

Second Thoughts

By Arthur Moore

I

As the clock struck eight Sir Geoffrey Vincent cast aside the dull society journal with which he had been beguiling the solitude of his after-dinner coffee and cigar, and abandoned, with an alacrity eloquent of long boredom, his possession of one of the capacious chairs which invited repose in the dingy smoking-room of an old-fashioned club. It had been reserved for him, after twenty monotonous years of almost unbroken exile, spent, for the most part, amid the jungles and swamps of Lower Burma, to realise that a friendless man, alone in the most populous city of the world, may encounter among thousands of his peers a desolation more supreme than the solitude of the most ultimate wilderness ; and he found himself wondering, a little savagely, why, after all, he had expected his home-coming to be so different from the reality that now confronted him. When he landed at Brindisi, a short ten days ago, misgivings had already assailed him vaguely ; the fact that he was practically homeless, that, although not altogether bereft of kith and kin, he had no family circle to welcome him as an addition to its circumference, had made it inevitable that his rapid passage across the Continent should be
haunted

haunted by forebodings to which he had not cared to assign a shape too definite ; phantoms which he exorcised hopefully, with a tacit reliance on a trick of falling on his feet which had seldom failed his need. He consoled himself with the thought that London was home, England was home ; he would meet old comrades in the streets perhaps, assuredly at his club, and such encounters would be so much the more delightful if they were fortuitous, unexpected. The plans which he had laid so carefully pacing the long deck of the P. and O. boat in the starlight, or, more remotely, lying awake through the hot night hours under a whining punkah in his lonely bungalow, had all implied, however vaguely and impersonally, a certain companionship. He was dimly conscious that he had cousins somewhere in the background ; he had long since lost touch with them, but he would look them up. He had two nieces, still in their teens, the children of his only sister who had died ten years ago ; he had never seen them, but their photographs were charming—they should be overwhelmed with such benefactions as a bachelor uncle with a well-lined purse may pleasantly bestow. His friends—the dim legion that was to rise about his path—should take him to see Sarah Bernhardt (a mere name to him as yet) at the Gaiety, to the new Gilbert and Sullivan opera at the Savoy ; they should enlighten him as to the latent merits of the pictures at Burlington House ; they should dine with him, shoot with him, be introduced to his Indian falcons ; in a word, he would keep open house, in town and country too, for all good fellows and their pretty wives. It had even occurred to him, as a possibility neither remote nor unattractive, that he might himself one day possess a pretty wife to welcome them.

His sanguine expectations encountered their first rebuff when he found the Piccadilly Club, which had figured so often in the dreams

dreams of its exiled member, abandoned to a horde of workmen, a mere wilderness of paint and whitewash ; and it was with a touch of resentment that he accepted the direction of an indifferent hall-porter to an unfamiliar edifice in Pall Mall as its temporary substitute. Entering the smoking-room, a little diffidently, on the evening of his arrival in London, he found himself eyed, at first with faint curiosity, by two or three of the men upon whom his gaze rested expectantly, but in no case was this curiosity—prompted doubtless by that touch of the exotic which sometimes clings to dwellers in the East—the precursor of the kindly recognition, the surprised, incredulous greeting which he had hoped for. After a few days he was simply ignored ; his face, rather stern, with its distinctive Indian tan through which the grey eyes looked almost blue, his erect figure, and dark hair sparsely flecked with a frosty white, had become familiar ; he had visited his tailor, and his garments no longer betrayed him to the curious by their fashion of Rangoon.

The Blue-book, which he had been quick to interrogate, informed him that his old friend Hibbert lived in Portman Square, and that the old lady who was the guardian of his nieces had a house at Hampstead : further inquiry at the addresses thus obtained left him baffled by the intelligence that Colonel Hibbert was in Norway, his nieces at school in Switzerland. Mackinnon, late of the Woods and Forests, whom he met at Burlington House, raised his hopes for an instant by a greeting which sounded precisely the note of cordiality that he yearned for, only to dash them by expressing a hope that he should see more of his old friend in the autumn ; he was off to Southampton to join a friend's yacht on the morrow, and after his cruise he had designs on Scotland and the grouse.

