

A Study in Sentimentality

By Hubert Crackanthorpe

A PHANTOM regiment of giant mist-pillars swept silently across the valley ; beaded drops loaded each tuft of coarse, dull-tinted grass ; the peat-hags gaped like black, dripping flesh-wounds in the earth's side ; the distance suggested rectangular fields and wooded slopes—vague, grey, phantasmagoric ; and down over everything floated the damp of fine rain.

Alec's heavy tread crunched the turf-edged path rhythmically, and from the stiff rim of his clerical hat the water dribbled on to his shoulders.

It was a rugged, irregular, almost uncouth face, and now the features were vacantly huddled in a set expression, obviously habitual. The cheeks were hunched up, almost concealing the small eyes ; a wet wisp of hair straggled over the puckered forehead, and the ragged, fair moustache was spangled by the rain.

At his approach the sheep scampered up the fell-side ; then, stood staring through the mist in anxious stupidity. And Alec, shaking the water from his hat, strode forward with an almost imperceptible gleam on his face. It was so that he liked the valley—all colourless and blurred, with the sky close overhead, like a low, leaden ceiling.

By-and-by

By-and-by, a cluster of cottages loomed ahead—a choppy pool of black slate roofs, wanly a-glimmer in the wet. As he entered the village, a group of hard-featured men threw him a curt chorus of greetings, to which he raised his stick in response, mechanically.

He mounted the hill. Three furnace-chimneys craned their thin necks to grime the sky with a dribbling, smoky breath; high on a bank of coal-dust, blurred silhouettes of trucks stood waiting in forlorn strings; women, limp, with unkempt hair, and loose, bedraggled skirts, stood round the doorways in gossiping groups.

“Which is Mrs. Matheson’s?” he stopped to ask.

“There—oop there, Mr. Burkett—by yon ash—where them childer’s standin’,” they answered, all speaking together, eagerly. “Look ye! that be Mrs. Matheson herself.”

Alec went up to the woman. His face clouded a little, and the puffs from his pipe came briskly in rapid succession.

“Mrs. Matheson, I’ve only just heard— Tell me, how did it happen?” he asked gently.

She was a stout, red-faced woman, and her eyes were all bloodshot with much crying. She wiped them hastily with the corner of her apron before answering.

“It was there, Mr. Burkett, by them rails. He was jest playin’ aboot in t’ road wi’ Arnison’s childer. At half-past one, t’ grand-moother stepped across to fetch me a jug o’ fresh water an’ she see’d him settin’ in door there. Then—mabbee twenty minutes later—t’ rain coome on an’ I thought to go to fetch him in. But I could’na see na sign of him anywhere. We looked oop and doon, and thought, mabbee, he’d toddled roond to t’ back. An’ then, all at once, Dan Arnison called to us that he was leein’ in t’ water, doon in beck-pool. An’ Dan ran straight doon, an’
carried

carried him oop to me ; but t'was na use. He was quite cold and drowned. An' I went——” But the sobs, rising thickly, swallowed the rest.

Alec put his hand on her shoulder soothingly.

“Ay, I know'd ye'd be grieved, Mr. Burkett. He was the bonniest boy in all t' parish.”

She lifted the apron to her eyes again, while he crossed to the railings. The wood of the posts was splintered and worm-eaten, and the lower rail was broken away. Below, the rock shelved down some fifteen feet to the beck-pool, black and oily-looking.

“It's a very dangerous place,” he said, half to himself.

“Ay, Mr. Burkett, you're right,” interrupted a bent and wizened old woman, tottering forward.

“This be grandmoother, Mr. Burkett,” Mrs. Matheson explained. “'Twas grandmoother that see'd him last——”

“Ay, Mr. Burkett,” the old woman began in a high, tremulous treble. “When I went fer to fill t' jug fer Maggie he was a-settin' on t' steps there playin with t' kitten, an' he called after me, ‘Nanny!’ quite happy-like ; but I took na notice, but jest went on fer t' water. I shawed Mr. Allison the broken rail last month, when he was gittin' t' rents, and I told him he ought to put it into repair, with all them wee childer playin' all daytime on t' road. Didn't I, Maggie?” Mrs. Matheson assented incoherently. “An' he was very civil-like, was Mr. Allison, and he said he'd hev' it seen to. It's alus that way, Mr. Burkett,” the old woman concluded, shaking her head wisely. “Folks wait till some accident occurs, and then they think to bestir themselves.”

Alec turned to the mother, and touched her thick, nerveless hand.

“There, there, Mrs. Matheson, don't take on so,” he said.

At

At his touch her sobbing suddenly ceased, and she let her apron fall.

“Will ye na coome inside, Mr. Burkett?” she asked.

And they all three went in together.

The little room had been scrubbed and tidied, and a number of chairs, ranged round the table, blocked the floor.

“We’ve bin busy all marnin’, gittin’ things a bit smartened oop for t’ inquest. T’ coroner’s cooming at twelve,” the grandmother explained.

“Will ye coome oopstairs, Mr. Burkett—jest—jest to tak’ a look at him?” Mrs. Matheson asked in a subdued voice.

Alec followed her, squeezing his burly frame up the narrow, creaking staircase.

The child lay on the clean, white bed. A look of still serenity slept on his pallid face. His tawny curls were smoothed back, and some snowdrops were scattered over the coverlet. All was quite simple.

Mrs. Matheson stood in the doorway, struggling noisily with her sobs.

“It is God’s will,” Alec said quietly.

“He was turned four last week,” she blurted out. “Ye’ll excuse me, Mr. Burkett, but I’m that overdone that I jest canna’ help myself,” and she sank into a chair.

He knelt by the dead child’s side and prayed, while the slow rise and fall of the mother’s sobs filled the room. When he rose his eyes were all moist.

“God will help you, if you ask Him. His ways are secret. We cannot understand His purpose. But have faith in Him. He has done it for the best,” he said.

“Ay, I know, I know, Mr. Burkett. But ye see he was the youngest, and that bonny——”

“Let

“Let me try to comfort you,” he said.

* * * * *

When they came downstairs again, her face was calmer and her voice steadier. The coroner, a dapper man with a bright-red tie, was taking off his gloves and macintosh; the room was fast filling with silent figures, and the old grandmother was hobbling to and fro with noisy, excited importance.

“Will ye na’ stay for t’ inquest?”

Alec shook his head. “No, I can’t stop now. I have a School-board meeting to go to. But I will come up this afternoon.”

“Thank’ee, Mr. Burkett, God bless thee,” said Mrs. Matheson.

