of the family, but she had a singularly pure expression, and with her gallant bearing would have made an ideal Joan of Arc. The countess, of a very different type, was, it transpired, the bosom friend of another and married Lorrain sister. She was little and piquant and plump, and made-up as for the stage. Pearl powder lay thick as white velvet on her nose, and her dark-green eyes were artistically outlined with spode-blue shadows. A little mole on her chin had been carefully blackened–and in her cheeks was a wild-rose flush out of a box. A few gilt streaks in the little dark plaits she wore coiled over her ears *jeune fille* fashion told that at some past period her hair had been magically changed to gold, but was now returning to its original colour. No doubt she was extremely picturesque, and her manners were charming. But Val, who always looked at eyes, noticed that hers, in spite of their enshrouding blue shadows, were as cold as some still mountain lake, though, at the same time, full of the swift brightness of the Parisienne who misses nothing there is to see. She included the two women, the girls, and the room in one rapid enveloping glance, much as a painter might take a snapshot of something he meant to examine more carefully later on, and thereafter took upon herself the "expense of the conversation," as the French phrase runs. Unfortunately, her English was not so excellent as she believed it to be–though a good deal more amusing. In answer to Val's polite "How do you do?" she responded affably:

"Vary much." And later she related, with a pretty little high laugh: "It is the costume in France for strange womens to visit first, but we have taken the beef by the horns and come to see you in case you have not the spirit of the adventuress."

Mrs. Kesteven, fearing that Kitty and Haidee might disgrace themselves if they listened to much of this style of thing, gradually wriggled the conversation back into French, at which they were all fairly fluent, except Val who, however, understood everything. With a general intention to be amiable, time hung on no one's hands. Every one took tea, and the young men made themselves useful, twisting with ease in the tiny room to hand cups and bread and butter.

"We must all be friends and go walks and swims together," said the Comtesse. "I hear your girls swim beautifully, Madame Valdana. I want them to teach me."

"And would you let them go sailing with us in our little sailing boat?" a voice beguiled in Val's ear, and she found the misty blue eyes which she had maliciously described as "drunken" looking at her.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said in her faltering French.

"You spik in English and I spik in French and we will understand us," he said, smiling charmingly at her. He reminded her intensely of Bran, and for this reason she felt a great leaning to him. Besides, no one could have helped liking

him. His fresh clear skin was made fresher by the blueness of his eyes and the blackness of his hair. Added to his boyish beauty was a sort of good honest look that warmed the heart.

"We are very all right sailors," he continued, still politely expressing himself in English. "My cousin and I have sailed our boat here every year since we had ten years of age. You need not have fear of accidents."

"My sister often goes with us," chimed in Sacha, "but she's getting lazy. Mademoiselle your daughter and Mees Kesteven both say they adore to go on the sea."

Val let them remain under the impression that Haidee was her daughter, feeling that it gave her more authority to shake her head at the idea of the girls going sailing. But the chorus of beguilements continued and the two girls kept saying:

"Oh, do, Val ... *do*, mother ... *do* ... *do*...."

Bran made a diversion by bursting in, bright of eye, his fair hair wild, a strong scent of puppy dog about him, for he had been amusing himself with a litter of terriers bred by *pére* Duval.

He was introduced to the company, but his news would hardly keep until the ceremony was over.

"Mammie! At last I 've found out the difference between boy puppies and girl puppies. The boys—-"

"Go and wash your hands for tea, darling."

"But, Mammie, the boys–

"Yes, I know, Bran, go now and wash your—-"

"The boys have blue eyes and the girls have brown ones," he shouted indignantly as, hurt and astonished at his mother's strange lack of interest in his latest discovery, he was being pushed from the room by Haidee. Val suddenly ran after him and hugged him, and every one exploded into laughter.

Val and Harriott found themselves almost mesmerised into giving half-promises to let the girls go sailing, but after the visitors were gone and the last echo of the Comtesse's little gay sky-high laugh had died away, they gazed at each other doubtfully. The mesmerism was wearing off.

"I don't think we ought to let them go," Mrs. Kesteven said.

"I 'm sure we ought not," declared Val, wondering what Westenra would say if Haidee were drowned. There was a chorus of howls. Kitty put on her *Spring Song* face. Haidee's expression resembled that of a rhino about to charge.

"Mother, you *promised*...!"

"Oh, Val, you mean pig...!"

They burst from the room, scowling and muttering. Later even sobs were heard upstairs.

"Perhaps, after all...?" Harriott wavered.

"They are, I 'm sure, nice boys..." said Val, "and evidently good sailors. Shall we ask *père* Duval?"

They found the latter, as usual, hoeing his garden, Bran assisting him. Bran loved *père* Duval, who, he said, "smelt like a bar of iron that had been lying at the bottom of the sea for a few weeks ... all green and rusty, but yet nice."

"Of those two boys," the old man peered at them with his bleary eyes, "you need have no fear, mesdames. There are no better sailors on this coast. And round here it is very safe too–no bad winds–safe as heaven."

Less uneasy, they went upstairs to throw the oil of consent upon the stormy waters of rebellion. Immediately the two began to get out their sweaters and warm skirts as if to start at once, though the sail had been fixed for next morning. Harriott and Val stood smiling grimly, throwing little darts.

"I hope you 'll take your tubs before you go–even though you may get an unpremeditated dip," gibed Harriott.

"Yes; brush your teeth, dears, and your hair," supplemented the other tormentor. "Don't go out looking like a pair of rabbits plucked out of a dust barrel."

"Rabbits! Dust barrels!" snorted the girls, shaking their hair, each strong in the consciousness of annihilating beauty. Afterwards Haidee said with a superior smile to Kitty:

"Poor things! It must be awful to be old."

"Yes," said Kitty, who was sniffing a good deal. "They 're mad with jealousy. That's why I don't take any notice of all Mother's blither." She added thoughtfully: "I hope she doesn't find out I 've got a cold, before to-morrow morning. She 's such a fuss pot."

"Let's go to bed early, then she won't," suggested Haidee. And they went, and rose early too. Usually it was the work of two persons to pick them out of their blankets, but they were up at five, pinking and preening before the mirror, with many a glance from the window to see why the river was n't filling. The tide, it seemed, was unaccountably delayed that morning!

Val, who always rose at seven to make tea on her spirit lamp, took the usual cup to Harriott's bedside, and found Kitty there by special command. She was vehemently denying that she had a cold.

"I hawed god wud, buther, I ted you."

"Kitty, how can you say so? You can't speak properly. All traffic in your nose is absolutely suspended."

"It tiddent, buther!"

"You are snorting and snuffling like the bull of Bashan."

"I 'b *dot*, buther."

"I 'm sure it's no good for her to go out in that state," sighed Harriott after-

wards. "But what would you? She 'd have broken a blood vessel if I 'd stopped her."

Val looked out of the window and reported gleefully:

"They are prowling up and down the *digue* like two hungry tigers. If they could only pull the tide in with ropes they would set to work at once."

At last there was water enough to float a boat, and the Lorrains' little craft was seen winging down the river from the *petit port.* The girls came racing back to get their warm coats. A moment later Bran's voice was heard from the front steps:

"I want to go too–I want to go too!" He had smelt what was in the wind, and hastily shuffling on his little garments was following the girls. With the cold brutality of an elder sister Haidee rebuffed him.

"No; you can't come. We don't want any kids."

"Besides, you can't swim," said Kitty more kindly.

"I can swim–I can swim!" averred Bran, and ran after them wailing passionately. "I can swim–I *can* swim!"

Val had to fly out and bring him home weeping on her shoulder.

"You shall have a beautiful boat all your own some day, my Wing, and we 'll sail away in it together."

She comforted him, drying his tears on her blue veil.

"Oh, jeer buck!" sniffled Bran, trying to cheer up, "and will daddy come too?"

Val thought of a lost ship in which she had thought to sail with all she loved to the islands of the blest, and her breath caught in her throat. "Yes, darling, let us pray so," she said, though she had no hope.

————

From that day forward the Shai-pooites and the Duvalites were constantly together. The two parties joined forces and were as one man in all things that pertained to amusements and making the sunny days fly by.

There was always the daily excursion to the beach. Kitty and Haidee were as much at home in the water as two seals, and Val too was a good swimmer. Harriott always turned blue when she had been in two or three minutes, so her lot in life was to stay on the beach and rub Bran down when he came from floundering like a little scarlet tadpole in the surf. The Insanes wore red twill costumes, and resembled nothing so much as a band of Indians on the warpath when they came prancing from the cabins across the flat beach, with the Shai-pooites in dark blue *maillots* at their heels. A strange note of colour was a scarf of deep orange, which Val wore round her head, dock fashion. She never let her cropped head be seen by

any one, though it was well covered now with little sprouting fluffy curls. Only Bran was allowed to see it in the nights, and loved to nestle against it, as a bird nestles against the downy breast of its mother. From the rest of the world she kept her distance, even in the sea, for she hated any one to see the curiousness of her face without its frame of hair.

The Comtesse was learning to "make the plank"–otherwise float, and on calm days incessant laughter came streaming over the smooth, silky waves, as her plump little person was held up by a ring of instructors. When all seemed well they let go, and immediately a shrill cry would ring out:

"*Ah, mon Dieu! Je coule.... Je coule dans le milieu.* I am sinking in ze middle!" And down she would drop and come up spluttering: "Ah! *Quelle abomination de la désolation!*"

But she never went in deep enough to damage the wild-rose flush in her cheeks and the blue mountain shadows round her eyes. The two English girls and Celine Lorrain came out always sleek as seals, their hair dripping and dank about them, but when Madame de Vervanne's cerise head-wrap was unbound, never a hair was out of place. She thoroughly understood the art of bathing beautifully. Later, arrayed in a wondrous kimono, she would take a sun bath on the beach, scuffling her bare feet daintily in the sand.

"*Imaginez-vous!*" she told Mrs. Kesteven. "I never knew until this year that I had Greek feet. *Le vrai grec*, with the arch and perfect toes–see?" She stuck out her short white foot. "An artist revealed it to me this year. Figure it to yourself! I have had them all these years and did not know."

She flung her little laugh to heaven, and the other women could not but join in it at this frank exhibition of vanity. Never was a little lady more thoroughly pleased with herself than Christiane de Vervanne, and, indeed, she was of those who add to the gaiety of nations. Without her cold, brilliant wit and Harriott Kesteven's gentle humour the party might easily have been heavy. Val, shrouding a brooding heart as well as a cropped head behind her blue veil, came forth little except when alone with Harriott or the children, whilst Kitty and Haidee, alternately weighed down by the new-born consciousness of their wonderful beauty and absolute desirability, were not amusing except unintentionally, and often indeed when their plans went wrong were sulky and quarrelsome. At other times they would be buoyed up to a pitch of perky inanity most provoking. But on the whole the two girls improved noticeably under the influence of their first flirtation. Haidee's cowboy habits dropped from her one by one never to return, and untidiness was no longer a habit. Kitty became gentler, too, and less inclined to treat her mother as a slave sent unto the world for her special benefit. Respect for their elders is one of the most attractive traits in the character of young French people, and the girls were quick to note the astonishment

and disapproval of the Lorrains at any discourtesy shown by them to Val and Harriott. An actual demonstration of how parents should be treated could not be given by Sacha and Celine unfortunately, for (for reasons of his own at which Mrs. Kesteven and Val could make a good guess), General Lorrain, their only surviving parent, never called with his family at Villa Duval, nor even materialised when the English party took tea at Shai-poo. Val and Harriott often wondered whether he had taken the Comtesse into his confidence over the little *contretemps* on the *digue* when Mrs. Kesteven's ankle had been mistaken for that of Madame de Vervanne's. Certainly the latter gave no sign.

It transpired that she was in the position so unfortunate in France of having been obliged to divorce her husband. She was most frank about the details of her conjugal unhappiness, and the fact that she had been thrust a little way out of her own world since the divorce, did not seem to weigh her down very much. The Lorrains were among the few of her liberal and broad-minded friends to whom her position had made no difference. Her husband had been an officer in General Lorrain's regiment, and she married him when she was eighteen and he thirty and *très connaisseur*.

"Like most young girls I thought it was a very wonderful thing for him that I was conferring my innocence upon him–that he too shared my state of ecstatic bliss, and that it would last for ever. *Quelle bêtise*! Naturally for him it was nothing–he was soon *ennuyée* with my bliss. That is a mistake young girls make–they soon bore a sophisticated man with their simplicity."

"A sophisticated Frenchman, I dare say," said Harriott dryly.

"Ah! There you hit the affair on the back, Mistress Kesteven," agreed the Comtesse affably. "I do not spik of your Englishmen with the big hearts and the big feets."

She proceeded to describe the lady who stole her husband.

"She was my best friend, and I was very proud to know her–very *chic*, very Parisienne, and with the cleverness of forty. Ah! she was as subtle as an Egyptian! What chance had I against her when she began to put her cobra spells on de Vervanne? I could only look on like a fascinated rabbit." She burst into a peal of laughter. Val looked at her thoughtfully, wondering if she were the result of her ill luck or the cause of it. Certainly she had arrived at being much more like the cobra than the rabbit.

"Did you ever hear of the little baker's girl, who had to carry round the tarts and cakes to her master's customers? Some one said to her, 'Do you never take any of the nice tarts, my child?' 'Oh, no,' said she, 'that would be stealing. I only lick them, and that does no one any harm.'"

Harriott threw an apprehensive glance ahead. They were taking one of their long country walks, the younger folk marching in front, with Bran and a

tea-basket to leaven their exuberance. It was a relief to see that they were out of ear-shot, for the Comtesse's baker-girl stories were apt to be very spiced bread indeed, and less likely to point a moral than to adorn some one without morals.

"If my friend had only been like the little *boulangère*," continued the Comtesse mournfully, "I would have said nothing. But no, she was greedy and wicked, and could not content herself except by stealing my nice cake." She trilled and bubbled with laughter. The other woman's thought, if interpreted, might have read much the same as Wolfe Tone's brief reflections on the subject of Madame de Vervanne's countrywomen:

"A fine morality, split me!"

At the same time it was impossible not to feel a touch of admiration for a woman who could turn her tragedy into laughter. Val was wistfully inclined to wish that she could achieve the same state of philosophy herself.

Meanwhile the Comtesse, very pleased with her little tale, and the thought that she had shocked the "women made of wood," as she secretly described all Englishwomen, walked ahead, for the path had narrowed, her skirt held high to avoid the brambles, revealing the famous Greek feet encased in high-heeled *suède* shoes, with a pair of boy's socks falling round her ankles. She affected these at the seaside, under the impression that she was being truly Arcadian. Suddenly she burst into a little song. Her voice was dainty and pretty, her specialty innocent nursery rhymes with a tang to the tail of them. She never sang anything that was not of eighteenth-century origin. All of her songs were about shepherdesses and *boulangères*–sometimes a curé would be introduced into the last verse, but his presence there rarely imported holiness.

When the kettle was singing over the fire of wood branches, and the band sat scattered at ease among golden clumps of gorse and purple heather, she trilled them one of the least frisky in her vocabulary:

"Philis plus avare que tendre,
Ne gagnant rien à refuser,
Un jour exigea de Sylvandre
Trente moutons pour un baiser!

"Le lendemain nouvelle affaire!
Pour le berger, le troc fut bon
Car il obtint de la bergère,
Trente baisers pour un mouton!

"Le lendemain Philis plus tendre,
Craignant de déplaire au berger,

Fut trop heureuse de lui rendre
Trente moutons pour un baiser!

"Le lendemain Philis peu sage
Aurait donné moutons et chien
Pour un baiser que le volage
A Lisette donnait pour rien."

After this contribution to the general well-being the Comtesse embraced Bran, who wriggled desperately to get away, for as he had secretly confided to his mother, he did not care for her smell. She said she would let him go if he would sing them a song, so Bran, in spite of his shyness, paid the price with two of his little impromptu anthems, chanting and rolling his eyes at them like a Zulu:

"Mary, Queen of Scots,
Went to sea
In a soft boat,
A boat as soft as cream."

"Bobyian went to church
But he had no money
So he took two sous out of the plate."

They all applauded and hugged him.

"Sapristi! You have the voice of an angel, *mon ami*," said Sacha.

"I know it well," answered Bran modestly in his pretty French.

"Ah! He is enormous, this Bran! He knows all things well," cried the Comtesse. "And can you tell me now, *mon petit ange*, where can I get such another little boy as you for myself?"

For the first time Bran's noted phrase faltered on his lips. He considered the point for a moment, but swiftly came to the conclusion that no little angel would care to leave his wings under a cloud in heaven, as he had done, to come down and seek the Comtesse for his mother, so he presently announced to a breathless audience:

"*Je ne sais pas!*"

"Ah, ha!" twittered the Comtesse. "I like better to hear you say so, my little

hen, than to hear you answer that you know well."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WAYS OF A LOVER

THE WAY OF THE SEA

"All the great things of life are simply done,
Creation, Death, and Love the Double Gate."
MASEFIELD.

One morning Harriott came into Val's room and found her writing at the table with the blue veil fallen off, lying on her shoulders.

"Why, Val!" she exclaimed in genuine astonishment. "Your hair is perfectly lovely! Never, never cover it up any more!"