Sir Geoffrey, chained to the neighbourhood of London by legal
business

business, already too long deferred, connected with the succession which had made him a rich man and brought him home, could only rebel mutely against the ill-fortune which left him solitary at a time when he most longed for fellowship, acknowledging the while, with a touch of self-reproach, that the position which he resented was very largely due to his own shortcomings; he had always figured as a lamentably bad correspondent, and his inveterate aversion to letter-writing had allowed the links of many old friendships to fall asunder, had operated to leave such friends as were still in touch with him in ignorance of his home-coming.

Now, as he paused in the hall of his club to light a cigarette before passing out into the pleasant July twilight, he told himself that for the present he had done with London; he would shake the dust of the inhospitable city from off his feet, and go down to the place in Wiltshire which was learning to call him master, to await better days in company with his beloved falcons. He even found himself taking comfort from this prospect while a hansom bore him swiftly to the Savoy Theatre, and when he was safely ensconced in his stall he beguiled the interval before the rising of the curtain—a period which his impatience to escape from the club rather than any undue passion for punctuality had made somewhat lengthy—by considering, speculatively, the chances of society which the Willescombe neighbourhood seemed to afford. He enjoyed the first act of the extravaganza with the zest of a man to whom the work of the famous collaborators was an entire novelty, his pleasure unalloyed by the fact, of which he was blissfully unconscious, that one of the principal parts was played by an understudy. His *ennui* returning with the fall of the curtain, he prepared to spend the entr'acte in contemplation of the people who composed the house, rather than to incur the resentment of the placid dowagers who were his neighbours, by passing and repassing, like
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the majority of his fellow-men, in search of the distant haven where cigarettes and drinks, obtained with difficulty, could be hastily appreciated. More than once his wandering eyes returned to a box next the stage on a dress-circle tier, and finally they rested rather wistfully on its occupants, or, to be more accurate, on the younger of the two ladies who were seated in front. It was not simply because the girl was pretty, though her beauty, the flower-like charm of a young Englishwoman fresh from the schoolroom, a fine example of a type not particularly rare, would have furnished a sufficient pretext: he was struck by a resemblance, a haunting reminiscence, which at first exercised his curiosity, and ended by baffling and tantalising him. There was something vaguely familiar, he thought, in the manner of her smile, the inclination of her head as she turned now and then to address a remark to her companion, the lady in grey, whose face was hidden from him by the drapery at the side of the box. When she laughed, furling a feathery fan, and throwing a bright glance back at the gentleman whose white shirt-front was dimly visible in the background, Sir Geoffrey felt himself on the verge of solving his riddle, but at this point, while a name seemed to tremble on his lips, the lights of the auditorium were lowered, and the rising of the curtain on the fairyland of the second scene diverted his attention to the stage. Later, when he had passed into the crowded lobby, and was making his way slowly through a jungle of pretty dresses towards the door, he recognised in front of him the amber-coloured hair and dainty, pale-blue opera cloak of the damsel who had puzzled him. The two ladies (her companion of the grey dress was close at hand) halted near the door while their cavalier passed out in search of their carriage; the elder lady turned, adjusting a cloud of soft lace about her shoulders, and Sir Geoffrey was struck on the instant by a swift thrill. Here, at last, was an old friend—that face could
belong

belong to no one else than Margaret Addison. It was natural that her maiden name should first occur to him, but he remembered, as he edged his way laboriously towards her, that she had married just after he sailed for Burma ; yes, she had married that amiable scape-grace Dick Vandeleur, who had met his death in the hunting-field nearly fifteen years ago.