He shook hands with the coroner, who was grumbling concerning the weather; then strode out back down the valley.

Though long since he had grown familiar with the aspects of suffering, that scene in the cottage, by reason of its very simplicity, had affected him strangely. His heart was full of slow sorrow for the woman’s trouble, and the image of the child, lying beautiful in its death-sleep, passed and repassed in his mind.

By-and-bye, the moaning of the wind, the whirling of lost leaves, the inky shingle-beds that stained the fell-sides, inclined his thoughts to a listless brooding.

Life seemed dull, inevitable, draped in sombre, drifting shadows, like the valley-head. Yet in all good he saw the hand of God, a mysterious, invisible force, ever imperiously at work beneath the ravages of suffering and of sin.

It was close upon six o’clock when he reached home. He was drenched to the skin, and as he sat before the fire, dense clouds of steam rose from his mud-stained boots and trousers.

“Now, Mr. Burkett, jest ye gang and tak off them things, while I make yer tea. Ye’ll catch yer death one of these days—I know ye will. I sometimes think ye haven’t more sense than
a boy,

a boy, traipsin' about all t' day in t' wet, and niver takin' yer meals proper-like."

A faint smile flickered across his face. He was used to his landlady's scoldings.

"A child was drowned yesterday in the beck up at Beda Cottages. I had to go back there this afternoon to arrange about the funeral," he mumbled, half-apologetically.

Mrs. Parkin snorted defiantly, bustling round the table as she spread the cloth. Presently she broke out again :

"An' noo, ye set there lookin' as white as a bogle. Why don't ye go an' git them wet clothes off. Ye're fair wringin'."

He obeyed; though the effort to rise was great. He felt curiously cold: his teeth were clacking, and the warmth from the flames seemed delicious.

In his bedroom a dizziness caught him, and it was a moment before he could recognise the familiar objects. And he realised that he was ill, and looked at himself in the glass with a dull, scared expression. He struggled through his dressing however, and went back to his tea. But, though he had eaten nothing since the morning, he had no appetite; so, from sheer force of habit, he lit a pipe, wheeling his chair close to the fire.

And, as the heat penetrated him, his thoughts spun aimlessly round the day's events, till these gradually drifted into the background of his mind, as it were, and he and they seemed to have become altogether detached. His forehead was burning, and a drowsy, delicious sense of physical weakness was stealing over his limbs. He was going to be ill, he remembered; and it was with vague relief that he looked forward to the prospect of long days of monotonous inactivity, long days of repose from the daily routine of fatigue. The details of each day's work, the accomplishment of which, before, had appeared so indispensable, now, he felt in his lassitude,

lassitude, had faded to insignificance. Mrs. Parkin was right : he had been overdoing himself ; and with a clear conscience he would take a forced holiday in bed. Things in the parish would get along without him till the end of the week. There was only the drowned child's funeral, and, if he could not go, Milner, the neighbouring vicar, would take it for him. His pipe slipped from his hand to the hearthrug noiselessly, and his head sank forward. . . .

He was dreaming of the old churchyard. The trees were rocking their slim, bare arms ; drip, drip, drip, the drops pattered on to the tombstones, tight-huddled in the white, wet light of the moon ; the breath of the old churchyard tasted warm and moist, like the reek of horses after a long journey.

The child's funeral was finished. Mrs. Matheson had cried noisily into her apron ; the mourners were all gone now ; and alone, he sat down on the fresh-dug grave. By the moonlight he tried to decipher the names carved on the slabs ; but most of the letters had faded away, and moss-cushions had hidden the rest. Then he found it—"George Matheson, aged four years and five days," and underneath were carved Mrs. Matheson's words : "He was the bonniest boy in all the parish." He sat on, with the dread of death upon him, the thought of that black senselessness ahead, possessing him, so sudden, so near, so intimate, that it seemed entirely strange to have lived on, forgetful of it. By-and-bye, he saw her coming towards him—Ethel, like a figure from a picture, wearing a white dress that trailed behind her, a red rose pinned at the waist, and the old smile on her lips. And she came beside him, and told him how her husband had gone away for ever, and he understood at once that he and she were betrothed again, as it had been five years ago. He tried to answer her, but somehow the words would not come ; and, as he was
striving

striving to frame them, there came a great crash. A bough clattered down on the tombstones ; and with a start he awoke.

A half-burned coal was smoking in the fender. He felt as if he had been sleeping for many hours.

He fell to stupidly watching the red-heat, as it pulsed through the caves of coal, to imagining himself climbing their ashen mountain-ridges, across dark defiles, up the face of treacherous precipices. . . .

Hundreds of times, here, in this room, in this chair, before this fire, he had sat smoking, picturing the old scenes to himself, musing of Ethel Fulton (Ethel Winn she had been then ; but, after her marriage, he had forced himself to think of her as bearing her husband's name—that was a mortification from which he had derived a sort of bitter satisfaction). But now, with the long accumulation of his solitude—five years he had been vicar of Scarsdale—he had grown so unconscious of self, so indifferent to the course of his own existence, that every process of his mind had, from sheer lack of external stimulation, stagnated, till, little by little, the growth of mechanical habit had come to mould its shape and determine its limitations. And hence, not for a moment had he ever realised the grip that this habit of sentimental reminiscence had taken on him, nor the grotesque extent of its futile repetition. Such was the fervour of his attitude towards his single chapter of romance.

Five years ago, she and he had promised their lives to one another. And the future had beckoned them onward, gaily, belittling every obstacle in its suffusion of glad, alluring colour. He was poor : he had but his curate's stipend, and she was used to a regular routine of ease. But he would have tended her wants, waiting on her, watching over her, indefatigably ; chastening all the best that was in him, that he might lay it at her feet. And
together,

together, hand in hand, they would have laboured in God's service. At least so it seemed to him now.

Then had come an enforced separation; and later, after a prolonged, unaccountable delay, a letter from her explaining, in trite, discursive phrases, how it could never be—it was a mistake—she had not known her own mind—now she could see things clearer—she hoped he would forgive and forget her.

A wild determination to go at once to her, to plead with her, gripped him; but for three days he was helpless, bound fast by parish duties. And when at last he found himself free, he had already begun to perceive the hopelessness of such an errand, and, with crushed and dogged despair, to accept his fate as irrevocable.