"Really?" said Val shyly and flushing deep rose. "Do you think I might go without the veil now?"

"Do I think! Look at yourself!" She gave Val a gentle push towards her mirror, where the pale oval face was reflected, a very girlish face still in spite of sorrows, and framed now in a nebulous, wavering frame of feathery, fluttering curls.

"I never saw anything so dear," said Harriott, dipping her hand into the airy softness. "It is ten times prettier than it was before. How on earth did you manage it?"

"It must be the salad oil," said Val laughing. "I 've rubbed in a whole quart bottle during the winter. Poor Bran! Many is the morning he has come sniffing to my pillow with the question, 'Did you have potato salad for supper last night, Mammie?' Is n't it extraordinary what we women will do for vanity's sake, Harry. You 'd think I ought to know better at thirty-two, wouldn't you?"

"Thirty-two, what's *that*? Women are only just beginning to find themselves at thirty. You 're an infant still, my dear, and fortunately you look it." She added inconsequently, "I think that man of yours must be a pig."

A grave sadness came back into Val's face.

"Never say anything like that, Harry. Those are the kind of words that

separate friends."

For a moment Mrs. Kesteven regarded her reproachfully, but her soul was too loyal a one to misunderstand Val's feelings. There was a great soul-likeness between the two women. Only that Val would be always more or less primitive, while Harriott Kesteven had come of a long line of cultivated ancestors, and was more highly civilised. But in the simple elementary things the two felt and saw alike.

"Forgive me, dearest," she said gently. "It is only that I hate to see you so alone–and lonely. You were not meant for such a life."

"I must be unworthy of companionship, for it is always taken from me," said Val, as if to herself, staring at her image in the glass. "I sometimes tremble because of Bran. Oh, Harry, if Bran–if Bran–!" Her eyes darkened with tears, her lips twisted in an anguish of terror and love and foreboding.

"Never think of such a thing," cried Harriott. "It is like inviting the daughter of Zeus to come after you. You will have Bran and much more than Bran, dear. Your life is far from over. There are those whom Sorrow elects her own for many years only to bless them in the end. All will come right with you yet, Val."

"Bless you, Harry! What would one do without friendship?"

"Well, you'll never have to do without me wherever you are, darling. Mine is one of the hands stretched across seas and hills to you. But I fear that my material body must leave you this day week; all sorts of things call me back to London."

"So soon?"

"My dear, do you realise that the summer is nearly over? While we have sat in the sunshine talking of old days, and watching the children grow their wings, two of our precious months are gone. Two of the hundred and twenty, Val!"

"Never mind, they 've left us something," said Val, kissing her.

From that day forward she discarded the blue veil. The French friends were amazed when they saw her without her shroudings. It had a curiously different effect upon them all. Something discontented and critical came into the still-lake eyes of Madame de Vervanne, but Celine used to like to come close and brush her cheek against Val's head as if she or Val were a kitten. The two boys seemed suddenly to wake up and realise that Val was still a factor in the game, at least Sacha did, and the look half gallant, half appraising, which he had so far kept only for Kitty and Haidee or any other pretty girl who happened along, began to lurk in his eye for Val also. With Rupert it was a little different. He had from the first recognised something vital and alluring behind the blue veil, and had never shown himself averse to leaving the girls to walk with Val, carrying her things, or holding one of Bran's hands while she held the other. There had come to exist between them one of those wordless sympathies that make for friendship.

They spoke the same language, for there was one great bond between them–the wanderlust. Rupert, strange and rare thing in a Frenchman, had "the love for other lands!" Hoping to assuage his thirst for travel in a legitimate way, and one traditional in his family, he had entered for the Navy and had worked hard to get in from the Lycée St. Louis. But though his physical qualifications for that profession were perfect, he was no student and the exams. had been too much for him. Three times he had gone up, and failed, and the third time was the last. He was over nineteen, and the age limit for men entering the Navy was passed.

At odds and ends of times he told Val these things, and her heart went out to him while her mind greatly wondered at the stupidity of the French Government. Here was an ideal sailor lost to his country because he could not pass a difficult exam., that dealt largely with languages and mathematics, though you had only to watch him with his inferiors, the villagers and fishermen, to know that he possessed all the qualities characteristic of the good sailor and commander of men. Above all he was a lover of the sea. As an Englishman or American other gates to that "lover and mother of men" would have been open to him. But as a French gentleman having failed to get into the Navy, he was obliged to renounce the love of his life, for there was no other way, compatible with honour, of wooing her.

The next best thing then he declared was to join the Colonial Infantry, and achieve travel and adventure in foreign service. But such a decision thoroughly scandalised his family, for the Colonial Infantry is looked upon as the last resort of the destitute. Only men who have n't a penny of private income go to the Colonies, and it was considered a most unfitting fate for a man of such brilliant fortune as Rupert would be master of in a year or so. Even Sacha, who had no more than two hundred and twenty francs a year, disdained the Colonial Infantry and was in the "Dragons," preferring a cavalry regiment likely to be stationed within reach of Paris, living a life of gaiety on credit, always in debt, but always with an open chance of catching an heiress whose fortune would regulate his affairs and settle him in life.

The Colonial Infantry very often means quick promotion, but it also means travel and rough life in far places, and these things do not appeal to the ordinary young Frenchman, who is out for "life" of a very different kind. That they appealed to Rupert showed that he was far from being an ordinary Frenchman. In his family everything was still being done to try and dissuade him. But he showed no signs of budging from his purpose–for him the Colonial Infantry or nothing, he said, and had already accomplished the one year's military service essential to a candidate for St. Cyr. He told Val of his intentions, and she secretly upheld them and encouraged him to go his own way. For to her Rupert looked like one of those whom Nature chooses to track her across deserts and mountains

and seas. He had the vague yet ardent eyes of the follower of the Lone Trail. Val recognised in him, boy as he was, a wanderer like herself, and it seemed to her that it would be a tragic thing to confine such a boy to the smug and conventional paths of life in France.

While the Kestevens were still in Mascaret, Rupert was looked upon as being more or less property at the disposal of Kitty, and Val had only an occasional opportunity for the long rambling talks she liked with him. But after the Kestevens had gone, and Val made her *début*, veilless, indeed hatless, with shining fluffy hair curling in the sun, her eyes containing a secret, and about her that certain flower-like grace which is the peculiar attribute of those who keep always a little dew in the heart, Rupert came hovering continually about her and she grew fonder than ever of him. A reef was taken in their friendship, and no one seemed to mind very much except Christiane de Vervanne. The little Comtesse took rather more than an ordinary interest in Rupert, and when she was about, Val with her seventh sense often felt in the air the presence of the little silken cobwebs that some women, spiderlike, spin out and weave about all young male things. However, Rupert so far appeared to be immune to any spells except those of the sea, and other lands. And because Val too felt these spells he loved to be with her. The Comtesse, on the other hand, looked upon such talk as the ravings of madness. She strongly opposed the Colonial Infantry scheme, and declared it a shame to think of one of La France's sons departing to other stupid countries. It was plain that she meant to do all she could to prevent such a catastrophe.

It was lovely autumn weather, and in the cool of every afternoon the party went forth on blackberrying expeditions, gathering the fruit which the peasants despise and leave to rot upon the hedges. Every morning Villa Duval was fragrant with the fresh scent of blackberries stewing in their own juice, to be eaten at tea time the same day. The flies and the wasps swarmed in, and at intervals all doors and windows would be closed and the family, assisted by the granite-eyed Azalie and armed with bath towels, would engage in a *grande battue*, and the wooden walls of the villa resounded with slaps and bangs. Only Bran would take no part in these massacres. He had a funny little objection to killing anything, and strongly disapproved of Azalie's methods.

"She is very unkind," he complained. "She just *kills* the flies. She does n't look into their eyes first to see whether they are poor or good or naughty."

"How do they look when they 're good, assie?" jeered Haidee.

Bran strangely but immediately glazed his eyes, and with some odd movement of his hands acutely suggested the attitude of a sick fly suffering with cold.

"And a naughty one?"

His eyes rolled, and he lifted a paw to his nose. A sprightly fly!

The days were slipping along very peacefully when suddenly Val's eyes

were opened to the fact that Haidee was in danger. Her little girlish flirtation with Sacha Lorrain was growing into something more serious.

One afternoon, as Val was sitting in the *Jules*, with Bran at the imaginary wheel, a puff of wind blew a sheet of paper up into the air and over the side of the boat. Carelessly she took it up, but her idle glance crystallised into consternation when she found that it was a rough draft of what was evidently meant to be a poem, in Haidee's writing.

That an out-of-door, tomboy creature like Haidee should take to writing poems was strange enough, but what startled Val still more was its open dedication to Sacha. It ran into several verses:

"You are more beautiful than the rising sun,
And I love you more,
And I wish to steal you and keep you
As in the old, old law.

"For you are mine, you were born for me:
It is written in the book of Fate
That thou should 'st love me, and I love thee–
Do now, 'fore it is too late.

"Come to me now, to my ever open arms,
And make me glad,
And I will mark our meeting with an everlasting kiss
To make us sad."

Poor Haidee!

When Val had finished reading it her eyes were full of tears, though her lips smiled. It was not poetry, but in its broken, ill-balanced phrases it revealed what poetry does not always do–the heart of the writer and the big things in the writer's nature struggling to get out. The old cowboy rudeness and lawlessness were there, but Val was so thankful to God to see the sign of big things–of generosity, of the courage that dares, of soul. Yes, there under the beat of young passion's wing was another still small sweet sound–the voice of soul. What else did those two last lines reveal?

"...an everlasting kiss
To make us sad."

Only the soul knows the secret of that great sadness lurking under passion's wing!

Poor Haidee! So her feet, too, were touching the outer waves of that stormy sea where women sink or swim, and few reach the happy shore! Yet Val was proud to recognise that she was not afraid to put forth. This was no suppliant cry of one afraid to drown! Here was not one of the world's little clinging creatures that grip round a man's neck and pull him under. She, too, had the strong arm and the stout heart. She would give help, not only seek to take it. Yes, that was what Haidee's poor little poem revealed more than anything to Val–that she was one of life's givers.

"Thank God for it," said Val, "and let her give." After long thought, doubled up in Bran's boat and staring at the sea as was her way, she added: "but not to Sacha Lorrain."

It is not to be supposed that she had spent a whole summer of intimacy with the Lorrain family without drawing up some kind of a moral estimate of each member of it. They were not very harsh affairs, these little estimates. For it was ever Val's way to "heave her log" into the heart rather than the mind, and to what was in the pocket she never gave a thought. Like many of the cleverest women, she had no judgment, no gift of looking past the hardy eye and the smooth smile into the mind to see what was brewing there. But she had instincts, and sometimes inspirations, and a highly tuned ear for sincerity. Also, no act or look or word containing beauty was ever lost on her.

Well! it must be confessed that Sacha had emerged but poorly from her process of assessment. She had turned her ear and inclined her eye for many a long day for grace in him–and both had gone unrequited.

If Sacha's worldly possessions were small, they still predominated over his jewels of the heart, while in mind he possessed much the same qualities as Christiane de Vervanne–gaiety, egotism, the hard, cold brilliance of a diamond, a straining ambition for all the worldly "good things of life." In their alikeness these two might have been brother and sister, while Celine and Rupert, though only cousins, much more closely resembled each other in nature and bearing.

It seemed the usual irony of circumstance that had ordained for Sacha, who loved the good things of the world, comparative poverty, while to Rupert, the John o' Dreams and lover of seas and skies, was given wealth! The latter's father (the general's brother), with a head for finance, had gone into banking instead of the army, and thereafter married a banker's daughter with a fortune, which he had trebled and quadrupled to leave to their only son.

However, Sacha, with a small income squeezed out of his father's pension, gave himself a very good time, and had every intention and likelihood of making

a rich marriage. In the meantime he was open to any love experiences that came to hand. Like all young Frenchmen, he preferred women older than himself, and went in fear of the young girl–when she was French. But this summer no flirtations with women older than himself had offered; Mrs. Kesteven treated him like a grandson, Val was secret behind her veil, while the Comtesse's beguilements were not for him–he and she understood each other too well. Remained Haidee, who was *jeune fille* indeed, without being French.

Her daring boyish ways and fresh beauty attracted him immensely, and though he was an honourable fellow, according to his lights, the lights of a young French officer make no very great illumination, and apparently he had not been able to resist the temptation of making her fall in love with him.

Val, reviewing the position, knew that it would be fatal to let Haidee lose her head over this young worldling. He was only amusing himself. No Frenchman who is poor ever contemplates marriage with a girl unless she happens to have a *dot* worthy of consideration, in which case the affair becomes a ceremonious one in which parents and relations take an even more important part than the young people themselves. Val knew all this well, and that there was not the faintest idea of anything serious in Sacha Lorrain's mind. But, no doubt, it was very amusing to make a little American girl fall in love–and to him appeared harmless enough. Only, it would have to be put a stop to at once, though at first Val did not quite see how. Impossible to break off friendly relations all at once with the occupants of Shai-poo. They had all become too intimate for that. Besides, such an act would not serve its purpose. Haidee was too wilful and lawless not to find means of being with the Lorrains whatever Val did, and opposition would simply have the effect of making her keener. The only course open to Val was one that Sacha himself had suggested by his manner since she came out from behind her blue veil. Whether it was that he was piqued by her preference for his cousin, or whether he thought a little jealousy might be good for Haidee, it would be hard to say, but at any rate he had shown distinct signs and symbols of being attracted to Val. So far she had disregarded, while being greatly amused by his not very subtle efforts to flirt with her, but she now resolved to make a change in her tactics. If Sacha wanted a flirtation with a woman older than himself he should have it.

She gave him an opening the very next day on one of their long excursions, and he grabbed it with a fervour that astonished her. She kept him at her side all the afternoon. Rupert took her defection good-naturedly, and devoted himself to Haidee, who rebuffed him and sulked. The next day, on the beach, Val did the same thing. Sacha became more fervent. Rupert began to look wounded. Haidee glared, and would not speak when they reached home.

After all, it was an easy matter. What inexperienced girl, however pretty,

can hold her own against a woman of the world, determined on capture–especially when the prey is only a youth? Sacha, his vanity flattered by Val's sudden interest in him, paid little attention to Haidee's scowls and sulks. And when Val realised how serious it was, saw how Haidee paled and flushed and lost her appetite, she lured the mothlike Sacha all the more within the radius of the flame which attracted him. She did not mean to burn him, only to dazzle him a little; but if his wings were slightly scorched, that was his affair. Haidee had got to be saved from unhappiness even at that cost.

The thing was made easier by the departure of the Comtesse and Celine to pay a week's visit to some army friends stationed at Cherbourg. With no one left but the two boys, it was simple for Val to take entire possession of Sacha. Haidee was left to the share of Rupert. She liked Rupert well enough–no one could help it. But she was in love with Sacha. Before long the look of an assassin came into her eyes when she turned them upon Val. But Val did not falter in her purpose. Not even when Rupert withdrew from the quartette and let Sacha come alone to the villa. On such occasions they all went out together as usual, but Val kept Sacha by her side. She was the soul of gaiety, she flirted and spun fine threads. Haidee gloomed and grew paler. Val's heart ached for the girl, and she was sick of the business herself, but Sacha's leave was almost up. It was only a matter of days. She determined to stick at the wicket.

On Sacha's last evening the whole party from Shai-poo came to Villa Duval with the suggestion of a moonlight walk to the cliff point near the lighthouse. The Comtesse and Celine had returned from Cherbourg bringing in tow a young cavalry lieutenant, a friend of Sacha's, and plainly a satellite of Christiane de Vervanne. The object of the walk was to re-cement a wooden cross upon the ruined walls of the old church of Mascaret. The village in some by-gone age had been situated on the North Foreland, but the gales and storms that besieged it there had driven the villagers inland, and no trace remained of habitation except the four walls of a primitive church, battered and time-stained, pitched perilously on the side of the cliff, like wreckage flung there by some wild storm from the sea below. The little wooden cross that leaned crazily on the east wall had been put there many years past by Rupert and Sacha, and it was a sort of religious rite with them to re-cement it upright in its place every year.

It was a glorious night for a walk, and when they came to claim her, Val could make no excuse for not going, though all that day a wave of dreariness had possessed and submerged her, making her long to be alone. She could not plead that Bran would be lonely, for, tired out from an afternoon's net-fishing in the shallows of the river, he was deep asleep, and Hortense by some unwonted chance was available to watch over him. Besides, Haidee looked so wretched and wistful that compassion overcame reason in Val. She began to half doubt her

right of interference. Because of this she allowed herself to be taken possession of by Rupert and Celine, while the Comtesse and her lieutenant went on ahead, so that nothing was left for Sacha to do but walk with Haidee. He did it with so bad a grace that the latter was even more unhappy than if she had been left to herself. The two walked in silence and when they were winding in single file round the face of the cliff Sacha made a determined effort to regain Val, but she cold-bloodedly hedged him off. She saw now very plainly that her labour was at an end. He and Haidee were so thoroughly estranged that all danger was past, and her task over. Subtly her manner changed then to one of half quizzing gaiety extremely disconcerting to the amorous Sacha, and yet with which he could find no fault, for her flirtation with him had been so delicately done that it could hardly bear that name. Puzzled and savage at the change in her he turned back to Haidee, but Haidee had her pride that wrestled with her poor little crushed love and for the time at least conquered it. She would not be left and again taken at will. She retired behind a sullen scowl. Sacha, for once, was at a loose end and did not like it a bit.