As he drew near, Mrs. Vandeleur's gaze fell upon him for a brief instant ; he thought that she had not recognised him, but before his spirits had time to suffer any consequent depression, her eyes returned to him, and as he smiled in answer to the surprise which he read in them, he saw her face flush, and then grow a little pale, before a responsive light of recognition dawned upon it. She took his hand silently when he offered it, eycing him with the same faint smile, an expression in which welcome seemed to be gleaming through a cloud of apprehension.

"I'm not a ghost," he said, laughing ; "I'm Geoffrey Vincent. Don't be ashamed of owning that you had quite forgotten me !"

"I knew you at once," she said simply. "So you are home at last : you must come and see me as soon as you can. This is my daughter Dorothy, and here is my brother—of course you remember Philip ?—coming to tell us that the carriage is waiting. You will come, to-morrow—to prove that you are not a ghost ? We shall expect you."

II

A fortnight later Sir Geoffrey was sitting in a punt, beguiling the afternoon of a rainy day by luring unwary roach to their destruction with a hair-line and pellets of paste, delicately kneaded by the taper fingers of Miss Dorothy Vandeleur. He was the
guest

guest of Mrs. Vandeleur's brother, his school friend, Philip Addison the Q.C., and Mrs. Vandeleur and her daughter were also staying at the delightful old Elizabethan house which nestled, with such an air of immemorial occupation, halfway down the wooded side of one of the Streatley hills, its spotless lawn sloping steeply to the margin of the fairest river in the world. Miss Vandeleur had enshrined herself among a pile of rugs and cushions at the stern of the punt, where the roof of her uncle's boat-house afforded shelter from the persistent rain. She was arrayed in the blue serge dear to the modern water-nymph; and at intervals she relieved her feelings by shaking a small fist at the leaden vault of sky. For the rest, her attention was divided impartially between her novel, with which she did not seem to make much progress, her fox-terrier Sancho, and the slowly decreasing lump of paste, artfully compounded with cotton-wool for consistency, with which, as occasion arose, she ministered to her companion's predatory needs. The capture of a fish was followed inevitably by a disarrangement of her nest of cushions, and a pathetic petition for its instant release and restoration to the element from which it had been untimely inveigled. Occasionally, the rain varied the monotony of the dolorous drizzle by a vehement and spirited downpour, lasting for some minutes, prompting one of the occupants of the punt to remark, with misplaced confidence, that it must clear up soon, after that. Then Sir Geoffrey would abandon his rod, and beat a retreat to the stern of the punt; and during these interludes, much desultory conversation ensued. Once, Miss Vandeleur startled her companion by asking, suddenly, how it was that he seemed so absurdly young?

"I hope I am not rude?" she added, "but really you do strike me as almost the youngest person I know. You are much younger than Jack—Mr. Wilgress—for instance, and it's only about three years since he left Eton."

Sir

Sir Geoffrey smiled, wondering a little whether the girl was laughing at him ; for though a man of forty-seven, who has for twenty years successfully resisted a trying climate, may consider himself as very far from the burden of old age, it was conceivable that the views of a maiden in her teens might be very different.

"It's because I am having such a good time," he hazarded. "You and your mother are responsible, you know ; before I met you at the Savoy, on that memorable evening, I was feeling as blue as—as the sky ought to be if it had any decency, and at least as old as the river. I suppose it's true that youth and good spirits are contagious."

Dorothy gazed at him for a moment reflectively. "How lucky it was that Uncle Philip took us to the theatre on that evening ! It was just a chance. And we might never have met you."

"It was lucky for me !" declared the other simply. "But would you have cared ?"

"Of course !" said the girl promptly, but lowering her blue eyes. "You see, I have never known a real live hero before. Do tell me about your fight in the hill-fort, or how you caught the Dacoits ! Uncle Philip says that you ought to have had the V.C."

Sir Geoffrey replied by a little disparaging murmur. "Oh, it was quite a commonplace affair—all in the day's work. Any one else would have done the same."