In his boyhood—at the local grammar-school, where his ugliness had made him the butt of his class, and later, at an insignificant Oxford college, where, to spare his father, whose glebe was at the time untenanted, he had set himself grimly to live on an impossibly slender allowance—at every turn of his life, he had found himself at a disadvantage with his fellows. Thus he had suffered much, dumbly—meekly many would have said—without a sign of resentment, or desire for retaliation. But all the while, in his tenacious, long-suffering way, he was stubbornly inuring himself to an acceptance of his own disqualifications. And so, once rudely awakened from his dream of love, he wondered with heavy curiosity at his faith in its glamorous reality, and, remembering the tenour of his life, suffered bitterly like a man befooled by his own conceit.

Some months after the shattering of his romance, the rumour reached him that James Fulton, a prosperous solicitor in the town, was courting her. The thing was impossible, a piece of idle gossip, he reasoned with himself. Before long, however, he heard it again, in a manner that left no outlet for doubt.

It

It seemed utterly strange, unaccountable, that she, whose eager echoing of all his own spiritual fervour and enthusiasm for the work of the Church still rang in his ears, should have chosen a man, whose sole talk had seemed to be of dogs and of horses, of guns and of game; a man thick-minded, unthinking, self-complacent; a man whom he himself had carelessly despised as devoid of any spark of spirituality.

And, at this moment, when the first smartings of bitter bewilderment were upon him, the little living of Scarsdale fell vacant, and his rector, perhaps not unmindful of his trouble, suggested that he should apply for it.

The valley was desolate and full of sombre beauty; the parish, sparsely-peopled but extensive; the life there would be monotonous, almost grim, with long hours of lonely brooding. The living was offered to him. He accepted it excitedly.

And there, busied with his new responsibilities, throwing himself into the work with a suppressed, ascetic ardour, news of the outside world reached him vaguely, as if from afar.

He read of her wedding in the local newspaper: later, a few trite details of her surroundings; and then, nothing more.

But her figure remained still resplendent in his memory, and, as time slipped by, grew into a sort of gleaming shrine, incarnating for him all the beauty of womanhood. And gradually, this incarnation grew detached, as it were, from her real personality, so that, when twice a year he went back to spend Sunday with his old rector, to preach a sermon in the parish church, he felt no shrinking dread lest he should meet her. He had long ceased to bear any resentment against her, or to doubt that she had done what was right. The part that had been his in the little drama seemed altogether of lesser importance.

* * * * *

All night he lay feverishly tossing, turning his pillow aglow with heat, from side to side ; anxiously reiterating whole incoherent conversations and jumbled incidents.

At intervals, he was dimly conscious of the hiss of wind-swept leaves outside, and of rain-gusts rattling the window-panes ; and later, of the sickly light of early morning streaking the ceiling with curious patterns. By-and-bye, he dropped into a fitful sleep, and forgot the stifling heat of his bed.

Then the room had grown half full of daylight, and Mrs. Parkin was there, fidgetting with the curtains. She said something which he did not hear, and he mumbled that he had slept badly, and that his head was aching.

Some time later—how long he did not know—she appeared again, and a man, whom he presently understood to be a doctor, and who put a thermometer, the touch of which was deliciously cool, under his armpit, and sat down at the table to write. Mrs. Parkin and he talked in whispers at the foot of the bed : they went away ; Mrs. Parkin brought him a cup of beef-tea and some toast ; and then he remembered only the blurred memories of queer, unfinished dreams.

Consciousness seemed to return to him all of a sudden ; and, when it was come, he understood dimly that, somehow, the fatigue of long pain was over, and he tasted the peaceful calm of utter lassitude.

He lay quite still, his gaze following Mrs. Parkin, as she moved to and fro across the room, till it fell on a basket-full of grapes that stood by the bedside. They were unfamiliar, inexplicable ; they puzzled him ; and for awhile he feebly turned the matter over in his mind. Presently she glanced at him, and he lifted his hand towards the basket.

"Would ye fancy a morsel o' fruit noo ? 'Twas Mrs. Fulton that sent 'em," she said.

She held the basket towards him, and he lifted a bunch from it. They were purple grapes, large and luscious-looking. Ethel had sent them. How strange that was! For an instant he doubted if he were awake, and clutched the pillow to make sure that it was real.

"Mrs. Fulton sent them?" he repeated.

"Ay, her coachman came yesterday in t' forenoon to inquire how ye were farin', and left that fruit for ye. Ay, Mr. Burkett, but ye've had a mighty quantity o' callers. Most all t' parish has been askin' for news o' ye. An' that poor woman from t' factory cottages has been doon forenoon and night."

"How long have I been in bed?" he asked after a pause.

"Five days and five nights. Ye've bin nigh at death's door, ravin' and moanin' like a madman. But, noo, I must'na keep ye chatterin'. Ye should jist keep yeself quiet till t' doctor coomes. He'll be mighty surprised to find ye so much improved, and in possession of yer faculties."

And she left him alone.

He lay staring at the grapes, while excitement quickened every pulse. Ethel had sent them—they were from Ethel—Ethel had sent them—through his brain, to and fro, boisterously, the thought danced. And then, he started to review the past, dispassionately, critically, as if it were another man's; and soon, every detail, as he lingered on it, seemed to disentangle itself, till it all achieved a curious simplification. The five years at Scarsdale became all blurred: they resembled an eventless waste-level, through which he had been mechanically trudging. But the other day, it seemed, he was with her—he and she betrothed to one another. A dozen scenes passed before his eyes: with a flush of hot, intolerable shame, he saw himself, clumsy, uncouth, devoid of personal charm, viewing her bluntly, selfishly through the cumbrous medium of his own personality.

personality. And her attitude was clear too: the glamour, woven of habitual, sentimental reminiscence, faded, as it were, from her figure, and she appeared to him simply and beautifully human; living, vibrating, frail. *Now* he knew the meaning of that last letter of hers—the promptings of each phrase; the outpourings of his ideals, enthusiasms, aspirations—callow, blatant, crude, he named them bitterly—had scared her: she had felt herself unequal to the strain of the life he had offered her: in her loveable, womanish frailty, she had grown to dread it; and he realised all that she had suffered before she had brought herself to end it—the long struggles with doubt and suspense. The veil that had clogged his view was lifted: he knew her now: he could read the writing on her soul: he was securely equipped for loving her; and now, she had passed out of his life, beyond recall. In his blindness he had not recognised her, and had driven her away.

How came it that to-day, for the first time, all these things were made clear?

The clock struck; and while he was listening to its fading note, the door-handle clicked briskly, and the doctor walked in. He talked cheerily of the crops damaged by the storm, and the sound of his voice seemed to vibrate harshly through the room.

“There’s a heavy shower coming up,” he remarked. “By the way, you’re quite alone here, Mr. Burkett, I believe. Have you no relatives whom you would like to send for?”