Arrived at the *vieille église*, the two cousins climbed cautiously up the crumbling walls, Rupert with the string handle of the cement pot between his teeth. The rest of the party, scattered on the sloping cliff-side in the mother-of-pearl moonlight, sat watching them. Below, the sea, a star-spangled mirror, stretched from France to where Alderney humped against the sky-line. On the Jersey coast a powerful light winked spasmodically. The sky, clear in the east, was flecked overhead and in the west with tiny snatches of snowy cloud, regular as knitted stitches, or the scales on a mackerel's back.

Softly the Comtesse began to sing to them:

I

"Au clair de la lune,
Mon ami Pierrot,
Prête-moi ta plume
Pour écrire un mot.
Ma chandelle est morte,
Je n' ai plus de feu.
Ouvre-moi ta porte
Pour 1' amour de Dieu!

II

"Au clair de la lune

Pierrot répondit:
'Je n'ai pas de plume,
Je suis dans mon lit!
Va chez la voisine,
Je crois qu' elle y est,
Car dans sa cuisine
On bat le briquet.'

III

"Au clair de la lune
L'aimable Lubin
Frappe chez la Brune,
Elle repond soudain:
'Qui frappe de la sorte?'
Il dit à son tour:
'Ouvrez votre porte
Pour le dieu d'amour!'

IV

"Au clair de la lune
On n' y voit qu' un peu,
On cherche la plume
On cherche du feu.
En cherchant de la sorte
Je ne sais ce qu' on trouva,
Mais je sais que la porte
Sur eux se ferma!"

"Ah!" she sighed softly in the silence that followed her song. "And now we all go back to Paris! That dear Paris! *C'est comme un amant qu'il faut quitter pour un revoir plus chaud, et comme tout neuf*! If you do not budge from it, it becomes like a husband, fatiguing and *exigeant*, who makes you work too much and never gives you room to breathe. But—-" she gazed ecstatically towards Alderney in which direction the lieutenant and Rupert happened to be sitting. "Go away for a little while and you find yourself dreaming of the sweet suffocating embrace that exalts the veins—-"

"How white the sea looks!" suddenly broke in Val. It troubled her to see

how Haidee hung upon the pretty immodest phrases that slipped so easily from Christiane de Vervanne's lips. "What were those lines of yours, Sacha, about when the sea is milk-white and Jersey black as ink and a storm coming to-morrow?"

"Quand la mer est comme le lait, et Jersey tout noir
On peut attendre un orage avant demain soir,"

quoted Sacha sulkily.

The Comtesse shot an icy glance at Val. She did not like her rhapsodies interrupted.

"*Épatant*, that woman!" she murmured to her cavalry-man.

On the walk home Sacha tried once more to re-arrange the order of the party and get Val to himself, but pitilessly she left him to the mercy of Haidee, furious and vengeful as a Gorgon. When they reached home it would have been hard to say whose was the crossest-looking of their two faces. Trinkling back farewells, the Shai-poo party continued on its way down the *Terrasse*, but Sacha stayed. He had gripped Val's hand over the little fence that enclosed the yard and would not let it go.

"I must speak to you," he said urgently, fiercely, and did not care that Haidee lingered within earshot, and when she heard his words started, then tore up the flight of steps into the villa.

"What is it, Sacha?" said Val, gently.

"You have been playing with me!" He was white-lipped and furious. She felt ashamed though her intention had been good.

"Oh, Sacha!–do not be angry! Surely you too were playing?–I—-"

"No!" he shot out at her. "It was not play for me–I—-"

But she would have no declarations.

"Well–I am truly sorry–you must forgive me–I, am very fond of you, Sacha–both you and Rupert–but you must not think–Why, I am a very serious woman. Think, I have a son, and am almost old enough to be your mother!"

"Why did you not say that to me before? Why have you been to me these last weeks so full of allure, so *attirant*?" he asked savagely. "Sapristi! you have been fooling me. It has pleased you to play with my heart!"

She thought it the wisest thing then to tell him the flat ungentle truth.

"As it pleased you to play with Haidee's."

He glared at her, and she stood staring steadily back, the light of battle in her eye.

"Haidee is only a child–her heart is very tender and romantic. I could not have its first bloom rubbed off by you, Sacha–a sophisticated Frenchman who

would laugh and go on your way. She is too good for that."

He breathed hard.

"So!" He muttered at last, "That is it?"

"Yes, that is it." There was a silence. Then she said gently:

"And in your heart you do not blame me, Sacha. Think if it had been your little sister, and you had seen her trying to waste her heart's first freshness foolishly, uselessly. What would you have done? I know well enough what you would have done."

"You had no right to play—-" he began, but he was softened.

"Oh yes, every right. Haidee is like my little sister."

She put her left hand over the gate and laid it on the one which gripped her right.

"Come! There are no bones broken, Sacha. You know very well that you do not really care about me. This was just one of the little experiences of which you will have scores in your life; the remembrance of it may help you in others. But I have not found it uninteresting. You are a charming and attractive fellow–if I did not happen to be immune–(this was sheer guile on her part, but honey has a great healing quality in such cases). I assure you that I have found it anything but an uninteresting experience. Will you not pay me the same compliment and shake hands on it?"

After a little pause he let go his grip of her right hand and took the other into a more gentle grasp. The scowl passed from his face. He was not a bad-hearted fellow–only one of his kind! A smile came into his hard blue eyes.

"*B'en*! All rite," he accepted, and kissed her hand, not without a show of grace.

Val sighed as she went softly indoors, and a pain shot through her breast as she came upon Haidee in the sitting-room, head on the table, hair spread in every direction, absolute abandonment in her pose. A longing seized Val to sit down and put her arm round the girl's waist, but she knew Haidee too well to succumb to it. Instead, she pretended to notice nothing unusual.

"A headache, chicken?" she asked casually, and went to hang her hat behind the door. At the sound of her voice Haidee sprang up and stood facing her.

"I hate you–I hate you–" she cried passionately. "You always take away the people I love from me!"

"Oh, Haidee!" cried Val, sorrowfully, suddenly remembering the night she had found the child on Westenra's bed.

"I hate you!" she screamed in concentrated rage, her face dark with passion. "I will hurt you some day. You'll see!"

She flung out of the room.

"So that is my reward for putting up with that silly ass for three weeks!" said

Val to herself, and sighed once more. Wearily she lighted her candle and went to warm her heart with a glimpse of her son. He lay flung on the pillow like a warm pink rose. She burrowed her nose gently into his soft neck, scenting the lovely puppy dog scent that all young things have round their throats, scenting, too, the little stinky hands that in his yearning for bed he had only half-washed. With a wet sponge and some drops of eau-de-cologne she gently removed from them the mingled odour of shell-fish, bread and jam, and night dews. Then she made the sign of the Cross over him, and went to bed.

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The mackerel sky had not lied! The next morning was all glittering with sunlight under a steel blue sky swept clear by a September wind that tore up the sea and sent it pounding in great grey-green walls with spittering spraying tops to crash upon the shore. They were delicious to jump in, those great tawny breakers, and carried the jumper fifteen or twenty feet high before they hurled themselves with a roaring swish to cream along the beach. It was not a day to venture out far. Even good swimmers in such a sea contented themselves with going in only up to the armpits, waiting for the breaker to gather them up, then pass and leave them in flat, clear water ready for the next.

The Comtesse and Celine, tired from their journey the day before, sat and looked on, but Rupert, Val, Haidee, and Sacha, with half a dozen others, were in the water jumping like maniacs, diving through sheer solid green walls, disappearing under avalanches of foam, gasping, laughing, panting. Sometimes short, wild screams, almost as of terror, were jerked out of them as the breaker moved on them like some monster determined on destruction.

"*Quelle courage!*" said Christiane de Vervanne wonderingly. "And did you ever see anything like Madame Valdana screaming and jumping like a mad thing! She behaves with a great curiousness at times, that lady!"

"She is an original!" said Celine, who was fond of Val, and felt for her none of the antagonism which the generality of Frenchwomen, in spite of the *entente cordiale* and Edward the Peacemaker, always will feel for Englishwomen. True, Val was not English, but Celine was unaware of the fact.

In time Val gave Haidee the signal to come out. They had been in quite half an hour, the breakers appeared to be getting worse, and the wind had turned bitterly cold. Every one but the members of their party had already left the water. The Frenchmen, however, Sacha, Rupert, and the young officer, were disinclined to come out. Instead it seemed as though with the departure of the ladies they felt free to go farther in. Val stood in the creaming froth watching them for a moment before she raced Haidee to the cabins.

"I wish they would n't," she said uneasily, and suddenly threw out her voice in a coo-ee.

"*Venez*! *Venez*, you boys! You've been in long enough!"

The laugh and shout in Sacha's voice that came blowing back seemed to be snatched by the waves and torn to ribbons by the wind before it reached the beach. Val found herself shivering, and ran for the cabins. Just as she was dressed she heard a scream, and looking through the diamond-shaped hole in the door, saw Celine standing up stripping off her clothes to her knickerbockers, while the Comtesse stood by screaming and wringing her hands. A moment later every one was pouring out of the cabins, and Val and Haidee back in their wet bathing suits were running down to the water's edge. Only two heads were bobbing in the waves–the third had disappeared!

———

It was nearly half an hour later when they brought Sacha Lorrain's body to the beach. The delay came of no one knowing where he went down. Only Celine had seen the wave hit him full in the face and knock him backwards stunned, but when, followed by Val and Haidee, she swam out to the spot she had marked with her mind's eye, he was not there. They dived and swam under water all round the place. In that rough sea, with the waves growing every moment more violent and blinding, and churning up the sands, they could scarcely see a yard before them under water. And of course every moment was of value. Some one had run to the *digue* to get the lifeboat manned; some one else to Villa Duval for hot bottles. Azalie, her harsh face grown amazingly soft, stood laden with blankets. Fishermen joined the searchers in the water. Fishwives walked up and down the beach wringing their hands.

"The General's son! The Admiral's grandson! Monsieur Sacha!"

"Only the other day he was a *petit gars* in his sailor's suit. It was my man who taught him to swim."

"He made his first communion the same day as my Jean!"

"Ah! The gay eyes he had!"

Before they found him every one from the village was grouped on the beach. Sacha's father–General Lorrain–the curé, the doctor, the mayor. All stood waiting with strained, fearful faces, while the boat pulled up and down, battered by the waves. The swimmers exhausted would come up to rest in the surf, then enter again. The sunshine had gone, and the storm Sacha had prophesied the night before was creeping like a black beast across the horizon. It was a sailor in the lifeboat who spied the body at last, and diving down into the water heaved it over the side. Then they pushed the boat in through the surf, and poor Sacha

was taken out and laid on the sands he had trodden so blithely an hour before.

After the first half an hour every one knew there was no hope, though none voiced the knowledge. People just stood in silent groups a little way off from the central group that knelt, and swayed, and jerked and moved unceasingly. Rupert, white and exhausted, wrapped in his bathing toga, walked up and down the beach, stopping every now and then to try and get Celine away, but Celine would not come. She was rubbing Sacha's feet, and staring, staring at his cold, calm face. Every now and then she would say imploringly:

"Listen, Sacha! Sacha, my brother! *Veux tu écoute?*"

The General, very calm and stern-faced, stood at the head of the group. But sometimes he would go away suddenly and walk swiftly up and down with Rupert, for a moment or two, his head high, the little ribbon of honour a red dot on his upright breast, then return to look down again at the still, still face of his only son. He could do nothing. The operations were in the hands of competent men. The doctor from Barleville had come rushing in his motor to reinforce the Mascaret doctor. Val, when she was dressed, sat on a rock with her arms round Bran, and could not bear to see the General's eyes. Haidee and Christiane de Vervanne were crouched close by.

All the sailors and lifeboatmen were acquainted with the business of resuscitation, and there was no lack of relays. When one batch of men wearied another took its place. But all was in vain. The body of Sacha Lorrain lay there, very gallant in its youth and beauty, but his soul was gone beyond recall, and

"...might not come again
Homeward to any shore on any tide."

CHAPTER XIX

THE WAY OF NEMESIS

"Spring is dead,
And summer is dead.
Oh! my heart,
And, oh! my head!"

It had always been understood that after the summer Haidee was to go back to Paris to finish her education at the Versailles Lycée, while Val and Bran put in another healthy, if desolate winter at Mascaret. Now the latter part of the plan was impossible. The place was haunted, for Val, by poor Sacha's ghost. She knew not where to go except it were back to Paris. Bran was older now and his health established. Perhaps if she could find a governess for him he would get along all right while she worked! The need for work was imperative. Funds were down to zero. She knew not where to turn for money, except where nothing but the prospect of starvation for Bran would let her turn–to the Credit Lyonnais where lay the accumulating quarterly sums from Westenra.

So when the time came for Haidee to make her entrance at the Lycée, Bran and Val returned to Paris as well: the latter having written and re-engaged her old studio which was to let furnished.

Haidee was a changed girl. She seemed to have grown years older and hard as a stone. She had withdrawn herself from all intimacy with Val, and was even cold and harsh in her manner to Bran, who could not understand and was always saying wistfully:

"Don't you love me any more, Haidee?"

"Of course I do," she would answer impatiently.

"Then why do you look at me as if you 'd like to spank me on my tailie?"

"Oh, don't worry me, Bran. You make me tired!"

Mascaret seemed suddenly to have grown old and grey. A great coldness had settled upon the little village. Bitter winds swept every leaf from the trees and the sun was hidden in wet mists. The Villa Shai-poo, its flagstaff bare, its windows shuttered and barred, looked like a bereaved brooding mother folding arms on her grief. The occupants of Villa Duval were the last of the visitors to leave the village. Even Sacha had gone. His people had taken him back to Paris to lie in the family vault at Père La Chaise.

From Mascaret to Paris is an eight hours' journey on the worst line in France, and when they reached St. Lazare Station late in the afternoon they were all tired out, with hearts as heavy as lead. Val left Bran on Haidee's lap in the waiting-room while she went to unlock the trunks in the Customs' shed. There were crowds of travellers and loads of baggage to be gone through, for the boat-train from Cherbourg was just in also. Val, very weary, sat on the low table waiting, and staring about her with sad eyes full of trouble. Suddenly, standing quite near, she saw a face she knew. She could not immediately place the man in her memory but she was so sure of knowing him that she smiled and gave a little nod. Immediately he took off his hat and approached.

"I think you *almost* remember, Mrs. Valdana, but not quite," he said. The

moment she heard his voice she placed him. It was the French Jew who had sat next her on board the *Bavaric*.

"How do you do, Mr. Bernstein!" she said cordially, extending her hand. It was as though she had met an old friend. A look of keen pleasure came into his shrewd face.

"Such a memory must be a treasure to you as a journalist!"

"A journalist!" The words sounded strange in her ears. How many years ago since she was a journalist! Since she first met this man! A far absorbed look came into her eyes.

"I knew you in a minute," he said. "You have not changed at all, only grown a little"–("sadder," he was going to say, but substituted)–"younger."

"Ah! you have not changed either," she said dryly.

"You have even the same beautiful chain on you! I hope you have not forgotten your promise to give me first refusal if ever you want to sell it?"

A startled look flashed across her face.

"Ah, yes! My chain! You did say that, did n't you?" She stared at him meditatively. "What do you really think it is worth?"

"It would be hard to say right here." He had grown extremely American in accent and speech. "But if you would call and see me with it. Are you staying in Paris?"

"Yes."

He got out a card.

"Well, here is my office address–*Rue de Bach*. Call any time you like, but soon, as I am off to England again in three days."

"I will come to-morrow," she said. "In the meantime, would n't it be a good thing for you to take the necklace with you and examine it?"

She detached it from her neck with some little difficulty, for the clasp was a firm one, and held it out. The Jew looked at her with eyes in which for a moment there hovered a shade of something like pity that quickly turned to pleasure. A faint flush came into his face, and as he took the necklace he pressed her hand warmly. In America where he had been for the past five years such a trusting spirit as Val's was not met with every day in the week, and the *rencontre* refreshed his jaded Hebraic heart like wine.

"You *just* come," he said cordially, "and I bet I 'll have something good to tell you."

Immediately afterwards she was called to open her luggage, and bade him good-bye, telling him that she had some one waiting for her.

All the way of the long drive across Paris, she sat cogitating the question of the necklace. Even if it turned out to be of value, ought she to part with it? Would ill luck come to her for parting with her mother's mascot? Could any worse luck

than she already had, come to her, she began to ask herself in irony? Then she stopped and flung her arms round Bran. Yes; yes. Ill luck can always come to mothers. Mothers are never safe–nor fathers! She thought of Sacha lying still on the beach, and of that stern look on his father's face!

