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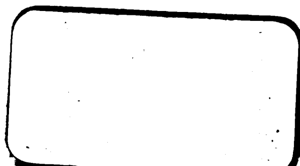

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LADY DEANE

AND OTHER STORIES.

VOL. II.

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LADY DEANE

And other Stories.

BY

MRS. LEITH ADAMS,

AUTHOR OF
"MY LAND OF BEULAH," "AUNT HEPSY'S FOUNDLING,"
"KEANE MALCOMBE'S PUPIL," "GEORGIE'S WOOER,"
ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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CONTENTS OF VOLUME II.

Lottie.

(*CONTINUED.*)

		PAGE
	CHAPTERS VI.—IX.	3—87

Mrs. Armytage.

CHAP.		
I.	DAMON AND PYTHIAS	91
II.	MRS. ARMYTAGE	106
III.	FRIENDSHIP UNDER DIFFICULTIES	121
IV.	THE SHADOW OF DEATH	133
V.	"INTO THE DREAM BEYOND"	148
VI.	A PHANTOM OF THE NIGHT	164

www.libtool.com.cn

CHAP.		PAGE
VII.	HOME, SWEET HOME!	176
VIII.	AN UNEXPECTED MEETING	184
IX.	THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA	197
X.	THE DEAD PAST	207
XI.	GOLDEN DAYS	218
XII.	PUT TO THE TEST	237
XIII.	IN TIME OF NEED	252
XIV.	PARTED NO MORE	264

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LOTTIE.

(CONTINUED.)

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LOTTIE.

CHAPTER VI.

AUTUMN is upon us in earnest at last. Leaves fall and drift in the crisp, chill wind that first makes them shiver on their stems, and then twirls them round and tears them from the parent branch. The great beech on the lawn at Morncliffe is a perfect Niobe —its dead children lying about its feet, its bare brown branches tossing in a wordless agony.

The soft moan of the sea is changed to a swift rush and roar, diversified now and then by a mighty "thud" as some breaker heavier than its fellows rears its green sides

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and crested head, and flings itself headlong, in impotent rage against the rocks that bar its progress. With what a swirl of baffled passion it rushes back into the ocean whence it came! how the little pebbles cry as they are torn from their bed and dragged seawards, like mandrakes uprooted from the earth!

One night I lie awake listening to these weird sounds, and fancying the boom of guns borne upon the sough of the wind that buffets my window as might ghostly palms of ghostly hands, intangible and terrible—fancy shrill cries of drowning men mingling with the blast—sleep to find these thoughts of horror pursuing me in shadow-land—for I dream that I am wading through deep water, whose oily surface looks smooth and fair enough, but whose treacherous under-current drags and tears at me to pull me down to gruesome depths I can but guess at. Even in the misty world of

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dreams I cling to the thought of Dick as the one who, loving best, can save . . . I try to call upon his name, but the death-cold water must have turned my tongue to stone, for utterance find I none. . . And darkness creeps upon the face of the waters —overshadows me, blinds me—the current pulls me down, the dreadful waters part, then close above my head.

I wake bathed in cold sweat; my hair is dank as though that awful dream had been reality. The wind is moaning up from the sea, the rain beats upon my window-pane; and so I lie waking, wide-eyed, till dawn.

"What a white, weary face to greet a fellow with!" says Dick, as I join the party at the breakfast table.

The sight of his "wayward love" looking like a young ghost makes Dick oblivious, or unmindful of, I know not which, her ladyship's calm, observant eyes—twin stars

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that shine above that substantial cloud, the tea-urn.

He holds both my hands in his, draws me to the fireside, and tenderly chafes my numb fingers.

"Why, child," he says, "what have you been doing to yourself? Has Hubert's family banshee been wailing outside your window all night, and scared you half out of your dear little wits?"

At this Sir Hubert rises in frantic haste from his place at the breakfast-table, drops his table-napkin, stands on Castor, and stumbles over Pollux (who both howl), seizes the poker, begins to stir the fire wildly, and then, suddenly meeting the scathing glance of his liege lady, falls to whistling a tune through his teeth to cover his confusion and retreat—for in a minute more he is back in his place trying to whistle and eat crumpet at the same time, a feat never yet achieved by mortal man.

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"When this fuss subsides—" says her ladyship, in clear, ringing tones, and keeping an eye on the miserable countenance of her spouse, "this really unwarrantable and, I am compelled to say, ill-bred amount of fuss over Charlotte's indisposition—"

"I am not ill at all," I blurt out, drawing my hands from Dick's, and making my way to the table; "the wind was high last night, and it rained. I did not sleep well, and—that's all."

"It would have saved some trouble and disturbance" (with a withering glance at Sir Hubert, who promptly buries his face in a raised pie), "if you had told my brother the exact state of the case at first. I am sorry you had a disturbed night, but one cannot control the elements. Shall I give you coffee or tea?"

Somehow I feel that between us the "elements" and myself have behaved in a highly reprehensible manner; it is, there-

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fore, a relief to look through the tall, narrow windows at the end of the dark oak-panelled room, and see that the wind and the rain are penitent and reformed, no matter what I may be.

Here and there a straggling watery sunbeam begins to touch the tips of the waves with broken lights. The gulls have flown close in shore during the gale, and still linger near the land, their wings showing snowy white against the deep olive greens and purple greys in which the whole landscape is "put in."

Her ladyship's glance, following mine, notes the improvement in nature's aspect approvingly.

"We shall have a fine day after all," she observes, carefully adjusting her *pince-nez* so as to take in each detail of struggling sunbeam and tiny glimpses of far-off blue sky; "and, doubtless, a pleasant evening for our long drive to the Anstruthers'."

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"Does that delectable entertainment come off to-night?" puts in Dick, with the slightest possible shrug of his broad shoulders.

"By Jove!" ejaculates Sir Hubert, and then he gives an appealing look round the table, as much as to say he hoped no one heard him.

Vain and evanescent hope! Fond, fond delusion!

"Hubert," says his wife, severely, "I must ask you to remember that there are ladies present."

It is very evident that the monarch who reigns upon Olympus must not be named to ears polite. Perhaps he neither possessed "sterling qualities" nor yet led a well-balanced and well-regulated life.

I dare not look Dick's way for any earthly bribe. The whole situation is so ludicrous that, combined with the unstrung state of nerves consequent upon that dream

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so terribly real and so vivid, I feel, for the first time in my life, ready to be hysterical.

I am convinced that Sir Hubert has certain blood-curdling memories of past entertainments at the Anstruthers'—whoever those worthy people may be—also that Dick is more than inclined meanly to incite the (nominal) master of the house to join in a sort of general rebellion, and stay at home.

"Lady Anstruther is one of my most valued and esteemed friends. She is a person—" began Lady Colquhoun.

"My dear Harriet," breaks in my lover, somewhat to my dismay, "I have heard the catalogue of that worthy woman's many virtues and surpassing excellencies *ad nauseam*—I mean until I know them off by heart," he adds, hurriedly, as if afraid of having been indiscreetly frank.

There can be no doubt that I detect the slightest trace of a grin on Sir Hubert's

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face at this, but he whistles it away in the twinkling of an eye, and is even hypocrite enough to shake his head reflectively, as though lost in the vast contemplation of Lady Anstruther's perfections.

"To my mind," says Dick, passing and re-passing his strong, shapely hand over the golden moustache that I feel convinced hides a lurking smile, "there are few things more detestable than a long drive in a close carriage, with 'a little music' at the end of it."

"Perhaps there will be—not a little, but a great deal of music at Lady Anstruther's to-night," says our hostess; and—yes—there is a twitch at the corner of her mouth—a something that, in a gentler woman, would be a quiver.

Has the family banshee been visiting my lady too? Is that cast-iron machinery, her nervous system, thrown into some strange disorder? Surely; for as Dick goes on to

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hint pretty plainly at a well-developed inclination to remain at home instead of running the chance of having to hearken to music much or music little—as he gives utterance to the utterly unconventional and slightly incorrect suggestion that I should keep him company in his seclusion—his sister's cheek pales noticeably, and I see her hand tremble as it rests upon the edge of the table.

"Have I wronged this woman?" I think, wonderingly. "Is her coldness of demeanour after all but the ice that covers the volcano? Does she really, truly, fondly love this young brother of hers, to whom, in past days, she has been 'a sort of young mother'?"

Granted; but even then, in the present instance, the cause seems hardly adequate to the effect . . .

Dick's going, or not going, to this party at Lady Anstruther's can hardly be so vital a thing—except to me. For, of course, I

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look upon that sketchily-given and totally unfeasible suggestion of his as to my remaining behind too—as the maundering of an idiot, or a man idiotically in love—which comes to the same thing.

So weak, however, is human nature, that I find myself, three minutes after these sage and prudent thoughts have crossed my mind, looking with sneaking fondness at a certain low chair in Lady Colquhoun's morning-room, that bears a distant family resemblance to the one given to wobble, but mightily comfortable when once it has settled down, in the dear old home up north.

Of course all the Morncliffe chairs are faultless as to stability, and this one only bears such likeness to its Oak Hill congener as might the proud wearer of a ducal coronet to some poor and mouldy relative he would pass in the street without a nod.

Still, its muchly-quilted cushions are soft; its shallow wide-spread embrace is

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a cosy thing to find oneself in. Dick would be awfully comfortable lounging there by the bright, pine-wood fire; so should I, squatted on the rug made of skins of beasts, on which it stands; so would my hand lying snug in a firm, loving grasp; so would my head laid back against my lover's breast. As to my lips, they would smile merrily enough, be sure, as my tongue chattered of all things under heaven—of the "old house at home" —of Baby Maud's last message which, chronicled by her own pudgy little hand, was nothing but a huge blot—of Cuffy's request for nine live sea-urchins in a bottle of sea-water—of Nellie (very proud of being the family scribe for the time being) sending her "dear, dear love," and every time she tells Kaspar that "Sissy is coming home soon," Kaspar wags his tail, and —"when is the time you are coming home, Sissy dear?"

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These and other kindred topics would be very delightful to enter upon in a room filled with mingled firelight and shadows.

But there is an old saying concerning what we would do with the moon if that placid luminary were made of cream cheese; and, at the present time, my moon is assuredly not edible, for it is promptly settled that Dick is to go to Lady Anstruther's. Indeed, he seems suddenly possessed by a wild longing to disport himself at this entertainment of hers; a state of mind that I feel convinced owes its origin to that unwonted agitation displayed by Lady Colquhoun when his going or not going was under discussion.

It is strange, too, that all through the length of that day I notice a restlessness, a pallor, about my hostess that incline me to think she must have had uncanny visions in the night that is past, as well as her

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guest. More than once, too, I find her watching me, gravely, observantly, almost pityingly.

Perhaps, I think, that ghastly dream has left its mark upon me more plainly than I think for. I go and question my mirror, and that unflattering friend gives me for answer the sight of a pale, small face white and wan, eyes heavy and tired-looking, lips that have more of the white than the red rose about them.

Yes, that is it, I have counted Dick's sister a harder-hearted woman than she is. A thaw that once sets in generally goes on till all the ice is melted and the snow gone. Presently—very soon, perhaps—I shall grow to like, to love, Lady Colquhoun. . . I even begin to blame myself for those barren weeks that have been passed at Morncliffe, "within sound of the sea."

We Vaughans are a family of the loving, tenderly-demonstrative sort. We have all

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sorts of little petting ways among ourselves, and in times of special trial are apt to make a general sort of embrace of it, not excluding Kaspar, who will jump up on Maudie's knee, she being seated on mine, while Cuffy and Nell get as close as they can to the three of us on either side.

Families, like nations, have their own codes of laws, modes of government, and all that sort of thing. Ours is ruled by a law of love, a community of sympathy, of keenest interest in every little thing that concerns any one member of what Cuffy irreverently calls "the squad." We all combine together, not only to take care of mother, but to keep all harm away from her so far as lies in our power; and, as our sources of pleasure are decidedly limited, we make the most of the contentment to be found in never-failing, outspoken love for each other.

A training such as this (so I reason with

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myself, knitting my brows and looking mighty wise the while) is by no means a good preparation for being thrown in contact with a character such as Lady Colquhoun. One was sure to expect too much—to condemn reserve, to look upon lack of demonstration as lack of feeling.

As I ponder thus I am inspecting that black silk robe, that *chef d'œuvre* of the inimitable Tippet, as it lies, long, imposing, regal, upon my bed. When you have only one evening dress of any kind, choice is limited, and the weakness of vacillation impossible.

I have only one evening dress, and there it lies before me, a sight to make glad the heart of any eighteen-year-old maid whose ideas have never become expansive from indulgence in luxury of apparel. It looks even longer than I thought it was, and has more and fuller cascades of soft black lace about it than I imagined.

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The sleeves reach only to the elbows, there terminating in a deep fall of fine old lace, a treasure unearthed from among mother's small store of "pretties" for her dear Lottie's adornment.

With a "red, red rose" at the throat, and another above my left ear (all among the brown ripples Dick is so fond of touching, with gentle, loving fingers, when he has the chance), with long pearl-grey gloves meeting the white lace elbow frills, I shall really look—

Well, I am quite sure I look rather nice, on the whole, when I am complete. I say this confidently, not so much because of anything my mirror tells me, as from something I read in my lover's eyes, as I enter the drawing-room where my lady, gorgeously caparisoned in violet brocade, awaits her carriage.

As to Sir Hubert, in the chaste simplicity of male evening attire, he looks more like

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some small black bird with a crested head than anything else. He looks sad, too, and not as if he thought he were going to enjoy himself—quite the contrary, in fact.

Dick, too, looks bored, or as if he were about to be; except when he is looking at me.

With exemplary meekness I insist upon sitting with my back to the horses—opposite my host and hostess—and beside Dick. The night is dark (Heaven be praised for the clouds that drift everywhere and make it so!), and I do not find the drive long, for my dear love's hand has crept somehow near to mine, then closed and held it fast—glad to lie in that firm, strong clasp as a little, unfledged bird to nestle beneath its mother's wing.

Lady Colquhoun sits opposite to me, and every now and again a fitful gleam of dull grey light as the moon makes an attempt at shining through some patch of cloud

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less dense than all the rest, shows me the haughty, beautiful face, crowned with its diadem of dark, braided hair—dark, troubled eyes—troubled into transitory softness—and the pallor of fair cheek and chiselled lips.

For an instant an impulse came over me to touch with mine the gloved hands that lay folded, one in the other, upon the rich brocaded dress.

If you love a man very dearly indeed, it is so natural to try and love his belongings, no matter what unpromising materials they may be made of.

But I thought better of it. I called to mind the fact that Morncliffe was not Oak Hill—that I was living in a different atmosphere altogether to that which pervaded the shabby rooms and unkempt garden of my own home.

With much rustling of branches against the roof of the carriage, with much shaking of rain drops on to our windows, we pass

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through the lodge-gates of Eversleigh, Lady Anstruther's place.

Then comes the gleam of lights, an open portal; beyond—flitting figures, gay and bright. This is my first experience of any dissipation more important than a "tea-party" at our doctor's, or a half-past five dinner at our rector's.

No wonder I feel shy, no wonder I give Dick's hand a frantic squeeze, wishing the drivellingly foolish wish that I could keep hold of it all the evening.

Lady Anstruther, like death, has to be faced with the best courage one can muster.

She is tall and commanding. She has almost as much hair on her chin as Sir Hubert has upon his head, and as she kisses Lady Colquhoun first on one cheek, then on the other, French fashion, even in the midst of all my shyness I cannot help wondering if it tickles?

Be this as it may, my future sister-in-law

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receives the salute smiling, and, after duly presenting me to our hostess, is led off to a seat of honour among other county magnates.

Dick seems quite at home at Eversleigh, and, as I watch him greet this one or that of the assembled guests, I think that hardly yet have I done full justice to his manifold perfections. We all know what an attractive thing in a man is ease and grace of manner; how trying *gaucherie* and that I-don't-know-what-to-do-now-I'm-here sort of way is, even to the friend who knows how much that is good and true lurks beneath the awkward gait and sheepish air of indecision. I like to watch my bonnie lover moving about among the gay throng around us; and sit contentedly by the side of Sir Hubert, who appears to me to be very unhappy, and to cling to me as to an ark of refuge.

Dick has just turned his handsome head in my direction, and is making his way across the room, when I hear a most extra-

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ordinary sound close to my left ear. It is nothing less than a long-drawn-out and perfectly audible whistle proceeding from Sir Hubert Vane Colquhoun's lips, and causing more than one person in our neighbourhood to look round curiously.

Having glanced at the little man's face, and discovered it to be one glowing orb of deepest red, having seen that his eyes, blinking madly the while, are fixed steadily on one point of the compass, I follow their lead, and see—the most perfectly beautiful woman my eyes have ever yet lighted on.

She is tall, but not too tall; slender, but not too slender; her "eyes are lodestars," her hair a web of gold, bright as my little Maudie's own. Opposite to her, right in her pathway, stands Dick, and to my great, my unspeakable fear and dread, a look that I have never seen there before is in the dear blue eyes that are not turned on me, but on the lovely, changing face, the

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gracious, graceful form of the woman before him.

Pearls are twisted in her hair, and clasp the perfect column of her throat; yet scarce are the dainty jewels whiter than her cheek grows as she looks on Dick—my lover. In her eyes dawns and grows a strange mingling of passionate gladness and nervous dread.

I think I see—ah, God! the pang with which I see!—an answering look dawn and grow in the eyes of the man who stands beside her, pale as herself.

Then she bends low, he touches her hand lightly, just for an instant—and no more. The beautiful woman whom I do not know, but Dick does, glides up the vista of the rooms to greet the hostess. Dick comes to my side.

The dear face I love is troubled, the lips that have ofttimes pressed my own are pallid; nor does the heavy sweep of the

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fair moustache conceal a quiver that passes across them.

"Yes, yes, that's right; take my place," says Sir Hubert, looking as if he were about to dance a *pas seul* for the edification of the assembled company, and whistle an accompaniment.

But Sir Hubert is not to have his way this time.

"I had quite lost sight of you. One cannot see this room from the next," says a measured voice at my elbow. "How are you enjoying yourself? Not much, I fear, for of course you don't know who the people are. Well—I will be your *cicerone*."

And so Dick's sister glides into the chair her husband has just vacated, dismisses the two men with a nod and a little graceful wave of her hand, and—there we are.

I feel as if I were being smothered in violet brocade that rustles with every movement of the wearer. I know that my face

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is dead-white, my breathing quick, coming in short, uncomfortable gasps. I know that Lady Colquhoun is aware that these things are so. I also know that I shall never get rid of her again the whole evening. I never do.

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CHAPTER VII.

How does the rest of that terrible evening pass?

Very much like other evenings of the same kind, I suppose.

Society is a tyrannical mistress, and her laws are like those of the Medes and Persians, not to be infringed.

Though the heart within you may be breaking, you must show no outward sign. Though the world be taking a new and strangely-darkened aspect to your sad eyes, you must not weep, nor wail, nor utter a cry.

I think that the heart in my young bosom is surely breaking. I know that the world has grown dark around me. I feel as

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though the blessed sun would never shine on me again, and yet I take up my part in the drama of the moment, and take it up bravely, too.

A thought that stings gives courage—strength, too, though only the strength of fever.

I am a simple girl enough in many ways; but I am no fool. I have had to think for others, to act promptly, to rely upon myself, and myself alone, in time of need.

* * * * * *

I know, instinctively, that there is some story in Dick's life that I have never been told. I know that that violet-eyed, queenly woman has part in it. I know more than this—how, it is hard to say. I know that Harriet, Lady Colquhoun, knew she would be here to-night, planned that she should be here, and that some plan is afoot to cheat me, trick me, rob me of that fair inheritance—my dear love's love.

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This plot is hers and hers alone—not Dick's. He has walked into the snare blindly, unknowingly. Did I not catch the one look interchanged between brother and sister but now?

On his side wrathful yet pleading; on hers imperious, triumphant, cruel.

So this was the trouble in her eyes—this was the unwonted softness that almost touched my ready heart to tenderness. She was plotting against a girl's happiness, and as the vivisector may, for one passing moment, pity his victim's pangs, she pitied me.

In both cases the excuse made for cruelty would be expediency; the doing of evil that good may come. She has never liked me; she thinks me an "unsuitable" match for her brother.

While my thoughts have been tossing to and fro in a conflict of emotions as to whether or not she may be right after all,

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Lady Colquhoun has been talking to some one on the other side of her.

I have a sort of faint idea that this is meant as a kindness. She must know that I have seen that meeting in the archway that leads from the room we are in to the next; she must know that I saw the look that passed between herself and Dick.

Knowing these things I imagine she is giving me a chance of recovering my equanimity. She need not be in the least afraid of my making a scene. My past experiences of life have taught me too much self-control for that. I have been no spoilt child of fate, lapped in luxury, and sheltered from ill. My world has been a small one, it is true; but even a small world has room enough in it for a vast deal of sorrow and discipline.

My meditations are pleasantly disturbed by music. I love music. Not a little, not calmly, placidly, moderately, but passion-

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ately—with every fibre of my being, every pulse of my heart. And the music I am listening to now is simply perfect. A voice, soft and full—a voice that "has tears in it," many tears—a voice in which passion and pathos seem to find their "speech and language."

Every one is absorbed in making as excellent a use of their ears as possible—their other senses are in abeyance. So I manage to move from my place, and get a yard or two nearer the archway between the rooms.

I know that Lady Colquhoun is conscious of my proceedings, though she never looks at me. I even detect a tiny lurking smile at the corner of her mouth—a phenomenon that I understand later, though not at the time.

The singer is the yellow-haired woman with the pearls about her throat. Her own white hands play the low, rippling accompaniment to her song. She has

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no notes; she seems to look at nothing; or rather to see nothing that she looks upon. She is pale, even to the lips that utter such sweet sounds. Dick stands where he can both watch and listen; and, oh! my love, my love! how sad are those dear eyes that to your "little girl" have been as bits of Heaven's own fair blue sky, shining out behind the "clouds and thick darkness" of her weary, troubled life! . . .

> "We've journeyed together so long, sweetheart,
> That it's hard to be parted now. . . ."

How distinctly each word falls on the charmed ear! Each tremulous note is laden with passion—longing—tenderest, pitifulest regret. If a man had ever loved that woman, how could he look and listen, and—*forget?*

> "We've journeyed together so long, sweetheart. . ."

When had these two—my lover and that siren singer—"journeyed together," heart

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to heart, and soul to soul? Long ago? Or but now, as it were—not so very long before I found Dick, and Dick found me?

"It's hard to be parted now. . ."

Hard indeed! Her soul is in her voice, and at the last—the very last, when a long, sweet note is dying—she turns her violet eyes, "bright with unshed tears," upon Dick.

Is he afraid to meet them—afraid to read the tale they tell? It seems so, for he turns sharply away, and I see him pass through an open doorway that leads into a dimly-lighted conservatory. How I long to follow—to rend and tear the truth out of my darling's breast, even though with it I tear my own image from that dear abiding-place!