“No—no one,” Alec answered. “Mrs. Parkin will look after me.”

“Yes—but you see,” and he came and sat down by the bedside, “I don’t say there’s any immediate danger; but you’ve had a very near touch of it. Now isn’t there any old friend?—you ought not to be alone like this.” He spoke the last words with emphasis.

Alec

Alec shook his head. His gaze had fallen on the basket of grapes again : he was incoherently musing of Ethel.

"Mind, I don't say there's any immediate danger," he heard the man repeating ; "but I must tell you that you're not altogether out of the wood yet."

He paused.

"You ought to be prepared for the worst, Mr. Burkett."

The last phrase lingered in Alec's mind ; and slowly its meaning dawned upon him.

"You mean I might die at any moment ?" he asked.

"No, no—I don't say that," the other answered evasively. "But you see the fever has left you very weak ; and of course in such cases one can never be quite sure——"

The rest did not reach Alec's ears ; he was only vaguely aware of the murmur of the man's voice.

Presently he perceived that he had risen.

"I will come back in the afternoon," he was saying. "I'll tell Mrs.—Mrs. Parker to bring you in some breakfast."

After the doctor had gone he dozed a little . . .

Then remembered the man's words—"No immediate danger, but you must be prepared for the worst." The sense of it all flashed upon him : he understood what the man had meant : that was the way doctors always told such things he guessed. So the end was near . . . He wondered, a little curiously, if it would come before to-night, or to-morrow . . . It was near, quite near, he repeated to himself ; and gradually, a peacefulness permeated his whole being, and he was vaguely glad to be alone. . . .

A little while, and he would be near God He felt himself detached from the world, and at peace with all men.

His life, as he regarded it trailing behind him, across the stretch of past years, seemed inadequate, useless, pitiable almost ; of his
own

own personality, as he now realised it, he was ashamed—petty mortifications, groping efforts, a grotesque capacity for futile, melancholy brooding—he rejoiced that he was to have done with it. The end was near, quite near, he repeated once again.

Then, afterwards, would come rest—the infinite rest of the Saviour's tenderness, and the strange, wonderful expectation of the mysterious life to come . . . A glimpse of his own serenity, of his own fearlessness, came to him; and he was moved by a quick flush of gratitude towards God. He thought of the terror of the atheist's death—the world, a clod of dead matter blindly careering through space; humanity, a casual, senseless growth, like the pullulating insects on a rotting tree. . . .

A little while, only a little while, and he would be near God. And, softly, under his breath, he implored pardon for the countless shortcomings of his service. . . .

The German clock on the mantel-piece ticked with methodical fussiness: the flames in the grate flickered lower and lower; and one by one dropped, leaving dull-red cinders. Through the window, under the half-drawn blind, was the sky, cold with the hard, white glare of the winter sun, flashing above the bare, bony mountain-backs; and he called to mind spots in the little, desolate parish, which, with a grim, clinging love, he had come to regard as his own for always. Who would come after him, live in this house of his, officiate in the square, grey-walled church, move and work in God's service among the people? . . .

And, while he lay drowsily musing on the unfinished dream, a muffled murmur of women's voices reached his ears. By an intuition, akin perhaps to animal instinct, he knew all at once that it was she, talking with Mrs. Parkin down in the room below. Prompted by a rush of imperious impulse he raised himself on his elbow to listen.

There

There was a rustling of skirts in the passage and the sound of the voices grew clearer.

"Good day, ma'am, and thank ye very kindly, I'm sure," Mrs. Parkin was saying.

No reply came, though he was straining every nerve to catch it . . . At last, subdued, but altogether distinct, *her* voice :

"You're sure there's nothing else I can send?"

The door of his room was ajar. He dug his nails into the panel-edge, and tried to swing it open. But he could scarcely move it, and in a moment she would be gone.

Suddenly he heard his own voice—loud and queer it sounded :

"Ethel—Ethel."

Hurried steps mounted the stairs, and Mrs. Parkin's white cap and spectacled face appeared.

"What be t' matter, Mr. Burkett?" she asked breathlessly.

"Stop her—tell her."

"Dearie, dearie me, he's off wanderin' agin."

"No, no; I'm all right—tell—ask Mrs. Fulton if she would come up to see me?"

"There, there, Mr. Burkett, don't ye excite yeself. Ye're not fit to see any one, ye know that. Lie ye doon agin, or ye'll be catchin' yer death o' cauld."

"Ask her to come, please—just for a minute."

"For Heaven's sake lie doon. Ye'll be workin' yeself into a fever next. There, there, I'll ask her for ye, though I've na notion what t' doctor 'ud say."

She drew down the blind and retired, closing the door quietly behind her.

The next thing he saw was Ethel standing by his bedside.

He lay watching her without speaking. She wore a red dress trimmed

trimmed with fur ; a gold bracelet was round her gloved wrist, and a veil half-hid her features.

Presently he perceived that she was very white, that her mouth was twitching, and that her eyes were full of tears.

“Alec—I’m so sorry you’re so ill . . . Are you in pain ?”

He shook his head absently. Her veil and the fur on her cloak looked odd, he thought, in the half-light of the room.

“You will be better soon : the worst is over.”

“No,” he answered, with a dreary smile. “I am going to die.”

She burst into sobs.

“No, no, Alec . . . You must not think that.”

He stretched his arm over the coverlet towards her, and felt the soft pressure of her gloved hand.

“Forgive me, Ethel, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pain you. But it is so ; the doctor told me this morning.”

She sat down by the bedside, still crying, pressing her handkerchief to her eyes.

“Ethel, how strange it seems. Do you know I haven’t seen you since I left Cockermouth ?” The words came deliberately, for his mind had grown quite calm. “How the time has flown !”

Her grasp on his hand tightened, but she made no answer.

“It was very kind of you to come all this way, Ethel, to see me. Will you stay a little and let me talk to you ? It’s more than five years since we’ve talked together, you know,” and he smiled faintly. “Don’t cry so, Ethel, dear. I did not mean to make you cry. There’s no cause to cry, dear ; you’ve made me so happy.”

“My poor, poor Alec,” she sobbed.

“You’d almost forgotten the old days, perhaps,” he continued dreamily,

dreamily, talking half to himself; "for it's a long while ago now. But to me it seems as if it had all just happened. You see I've been vegetating rather, here in this lonely, little place . . . Don't go on crying, Ethel dear . . . let me tell you about things a little. There's no harm in it now, because you know I'm——"

"Oh! don't—don't say that. You'll get better. I know you will."