"Oh God! What are necklaces? ... what is money? ... what is anything against that pain?" she cried in her heart, and held Bran so tightly that he gave a yelp. Haidee, as always now, sat wrapt in a sullen reserve. Neither by look nor word did she exhibit the faintest sympathy for any troubles but her own. The only thing that seemed to interest her was the prospect of getting away from Val and Bran to her new life at school. It chilled Val's heart to have one who had been so close turn away from her thus. Even worse it was to see Bran's dear little efforts to be kind and friendly, snubbed. Every rebuff to him was like a blow in the face to Val. But she would not blame Haidee: the child was dear to Westenra. Besides she *was* only a child, and had suffered through Sacha's death. The shock of it coming on top of her wounded pride and little lost love-dream was enough to embitter her, thought Val, and blamed herself for ever having interfered.

"Such things are safe in God's hands! He takes care of children and drunkards. Who am I to have arrogated His rights?"

But Haidee's attitude acutely added to the misery and uncertainty of life at this time, and in the dusky shadows of the cab as it rumbled over to the Latin Quarter, Val held her boy's head against her breast and slow tears stole down her face and were drawn in between her lips, drying her throat with their salty flavour. Life too tasted salt and acrid. It seemed to her that in everything she had put her hand to she had failed and fallen short.

At *rue Campaigne première* the concierge almost embraced them, so delighted was she to see them again.

"Many people have been looking for Madame and wishing her back," she announced. "Not only artists but persons very *chic* also have been to call."

"Locusts!" said Val to herself. "Locusts and devourers all!" She knew those *chic* ones well. People who would not work themselves and could not bear to see others achieving. All artists have this class to contend with.

"I told every one you would be back this week. I know you owe no one money, and are not afraid, like some artists, of visitors," said the concierge cheerfully, and Val gave a groan. She resolved to be up early the next day and take Haidee off to school before there was a chance of meeting any early-fliers.

Before she went to bed, however, she unpacked her papers and found a little old parchment letter which dealt with the gift to her mother of the comfort necklace. It was written in Russian and neither she nor her mother had ever had the curiosity to have it translated, but Iolita had always been careful to preserve it, and it had marvellously survived all Val's many packings and wanderings. She

now sealed it up and forwarded it to Bernstein on the vague chance of its being of use in the valuation of the necklace.

At seven in the morning she received a *petit bleu* from him, evidently sent off the night before, but posted after tea, asking her to call without fail at three o'clock that afternoon. Immediately she sent out her *femme de ménage* to see if Bran's old governess, the young American girl, could take charge of him for the day, giving him lunch and tea at her mother's home. That matter satisfactorily settled, she started for the Gare Montparnasse with Haidee, en route for Versailles. It took the whole morning to settle Haidee in, pay her bills, and talk over with the Directrice her future course of study. Asked to lunch with the girls at the Lycée she would not stay. It was no pleasure to be with Haidee while she preserved that sullen, resentful manner. Life was grim enough! So Val took lunch in a little *crémerie* in the avenue de Paris, and returned to Paris by tram to the *Pont Royal*, where she dismounted and took a bus to Bernstein's number in the *Rue de Bach*.

He received her with a manner full of some suppressed excitement which quickly communicated itself to her.

"You have something to tell me?" she said, trembling with she knew not what fear. She had almost forgotten the necklace. With her curious sense of prevision it was revealed to her in some way that for the moment the Jew was arbiter of her destiny.

"Sit down," he said, pushing a comfortable chair towards her. "I want you to tell me the history of the necklace."

"Oh, as to that, Mr. Bernstein, I know very little. My mother gave it to me when she died. She had always worn it, ever since I can remember. She loved the beautiful little pictures, and she had an idea that it was not only a mascot against extreme poverty but also that it possessed some healing power in sickness. Many times when we were very poor indeed she was asked by people who liked curious things to sell it, but she never would. She always remembered that the old Russian man who gave it to her told her that in the day of trouble it would bring comfort to her and hers. He was a strange old man who lived in exile in Spain. He had committed some political crime and had fled from Russia; was very wealthy but lived with great simplicity in quite a poor part of Seville, and it was there that he made great friends with my mother and her father, who was blind but had been a great adventurer and soldier of fortune. The old Russian grew to love my mother–every one who knew my mother loved her. And one day he gave her the necklace. She took it because it was so pretty and yet did not seem very valuable. She never took jewels from people, though of course many were offered her, as to all dancers. But this man was very old and gentle and his gift seemed simple too. Only, he strangely insisted on giving her, with it, that paper which I sent

you last night. That was to show that it was a deed of gift, and no one could take it from her. But no one ever tried. He was assassinated a year or two later and all his papers and jewels mysteriously stolen, but my mother had left Spain then and was in London and no one ever claimed the necklace. She loved it and I love it. It hardly seems to me, Mr. Bernstein, after talking about it that I can part with it after all." She took it up and fingered the glowing, luminous beads tenderly.

"Not even for seventy-five thousand pounds!" he said quietly.

"What!" She stared at him. She thought he had gone mad.

"That is what I offer you," he said in a business-like tone.

"But...?"

"They are pearls of the first quality."

"Pearls!"

"Yes, the pale green colour is only a clever coating of paint that can be removed easily by the use of a certain spirit. Look here where I have worked at this one a little–I had to, you know, in order to be certain. I have n't harmed the painting."

He showed her a bead that had a picture of a desert on it, with tiny palms waving, and a primitive well. From the back of this he had removed the pale green colouring and there instead glowed the rich ivory-grey thick yet luminous substance of the pearl.

"I was pretty certain of it from the first, that is why I was so keen. It is one of the most wonderful necklaces the world has ever seen. It once belonged to the Russian royal family–as your old man in Seville did. He knew what he was doing when he gave it to your mother, and when he wrote out that paper, which was a deed of gift, witnessed by his old Chinese servant and the Russian consul. I had it translated first thing this morning. It will hold good in a court of law. It was the Chinese servant who painted the pictures on the pearls to hide and disguise them, and by Gee! he was an artist, that fellow. Only a trained eye like mine would have suspected the truth. And let me tell you, Mrs. Valdana, with any one but you I should have made use of my knowledge to my own advantage. It is my business to do so. Every business man is entitled to make use of the ignorance of those he deals with. That is business training, *we* have learned it and paid for it, the other party has n't. It is like a doctor's fees. You pay him because he knows better than you. He has been in training for years, and paid with his mind and his soul for that training, while you have been busy with other things–training in another direction perhaps. Well, the time comes when you need his training and you pay for it."

"I understand," said Val quietly.

He laughed.

"No, you don't understand at all. You could never understand such a

method. You have never got the best of any one in your life. That is why I am not going to use my method in your case. But I can tell you," he added with a grim smile, "it is a unique case. I never did such a thing before in my life and never will again. It is a good thing after all that there are not many people like you in the world, Mrs. Valdana. Jewellers with hearts might be ruined."

"It is very kind of you, but I can't accept this sacrifice of your interests," said Val, stammering a little, very embarrassed and uncomfortable. "I couldn't dream of accepting it," she added firmly.

"Don't worry–skip," said he laughing. "My sacrifice is only comparative. At the worst I stand to make anything between five to twenty-five thousand pounds out of the deal."

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure–seventy-five thousand pounds sure," he said dryly. "My philanthropy does n't run to such risks as that. It only means that if you had n't happened to be *you*, it would have been I who took seventy-five and the rest and you who got the speculative twenty-five."

"I think you are too kind," she said. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Don't try," he said blithely. "It will be a good deal all round, and everybody happy. That old Russian knew something when he told your mother to put it by for a day of need. Now I am going to fix the matter instantly and give you a cheque for half the amount on the Bank of France. The rest you shall have tomorrow. Sit down while I get busy."

She asked him to make out a clear statement of the sale, price, etc., and to give it to her. She had a special purpose in this. In the act of writing he looked up suddenly.

"By the way, talking of doctors, do you remember a man called Westenra who was on board the *Bavaric*?" He looked at her keenly, for he remembered very well the talk of her interest in that same man. But of the truth he had no inkling.

"Yes," she said slowly.

"Well, what do you think? I got appendicitis in New York last May, and my partner, who is an American, said to me, 'There is only one man for you, and he is the best man in New York; come along to his nursing home.' And when I got there who was his famous guy but our man from the *Bavaric*! What do you think of that?"

"I knew he was a surgeon," said Val evenly.

"Well, I tell you, I was surprised. He did me up bully. He 's got a fine place there in 68th Street. A tip-top show; everything running on wheels. And a corking, handsome girl that he 's going to marry, at the head of things."

He applied himself to his writing.

"Is he not married already?" said Mrs. Valdana, and he thought, as he had often thought before, what a strange melancholy cadence her voice possessed.

"A widower, I believe. The nurses told me so at any rate. You know what jolly gossips they are. But Miss Holland is a cut above the ordinary American nurse, that's why they 're so jealous of her, I guess, and ready to say that she 's been after the doctor for years, and only made a success of the place because of that. And why not, I say? That's what most women make a success of things for, isn't it, Mrs. Valdana–some fellow?"

"Or a failure of things!" said Mrs. Valdana, following some train of thought of her own. There was a deeper melancholy in her voice, and he thought how tired and ill she looked.

"You ought to get away for a change, Mrs. Valdana," he said, when he handed her the cheque and shook hands in farewell. "You look like a woman who 's come to the end of her tether."

She felt like it too. She went home like a woman who has heard the sentence of death pronounced upon her. In the Metro she lay back in her corner with closed eyes and whispered to herself.

"What is the good? What is the good? Oh, that one might let go–lay it all down and go to rest!"

But she knew she could not. There are always ropes to bind the hopeless ones fast to life–to pull them forth from the shadows back to the bleak grey road of life. Bran was her rope.

At the concierge's lodge she was informed that several visitors had called and gone, but one, more persistent, waited for her on her landing.

"He has been many times, poor soul," said she, "and one has not the heart to refuse him entrance. I think he is one of those whom Art has been too much for."

Val hardly heard her. A sort of numb dulness that had taken possession of her prevented her from feeling anything but a passing vexation that she might not be alone; heavily she climbed the stair and came at last to the door. A tall loose figure in grey tweeds rose up at her from the doorstep.

"Val! Will you forgive me for dogging you like this?" said a humble trembling voice she did not know. She had to peer into his face and examine him before it dawned upon her that it was Horace Valdana.

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"How did you find me?" she said dully. He was sitting doubled up in the most comfortable chair in the studio. But there was no comfort in his face or attitude. His arms, pressed in a curious way against his stomach, seemed holding

something there that hurt him.

"Bribed one of Branker Preston's office boys."

This simple statement was in keeping with all the rest he had uttered within the last hour. The man was changed. He was finished with lying and subterfuge because life had finished with him–or was finishing rapidly. The hand of death was on him at last, there could be no mistake about it this time. His doom was dight. He had lied and lied, but nothing he could now say availed, for his face told the truth. He was doomed, and by some strange act of justice the fell disease that had him in its grip was the very one he had only pretended to have years before when playing for her sympathy and money.

And Val, during that hour in which she sat listening to him not so much pleading his cause as merely stating his case in all its hideous pitifulness, came to the decision that she had no longer right nor reason for withholding such help as he begged. It had been a black, terrible hour.

Not less so because she was really touched by the look of suffering on his face, by those spasmodic jerks of his arms, and that habit of holding fast to something within that ate like a rat at his vitals, while sweat broke out on his forehead and a grey agony passed ghostlike across his face. Her heart could never harden itself against suffering, and she came nearer in those moments to forgetting the wrongs Valdana had worked upon her than ever before.

And it looked uncommonly like her duty to forgive this man and take care of him now that he so urgently needed it. There was no one else in the world to do it. For his mother was dead, and his secret buried with her. She had died very suddenly, the end doubtless brought on by the dreadful anxiety of having to carry that same secret unshared. Such provision as she could secretly make for him she had made, but it was only a slight one, and Valdana had long been at the end of his resources.

"And if you turn me down, Val, and you have every right to, I shan't blame you a bit. I shall see what the Seine can do for me–though I 'd rather it had been the old Thames."

A better man would have given the river first refusal perhaps, but Valdana had never set up for a hero, and was not going to begin now.

In the end her decision was clinched as often happens by something outside herself. A terrible spasm seized him, doubling him up right there before her, turning him grey, and jerking a groan of agony from the very depths of him. A fit of shivering succeeded, and it was plain that the man was not fit to be up and about. His place was in bed, under medical supervision.

With decision came energy, and in a few moments she had him lying on the large divan in which she and Bran were used to sleep, covered up, and a steaming cup of tea inside him. Then she ran downstairs to the concierge's lodge

and telephoned for a doctor. Afterwards she sent round to Bran's governess to ask them to keep him for the night. They were good responsible people, and she knew that she could trust them with her child–for a night at least, until she knew what further was to be done.

The doctor suggested a hospital; such a case, he said, needed constant nursing and care.

"Unless you are well enough off to have a nurse to help you," and he tried not to look doubtfully around him at the big bare studio, "I should think you had better try and get rid of the responsibility of this hopeless case by putting him into one of the English or American hospitals here. You are American, are n't you?"

"I have plenty of money," said Val, leaving his question unanswered, "and am quite able to have help in nursing him here. Please give me full instructions and information."

The doctor looked surprised, and more so when, after he had examined Valdana, she paid him his fee and took down the address of the best cancer specialist in Paris.

"Not that he can do any good. The case is too far advanced for operation–even I can tell you that. But he will be able to give the best treatment for alleviation until the end comes–that won't be long, I expect."

And the great specialist could do no more (as is more often the case than people guess) than confirm the verdict of the ordinary practitioner.

"A matter of months!" he said. "And they will be bad months–for others beside the patient. You had better send him to a hospital."

But Val shook her head. She had determined to accept this duty that was so clear to her; and there was money now to ease the way. Seventy-five thousand pounds! How neatly that sum had been inserted into the gap of circumstance by the clever hand of Fate!

CHAPTER XX

THE WAYS OF LIFE AND DEATH

"Oh them who plantest in the eyes and hearts of girls
The cult of wounding and the barbs of love!"

Translation from BAUDELAIRE'S Litany to Satan.

"Yes; she is very droll, your *belle-maman*," said the Comtesse de Vervanne. "To live in three *ateliers*! That is *fantastique*! Three big wide *ateliers*! one for herself, one for the little Bran, and one other for–*who*? Who is it that dwells in the third *atelier* across the landing, Haidee, my very dear?"

"Don't ask *me*," said Haidee sulkily, yet with alert eyes, for she was unable to contain her curiosity and amazement at the news. Val with three studios, who on their return to Paris had not possessed the price of a quarter's rent for one! And according to Madame de Vervanne they were big studios–no mere holes in the wall with skylights let in the ceiling. Parquet floors, beautifully shaded walls, wide galleries and French windows that led into balconies! It sounded like an Arabian tale. Haidee knew, as she knew most practical everyday things, how the rents of studios ranged, and she computed that the rent of such a one as the Comtesse described ran into not a centime less than three thousand francs a year. And Val with three! But the thing was incomprehensible, *impayable*–fantastic indeed as the Comtesse described it!

She was aware from the new address forwarded to her that Val had removed to the Lamartine Building in Boulevard Raspail, a great block of newly finished and very elaborate studios, which they in company with all the other hard-working and poor artists of the Quarter had long made a mock of, calling it the American Crystal Palace. It had lifts, a roof garden, balconies, baths, and all the luxuries that artists can never aspire to. Haidee on seeing the changed address had supposed that in the feeble condition of the family finances Val had been obliged to take one or two of the tiny rooms always to be let at the top of most big mansions, and which are usually rented out to domestics. The idea was not displeasing to Haidee. In the frame of mind she had adopted she liked to think of Val suffering discomfort and poverty. And she did not care either if Bran had to undergo the same thing, because she knew that if Bran's quarters were cramped Val would suffer far more than for herself. It will be seen that the dark caves in Haidee's soul had taken unto themselves infernal occupants, as dark caves will if the sunshine of loving-kindness is not let into them from day to day. It actually irked her to hear now from Christiane de Vervanne that Bran's room was as big as a schoolroom.

"About four times as big as this," said the Comtesse, casting an appraising eye round classroom B of the Pavilion Mauve. "With shelves all round, and an assortment of toys most wonderful. Even I could find myself very much amused with such toys. He has a *foxe* too."

"A fox!" shrieked Haidee.

"But yes–one of the little black and white ones with the tail of him cut off."

"Oh, a fox-*terrier*." Haidee turned away impatiently, but curiosity obliged her to turn back instantly to hear the rest of the amazing tale.

"At one end of this big nursery studio two white beds, one for the *petit* Bran and one for the American governess who is permanently installed and very devoted."

"A governess to sleep with Bran!" exclaimed Haidee. "Oh, no, that is too strong. I have never known Val let Bran sleep out of her sight!"

"But yes–it is all so *bizarre*. You must go home and see, my Haidee."

Indeed Haidee registered a resolution to write to Val that very night and ask for a *sortie* letter to be sent for her to come home for the following Saturday night and Sunday. She was still hating Val with a fierce hatred and had no desire to see her. But this was a thing that had got to be looked into.

"And," continued Madame de Vervanne, with her amiable air of finding everything extremely amusing, "who do I find installed in the studio of Madame Valdana taking tea, indeed making tea, as much at home as if he had collected the sticks for it on the Mascaret beach, but–who do you think, my Cabbage?"

"Goodness knows!" muttered the Cabbage. "Val is mad."

"Why, who but our *cher* Poulot, Rupert!"