* * * * * *

As we drive through the dark and eerie night Dick's hand does not hunt for mine

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in the friendly gloom. As we pass through the dimly-lighted streets of a country town I note a strange glitter in Lady Colquhoun's eyes, and catch Dick's clear-cut profile, set and hard. His arms are folded; he looks steadily out at drifting cloud and wind-bent trees—never at me—never at me!

Coming, I had thought the drive all too short; returning, the road seemed interminable, as with every mile we travel I drift, mentally, further and further from the man by my side.

Arrived at Morncliffe, it is Sir Hubert, not Dick, who hands me from the carriage. The little man's eyes look as if ready to start out of his head. His hand squeezes mine in a convulsive grip that I know is meant to be comforting and reassuring. Just as I have my foot on the step he ducks his head and whispers in my ear—

"*He* had no hand in this, my dear; it's all *her* doing, every bit of it."

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He jerks his thumb at the majestic figure of his spouse as he speaks, and I am devoutly thankful that her ladyship's ample violet brocade back is fully turned upon the pair of us. By the time she faces us in the hall Sir Hubert has on his most innocent and child-like expression.

Fearing nothing just then so much as the touch of Dick's hand or the sound of his voice, I try to get up-stairs quickly, hoping that I shall not be missed in the bustle of our arrival. But all at once my heart begins to beat heavily, a mistiness comes over my sight, my knees grow weak and shake with the weight of my weary body.

So I turn aside quickly into the inner drawing-room, close the door after me, and there, in the welcome darkness, crouch down upon a couch, bury my face in my hands, and—think.

What is this sorrow that has come upon

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me? Is this shivering, miserable woman Lottie Vaughan—she who stood in the old wilderness of a garden at home, and deemed herself in Paradise, because her bonnie lover, brave and goodly, bent his head and kissed her lips under the tangle of the clematis and woodbine? Is this the girl who said to her own heart that for ever and for ever sorrow could touch her never more, because her dear love "loved her so"?

What is the story that forms a link between Richard Godfrey—the man whose promised wife I am—and that woman with the dreamy, violet eyes and maddening voice?

At length the sound of voices reach my ears. I sit up quickly, push back the hair that has fallen over my face, and then—I commit the meanest action possible to an educated gentlewoman: I listen—eagerly, hungrily, breathlessly—to words that are not meant for my ear—not meant for

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any one's ear, least of all the world for mine.

Evil possesses me. For the time being my sense of right and wrong is wholly blunted, my perceptions of honour and dishonour are dulled by the great agony that overwhelms me, even as the deep, dark waters overwhelmed me in my dream.

For never have I fully realised, or so it seems, how precious Dick is to me until now—now, when he seems drifting from me —drifting I know not where.

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CHAPTER VIII.

"ALL I ask you to tell me is this—did you know?"

It is Dick who speaks.

I thought I knew every trick of manner and mode of speaking of which he was capable. But I have been mistaken. Both voice and manner are new to me. There is a short silence, and then Lady Colquhoun shows that, at all events, cowardice is not one of her failings.

She speaks quite calmly, yet not without a certain triumphant defiance.

"Yes, certainly I knew. Lady Anstruther called upon me, and told me of

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Margaret Power being in Cornwall—let me see, yes—on Wednesday."

"And you knew that Margaret—that Miss Power would be there to-night? You and Lady Anstruther laid the plot between you?"

"I knew that Margaret—we will call her Miss Power if you like it better, Dick—would be there to-night. That was why I was so anxious for you to go. Lady Anstruther and I laid the plot between us."

"What has been your motive in acting thus—*yours*, Harriet?—I don't care a jot for Lady Anstruther. I believe she would hang her adored pug on the gate-post if you told her to do so, though she does look like a grenadier in petticoats. What made *you* cheat me like this?"

"I wanted to show you the state of your own heart by a *coup de main;* milder measures would not have done."

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"I think I know the state of my own heart . . ." begins Dick, hotly.

"Do you?" says my lady, coolly.

There is a rustling of brocade, and I know she has seated herself composedly on the sofa by the fire.

The room these two are in is lighted by a hanging lamp. The one in which I am is entirely dark. There are velvet curtains between the two, and these are a little—a very little—apart.

I catch, through this chink of light, a glimpse of Dick standing on the rug, his elbow resting on the crimson mantel-shelf. I lean eagerly forward—almost afraid to draw my breath. As her companion keeps silence, making no reply to that last short pertinent question, Lady Colquhoun continues—

"That you *think* you know the state of your own heart I am aware. You are not the first man who has fancied his heart caught on the rebound."

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"Fancied!" says Dick, tossing back the hair from his brow, and looking at his sister with a sort of defiant mockery which I know must be hateful to her. "Harriet, my dear sister, you don't know what you are talking about."

"Dick," says his sister, earnestly, and with a thrill of real feeling in her voice, "you must not marry that girl—Lottie Vaughan. I have never said so to you yet—but—I do not—"

The sentence is finished for her.

"You do not like her? I have known that for a long while. Women are transparent creatures, easily seen through."

"You are on the wrong track. I was not going to say I did not like this girl—merely that I see nothing in her worth either liking or disliking. Everything about her is insignificant—a picture put in with faint and undecided colours."

"What has all this got to do with

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my making her my wife?" asks Dick, sternly.

"Nothing," answers my lady, "if you choose to count my opinion for nothing; but, in that case, allow me to say it will be for the first time."

There is an impatient exclamation from Dick, of which, apparently, his companion takes no notice, for she goes on speaking rapidly, and as I can well judge from the thrill in her voice, with rising passion.

"I have not been all I have to you, Dick, all your life, without getting to know you to the finest fibre of your nature—better, indeed, than you know yourself; and now, tell me, what is there in this girl—this brown-eyed child, for she is little more—to make up to you for all the disadvantages that must attend your marriage with her? What is there about her that will compensate you for knowing that your wife is—the daughter of a drunkard and a blackleg?"

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I have never heard this last term applied to my father. I dare say it is true; but things do not hurt the less because they are true, do they?

I clench my teeth as Lady Colquhoun speaks. This is what I am, then—a clog about Dick's neck, a shame, a disgrace to the man I love.

"I have heard all about these Vaughans from a cousin of Lady Anstruther's."

"Confound Lady Anstruther!" puts in Dick, viciously. "What business has she to meddle?"

Lady Colquhoun ignores both expletive and protest.

"Some cousin of hers—Yorkshire people—know the character this man (Lottie's father) bears. I dare say he has borrowed money from you already, Dick?"

This last accusation makes my blood boil. No; my father, bad as he is, could never be so mean—so cruel— Alas! alas! Dick

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utters no frantic denial such as I strain my ears to catch; he is silent—he has not a word to say.

This, then, is what made papa so pleasant, so almost kind to me about my engagement to Mr. Godfrey. He has been too clever by half, too cunning for me. Oh, how cruel, how cruel a thing life is!

There is a blight upon me and mine—the shadow of dishonour follows me go where I may.

"Ah!" says Lady Colquhoun, drawing a deep breath of satisfaction at having driven her arrow well home; "I thought so. He borrows money of everybody, even of his own son whom some one has adopted for charity, when the boy pays a visit to his dreary home."

"I dare say," says Dick, wearily; "but what has all this got to do with Lottie?"

But I, miserable that I am, cowering there in the darkened room, feel that it

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has a great deal to do with "Lottie." I have never looked at things in this light before. I have never realised how much of selfishness has all along lurked in my love for Dick.

I have been only conscious that, weary, I found rest; thirsty, I found a stream of living water, and drank. Dear lips that spoke such words of fondness, that kissed so tenderly, that lingered upon mine with such sweet passion—dear hands that clasped my own — dear breast on which my tired head lay so restfully—was it wrong of me to count you all so dear?

Was I taking all you had to give, my bonnie love, and, in return, giving you nought save a dower of shame and black dishonour?

It may be so; but if it were, together with that gift of sorrow, I gave you something else, even all my heart. Set one gift against the other, and, so doing, forgive me

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—I will pass out of your life—I will leave you free. I will keep back but one treasure—just one—as we might press a faded flower or look at it with tender, regretful eyes when the giver is far away, so will I keep, so cherish one memory of that short, sweet story, your love for me, and mine for you. . . .

We are wandering in the gloaming; all the soft gloom of the summer night is sweet with the breath of the sleeping flowers; the chime of distant bells; the children's voices as, gathered about the old sundial, they laugh and chatter like so many magpies over the day's adventures; a robin, very late in seeking his leafy home, sings one or two long-drawn plaintive notes. We are nearing the old garden-seat under the chestnut tree. "That fellow is making a night of it all among the roses," you say, laughing. Then you suddenly peer into the face of your "wayward love," striving,

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by the dim, grey light, to read the story it tells. . . .

"Have things been going badly with you to-day, little woman?" you say when that long look comes to an end; and I answer—

"Very—very badly!"

I do more than this; I lay my head back against your shoulder, and your kisses fall on brow and lips and weary, aching eyes. . . .

* * * * *

There must have been a long silence in the next room for my thoughts to wander thus, stretching out fond arms of longing to the dear, dead past—yes—dead!

I have been blind, but now I see. I have been full of thoughts of my own selfish feelings. I have clutched at happiness greedily, unthinkingly; but I shall be wiser now. I shall be a miracle of wisdom. . . .

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For it is all true what Lady Colquhoun has been saying, and I know it is. I am just that and nothing more—the dowerless daughter of a drunken "blackleg," a man who borrows money from anybody, who has — ah! shameful thought — traded on my lover's love for me, twisting it to his own dastardly ends.

I have nothing to lay at my lover's feet save this woman's heart of mine; and now I must face things boldly, recall the look in the eyes of that yellow-haired siren to-night, and say, "Can she not bring as goodly a gift of love to him as I?" . . .

"I know," says the voice of Lady Colquhoun, breaking in upon these bitter, bewildering thoughts of mine—"I know that when you parted in anger with Margaret Power your self-love was wounded sorely. I know that a year later, coming across this girl, there was healing balm to you in the love she gave—very readily too, I doubt

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not. You were the first lover, Dick, I suspect, and had a charm half your own, half to be attributed to—"

"You are wrong — wholly, entirely wrong!" breaks in Dick. "Lottie is too maidenly to love any man over-readily; and as to the love she bears me now, I know that it is a love pure and passionate, a love that could never fail me, that through evil report and good report, through all the ups and downs of life, could know no variableness nor shadow of turning."

"All this may be so; you ought to be a better judge in the matter than I can be; but if you vaunt this girl's love for you I can match the boast for—Margaret."

"Margaret! Harriet, what are you saying? Was she not my promised wife? Did she not try my forbearance beyond all endurance? Did she not send me from her—order me to quit her presence almost

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with as scant courtesy as one might give to a dog?"

"She sent you from her—loving you all the while. . ."

I slip from the couch as Lady Colquhoun speaks. I fall upon my knees in the darkness, cowering as from cruel blows.

What am I going to hear now? What new lesson is the next few moments to teach me?

There is an articulate ejaculation from Dick, and I know that the arrow let fly by his sister has gone home.

"Margaret's great fault—her one fault—is pride. It was her pride that urged her to send you from her, when all the while her love pleaded hotly for your pardon."

"I did no wrong — I had no need of pardon."

"You forget that you had to deal with a spoiled child—one who had been all her life a beauty and an heiress, whose will had

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been law to every one about her. Well, as I said before, Margaret quarrelled with you —loving you all the while; sent you from her—loving you all the while. In the passion of mingled resentment and disappointed love that possessed her she promised to become the wife of another man, a man who had long loved her, who had wealth, title, all things desirable. She did this, loving you all the while, and at last—at the very last—her better nature triumphed; she could not, dared not, marry that other, loving you so dearly in her heart of hearts. She told him all the truth, and he was not ungenerous—he released her—"

"I never knew—you never told me," says Dick, hoarsely.

All the heart in him is stirred, I know, by this strange and pitiful story.

"I did not know myself until the other day, and then it was too late. You had engaged yourself to this child. You wrote

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to me and said that in her love for you and in her simple ways you had found 'rest and healing.' It was too late—what could I do? I knew you well enough—my boy whom I had watched over through all the long, long years, to know that you would be true to her for honour's sake, unless by some *coup d'état* I could unveil to your mistaken eyes the enormity of the sacrifice, the state of your own heart and—Margaret's barren, broken life."

"Oh—my God!"

I know that Dick's lips are white with pain as he utters that cry. I know that his heart is riven—torn in two; pitiful for me, his "wayward love;" pitiful, too, for that peerless woman, his "first love;" pitiful for himself, in that he has learned all the strange truth too late.

He has loved this woman with an intensity never given to me. I brought him —what was it?—"rest and healing," nothing

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more. I "soothed his self-love" that had been so sorely wounded.

So I have had my uses. It has not been quite in vain, that idyl in the old wilderness of a garden, those precious hours of content in the shabby old rooms. Not quite —not quite—oh weary heart of mine! . . .

As I think this, I am going up the wide, low stairs that lead from the hall at Morncliffe to the rooms above. I have managed to escape from my lair undiscovered and am soon safe in my own chamber. I have been very mean—detestably mean—in listening to what was never meant for my ear. I do not repent. I acknowledge my crime, and lift the burden of it, not repentantly, but in triumph.

But for this sin against high honour I should never have known how things stood with Dick. I should never have understood how the happiness of his whole life lies in my hand—lies there as really and as truly

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as though it were some jewel resting on my palm—something infinitely precious, something that must be given back to him. My thoughts centre so much in him that, for the time being, I almost forget Lottie Vaughan.

She, poor weary creature, has pulled aside the blind from the tall, narrow windows of her own room, and let in a faint flood of moonshine, together with the sound of the sea, the soft, sad sobbing of the water against the rocks below the cliff, the one voice of nature that seems in harmony with her own heart.

I am so tired, so tired, sitting there listening to that measured splash. . . .

I shall ofttimes be tired in that endless procession of days that lies before me like some long, unending vista. The "squad" will worry me with their petty wranglings; other troubles, heavier ones, will have to be faced.

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"Be the day weary, or be the day long,
At length it ringeth to evensong."

Just so. But what comfort is to be found in *that* poetic thought when "evensong" is just the hour of the day, or rather of the night, when your troubles come thickest, when you have to keep weary vigil. . . .

Bah! why should I weaken myself for the struggle that lies before me, by dwelling upon such-like black and terrible memories?

Will they be made any better by thinking about and anticipating? What will it matter *how* tired I am—then? No loving voice will ask if I am weary, no strong arm fold me round. My head will rest upon no tender breast; no one will care—except mother.

There is always mother; but, ah! dear God, how shall I find it in my heart—what words will my stammering tongue lay hold of, to tell her that her Lottie's dearest hopes have turned to dust and ashes

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in her mouth; that she—the child of so much love, the child whose new-found joy cast a reflected radiance over her own sad, "still, grey life"—is coming home lonely, desolate, sorrowing?

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CHAPTER IX.

WHAT a beautiful thing is the death of the day! A line or two of pale orange-pink on the horizon; overhead, just a faint rose tint here and there; in the distance an opal-tinged mist; the river lying dark and still, a mirror in which each separate pollard has its clear reflection—a reflection so clear as to be a perfect duplicate of itself. Above all, the grand, massive, dual towers of York Minster.

It is, indeed, a fair eventide, that on which I once more near my home. I have travelled all day from earliest dawn. I was up before the birds began to twitter underneath my window. It does not take long

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to get up when you have only lain down in your clothes over night, or rather, when the night began to brighten at the touch of day before you thought of going to rest at all. Doubtless the usual amount of hours have been consumed in the journey. I cannot, however, gauge or define the duration of time, for surely it is a lifetime since I crouched in that darkened room, listening to words that sounded in my ears as the "crack of doom"!

There has been nothing romantic or mysterious in my flight—for flight it is—from Morncliffe. No one is uncertain as to the route I have taken. It is not needful to have the grounds searched lest my slender young body be dangling unpicturesquely in the wind from the lower branch of some towering fir, therefrom suspended by my best silk neck-scarf; nor yet for any one to wander along the shore in dire expectation of seeing my lifeless corse,

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flabby and unpleasant, with my hair plastered moistly over my face and shrimps in hiding among the frills of my petticoat, cast up from the briny deep, and necessitating a shutter being brought down from the manor-house to act as an improvised bier.

Of all these things there is no fear lurking in any one's mind. The state of the case, put in plain, unvarnished language is this:—I have no belief in touching interviews, picturesque partings, or thrilling scenes. If a thing has to be done, let it be done promptly, decisively, and once for all. "If 'twere done, then 'twere well it were done quickly" is, to my mind, as full of wisdom as any one of Solomon's wisest utterances. It seems to me more particularly sage when applied to a parting that must be—a wrench that has to be faced.

And I don't think I am naturally a laggard. At all events, if I ever was so

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by nature, I have become the opposite in consequence of having to manage the "squad" so long, and finding the exercise of energy and decision needful to the success of that undertaking.

I have said that my room at Morncliffe was a very different sort of affair to my room at Oak Hill. The former was replete with luxuries of all kinds, among them a writing-table, daintily appointed. There I wrote—not, perhaps, very fluently, but with much resolve—a letter to Dick. I sat down to the task about two o'clock in the morning, and was near an hour in completing it.

The words were tremulously penned I doubt not. I know that a tear splashed down upon the paper more than once: but the sense of what I wanted to say was clear and to the purpose.

The precious missive had no formal beginning. How could one begin a letter

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"My dear Dick," to a man who wasn't yours at all any more? No; my letter ran like this:—

"It was very wrong of me, I know, Dick; but I overheard you and your sister talking together last night, after we all came back from Lady Anstruther's. At first I played the part of eavesdropper by accident; then I listened, wilfully and deliberately. It was a shameful thing to do, of course, and a thing that no one except a person brought up in the scrambling kind of way I have been brought up would have thought of doing. But I don't think I am sorry, so I must not say I am, just to make you think better—no—less badly of me. You see, in no other way could I so well have learned all about everything. Now there is nothing I do not know. I know all about how you quarrelled with Miss Power, and how she sent you away,

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and you went with a sore heart; how you found me, and how I came to be some comfort to you—'rest and healing,' didn't you call it? Yes, I think so. Well, I am glad of that. I am glad I was some help to you sometimes. I shall always be glad to think I was—in days to come, I mean. When I have written this I am going to steal along the corridor and slip it, ever so quietly, under your door. Then I am going to pack one or two things in a hand-bag, and put all the rest into my boxes. The hand-bag I must take with me. The bigger things please have sent after me, whenever it may suit Lady Colquhoun. You see I am going away—quite away, Dick—home to my own people—home to the 'squad' who will be royally glad to see me, and to Kaspar, who will pretty near wag his tail off with delight. It has all been a mistake this love affair of ours, and if I don't have the courage to say so you never will. You

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will be true to me, 'for honour's sake,' and you see, Dick, I wouldn't care for any one to be true to me for anything except 'love's sake'—just that, and nothing else. Don't worry about it being a long walk for me to the station; you know the miles and miles Nell and Cuffy and I manage to cover in a day, once we give our minds to it. This crisp autumn weather, too, is good for walking. There is no need for any one to come after me—no need for any one to give themselves any trouble about me. I am just going straight home to mother. There is only one favour I have to ask you, Dick, and it is this: never try to see me again, and never write to me about anything. Nothing can do any good, and that you know as well as I do. You made a mistake in having anything to say to the daughter of a 'drunkard and a blackleg.' You ought to be very glad to get rid of her quietly, and without a fuss. Good-bye, dear Dick.

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If ever I see you again—perhaps I may do when we are (both of us) quite, quite old, you will be 'Mr. Godfrey.'"

That was all. I did not sign my name to the letter. Dick would know quite well who it came from without the fact being put down in black and white—wouldn't he? It was not a romantic letter, this farewell letter of mine to my one-time lover. Sometimes it is best to crush down all the passion in one's nature, and let nothing but what is commonplace rise to the surface. If I had once begun to write about what I was feeling, all the dainty, crested note-paper in Lady Colquhoun's portfolio would have been exhausted before I got to the end of *that* story.

White and wan, huddled in the corner of a railway carriage that kind fate ordains I should be the sole occupant of, once off on that homeward journey I have to face the

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abomination of desolation that has overtaken me—I have to "dree my weird" as best I might, and a sorry "weird" it is. Oh! how weary, how sore and beaten I feel, as, bag in hand, I reach the gate at the end of the Oak Hill avenue!

"What a home-coming!" I think as I swing back the portal that never will hang straight because its posts are like two slightly inebriated beings feebly trying to stand erect and failing miserably.

I scarcely take half-a-dozen steps towards the house when there is a chorus of exclamations, a stampede through fallen leaves and tangled creepers, and the "squad" are upon me in full cry.

They surround me, swarm upon me, hug me, kiss me, and all talk at once at the pitch of their clear, young voices. Kaspar, too, is there, and seems to be specially endowed for the occasion with twenty tongues and as many tails, so wildly does

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he lick my hand, bag and all, with the former—so madly does he wag the latter.

Then we all move *en masse* to the house, Kaspar performing most of the journey biped fashion by way of expressing his unspeakable delight at my return.

"Aunt Emily's gone out to tea," says Nell, eagerly presenting her one scrap of domestic news to me.

"In a green dress," adds Cuffy, reversing himself suddenly and taking a couple of steps on his hands instead of his feet.

This charms Baby Maud (who has caught fast hold of me the first moment I appeared, and never let me go again), and she lays her dear little head, "running over with curls," back against my shoulder, while the laughter trills and ripples from her sweet, wee mouth.

"Cuffy does be a welly funny boy; Maudie sinks so," she says, patronisingly,

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as it becomes a household queen to speak of one of her subjects.

But Nell does not join in the merriment of the other two. Her dark eyes watch me curiously. The little maid is puzzled about something.

"Sissy," she says, at length, kissing me between each sentence; "has any one been unkind to you while you've been away from us? Why do you look so sad and sorry?"

Kaspar too, apparently, has his misgivings.

With that close and wonderful sympathy a dog will often show in the moods and fortunes of the human creatures it loves, Kaspar recognises the fact that all is not well.

He comes to my knee, puts up two paws, and as the golden-brown eyes look at me with wistful intentness gives a low whine.

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Now, I have a horror at all times of the process usually described as "breaking down," more especially in public; but I feel that Nell and Kaspar are being too many for me.

Something that will not be swallowed rises in my throat. My eyes take to aching and burning in my head.

"This sort of thing will never do, Lottie," I say to myself, "for you have yet to face the worst part of the ordeal."

So I resolve to get it over at once. I set Baby Maud down upon her feet, put Nellie gently from me, make believe not to see Kaspar, put on the air and tone of authority, and say—

"Now will you go, all of you, to Bessie, and ask her to get some tea ready? Sissy is very thirsty and very tired. She is sure, too, that you will all be very good and quiet while she goes up-stairs to see mamma." A catch in my breath comes

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with that last word, but I soon recover myself. "Take Kaspar with you," I say, "and don't any of you come up-stairs until you hear me call."

Cuffy pounces upon Kaspar like a vulture on a lambkin, huddles that animal's elongated and wriggling body in his arms; Nell, grave as a young owlet, takes Maudie by the hand.