"No, Ethel, I sha'n't. Something within me tells me that my course is done. Besides, I don't want to get better. I'm so happy . . . Stay a little with me, Ethel . . . I wanted to explain . . . I was stupid, selfish, in the old days——"

"It was I—I who——" she protested through her tears.

"No, you were quite right to write me that letter. I've thought that almost from the first . . . I'm sure of it," he added, as if convincing himself definitely. "It could never be . . . it was my fault . . . I was stupid and boorish and wrapped up in myself. I did not try to understand your nature . . . I didn't understand anything about women . . . I never had a sister . . . I took for granted that you were always thinking and feeling just as I was. I never tried to understand you, Ethel . . . I was not fit to be entrusted with you."

"Alec, Alec, it is not true. You were too good, too noble-hearted. I felt you were far above me. Beside you I felt I was silly and frivolous. Your standards about everything seemed so high——"

But he interrupted, unheeding her :

"You don't know, Ethel, how happy you've made me. . . . I have thought of you every day. In the evenings, I used to sit alone, remembering you and all the happy days we had together, and the remembrance of them has been a great joy to me. I used to go over them all, again and again. The day that we all went

to Morecambe, and that walk along the seashore, when the tide caught us, and I carried you across the water . . . the time that we went to those ruins, and you wore the primroses I picked for you. And I used to read over all your letters, and remember all the things you used to say. Downstairs, under the writing-table, there is a black, tin cash-box—the key is on my bunch—Mrs. Parkin will give it you. It's where I've kept everything that has reminded me of you, all this time. Will you take it back with you? . . . You don't know how you've helped me all these years—I wanted to tell you that . . . When I was in difficulties, I used to wonder how you would have liked me to act . . . When I was lonely and low-spirited, I used to tell myself that you were happy." He paused for breath, and his voice died slowly in the stillness of the room. "You were quite right," he murmured almost inaudibly, "I see it all quite clearly now."

She was bending over him, and was framing his face in her two hands.

"Say I was wrong," she pleaded passionately. "Say I was wicked, wrong. I loved you, Alec . . . I was promised to you. I should have been so happy with you, dear . . . Alec, my Alec, do not die . . . God will not let you die . . . He cannot be so cruel . . . Come back, Alec . . . I love you . . . Do you hear, my Alec? I love you . . . Ethel loves you . . . Before God I love you . . . I was promised to you . . . I broke my word . . . I loved you all the time, but I did not know it . . . Forgive me, my Alec . . . forgive me . . . I shall love you always."

He passed his fingers over her forehead tentatively, as if he were in darkness.

"Ethel, every day, every hour, all these years, you have been with me. And now I am going away. Kiss me—just once—just once. There can be no wrong in it now."

She

She tore her veil from her face : their lips met, and her head rested a moment, sobbing on his shoulder.

“Hush ! don’t cry, Ethel dear, don’t cry. You have made me so glad. . . . And you will remember to take the box . . . And you will think of me sometimes . . . And I shall pray God to make you happy, and I shall wait for you, Ethel, and be with you in thought, and if you have trouble, you will know that I shall be sorrowing with you. Isn’t it so, dear ? . . . Now, good-bye, dear one—good-bye. May God watch over you.”

She had moved away. She came back again, however, and kissed his forehead reverently. But he was not aware of her return, for his mind had begun to wander.

She brushed past Mrs. Parkin in the passage, bidding her an incoherent good-bye : she was instinctively impatient to escape to the protection of familiar surroundings. Inside the house, she felt helpless, dizzy : the melodrama of the whole scene had stunned her senses, and pity for him was rushing through her in waves of pulsing emotion.

As she passed the various landmarks, which she had noted on her outward journey—a group of Scotch firs, a roofless cattle-shed, a pile of felled trees—each seemed to wear an altered aspect. With what a strange suddenness it had all happened ! Yesterday the groom had brought back word that he was in delirium, and had told her of the loneliness of the house. It had seemed so sad, his lying ill, all alone : the thought had preyed on her conscience, till she had started to drive out there to inquire if there were anything she could do to help him. Now, every corner round which the cart swung, lengthened the stretch of road that separated her from that tragic scene in his room . . . Perhaps it was not right for her to drive home and leave him ? But she couldn’t bear to stay : it was all so dreadful. Besides, she assured herself, she could do

no good. There was the doctor, and that old woman who nursed him—they would see to everything . . . Poor, poor Alec—alone in that grey-walled cottage, pitched at the far end of this long, bleak valley—the half-darkened room—his wasted, feverish face—and his *knowing* that he could not live—it all came back to her vividly, and she shivered as if with cold. Death seemed hideous, awful, almost wicked in the cruelty of its ruthlessness. And the homeward drive loomed ahead, interminably—for two hours she would have to wait with the dreadful, flaring remembrance of it all—two hours—for the horse was tired, and it was thirteen miles, a man by the roadside had told her. . . .

He was noble-hearted, saint-like . . . Her pity for him welled up once more, and she convinced herself that she could have loved him, worshipped him, been worthy of him as a husband—and now he lay dying. He had revealed his whole nature to her, it seemed. No one had ever understood, as she did now, what a fine character he was in reality. Her cheeks grew hot with indignation and shame, as she remembered how she had heard people laugh at him behind his back, refer to him mockingly as the ‘love-sick curate.’ And all this while—for five whole years—he had gone on caring for her—thinking of her each day, reading her letters, recalling the things she used to say—yes, those were his very words. Before, she had never suspected that it was in his nature to take it so horribly tragically; yet, somehow, directly he had fixed his eyes on her in that excited way, she had half-guessed it. . . .

The horse’s trot slackened to a walk, and the wheels crunched over a bed of newly-strewn stones . . . She was considering how much of what had happened she could relate to Jim. Oh! the awfulness of his *knowing beforehand* like that! She had kissed him: she had told him that she cared for him: she hadn’t
been

been able to help doing that. There was no harm in it; she had made him happier—he had said so himself . . . But Jim wouldn't understand: he would be angry with her for having gone, perhaps. He wouldn't see that she couldn't have done anything else. No, she couldn't bear to tell him: besides, it seemed somehow like treachery to Alec . . . Oh! it must be awful to *know beforehand* like that! . . . The doctor should never have told him. It was horrible, cruel . . . In the past how she had been to blame—she saw that now: thoughtless, selfish, altogether beneath him.