"Rupert! She 's got *him*, now?" cried Haidee, and her face darkened as definitely as if some one had passed a blacking-brush over it.

"Yes," said the Comtesse softly, reflectively. "It is as you say. First poor dear Sacha, now the innocent Poulot. Who next?" She sighed.

There was a little silence. Then Haidee said:

"Rupert has been twice to see me, once on Sunday and once on Thursday."

"Ah! and did he tell you how many times he went to see Madame Valentine?"

"No, indeed, and I don't care anyhow," was the retort given with perhaps unnecessary fierceness.

"But," cooed Madame soothingly, "one should care a little, *chère* Haidee, for the sake of the poor good Poulot. She is no doubt a very fine lady, the charming Mistress Valentine, but we do not wish to see Rupert suffer as Sacha did."

The subtle words bit into Haidee's heart like acid on an old wound. She had been very much touched at the Comtesse's act in writing to the Directrice for permission to call at the Lycée. And it was very gratifying that Madame de Vervanne should have arrived in a motor which also contained a young lieutenant of Dragons in uniform, and which stood growling and puffing at the Lycée gates, filling all the girls with excitement and envy. Haidee's vanity too was greatly flattered by the tender and confidential manner of the older woman, who never forgot also to tell her how pretty and clever she was and to give recognition to the

fact that she was now seventeen. So different to Val's manner of treating her as though she were still a child and quite unable to arrange her own destiny. A curious, fresh access of fury was aroused in Haidee's breast by the Comtesse's tale of Rupert's devotion to Val. Rupert had been to see Haidee twice. He was stationed at Fontainebleau, doing his second year of military service, and when he came to the Lycée accompanied by his sister Celine he was wearing the ordinary private soldier's uniform, and looking very handsome in the gay red and blue. All the girls had admired him immensely, and Haidee herself liked him extraordinarily better than in Mascaret. While Celine talked with some of the girls she knew, Rupert and Haidee had wandered about the gardens, talking about Sacha and little incidents of their happy time together that now, looked at from a little distance of time, seemed wonderfully perfumed and beautified. The remembrance of these two walks with him made Haidee burn with sudden indignation against Val.

The Comtesse had begun to talk about other things, made Haidee show her all round Pavilion Mauve and the big roomy schoolhouse, then take her out into the grounds, along the paths that wound amongst other Pavilions, the Red, the Blue, the Rose–and over broad lawns that in the soft mild air of Versailles were green, even in winter. In the middle of one of the lawns was a little lake bordered by strange-leaved dwarf-like bushes that in summer were thick with crimson flowers, but which now stretched out frail black branches to the silent fountain. Dead leaves rustled and cracked under the Comtesse's high-heeled shoes as they walked. She waved her hand at the well-kept tennis courts.

"But you are charmingly well here!" she cried, in her gay little soprano. "Oh, to be young again and lovely like you, my child! Not all the Mistress Valdanas could take away from me what I wanted!"

She returned meditatively to the former subject.

"But who is it that resides in the third *atelier* think you, Haidee? Curiosity consumes and burns me. There is a door leading into it from Madame's *atelier*. Twice she left us to go swiftly and return. Once when the door opened I heard a man cough. Tell me?–it could not be the mysterious papa returned, could it?"

Haidee gazed at her blankly.

"There *is* a mysterious papa, is it not?" If the curiosity of the Comtesse had not always been pleasantly glossed by pretty childish gestures and rippling laughter, it might have seemed vulgar. Haidee was not clever enough to realise this, and she was staggered by the whole strange story, which sounded unlike Val in every detail, but even in her amazement she was not going to confide to a comparative stranger the tangled domestic history of the family. If she had no feeling but one of resentment for Val, she could still be loyal to Westenra.

"Oh yes, there is a papa–Bran's papa of course, and my guardian; but it

would n't be him."

"That makes even more *bizarre* the affair," said the Comtesse lightly. Then, knowing that she had said enough for the time being, she dismissed the subject and shortly afterwards departed with her Dragon.

As soon as she was gone Haidee, who was nothing if not prompt, sat down and wrote to Val for a *sortie* letter for the coming Sunday. She intended to investigate this mystery of the three studios for herself–likewise the story of Rupert's entanglement.

But to her acute annoyance the opportunity was not afforded her. A letter from Val came by return to the effect that she was too busy and worried to be able to receive Haidee that term. As a palliative she sent a parcel of books, an enormous box of exquisite chocolates from Boissier's, and a dozen tennis balls. Haidee was a devotee of tennis and always complained bitterly of the lack of balls, for tennis balls are outrageously expensive in France. These Val sent were of the best quality and must have cost at least three francs each. The mystery deepened.

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During the bad time of worriment and weariness with Valdana, Rupert was indeed a great stay to Val. Being stationed so close to Paris he was able to come often to the Lamartine Studios, and she was always glad to see the blue friendly eyes that had in them some of the space and compassion of sea and sky. There was something so loyal and reliable about him that she had actually told him the truth about Valdana, and been definitely aided by his sympathy and understanding. His influence was good, too, for Bran, who was beginning to reach that stage when the society and point of view of men means a great deal in a boy's life. And Bran had always had a special *penchant* for boys and men. It gave Val many a sharp pang, not of resentment but of sorrow, to observe in him a yearning for his father, for she knew that whatever she was able to do for her son, she could never assuage that longing, never give him the masculine companionship and influence of which he had been robbed. It grieved her terribly to think that in her son's life those lovely pliable years, when bonds between father and son are so simply but strongly fashioned from the one's weakness and the other's strength, were passing week by week, month by month. Glad enough then was she that he had at least the friendly brotherly affection and influence of so clear-hearted a boy as Rupert.

With Valdana she never allowed Bran to come into contact. Indeed, Valdana from the first was practically oblivious to those about him. His race was very nearly run. He had come to Val in the last lap of it, upheld by God knew

what strange resolution to make her share to the bitter end their disastrous partnership. Having found her he seemed content to let life wreak her pitiless worst on him before he was allowed to depart to that death which he had once ignobly shirked, but whose embrace he now longed for with the ardour of a lover. His sufferings, indeed, were terrible. In the centre of the great lofty room he lay and wrestled with an agony that was almost unceasing. But he was well aware of being surrounded and enfolded by every comfort. Softened light, flowers, music, good nursing, everything that money and kindness could supply to alleviate pain was at hand, and he knew he had Val to thank, and vaguely wondered how she achieved it, but did not care much as long as she was by his bedside, in the pale blue linen overall she always assumed as soon as she entered. Cancer may or may not be infectious–that is one of the problems science has not yet solved–but with Bran so near she took no risks, changing even her clothes on entering and leaving the sick-room, which was an entirely self-contained *appartement* and *atelier*. She had been so fortunate as to obtain in the newly-finished building the whole of the immense floor of three studios. It rejoiced her to be able to give her Brannie one entirely to himself and his governess. That was one of the joys the seventy-five thousand pounds had brought her. She had already spent some hundreds of it on furnishing and the heavy expenses entailed by Valdana's needs. But the rest she had been wise enough to allow the kindly Bernstein to invest for her, and her mind was at rest at last and for the first time in her life from the gnawing tooth of poverty. She was doing no writing. Not only was her life, divided between Bran and the sick man, too full for such a thing, but at last she could permit herself the luxury of refraining from writing when she had nothing to say. That forced work in Mascaret had sickened her soul. Now she could let her creative faculty rest for a while at least and give undivided attention to this duty of hers to Valdana.

As for having Haidee home, it was out of the question. She felt herself unable to go into the matter of her relation to Valdana with any one so antagonistic to her as Haidee was at present. She knew that the girl still cherished bitterness against her for poor Sacha's defection, and she could only hope that with the coming of other interests, this feeling would pass away and allow a return to the old footing of comradeship and affection. She let Haidee profit too by the necklace windfall, sending her presents of music, books, and the countless pretty trifles that girls set store on. Bran went weekly with his governess to see her, and Rupert, urged by Val, went very often too. Rupert knew all about the affair of Sacha. Not from Val, but because by a strange coincidence Sacha had opened his heart to his cousin the night before his death. The two young men had shared the same room at Shai-poo, and in the silences of the night shared many confidences also. That was how Rupert had come to know the truth, and

to keep his reverence and affection for Val unshaken.

"I love the sea, I love the music of the violin, and I love you–all with the same love," he told her one day. He had found her weeping alone in her studio. The strain of Valdana's hideous suffering and Westenra's long silence sometimes racked her so that she was glad of the relief of tears. "You know what Jean Paul Richter said of music,–'Thou speakest to me of things which in all my endless life I have found not–and shall not find';–that is what you and the sea and the violin say to me."

She blessed him for that, not from gratified vanity, but for comfort in the thought that others besides herself suffered from the cry of those things "that we find not nor shall find."

"Dear boy," she said, and stroked his hair as if he had been Bran while he knelt by her. "I love you too–as if you were my son, as your mother must have loved you, Rupert."

Rupert kissed her hand in a very un-sonlike fashion and looked at her lips.

"I want to comfort you," he said, "to take pain out of your life."

"You cannot do that, Rupert." She quoted gently–"'Pain is the Lord of Life–none can escape from its net.'" Something in his eyes made her go on steadily. "My pain is chiefly caused by love. I love my little Brannie's father, Rupert–there can never be any other man in my life. He speaks to me of all those things which I have found not nor shall find!"

Rupert bowed his head again over her hand, his boyish mouth drawn in a straight line. It was unfortunate that the Comtesse, whom the *femme de ménage* had admitted to the entrance hall, should have come softly in at that moment.

"Ah, the nice Poulot!" she twittered merrily. "Taking the lessons of deportment from the *charmante* Madame Val!" And burst into happy laughter.

But she had not called it "deportment" when she reported the episode to Haidee a few days later.

"He is gone, our Poulot," she said mournfully. "She has put into bandages his hands and foots–a slave!"

"He did not seem very bandaged last time he came out here," answered Haidee rather snappishly, not even amused any more by the Comtesse's weird English.

"Ah, but you do not see him with her, my child! It is amazing how she finds the time and energy for so much 'flirt'!–She is enormous!–and with the sick lover in the third *atelier* all the same time!"

"The sick lover! Comtesse, what *do* you mean?"

"Ah, of course, I did not tell you yet. The concierge it was who informed me that Madame Valdana occupies herself with a sick gentleman in the third room. The doctor every day, and always fruit and flowers arriving. Is it not romantic?

But always silence and the sealed-up lip from Madame Valdana. She takes no one into her heart where the secret is, except Poulot."

Haidee was now looking frightfully miserable. These visits from Madame de Vervanne were a disturbing element in her life and almost she wished they could be dispensed with. She was working hard to try and pass her *baccalauréat* and achieve her *diplôme*, but a visit from the Comtesse always left her disinclined to grapple with school work. And this news about Rupert and Val irritated her intensely. What business had Val to let Rupert get so fond of her? It was a shame, a wrong to her–Haidee. First Westenra, then Sacha, now Rupert–just when he was so nice to her, and she was beginning to like him so much. She ground her teeth in childish rage and jealousy. The Comtesse put an arm round her waist and they walked together down the paths of the Lycée gardens, now dank and sodden by winter rains.

"Tell me ... could not the papa of Bran make her mind her own business, which is surely to nurse the sick friend and leave poor Rupert alone? I think he will not even pass his exam, for the Colonials if he had not a mind at ease. You know he is working for that now, so that when he has done his two years' service he will be eligible if he still wishes to enter."

How his mind would be eased by a break with Val she did not specify. Nor why she had developed such fervour for the hitherto detested Colonial infantry scheme. But Haidee was in no state of mind to thrash out these intricacies. Worked up by the subtle Frenchwoman's malice into a state of teeming anger against Val, and blind to the fact that she was being used as a catspaw, she allowed herself to consider the Comtesse's suggestion, and in the end wrote Westenra a letter which contained many bitter and cruel things about Val, and gave him fuller information concerning the three studios than even the story of the Comtesse justified. That she was ashamed of herself for her action, and that it was only a passing spirit of vindictiveness which impelled it, did not make the letter as a document any the less poignantly indicting.

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And that same evening Val was watching the final effort of Valdana's troubled spirit to break from the bonds of the body and go forth upon its way. Ate Dea had run him to earth. The Hand whose fingers he had slipped through on the veldt was closing in on him inexorably, but with a worse thing in it now than a soldier's short sharp doom. It was only a matter of hours when he must join those others from whom he had fled–but with a difference! The difference between the lonely, painful death from an atrocious malady, and an end worthy of a man, face to the enemy, his comrades about him–

"Fighting hard and dying grimly,
Silent lips and striking hand."

"It seems hardly worth while now to have shirked!" he said quietly. "Just for a few more years crawling up and down the earth! I wonder why we dread old Death so, Val? After all he 's the best pal we have–always waiting so patiently and faithfully; whatever we do, nothing estranges him from his purpose. He never gets mad and takes our gift and gives it to some other fellow–the gift of rest, darkness, sleep!"

Like many a blackguard Valdana cherished in the deeps of him odds and ends of noble thought and chivalrous intention garnered from the lines of some man-poet. Lindsay Gordon always was the waster's poet, and always will be. He helped Horace Valdana to die now with gratitude instead of curses in his mouth.

"Tho' the gifts of the Light in the end prove curses,
Yet abides the gift of the Darkness,
Sleep!"

His mind had grown strangely clear. He lay upon the wide divan in the centre of the room, and his eye roving from object to object, unusual recognition in its glance. A Godin stove glowed in one corner of the great room; the fire in it had never been allowed to die out since the first occupation of the studio. It filled the room with a summery warmth that drew out to the last drop the fragrance of a jar of Sicilian lilac that stood in the open window; and brought lovely memories of the veldt from an enormous bunch of mimosa stuck in a blue pot on the piano. So warm was the climate of the room that a balcony door stood perpetually open, even on a night such as this, when the outside air sliced against the warmth of the body with the keenness of a scimitar. Shaded lights threw faintly-tinted shadows in far corners. The only objects that showed clear in the dimness of the big shadowy room were the busts and figures of dead white clay–a gigantic head of Tolstoi, bearded, rugged; a perfect reproduction of Houdon's bust of Napoleon as First Consul; some little Donatello angels.

"It 'll be cold lying here in a Paris cemetery, Val!" said Valdana musingly.

His eye rested reflectively on the face of *L'Inconnue*, hung on a nail against a pale green-and-rose Persian rug–that lovely mask taken from the dead face of a young unknown girl, fished out one morning from the river's muddy waters. She had cast her secret into the bosom of the Seine, and that kind, wicked, cruel, voluptuous, motherly old river had kept it for ever, so that to this day the world still wonders and longs to know who the girl was, and why with youth and beauty

and all the gifts of life stamped upon her she chose to go out into the dark with that little radiant smile on her lips, as if in the last instant she had thought on some wondrous hour into which all the beauty of life had been compressed–and was glad to die because that hour could never come again.

Val, who had often studied the quietly smiling tragic face, said once:

"It was some man's eyes she was thinking of just before she sprang! That little smile was meant for just one man in the world."

"Yes: it'll be cold lying here in Paris," repeated Valdana thoughtfully. "I wish now I 'd stayed with those fellows at Platkop. They have the sunshine, and they 're all together."

Val smoothed the bright rug that lay over him with her thin nervous hands.

"Don't bother now, Dan."

It was many a long year since she had called him by that name which pity now wrung from her.

"I wonder why I should have been the only one not wounded?" He looked at her critically. "All the others had got it somewhere, but I had n't a thing, not a spot! And there was n't a bullet left among those blasted Boers: it was easy enough to slink off as the evening came on ... but some of the fellows looked at me as I undid that door. No one said anything, but they *looked* at me, Val."

Val hid her eyes.

"One or two of them thought I was going to try for some water from the spruit near by–God! it was as hot as hell there all that poisonous day–and no water! Yes, some of them thought ... but Brand, my sub, he knew. I saw the look he gave as I crept to the door–and the smile–half his face was shot away, but he could still smile–he knew I did n't mean to come back—-"

"Don't talk about it any more," whispered the woman by his bedside.

In a swift vision she saw the shot-away face with the brave scornful smile on it, and longed to hold it to her breast and kiss its broken bloody lips. Oh, if men knew how women consecrate those brave, quiet acts done in lone places with none to pity or to praise!

"Whose face is that hanging smiling there over your writing-desk?" His eyes were on another death-mask now, the most wonderful the world has ever seen. Keen, salient, proud yet gentle, all the arrogance and lust of power and good living gone–only peace, the traces of physical pain, and a gentle irony about the lips, left only ideality and lofty hope stamped above the brows. The world has one thing for which to thank the Corsican doctor Antommarchi–that he took the cast of Napoleon's face "when illness had transmuted passion into patience, and death with its last serene touch had restored the regularity and grandeur of youth." That was the face from which Horace Valdana could not keep his eyes.

"By Jove!" he whispered at the last. "He had the same thing as I 've got. He

must have known the same hell as I am suffering now. Who am I that I should complain!"

The thought helped him to "overcome the sharpness of death," and die with greater dignity than he had lived.

A few days later, Val, with Rupert Lorrain standing by her side in the cemetery of Montparnasse, dropped a few violets, flowers of compassion and forgiveness, into an open grave, and Rupert threw down a friendly sod.