Dorothy settled herself back among her cushions resentfully, clasping her hands, rather sunburned, across her knees.

"I should like to see them !" she declared contemptuously. "That's just what that Jack Wilgress said—at least he implied it. It is true, he apologised afterwards. How I despise Oxford boys !"

"I thought he was a very good fellow," said Sir Geoffrey, diplomatically

diplomatically turning the subject from his own achievements. "I suppose it might improve him to have something to do; but he strikes me as a very good specimen of the ornamental young man."

"Ornamental!" echoed Dorothy sarcastically. "It would do him good to have to work for his living."

"Poor beggar, he couldn't help being born with a silver spoon in his mouth—it isn't his fault."

"Spoon!" exclaimed Miss Vandeleur. "A whole dinner service I should think. A soup-ladle at the very least. It's quite big enough: perhaps that accounts for it!"

The girl laughed, swaying back, with the grace of her years, against her cushions; then, observing that her companion's grave grey eyes were fixed upon her, she grew suddenly demure, sighing with a little air of penitence.

"I am very wicked to-day," she confessed. "It's the rain, I suppose, and want of exercise. Do you ever feel like that, Sir Geoffrey? Do you ever get into an omnibus and simply loathe and detest every single person in it? Do you long to swear—real swears, like our army in Flanders—at everybody you meet, just because it's rainy or foggy, and because they are all so ugly and horrid? I do, frequently."

"I know, I know," said the other sympathetically, while he reeled in his line and deftly untied the tiny hook. "Only, the omnibus has not figured very often in my case; it has generally been a hot court-house, or a dusty dāk-bungalow full of commercial travellers. But I don't feel like that now, at all. I hope I am not responsible for your frame of mind?"

"Oh," protested Dorothy, "don't make me feel such an abandoned wretch! I should have been much worse if you had not been here. I should have quarrelled with Uncle Phil, or
been

been rude to my mother, or something dreadful. I'm perfectly horrid to her sometimes. And as it is, I have let her go up to town all alone—to see my dressmaker.”

Sir Geoffrey stood up and began to take his rod to pieces. “And are you quite sure that you haven't been ‘loathing and detesting’ me all the afternoon?”

Dorothy picked up her novel and smoothed its leaves reflectively.

“I—— But no. I won't make you too conceited. Look, the sun is actually coming out! Don't you think we might take the Canadian up to the weir? You really ought to be introduced to the big chub under the bridge.”

The rain had almost ceased, and when they had transferred themselves into the dainty canoe, a few strokes of the paddle which Miss Vandeleur wielded with such effective grace swept them out into a full flood of delicate evening sunlight. The sky smiled blue through rapidly increasing breaks in the clouds; the sunbeams, slanting from the west, touched with pale gold the quivering trees, which seemed to lift their wet branches and spread their leaves to court the warm caress. A new radiance of colour crept into the landscape, as if it had been a picture from which a smoky glass was withdrawn; the water grew very still—this too was in the manner of a picture—with the peace of a summer evening, brimming with an unbroken surface luminously from bank to bank. Strange guttural cries of water-birds sounded from the reed-beds; from the next reach came the rhythmic pulse of oars, faint splashes, and the brisk rattle of rowlocks; voices and laughter floated down from the lock, travelling far beyond belief in the hushed stillness of the evening. The wake of the light canoe trailed unbroken to the shadows of the boathouse, and the wet paddle gleamed as it slid through the water. Presently Dorothy stayed her hand.

“What

“What an enchanting world it is !” she murmured, with wide eyes full of the glamour of the setting sun. “Beautiful, beautiful—— ! How soon one forgets the fogs, and rain, and cold ! I feel as if I had lived in this fairyland always.”