It was like a chapter in a novel. His loving her silently all these years, and telling her about it on his deathbed. At the thought of it she thrilled with subtle pride: it illuminated the whole ordinariness of her life. The next moment the train of her own thoughts shamed her. Poor, poor Alec. . . . And to reinforce her pity, she recalled the tragic setting of the scene.

That woman—his landlady—could she have heard anything, she wondered with a twinge of dread? No, the door was shut, and his voice had been very low.

The horse turned on to the main road, and pricking his ears, quickened his pace.

She would remember him always. Every day, she would think of him, as he had asked her to do—she would never forget to do that. And, if she were in trouble, or difficulty, she would turn her thoughts towards him, just as he had told her he used to do. She would try to become better—more religious—for his sake. She would read her Bible each morning, as she knew had been his habit. These little things were all she could do now. Her attitude in the future she would make worthy of his in the past . . . He would become the secret guiding-star of her life: *it* would be her hidden chapter of romance. . . .

The

The box—that box which he had asked her to take. She had promised, and she had forgotten it. How could she get it? It was too late to turn back now. Jim would be waiting for her. She would only just be in time for dinner as it was . . . How could she get it? If she wrote to his landlady, and asked her to send it—it was under the writing-table in the sitting-room he had said . . . She *must* get it, somehow. . . .

It was dark before she reached home. Jim was angry with her for being late, and for having driven all the way without a servant. She paid no heed to his upbraiding; but told him shortly that Alec was still in great danger. He muttered some perfunctory expression of regret, and went off to the stables to order a bran-mash for the horse. His insensibility to the importance of the tragedy she had been witnessing, exasperated her: she felt bitterly mortified that he could not divine all that she had been suffering.

* * * * *

The last of the winter months went, and life in the valley swept its sluggish course onwards. The bleak, spring winds rollicked, hooting from hill to hill. The cattle waited for evening, huddled under the walls of untrimmed stone; and before the fireside, in every farmhouse, new-born lambs lay helplessly bleating. On Sundays the men would loaf in churlish groups about the church door, jerk curt greetings at one another, and ask for news of Parson Burkett. It was a curate from Cockermonth who took the services in his stead—one of the new-fangled sort; a young gentleman from London way, who mouthed his words like a girl, carried company manners, and had a sight of strange clerical practices.

Alec was slowly recovering. The fever had altogether left him: a straw-coloured beard now covered his chin, and his cheeks were grown hollow and peaky-looking. But by the hay-harvest, the

the doctor reckoned, he would be as strong as ever again—so it was commonly reported.

Mrs. Parkin declared that the illness had done him a world o' good. "It's rested his mind like, and kept him from frettin'. He was alus ower given to studyin' on his own thoughts, till he got dazed like and took na notice o' things. An' noo," she would conclude, "ye should jest see him, smilin' as free as a child."

So, day after day, floated vaguely by, and to Alec the calm of their unbroken regularity was delicious. He was content to lie still for hours, thinking of nothing, remembering nothing, tasting the torpor of dreamy contemplation; watching through the window the slow drifting of the shadows; listening to the cackling of geese, and the plaintive bleating of sheep. . . .

By-and-bye, with returning strength, his senses quickened, and grew sensitive to every passing impression. To eat with elaborate deliberation his invalid meals; to watch the myriad specks of gold dancing across a bar of sunlight—these were sources of keen, exciting delight. But in the foreground of his mind, transfiguring with its glamour every trivial thought, flashed the memory of Ethel's visit. He lived through the whole scene again and again, picturing her veiled figure as it had stood by the bedside, wrapped in the red, fur cloak; and her protesting words, her passionate tears, seemed to form a mystic, indissoluble bond between them, that brightened all the future with rainbow colours.

God had given him back to her. Whether circumstances brought them together frequently, or whether they were forced to live their lives almost wholly apart, would, he told himself, matter but little. Their spiritual communion would remain unbroken. Indeed, the prospect of such separations, proving, as it did to him, the sureness of the bond between them, almost elated him. There would be unquestioning trust between them, and, though the
world

world had separated them, the best that was in him belonged to her. When at length they met, there would be no need for insistence on common points of feeling, for repeated handling of past threads, as was customary with ordinary friendships. Since each could read the other's heart, that sure intuition born of chastened, spiritual love would be theirs. If trouble came to her, he would be there to sacrifice all at a moment's bidding, after the fashion of the knights of old. Because she knew him, she would have faith in him. To do her service would be his greatest joy.

At first the immobile, isolated hours of his convalescence made all these things appear simple and inevitable, like the events of a great dream. As time went on, however, he grew to chafe against his long confinement, to weary of his weakness, and of the familiar sight of every object in the room; and in the mornings, when Mrs. Parkin brought him his breakfast, he found himself longing for a letter from her—some brief word of joy that he was recovering. He yearned for some material object, the touch of which would recall her to him, as if a particle of her personality had impregnated the atoms.

Sometimes, he would force himself into believing that she would appear again, drive out to learn the progress of his recovery . . . After luncheon she would leave home . . . about half-past one, probably . . . soon after three, he would see her . . . Now, she was nearing the cross-roads . . . now climbing the hill past Longrigg's farm . . . she would have to walk the horse there . . . now, crossing the old bridge. He would lie watching the clock; and when the suspense grew intolerable, to cheat it, he would bury his head in the pillow to count up to a thousand, before glancing at the hands again. So would slip by the hour of her arrival; still, he would struggle to delude himself with all manner of excuses
for

for her—she had been delayed—she had missed the turning, and had been compelled to retrace her steps. And, when at length the twilight had come, he would start to assure himself that it was to be to-morrow, and sink into a fitful dozing, recounting waking dreams of her, subtly intoxicating. . . .

* * * * *

In April came a foretaste of summer, and, for an hour or two every day, he was able to hobble downstairs. He perceived the box at once, lying in its accustomed place, and concluded that on learning that he was out of danger, she had sent it back to him. The sight of it cheered him with indefinable hope: it seemed to signify a fresh token of her faith in him: it had travelled with her back to Cockermouth on that wonderful day which had brought them together; and now, in his eyes, it was invested with a new preciousness. He unlocked it, and, somehow, to discover that its contents had not been disturbed, was a keen disappointment. He longed for proof that she had been curious to look into it, that she had thus been able to realise how he had prized every tiny object that had been consecrated for him by her. Then it flashed across him that she herself might have brought the box back, and fearing to disturb him, had gone home again without asking to see him. All that evening he brooded over this supposition; yet shrank from putting any question to Mrs. Parkin. But the following morning, a sudden impulse overcame his repugnance; and the next moment he had learned the truth. Untouched, unmoved, the box had remained all the while—she had never taken it—she had forgotten it. And depression swept through him; for it seemed that his ideal had tottered.