Already it was spring. The winter of pain and misery was past. On the graves crocuses were thrusting out their little sheathed heads, symbolic proof of the sweetness that comes forth from sorrow.

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CHAPTER XXI

LONELY WAYS

"I have lived long enough, having seen one thing, that love hath an end."–A. C. SWINBURNE.

But for the time being she went no farther than to the South of France. Not less than she, Bran, after wintering among houses, needed open skies. They were of one blood, and the longing for blue was on them both–the blue of space and sea and sky. And nowhere better in Europe can that blueness be found in April and May than down along the Mediterranean coast. At first they went to Ste. Maxime, a little village pitched in green and golden beauty beside St. Tropez's azure bay, and from where at dawn the sun can be seen shooting up from his golden bath just behind Corsica. For just several seconds the little island, cradle of the world's greatest general, shows like an inky mound against an aureole of yellow light that swiftly turns to rose, for another moment the sun rests on the peak of its highest mountain, then Corsica seems to sink and disappear into the sea until the next day's dawn.

Val did not stay long at Ste. Maxime. She wanted a villa where she could have Bran to herself, after the long months of enforced absences from him. If her unexpected fortune could not give her the delicious joy of absolute companion-

ship and intimacy with her child it was useless indeed! Besides, in hotels children are swiftly spoilt by people who do not afterwards have to bear the brunt of the spoiling, and Val did not mean Garrett Westenra's boy to become weakened by the petting of Frenchwomen who love to treat other people's children like pretty lap-dogs–to be caressed in certain moods and thrust aside in others.

So after a week or two during which an agent busied himself on her behalf, she moved on to Cannes, and took possession of an ideal villa he had found for her. It lay above the road between Cannes and Cap d'Antibes, but perched high beyond the dust and din of motors; on the right, La Croisette winged away into the sea, on the left, a gaunt shoulder of the Alps with a shawl of snow draped on it showed keen against the mistral-swept skies; while about it, in all the tall beauty and tropical splendour of Riviera foliage, clustered a garden full of dreams. A garden of winding paths edged by ivy leaves lying flat, and little wild strawberry plants thrusting up coral fruits; tall palms and cacti glowing with flaming candelabra, waxen-leaved creepers, branching giant-aloes, delicate fern-like mimosa leaning tenderly above beds of violets, large as purple butterflies, great patches of poppies, massed clumps of heather white as snow and bright with happy bees; and everywhere roses, roses drowsing in the sunshine, perfuming the air!

It was a garden in which coolness could be found on the sultriest day of summer, but for spring days the open space before the wide white steps and pillared porch was ideal. The floor of this space was of gravel, bleached by rain and a southern sun to snowy whiteness. A clump of tall pines spiking against the sky afforded a webwork of flickering shadows under which to sit as in a balcony hung over the blueness of Golfe Juan. Always there are ships in that bay of molten turquoise; red-sailed fishing boats; leaden-coloured warships, with their grim air of power, lying at anchor; yachts spreading white wings for flight.

The house itself, like nearly all Riviera villas, was square built, and standing alone would have been less beautiful than solid and comfortable-looking. But in its jewelled setting of leaf and gold and blazing colour, the walls of dead white gave a note of quiet beauty and peace. A long balcony from the upper rooms dripped with clematis, and all round the house, high on the walls, large medallions bore the names of the days. Alternately with these were other medallions on which were painted on a pale blue ground white and scarlet-winged storks, flying, flying like the days.

The Villa of Little Days, a poetess who had lived and dreamed there named it. She was a famous woman, a friend of Gambetta, who in his lifetime came often to visit her. It was she who had planned the wild and tender beauty of the garden. Val blessed her often in the spring months she and Bran passed there.

The domestic arrangements were, from her point of view, ideal. A garage across the road pertained to the villa, and had attached to it a cottage which was

occupied by a man and his wife whose services were at the disposal of those who rented the villa. The man minded the great garden all through the sultry summer, dug, gathered, transplanted, and cut firewood from the pines for the log fires of winter; also he could drive a car, and did not disdain to clean a window. His wife Marietta, a big-boned gay-faced Marseillaise, with the bloom of a peach on her cheeks, and rings of garnets in her ears, made short work of such cleaning as a villa bathed in perpetual sunshine and purified by sea-breezes needed. Incidentally, she could serve up a tureen of *bouillabaisse* of a flavour and fragrance to seduce the heart of a king and convert a vegetarian from his amazing ways.

Bran, happy as always within sight of the sea, raced the garden with his "fox," or sat under the pines with his mother, listening to the pine needles growing, or hearing stories of the Greek heroes who, on the shores of the Mediterranean, seem to be more real and comprehensible than in any other part of the world. Perhaps because old Greece and the Ionian Isles are so near at hand! Indeed, the lure of the horizon is so great on that fair shore, that if she had been alone in the world nothing could have held Val from taking train to Marseilles, and from thence as fast as ship could bear her. But Bran and his well-being bound her fast like Prometheus to his rock. The rush of trains and the throb of ships' machinery are no furtherances to health in young children. It is in quiet gardens and comfortable homes that the young heart expands and the little body shoots and flourishes. The garden of the veldt was what she could most have wished for him–that wild garden where her own heart had grown its dreams. But it was far, far, and only to be reached by such long journeying as the child was not yet fit for. So she stayed with him in the southern garden, and if her own heart sailed away sometimes in the ships that slid over the horizon down the side of the world, her body remained to guard Westenra's son and to give him what she "possessed of soul."

Her only regret was that Haidee too could not be revelling in the golden southern sunshine. But Haidee was studying at Versailles with quite extraordinary energy. The exams. were close upon her, and Val was far from wishing to divert her attention from the goal. She had never failed to impress upon the child the importance of mental equipment that is grounded on solid instruction. She could see for Haidee too, where she had never seen for herself, that to leave the mind and heart and soul open and waiting for some man to walk in and fill them is to court disaster. There is no man in the world big enough to fill the heart and mind and soul of a woman worth considering. The thing is to fill them first with beauty and learning and wisdom, and let the man come in after, if there be room. For a woman to stake everything on a man is to play a losing game. But another love in the soul, be it music, literature, art, mathematics, or the maternal instinct, is insurance against total beggary. If by great good chance a man's love brings

happiness, then the other love is an added glory; if misery comes the other is a refuge.

Poor Val! She had not followed the creed herself, but she saw well enough the wisdom of it for Haidee, and had tried to instil into her the prudence of going nap on Art rather than on Heart. She wanted Haidee to benefit by her own failures, and never ceased from urging and encouraging her on towards a goal. A further instigation she used freely was the mention of the great pride and pleasure Westenra would feel in her successful passing of the "*Bacho*" and gaining of the *diplôme*.

But Haidee, in response to all letters, kept on saying nothing. Even to Val's promise of a trip to the South as soon as the exams, were over, she made no more than a sullen acknowledgment. But Val knew from the reports of the professors that she was working hard.

Most people flee from the Riviera during the summer months. Of course it is hot, but that is not the reason. With the advent of the hot weather the Riviera becomes very quiet. The "season" is over, and the fashionable birds fly away. But as a matter of fact the charm of the place is only ripening. The blaze and beauty of the scene become riper and more gorgeous. The white villas disappear into their gardens, submerged by a flood of green leaves that hide and protect them from the blaze and dust, though of the last there is less than in the season, for the motors cease from troubling and the siren is at rest. The sweet silence of the night is unbroken by blood-curdling shrieks or jerked-out hoots from the cars of those rushing to, or returning furiously from, Monte Carlo. Of course in the bungalow type of villa built to catch the spring sunshine, and with no well-treed garden in which to shelter from fierce heat, it would be unwise and uncomfortable to stay through the summer; but in the Villa of Little Days there was every comfort within and without, and nothing to irk except the occasional bite of a mosquito that had intrigued its way through wired windows and mosquito netting. The days passed in a great idle peace. For Val was frankly idle–with her hands. With her mind she was always working and giving forth to Bran. But with her hands, for the first time in her life since she had sat idle under the shadow of a buck-sail imbibing her father's vagabond creeds, she did nothing. And, even as in those days Gay Haviland had handed on to his child what was his of greatness of heart and soul, so in the southern garden during long torrid days of tropical peace, when under the tingling ether thought seemed to detach itself in bright fountains from the sluggish mass of lesser things, Val gave of all that was best in her to Westenra's son. The pity of it is that all mothers cannot have this unlimited leisure to give to their children in the days when character is forming for life.

In a sense, too, Val was at peace for the first time since her early marriage. The menace and terror of Valdana's existence, the load she had carried on her

conscience for years with regard to her position in Westenra's life, all had been swept away by the hand of Death, the greatest friend! And she was free of Westenra too. Whether it were true or not that he intended to marry Miss Holland she would never lay claim to his life or name again, never return to that life in New York that crippled her soul, robbed her of her individuality, and turned her into a useless, incapable creature whom she herself despised.

The decision was not even hers to make–at least so it seemed to her. He had made it for her in Jersey. And it was all old grief and pain! She had learned during those terrible months of nursing Horace Valdana to hush her heart to rest. She had had her chance with Garrett and his love, and failed, it seemed. Even in spite of Valdana's resurrection she would surely, had she been worthy, have kept Westenra's love? As it was, love had done with her, she would never feel passion again.

"All her red roses had fallen asleep,
All her white roses were sleeping!"

The brave thing was to face the fact and abide by it. Besides, she had Bran. A woman who is a mother can never be quite lonely and unhappy. One little chapel of the heart may remain empty and dismantled but all other spaces in it are filled to overflowing. And ... away at the back of Val's mind a dream had begun to simmer and waver and take form–a dream of a waggon on the veldt, with Bran. Some day she would return to work and wandering–she knew that now.

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In the autumn Haidee passed her exams, brilliantly, getting honours with her "*Bacho*" and a first-class *diplôme*. It was a great achievement, and Val was deeply pleased, knowing how the news would gratify Westenra. She wrote at once sending Haidee a beautiful gift in celebration of the success, and asking when she should come to Paris and fetch her South. For by this time she had discovered that she could trust Marietta with Bran, and had no fear of leaving him for a few days.

But Haidee wrote back coldly, barely acknowledging the gift, and stating that she wished to stay on at the Lycée working at her music and painting until December, when Celine Lorrain and her father were coming down to Marseilles to see the last of Rupert, who, having finished his two years' military service, was going out to Morocco. Val made no objection to this plan, but her heart was chilled at this open preference for strangers. The Lorrains were good friends, of

course, but after all she and Haidee had been through poverty and sorrow and sickness together. She looked upon the girl, if not as her child, at least as her younger sister. Was it possible that she still cherished resentment about Sacha? At any rate Val was too proud to make any further advances. She knew Haidee to be one of those natures that are not softened by kindly advances, but rather inclined to hold the advancers in contempt for their pains–a fault of youth that passes with a wider knowledge and experience of humanity.

When she had gone to say good-bye to Haidee before leaving Paris, it was with the intention of telling her the wonderful news about the necklace, and also as much as was necessary of the return and death of Valdana without exactly revealing the identity of the latter and his relationship to herself. However, Haidee's bleak manner had nipped untimely in the bud the good intention. Val could not afford to take into her confidence any one who was not entirely sympathetic, and though she did not believe that Haidee would be capable of deliberate disloyalty, yet she realised that the latter, in spite of the grown-up airs, was only a child, and as such liable to be swayed by moods in which she might fling a confidence to the four winds, and repent her action when it was too late. And the secret of Horace Valdana's resurrection had not been kept these many years for it to be lightly betrayed by a child. As for the matter of the fortune gained by the sale of the Comfort necklace, Val had been obliged to strangle her longing to tell Haidee all about it, for how could she suppose that any one who showed such an almost offensive indifference to her affairs was really burning with curiosity to know the meaning of her suddenly changed circumstances? Haidee hid her feelings well. Thus it came to pass that a secret which Val would gladly have shared and felt redoubled pleasure in the sharing, had been kept of necessity to herself. She had not even told Rupert, for she felt that apart from the children no one else before Westenra had a right to know. And since Westenra showed no further interest in her–well, it was no one's affair.

When the week came for the expected arrival of Haidee, what was Val's intense surprise to receive a letter from her saying that she should not be coming down with the Lorrains. For one thing, she wrote, General Lorrain was ill and Celine could not leave him, so that Rupert would be travelling alone. For another, she added casually, as if prompted by an afterthought, "Garry is in Paris and we are going about a great deal together. It is possible that he may come down South–*to see Bran* before he returns to New York. But this is not quite certain. I will let you know later."

Westenra in Europe for the first time for four years, and this was the way he notified her! Val was stricken to the soul. Never had she so acutely realised the position to which he had relegated her. A mere minder of his child, and in some respects not so good as that, for a nurse or governess would at least have re-

ceived kindly and courteous letters from her employer. This casual second-hand message seemed to be the cruellest of any of the blows her heart had suffered since first she threw in her lot with Garrett Westenra. And at first she sank under it. It was the little more that is too much. But presently with some of her old courage she braced herself to the new situation. If she had got to meet Westenra she would be ready for it. She had not trained her soul for years to no avail. She had not lived with austerity, stood apart from temptation, fought spiritual battles, for nothing. A strong rock was at her back for the hour of need, a rock she had been forming for herself in all the years since she last saw Westenra. She would be ready when he came to receive him with dignity and strength untainted by resentment or any petty feeling.

But before that time Rupert the blue-eyed and ardent, in whom she recognised so much of her own nature, came bursting into the Calendar of Little Days. She welcomed him with all the pleasure a woman feels in seeing those whose affection for her is sure and unquestioning, who doubt not her loyalty and pure intention.

His light-heartedness seemed to have waned a little, and his pleasure at having attained his majority and freedom to depart where he listed was not so great as Val had expected. He explained the reason succinctly.

"It is all very well to be rich and free, Val, but I am very alone in the world." His eyes resting in hers took an expression of intense melancholy.

"That is the curse the gods lay upon us wanderers, Rupert," she said sadly.

"'Lover of the Lone Trail, the Lone Trail waits for you!'

"Yet it is that loneliness we are always trying by our own efforts to alleviate."

"There is only one person in the world who can alleviate it for me."

"And you have not found her yet," interrupted Val promptly, and before he could say what she read in his eyes, continued swiftly: "I want you to tell me all about Haidee. You saw her recently, didn't you? How is she looking?"

"Very pretty," said Rupert gloomily. "She is a great beauty, that Haidee, and looks no longer like a brown pony."

"Brown pony?"

"Ah, I should not have said that! It was one of poor Sacha's *blagues* that she always looked like a wild pony with her brown mane flying ... but she is very different now and quite cured of Sacha, with her hair put up and long frocks and the self-possessed manner of twenty."

"Has she really got her hair up?"

"Yes, indeed. I saw her with the guardian. He is a fine fellow, is n't he? She

is much in love with him. I think they will marry."

"Marry!" Val started as if a missile had struck her. A moment later she controlled herself and laughed–an odd, nervous laugh. "Why, Rupert, how silly you are! She is practically Dr. Westenra's child. He has brought her up from a baby."

"That makes nothing. She is not a baby any more, and she does n't look at him like a father. I prophesy to you that Haidee marries him."

He was arrested by Val's expression.

"You do not care for such a marriage?"

"It is out of the question to discuss such a thing," she said firmly, but her face was ashen.

Rupert examined her acutely. He did not know of course that he was speaking of Bran's father.

CHAPTER XXII

THE WAY OF LOVE

"The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul."–EMERSON.

The Lemprière hat Haidee had on, though it was only a travelling hat of soft silk, turned up in front with one orchid, must have cost at least six guineas, but Westenra had paid it without blenching. It seemed to him that Val had trained him to buying hats and choosing pretty gowns, though the strange thing, if he had analysed it, was that he had never bought Val a hat or gown in his life. Yet because of Val he knew that women needed these things, and because life had gone exceedingly well with him in the last few years, he bought for Haidee all she asked, and made no demur. In America he always travelled second, but now he and Haidee were in a first-class carriage, en route for the South of France, and it seemed natural enough.

Haidee had certainly come into her own, and it was a goodly inheritance of beauty. With her hair *coiffé* and the hat with the orchid (a wonderful imitation of a rare species found in the Congo forest), she was a lovely dryad come to town.

The cut of her tan shantung suit betrayed a master hand, and from its open coat rippled little cascades of fine lace. Yet she looked discontented. Perhaps the bitter moodiness on the face opposite had infected her.

Westenra had not worn that look when they commenced the journey; it was within the last half-hour while they talked of Val that Haidee had watched it creeping like a shadow into his eyes, making harsh lines about his mouth.

"You should have gone to the Lamartine studios and made inquiries," she said suddenly. "Then you 'd have known all about it–far more than I wrote and told you!"

"I have no right to make inquiries about Val, Haidee. She is not my wife and I have no claim whatever over—-"

"Not your wife?"

"No. Has she never told you? Her husband whom she thought dead came back. You must never speak of this to any one."

"Of course not. But how funny, Garry!"

"Very funny," he said grimly. "That is, of course, who was staying with her at the studios, with a perfect right to do so. Only"–his face took a harder expression–"she can't go on having Bran too."

"But why not, Garry? She hasn't got the man–her husband–staying at Cannes with her. She 's told me heaps of times she and Bran are there alone. Rupert wrote and told me too."