This domestic procession disappears along the passage that leads to Bessie's domain, and I go up-stairs to mother.

Looking to neither right nor left, straight unto the shelter of the love that I know can never fail me, I carry the burden of my pain.

At last, reaching that "haven where I would be," I sink upon my knees beside the couch. I take the worn, sweet face between my two hands; I kiss it reverently and fondly, the while my tears fall down like rain . . .

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"Mother, it is I—your child—Lottie! I have come back to you, dear, never again to leave you. . . ."

* * * * * *

During the course of the next day I discover the pleasant fact that during the period of my absence a series of skirmishes between Aunt Emily and Bessie, diversified by an occasional battle royal, have kept the domestic kingdom of Oak Hill in a lively and interesting state. Happily, both combatants have had sufficient sense to keep from mother the noise of battle and the clash of arms; but I find no other gleam of brightness in the home record, unless Cuffy's radiant assurance of his own keen enjoyment of the various "rows" can be looked upon in that light.

The mistress of a household must order dinner and cogitate the vexed question of the morrow's breakfast, though her heart lie "like melted wax" in her bosom, and

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all life's shading seems to be put in in Indian ink and neutral tint.

I order dinner and cogitate over the morrow's breakfast. I also sadly compare meat-tickets, milk-bills, and baker's book one with the other, and find that the spirit of opposition roused in Bessie's breast by petty and injudicious tyranny on the part of my *locum tenens* has resulted in a sort of outbreak and debauchery of extravagance such as it will take me weeks—perhaps months—of cheese-paring and close economy to counteract. I also find that every nail on every post, and every thorn on every tree on the premises, has apparently conspired to rend and tear Cuffy's garments; that sweet, wee Maud displays a pink toe peeping through her sock when she takes her shoe off; and that Nell's Sunday-go-to-meeting hat has had, by some terrible mischance, a dip and a swim in the pond at the corner of Church-lane. So the first

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long empty day (I mean the first day quite without Dick) is a very busy one, and passes more quickly than I could have thought possible.

However unhappy you are, when little but imperative homely duties keep shoving themselves under your nose to be done, you cannot be for ever sounding the depths of your sorrow with a mental plummet. It is when the day's work is over, when the quiet eventide sets in, when the little ones have given you their "kiss good-night," when the gloaming steals o'er field and tree, it is then that your sadness looks you in the face with weary, haggard eyes—and so was it with mine.

All day there has been no time to think; but later the "squad" go out to one of their rare tea-drinkings at the rectory. Mother is asleep, Aunt Emily busy packing in her room (she leaves Oak Hill to-morrow), and I—Lottie—drawn by some irresistible

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influence of time and the hour wander forth into the wilderness.

The day has been soft and warm, full of faint sunshine across a sky of grey and fleecy clouds. The garden looks all yellow-green and olive-grey, with here and there a crimson patch that means dahlias, or a white gleam that means chrysanthemums, those last of flowers of autumn, so welcome and beautiful.

I have tied Aunt Emily's black lace scarf over my head, and thrown a dark shawl round my shoulders. Thus attired I seem in harmony with the evening that is all soft shadows and subdued colouring.

I take my way towards the old garden-seat near the chestnut tree. These old haunts must be revisited some time—why not now, when I am in a mind to keep company with sadness for a while?

The bills are sorted and added up to form one black, appalling total; Maudie's

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sock shows a deftly-made net-work instead of a gap; Nell's hat shines forth in all the glories of a fresh ribbon; Cuffy's clothes are—well, more presentable than they were. May not my busy hands rest a while?

I have scarcely reached the chestnut tree when, at the sound of a foot-step behind me, I stop and turn.

The grey light that still lingers falls on a fair, uncovered head, on blue eyes, grave and steadfast—in a word, on Dick, standing right in the weedy pathway, hat in hand. I take a few quick steps that bring me to the refuge of the garden-seat. The ground beneath my feet seems to be moving up and down in an odd, uncomfortable sort of way. I want something to hold on to. I find it in the curved back of the bench. Then, seeing that Dick—Mr. Godfrey—is for the nonce apparently dumb, I feel compelled to say something, and the something is this—

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"What have you come for?"

I should like to cheat myself into the belief that I am speaking with calmness and dignity; but candour obliges me to admit to myself that my voice is what Cuffy would have described as "wobbly," and that my breath comes and goes as though I had been running violently not down, but up a steep, very steep place, and just got to the top.

"To answer your letter in person."

Dick puts on his travelling hat as he speaks, folds his arms (to reassure me, no doubt, in case I should have any lurking fear as to them lapsing into old habits), and comes close up to my side.

"Let us sit down," I say, with as much dignity as my breathless condition leaves in me. I see I am in for an "interview," and that there is no help for it, no way out of it.

We take our places side by side, like two pigeons on a rail, and there is a ludicrous

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side to the situation which I realise acutely in spite of the reverse side. We are a tragedy, Dick and I — a tragedy with a tinge of comedy about it, like the one comic actor who enlivens the ghastly gloom of a melodrama.

"Why did you write that letter to me, Lottie? Why did you run away from me —child?"

Now, really, I do wish that Dick (Mr. Godfrey) would take any other tone than that. When you are full of high, heroic, grand resolve, taking an amble on a very high horse indeed, it is simply detestable to be spoken to as if you were a foolish, headstrong child.

"I wrote that letter because I meant every blessed word of it; and I came away because I wanted to come."

"The words in your letter were by no means 'blessed' ones. You are under some wild delusion, some strange mistake.—Why

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do you want to wreck the happiness of two lives?"

"It is just because I do *not* want to wreck the happiness of two lives that I set you free—that I 'ran away,' as you are pleased to put it. You can marry Miss Power now any time you like."

"It is very kind of you to say so."

Dick's eyes look at me with a grave scrutiny that has something maddening about it. Nay, more than this, I fancy I detect a faint gleam of amusement quite deep down in them somewhere.

Metaphorically I arise in my might; I put on my whole armour, and rush into the heat of battle; in other words, I mount that high horse before named and prepare to take a gallop.

I "begin properly at the beginning" of my visit to Morncliffe, expatiate on Lady Colquhoun's dislike to me, her miserly conduct in the matter of keeping Dick all to

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herself, and never letting me have a bit of him, my loneliness, my longings to return to the bosom of the "squad," the visit to Lady Anstruther's, the subsequent verification of the old adage that "listeners hear no good of themselves." In my earnestness I have risen to my feet, and my tongue runs on glibly enough, for passion bestows upon me the temporary gift of a surpassing eloquence. I feel that Dick must be gravely impressed, that he must have a higher opinion of my qualities both of head and heart than ever he has had before, that he will presently take leave of me and go, (still much impressed,) proceeding to lead Miss Power to the hymeneal altar at the earliest opportunity. But all these noble convictions of mine don't make me feel it a bit less dreadful—this seeing Dick again, this feeling of being like a poor draggled-winged peri gazing into a lost Paradise, and finding it fairer, dearer,

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sweeter than ever she had deemed it before.

I have just pronounced a sort of spasmodic benediction upon the united lives of Mr. Richard Godfrey and that yellow-haired love of his with the siren voice, when my breath fails me and there I stand, shivering, panting, voiceless, miserable.

"I really think," says Dick quietly, flinging one arm over the back of the garden-seat and slightly turning so as to have a fuller view of me; "I really think, Lottie, you have hitherto mistaken your vocation. There cannot be a doubt of it—you ought to be a public lecturer, a strong-minded advocate. . . ."

"You are cruel!" I cry desperately, as the hot tears start, half-blinding me. I am so angry that I should like to stamp my foot—I should like to box Cuffy's ears (the boy is always in some mischief or

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other, so a slap or two would never come amiss) if he were present.

None of these vents for the hot indignation within me being feasible or ladylike, I can but reiterate my last adjuration—

"You are cruel!"

"Am I?"

Dick's voice is so gentle as he puts that question by way of an answer, his eyes look so loving (no, not exactly that, of course), but so much like as if he were grieved with me, that I long to throw myself upon my knees — discarding all thought of the mossy, weedy ground staining my afternoon gown a smeary green—and beg forgiveness for I scarce know what—beg Dick to speak a kindly word or two, and then to kiss me just once before he marches away to marry Miss Margaret Power.

"It is you who are cruel, Lottie—you who, in your determination to render your

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own life barren and sad, give no thought to making mine so too."

"Yours! But if you love Miss—"

"I do not love Miss Anybody. I love nobody except Lottie Vaughan. I have come all this way after her, leaving my sister without one word of explanation as to my sudden and mysterious disappearance, just because my heart wearied to find her again—just because that cruel letter hurt so terribly in the reading—just because if she takes herself and her dear love away from me she will make my life desolate indeed."

"But," I stammer, afraid to yield to the rush of joy well-nigh too keen to be endured that seems to be turning the grey-green wilderness around into the likeness of an earthly Paradise once more; "what about Margaret Power?"

"It was a pity," says Dick (and this time I am sure his eyes are full of fun), "that

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when you went in for eavesdropping you did not do it thoroughly."

"Thoroughly?" I say, with a little gasp.

"Yes; had you only heard the whole instead of the half of what passed between my sister and myself, you would never have —run away."

My temporary gift of eloquence has disappeared. I find no "word in season" ready for utterance.

"All the blame of this misunderstanding of ours does not rest with you, however," continues my companion. "I ought to have been more frank with you—I ought to have told you that I once loved Margaret Power passionately—that she wore my love out—and that I had grown to thank God for these things being so, inasmuch as they led, indirectly, yet as a matter of fact, to my finding—you. It was ungenerous of my sister bringing me face to face with Margaret Power unawares. A man never

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forgets a woman he has once loved; and since you heard what Harriet had to tell me you may well suppose the story was not without its tragic interest for me. No man hears with indifference that a woman loves him, and when he has nothing worth the taking to give in return he hears it with inexpressible pain. As to my sister liking or disliking you, Lottie, dear child, I do not want you to take up your permanent residence at Morncliffe; and Harriet, though a person of many sterling qualities, is often the victim of strong prejudices."

In my heart I think Lady Colquhoun behaved villainously, and that Dick takes far too lenient a view of the case; but time and experience have taught me that it must be looked for from no man that he should think hardly, or even justly, of the misdemeanours of his own kith and kin.

"All this may be so," I presently falter; "and I am glad, Dick, that you like me;

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but it has nothing to do with me being the daughter of my father."

"I knew whose daughter you were when first I strove to win that dear, brave heart of yours. Every trial and trouble in your life has only been a fresh bond to bind you closer to me. I would rather be some help and comfort to you than add to the happiness of a happier woman's life; and now, my darling, if you still tell me to leave you —if you are resolved to be so magnanimous in ruining your own life (which is yours to do as you like with), and mine (which is not), I will go."

I hear a babel of many voices, I hear Cuffy bawling out my name in his usual abominably rude manner, I hear Kaspar bark and whine, and I know that he is grovelling at Maudie's feet and flattening himself out in an agony of delight.

So, yielding myself a complete prey to impulse, I suddenly go close up to Dick—

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"The 'squad' have been out to tea; they are come back; they will be on us in a minute," I say, breathlessly; "Oh, Dick—be quick and kiss me before they come!"

And he does. He clasps me close and fast, and our lips meet and cling.

We have only just time to get through with this proceeding when the noisy pack are about us, and Mr. Godfrey, catching up Baby Maud, has tossed her sky-high and brought her down again shrieking with delight. Meanwhile Cuffy tries to talk with his mouth full of sweetmeats, and Nell—dear, loving Nell—cuddles up to me and whispers—

"You don't look sad and sorry any more, Sissy dear;" adding, with a child's outspokenness, "your face is quite red now, not white like it was."

Which I dare say it is. We all go into the house together, Kaspar running on, but stopping every now and then to look back

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and make sure every one is following him. Dick takes the "squad" into the old school-room, and sets to work to tell them a story. I think he knows that I, his "wayward love," want to go and tell mother all about everything; which I do, leaving the children engrossed in the "story," to which Kaspar, with ears well squared to "attention," listens as intently as if he, too, understood every word ahead of it.

THE END.

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MRS. ARMYTAGE.

"Love strong as Death. . ."

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MRS. ARMYTAGE.

CHAPTER I.

DAMON AND PYTHIAS.

I DON'T look like a man with a story.

Well; perhaps not.

Still, it is always rash to judge what the contents of a book may be from the binding; and I was not always just what I am now.

To look at, I mean.

At heart I feel to have changed very little: wonderfully little, indeed, since the day when I first met . . . But you must have *that* story circumstantially.

And now to "begin properly at the

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beginning," as that little maid my six-year-old ward used to say in the days when she climbed on my knee between the lights, and petitioned for a fairy-tale — to begin properly at the beginning. . .

I am a retired Army Surgeon: a tall, gaunt old man, with bald head and shaggy, grisly moustache and beard. At four-and-twenty I was neither bald nor gaunt; and my moustache was an object of some little pride to me.

Nous avons changé tout cela; but still I like to remember that I had some claim to good looks in those now far-off days.

Well, at four-and-twenty, full of life, and health, and hope, I found myself transferred from the medical staff, and gazetted assistant-surgeon to a regiment then serving in India—"a fine corps," so our Director-general informed me when I presented myself before him to make my farewell bow — a regiment, as I soon found, well

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cemented together by that grand *esprit de corps* that will soon cease to exist in the Service altogether if things go on as they are doing now-a-days.

Life seemed a very glorious thing to me in those days — a book the turning over each leaf of which showed me some fresh and charming picture, some prospect more alluring than the last.

My Chief had been right about the 167th Foot. It was well commanded, well officered, and thoroughly popular. The station I joined at was one of the best in the Madras Presidency, and the society of the place attractive.

These were pleasant elements enough to exist in the life of any young fellow, and beyond and above them all was the study of nature under some of her grandest aspects —a study that years of residence in that rich Eastern land would hardly suffice a man to more than learn the merest rudiments of.

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I loved my profession, and never a leisure hour hung heavy on my hands. What more could a man want? Perhaps the lack may have been friendship, perhaps love, who knows?

Be this as it may, lack there was. I was conscious of being a happy sort of fellow—of knowing nothing of that ennui that I saw preying upon others—and yet, had not the chords of life the possibility of deeper and more thrilling notes—was I not somewhat in the position of the man who, revelling in solitude, yet longed for a kindred soul to whom he could whisper that it was sweet?

The experiences for which I half unconsciously longed were not far off.

I have said that the men of my regiment were a pleasant set of fellows, that I liked my colonel and my surgeon, and was interested in my work. These sentences comprise the story of my first three month's

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service with the 167th. Then the aspect of things changed.

The captain of the light company had been on home leave. He re-joined; and one evening as we all gathered in the ante-room before mess, the colonel introduced me to Oscar Temple.

"This is our new doctor," said the chief, with his genial smile, and Captain Temple held out his hand for mine.

Thus I met the man who was destined to play Orestes to my Pylades, Damon to my Pythias. He was looked upon as a reserved kind of fellow, a man of few friendships; one whom many feared for a certain sternness of manner that well became his handsome, clear-cut face and stalwart form.

If he spoke a kindly familiar word to any youngster of ours, that youngster was the envied of his fellows. And yet, before Oscar Temple and I had known each other

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a month, our friendship was such as might have been the growth of years.

Beneath a reserved and somewhat haughty exterior this man concealed a mind of great and varied culture. There was, indeed, a power and refinement of thought in him that, through all the passing of the years that have elapsed since the sudden dawn and fatal close of our friendship, I have never met with in any other. It seemed as if to me, and to me alone, did he throw off his restrained manner and habitual reserve.

Brilliant, trenchant, and at times sarcastic, was the wit that touched upon this subject or that; perfect the appreciation of every shade and turn of Nature: tenderly appreciative the power of entering into the thoughts of others in prose or poetry. All these attributes of his made the society of my new friend a delight beyond all words a new happiness in each day's routine.

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When under the influence of his presence I could have assured myself that in no respect could I have wished him other than he was. When I thought over him as I smoked a solitary cheroot, or wandered, gun in hand, over some fertile hill-side, I was forced to own that there was one subject of which I knew as little now as when our friendship first began.

Men never question each other as women do. Confidence, when given, is voluntary. I had then enjoyed close and delightful companionship, much interchange of thought, with Captain Temple; but, as an element in our friendship, confidence—at all events on his side—did not exist. I had told him of the struggles of my early life, of the difficulty with which I had obtained the education needful for an army medical career, and he had listened—sympathetically. I had told him of my first love — a touching and somewhat feeble

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episode—and he had listened—also sympathetically.

But he had given me no histories of life or love in return. I began to wonder if there was a story in my friend's life—if the dreamy sadness that I had at times noticed in his face when he was thinking deeply, might not be the key-note to some tale of sorrow, some disappointed hope?

With the fair sex Temple was, as I soon found, by no means popular; though his tall, commanding figure, close fair locks, and dreamy, grey eyes might well have claimed their favour had he cared to win it.

"Those handsome, care-for-nobody sort of men are *so* disagreeable," said a saucy, black-eyed coquette, to me one evening. "They hurt one's self-love so, don't you know?"

As she spoke she glanced spitefully at Temple, who was leaning against the open doorway of our mess-room (temporarily

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converted into a ball-room), and every now and then thoughtfully passing his hand over the heavy, sweeping moustache that shaded his scornful lip—a habit he had when somewhat bored by his surroundings. All we men were in uniform, and on Oscar's breast gleamed more than one bit of ribbon, telling of medals won in the Crimea by a gallantry as cool as it was daring.

"It is a pity no one can make any impression on your friend," continued my lively partner, tapping the floor with her pretty foot to the rhythm of the "Soldaten Lieder."

Of course I murmured some idiotic sentence to the effect that she had evidently never laid siege to Captain Temple's heart.

She was not listening to me, and my eloquence was wasted. Temple had suddenly crossed the room. He was bending his tall head with an air of chivalrous

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devotion and talking to my surgeon's wife, a poor, sickly, dowdy woman, nearer forty than thirty—a woman whose very voice was an aggravation, and whose conversation seldom took any wider range than the ailments and perfections of her numerous and most uninteresting progeny.

"Just look at him talking to that woman!" muttered my companion. "Oh! I beg your pardon; I forgot you were Dr. Baynes' A.D.C., and, I dare say, his friend."

"Certainly his friend," I answered, rather hotly.

Baynes was a kindly-hearted, ill-defined sort of man, with sandy-coloured hair that stood straight up on the top of his head; and an injured look about him, as if he had found life rather too much for him—as, indeed, there is every reason to suppose he had—but he was a thorough good fellow at heart, and besides, he belonged to Ours,

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and must, therefore, be held sacred by those outside the regiment.

As to his wife—well, there can be no disguising the fact that she was the most wearying of women. As I said before, her voice—fretful, whining, monotonous—was in itself a trial. She used to make a sort of rush at me whenever I came within speaking distance, in order to pour into my reluctant ear her fears respecting Johnny, or Janey, as the case might be. Even Colonel Mostyn, our adored chief—best of officers and best of men—could not help a yawn lurking round his mouth when the doctor's wife got him well in hand; and that graceful and gracious woman his wife, whom every man, woman, and child in the 167th looked upon as a sort of paragon, had been heard to give a sigh of relief as Mrs. Baynes left her side.

And this was the one woman in the

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station to whom Oscar Temple showed any attention in public!

On this particular occasion, too, Mrs. Baynes had excelled herself in the matter of toilette. It was always of a patchy and fragmentary description; but really, at this ball of ours, she gave one the idea of having bedecked herself in every forlorn odd and end of finery in her possession. Nothing seemed to match anything else.

"I don't believe even her shoes are a pair!" said my exasperated partner. "And just look at her going down to the refreshment-room on Captain Temple's arm. It's too ridiculous!"

It certainly was calculated to provoke a smile, for Mrs. Baynes was in a perfect flutter of delight, and the good doctor kept winking and nodding at me, as much as to say, "You see how my belongings are appreciated in society—eh?"

Once before I had noticed Temple's

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kindly attention to little Mrs. Baynes, and made some allusion to it afterwards.

"Yes," he said; "I like to do anything I can to please her; she seems such a fragile, weary, worn-out creature, and all the fellows fight shy of her;" then he added, with the old, far-off, dreamy look in his eyes, "besides, I would as soon talk to her as to any one else, and it makes her happy to think that one is interested in Johnny and Janey, and that dreadful baby with the goggle eyes and a stand-up crop of hay, like poor old Baynes himself."

It did, indeed, make her happy, for in the sunshine of the young captain's kindly ways I had seen her put on an air that was positively jaunty — something like a moulting hen trying to ape the airs of a peacock.

"Dr. McLeod," said my partner, all at once, "I think Mrs. Mostyn is looking for you."

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Now, our colonel's wife's will was law with all of us. We would have gone through fire and water for her. She was our ideal of what a wife—more particularly a soldier's wife—ought to be. I am not sure she had many claims to beauty; nor would she have cared to put them in if she had. She was perfectly graceful, not only in form and carriage, but in everything she said and everything she did, and exerted—unconsciously, I fancy—a resistless influence over those who came across her path. She was so pure and true, so earnest and real, in all she said and thought, that even hypocrisy and wrong tried to wear their best faces in her company.

Scandal died under the quiet glance of her beautiful eyes—the tempted gained fresh strength to resist from the cordial clasp of her hand. She was in very truth a help-meet to her husband—his second self, his dear companion and sympathiser. And yet

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in the home she adorned was one keenly-felt want.

I had seen a look of wistful longing dawn in Mrs. Mostyn's eyes as Johnny or Janey ran up to their mother to see which could tease her most; or when the goggle-eyed baby insisted upon sucking the end of mammy's neck-ribbon. I had seen the same look upon her face as some soldier's brat ran staggering across the barrack compound, crying, "Daddy!—daddy!" to embrace Daddy round one of his scarlet-striped legs when caught.

But I am wandering away from my story, and have left the colonel's wife waiting for me far too long.

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CHAPTER II.

MRS. ARMYTAGE.

"DR. McLEOD," said Mrs. Mostyn, as I reached her side, "I want to introduce you to my friend, Mrs. Armytage."

I bowed, the lady bowed; taking her hand from Mrs. Mostyn's arm, and, with a gentle cordiality that charmed me not a little, holding it out to me.

We spoke of the usual topics on such occasions — the weather, the ball, and the music discoursed by the band of the regiment. I have no doubt I acquitted myself as any ordinary man holding her Majesty's commission might have been expected to do —that is, to all outward seeming.

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Inwardly my thoughts were tossing like the waves of a restless sea. Why, I thought—petulant with what seemed a waste of life in a dull, dead past—why had fate kept me so long in ignorance of the fact that the world held such a woman as Mrs. Armytage?