Her lips trembled a little as she spoke, and Sir Geoffrey found something in the pathos of her youth which held him silent. When they broke the spell of silence, their words were trivial, perhaps, but the language was that of old friends, simple and direct. Sir Geoffrey at least, for whom the charm of the occasion was a gift so rare that he scarcely dared to desecrate it by mental criticism, was far from welcoming the interruption which presently occurred, in the shape of a youth, arrayed in immaculate flannels and the colours of a popular rowing club, who hailed them cheerfully from a light skiff, resting on his sculls and drifting alongside while he rolled a cigarette.

III

Dorothy sank down, rather wearily, in the low basket-chair which stood near the open window of her mother's bedroom—a tall French window, with a wide balcony overrun by climbing roses, and a view of the river, and waited for Mrs. Vandeleur to dismiss her maid. As she lay there, adjusting absently the loose tresses of her hair, she could feel the breath of the faint breeze as it wandered, gathering a light burden of fragrance, through the dusky roses ; she could see the river, dimly, where the moonbeams touched its ripples, and once or twice the sound of voices reached her from the distant smoking-room. The closing of the door as the maid went out disturbed her reverie, and turning a little in her chair she found her mother regarding her thoughtfully.

“No,”

"No," said Dorothy, swiftly interpreting her mother's glance. "You mustn't send me away, my pretty little mother. I'll promise not to catch cold. I haven't been able to talk to you all day."

Mrs. Vandeleur half closed the window, and then seated herself with an expression of resignation on the arm of her daughter's chair. In the dim light shed by the two candles on the dressing-table, one would have thought them two sisters, plotting innocently the discomfiture of man. The occasion did not prove so stimulating to conversation as might have been expected. For a few minutes both were silent; Dorothy began to hum an air from the Savoy opera, rather recklessly; she kicked off one of her slippers, and it fell on the polished oak floor with a little clatter.

"Little donkey!" murmured her mother sweetly. "So much for your talking. I'm going to bed at once." Then she added, carelessly, "Did you see Jack to-day?"

The humming paused abruptly; then it went on for a second, and paused again.

"Oh yes, the inevitable Mr. Wilgress was on the river, as usual. He nearly ran us down in that idiotic skiff of his."

Mrs. Vandeleur raised her eyebrows, gazing at her unconscious daughter reflectively.

"You didn't see him alone, then?" she inquired presently.

"Who? Mr. Wilgress? Ye-es, I think so. When we got back to the boathouse he insisted on taking me out again in the canoe, to show me the correct Indian stroke. Much he knows about it! That's why I was so late for dinner. Oh, please don't talk about Mr. Wilgress."

"Mr. Wilgress again?" murmured Mrs. Vandeleur. "I thought it always used to be 'Jack.'"

"Only, only by accident," said the girl weakly. "And when he wasn't there."

"Well,

“Well, he isn’t here now. At least I hope not. You—you haven’t quarrelled, have you Dolly?”

“No—yes. I don’t know. He—he asked me—oh, he was ridiculous. How I hate boys—and jealousy.”

Mrs. Vandeleur shivered, then rose abruptly and closed the window against which she leaned, gazing down at the formless mass of the shrubs which cowered over their shadows on the lawn. Her mind, vaguely troubled for some days past, and now keenly on the alert, travelled swiftly back, bridging a space of nearly twenty years, to a scene strangely like this, in which she and her mother had held the stage. She too, a girl then of Dorothy’s eighteen years, had brought the halting story of her doubts and scruples to her natural counsellor: she could remember still how the instinct of reticence had struggled with the yearning for sympathy, for the comfort of the confessional. She could recall now and appreciate her mother’s tact and patient questioning, her own perversity, the dumbness which seemed independent of her own volition. A commonplace page of life. Two men at her feet, and the girl unskilled to read her heart: one had spoken—that was Dick Vandeleur, careless, brilliant, the heir to half a county; the other—her old friend; she could not bear to think of him now. Knowledge had come too late, and the light which made her wonder scornfully at her blindness. And her mother—she of course had played the worldly part; but her counsel had been honest, without bias: it were cruel to blame her now. Loyal though she was, Margaret Vandeleur had asked herself an hundred times, yielding to that love of threading a labyrinth which rules most women, what would have been the story of her life if she had steeled herself to stand or fall by her own judgment, if she had refused to allow her mother to drop into the wavering scale the words which had turned it, ever so slightly, in favour of the richer

richer man, the man whom she had married, whose name she bore.