"That is understood," said Westenra coldly. "Or I should n't let you go to her, even for a few days."

"Where are *you* going?"

"To a hotel, of course. I 've arranged for a room at the Metropole."

Haidee mused awhile, her brows knitted.

"And afterwards, Garry–when you have got Bran?"

"God knows, Haidee." He did not speak like a man who has won fame and renown and almost all he set out to get–except one small thing! But rather as one whose golden gifts have turned to ashes in the mouth, whose laurels have fallen to dust. Inspiration shot into Haidee's eyes.

"Then you haven't got a wife at all, Garry?"

"Devil a wife!"

"Then I don't see why I can't marry you at last. I 've always wanted to."

Westenra began to laugh.

"There's nothing to laugh at. Lots of girls marry their guardians. Oh, *do* let me marry you, Garry. I do love you so."

"Dear Silly Billy, I couldn't possibly."

"Why not? Why *not*? How can I come back to America with you and Bran unless I *am* married to you? It would not be at all correct." (Haidee had not been

brought up in conventional France for nothing!) Westenra grinned sardonically.

"And if you get Bran away from Val, he will need a mother, and you surely would n't marry some old strange pig of a woman to mind him. He 's a gentle little kid and he *must* be mothered. I believe he 'd just die if he did n't have love and kindness round him all the time."

Westenra left off laughing and for the first time considered her seriously.

"Do you think you 'd make him a good step-mother, Haidee?"

"I *love* Bran, though I 've often been a pig to him–but *that's* Val's fault," she ended vindictively. "Oh, do have me, Garry."

"Well, we 'll think about it," said he gravely, though the suspicion of a smile hovered in his eyes. Haidee pounced upon him with her fresh lips.

"Won't I just run your nursing home for you!"

"Oh, *that*!" said Westenra, startled. "It runs itself now. Besides"–("No more experiments like that," he had been going to say, but did not)–"I have practically given it up. There'll be nothing for you to do in New York but mind Bran and amuse yourself."

Haidee looked glum for a moment. It was plain she was dying to run something.

"Anyway it's settled, is n't it, that I am to marry you and go back with you and Bran?" She flung her arms imploringly round his neck. Gently and a little wearily he unlaced them.

"All right, dearest, if you 're so keen on it, you shall go–but we won't get married just yet, I think–" He patted her hand affectionately.

"You 'll meet some one you like better than me on the voyage, perhaps."

"Never, never," she said almost viciously, and her eyes seemed to look down a long passage which had some one at the end of it.

"At last I 've got some one away from her!" she murmured to herself.

Westenra, even though in the past few weeks he had grown used to her extraordinary childish innocence and ignorance of life, mixed with a leaning for outlawry, an amazing respect for *étiquette*, and an anxiety to keep up a conventional appearance, found this new phase incomprehensible. He could not understand the gloating triumph of her manner. She behaved as if he were a hunting trophy which she had long yearned to bag. A dozen times she would jump up from her seat, examine him proudly, hug him, and sit down again murmuring:

"I've got you–I've got you, haven't I, Garry? No one can get you away again, can they?"

"Of course not, Silly Billy," came to be his standard reply.

————

Times are when a traveller arriving at Cannes railway station needs the physique and temper of a thoroughly-aroused buffalo to make any impression on the crowd that surges and sways and laughs and greets and grumbles there. But on the early June morning when Westenra and Haidee Halston descended from the P.M.L. Express there was no one in sight expect a few somnolent porters and a tall woman holding a small arrow-straight boy by the hand. The woman was beautifully dressed in white linen and a hat smothered with red and yellow poppies. The arrowy boy had a waving topknot of shiny, ruddy-gold hair, with bare legs and sandalled feet to make a sculptor rave.

Haidee having seen them last recognised them first. But even she had to give a second glance to make sure that it really was Val and Bran. They both looked so well and charming and beautiful to behold. Bran had never had clothes so truly *magnifique* before. And Val had roses in her cheeks and lips–a strange thing in so hot a climate! Somehow the triumph Haidee had been exulting over and vengefully trumpeting in her heart died down and faded away when she saw Val coming towards her, hands out in the usual eager fashion, a kiss forming on her lips. Both she and Bran at the back of their welcoming smiles seemed to be wearing their wistful lion-cub expression, and Haidee had to grip hard on to her vengeance not to lose it altogether and just fall upon them both and hug them. Westenra, too, was aware of a sensation that surprised him, at the sight of this woman who had once been so much to his life and now was nothing, standing there with frank outstretched hands smiling a welcome from under her cool flowery hat. The fact was that she did not sufficiently look the part of a shrine-smasher. If he had not happened to know her guilty it might have been quite difficult for him to believe that this was the woman who had destroyed his life-dreams–and ruined his home. As it was he could only marvel at the strangeness of women who could do such things and yet retain a look of honesty and inward peace. He marvelled, too, that as he took her hand and looked into the eyes he knew so well his heart stirred like a live thing. He was more amazed by that strange stirring in his breast than if a body he had certified dead and seen put away into the place of dead things suddenly quickened in its shroud and returned to life. For he had in the last few years deliberately fought down and crushed out his feeling for Val as a man might crush and kill a useless, hopeless thing. It *was* useless that madness he had felt for her–as useless as she was and always would be to a sane, practical man. There was no use or sense in letting the pain of his longing for her get the upper hand of him and he had not let it, but wrestled with it until he got it under. Had she not shown him in Jersey that she did not care enough for him to change? Shown him, and told him, and proved her words with deeds. And it was all old grief and pain now. Even if he had still retained any feeling for her she had gone back to Valdana. That ended it all

as definitely as if she lay before him in her coffin. He would never have risked seeing her again if it had not been for his son.

Ah! his son! That was different. It was natural and justifiable that his veins should thrill at the sight of such a brave stripling. Bran, for all his elfin faun-like grace of body, had a big face, with the promise of big things lurking behind its plastic contours and deep-set eyes. He sprang into his father's arms and kissed him ardently.

"Oh! Daddy, I do love you."

Val's face curiously gave the impression that it had grown pale, while the colour in her cheeks and lips "stayed put"–almost as if it *had* been "put." Haidee was interested in this phenomenon, but there was no time to give it more than passing observation, for Rupert Lorrain suddenly flashed into the scene with the announcement that he would drive them back in his motor. They engaged in a bustle for luggage, of which Haidee had apparently brought a mountain–and a few moments later all were packed into Rupert's luxurious Panhard and flying along the *route Nationale*, Bran tooting the siren and singing at the top of his voice.

"Sing before breakfast, you 'll cry before tea," quoted Haidee at him. She had to shriek to be heard.

"Shall we drop you at your hotel, Garrett? Or will you come to breakfast with us at the Villa?" Val's voice was the casual gentle voice of a good friend.

The realisation that he had been calmly and unquestioningly going back with this noisy crowd as though it belonged to him, to her villa which was not his, shocked him into a stiff answer.

"At the hotel, please. And I 'd like Bran to stay with me this morning, if you don't mind."

"Oh, yes," cried Bran, ecstatically. "I'll come."

"I'll bring him back safely to you after lunch."

"Of course," said Val, smiling radiantly. It is on record that martyrs could radiantly smile even when the slow fire was applied.

So he and Bran were dropped at the Metropole, not without many proprietary grumblings from Haidee and warnings from Rupert that he would be back to join them ere long. The car drove off amidst a shower of shouts and calls and farewells. Only Val sat silent under her poppies.

As soon as they were on their way once more, under cover of the motor's burr, Haidee said, staring Val defiantly in the eyes:

"Garry and I are engaged."

It never occurred to her that Rupert had in any way prepared the way for her announcement, and she was blinded with amazement and fury that Val took it so serenely. True she once more got the impression of pallor under that unwonted

colour in Val's cheeks, but the latter's eyes were very big and bright and friendly when she said quietly:

"That is very wonderful news, chicken."

That was all! The lovely dark face under the Congo orchid grew darker.

"We shall be awfully happy," she said fiercely. "And never think of this rotten old Europe or any one in it again."

Val spoke a strange saying, laying her hand on the girl's.

"One should try alway to keep a little dew in one's heart, Haidee, or else, in the heat and weariness of the desert it may dry up and blow away like a leaf."

Haidee wrenched her hand away.

————

"And what do you think of being when you 're a man, Bran?"

Bran reflected a while, balancing a spoonful of strawberry ice-cream on the edge of his glass.

"Well, Daddy, sometimes I 'd like to be one of those professors that feed the animals at the Zoo, *you* know. But after all, I think I prefer to be an engine driver." The little golden face looked up into Westenra's with the perfect confidence and frankness of a nature that has never been snubbed or thwarted. "You see one could be always going to new places."

Westenra's heart sank. He got a sudden vision of Val smiling that very smile of boyish confidence as she looked up from a deck chair saying:

"I would love to wake up in a new place every morning of my life."

Good God! was it possible that it was after all only a child, no better or worse than this golden-headed stripling, whom he had had in his hands all these years, treating harshly, misjudging, scolding, neglecting? The thought was horrible, but it pierced as though it were true.

"What is the good of that, my boy?" he said gently. He shrank from losing that lovely confidence by an unsympathetic word, but–"What would you do in all those new places?"

"Do?" Bran mused a while. "Oh, there'd always be something to do, Daddy. Sometimes the people there would want a bridge made, or a tower built, or there might be a giant there eating all the little boys and girls. Then I would stay just long enough to kill the giant, you know, or make the bridge—-"

"I see."

"Or sometimes I would just make a picture of the place."

"A picture?"

"Yes, I love to make pictures–then get on my engine again and away I 'd go."

So! This was what she had made his son into? A vagabond like herself, a wanderer, a seeker after nothingness? He said it bitterly to himself, yet there was no echoing bitterness in his heart. The boy's eyes were so sweet and clear. There seemed no base thought in any corner of him. And that big head and wide glance–surely something great would come of them! The boy looked at the world as if it had been made for him. Surely Raleigh had that spirit, and Drake, and Napoleon, and Cecil Rhodes. Surely it was the spirit of great adventure!

He spent a strangely happy day with his son. Unreal, yet as natural as if he himself had lived every moment of it before. When at last they came to the Villa of Little Days it was to find the others gathered together in the garden, sitting under the spiking pines. Capacious easy-chairs with bright cushions stood about on the gravelled terrace and everywhere was colour, colour. Blue above, and blue below, and round them on shrub and tree and plant every known and lovely shade that Nature could invent, all woven and blended as skilfully as the broidering on some masterpiece of tapestry. Val too had returned in jewels and dress to her love of oriental colouring. She had two large silver rings set with turquoises in her ears, and round her neck a chain of rugged chunks of malachite and turquoise-matrix. None of these things were expensive. She never bought jewels because they were valuable, but for the sheer colour of them and the joy that colour gave. Diamonds said nothing to her and she would never have worn them if she had been a millionairess. The ear-rings were a spare pair of Marietta's which she had been delighted to sell Val for a couple of *louis*; matrix and malachite are, as every one knows, almost as common as sea-shells–and so are violets common, and poppies of the field, and forget-me-nots; but none the less are they the colour-gifts of God and the world would be a less beautiful place without them. Her gown of some kind of flexible opaline silk blended with the colours of the garden, even with the poppy hat which she still wore. Westenra had never seen her look so much at peace with herself and her surroundings or realised before that she possessed beauty. He did not realise indeed that never had he seen Val in beautiful clothes nor in surroundings that were full of grace and peace. Always he had the picture of her rushing about the house in 68th Street like some driven wild thing, the worried look of a hunted creature in her eyes, the grey linen overalls typical of the grey hurrying life, making her eyes grey only, without a glint of the blueness which now made them so attractive.

They sat and talked, spying with field-glasses at the warships in the bay. Naval manoeuvres had been going on for some days, and a large portion of the French fleet lay out in the blue, throwing great purple shadows upon the water and sending up streamers of black smoke to heaven.

Rupert, as much at home in the family circle as if he belonged to it, seemed to wish to monopolise Haidee, but she kept withdrawing from his advances and

plying herself to the task of playing proprietress to Westenra. She sat on the arm of his chair with her arm along his shoulders, deferring to him in everything, constantly referring to New York and their premeditated return there. Westenra, with Bran perched on the back of his chair, legs dangling round his father's neck, hands occupied with his father's hair, was forced into announcing plans of some kind. He disclosed a contemplated return to Paris to deliver two important lectures at the Sorbonne. That done, he should return South, and book by some tramp steamer which would take him home via Greece and Algeria, sailing from Marseilles.

"Don't forget that I'm coming too," said Haidee feverishly.

"How could I?" Westenra's smile was dry.

"Me too, Daddy," chirruped Bran. A kind of breathless stillness fell for an instant. Every one save Bran, busy with his father's hair, looked swiftly at Val and as swiftly away again. Val sat like a stone woman. In the silence Bran, who had gone on twisting his father's hair into little spikes, spoke again placidly:

"Me too, Daddy. I don't want to be away from you any more."

A pang of joy and triumph shot through Westenra, but it was mingled with something that cut like a knife on an open wound. Val was staring before her sightlessly. Yet a little smile played round her lips–a smile of some feeling Westenra hardly understood. There was something infinite in it, yet terribly human.

"You would rather go back to America than stay with me, Brannie?"

It was not pleading, nor sad, nor coaxing. Just a little simple question. Only she and Westenra knew how much hung on it, though one of the others had a very good notion of what was behind. Bran looked across at his mother hesitatingly. She had always trained him to truth and directness, yet he searched her face for a moment as if for a clue. Bran hated to hurt any one's feelings–most of all his mother's. But she smiled on, and he could read nothing. He had never seen her eyes so empty before, and could not know by what great effort she had emptied them of all the fierce love and terror in her heart, so as to play fair, and not bias the issue. So after a little moment Bran said:

"I like daddy. He's got a hard smell–like steel. I don't want to be away from him any more." He slid an arm round his father's neck. No one looked at Val. Suddenly and amazingly Haidee cried out in a fury of indignation:

"You are a little pig, Bran! ... an ungrateful little pig!"

She burst out crying, and jumping up ran to the house. Bran's eyes slowly filled with tears.

"Haidee *is* nasty!" he said in a trembling voice. "What have I done?" In his trouble he turned naturally to his mother and the tenderness that had never failed him.

"Nothing, my Wing. Haidee will be all right by and by. Here is Marietta

with the tea."

But Westenra would not take tea. He appeared to stiffen at the sight of it. After Bran had swallowed a hurried *goûter*, as the French call it, his father took him by the hand and they went away together for a walk by the sea. When they came back at seven, Westenra excused himself, and returned to the hotel with a promise to call after dinner.

————

That evening he and Val walked together through the twilight garden in which Gambetta had pondered his plans and philosophies. They, too, had a problem to consider. It had to come, this talk together. They both had felt the imperativeness of it. And now both were remembering that other walk on the moonlit cliffs above St. Brelade's Bay, when the curlew wailed and cruel words were said that separated them as only cruel words can separate, driving them apart for ever. Even as Val had struggled that long-ago night for words to explain and condone the situation Westenra struggled now, while Val walked beside him still and white, but with some hidden strength in her which he felt while he could not understand it.

The curious thing was that, though he had meant to upbraid her, though his heart was bitter against her, he found himself speaking as if he, not she, were the defalcator.

"I suppose you think me a cold-blooded brute?"

With that which Haidee had told her still tingling in her mind she could not pretend to misunderstand, but she tried to be fair.

"You know your own interests best, Garrett."

"Oh, as to my interests–" He found that a strange answer, and cogitated on it for a while.

"Haidee is devoted to you and your interests."

"Haidee? I should not be such a fool as to expect that–again?" No doubt he meant that javelin to reach her. If it did she gave no sign. Only her next words might have been a faint attempt at a return thrust.

"Even Haidee would not find it a very difficult life since things are so prosperous with you now."

He answered swiftly: "Yes; the law of compensation has been busy with my affairs. Unlucky in love–" The sentence remained unfinished.

They found that they were standing still, staring white-faced at each other. For a moment they stayed so, then she said gently:

"Surely we have not come here to gibe at one another? I–I bear you no ill-will, Garrett." It was such a strange way of expressing her feelings that she

could not help but stammer a little.

He laughed. Strange, that he who felt so old in the train that morning should now feel young enough for fierce anger and rage.

"That is good of you. I am sorry I cannot with truth claim to reciprocate your generosity."

The calmness that had amazed him sustained her now.

"Well, let us leave the subject then, and speak of one that matters more to our future life–Bran. What about Bran?"

"You saw yourself to-day–you heard." He did not care to keep exultation from his voice.

"You think it fair, then, to take away from me what I have lived and worked for these last six years?"

"Have not I worked for him too?"

"You may have done so. It has made no difference to him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that since we parted in Jersey, Bran, like myself, has neither eaten nor drunk nor been clothed at your expense."

"But...?"

"The exact half of all moneys you have sent is lying at the Credit Lyonnais. The other half has been spent explicitly on Haidee. You have seen the bills."

His face darkened.

"How dared you treat me so?–my own son!"

"If you had come to see him it would have been different, but to stay away year after year, and expect money to fill the gap that a father's influence and love and tenderness should have filled ... that seemed to me too mercenary, too unworthy treatment of *my* son."