(When in our lives we come to what is the first link of a long, fateful chain, does no presentiment warn us of the future that lies looming before us? *Chi lo sa!*)

She was about the medium height, slight in figure, and possessing that wondrously beautiful thing in a woman—a small, perfectly-formed head, well set upon a slender throat and gracefully-moulded shoulders. Her hair, dusky and bright, was simply coiled in a cluster of tresses behind her head. Her eyes were hazel—of that clear, soft brown you may see in the eyes of a Newfoundland dog, and had something of the same wistful, steadfast gaze. Her mouth would have been perfect but for a patient

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sadness in its lines that seemed unnatural in one so young. Nor was this defect—if such it could be called—remedied when she smiled, for her smile was the saddest thing about her.

Her voice was "soft and low," and so sympathetic, that, listening to its gentle accents, you felt that, no matter what sorrow you were in, words of consolation so uttered must hold the charm of healing.

There—I have done my best to describe Margaret Armytage as first I saw her, long, long years ago in the dear, dead past.

But it is a failure. All words are failures—must be so—to tell of the marvellous sweet grace that wrapped this woman round like a fair garment.

"Margaret does not dance," said Mrs. Mostyn, "but she likes to watch others do so. Take her through the rooms."

The little hand was laid gently on my arm, the soft rustle of a trailing dress

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followed us as we crossed the floor, where, for the moment, no dancers spun like teetotums.

A long open verandah ran all along one side of the room, and for this I made, but before we reached it, Oscar Temple, still with fluttered, happy Mrs. Baynes, rustling her countless ends of ribbon and tags of lace, at his side, met us face to face. Mrs. Armytage bowed, and my friend returned the salutation.

"You know Captain Temple?" I said, eagerly. "I am glad of that: he is my greatest friend."

"You are fortunate," she answered, with a slight bend of her beautiful head.

"I am glad you think so. Temple is so reserved that few—very few, I think—rate him at his full value. What that value is, in my opinion, I could scarcely say. However, at this moment he is giving a proof of what a golden nature is his—he is making

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that poor weary little woman happy, by showing her a kindness that no other man in the room would care . . ."

What more I might have said, having once embarked upon so congenial a theme, Heaven knows, had I not chanced, meeting my companion's wonderful pathetic eyes, to find them bright with the sheen of tears.

"Surely you are ill?" I said, in much alarm. "The air will do you good—these rooms get so warm, in spite of the punkahs." Then, conscious of becoming slightly incoherent at sight of her agitation, I stopped short.

She tried to laugh away those tell-tale tears—tears that had started I knew not why; but her voice trembled as she assured me she was not feeling in the least ill, and had never been at a pleasanter ball.

It was all very strange, I thought, glancing furtively at the pensive beauty of her face, seen to marvellous advantage in the

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faint light from within the ball-room. For now we were in the verandah, and the music came to us softened by distance.

"I did not mean to be unsympathetic about what you were telling me of your friend just now," said Mrs. Armytage. "I fear you must have thought so, you stopped so abruptly."

She was not looking at me as she spoke; but out into the dreamy distance of the night.

Was she thinking to please me by returning to the subject of my friend, or—was she a prey to that curiosity about Oscar Temple that every other woman in the station must have pleaded guilty to?

"I am afraid, Mrs. Armytage, that Captain Temple is rather an inexhaustible subject with me," I said, hesitatingly. "It may seem a strange thing, but it is a truth, nevertheless, that he is the first real friend I have ever made."

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"And he being a man of so few friendships, you must value all the more highly that which he gives to you."

"You speak as if you knew him well."

"Do I?"

"Yes; and yet he has never named you to me. He would have been sure to do so; no man could be insensible or forgetful of the honour of possessing your friendship . . ."

Her clear-cut profile had alone been visible, as she leant against the rails of the verandah; now she turned towards me, and her eyes shone dark and bright in the dusky light.

"Are you not rather an impulsive person, Dr. McLeod?" she said, smiling. "Is it a safe thing, think you, to form such hasty opinions of people? You see I do not disclaim your kindly estimation as I should if I thought its expression but a foolish, meaningless compliment. I am sure you are sincere, loyal, true — such are the

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characteristics of your nation, are they not?"

"Who is impulsive now?" I answered, smiling in my turn; "but you are right. I am apt to be guided by instinct, and hitherto I have had no reason to regret my impulsiveness. The first time I ever met Oscar Temple I felt that the world could never be quite the same to me. I felt that every effort of my life — every aim and ambition — would be henceforth intensified."

She caught her breath quickly.

"Yes," she said, "yes. I can fancy any one that cared for him feeling like that."

We were both silent a moment, and then she said, gathering a black lace mantilla she wore more closely about her slender throat—

"Is it not a little chilly here?"

Of course I led her in, and by her own request to Mrs. Mostyn's side. At that

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moment I was told that an orderly was waiting me outside, and in another I was hurrying to the hospital.

I have said that my professional work was at all times deeply interesting to me, but on the present occasion I confess to harbouring a certain feeling of resentment against one Private John Edwards, No. 10 Company, in that he had seen fit to choose this particular night and hour to fall down and split his head open in such fashion that the mending thereof was beyond the skill of our hospital sergeant.

It was nearly an hour before I again entered the ball-room. The energy of the dancers knew no abatement. The scene was the same as when I so reluctantly left it, save that now the "Manolo" waltz sighed through the rooms, instead of the more stirring "Soldaten Lieder."

First my eyes turned to where the colonel's wife sat enthroned, a sort of queen

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among her fellows. Then my feet took me to that part of the room.

"Are you looking for Mrs. Armytage?" said Mrs. Mostyn. "She went home half-an-hour ago."

Now, where may "home" be? I pondered, feeling ridiculously aggrieved at the state of things in general.

Had I hurried back the very moment Private John Edwards's broken pate was mended to find—an empty chair? I saw that Mrs. Mostyn watched me with a quizzical look of amusement.

"You are disappointed, Dr. McLeod?" she said, at length. "You have lost your rare bird—found her flown. Well, I am glad you like my friend."

I rebelled against the expression "like" with all the force and passion of my young, undisciplined heart; but, of course, the only outward sign I could give was to bow an acquiescence.

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"How is it that I have—"

Thus far I got, and then halted, lamely. I felt that there was a suspicion of impertinence in the question I was about to ask. But Mrs. Mostyn completed it for me.

"How is it you have never met her before? She has been away for some time back, up in the hills with her little daughter. She only returned here two days ago, and—"

Here the duties of hospitality claimed her attention—some parting guests had to be speeded in her own matchlessly graceful and courteous manner.

I saw that I could not hope to learn more of my new idol, the sweetest, loveliest woman my eyes had ever rested on.

At a late, or rather early hour, Temple and I (the last regimental guests having departed) strolled to our quarters through the quiet, Indian night.

A delicious coolness was in the air. We

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were even ready to fancy that here and there the huge leaves of some tropical shrub stirred ever so gently, moved by the breath of a breeze that came as a herald to the dawn that was not far off.

Out of the fulness of my heart, at last, my tongue spake.

"What a beautiful woman that young widow—"

Thus far in my speech I got, but no farther.

"McLeod—" said Oscar, standing still and looking at me with grave amusement; "do you really mean to say you admire her. Good heavens! and I have fancied you a kindred soul, and all that sort of thing. If there *is* a type of woman more detestable than another it is surely that of which that low-browed, restless-eyed—"

"Stop, stop!" I cried. "There is some mistake; there must be. I was speaking of Mrs. Armytage."

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Oscar stooped quickly — to bring a vesuvian sharply across the bark of a tree we were passing. Then he lighted his cigarette with some care. After this process was complete, he answered my impatient speech of a moment back—

"My dear fellow, Mrs. Armytage is not a widow. There was no widow in the room to-night except that woman who talks military slang like a trooper, and wears her hair in a tangled bush down to her tinted eyebrows."

"Not a widow—with one little girl?" I said, feebly endeavouring to cover my dismay.

"With one wee four-year-old maid—a fairy, with golden locks—yes; a widow, no. Her husband is in the Civil."

"How is it you have never spoken of her? Why, she is peerless—a queen among women—and, besides, she says she knows you."

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"Does she? Well, so she does, slightly —that is, I see her once in six weeks or so. I was surprised to see her there to-night. She so seldom goes anywhere. It must have been Mrs. Mostyn's doing. It was strange . . ."

He seemed almost to have forgotten my presence; to be speaking more to himself than to me. And in the faint light I saw the old, far-off, weary look in the eyes of the man who had grown as dear to me as though the same mother had borne us both.

"I have bored him, talking of these people of whom he knows little, and cares less," I thought, moodily.

In spite of the shock I had just sustained, I wanted to hear more about Mrs. Armytage. I felt that the thoughts and feelings of the last few hours had been as castles built upon the sand, that they were crumbling about my ears, leaving me desolate and— yes, injured; though by what or by whom

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I really could not have explained. No one had told me Mrs. Armytage was a widow. No one had lied to me on the matter: and yet I was all in arms against the universe. I was almost ready to be irritable with my other self, lounging lazily along by my side, and trolling now and again under his breath snatches of a certain barcarolle just then much *en vogue*.

"What sort of a fellow is Armytage?" I ventured to say, at last.

My friend took his cigarette from between his teeth, flicked off the ash deliberately, and, as though lazily surprised at my so persistently returning to an old subject, said, in his most indifferent and distant manner—

"He's not the sort of fellow I care for."

I felt that the subject of Mrs. Armytage and her husband was dismissed, and against a resolve of Oscar Temple's, be that resolve what it might, there was no appeal.

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CHAPTER III.

FRIENDSHIP UNDER DIFFICULTIES.

OTHER people were not so reticent about Mrs. Armytage as my friend. And this is what I learnt about her. She had married at sixteen, some said to escape from an unhappy home, others for love. Recalling the quiet steadfastness of her eyes, I was inclined to decide in favour of the latter. She gave me the idea of a woman too brave to shrink from facing an uncongenial existence; too true to barter herself for peace and luxury.

That in the ignorance and innocence of extreme youth she had taken tinsel for gold I could well imagine. That she strove to

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be brave when all illusions died, and she found herself the wife of a man whom she could neither love nor honour, I could also believe.

On the peculiarities, to use a mild word, of Mr. Armytage the station was not reserved. He appeared to unite in his own personality almost every vice of which humanity is capable; but of these endearing traits one especially struck me as detestable beyond all words. There was a child—the "wee maid with golden locks" of whom Captain Temple had spoken (she was a delicate, sensitive little creature, with her mother's eyes)—and through the child the father did not hesitate to torture the mother.

Tales were told of his cruelty to little Mabel that were enough to make one's blood boil, and it appeared that Mrs. Armytage had made many an effort to get the child sent home.

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Against this being done her husband set his will like a rock; and so the two, mother and child, lived on as best they could. Considering his constant bouts of intemperance, it seemed a strange thing that Mr. Armytage had not long since got into trouble with the heads of the Service to which he belonged. But he was a man highly connected, and influence had done and was doing its work to induce the authorities to affect a convenient blindness to his ill-doings.

Mabel was now six years of age, as pretty a sprite as ever charmed the eye. Her little mouth seemed made for smiles, her brown eyes had all that power of lighting up into laughter that none but brown eyes can have. But the smiles were rare, the eyes oftener wistful than merry.

I shall never forget, while I live, the first time I ever saw this mother and child together. It seemed impossible for their

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eyes to meet without looks of unutterable tenderness passing from the one to the other; and the child's tiny hand seemed like a restless bird unless it nestled in that of the mother. Then it was at rest, and lay content.

It was Mrs. Mostyn who first took me to call upon Mrs. Armytage.

When we left the house, after the visit was over, we were both very silent.

I affected to be absorbed in managing the pair of high-mettled ponies I was driving. Mrs. Mostyn appeared lost in thought.

The drive home to the colonel's quarters was a long one, and before we reached our destination the silence between us was broken, and I had heard so sad a story of a woman's life that, man as I was, the evening landscape through which we passed grew blurred and misty to my sight, and I doubt not that the groom in attendance thought

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but small things of the "new doctor" as a whip.

"It is so seldom my friend can or will see any one," said Mrs. Mostyn, "that I have to time my visits carefully. I asked her to let me bring you with me to-day, Dr. McLeod, because I think you are a good friend for her to make, and because she is anxious about Mabel's health. Mr. Armytage hates a civil doctor to be consulted about the child at any time. It will hardly dawn upon him, you see, that you are a doctor, and you can manage to be of some help and comfort to poor Margaret without obtruding the fact of your profession. You must be wary and prudent, just as I am, as to the times and seasons when you go there; for, as often as not, closed doors are a necessity, in consequence of the condition of the master of the house."

Some exclamation that ought to have

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been repressed forced its way from under my moustache.

But Mrs. Mostyn did not resent the slip of the tongue. Presently we passed Temple. He touched his white helmet to my companion, and waved his hand to me, but showed no inclination to stop.

"What a pity it is that Captain Temple is so reserved," said Mrs. Mostyn, as we drove on. "Really, until you came, I thought he had made up his mind to go through life without a friend. At one time, about a year ago, he seemed to come out of himself, as it were, a little indeed. Dr. McLeod, can you imagine any one resisting kindness from *my husband?* Well—just as I hoped he was thawing under the warmth of Colonel Mostyn's cordiality, a sudden change came over him—for months he spent all his leisure hours in long, solitary wanderings; and then he applied for leave, got it, and disappeared from our midst. To you,

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it seems, was reserved the charm of being able to say, 'Open sesame!' to a grand, noble, yet, I cannot but think, mistaken nature."

Here a figure hove in sight that at once drove all thoughts of any other earthly thing from my companion's mind.

"Oh! stop," she said, laying her hand on my arm; "there is Colonel Mostyn."

The groom, apparently conversant with the ways of his mistress, sprang to the ponies' heads, touching his hat, as he said—

"Please, my lady, the 'Curling.'"

I have no manner of doubt he would have done and said exactly the same if the Viceroy himself had been the driver of the frisky ponies, instead of an humble individual like myself.

Servants are very apt to take the tone of their employers, and as to Mrs. Mostyn the "Curling" was the one great paramount

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fact in the entire universe, so in the eyes of her household did he reign supreme.

He came up to us radiant, full of most genial life and energy; as handsome and gallant a soldier as one could well see in a day's, or, for the matter of that, a year's march. I sprang from my seat in the phaeton, and said I would walk on to my quarters.

"No, no!" he said, beaming at his wife as though he had not seen her for an age; "take the 'missus' safe home, and stay and dine with us this evening—the mess can do without you for once in a way." Then he added, in a lower tone, "So you've been to see Mrs. Armytage and that precious little maid, Queen Mab. God bless my soul! McLeod, but that's a bad business."

Understanding that the business in question meant Mrs. Armytage's husband, and thinking it a very bad business indeed, I answered, shortly—"Yes, sir—that it is."

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When I came to think the day's adventures over quietly in my own room it seemed a worse thing still. The whole story seemed almost too painful to dwell upon. What was the end to be?

Would kind fate rive off the cruel bonds that bound that sweet woman's life? Would Mabel—dainty, gentle, patient Mabel—one day laugh as merrily as any other little child? Would her pretty eyes lose that wistful look—her little hands gather some of the flowers of life, instead of being wounded by its thorns? Or would the unhappy wife drop at her post, and Mabel be left alone in the power of the tyrannical and wicked man who knew no touch of softening, loving tenderness, even towards his own child?

Mrs. Mostyn and I talked the whole thing over and over again. We beat our brains to find out ways in which we might bring some occasional ray of brightness into

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those two cold, grey lives—that patient, suffering mother and the "wee maid with golden locks."

I had no one else but Mostyn to talk over the Armytage family with, for Temple kept up the barrier of a determined reserve on that one particular subject, or, rather (so it seemed to me), he soon tired of it, and the far-off, wearied expression came into his eyes, and the set look about his mouth—signs that always warned me quickly off unwelcome ground.

The year wore on, and many were the happy wanderings in the lonely woods and on the hills enjoyed by my comrade and myself. Ofttimes, when I look back, I think that even then when I fancied I knew him best—when I most imagined I fully entered into the refinement of his thoughts, the cultured grace of his ideas of books and things and people—I had but, after all, half learnt the lesson of his worth.

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Meanwhile, my friendship with Mrs. Armytage progressed; or, at all events, gathered all the intimacy that was possible to one in her position.

She seemed to trust me implicitly. She spoke to me of her child's health, and evidently valued what advice I had it in my power to give. Of her husband she never spoke, except in the most casual manner. She was not one of those shallow women who find solace for a trying lot in always laying bare their sorrows on every possible occasion.

Both Mrs. Mostyn and myself perfectly understood that we rejoiced in her friendship on the most uncertain terms, as at any moment it was possible Mr. Armytage might fall foul of us, and forbid us to again enter the presence of his wife. Such things had happened, it being reported that one lady fled in terror from the torrent of abuse with which the drunken wretch assailed

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her, leaving a little Maltese dog behind by some mischance—a mischance of which Mr. Armytage took instant advantage by hanging the unfortunate animal on one of the trees in his garden with a piece of whipcord that happened to be handy.

"There's no monotony about visiting at the Armytage's," said the jolly colonel to me one day; "you never know what may happen before you come away again—yet I can't find it in my heart to forbid my wife going to see that poor soul."

These words might have been prophetic, for surely I was soon to see strange and marvellous things in that fateful house.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

"MABEL does like zoo!" said that dainty maiden, standing by my knee, and looking up into my face with that calm, observant, unabashed curiosity peculiar to children of tender years; "Mabel does like zoo—welly!"

The adjective was uttered with a sort of royal graciousness—an air as of conferring upon me some title of which I might well be proud.

"Not more than I like her," I replied, lifting the child on to my knee.

She clapped her hands, and immediately desired to be told if I liked her Mina-bird

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too, adding, with a pout of grief, that a big feather had tumbled out of its tail that very morning, and did I think I could put it in again?

I shook my head at this, but expressed a confident hope that a new and beautiful one would presently grow in its place.

Then Miss Mabel grew restless, and after bestowing a fond caress upon her mother, took her little self off into the verandah.

The day was unusually oppressive for the time of year, and I thought Mrs. Armytage seemed to be suffering in consequence. Yet she did not say so. She was busy with some delicate embroidery—a group of violets upon a satin ground. The flowers were so natural that they only wanted dew to make them perfect.

I admired her handiwork, and said there were few flowers I liked so much as the violet.

"In which I am not singular either," I

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went on, "for only the other day when Temple and I were wandering in lonely places together he said the same thing. We were talking of home and of England, you know, and of that strange home-sickness that comes over a person sometimes at sight of some trifling thing that holds an association."

Her head was still bent over the work-frame while I spoke, but the needle was motionless in her hand, and I saw the little shining steel quiver. I could not finish my sentence.

I had grown to look upon the friendship of the woman before me as a most precious possession. Any mad thoughts that had on our first meeting, when I deemed her free, run riot in my heart, had died into silence once I knew how her life was bound. I had no dearer hope, no higher ambition, than to be some help to her in the weary battle of her life, if ever God should give me the

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chance. I could not see her suffer and remain unmoved. I drew my chair nearer to her side.

"You are not well to-day?" I said. "Give me your hand."

As it lay in mine I felt the quick pulse leap and throb. But, as I was about to speak some word of professional caution, she caught it from my hold with a quick, nervous shudder, rose suddenly to her feet, and walked across the room to the open window.

I had seen Mrs. Armytage in many a mood, but this was a new phase.

"I think there must be a storm coming," she said, turning to me a face pallid, yet beautiful, by reason of the vivid scarlet of the lips that were slightly parted to let the quick breath come and go. I could only watch her anxiously. I had not a word to say.

After a silence, during which she seemed

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to be enduring some sort of mental struggle, she spoke again—

"I am dealing uncandidly with you, Dr. McLeod. You have been too good a friend to me to deserve such treatment at my hands. Now I will tell you all the truth."

Mabel had wandered round to the other side of the compound, and across the square we could see her ayah's dark face smile a greeting to her charge. Then the woman caught her up upon her knee, and, rocking slowly backwards and forwards, began to sing, or rather chant, one of those wild, monotonous Indian plaints, that once heard are not easily forgotten.

As no other sound broke the stillness, I at last ventured to remind my companion that I was waiting patiently, yet in some anxiety.

"Well," I said, softly, "tell me all the truth. You know, as well as though I had already told you so a thousand times, that

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nothing that concerns you can fail to have the deepest interest for me. Tell me all the truth. What is the matter with you to-day? Why are you so unlike yourself?"

"There is nothing the matter with me. That is the worst of it. Nothing, I mean, that your art can minister to. Please do not say you are sure my nerves are out of order, and that bodily malaise is the cause of this fevered condition. I do hate doctors tracing all one's thoughts, convictions, feelings, fears, to physical evil of one kind or another!"

"I am not likely to do that," I answered, eagerly; "on the contrary, my professional experience would lead me rather to invert the order of cause and effect."

"I am glad of that," she said, speaking like a person who has been running hard, and is short of breath; "I am glad of that, for I can speak more freely to you. Dr. McLeod, would you take me to be a super-

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stitious woman? There! I see you are going to say No; but I assure you I am—that is, on certain points. Will you believe me that for the last two hours I have been hoping—nay, praying, that some one—Mrs. Mostyn, yourself, anybody, might come in? I have wanted to hear a fellow-creature's voice. I, who so love to be alone, have longed to be conscious of the nearness of some friend in whom my trust is absolute."

"As it is in me?"

"As it is in you."

"Thank God, then, that I chanced to come when most you needed me! But tell me, dear friend, why have these strange fears beset you?"

"I do not know," she almost whispered, shuddering, as I could see, from head to foot. "I cannot tell, but the terrible presentiment of coming evil is over me. Some horrible thing is going to happen to me. . . . Oh, my God—what is it?"

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She seemed almost to have forgotten my presence. Her eyes, heavy and dull, stared out across the compound; her hands, wrung together as in passionate pleading against fate, drooped before her. As I watched, a change came over her—a look of intentness, of hushed expectation.

Was she listening to the measured drone of the ayah's song? Mabel had fallen asleep, for the golden head lay back against the gaily-striped shawl of her attendant; but surely new sounds were mingling with the wild, unearthly song that had been the child's lullaby?

Yes; hurrying footsteps approached the tattie that hung over the doorway of the room.

"Sahib—sahib!" cried the native servant whose special duty it was to attend to visitors; and then, forgetful of his usual good manners in the excitement of the moment, my soldier-servant Davis, usually

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a calm and stolid specimen of his class, roughly thrust the tattie aside, and gasped out something that at first sounded unintelligible.

"Speak out, man!" I cried, in much amazement and no little alarm; "What is it?"

"It's Captain Temple, sir!"

"Captain Temple—what of him?"

"His horse has throwed him, just by the barrack-gate, sir, and rolled on him, and Dr. Baynes says you're please to come as quick as you can. He's mad-like is Dr. Baynes. I've run all the blessed way, for the corporal said the captain hadn't never spoke nor moved since they carried him into his quarters."

I stood a moment grasping the tattie in my hands, as if even that frail stay were a welcome support. The world seemed going around with me,

Was it of my friend—my companion of

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only that morning—was it of *Oscar Temple* that the man was speaking?

I fought with that deathly feeling at my heart, the gathering round it of a chill and awful fear; and then I rallied strength and courage for the duty that had to be faced.