It seemed plain enough, to a woman's keen vision—what sense so subtle, yet so easily beguiled—that Dorothy's choice was embarrassed, just as her own had been. The girl and her two admirers—how the old story repeated itself!—one, Jack Wilgress, the good-natured, good-looking idler, whose devotion to the river threatened to make him amphibious, and whose passion for scribbling verse bade fair to launch him adrift among the cockle-shell fleet of Minor Poets; the other—Geoffrey Vincent! To call upon Margaret Vandeleur to guide her daughter's choice between two men of whom Geoffrey Vincent was one—surely here was the end and crown of Fate's relentless irony. She felt herself blushing as she pressed her forehead against the cool window-pane, put to shame by the thoughts which the comparison suggested, which would not be stifled. Right or wrong, at least her mother had been impartial: there was a sting in this, a failure of her precedent. She sighed, concluding mutely that silence was her only course; even if she would, she could not follow in her mother's footsteps—the girl must abide by her own judgment.

When she turned, smiling faintly, the light of the flickering candles fell upon her face, betraying a pallor which startled Dorothy from her reverie. She sprang from her chair, reproaching her selfishness.

"You poor, tired, little mother," she murmured penitently, with a-hasty kiss. "How could I be so cruel as to keep you up after your journey! I'm a wretch, but I'm really going now. Good-night."

"Good-night," said her mother, caressing the vagrant coils of the girl's amber-coloured hair. "Don't worry yourself; everything will come right if—if you listen to your own heart."

Dorothy's

Dorothy's answer was precluded by another kiss. "It's so full of you that it can't be bothered to think of any one else," she declared plaintively, as she turned towards the door. Then she paused, fingering nervously a little heap of books which lay upon a table. "He—he isn't so very old, you know," she murmured softly before she made her escape.

When she was alone Mrs. Vandeleur sank into the chair which her daughter had just quitted, nestling among the cushions and knitting her brows in thought. The clock on the mantelpiece had struck twelve before she rose, and then she paused for an instant in front of the looking-glass, gazing into it half timidly before she extinguished the candles. The face which she saw there was manifestly pretty, in spite of the trouble which lurked in the tired eyes, and when she turned away, a hovering smile was struggling with the depression at the corners of the delicate, mobile lips.

IV

When Sir Geoffrey returned to Riverside, three days later, after a brief sojourn in London, spent for the most part at the office of his solicitor in Lincoln's Inn, he found Mrs. Vandeleur presiding over a solitary tea-table in a shady corner of the garden. A few chairs sociably disposed under the gnarled walnut-tree, and a corresponding number of empty tea-cups, suggested that her solitude had not been of long duration, and this impression was confirmed when Mrs. Vandeleur told her guest that if he had presented himself a short quarter of an hour earlier he would have been welcomed in a manner more worthy of his deserts.

Sir Geoffrey drew one of the low basket chairs up to the table, protesting,

protesting, as he accepted a cup of tea, that he could not have wished for better fortune.

"This is very delightful," he declared. "I don't regret the tardiness of my train in the least. The other charming people are on the river, I suppose?"

Mrs. Vandeleur nodded. "Yes, the Patersons have just taken up their quarters in that house-boat, which you must have noticed, near the lock, and my brother and Dorothy have gone with Jack Wilgress and his sisters to call upon them. You ought to have seen Daisy Wilgress; she is very pretty."

Sir Geoffrey smiled gravely, sipping his tea.