His prolonged isolation and his physical lassitude had quickened his emotions to an abnormal sensibility, and had led him to a constant fingering, as it were, of his successive sentimental phases.

And

And these, since they constituted his sole diversion, he had unconsciously come to regard as of supreme importance. The cumbersome, complex details of life in the outside world had assumed the simplification of an indistinct background: in his vision of her figure he had perceived no perspective.

But now the grain of doubt was sown: it germinated insidiously; and soon, the whole complexion of his attitude towards her was transformed. All at once he saw a whole network of unforeseen obstacles, besetting each detail of the prospect he had been planning. Swarming uncertainty fastened on him at every turn; till at last, goaded to desperation, he stripped the gilding from the accumulated fabric of his idealised future.

And then his passion for her flamed up—ardent, unreasoning, human. After all, he loved as other men loved—that was the truth: the rest was mere calfish meandering. Stubbornly he vindicated to himself his right to love her . . . He was a man—a creature of flesh and blood, and every fibre within him was crying out for her—for the sight of her face; the sound of her voice; the clasp of her hand. Body and soul he loved her; body and soul he yearned for her . . . She had come back to him—she was his again—with passionate tears she had told him that she loved him. To fight for her, he was ready to abandon all else. At the world's laws he jibed bitterly; before God they were man and wife.

The knowledge that it lay in his power to make her his for life, to bind her to him irrevocably, brought him intoxicating relief. Henceforward he would live on, but for that end. Existence without her would be dreary, unbearable. He would resign his living and leave the church. Together they would go away, abroad: he would find some work to do in the great cities of Australia . . . She was another man's wife—but the sin would

be his—*his*, not hers—God would so judge it ; and for her sake he would suffer the punishment. Besides, he told himself exultantly, the sin was it not already committed ? “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.”

He would go to her, say to her simply that he was come for her. It should be done openly, honestly in the full light of day. New strength and deep-rooted confidence glowed within him. The wretched vacillation of his former self was put away like an old garment. Once more he sent her words of love sounding in his ears—the words that had made them man and wife before God. And on, the train of his thoughts whirled : visions of a hundred scenes flitted before his eyes—he and she together as man and wife, in a new home across the seas, where the past was all forgotten, and the present was redolent of the sure joy of perfect love. . . .

* * * * *

He was growing steadily stronger. Pacing the floor of his room, or the gravel-path before the house, when the sun was shining, each day he would methodically measure the progress of his strength. He hinted of a long sea voyage to the doctor : the man declared that it would be madness to start before ten days had elapsed. Ten days—the stretch of time seemed absurd, intolerable. But a quantity of small matters relating to the parish remained to be set in order : he had determined to leave no confusion behind him. So he mapped out a daily task for himself : thus he could already begin to work for her : thus each day's accomplishment would bring him doubly nearer to her. The curate, who had been taking his duty, came once or twice at his request to help him ; for he was jealously nursing his small stock of strength. He broke the news of his approaching departure to Mrs. Parkin, and asked her

to

to accept the greater portion of his furniture, as an inadequate token of his gratitude towards her for all she had done for him. The good creature wept copiously, pestered him with questions concerning his destination, and begged him to give her news of him in the future. Next he sent for a dealer from Cockermouth to buy the remainder, and disputed with him the price of each object tenaciously.

One afternoon his former rector appeared, and with tremulous cordiality wished him God-speed, assuming that the sea voyage was the result of doctor's advice. And it was when the old man was gone, and he was alone again, that, for the first time, with a spasm of pain, he caught a glimpse of the deception he was practising. But some irresistible force within him urged him forward—he was powerless—to look back was impossible now—there was more yet to be done—he must go on—there was no time to stop to think. So to deaden the rising conscience-pangs, he fiercely reminded himself that now, but five days more separated her from him. He sat down to write to his bishop and resign his living, struggling with ambiguous, formal phrases, impetuously attributing to his physical weakness his inability to frame them.

The letter at length finished, instinctively dreading fresh gnawings of uneasiness, he forced himself feverishly into thinking of plans for the future, busying his mind with time-tables, searching for particulars of steamers, turning over the leaves of his bank-book. All the money which his father had left to him had remained untouched: for three years they could live comfortably on the capital; meanwhile he would have found some work.

At last, when, with the growing twilight, the hills outside were hurriedly darkening, he sank back wearily in his chair. And all at once he perceived with dismay that nothing remained for him to do, nothing with which he could occupy his mind. For the
moment

moment he was alone with himself, and looking backwards, realisation of the eager facility with which he had successively severed each link, and the rapidity with which he had set himself drifting towards a future, impenetrable, with mysterious uncertainty, stole over him. He had done it all, he told himself, deliberately, unaided ; bewildered, he tried to bring himself face to face with his former self, to survey himself as he had been before the fever—that afternoon when he had gone up to Beda Cottages—plodding indifferently through life in the joyless, walled-in valley, which, he now understood, had in a measure reflected the spirit of his own listless broodings. Scared remorse seized him. The prospect of departure, now that it was close at hand, frightened him ; left him aching as with the burden of dead weight, so that, for a while, he remained inert, dully acquiescing in his accumulating disquietude.

Then, in desperation, he invoked her figure, imagining a dozen incoherent versions of the coming scene—the tense words of greeting, his passionate pleading, her impulsive yielding, and the acknowledgment of her trust in him. . . .

By-and-bye, Mrs. Parkin brought him his dinner. He chatted to her with apparent unconcern, jested regarding his appetite ; for a curious calm, the lucidity evoked by suppressed elation, pervaded him.

But through the night he tossed restlessly, waking in the darkness to find himself throbbing with triumphant exhilaration ; each time striking matches to examine the face of his watch, and beginning afresh to calculate the hours that separated him from the moment that was to bind them together—the irrevocable starting towards the future years.

* * * * *

She stood in the bow-window of her drawing-room, arranging some cut flowers in slender pink and blue vases, striped with enamel
of

of imitation gold. Behind her, the room, uncomfortably ornamental, repeated the three notes of colour—gilt paper shavings filling the grate; gilt-legged chairs and tables; stiff, shiny, pink chintzes encasing the furniture; on the wall a blue-patterned paper, all speckled with stars of gold.

Outside, the little lawn, bathed in the fresh morning sunlight, glowed a luscious green, and the trim flower-beds swelled with heightened colours. A white fox-terrier came waddling along the garden path: she lifted the animal inside the window, stroking his sleek sides with an effusive demonstration of affection. Would Jim remember to be home in good time, she was idly wondering; she had forgotten to remind him before he went to his office, that to-night she was to sing at a local concert.