"My horse is tied to the fence at the side of the compound. Bring it round to the door."

Davis touched his cap and vanished.

Then I re-entered the room I had left but a moment ago, dropping the tattie behind me.

Shall I ever, as long as memory lasts, forget the face of the woman who awaited my coming? Lividly pale, with wild distended eyes—eyes full of unspeakable dread—with white lips, not quivering, but more piteous still, set and drawn in a rigid look of pain—I saw Mrs. Armytage, and knew that the horror she had foreseen had come upon her.

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Of all that her pitiful condition revealed to me I did not stop to think.

As she strove to speak, and failed to utter any sound but a gasping, sobbing sigh, my professional instinct came to the fore. I recognised the danger to which a sensitive frame was exposed by this state of silent, terrible suffering. Though every instant was precious, I could not leave her thus.

I took both her hands firmly in mine, led her to a couch, and forced her to sit down, seating myself by her side. She struggled to free her hands, but I would not let them go.

"Mrs. Armytage," I said, speaking slowly and distinctly, in spite of the raging devil of impatience within me; "try and speak to me—I cannot leave you like this. Listen! it may not be so bad as we are ready to think. He may yet—"

But she writhed herself free from my grasp; she wrung her hands wildly,

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moaning out words that had no sense or meaning.

And still across the compound came the sound of that wailing song, and still little Mabel slept with her golden curls against the ayah's shoulder.

I grew desperate.

"Mrs. Armytage, try to control yourself. I ought to go; my friend claims my care, and yet, how *can* I leave you like this? You are keeping me from *him*."

"I am not!" she broke out, wildly: "Who asked you to stay? Go! he wants you; but, oh! if you have any pity in your heart, take me with you!"

The long, shuddering sigh with which she uttered this useless prayer was enough to unnerve the strongest man; but yet I could only say her nay.

"You know it is impossible I should take you with me. It is you who have no pity—no pity on yourself—on me—on him!"

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But she only moaned out his name, cowering away from me, as if to hide from some haunting sight of horror.

"I have suffered so much," I heard her say; "suffered so much—I cannot bear any more. Oscar! Oscar! Ah, dear God!"

What was I to do?

At any moment some one might come in, and the grief-mad woman was far beyond any possibility of thought for herself.

Nothing but tears could soften this delirium of sorrow—and how to make them flow—

"For your own sake—for your child's sake, try to calm yourself;" I urged, once more getting possession of her hands. "Think what you are doing. Have you no courage—no fortitude to call to your aid? Would Oscar wish you to act in this way—to yield to such undisciplined grief? What would he counsel you to do . . . . if he could speak to tell you?"

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It was a bold venture thus to utter the name she held so perilously dear. Like many another bold venture, it was successful.

She shivered from head to foot; her bosom rose and fell; the great tears gathered in her burning eyes, and fell a-down her poor, pale cheeks.

There was no fear for her now.

"Go! go!" she whispered, raising those streaming eyes to mine; "God forgive me that I have kept you from him one single moment—his need of you is greater than mine—go!"

She pushed me gently from her, and then sank back upon the couch and lay there like some lovely, breathing statue. The long, dark lashes lay upon her cheek. Tears dropped from beneath the closed lids.

And though each moment was a lost jewel, I lingered yet another.

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I lingered to raise the listless hand that lay white against her dark dress and press it to my lips.

We read of the accursèd kiss that was the sign and signal of betrayal—mine was a silent oath of fealty and trust.

In her passionate anguish she felt nothing now of all she had betrayed. But the time would come when she would *think;* and then she would be glad to call to mind that Duncan McLeod, the man in whom she had avowed her perfect trust, had touched her hand with his lips before he left her—ay! and as reverently as though she were a queen, and he a subject kneeling at her feet.

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CHAPTER V.

"INTO THE DREAM BEYOND."

We looked into each other's faces, trying to make believe that there was some hope.

We tried to cheat each other, tried to teach our tongues to lie, as a cover for the despair in our hearts. But I think that from the first we all of us knew that hope was not, and that all our watching and waiting only meant watching and waiting for the end.

True, Oscar Temple had youth and perfect health on his side. Did we not say so over and over again?

But to the poor crushed frame, of what avail were these?

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Science, looking on (and able to do but little else), could only own herself defeated, could only bow her head to the decree of Heaven.

In a state that seemed to those who watched beside him like a sojourning in some strange borderland between life and death, our gallant soldier lay almost as still as though he were the cunningly-carved effigy of some knight of old.

His face was uninjured, and save for its deathly pallor and the dimness of the eyes that saw not what they rested on, quite unchanged. On one side of the head the crisp, short curls were blood-bedabbled. Now and again a low, inarticulate moaning came from the lips that had smiled their last smile at me as I left him on the morning of that fatal day.

In vain, sitting by his bedside, did I strive to realise the events of the last few hours.

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Should I, in very truth, never hear again his cheery voice greeting me as I entered the familiar room? Should I never feel again the cordial clasp of the hand that now lay cold and inert in mine?

Oh, the silence, the awful, weariful silence of death is surely its bitterest sting!

"I wish he'd speak," said poor Baynes, bending over the still form on the narrow camp bed.

The little doctor's hair seemed more rampant than ever; his round eyes cast piteously imploring glances upon the world in general during this time of ceaseless anxiety.

He always spoke in a sepulchral and blood-curdling whisper in a sick room, and stole about on the extreme tips of creaking boots that creaked unmercifully, did Dionysius Baynes, M.D.; but his heart was so tender, his sympathy so ready, that I was angry with myself for being irritated by his peculiarities.

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"Amelia's in an awful way about all this," he said to me about a dozen times in two hours.

Now, "Amelia" was Mrs. Baynes, and I afterwards heard that while Oscar Temple lay a-dying she wept herself almost into a state of obliteration—indeed, she may have been said to resemble nothing so closely as a dissolving view half-dissolved, and quite uncertain as to what it should develop into next.

Well might she weep, poor faded woman! Where would she find so true a friend again as the man who had taken a forced interest in Johnny and Janey, and even in the goggle-eyed baby, just for the sake of cheering up the fretful, ailing mother?

Towards the evening of the next day the colonel brought his wife down to the barracks to see the sick man. Bitterly that gentle-hearted woman wept at the sight of the manly form laid so low.

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"Oh! Dr. McLeod," she said, "I wish every one belonging to him were not so far away. There is nothing to be done, I know, and yet it seems so hard—so hard!"

Just then Temple stirred, and we heard him mutter something, speaking like a man who talks in sleep.

In a moment we had gathered round the bed, and were bending over him. A smile flickered round his lips, and then we caught a word or two, uttered hardly above a whisper.

"My love—" he said, "my love!"

Mrs. Mostyn started back, turning her tender, appealing eyes upon her husband.

"It is horrible!" she sobbed, clinging to his arm: "did you hear what he said? Oh! Edgar, there is some one he loves dearly, some one far away, some one who ought to know, who ought to be here—here by his side!"

I turned quickly away, hurried to the

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window, and stood there looking at the landscape stretching far distant—a world of blinding sunshine and black shadows—looking, yet seeing nothing.

Was the woman whom my friend so dearly loved, in truth "far away"—or was she pitiably, cruelly near—near at hand, yet in reality far as land and sea could set her from him in this supreme hour of his sore need? How was she living through the long, endless hours of the day—how was she enduring the silent watches of the night?

I could not leave my patient for a moment. The only thing that kept Baynes from losing his head entirely was my constant presence. Besides, even if I could have taken an hour's respite from our hopeless vigil, I should have shrank from seeing Mrs. Armytage. Even as it was I shrank from the mere thought of our next meeting with a cowardice of which I could hardly

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have believed myself capable. I wrote her one hurried line, and sent it off by an orderly; but when he returned he said there was "no answer, as Mrs. Armytage was not at home."

Later on in the evening Baynes came in and told me that he had been over to the colonel's and there met Mrs. Armytage.

"By Jove!" said the little man, rumpling up his locks anew; "she's a handsome woman, that. I think she grows handsomer every time I see her. Some people say she's too pale, but to-day she was blooming like a rose—like a rose, sir, upon my word and honour! I fancy Amelia, who is spending the day with Mrs. Mostyn, thought her heartless about our poor friend here; but then, you know, as I said after she was gone, it's quite a different thing; a regiment's a regiment, and you can't expect outsiders to feel as we do—can you now?"

"Of course not; besides, Mrs. Armytage

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has only known Temple very slightly, and a person cannot be expected—"

"Oh! I don't know about that," put in Baynes at this point. "I remember there was a time—it was before you joined—when he and she seemed rather good friends; but Armytage had one of his worst blow-outs, you know, and I always fancied he insulted Temple in some way or other. You know it's a way he has. He chased Colville's wife—Colville of the R.H.A.—all the way down to the gate—ay! that he did, and then he hanged—"

"I have heard all about that affair," I said, "and in no way doubt the brute's power of making himself disagreeable, though I am bound to say he has been civil enough to me whenever I have chanced to meet him."

"Oh, yes, I heard he was on his good behaviour just now; it's Mrs. Mostyn's doing, that, I fancy. By Jove! that woman

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would tame a tiger, I do believe, if you only gave her time enough. Still, I must say I think Mrs. Armytage might have shown more feeling about poor Temple—upon my soul, I do! She seemed such a contrast to the rest, don't you know. The colonel's wife so pale and grave, and the chief himself with never one of his hearty laughs left in him; and then Amelia—why, her nose is twice its natural size, and as red as Billy Nipper's after a guest-night, and her eyes are half-swelled up; she's in an awful state, is Amelia!"

I am afraid I paid but very little attention to the state of "Amelia," or the lamentable condition of her eyes and nose. What about that other woman—the woman who "might have shown a little more feeling about poor Temple"?

Had I dreamt that terrible scene of the day before? Was I the victim of some strange hallucination, or was Mrs. Armytage

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acting a part—filling a *rôle* that no woman of less resolution could fill? Had her visit to the Mostyns been but the outcome of a maddening longing to gather some news of Oscar Temple? Had her indifferent manner been but a mask to hide the anguish of her heart?

Would she not, in very truth, have given ten years of her life to stand by the dying man now—to pillow his head upon her breast, and kiss the last breath from his lips?

What was that cry so full of pitiful anguish that haunted me even in the midst of all my anxiety and suspense?—

"Oscar—Oscar! Ah, dear God!" . . .

The last words seemed wrung from her lips, as if in piteous, reproachful appeal to the Heaven that had taken her dear love from her. . . .

* * * * * *

As the evening wore on a great longing

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began to take possession of me. I wanted to be left alone—quite alone with the man who was so dear to me. I wanted him, just at the very last, all to myself.

He was the first real friend I had ever made; our short companionship had been one unruffled time of happiness. Where in all the world should I find another like him—where the manly strength and courage, the womanly tenderness to the sad or suffering, the childlike purity of thought and purpose—where?

Long years have passed over my head since the day when, beside my first friend, I asked myself this question. The years have passed — youth has grown to maturity, maturity to age; but time has brought me no answer.

I have known good men, great men, clever men; but never one with the golden nature of the man who sleeps beneath the soil of that far-off land.

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The night was closing in: the sky, grown wondrously, darkly purple, was spangled with stars that seemed to hang lovingly towards earth, so near they seemed seen through the clear, still air.

No faintest breeze stirred any leaf—no sound broke the stillness save now and again a bugle-call from the men's quarters that lay at some distance.

I was to have my way—I was to have my friend all to myself just at the last, for I knew the end was near.

The breath that stirred the broad breast was slower, fainter, more intermittent. A livid line was settling round the lips; the poor, helpless hands were chill even in that hot night.

I saw that Baynes, full of concern as to the sad state of Amelia, and a new trouble in the form of some inconveniently-timed indisposition on the part of the goggle-eyed baby, had failed to detect these signs of sinister import.

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"Do go home," I said, with a determined air; "I shall stay by him all night, and it will be such a comfort to Mrs. Baynes to have you home for an hour or two; particularly if she is anxious about the baby."

The good little man hardly liked deserting his post; but his soul yearned towards Amelia and the baby.

"Send the orderly for me the instant you see any change. 'While there's life there's hope,' as I said to Mrs. Mostyn just now; and two heads are better than one. Anyway, I will be back in an hour or two."

The worthy fellow stole a-tip-toe into the next room, peered into the pallid face that lay back against the pillow, shook his head, and creaked his way out into the corridor, and so in the direction of his own quarters.

I drew a long breath of relief. I had a vast regard for my good friend the surgeon, though perhaps more a social than a professional regard. I knew he had always

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regarded Oscar Temple with mingled awe and admiration, and, moreover, revered him as one who appreciated Amelia, in that respect outshining most of his brother officers. But I wanted my friend for the short, short while he could now be mine all to myself.

Leaving the orderly in the ante-room I took my place by the bed.

Some faint and distant sound of singing came in through the open windows. I shuddered; for it was the same sad, wailing chant as Mabel's ayah sang on that terrible day.

The sick man's watch ticked on the table with that curious distinctness such sounds always seem to take to themselves at such times; and, as I kept my sad and lonely vigil, thoughts came and went — bitter thoughts, terrible regrets — little memories, too, of little things, recollections of kindly words, of ready sympathy, of a thousand

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trifles such as are wont to arise and mock the heart that knows a shadow of great dread is coming. . .

Baynes must have been detained by the sick baby longer than that hour or two of which he had spoken; or, wearied with anxiety and loss of rest, he had fallen asleep, and Amelia could not find it in her kindly soul to wake him. Anyway, the night wore on; the sky, seen through the open windows, grew less bluely purple, the stars shone fainter, and a certain chill in the air told me that day-dawn was not far off.

Was the dawn of an eternal day, too, also drawing on apace? I thought so.

Temple had moved, turning on his pillow so that his face was towards the window.

I bent eagerly over him. Such a longing that he might speak to me, if only once, came over me that I uttered his name aloud.

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"Oscar," I said, and I heard myself sob like any woman might have done; "do you not know me—can you not speak to me?"

But what thought or recollection lingered in the failing powers of life were not for me, but for one infinitely dearer. He did not seem even to hear me.

A faint, ineffably tender smile fluttered round his mouth, his lips moved, and bending close, close to him, unable to see his dying face for blinding tears, I caught the words, softly whispered, yet distinct enough—

"Margaret—my darling!"

Then came a long, deep sigh as of one laying down a heavy burden, and I had lost for ever in this world my first, best, dearest friend.

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CHAPTER VI.

A PHANTOM OF THE NIGHT.

How long does it take us to realise that some dear, familiar friend has passed away from our ken? How long is it before we cease to listen, from sheer force of habit, for the footstep on the stair, the sound of the cheery voice—how long?

These and such-like kindred reflections filled my heavy heart as, the night after Oscar Temple died, I took my way to my quarters after mess. To-morrow, at early dawn, all that was mortal of the man of whom the regiment had been justly proud would be laid in their last resting-place.

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Perhaps, I thought, after that supreme hour my loss would seem more real.

So far it felt almost like a dream. I had to reason with and overcome a foolish fancy that I should suddenly see the tall figure coming towards me, find my hand grasped in his, meet my friend face to face, and wake from my dream of loss to find the world less desolate than I had deemed it.

Perhaps it was because of this strange, dazed condition of my own mind that I felt no surprise, only a sort of vague wonder and curiosity, when, just as I crossed the compound near my quarters, a woman glided wraith-like from the deep shadow, and stood right in my pathway.

Had I gone through all this weird experience in some former state of existence, or in some dream? At all events it gave me no feeling of astonishment when I saw the figure in my path throw back a thick veil and disclose to me the face of Mrs.

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Armytage—a face almost as colourless as that of the dead man who lay in the room where burned a feeble, flickering light . . .

Her eyes, full of pleading agony, sought mine. Twice she essayed to speak; as often failed.

"If you have any pity, let me see him. I will not stay a moment—do not be angry with me for coming—I should have gone mad else—and you know I—always trusted you."

I spoke no word in answer to this piteous appeal, only bent my head in acquiescence, and turned into the double quarters that were mine—and his.

I knew by the light rustle of her dress along the matting that she was following me. I never once looked at her, but just pointed to the door of the room where the dead lay, and then passed into the one next to it. I felt rather than saw her enter, dropping the tattie behind her.

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My sense of hearing seemed to grow painfully acute. The sound of a footstep in the distance caused the sweat to ooze out upon my brow.

If any one chanced to come in while that terrible interview between the dead and the living was going on what should I do, what should I say, to shield that than which I well knew nothing could have been dearer to my lost friend—the fair name and fame of the woman he loved? Each moment seemed like an hour. I watched the matting that hung over the doorway, longing to see it put aside. How was it that no sound broke the stillness of the chamber it concealed, that chamber where the coffined face showed white and still in the faint light, looking like that of some sculptured knight taking his knightly rest after the "burden and heat of the day"?

Could this woman who had risked all a woman holds most dear for the sake of

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looking upon her dead love, so control the anguish of her soul as to bite back every sob, and stifle every moan that rose to her lips?

The oppression of this silence, and yet the knowledge of the awful conflict waging so near me, tried my nerves to the uttermost. Only a moment had I covered my eyes with my hand, when a light touch on my arm made me look up, and there at my side stood Mrs. Armytage. Her veil was down, but, as she caught my hand and raised it to her lips, their cold touch thrilled me through its meshes, and I knew they had taken their chill from the face of the dead.

"God bless and comfort you in your own day of sorrow!" she said, speaking very softly, but quite calmly. "If I had not seen him I could not have faced my life without him. Dr. McLeod, I must have fallen low, very low in your eyes. You know the secret of my life and his. I

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should like to tell you, if I can, how it all came about."

I made a passionate gesture of dissuasion; speak I could not, but she was determined to have her way. She was in that state of exaltation when it would have been dangerous to try and thwart her further.

So I listened; still, or so it seemed, in a wild, fantastic world of dreams. . . .

"You, who so loved him, do not need for me to tell you what he was. When first I met him he seemed like a revelation to me. I had never even pictured to myself such a man — so manly, yet so tender, so chivalrous. Ah, my God! why do I talk like this? Will it bring him back? . . ."

A moment she was silent, and I saw her shudder as though a blast of cold had struck her; then she recovered herself.

"It grew upon me—the thought of him, I mean," she said, her weary tear-dimmed

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eyes looking at me through the shadowy veil that covered them; "I meant no wrong, nor did he. I was like a person dying of thirst, who suddenly finds a spring of crystal water in a parched and desolate land where no shadow is. It made me happy to see him, and I saw him often. All my life seemed changed; things—troubles—were easier to bear. The world would not believe all this, I know. It would be ready to think evil of me and of him; but you are not the world, and you know I always trusted you—I told you so, didn't I?"

"God be my judge, and judge me in my turn as hardly, if ever I harbour a thought that is not full of reverence towards you, and towards him!"

The words felt weak and poor to clothe the impulse of my heart, but they were the best I could find.

And she?—well, she turned away with a

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little strangled sob, the first I had heard from her lips.

"I knew," she said—"I knew how it would be; but listen still. I have not told all the story. One night, it seems a long, long while ago now, I was in dreadful trouble. Things had been going very hardly with me and with my child. I was desperate. A cruel blow had hurt me—here."

She put up her hand to her brow: and again I saw her shudder.

"Yes," I said, shortly, "I understand."

"Well, some evil fate brought Oscar there that night. He came, knowing nothing, to bring me a message from Mrs. Mostyn. I had been brave enough before, but when I met him—when I saw the tender, pitiful look in his eyes, I grew weak and broken-hearted all at once. I do not know how it came about, but the next moment his arms were around me. I felt his hot tears fall

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upon my face: his lips pressed mine in wild despairing kisses. I knew then, once and for ever, that he loved me. I knew more than this—I knew that that very knowledge must part us—I knew that the old happy meetings could be—never again; and yet that hour was worth the living, let come what might in the future. The kisses that told me how dear he held me, were like strong wine to a fainting traveller. Life has never been the same again—never so hard to bear, for I had always that to think of—he loved me—my love—my love!

"I did not think my love a sin then," she went on wildly, looking at me with clear, defiant eyes; "I do not think so now. . . It helped me to be strong—it nerved me in many a dreadful hour that came after. I would rather believe there is no God in Heaven than think He would condemn a love like mine as an evil, sinful thing. I have thanked Him on my knees for that one

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gleam of light and joy that shone in upon my miserable, wretched life many a time. I have never feared to lay my heart before His eyes. He judges more tenderly—more truly than many. I tell you that in that hour *I lived*—life had been but a living death to me before. What did my dear love say as he left me? 'Be brave, dear heart:' And I was—I was! I had often turned coward before—I never did again. How could I—when he loved me so? I should have been unworthy of him else. . . And now—I shall never hear him speak sweet words of comfort any more—never any more. . . "

Her voice broke in sobs, and yet her eyes were tearless.

I saw that, maddened with mingled grief and love, she was not able to think for herself.

I thought I heard a footstep. At any moment some intruder might break in upon

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our solitude. The risk the woman ran was terrible.

I took her hand and drew it firmly through my arm. Then I led her out into the night which a kind fate had permitted to be dark.

A shiver shook the trees as we passed along—a faint moaning came from the hills.

"We shall have a storm before long," I said, hurriedly; "walk as quickly as you can, you have a long way to go."

"It is no matter," she answered, quietly; "I am not alone. You can leave me now, and we part friends, do we not, Dr. McLeod —true friends, with never a hard thought to come between us?"

I raised her hand to my lips by way of answer, and then she gave a strange, low call, more like the sound of some night bird's cry than anything else. A dark figure glided swiftly from the shadow of a group of trees, and I saw the faithful ayah,

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of whose absolute devotion to herself and little Mabel Mrs. Armytage had so often told me.

I still seemed to be in dreamland as the two figures, side by side, passed quickly along the road, and so out of my sight.

* * * * * *

In the faint grey dawn we followed our dead to the grave; and as the wailing shriek of the fifes rose and fell, the burden of my sorrow seemed well nigh too heavy to be borne.

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CHAPTER VII.

HOME, SWEET HOME!

DEAD and buried away out of sight, like the hero of her short, sad love story, was to be all cognisance of the secret told me on that fateful night by Margaret Armytage. Our strange meeting in the darkness of the night, the visit to the dead, the pitiful tale of a love as pure as it was unfortunate—all these things were to be as though they had never been. So she willed it. For some while after Captain Temple's death I shrank from seeking out the woman who had been, as it were, forced into giving me a confidence that, however sacred in my eyes, must be a painful remembrance to her. Thus it

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chanced that our first meeting came about in quite a casual manner at the house of a mutual acquaintance. She greeted me with perfect self-possession, and made no comment on the length of time that had elapsed since I had last seen her. Quietness and repose at all times marked her manner and speech: now I noted no change, save that, perhaps, the quiet was greater than before, and her cheek somewhat thinner and more pale.

I had long since come to the conclusion that the rosy bloom of which Dr. Baynes had spoken as adorning and heightening her beauty on that day when Temple lay hovering between life and death was but art called in to aid nature, and to hide, doubtless, a ghastly pallor that else would have betrayed the anguish of her heart.