"If she is prettier than your daughter, Miss Wilgress must be very dangerous. But I must see her with my own eyes before I believe that."

"Oh, she is!" declared Mrs. Vandeleur, laughing lightly, but throwing a quick glance at him. "Ask Philip; he is more wrapped up in her than he has been in anything since his first brief."

"Poor Philip!" said the other quietly, stooping to pick a fallen leaf from the grass at his feet. "I—I have a fellow-feeling for him."

"You know you may smoke if you want to," interposed Mrs. Vandeleur, rather hurriedly. "And perhaps—if you really won't have any more tea—you might like to go in pursuit of the other people; I don't think they have taken all the boats. But I daresay you are tired? London is so fatiguing—and business."

Sir Geoffrey smiled, his white teeth showing pleasantly against the tan of his lean, good-humoured face.

"I *am* rather tired, I believe," he owned. "I have been spending a great deal of time in my solicitor's waiting-room, pretending to read *The Times*. And I have been thinking—that is

always fatiguing. If I am not in your way, I should like to stay here."

Mrs. Vandeleur professed her satisfaction by a polite little murmur, leaning forward in her chair to marshal the scattered tea-cups on the tray, while Sir Geoffrey watched her askance, rather timidly, with a keen appreciation of the subtle charm of her personality; her face, like a perfect cameo, or some rare pale flower, seeming to have gained rather in beauty by the deliberate passage from youth; winning, just as some pictures do, an added grace of refinement, a delicacy, which the slight modification of contours served only to intensify.

"I told you just now that I had been thinking," he said presently, when she had resumed her task of embroidering initials in the corner of a handkerchief: "would it surprise you if I said that I had been thinking of you?"

Mrs. Vandeleur raised her eyebrows slightly, her gaze still intent upon her patient needle.

"Perhaps it was natural that you should think of us," she hazarded.

"But I meant you," he continued; "you, the Margaret of the old days, before I went away. For I used to call you 'Margaret' then. We were great friends, you know."

"I have always thought of you as a friend," she said simply. "Yes, we were great friends before—before you went away."

"It doesn't seem so long ago to me," he declared, almost plaintively, struck by something in the tone of her voice. Mrs. Vandeleur smiled tolerantly, scrutinising her embroidery, with her head poised on one side, a little after the manner of a bird.

"And now that I have found you again," he added with intention, dropping his eyes till they rested on the river, rippling past the
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the wooden landing-stage below in the sunshine, "I—I don't want to lose you, Margaret!"

Mrs. Vandeleur met this declaration with a smile, which was courteous rather than cordial, merely acknowledging, as of right, the propriety of the aspiration, treating it as quite conventional. The simplicity of the gesture testified eloquently of the discipline of twenty years; only a woman would have detected the shadow of apprehension in her eyes, the trembling of the hands which seemed so placidly occupied. Her mind was already anxiously on the alert, racing rapidly over the now familiar ground which she had quartered of late so heedfully. For her, his words were ominous; it was of Dorothy surely that he wished to speak, and yet—! In the stress of expectation her thoughts took strange flights, following vague clues fantastically. The inveterate habit of retrospection carried her back, in spite of her scruples; her honest desire to think singly of Dorothy, regarding the fortune of her own life as irrevocably settled, impelled her irresistibly to call to the stage of her imagination a scene which she had often set upon it, a duologue, entirely fictive, which might, but for her perversity, have been enacted—twenty years ago.

Sir Geoffrey rose, and stood leaning with one hand on the back of his chair. This interruption—or perhaps it was the sound of oars and voices which floated in growing volume from the river—served to recall his companion to the present. The silence, of brief duration actually, seemed intolerable. She must break it, and when she spoke it was to name her daughter, aimlessly.