Suddenly, she caught sight of a man's figure crossing the lawn. For an instant she thought it was an old clerk, whom Jim sometimes employed to carry messages. Then she saw that it was Alec—coming straight towards her. Her first impulse was to escape from him; but noticing that his gaze was fixed on the ground, she retreated behind an angle of the window, and stood watching him . . . Poor Alec! He was going away on a sea-voyage for his health, so Jim had heard it said in the town; and she formed a hasty resolve to be very kind to the poor fellow. Yet her vanity felt a prick of pique, as she noticed that his gait was grown more gaunt, more ungainly than ever; and she resented that his haggard face, his stubbly beard, which, when he lay ill, had signified tense tragedy, should now seem simply uncouth. Still, she awaited his appearance excitedly; anticipating a renewed proof of his touching, dog-like devotion to her, and with a fresh thrill of unconscious gratitude to him for having supplied that scene to which she could look back with secret, sentimental pride.

The maid let him into the room. As he advanced towards her,

her, she saw him brush his forehead with his hand impatiently, as if to rid his brain of an importunate thought. He took her outstretched hand: the forced cheeriness of her phrase of greeting died away, as she felt his gaze searching her face.

"Let us sit down," he said abruptly.

"I'm all right again, now," he began with a brisk, level laugh; and it occurred to her that perhaps the illness had affected his mind.

"I'm so glad of that," she stammered in reply; "so very glad. . . . And you're going away, aren't you, for a long sea voyage? That will do you ever so much good——"

But before she had finished speaking, he was kneeling on the carpet before her, pouring out incoherent phrases. Bewildered, she gazed at him, only noticing the clumsy breadth of his shoulders.

"Listen to me, Ethel, listen," he was saying. "Everything is ready—I've given it all up—my living—the Church. I can't bear it any longer—life without you, I mean . . . You are everything to me—I only want you—I care for nothing else now. I am going away to Australia. You will come with me, Ethel—you said you loved me . . . We love one another—come with me—let us start life afresh. I can't go on living without you . . . I thought it would be easy for you to come; I see now that perhaps it's difficult. You have your home: I see that . . . But have trust in me—I will make it up to you. Together we will start afresh—make a new home—a new life. I will give you every moment; I will be your slave . . . Listen to me, Ethel; let us go away. Everything is ready—I've got money—I've arranged everything. We can go up to London to-morrow. The steamer starts on Thursday."

The sound of his voice ceased. She was staring at the door, filled with dread lest it should open, and the maid should see him kneeling on the carpet.

"Don't,"

"Don't," she exclaimed, grasping his coat. "Get up, quick."

He rose, awkwardly she thought, and stood before her.

"We were so happy together once, dear—do you remember—in the first days, when you promised yourself to me? And now I know that in your heart you still care for me. You said so. Say you will come—say you will trust me—you will start to-morrow. If you can't come so soon I will wait, wait till you can come," he added, and she felt the trembling touch of his hands on hers, and his breath beating on her face.

"Don't, please," and she pushed back his hands. "Some one might see."

"What does it matter, my darling? We are going to belong to one another for always. I am going to wait for you, darling—to be your slave—to give up every moment of my life to you . . . It's the thought of you that's made me live, dear . . . You brought me back to life, that day you came . . . I've thought of nothing but you since. I've been arranging it all——"

"It's impossible," she interrupted.

"No, dear, it's not impossible," he pleaded.

"You've resigned your living—left the Church?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, everything," he answered proudly.

"And all because you cared so for me?"

"I can't begin to live again without you. I would suffer eternal punishment gladly to win you . . . You will trust yourself to me darling; say you will trust me."

"Of course, Alec, I trust you. But you've no right to——"

"Oh! because you're married, and it's a sin, and I'm a clergyman. But I'm a man first. And for you I've given it all up—everything. You don't understand my love for you."

"Yes, yes, I do," she answered quickly, alarmed by the earnest-

ness

ness of his passion, yet remembering vaguely that she had read of such things in books.

"You will come to-morrow, darling—you will have trust in me?"

"You are mad, Alec. You don't know what you are saying. It would be absurd."

"It's because you don't understand how I love you, that you say that," he broke out fiercely. "You can't understand—you can't understand."

"Yes, I can," she protested, instinctively eager to vie with his display of emotion.

"Then say you will come—promise it, promise it," he cried; and his features were all distorted by suspense.

But at this climax of his insistence, she lost consciousness of her own attitude. She seemed suddenly to see all that clumsiness which had made her refuse him before.

"It's altogether ridiculous," she answered shortly.

He recoiled from her: he seemed to stiffen a little all over; and she felt rising impatience at his grotesque denseness in persisting.

"You say it's altogether ridiculous?" he repeated after her slowly.

"Yes, of course it's ridiculous," she repeated with uneasy emphasis. "I'm very sorry you should mind—feel it so—but it isn't my fault."

"Why did you say then that before God you loved me, when you came that day?" he burst out with concentrated bitterness.

"Because I thought you were dying." The bald statement of the truth sprang to her lips—a spontaneous, irresistible betrayal.

"I see

"I see—I see," he muttered. His hands clenched till the knuckles showed white.

"I'm very sorry," she added lamely. Her tone was gentler, for his dumb suffering moved her sensibilities. In her agitation, the crudity of her avowal had slipped her notice.

"That's no use," he answered wearily.

"Alec, don't be angry with me. Can't we be friends? Don't you see yourself now that it was mad, absurd?" she argued, eager to reinstate herself in his eyes. Then, as he made no answer, "Let us be friends, Alec, and you will go back to Scarsdale, when you are well and strong. You will give up nothing for my sake. I should not wish that, you know, Alec."

"Yes," he assented mechanically, "I shall go back."

"I shall always think of this morning," she continued, growing sentimentally remorseful as the sensation of rising relief pervaded her. "And you will soon forget all about it," she added, with a cheeriness of tone that rang false; and paused, awaiting his answer.

"And I shall forget all about it," he repeated after her.

To mask her disappointment, she assumed a silly, nervous gaiety.

"And I shall keep it quite secret that you were so naughty as to ask me to run away with you. I sha'n't even tell Jim."

He nodded stupidly.

With a thin, empty smile on her face, she was debating how best to part with him, when, of a sudden, he rose, and, without a word, walked out of the room.

He strode away across the lawn, and, as she watched his retreating figure, she felt for him a shallow compassion, not unmingled with contempt.