Her pale looks were, therefore, now no surprise to me; while the chastened accents of her voice seemed but as the result of a

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resignation acquired not without intense and prolonged suffering.

Three months later our regiment was suddenly and unexpectedly ordered to a distant station, and I had to take my last look of the cross-crowned grave where Oscar Temple lay.

My farewell of Mrs. Armytage was said in the presence of others, and there was nothing to distinguish it from any common-place adieu between ordinary friends. True, there was an earnest, steadfast look in her eyes at last, and a warmth in the clasp of her hand that I fain would have fancied meant to tell me she knew she had not troubled me in vain.

Mabel—pretty, fairy thing—came flying after me into the entrance-hall, put up her sweet lips to mine, and called me over and over again her "own dear Dr. Duncan."

Yes, "Queen Mab" was sorry for my going, if no one else regretted me.

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After another year's service the 167th was ordered home, and, though I liked India passing well, I must confess I was by no means sorry to see the white cliffs of Old England once again.

Yet in my content was a feeling of some desolation. All through the homeward voyage those about me had been talking of their future plans. Every one seemed to have some group of relatives anxiously looking forward to their arrival, and eager to know how soon "leave" could be obtained.

I had no one.

The truth is, nature had not been very bountiful to me in the way of relatives, and I possessed nothing in the wide world that could be called a "home."

An only child, and left an orphan at an early age, I had been brought up under the stern eye of an uncle and guardian — a surgeon in Dublin; hence my being put into the medical profession. I really believe

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the crusty old fellow had a kindly heart of his own, but he certainly took great pains to conceal it. He impressed upon me the fact that the sooner I managed to "put the bread in my own mouth the better he should be pleased," and showed some quiet satisfaction when I passed my examination for the Army Medical Department and was gazetted as a staff assistant-surgeon, presented me with a hundred pounds, and told me I should never get anything more from him. I never did, except twenty pounds "to buy a mourning ring" when he died, a couple of years later.

Taking all these circumstances into consideration, it was not to be expected that I should feel as ecstatic as some of my comrades at reaching a land that was for them, but not for me, full of happy associations. I was perfectly content to take sole charge of the regiment, and let Baynes, his wife, and the olive branches rush into the fervent

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embrace of relatives on both sides of the house.

By the way, Johnny and Janey had made life a weariness to us all during the voyage, by climbing up every high place and falling into every deep one that was possible; and we got to be quite fond of looking at the goggle-eyed baby, so glad were we it was, happily, incapable of much progression on its own account.

Baynes informed me several times during the voyage that Amelia was in "quite a state, thinking of that poor fellow Temple left lying in his lonely grave on India's coral strand;" and I fancy she was by no means the only one on board who had sad, regretful thoughts of the brave young soldier we left behind us.

How vividly he was brought to my mind —with what intensity the strange, sad story of his life and of his death rushed back upon my recollection—who can say, when,

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about a month after we had settled down in our new quarters, I read in a copy of the Friend of India that had followed us home the record of the death of Mr. Armytage?

I hastened to my own room, taking the paper with me; I laid it on the table before me, and read and re-read the few words that told me Margaret Armytage was a widow.

"So," I said to myself, "she is free, and her dead love sleeps in his lonely grave!

'There is a reaper whose name is Death—'

Yes; and he is no respecter of persons—no truckler to human happiness; for, if his 'sickle keen' lays low the foul, rank weeds, it does not spare 'the flowers that grow between.'"

Should I ever hear of her? Should I ever meet again the sweetest, most womanly, woman I had ever known? Even if I did

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— well, what then? Was not her heart buried in Oscar's grave?

Mrs. Mostyn was away just at this time, staying with some relatives, so that I had no one to speak to of the thoughts that came and went; and when I did see the colonel's wife she had no news to tell me of Margaret and her child. Beyond the fact that they had left India shortly after Mr. Armytage's death neither she nor I heard anything; and so that chapter in my life seemed closed.

Closed, but not forgotten.

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CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

My old uncle, Doctor Neville, left a son to inherit his hard-earned gains, one Percy Daynton Neville, a youth who, in past years, had by no means succeeded in winning my affections.

I am one of those people philosophical enough to try and forget folks who do not please me, and assuredly this cousin of mine had almost faded from my remembrance, when, during the spring of my second year's home-service, I received a reminder of his existence in the shape of a most kind and cordial invitation to visit himself and his wife at Ferndene, their home on the Cornish coast.

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It appeared that a distant relative had bequeathed this property to my cousin, and with it a fair round sum in hard cash wherewith to keep it up. I was surprised, both at Percy's good fortune and his remembrance of me; but saw no reason why I should not take advantage of the latter.

Leave was easily obtained by one who had had so little, and, in spite of Mrs. Baynes feeling not a little injured at me deserting my post just when the goggle-eyed one had escaped croup by the "skin of his teeth," I started for Ferndene one glorious morning late in April, and reached that delightful spot just as the sun was setting, turning the sky all red and gold, and making every window in the old house gleam as though illuminated in my honour.

I found my Cousin Percy grown a fine, stalwart specimen of a country squire. As to his wife, Alice, she was a wife worth

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any man's claiming. Devoted to her husband, a blind worshipper at the feet of Percy the younger—a blue-eyed brat not two years old, whose one object in life was, apparently, to clutch at every object, animate and inanimate, that came within his reach—pretty, blithe, and bonnie; such was Percy Daynton Neville's wife, and well might he deem himself a lucky fellow.

Could anything be more perfectly charming than the oak room at Ferndene?

Deep-mullioned windows, festooned outside with clematis and monthly roses, dark panelled walls, a sea of polished floor containing one square island of Turkey carpet; in each narrow recess on either side of the fireplace rows of book-shelves well filled.

Through these delicious windows the stirring of branches, the flutter and song of birds; further on, green, undulating ground, leading almost down to the sea.

Not quite, though; for a steep rocky shore

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intervened, and the low diapason of the waves sang the world to sleep.

"As you are fond of reading, Cousin Duncan," said fair Alice to me the morning after my arrival in their midst, "you can look upon this room as your particular haunt. Baby and I seldom come here of a morning—do we 'Poppums'?"

This last remark was, I need hardly say, addressed not to me, but to Percy junior, who replied thereto by madly seizing a ringlet that hung upon the speaker's shoulder, and holding on as though for dear life itself.

"It's a precious good thing that my wife's hair *grows*," said Percy, who was standing by; "if it didn't our domestic history would be a series of appalling catastrophes."

"It should pull mammy's hair if it liked, so it should!" put in Alice, crooning over her darling and cuddling him closer in her arms.

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"By all means," said Percy, laughing. "Let him make bellropes of every tress upon your head if it pleases you, my dear. But how about your generous offer of setting apart this room for Duncan's use? You had better give him full warning that occasionally caprice moves us to dine here."

"There is nothing so pleasant as a round table dinner," I put in. "It is quite the most charming thing in the world for a small party—the absence of angles seems to promote conversation. . ."

"Quite so," said Alice, with a knowing look at her lord and master; "and we shall very likely dine at this round table to-morrow evening, a small and select party, with no angles. We are going to try and make it a pleasant time for Cousin Duncan —aren't we, Poppums?"

Again Alice addressed herself to that ridiculous baby, who appeared to enter into the joke, whatever it was, with ardent

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zest, clutching at the knot of cherry-coloured ribbon at his mother's throat, and trying to devour the same.

"I do believe," said Percy, touching the callow down of his son and heir with a loving hand—"I really do believe that every woman is, at heart, a match-maker! Here is this absurd wife of mine plotting against your liberty, Duncan. It's no use frowning at me, and shaking your head like that, Alice. I know you are. You want to introduce Duncan to the most charming woman in the world."

"Well, and why shouldn't I?" cried Alice, pouting; "why shouldn't I?"

She hid her face in her boy's fat little neck, the youngster crowing and squealing with delight the while.

Seeing that my fair cousin was keeping dark some harmless plot for my advantage, I made no further inquiries as to the "most charming woman in the world," a piece of

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forbearance for which I was rewarded by a grateful glance from Alice's bright eyes, and a kiss from baby; this last a moist and doubtful blessing.

The following evening, after a delicious ramble on the sea-girt rocks below Ferndene (during which I made the acquaintance of some of the most lovely of sea flowers and plants), I returned home only just in time to dress for dinner.

On my way up-stairs I glanced into the oak room, and there, sure enough, was the round table laid for dinner, and with four, not three, covers.

How pretty the room looked with flowers among the snowy napery and shining glass upon the table, a tiny wood fire flickering in the grate, and the windows open so that the clematis and roses thrust their pretty blossoms in as if to invite some hand to gather them, and beyond, the lovely rippling water, each little wave tipped with

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rose-colour, reflected from the rosy sky above!

We were soon gathered in a group in the deep recess of the window—Percy, his wife, and myself.

"Now, Duncan," said my cousin, "take care of yourself, my friend. You'll lose your heart to a certainty this evening, if it's your own to lose. It would need a fellow to be case-hardened, indeed, to withstand the attractions of our friend, the fair Margaret."

I had been looking out to where a strip of sand, left bare by the retreating tide, was rose-flecked, and so transparent that the shadows of a group of sailors gathered round a boat were rosy too; but at the sound of that name I started and turned.

Shakespeare says, "What's in a name?" and then assures us that the rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

Be it so; but still, there's ofttimes magic

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in a name. Is it not the key-note that may set some melody going in the memory—the "open sesame" that bids some ghosts of things past stir in their grave-clothes, look from their shrouds with sad, regretful eyes, and stalk forth to haunt the saddened mind?

Did not the very name of Margaret conjure up before me a woman slender as a reed, possessed of "every grace to grace a gentlewoman" — a woman with a small, sleek head and eyes of softest brown; a woman like to whom I had seen none other; a woman who had trusted me?

"Why, man," said Percy, clapping me on the shoulder, "you look as if you had seen a ghost."

What had I seen?

Margaret— No phantom, but the woman herself in whose strange story I once had borne so strange a part; Margaret—a little paler than I remembered her; but still the same gentle, calm-eyed woman as had bidden

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me farewell in a day that seemed almost a lifetime ago."

She was standing on the threshold of the room, her lips apart, her eyes on mine.

The next moment Alice ran forward, greeting her warmly.

"We did not hear you come in," she said, leading her friend forward by the hand; "but that is no matter so that you are here—and now, Margaret dear, let me introduce you to Dr. McLeod, Percy's cousin, and mine too."

I had not yet got over the shock of seeing her. It had been too sudden—too unexpected.

She too seemed agitated, but only for a moment. Women will manage to keep their self-possession where we men lose our heads, and are at a loss to find a word; and after that one instant's hesitation Mrs. Armytage came forward and cordially

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extended her hand, greeting me as "quite an old friend."

Alice looked from one to the other of us in perplexed astonishment. As to Percy, he so far forgot his manners as to give utterance to a low whistle of amazement.

"So you know each other already?" said his wife at last, recovering herself. "Why, how stupid of me not to remember you had both been in India!"

It was impossible to help laughing at this peculiarly British way of smoothing over the situation, and the laugh did us all good.

"I am very glad to meet Dr. McLeod again," said our guest.

"And I to meet Mrs. Armytage," I answered, having by this time recovered my *savoir faire*, though still feeling a little as if I were in a dream.

How strange it seemed to hear her voice —to watch the face that had never faded from my memory, and always seemed the

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fairest picture the eyes of my mind could rest upon!

She was but little changed, as I found when I had time to observe her furtively, yet closely. There was a look of peace about her that had been wanting before; and, as I have said, a slight additional pallor.

She was dressed all in black, and nothing broke the sombreness of her costume save a bunch of violets, fresh and dewy, that nestled at her throat. Once or twice during dinner I saw her touch them with loving fingers, and a strange thought flashed through my mind.

Who was it that used to say he loved the little English violet better than all the flowers of the field? Was it not my first, best, dearest friend, the man who lay in that lonely grave far away?

"A silver penny for your thoughts, Cousin Duncan?" cried Alice, and at the

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sound of her merry voice, like ghosts at cock-crow, these sinister phantoms fled back into the shadowy past.

"I have left Mabel installed as head-nurse to Uncle Paul this evening," said Mrs. Armytage, presently.

"Now, who may 'Uncle Paul' be?" thought I to myself.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE COTTAGE BY THE SEA.

"AND so you knew Margaret out in India?" said Alice, eagerly.

Our guest was gone. Poppums was in bed. Outside, the night was so calm and restful that it might have been a night in June. The sands and the sea were no longer rosy, but they were both besprinkled with flickering specks of light—tiny star reflections, that made them wondrously beautiful. The sea lapped softly against the rocks, as if it was singing a lullaby to Poppums up-stairs.

"Do tell me all about it," continued Alice, wistfully.

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We were all on the terrace in the garden, Percy and I smoking cigarettes, Alice, exquisitely pretty in the starshine, with a white filmy covering of some sort resting on her fair head.

"All about what, wifie?" said Percy, less curious, as became his sex.

"All about everything," explained his better-half, comprehensively. "Where he first met her, and, oh! Percy — what sort of a man her husband was."

That "Oh! Percy" was delicious.

It meant a sort of awful awe in the thought that the same humanity that had produced such a noble specimen as the gentleman in question for the speaker's own behoof, could have allotted such a creature as the late Mr. Armytage to the friend she loved.

"I first met Mrs. Armytage at a ball given by our regiment. She was a great friend of our colonel's wife, Mrs. Mostyn."

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"And wasn't she—Margaret, I mean—thought very beautiful? *I* think there is no one in the whole world fit to hold a candle to her, you know."

"Yes, she was considered a handsome woman. I hardly think, though, she was as popular a one as many a woman with a tithe of her attractions."

"I can fancy that," put in Percy, leisurely flicking the ashes from his cigar; "she's too proud to care to be popular; besides, I should think with such a husband—for even his own belongings almost disown him—she must have had her hands full, and little time to give to society."

"Duncan, was he really so very, *very* dreadful?" said Alice, eagerly.

I summed the late Mr. Armytage up in one word—

"Detestable."

"What a good thing he died!" cried

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the happiest little wife in the world, thinking of that other woman's lot.

Then the gentle heart felt some misgiving.

Alice slipped her hand into Percy's.

"Was it wrong of me to say that?" she said, with a touchingly penitent air.

"Not a bit!" cried Percy, in his hearty ringing voice; "I'm right glad the brute's done with. Why, I did hear that he used to torture the mother through the child; that his cruelty to our dear 'Queen Mab' was one of Margaret's worst trials."

"So did I."

"He killed himself with drink at last," continued Percy, "and then the widow and her child came to this quiet nook—almost out of the world, eh, isn't it, Duncan?—to live with old Josiah Paul, the jolliest old cove you ever saw—Margaret's uncle, and, I fancy, about her only living relative."

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"Oh! he's a darling is Dr. Paul," said Alice. "He's a naturalist, you know—catches creatures in the pools left by the tide, gums dried plants on paper and puts long names below them, writes papers—awfully clever things—about all sorts of wonderful things, and then somebody else reads them at learned societies because he won't go to London to read them himself. You'll be charmed with Dr. Paul."

We were silent for a little while, and softly, sadly, sweetly the water lapped against the rocks at our feet.

"Margaret never speaks about her husband—never—" said Alice.

"She is hardly one to speak ill of a man who was her husband: and what good could she have to say?" I answered.

"You must have known her pretty well," put in Percy, "for you have described her to a nicety. There is a perfect loyalty about her that is delightful."

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"Yes, you must have known her very well—" echoed Alice.

"I did."

"Still, you don't seem to have much to tell us about her."

"My dear wife," said Percy, "men don't chatter about their friends like women do."

"Well, at all events, cousin Duncan, I'm sure you'll agree with me that it would be a very good thing for Margaret to marry again — I mean, to marry some one who would make her really happy, some one like—like Percy, you know."

We had a good laugh at this.

"I'm sorry I'm not available," said my cousin, "and it appears that your friend, Charley Musgrave, isn't suitable, though he was certainly not lacking in willingness. One seldom sees a man so *besottedly* in love as poor Charley. It used to give me quite a turn whenever I saw a fisherman

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hauling in his net, for fear it should contain Musgrave's lifeless corpse."

I got up and began to pace up and down the terrace.

"Cold — eh?" said Percy, tilting his chair back on to its hind legs to have a look at me as I passed.

"Yes, a little," I answered.

But I fear the admission was a white lie. There was a certain sense of chill about me, it is true, but it was more of the heart than of the bodily frame.

What was the meaning of my feeling thus — I thought, fiercely girding against my own weakness. Was the mad glamour of that night long ago, that night when first I met Margaret Armytage, going to rise into life again and make me its victim? Why so madly jealous all at once of a man I had never seen, and whose only sin was the fact of his aspiring to the favour of Mrs. Armytage? Was she not free—free

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to all the world—and knowing by heart as I did, the subtle charm of manner and of look that pervaded all the atmosphere around her as the perfume of a flower makes the world about it sweet, surely I ought to be the last man in the world to wonder at this "Charley Musgrave" yielding to her power?

Alice went flying into the house at the sound of a tiny bit of a cry from Poppums. The nestling was stirring in its nest, and the mother-bird flew to the rescue.

"Her whole life is one long act of baby-worship," said Percy, looking smilingly after her.

"When it isn't Percy-worship." I answered, perhaps more surlily than the circumstances seemed to call for.

But really there was something aggravating in the matter. Some men do have such luck in life; and really in our own boyish days my cousin was anything but

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a nice lad. Who could have supposed he would turn out a model young squire, with a model wife, and a model baby? For there really could be no other baby in all the world like "Poppums." I was only a bachelor, but I was obliged to admit that.

"Duncan, my good fellow," said Percy, coming behind me and slapping me on the shoulder just as I was absorbed in the mental contemplation of his son's perfections; "you ought to get married. You'd make a model husband, and there's a restlessness about you that makes me think you would be happier if you had a home of your own, and a nice little woman in it to take care of you."

"One wants to get the right woman to make the home a happy one. I'd rather have no other home than a bachelor's quarters, and no one to look after me but my old soldier-servant, Davis, than the

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finest house in the world—with the wrong woman in it."

Percy looked at me suspiciously for a moment. Then he said—

"When a man talks like that, Duncan, he's generally found the right woman already, but there are rocks ahead."

"Well, let us say there are rocks ahead, if you like to have it so. Perhaps some day I may steer my barque into the haven where I would be."

Then we went in. It was only April, though it looked like June, and a chill breeze came rustling through the pine branches from over the sea.

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CHAPTER X.

THE DEAD PAST.

SEAVIEW, the fishing village that lay to the right of Ferndene, nestling in a hollow of the coast like a child in its nurse's arms, was but a tiny hamlet after all. Yet what could be more picturesque than the old-fashioned thatched roofs of its cottages, whereon crept the ivy with its long, lithe, green arms, clasping even the chimney-stacks, as if afraid that the builder had not done his work very well, and determined to complete it for him?

The church was almost half-way up the cliff, and the chimes of the three bells in its squat, square tower, seemed to fall like

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drops of melody into the midst of the village below. It was a pretty sight on a Sunday to see the folk taking their way up the winding road that led to the church. Here and there an old woman with a scarlet cloak made a delicious bit of colour against the greys and greens of the cliffside, escorted by her "man," whose tottering spindle-legs, clad in grey knitted stockings and corduroy breeches, proclaimed him a very old inhabitant of the land.

I soon found that Margaret was well known and greatly beloved among these simple folk.

"She seems to have the power of getting at their hearts at once," said Alice; "perhaps it is that, having suffered so much herself, she has learnt the lesson of a ready sympathy with others."

"Perhaps," I answered, somewhat absently, for my thoughts came rushing so

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quickly through my mind I was little inclined for words.

What a change, I pondered — what a marvellous, strange change to Margaret, from the restless, wild, tempestuous existence in that far-distant land where the drama of life had been for her played so terribly in earnest, and this quiet village, this "daily round"—this world of murmuring sea, of moonlit nights, where all nature seemed "put in" in silver and ebony, of sea-birds' wings wafting between the blue sky and the green-grey water—this world of calm and passionless content. I had by this time learnt all about "Uncle Paul." I had visited the little "cottage by the sea," where he, his widowed niece, and her child, lived their gentle, happy life.

As to "Queen Mab," the first time she saw me she cried out that that was her "dear old Dr. Duncan!" and almost squeezed me to death in the ardour of her welcome.

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Roses now bloomed upon her cheek, her eyes were bright, her step was buoyant.

On one side of Seaview village lay a range of low sand-hills covered with long fine grass, with which mingled the pretty pale pink buttons of the starwort, and just beyond these hills was The Gables, Dr. Paul's cottage home. He was a learned man was Dr. Paul, and had a procession of letters after his name, each of which meant all sorts of grand scientific distinctions; but he was the gentlest, most unassuming of old men, and always seemed to be in a state of gentle surprise at people listening so eagerly when he spoke. His delicate, refined features and long white beard made him at once venerable and picturesque; and I was sometimes almost inclined to wonder that Margaret never showed the slightest jealousy of Mabel's passionate devotion to him. She was rapidly becoming under his tuition quite a little naturalist, and knew

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the name of every tiny flower that grew in the crevices of the rocks, and every wonderful living thing that put forth delicate timid horns or waving tentacula into a watery world.

Was Margaret happy at last, I asked myself a thousand times, or was it only peace she had found—peace in the sense that means freedom from pain, and nothing more? Had she let the dead past bury its dead?

Had she forgotten—no, not forgotten, but laid by out of her life—now-a-days more a tender memory than a passionate regret—the man who had been my friend and her love? Was she ever haunted by the far-off weary look in the grey eyes long since closed in death?

Did she think of his manly beauty, his grace, his chivalry, the delicate refinement of word and manner that gave him such an irresistible charm, and, comparing the

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living with the dead, count all men but as shadows? Was it thus that the woman who had loved him, unconsciously, purely, most unhappily, thought of Oscar Temple? I tried to read that fair book—her face; but Margaret was inscrutable.

Once or twice when we chanced to be alone I fancied she might speak of the past. There was one thing I reproached myself for not having told her; and now, learning each day to love her more intensely, more entirely, more passionately, this self-reproach grew, for I was ready to impute to myself an unworthy motive for my reticence.

I was ready to think that perhaps, in those early days, there had been an unacknowledged jealousy of the man who was my friend above all others, lurking in my mind. I could look back and remember thinking that to be loved, however hopeless, at however great a distance, by such a woman as Margaret Armytage, was a higher, deeper

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happiness than wooing and winning, from some lesser nature, the love that has its completion in home ties and a lifelong companionship.

Be these things as they may, I had never yet told Margaret that Oscar Temple died with her name upon his lips; I had never yet told her that in his pocket-book I found a little bunch of English violets, faded, yet sweet-scented still. They were tied with a tiny knot of black ribbon.

Ominous conjunction! Violet and black commingled, mourning for the lost.

Were not the colours fitting emblems of the love that was hallowed only by renunciation, and whose record ended with its first passionate utterance?

As Captain Temple's nearest friend, I had been asked to search through his papers for certain addresses requested by Colonel Mostyn, and it was thus I came upon the dead violets.