"No matter ... no matter ... it is an infamous thing you have done–a crowning act of cruelty. I should have believed you incapable of it. By God! how dared you let any one else feed and clothe my child?"

She looked at his furious face in genuine amazement.

"Had I no right to work for him?"

"*You*, yes; and I know you have–Haidee has told me. But this last year ... and *now*. Who is paying for all this?" He swung his arm savagely at the beauties of the garden. His gaze was full of rage and contempt.

"In leaving Bran I left my honour with you–and you have sold it for this mess of pottage! It is time he went with me!"

She faced him steadily, with the calmness born of long vigils with misery.

"You are insulting me unnecessarily. No one has supported your son but myself."

He stared at her in unbelieving wrath. But something about her words and

still gaze presently quieted the fury in his veins, and he spoke more temperately.

"I will be glad to accept that. It is strange that by your own efforts you should have become wealthy enough to surround him with beauty and ease such as this–but if you say so I accept it."

There was a silence.

"My own efforts had nothing to do with it, Garrett. It is only that God has been good to me. Did you ever hear the saying, that 'God takes care of drunkards and children'?"

He regarded her long and earnestly.

"Are you a drunkard?" Anything less like one he had never seen. His medical experience told him that she could not be one. No drunkard could look as she did.

"No, Garrett. I can faithfully and truthfully say that I am not a drunkard."

Then she was a child. It was a child that he—-!

"Let me tell you about it," she was saying. "About eleven months ago something that might be regarded in the light of a family legacy came to me. The necklace my mother gave me turned out to be of extremely valuable pearls. I sold it for seventy-five thousand pounds–it has since realised one hundred and twenty thousand. That is the secret of such comfort and ease as you now see us enjoying."

The story was amazing, but Westenra instinctively knew it to be true. He had often been struck by the wonderful pearly beauty of the Comfort necklace.

"I am glad for your sake," he said at last; "it must simplify the future a great deal. I beg your pardon for what I said a moment ago. It is bad enough that I should have been denied the right to support my own son–but I could not bear that that other fellow should have done it. It even sticks in my gorge that you should have allowed Bran to come into contact with him."

"Whom are you speaking of, Garrett?"

"Why do you ask that? Surely you do not think me unaware of the fact of your return to Valdana?"

"Ah!" she said softly, and drew in her breath. "You know that?"

"Of course I know. It was that knowledge which brought me to France. I could not allow Bran or even Haidee, to be anywhere within the radius of that–" He bit off "scoundrel."

"Neither of them has ever seen him—-"

"I thank you for that at least."

"Nor would ever have seen him."

"Oh, as to—-"

"Is that the reason you would not enter my house nor accept my hospitality?"

He did not answer, but his neck stiffened, and he gave her the direct look which she well knew meant assent. And she thought to herself:

"There is not anything base and odious of which he does not think me capable. It is well that he and I should part for ever. The soul constantly suspected of baseness and cruelty must become degraded in time and shrink away to nothing. I will go away from here to places where my soul can grow and not shrink." These thoughts passed swiftly through her mind. All she said aloud was:

"You need not have feared. Horace Valdana has never come here, nor ever will. He and I will not meet again."

They had come out of the shadowy whispering paths and reached the open gravelled terrace, with the still waters of the Mediterranean lying below, silent under the stars, sombre as a pool of blue ink. The little group of chairs stood inviting. By mutual consent they sat down. Inside the Villa Haidee was at the piano playing wide, gallant chords, to which Rupert, in a rather strong tenor, sang snatches of the *Paimpolaise*.

"Et le pauvre gars ... fredonne tout has:
* * * * *
'J'aime Paimpol et sa falaise,
Son cloche et son grand Pardon.
J'aime encore mieux, la Paimpolaise
Qui m'attend au pays breton.'"

"Of course," said Westenra slowly, "if you are alone, and are going to be alone

... I have no right to take Bran."

"There is no question of right–" She put her hand over her heart–she could not speak calmly of this last savage blow fate was dealing her by the hand of her loved son. "He wants to go. That is enough."

"You know I will mind him well," he said gently.

"No one can mind him as I do," was her inward cry, but she said nothing, only pressed her hand harder to her side.

"—-and that he will come back to you. It is only fair that I should have him for a little while, but naturally I do not want to keep him from you, and I am very sure he would not stay."

She was still silent. He looked at her keenly. Each knew what the other suffered, for at the heart of each the parent hunger gnawed with cruel teeth.

"You will not beguile him from his wish to come with me?–I am very sure you could. It would be natural for him to stick to you after all you 've done for him–but you won't?" Almost he was pleading with her.

"Did I to-day?" Her face was bleak.

"No, God knows–and it would have been easy enough!"

"I know he needs you. A boy begins to need a father's influence, and Bran has always had a hunger for men and their ways ... but, oh! mind him well, Garrett Westenra ... mind him well ... give him back to me as sweet and whole in soul and body as I lend him to you–" Her voice broke. She could bear no more. Swiftly she rose, and with a little gesture full of despair and abnegation and farewell, left him.

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The next day Westenra was gone, presumably to Paris to give his lectures. Rupert, who had walked home with him the night before, brought a brief message of farewell to the Villa of Little Days, and the news that they might expect him back in anything under ten days.

As for Val, she went to bed for a week. At least she retired to her room, declaring a fear that a slight cold she had might develop into *grippe*, and that summer *grippe* was the most boring of all illnesses, and that she was not going to risk becoming the greatest of bores. So she lay down a good deal in a darkened room. When she was not resting she wrote many letters, and in the cool of the evening she would sit on her clematis-wreathed balcony with Bran in her arms, her lips on his hair, listening to his account of the day's doings. For Rupert's car was perpetually at the gate, and never a day passed but he and Haidee and Bran set off on some long excursion into the surrounding country.

Haidee came up to Val's room sometimes to make perfunctory inquiries. She would stare hard at the latter lying so lazily amongst her cushions, and narrowly search the smiling face. But, except that colour had fled from cheek and lip, Val showed no signs of trouble, only a vivid interest in all they had been doing.

"You do take it easy, I must say," Haidee remarked half grudgingly the fourth evening after Westenra's departure. "Lying here in the cool while we have to scoot about in the heat and dust."

Val laughed.

"You don't *have* to, chicken. And scooting in a motor is not so very disagreeable after all. You look as if it agreed with you, anyway."

Indeed the girl was radiant, and her half-hearted grumblings were entirely contradicted by her eager air of enjoying life. She need not have resented that Val smiled so brightly from her bed, and perhaps she would not have done so if she could have seen that when the door closed on her the light went out of the smoke-coloured eyes, and the smile withered, leaving only weariness upon Val's lips.

But on the day Westenra's return was notified by telegram Val came down very bright and gay and presided over the tea-table under the pines. Rupert had just brought the others back from Grasse in a condition of physical flop, and all three were distributed upon chairs in attitudes of utter abandon. Val, with all the colour back again in her pale dark face, looked fresher than any of them. Westenra's wire was a subject of great intrigue. It had come not from Paris, but from a little out-of-the-way place called Baurem les Mimosas, which lay about two hours from Cannes and not even on the main line! No one knew by which train he was coming, or where to go and meet him.

"I don't believe he has been in Paris at all," said Haidee discontentedly, and certainly the man who at that moment appeared at the top of one of the winding paths and came strolling towards them bore no stamp of Paris on himself or his raiment. His face, in spite of the protecting brim of a cow-puncher's hat which had clearly seen life and experience in other climes, was badly sunburnt, and he wore a truly disreputable grey flannel suit of the reach-me-down class, and evidently made for the French figure rather than for an Irishman of large and athletic build. The waist and hip measurements were of such amplitude as to give a slightly *bouffant* effect, but the calf accommodation was limited to bursting point; the rest of the trouser-leg would have hung in frills round the ankles had they not been secured tightly by large white safety-pins. A pair of "Weary Willie" canvas shoes completed Westenra's outfit.

"*Garry!*" gasped Haidee, shocked beyond words. But Bran leaped upon his father and embraced him joyously.

"Where you been, Daddy?"

"I been bicycling," responded daddy affably and saluted every one, beginning with Val and ending with Rupert. "That's where I been!"

"Bicycling! What a thing!" cried Haidee, while Val made him fresh tea. "How *could* you come through Cannes such a sight, Garry?"

"What's the matter with me? I feel good in these togs. In future I shall always dress like this."

Haidee shuddered.

"You did n't go to Paris after all?"

"No, Haidee, I did not go to Paris. I hired a bicycle, bought this bicycling suit you don't admire, and took to the open road. There isn't any village between here and Toulon that I haven't explored inside out, nor any 'café débitant' where I have n't sampled the chianti or the astispumanti or anything else that was *tanti*."

"But what for, Garry? Why?"

"I had some thinking to do," said Garry, "and I thought I could do it better on a bicycle than in Paris."

"Have you thought about when you're going to take me in a ship, Daddy?"

Bran had climbed on his knee.

"Yes; I 've been thinking about that, my son."

Haidee said abruptly:

"Did n't you say we would take one of those tramp steamers that go from Marseilles, and touch at all sorts of ports?"

"That was the idea." Westenra held up a cigar to Val, and she nodded permission to smoke. "Why?"

"Well, as Rupert is going to Morocco next week I thought we might as well take the same ship." Haidee sounded rather breathless.

"Ah!" remarked Westenra thoughtfully and lay back in his chair, his face between the knees of Bran, who had climbed up into his favourite position.

Rupert murmured something about that being "an idea *bien gentille*" and hunted nervously for a cigarette.

"In that case," announced Val quietly, "we shall all be sailing from Marseilles at much the same time."

"All?" Every eye was immediately focused upon her.

"You—-?"

"But you 're not coming–" Haidee broke off confusedly.

"No; but I am leaving France."

"Leaving France?" ejaculated Rupert.

"Yes, leaving France, and all cities, to go back to the life I lived as a child and which has been pulling and calling me ever since."

"What, that life in a waggon?" Haidee had heard of it so often it was strange she should become so excited about it now.

"Yes; a waggon that starts every late afternoon, and treks throughout the night; and brings you to a fresh place every morning." Her face suddenly lost the veil of shadows that had hung over it so long. Space, and joy and distance, and a fierce wistfulness came into her gaze. "One goes on and on to places one has never seen before, sometimes to places *no one* has ever seen before–that is best, that is wonderful—-"

Strangely the veil that had passed from her face seemed to fall upon the faces of her listeners. Not one among them but looked curiously disturbed.

"I shall see the wildebeeste grazing on the horizon once more–and hear the guinea-fowl in the bush crying 'come back! come back!"

Westenra stared at her. Was this the woman who had run his nursing home!

"Everything in nature, if you leave it alone, will come back–to the ways of its early life."

"If you leave it alone?" Westenra spoke almost involuntarily. She laughed.

"Am not I going to be left alone?"

There was a silence. Every one sat staring at her.

"Who but I would care for such a foolish life!" she said more sombrely.

"But wouldn't I?" burst out Rupert. "It is what I have always longed for. To *coucher à la belle étoile*! *Zut, alors*! I will come too. It is understood."

Val laughed.

"You would soon be bored. One must be a wanderfoot by birth and instinct."

But he repudiated the saying, and there was no boredom in his eye nor in the eyes of any. An odd uneasiness possessed them all. Haidee looked paler and was biting her lip. Bran had descended from his father's shoulders and advancing on Val stood looking at her, a startling reflection of her fierce wistfulness in his own eyes. But he still kept a hand on his father's knee.

It was Marietta who broke up the séance by coming out to announce in an autocratic manner that dinner would be ready in ten minutes. No one had realised that it was so late. Westenra did not accept the invitation to stay and dine as he was, but having secured its extension to the evening sprang on his bicycle and rode for his hotel to the endangerment of several lives on the *route Nationale*.

It hardly seemed an hour before he was back again, very big and handsome in conventional dress, among the tranquil trees of the garden. The place was silvered and transformed by the light of the moon, which, at the full, hung like a great luminous pearl on the radiant breast of heaven. The windows of the Villa were all set wide, and in the drawing-room Haidee's fingers were weaving fairy tales at the piano with such magic that they seemed real voices and hands that called and tugged at Val and Rupert under the trees. The boy stirred restlessly in his chair, gripping its sides. Since dinner Val had been sitting there, very silent, while Haidee played.

When he heard the bell tinkle on the garden gate far below, and knew that some one, probably Westenra, was entering, he said suddenly:

"I forgot to tell you that the other night when I walked home with the doctor I happened to mention to him ... that ... well, that I was with you at the funeral of Mr. Valdana."

"Ah!" Val sighed strangely and sat up straight in her chair. It was too late for anything more to be said. Westenra was upon them. And since Rupert, vacating his chair, was already on his way to the drawing-room, it was quite simple and natural that Westenra should sit down beside her. They talked, a little disjointedly about the beauty of the night, how well Haidee played, what a charming fellow Rupert was. Then he said suddenly:

"And you are really going back to that wild wandering life of yours, Val?"

It was the first time he had called her Val in all these years. She trembled a little, answering sadly:

"Like water, I must return to my own level."

"Then you should live on the mountain tops."

She trembled again and her heart ached a little more poignantly. Why should he mock her?

"You think you will be happy?" His voice was not mocking, only very gentle.

"Oh! happy?" she echoed. "Who is happy? But–

'Give me the long white road, and the grey path of the sea,
And the wind's will, and the birds' will, and the heartache
still in me,'

and I will reproach no one."

"Reproaching has never been a pastime of yours, I think–and you may be glad of it, Val, for reproaches, like curses, have a way of coming home to roost. My conscience is no better than an aviary—-"

Her involuntary laugh lightened the strain a little, but Westenra was a thorough man, and did not mean to leave it at that. Sombrely he finished.

"I beg your forgiveness, Val, for every reproach I have ever made you in your capacity as wife, mother–or lover. They were undeserved, every one!"

Why should his voice have grown hoarse at the last, and her heart come climbing up into her throat as if to suffocate her? It was some moments before she could half-whisper, half-mutter a response.

"You are too generous; I deserved everything you ever said–but after long thinking I see–that–we cannot all win out as wives and mothers. Of some of us, when you 've said we are good lovers you 've said all. I hoped I was a good mother too–but it is plain that I am not, for Bran, even Bran on whom I had staked my last throw–even Bran leaves me–"

Strange that Haidee should choose this moment to launch forth into the first trembling plaintive notes of the 17th Sonata, that wonderful pæan of terror and beauty under whose rushing spell seven and a half years agone Val had lain her face against her husband's and shared with him the greatest, sweetest secret that can ever lie between man and woman!

"Bran shall never leave you–if you will have me with him–or even if you will not."

"Garrett–what are you saying?"

"'The years teach much that the days never know.' Val, I have realised during the last seven days what I have been learning ever since you came into my life, that everything is worthless but the love and happiness of the woman you love."

"Oh, Joe!" she cried in great humility and wonder. "You with all your gifts

of mind and brain; with all you have done for science, and still will do—-!"

"It can all go to the devil," he said cheerfully. "I 'm coming to live with you in a waggon on the veldt, to see the wildebeeste, whatever they may be, grazing on the horizon, and hear the guinea-fowl calling from the bush. These things have got a hold on my imagination and will never let go. And if I can't do something for science, even out there on the veldt, I 'm a poor sort of fellow and will deserve to be forgotten."

"But the rewards you have already won–that are just within your grasp?–the chair at Columbia–the Nobel–the–" (She herself set no store by such things, but well she knew how men value them more than their immortal souls.)

"Too bad!" said Westenra, with an ironical smile. "Did you ever hear of what John L. Sullivan said the day after his defeat at New Orleans? A sympathiser came wheedling up to him, saying: 'It's too bad, Jawn! Too bad! What 'll you do now?' Sullivan, real man that he always was, even in defeat, growled back at him: 'What 'll I do now? Pugh! *Ain't I John L. Sullivan still?*' Pretty good philosophy for a pug, Val! I can only say in all humility–same here! Even in defeat I—-"

His words were cut short by a very whirlwind of lace and tears and laughter. A pair of arms were thrown round Val's neck, and a sobbing, happy voice cried, loud enough for all who wished to hear:

"Oh, Val–I love you, and I beg your pardon. I am a pig from away back–and a cat and a beast–but oh! I am so happy! Rupert and I are going to get married to-morrow, and after we have been in Morocco a little we shall come out and join you in your waggon."

Westenra stood up big and grim in the moonlight.

"Hell's blood and blazes!–and is *this* the way I am thrown down at the eleventh or any moment?–bring me the bridegroom, and I 'll eat him up at one mouthful. I 'll beat the gizzard out of him–I'll—-"

"*M'voilà, Monsieur le Docteur*! Here I am," said Rupert, not without dignity, and with great goodwill.

"Well, get out," said Westenra softly, "and take your bride to be with you. That's all that's required of you for the time being."

He cared not how they went nor where, so long as he was alone once more with this only woman of his life. He took her hand in his and drew her close until her cheek lay against his as on a long-ago night, driving up Broadway to 68th Street. Before them, through the trees, glimmered a silver expanse of water, with grim warships lying at rest and little red-sailed fishing boats rocking softly.

"Heart of my heart–does n't this seem to you a fair sea on which to launch a new ship of dreams."

"No. Not a new ship, Joe. The same old ship. I have never been out of it for an hour, or a moment."

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