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As my eyes fell upon them I recognised their significance. I remembered Margaret bending over the broidered group of the same sweet blossoms; I remembered how the hand that held the needle trembled when I chanced to say how Oscar loved the purple flowerets; and I took the withered things and laid them hidden in the dead man's breast.

Why had I not told Margaret of those things the night when I heard from her white lips the story of that love whose course was sorrow and whose end was death?

Had not the same devil chained my tongue, the devil of that lurking jealousy of "mine own familiar friend," that, looked back upon now, took the form of a base disloyalty?

Should I try to find an opportunity of telling her now, even at the eleventh hour though it was?

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Would not any of us give—ay! and gladly—ten years of life to learn tidings of one dead, who died away from us, who died and left no sign, who went out into the darkness and the silence, sending us no greeting?

Yet, whispered self-interest, she seems happy in her quiet life here. Even though she could not forget, the bitterness may have died out from her sorrow. No one can mourn for ever. She is still young—life is all before her; she trusts you now as in the past, and trust is no bad foundation for—love! "When sorrow sleepeth," says the old song, "wake it not." Might you not wake the old dead sorrow if you told fair Margaret of her dead love's dying cry—"Margaret, my darling!"—if you told her of the long-drawn, sobbing sigh, the accent of passionate, despairing longing, with which it was uttered?

So I kept silence, and the days wore on.

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Each one was longer, fairer, sweeter than the last.

The summer was coming towards us, and every day fresh notes of joyousness were added to the harmonies of Nature's song, fresh flowers blossomed in her garland. And new, fond hopes began to blossom in my heart.

I watched little Mabel with a new tenderness.

Was she not Margaret's? What charm could be more potent for me than that? What harm could ever again come to either of them once my arms had the right to protect them?

As to that friend of Percy's — Charley Musgrave, they call him — the idea of his wishing to marry Margaret was preposterous. Doubtless he was one of those men who, dazzled by a woman's beauty, give no thought at all to the qualities of her mind or the traits of her character—a kind of

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person who could not even attempt to grasp the meaning of the marriage of mind with mind which constitutes the highest union possible on earth.

Mrs. Armytage showed exactly the delicacy and prudence one would have expected from her in nipping his pretensions in the bud at once.

I have always supposed myself to be a sane man. I have never had any reason to suppose that my friends would be discharging a duty to society by shutting me up within the narrow bounds of a lunatic asylum; but I look back now and realise that I thought all the thoughts recorded above, and thought them in sober earnest, though I had never seen Sir Charles Musgrave, Bart., nor yet heard a single word to his disadvantage; which shows what a fool love and jealousy combined will make of a man.

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CHAPTER XI.

GOLDEN DAYS.

WHAT a pleasant thing it was to me to wander leisurely along the beautiful seaboard below Ferndene, and gradually make my way to "that cottage by the sea" where Dr. Paul carried on so quietly and perseveringly his scientific investigation of the secrets of Nature!

I used to say to myself (such a casuist is love) that Alice was glad to get rid of me in the morning in order that she might the more entirely devote herself to the worship of "Poppums." In the afternoon I reasoned that, naturally, the husband and wife liked to drive out together, or visit their friends

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in the neighbourhood of an evening. Then Dr. Paul's eyesight was anything but strong. The Latin names under the pressed wild flowers had to be written in a fine, small hand; and, in short, no hour of the day seemed inopportune for me to pay a visit to The Gables.

What a happy moment was that in which I lifted the latch of the little white gate at the end of the garden, and caught the first glimpse of Margaret in the wide bay-window, seated at her work or book, or bending over Mabel's lessons, the two pretty heads, the golden and the black, almost touching each other!

Somehow I came to think that no costume, however rich and rare, could so well become a woman's beauty as a plain, close-fitting dress of black, untrimmed, ungarnished, and full of sweeping lines, and delicious falling folds that would have enchanted an artist's eye.

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There had never been a shadow of coquetry in Margaret's nature. Even in the darkest times of home misery a lesser nature might have sought and found distraction in the admiration that would have been eagerly laid at her feet, had she cared to stoop to pick it up.

But Margaret "cared for none of these things."

Now she seemed utterly unconscious how marvellously beautiful she looked in her simple dress and classical mode of coiffure. Her hair was thick, and rippled like the sea in a summer breeze, and she wore it in a great rich knot low down upon her shapely head, a style rarer in those days than now.

Why was it that so often—so very often —I noted a tiny bunch of violets at her throat? Why was that one combination of colours so constantly before my eyes—the violet and the black?

Once, when Mabel and I were wandering

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in the woods above the cliff, we came upon a little cluster of those sweetest flowers peeping up from a nest of moss.

I gathered some, and then, holding them carelessly, let one or two fall.

"Queen Mab" stopped and picked them up, tenderly blowing the grains of sand from their petals.

"We must be very kind to the violets, because mamma loves them best of all the flowers that grow," she said, pinning the blossoms on the lappet of her apron.

"Does she?" I answered, as carelessly as I could: "Perhaps she loves them because they smell so sweet."

"Yes, I think so," said the child; "when she was in India Uncle Paul used sometimes to send her a tiny bunch of violets in a letter. They used to be quite faded, you know, by the time they got out there—but oh! how sweet they used to smell when we opened the letters."

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So that was how it had been.

The bunch of faded violets I found in my dead friend's pocket-book had come all the way from England in a letter of "Uncle Paul's." The withered flowers that were now but a tiny heap of dust upon a dead, still breast, had grown in some crevice of the very rocks where now Margaret so often wandered. And she did not know . . .

If she had ever broken that silence upon the terrible past that it had been, so far, her will to keep intact, I might have told her of Oscar's dying words. I might have told her of the treasured flowers.

But she seemed resolved that all the strange story of our Indian acquaintance should be as though it had never been; and upon such a subject no man with any sense of honour or of chivalry could be the first to speak. My life in these days was one long self-torture, one ceaseless weighing of this possibility or that.

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Did she love the violets for their own sweet sake, or because once another loved them?

Had all the depth of passion, the intensity of devotion that I knew to exist in her nature in the past, died when that brave young life ended—when she kissed the dead face of her love—her love that was never hers, save in the misty land of the "might-have-beens"—or might some other hand wake all the tenderness of which her heart was capable once more?

To see her smile greet my coming, to hear her voice welcome me—this was the hour to be looked forward to through all the twenty-four.

So the weeks passed on; the summer growing to greater fulness day by day; and still I lingered at Ferndene.

As to Alice and her husband, they surely guessed my secret.

Indeed, I had quite an uncomfortable

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feeling that even Poppums might have his suspicions.

Who indeed could tell what those great grave eyes held in their brown depths?

Margaret was a prime favourite with Poppums, and once, as I bent over the two at some game of play, Poppums lifted his tiny hand and hit me a slap in the face.

"Toddlekins is jealous, you see, Duncan," said Alice, standing by.

And I looked to see if, perchance, a conscious rosy flush might dawn in Margaret's cheek at her words.

But no change came over that fair, pale face. Margaret only smiled, and said babies were often jealous, she thought, and liked to be first with every one.

* * * * *

I oftentimes look back upon those days, and think they were blessed in their sweet

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uncertainty. For I was full of hope at times, if dejected at others.

Margaret was placid, calm, unchanging, ever glad to see me, always trusting, even as she had been in the past that now seemed so remote.

She used to talk to me about her child—about all her care for that child's future; and all these things she did with an air of assumed reliance on my ready sympathy, my perfect understanding of all her hopes and fears.

She spoke also of her present life; of the old doctor's love and tenderness to her and to "Queen Mab"; of Alice and Percy; of the beautiful nature that lay all around us.

"I think I love the sea more and more every day," she once said, as she and I were wandering along the shore. "One may say of it, in very truth, 'Time cannot stale its infinite variety.' Now it is calm and quiet, like dear wee Poppums, fast asleep (and I

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love it so), and then it rises into stir and passion, dashing against these rocks, and making the little pebbles shriek as it tears them down in its backward flow; and I fancy nothing can better suit my mood. Perhaps I love it best of all when I look out upon it on a starless night, and it is nothing but a vast, undefined darkness, from which rises a never-ceasing murmur—a murmur that always says the same thing, on and on, over and over again."

What did the voice of the sea say to Margaret over and over again?

Ah! what would I not have given to know.

Did it murmur of her dear, dead love? Did it strive to woo her to think of that eternal shore whereon at last they two should meet to part no more? Was it written in the book of fate? Was it *Kismet* that the dead should for ever stand between the living? I longed to put my fate to the

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test. And yet I feared. I feared to lose even the solace of the pure and trustful friendship this woman gave me, if I tried to claim too much. Yet day by day I grew to long, with deeper passion, with more yearning tenderness, to quench my soul's thirst of love; to press with mine the lips whose gentle words made all the music of my life, to draw down to the shelter of my breast that fair head that reared itself with so much womanly and stately pride, and yet—how well I knew it—could be bowed low by the storm of passion and the agony of loss.

The time drew on apace when I must return to my duty; and I began to notice a wonderful increase of affectionate friendliness in the manner of old Dr. Paul.

His dim eyes would watch me with a sort of wistful yearning; his mind wandered from his subject when he was propounding to me some scientific lore of deep research.

"So your time's nearly up, eh?" he

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would say. "Yes, yes; we must all work to live—work to live—and you love your work. You've told me so a hundred times. That's well—that's well; a workman who doesn't love his work never comes to any good; but you've had a good time of it here now, haven't you? and you'll be sorry to leave us all, won't you? Why, what will 'Queen Mab' do without her 'dear Dr. Duncan'? And there's Margaret, too; she'll miss you, you know. Ay, ay! that will she, sorely."

Dr. Paul was a very old man now—a man, too, given to looking everything, even death, calmly in the face.

He knew that one day—a day not so very far off—others would bear him on their shoulders up the hill to the pretty churchyard where many times and oft his aged feet had borne him already; and then, when he lay taking his last sleep beside the sea he loved, who could be a better

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guardian, a surer stay to Margaret and her child, than Duncan McLeod, the somewhat silent, reserved Scotsman, who loved the very ground those two—mother and child—walked upon? For he read all my heart did Dr. Paul. I knew instinctively that this was so; I knew also that he wished me "God-speed" in the wooing about which, truth to tell, I must have seemed somewhat of a laggard in his eyes.

It was the day before my departure. I had packed all my belongings, assisted by Poppums, who sat on the floor in the midst of his spreading white dress, looking like a flower rising out of a snowy calyx, and gravely considered my proceedings, clutched steadily at any article of my attire that came within his grasp.

Alice's pretty face wore an expression of grave trouble that even the approaching parting with her cousin Duncan could hardly account for. Percy eyed me now

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and again, when opportunity offered, with a certain curiosity that had about it an evident element of disapproval.

"Are you going down to say good-bye to them at the Cottage?" said Alice.

Lunch was over, and Poppums had duly appeared according to custom. His mother was cuddling him and kissing each particular tendril of his silken locks as she spoke, so that she mumbled over her words a good deal.

Before I could answer, or rather while I was making up my mind what to answer, Poppums shuffled down from his mother's knee, made his way across the floor by a method of progression entirely his own, and highly suggestive of a crab left on the shore by the tide—came up close beside me, and clasped his little chubby arms round one of my legs.

At the same time he laid his bonnie head, "running over with curls," against my knee,

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and began to make a low crooning noise, which meant, being interpreted, that he loved you very much indeed, and was telling you so to the best of his ability.

Indeed it was a sight not to be forgotten to see Poppums "love" Daddy's photograph. He would lay his bonnie head down upon the book containing it, kiss the picture over and over, slobber on it, make delicious little gurgling noises of supreme affection, and then look at you as much as to say, "Do you *see* how I love my Dadda?" This process, however touching as it was to see, was by no means improving to the photograph; so Poppums had to have a picture of his "very own" to love and spoil to his little heart's content. And now—as if my heart wasn't full enough already, without the boy coming and crooning over me in this ridiculous manner!

How I wished his mother would give him his "very own" picture-book to cosset

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and mumble over—anything to make him let go of me and leave off "loving" me inarticulately. . . .

Never was a child so full of irresistible "ways" as Poppums. He would sing little songs to himself—songs wordless as the happy chirruping of a bird, *Lieder ohne Wörter* of his own, understanded by none, yet passing sweet to hearken to.

Doubtless Poppums knew what those precious ditties meant, for delicious trills of laughter would now and again interrupt their melodious flow, the while the little rogue looked at you with wicked brown eyes a-twinkle, as if he quite expected you to enter into the fun, and find his pretty, halting warblings the drollest things going. He would tell long stories to himself in this same sweet, "unknown tongue," lifting his dear fat hands in wonder, and making eyes of astonishment ever so big at the marvels of his narration—marvels hidden from all

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the world, save Poppums. What chance had anybody—what chance was it *likely* anybody would have—with a child given to such ways as these; and with Poppums arrayed against me, what chance had *I?* With Poppums "loving" my left leg, and my cousin Alice looking at me appealingly with those blue eyes of hers, where was my strength of will likely to be? . . .

Percy turned on his heel with a laugh.

"My dear fellow," he said, "the domestic forces are too many for you; take my advice—surrender at discretion."

Poppums could not possibly gather the meaning of his father's words, yet he broke into one of his fits of merry ringing laughter, and began patting my knee, as if I had done something meritorious all at once, and deserved some mark of his royal and gracious approval.

I stood the soft "pat pat" of the little hand upon my knee as long as I could, then

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I caught the youngster up in my arms—a less resolute baby would have cried, but Poppums only gasped a bit—gave him a frantic kiss and a hug, and set him (still gasping) on his mother's lap. . . . In another moment I was tearing down the cliff-path, and had left Percy and his wife and Poppums to think just what they pleased.

As I reached the cottage Dr. Paul met me at the gate.

He had his little dredging-net in his hand, an impossible straw hat on his head—being of such dimensions as to appear more like an inverted yellow umbrella than anything else—and greeted me with a cheery, genial smile, that quickly changed to a look of concerned scrutiny.

I doubt not that I presented a somewhat wild appearance, for the very spirit of desperation was astir in my heart.

I had borne suspense long enough—I would bear it no longer. . . .

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"Margaret is up at the church," said Dr. Paul, still watching me curiously, and with a certain wistfulness, too, that I fancied augured well for me.

Evidently Dr. Paul would not fear to trust Margaret and her child to my keeping.

I knew that one of the labours of love in which Margaret seemed to find so much content was the training of the rustic choir of Seaview Church, therefore I answered—

"It is choir-practice afternoon, I suppose?"

"Yes," said the old man; "but Margaret is later than usual to-day. She is generally home half-an-hour earlier than this. I was going to fetch her before visiting my marine friends in those shining pools there on the sands; but now I may as well spare my old legs the pull up the hill."

He hesitated a moment, then, with his kindest, gentlest smile, held out his hand for mine.

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"Go and bring my child home for me," he said.

And I knew that he meant "Go and win her if you can."

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CHAPTER XII.

PUT TO THE TEST.

How lovely was the warmth and brightness of that early summer's afternoon! The pine-trees had all by this time fully arrayed themselves in suits of green tassels; the wild clover on the edges of the rocks had put forth tiny fluffy rose-pink buttons of blossoms; there were violets in the woods, for their scent betrayed them. . . . Far off lay the sea, one beautiful plain of rippling green, basking in the warmth of the level sun-rays; and each of those pools in which Dr. Paul loved to search for tiny prey glittered in its rocky bed like molten silver.

"One, two, three!" "One, two, three!"

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rang out the tinkling bells from the old church tower. It had often struck me that the "practice" in which the ringers of those three bells were wont somewhat proudly to indulge was rather a needless toil; but now I could find no fault with their zeal.

I was building castles as I made my way up the steep hill-side.

Perhaps on just such a lovely sunny day those bells should ring for me and for Margaret. Perchance the dreams I had dreamt should be dreams no longer. . . .

Some one who had gone that way before me had dropped a violet. Was it Margaret? I knew not; but there lay the little purple blossom all among the loose shingle of the road. I raised it; then, with a sudden, swift, undefined emotion, let it fall and set my foot upon it. . . .

The action, trifling as it was, expressed a passionate determination on my part to crush from Margaret's heart and life—what?

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The memory of the man who had been my chosen friend, my best-beloved companion—the man who had been at once so much and so little to her, so near, and yet so widely, fatally far from her? Yes; I was desperate.

A love that one deems crushed out of one's heart, give it chance, and it rises in renewed strength and passion.

And I had always loved this lonely, sad-eyed woman—even from the very first. I could acknowledge this to myself now.

Other women might be younger, fairer, more alluring. I cared not. To me they were as shadows, as things intangible.

Had Oscar lived, it might have been my duty to have stifled every impulse of tenderness towards Margaret Armytage; to have schooled myself to be her friend and his; but he was dead. He lay sleeping in that lonely grave beneath the shadow of the palm-trees. . . .

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There was no one, no one in the wide world, to come between me and the woman I loved, unless—and here a sudden shiver chilled and thrilled me—unless it were *a memory*. . . .

By this time I had reached the church. The door stood open; the bells had ceased.

There was no sound of mingled village voices, less tuneful, perhaps, than hearty, as it was their wont to be on Sundays.

The church itself was cool and shady, full of those subdued lights that come in through painted glass, and steal the colours as they pass. On the left hand side the chancel was the organ, raised a little above the level of the rest.

And there I saw Margaret.

She was seated at the organ; but her hands did not touch the keys. The light, streaming through the eastern window, fell full upon her. Was there any one in all the world like my Margaret?

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She had taken off her hat and shawl, and laid them on one of the benches near.

The small, graceful head, the pretty falling shoulders, the slender, supple waist—I noted all—hungrily—eagerly. But what was she doing?

Lower and lower she bent over something in her hand. Then she pressed it to her lips. I moved gently a step nearer, and caught the gleam of purple flowers.

Yes—she had kissed them yet again, and set them in her bosom. . . .

Once again I saw the old ill-omened mingling of colours—the violet and the black—the emblems of sorrow. I watched Margaret so intently that, leaning up against one of the pillars in the aisle, I hardly seemed to breathe.

She had raised her head, and though I could not see her face in full, I knew that she was looking upwards—as St. Cecilia

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may have looked—from earth to heaven—full of longing. . . .

All at once—as it seemed to me led on by some wild, irresistible impulse—she laid her hands upon the keys—and O, my God! how terrible to me who listened—through the silent church rolled the awful sound of the Dead March — the march in which the shrieking fifes had wailed and keened as we bore Oscar Temple to his grave beneath the palms. . . .

I longed to rush from the place. I longed to fly from the sound of that horrible dirge; but my feet seemed chained to the ground, my ear strained to catch each note of what I hated. At last the music ceased.

All was so still around that I heard the twittering of a bird upon a bough outside; and then—in a moment came a sound more terrible than the terrible Dead March—the sound of a woman's sob — a low, hushed,

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yet exceeding bitter cry—"O, my love—my love!"

* * * * * *

That night is a weary time to look back upon.

Alice was grave and silent; Percy noisily wishful to set every one at their ease, and piteously unsuccessful in his endeavours.

Neither of them put a single question to me. They had so much mercy; though I am well assured that Alice's gentle heart was full of womanly curiosity and sympathy.

Just as we were separating for the night I summoned up courage enough to make a casual reference to the events of the afternoon.

"Will you make my adieus to Mrs. Armytage. I called at the Cottage this afternoon, but she was not at home."

It was to Alice I spoke; and meeting the wistful gaze of her pretty eyes, I felt the colour ebbing from my cheek.

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"To Margaret?" she said, with a bewildered look.

I bowed my head in token of assent. Silence was an easier thing to me than words just then. For a few moments there was an uncomfortable silence. Then Percy dashed in with some perfectly irrelevant subject, and we were all three rather noisier than usual for the few moments we remained together.

* * * * * *

Was Seaview but some dreamland I had visited in spirit?

Were the murmuring sea, the wild cry of the sea-birds, the wafting of white wings, the gleam of red sails against purple skies—all nothing save ghostly sounds heard in a dream of long ago?

Had I never stood with my hand on the latch of a little white gate, and seen a supple, slender, black-robed figure coming down the pathway that was edged on either

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side with "London pride," and paved with shining round white stones, to meet me?

Had I never held a womanly, helpful hand in mine, and met two soft brown eyes, dark and clear as dead leaves under water?

I had but been one short month working in the old grooves—healing the sick, listening to Mrs. Baynes' long-drawn-out descriptions of the children's "symptoms," trying to extract some amusement from the garrison chit-chat as detailed by beardless youngsters in the ante-room and at the mess-table, taking long walks by myself so as to get tolerably tired before night, or reading the last new 'System of Surgery'—and yet it seemed as if somewhere very far away in the dim vista of the past I looked back upon that beautiful time—my life near the village that nestled under the shadow of the cliffs—the village where the three tinkling

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bells rang out from the old church tower across the sea. . . .

Had I really and in very truth stood in that quiet church and watched the sunbeams touch the dear head of the woman I loved so well, turning each closely-braided tress to burnished gold? Had I seen that dear head bowed in anguish? Had I heard that bitter cry of wildest despair, passion, and longing—"O my love—my love!" or—were these things but the phantasms of a mind exalted by constant dwelling on one absorbing subject?

Thus in the silent hours of the night did I commune with my own heart; falling into uneasy slumber, and there in my dreams still pursued by the image of the woman who was so tenderly loved—so hopelessly lost.

Yes—lost.

For I knew now that, as tangibly, as entirely as if he still lived in all the glory

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of his manly beauty, in all the old charm of mind, and speech, and thought, Oscar Temple stood for ever between my heart and Margaret's.

Perhaps now, even more than ever, did her ardent spirit hold "commerce with the skies"—now, more than ever, were her secret thoughts filled with aspirations toward that unseen world whither her lost love had gone before her. . . .

For I had not hesitated at last to break that silence about the past which she had so long maintained.

There are many things in life that have to be said, that are easier said on paper than by word of mouth.

I wrote to Margaret. And what I wrote was this:

"*Hitherto I have not dared to break the silence you have seen fit to keep: I have not*

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dared to speak of the past. I have waited—and waited in vain—for any word from you that might give me an opening.

"Now—I make one for myself; I rend the veil of silence that has covered the dead face of a memory, held infinitely dear and sacred by both of us.

"When Oscar died, he died with your name upon his lips. . .

"There was no one near him but I, who loved him best of all the world. His secret was safe—and was buried with him. . . . .

"Something else was buried with him too: for, in a little pocket-book that he always carried about with him, I found, carefully treasured, a bunch of faded violets. . . My instinct cannot, I think, have played me false, when it led me to think you had given them to him? At all events I dared to act upon the conviction, for I laid them on the breast of my dead friend, and folded his hands above them. . . .

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"You will say—'Why did I not tell you these things before?' Why, indeed! I cannot but blame myself for my silence. It takes the guise of a sin against you; for have I not defrauded you of a consolation? Well, I am making now what reparation I can. God send my words bring solace to the heart that is too faithful to forget! . . .

"It was just at the turn of the night, that Oscar died. . . . .

"The grey light of dawn had begun to steal in, making the night-lamp burn with a sickly flame. His hand, lying in mine, grew colder every moment. I watched, I listened, intently; every thought was a prayer that my friend might not drift away from me into the land of shadows without a word of greeting. . . .

"The word came; but it was not for me——

"A smile of wonderful sweetness just parted his lips a moment. 'Margaret,' he whispered —'my darling!'—and so died. . . .

"There, my tale is told—the tale that should

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have been told long since. If you wish to prove to me how entirely you forgive the cowardice and delay of my long silence, let me see that, if ever the day comes when you or your child need a friend, you do not forget that you have one most faithful and devoted in,

"*Duncan McLeod.*"

In due time the answer came.

"I am never likely to forget that I have one friend who can never fail me. I can never forget that there lives in the world one man in whom my trust has been, and ever will be, unquestioning—perfect—fearless—"

That was all.

Not one word of that dead love of hers—not one word of that withered posy, violet and black, that lay—the deadest things that can exist—dead flowers under a dead hand. . . .

And Margaret did not know how well

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I loved her; did not know that no other woman could ever fill the place that she willed to leave vacant—no other woman could be wife of mine—no child could ever prattle at my knee. . . . .

At times it galled me to remember how ignorant she was of the barrenness of my life; of the passion of longing for the sight of her face, the sound of her voice, the touch of her hand, that made me feel like some traveller perishing of thirst in a wide sandy plain, where might be found no cooling spring, no welcome shadow of tree or rock.

But the day came when I thanked God that she knew nothing, save that I was her true and faithful friend—hers and "Queen Mab's" . . . For else, she might have feared, in her gentle, womanly heart, to stretch out her hand to me in the hour of her need.

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CHAPTER XIII.

IN TIME OF NEED.

It is not in the first shock of a disappointment or sorrow that we feel its fnll pain. Things seem unreal, for in the first intensity of suffering is something that numbs and deadens our faculties. We move about on our daily routine, feeling a certain solace in work that demands exertion of mind and body—

> "The sad, mechanic exercise,
> Like dull narcotics numbing pain."

We are afraid to sit down and count the cost—afraid to think it out and lay before our shrinking minds the bare, unshrouded truth.

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How terrible is a life from which all expectation is taken! We lie prone at the feet of fate; we have no higher bliss to strive after save the peace of vanished hope. I had not thought there had been so much hope in my love for Margaret until it died painfully, and from the suffering I learnt what its strength had been.

Well, well, it was dead enough at last, and I had no worse things to learn than what I knew already. An unusual press of work came upon me just at this time. Our hospital was fuller than it had been for some months past; for the autumn was a damp and sickly one, and fever lurked in the dank mists that crawled above the brown carpet of the decaying leaves. Baynes, too, was on the sick list, and Mrs. Baynes got into the habit of sending for me, literally, at all hours of the day and night, until even their soldier-servant had some difficulty in presenting his mistress's compliments to

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me, and "Would I step over and see the master?" without a smile.

I should be afraid to say how many times I "stepped over"; indeed, I seemed to be always either stepping over or stepping back again.

On each occasion "John" had, in his wife's opinion, developed some new and startling "symptom;" an opinion in which she had induced him to coincide, though there was now and again a sort of shame-faced ruefulness about the poor fellow that showed me he was fully conscious of cutting rather a foolish figure on the whole. Mrs. Baynes used to watch him all day long as if she were anticipating the arrival of the supreme moment in which she should be called upon to receive his last sigh; and on one occasion I found myself called upon to suggest that he might have a better chance of rallying his spirits if she cried over him less.

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Indeed, if it had not been for Mrs. Mostyn, I don't know how we should have got along at all when things began to look somewhat serious for "John."

Day after day did the colonel's wife appear at the door of the Baynes' most untidy residence in her pretty pony-carriage—a conveyance that appeared to be of elastic proportions, since out of it came every possible luxury that could brighten a sick room, and give comfort to a suffering, fever-parched man.

I do not think the Baynes' children were attractive, looked upon as specimens of the young of the human species; but when Johnny, that most objectionable of boys, came up to me one evening, laid a by no means cleanly hand upon my knee, and said, with his mouth pulling down pitifully at the corners, "Is my daddy going to die, Dr. Duncan? Nurse says he is, but nurse is a great big story, isn't she? Because we

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couldn't have daddy die, and be shut up in a box, and played the burying tune over—could we now?" I felt a choking in my throat and a dimness over my sight that I could hardly have supposed that young creature capable of exciting.

I hardly think my emotion was all about Baynes; though, God knows, I would have given a great deal to pull him through; but the child's words brought a desolate feeling to my heart, as being typical of all those ties and affections in which I was fated never to have any part.

After all, "daddy" did not die and have the "burying tune" played over him; what's more, Mrs. Baynes never knew that the morning of that particular night on which Mrs. Mostyn insisted upon staying and sharing her vigil by "John's" bedside, might have seen her widowed. So "nurse" continued to be looked upon by her young charges as "a great big story."

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Baynes picked up rapidly, and even his wife could not keep up a ceaseless flow of bad spirits when she saw him gaining ground day by day.

It may seem as if I am somewhat drifting from the thread of my story in saying so much about Dr. Baynes, his wife, and the olive branches thereunto pertaining; but the whole matter of his illness had no slight influence upon me.

The fact was, I had been becoming morbid in my constant dwelling upon my love for a woman who had no love to give me in return, and nothing could have been a more wholesome and invigorating discipline than the heavy professional anxiety, the pitiful concern for others, that came with my coadjutor's illness. Naturally, he being laid by, the whole medical charge of the regiment devolved upon my shoulders; and so, added to the other care, there was plenty of hard

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work, and little time for thoughts of my own troubles.

It seems well to me, when I look back upon those days, that all these things happened; for otherwise how should I have faced and endured the black horror of the starless night that was even then coming upon me?

The shock of that visit to Seaview church—that parting with Margaret—had tried my nerves to the uttermost; but now, thanks to the bracing effect of having to succour others, I began to feel more like myself again. I had had more than one letter from Alice since I left Ferndene. In each she said that, "All at the cottage were well," and each had a postscript to the effect that "Poppums sent his love."

But now several weeks had gone by and no news had come to me from that fair, wild, Cornish coast.

Baynes was able to resume his share of

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the work, and I had, therefore, some leisure on my hands; so, returning one afternoon from a stroll, I sauntered into the ante-room, and took up the day's paper.

This is what I read—

"The pretty village of Seaview, on the coast of Cornwall, is being visited by a fever epidemic of great severity. The disease is of the same typhoid character as that which has been so prevalent in various parts of England during the last few weeks, but of a peculiarly severe character."

I found myself saying out loud, as if to impress the fact upon my own mind, "Of a peculiarly severe character—of a peculiarly severe character;" and then, all at once, I gathered from the astonished looks of one or two youngsters near that they rather imagined the doctor had suddenly become insane from over professional study.

Though scarcely a leaf remained upon the trees, the weather was still almost oppress-

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ively warm, and a mist—looking so tangible one was almost ready to wonder the dead, brown leaves did not rustle beneath its touch—crept along the low ground everywhere, leaving the hilly places standing up like islands in a sluggish sea. Robin, seated on a naked bough, sang his little weary, plaintive song as I passed. His rose-red breast was dank with dew-pearls, and his piping song seemed to me the saddest sound on earth.

Perhaps because my own heart was full of misgiving, because the foreshadowing of some coming evil was upon me, as the mist was upon the face of the earth, veiling all its beauty and shutting out the blessed sun itself.

I reached my quarters just in time to see our letter-corporal crossing the square with his letter-bag across his shoulders; and when I entered my room, the first thing that caught my eye was a letter lying on my writing-table.

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No unusual occurrence truly, and yet my heart throbbed heavily as I raised it in my hand and—no, not opened it. I could not nerve myself to do that all at once; but turned it over this way and that, as others before me have turned and re-turned a letter that they long yet fear to open. It was in the handwriting of my cousin Percy's wife, and bore the Seaview postmark.

"Fool!" I said to myself. "A few lines, no doubt, to say that Percy wonders if I am coming to them for Christmas; that Poppums has cut a new tooth; and that that young household potentate excels more than ever in the art of making a grave and stately bow when requested, like a prince returning a royal salute."

Thus ran my thoughts, recalling simple memories of simple things; and yet I dared not open the letter. A conviction had come over me that the evil of which I had already felt the shadow was now

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about to meet me; that I held it there in my hand.

At last I tore the envelope asunder. This was the letter—

"DEAR DR. MCLEOD,

"I fear there may be difficulties in the way, but, if you possibly can, will you come to us, and that quickly? We are in great trouble, Margaret worst of all. Your little friend, 'Queen Mab,' lies stricken down with the fever that is so bad in Seaview just now, and none of us feel any confidence in the doctor who is attending her. It seems to me he is keeping the child too low."

"Good God!" I cried out loud, at this stage of the letter, "does the man mean to murder her! Keeping her low when her strength is being—"

"Did you call, sir?" said my servant,

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appearing suddenly from an inner room, and looking not a little surprised at his master's unwonted vehemence.

"No—yes," I answered, somewhat incoherently. "Put some of my traps up in the small portmanteau. I have to go into the country for a couple of days."

And then, waiting to say no more, I betook myself with all speed to the colonel's quarters, in quest of a short leave of absence.

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CHAPTER XIV.

PARTED NO MORE.

THE mildness of the season had retarded the decay of vegetation all along the Cornish coast, but yet rich autumnal tints gleamed on the ledges of the cliffs, great bunches of golden red bracken drooped from this crevice or that, and those deep scarlet berries, the fruit of the orchid, shone out like clusters of rubies among the greys and browns and lovely olive-greens of the rocks.

Once again I saw the village nestling in the bend of the shore; once more I heard the three bells tinkling softly out over the sea. For it was Sunday evening when I reached Seaview; the afternoon service was

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over, and the people stood at their cottage doors or loitered about the streets, gossiping of local news, no doubt, and most of all—by far the most of all—of the little maid who lay sick—sick unto death, as some said—at the Cottage.

Every man, woman, and child in Seaview loved "Queen Mab." Hardly was there one in all the village who did not owe some debt of love and gratitude to the mother who now watched by her child's sick bed.

"I'm right glad to see ye, sir," said an old salt, whose sou'-wester was about as big as a small umbrella: "There's sore trouble up there," he went on, jerking his thumb towards the gabled roof that rose just visible above a group of pine trees. 'Two heads are better than one,' says I to my missus this morning, when I heerd as Mistress Neville had wrote for you to come, and I'm fain to see ye."

"They say as how the old gentleman's

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nigh daft wi' sorrer," put in the "missus," who was standing by; "and as for the little un's mother—why, they say, it beats all as ever was seen this side heaven."

I stayed to hear no more.

Already I had called at Ferndene, which was nearest to the station; but only to find it deserted.

I had lost no time in hurrying to Margaret's assistance, and yet how precious might not be those hours that had inevitably elapsed since I knew of the peril in which her child lay!

Sob, sob went the sea on the shore at my feet; a sea-bird's piercing cry came from a far-off sand-bank like the cry of a banshee.

The cottage home that I had last seen so full of peace and sweet content was now in sight, and—yes, some one was standing waiting for me at the gate.

It was Alice, and in a moment I had

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both her hands in mine, and had gasped out just one question—

"The child?"

Alice shook her head.

"Thank God you have come!" she said, and so we went into the house, still hand-in-hand, as if each felt a comfort in the touch of sympathy.

As we reached the threshold of the room where the sick child lay, Alice stood aside for me to pass in first, and as I did so a woman, sitting by the bed from which the curtains were strained tightly back, turned her head so that her eyes met mine. Oh! the anguish—the despair of those eyes full of mother-love and pain!

They seemed to tear from me a cry of answering grief.

"Margaret!" I almost sobbed, kneeling at her side, and clasping one cold and listless hand; "do not look like that. We will not let your darling die!"

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I had never called her Margaret before. She did not notice it now. She looked into my face with those wistful, pleading eyes, laid her hand upon my head, and smiled.

Have any tears, have any cries and moans of anguish the terrible pathos of such a smile as that?

"I am glad you have come," she said. "I have prayed that you might come quickly. I always trusted you — did I not?"

* * * * *

This is not a medical treatise, but a story; so I will not dwell upon the change in treatment that I managed to carry through for my little patient. Suffice to say that, after a consultation with the well-meaning but prejudiced individual who had hitherto had the management of the case, I watched beside "Queen Mab's" little white bed throughout the night.

There are some women whom grief and

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suspense render voluble and hysterical; but the two who shared my vigil were not of such-like calibre. Few words passed their lips, and all night long I saw the mother's set, white face and burning, tearless eyes watching the flushed cheek on the pillow, the poor parched mouth that now and again babbled something about "Uncle Paul," or cried out that the "little fishes were swimming about too quickly to be caught."

The next day passed, and the next night. I hardly should have known which was which, save that one was light and the other dark.

For me the world consisted of that slender child lying back upon her pillow, breathing short and quick, tossing from side to side the weary head from which had been shorn all the pretty golden locks.

Every thought, every effort of will, was concentrated on one absorbing object—to

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save, if human skill and human care could do it, Margaret's child.

As the grey, chill light of dawn began to steal across the room on the morning after our second day of watching, Margaret came gliding to my side.

I stood at the sitting-room window, looking how the sea stirred and shimmered, seeming to wake into new life beneath the touch of dawn.

Margaret laid her hand upon my arm.

"Tell me," she said, "is my darling better? Is God going to let me keep her? I fancy—it may be only fancy—that her breath comes so much more quietly; and just now, when I bent close over her, I thought there was a gentle moisture on her forehead. Tell me, are these things my fancy, or . . . are they true?"

"See," I said, laying my hand on hers, and holding it firmly; "the new day is dawning over there. Do you catch the

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silver ripple of the sea, like a tiny line of light?"

"Yes," she said; "how beautiful it is!"

"It is like the new hope that has come into the midst of your own night of sorrow. Dear friend, your child is saved."

"By you," she murmured—"by you!"

And she bent her head, touching my hand a moment with her lips.

Then she left me, and wild thoughts, passionate wishes once more ran riot in my heart.

Should I yet win, through the gratitude of the mother's heart, the fulfilment of my "heart's desire?"

* * * * *

The child's improvement was as rapid as is usually the case with the very young. She soon grew lively enough to smile at the loss of her curls, to peep into a glass, and make-believe to be afraid of the shorn head,

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looking like that of a pretty boy, reflected therein.

"One of these days I'll be ready to go with Uncle Paul again, and catch the little fishes in the pools, won't I, now?" she whispered to me, slyly.

The old man, looking very tremulous and tearful in the sudden reaction from despair to joy, heard her, came hurrying up to her side, and she laid her wee, white face against his weather-beaten cheeks, putting her arms about his neck.

"Not yet awhile, my pet," he said, with a wise look at me; "not yet awhile, but perhaps one of these days."

"Yes," I chimed in, feeling, it must be owned, by far the least cheerful of the three; "one of these days, Mab, when your legs are strong enough to carry you; I shall leave you in Uncle Paul's care, you know."

"Are you going to go?" said the child,

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turning her great brown eyes on me wonderingly.

"Yes, yes," I said, hurriedly. "I came to make you better, and now, you see, my work is done."

Was it done? or was the bitterest part of it yet to come?

* * * * * *

"Now that one has time to think of anything else except 'Queen Mab,' will you tell me what has become of Percy and of Poppums?"

I was speaking to my Cousin Alice, as she and I paced up and down the garden path edged with London-pride, and paved with round, white stones.

A glorious western breeze was blowing in our faces. The sun was shining, the tide was at its height, and breaking on the beach in long, green-topped rollers that, curling over, broke into tongues of foam every moment.

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A day to be glad in—a day to be happy in—a day whose very air was redolent of hope and joy.

"Percy went away and took Poppums with him, when Mabel sickened," said Alice, looking straight out across the sea: "I made them go," she added, speaking with a savage and determined air, but still looking at the sea, not at me.

"That you might stay with Margaret in her trouble?"

"That I might stay with Margaret in her trouble. It seemed such a desolate, lonely thing for her to be left all alone without any other woman near her; and this fever is not catching, not from one to another, I mean; but still it has been an epidemic here; it is in the air, and I thought Poppums had better go. He has two more teeth since you saw him: and ever so many more coming!"

Here Alice put up her hand and passed

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it lightly across her eyes. I think she saw the tossing of the sea through a mist.

"What a dear good little woman you are!" I cried.

"Well, I don't know," she said, turning her bright eyes towards me at last; "it isn't often one comes across a woman like Margaret, is it? and Percy said I should have my own way. I knew that if Poppums" (and here I really thought my little cousin was going to choke)—"if Poppums were ill, Margaret would never have left me to nurse him alone; and my boy has his father and his nurse to take care of him, and he is as well and as merry as he can be. He sends his 'great big love' to mother every day. He put his little fist down on the letter Percy was writing the other day, and Percy said, 'Please don't mind the blot. It's only Poppums—his mark.'"

There was no doubt about the tears now, for I saw them glittering in the sunshine.

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"I will never laugh at women's friendships again," I said—"never!"

"Why *should* you laugh at women's friendships?" she cried, tossing her pretty head.

We were quite merry after that.

It was a merry kind of day you see—a day of dancing waves, and sheen of sun, and song of birds. . . Strange thoughts arose in my mind—strange, mad hopes set my pulses throbbing. . . .

I must go—and soon; but must I keep silence in the little time that remained to me, or must I say to Margaret—"See how I love your child . . . and you!" . . . Alice had gone in, and my thoughts were having it all their own way. Suddenly I heard my own name called once, twice, thrice—and, or so it seemed, in suppressed fear and dread.

I rushed into the house—to meet Alice hurrying out.

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She did not speak; but, clinging to my arm, drew me into the sitting-room.

"What is it? Is the child worse? She was sleeping beautifully when I left her—"

"No, no," said Alice trembling; "Mabel is all right; she is asleep still; but—Margaret—"

"*Margaret!* My God!—what of her?" I said, under my breath.

"I do not know; come up-stairs. Oh! be quick."

In another moment we stood by Margaret's bed.

She lay there, all dressed as she had been when last I saw her. The blind of the room was lowered; and, above that, the curtains closely pinned.

As I crossed the room to throw them back Alice stopped me.

"You must not," she said; "she says the light hurts her. She would not let me touch the curtains when I was here just now."

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"Mrs. Armytage," I said, taking Margaret's hand in mine, and bending over her, "are you ill?"

She seemed to rouse herself with an effort.

"No," she said; "I am not ill; only tired—so tired. I have not been able to sleep these two nights past. I only want to be left alone; I only want quiet and . . . rest."

Her hand burnt in mine. I put my finger on the slender wrist, and the throbbing pulse leapt beneath it. Happily the very fact of being called upon to act in a professional capacity has the effect of calming most men who have been trained as physicians.

Self is quickly forgotten in the imperative need of thought for another.

"Get her to undress," I said, quietly, to Alice, as I left the room. "She is overtired; the strain has been too great."

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Telegraphs "were not" in Seaview; but I sat down and wrote a hasty line to the colonel, and another to Baynes, asking for renewed leave. I knew that I was like a man preparing for battle, and the foe that I was about to meet was Death. . . . . .

"We have been blind," I said to Alice that night. "We have thought of nothing save the child, and all the time the mother has been sickening. . ."

Never had I seen, in all my past experience, a deadly disease do its fell work so quickly.

Hour by hour Margaret drifted from us. In spite of skill, of care, of watchings, and of prayers, my foe gained upon me.

Quiet, steadfast, tender—Alice was ever beside her dying friend.

Yes; dying.

There, I have set it down; and as I write the words, the old terrible thrill of agony runs through my veins—the cruel

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pang that came upon me when I turned away from the eyes of the patient, gentle nurse, because I dared not answer their silent questioning. . . .

Twenty-four hours after she was first stricken down by the foul pestilence Margaret dwelt in a land of phantasy. She knew not whose hand ministered to her; whose voice soothed her restlessness. . . .

Sometimes she sang snatches of song that once she had sung by her baby's cradle; sometimes she muttered to herself words we could not catch. . . .

Swiftly she neared the land of shadows—swiftly she drifted away from earth—nearer to heaven; a little way further, a little nearer, as each hour passed by.

At last the end came.

We had persuaded the poor old man, whose sorrow was in truth a piteous thing to see, to go and seek the rest that had become absolutely needful. Mabel, un-

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conscious of the awful loss that threatened to make her young life desolate, slept the quiet, dreamless sleep of weakness and weariness.

There was no one in the quiet room save Alice and myself.

I, having walked some distance with the physician who still shared my labours, had just returned, and something in my cousin's face—a look of awe and unspeakable sadness—warned me that a change was near. In that supreme moment what did I think or feel?

Nay—I cannot tell. I hurried to the bed-side, where Alice knelt, supporting Margaret in her arms. I looked upon the face of the woman I loved beyond all earthly things, and knew that she was lost to me for ever—knew that the battle had been fought, and lost.

But I did not seem to *feel* much.

My whole soul concentrated in the wish to lose no passing look upon that sweet

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face — no word that death might suffer those dear lips to utter.

All at once Margaret opened her eyes—her eyes that looked at us through a dim, filmy haze, terrible to see. She raised herself a little in the loving arms that held her, and stretched out her hands to me. "*They are but little flowers*," she said, "*but they smell so sweet . . . they have come all the way from England . . . . and they are for you—because you told me that you loved them best of all . . . Oscar! . . .*"

The last word was more breathed than spoken—and then—

What then?

Alice laid her burden down.

Margaret had gone to her dead love. They were "parted no more."

* * * * *

A sad story mine, you say? Well, may be it is; but yet my life has not been all sadness. . . . Mabel—my dear "Queen

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Mab"—was left by her mother's will my ward.

Margaret trusted me: in this as in all else.

So my life was not without interest, though without those near home ties that make the sunshine of other men's lives; and there must be some old bachelors in the world, after all!

The things that I have been telling you of happened many a long year ago: for "Queen Mab" is married, and her children are my playfellows. They say there is nobody like "grandpapa Duncan" for a good game of romps "between the lights." As to "Poppums," he is called to the Bar, and his big eyes look more solemn than ever under his wig. Alice goes to hear him speak (as Junior Counsel), and considers that there is something wrong with the "government" in that he is not raised to the woolsack without delay. Percy affects to laugh at this conviction on the

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part of his wife; but in his heart, I am inclined to think, he sympathises with it.

"Poppums" has been that terrible thing, an only child; so it really is a marvel that he has turned out so well.

* * * * *

When Margaret died I filled her dead hands with violets. Every spring the flowers that are "so small," yet "smell so sweet," blossom upon her grave. And when I think of her it is not sadly.

Time was when a passion of grief bowed me to the earth; when life seemed nothing but desolation and silence; but time chastens all, even the most undisciplined sorrow, and life sets us so many tasks to do—gives us so many to help, to comfort, to heal, that none of us can afford to sit down by the way, and idly make our moan.

END OF VOL. II.

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