"Dorothy?" repeated Sir Geoffrey, as she paused. "She is extraordinarily like you were before I went away. Not that you are changed—it is delightful to come back and find you the same. It's only when she is with you that I can realise that there is a difference, a——"

"I was

"I was never so good as Dorothy," put in Mrs. Vandeleur quickly; "she will never have the same reason to blame herself—I don't think you could imagine what she has been to me."

"I think I can," said Sir Geoffrey simply. Then he added, rather shyly: "Really, we seem to be very good friends already: it's very nice of her—it would be so natural for her to—to resent the intrusion of an old fellow like me."

"You need not be afraid of that; she looks upon you as—as a friend already."

"Thank you!" murmured the other. "And you think she might grow to—to like me, in time?"

Mrs. Vandeleur nodded mutely. Sir Geoffrey followed for a moment the deliberate entry and re-entry of her needle, reflectively; then, as his eyes wandered, he realised vaguely that a boat had reached the landing-stage, and that people were there: he recognised young Wilgress and Miss Vandeleur.

"You said just now that you always thought of me as a friend," he began. "I wonder—— Oh! it's no good," he added quickly, with a nervous movement of his hands, "I can't make pretty speeches! After all, it's simple; why should I play the coward? I can take 'no' for answer, if the worst comes to the worst, and—— Margaret, I know it's asking a great deal, but—I want you to marry me."

She cast a swift, startled glance at him, turning in her chair, and then dropped her eyes, asking herself bewilderedly whether this was still some fantasy. The words which he murmured now, pleading incoherently with her silence, confirmed the hopes which, in spite of her scrupulous devotion, refused to be gainsaid, thrusting themselves shamelessly into the foreground of her troubled thoughts. An inward voice, condemned by her wavering resolution as a
whisper

whisper from the lips of treachery, suggested plausibly that after all Dorothy might have made a mistake ; she repelled it fiercely, taking a savage pleasure in her pain, accusing herself, with vehement blame, as one who would fain stand in the way of her daughter's happiness. Even if she had deserved these fruits of late harvest which seemed to dangle within her grasp, even if her right to garner them had not been forfeited long ago by her folly of the past, how could she endure to figure as a rival, triumphing in her own daughter's discomfiture ? Womanly pride and a thousand scruples barred the way.

"I love you," she heard him say again ; "I believe I have always loved you since—— But you know how it was in the old days."

"Don't remind me of that !" she pleaded, almost fiercely ; "I was—I can't bear to think of what I did ! You ought not to forgive me ; I don't deserve it."

"Forgive ?" he echoed, blankly.

"Oh, you are generous—but it is impossible, impossible ; it is all a mistake ; let us forget it."

"I don't understand ! Is it that—that you don't care for me ?"

Margaret gave a despairing little sigh, dropping her hands on the sides of her chair.

"You don't know," she murmured. "It isn't right. No—oh, it must be No !"

Sir Geoffrey echoed her sigh. As he watched her silently, the instinct of long reticence making his forbearance natural, he saw a new expression dawn into her troubled face. Her eyes were fixed intently on the river ; that they should be fixed was not strange, but there was a light of interest in them which induced Sir Geoffrey, half involuntarily, to bend his gaze in the same direction. He saw that Dorothy had now disembarked, and was standing,

standing, a solitary figure, close to the edge of the landing-stage. Something in her pose seemed to imply that she was talking, and just at this moment she moved to one side, revealing the head and shoulders of Jack Wilgress, which overtopped the river-bank in such a manner as to suggest that he was standing in the punt, of which the bamboo pole rose like a slender mast above his head. The group was certainly pictorial: the silhouette of Dorothy's pretty figure telling well against the silvery river, and the young man's pose, too, lending itself to an effective bit of composition; but Sir Geoffrey felt puzzled, and even a little hurt, by the interest that Margaret displayed at a moment which he at least had found sufficiently strenuous. He turned, stooping to pick up his hat; then he paused, and was about to speak, when Mrs. Vandeleur interrupted him, mutely, with a glance, followed swiftly by the return of her eyes to the river. Acquiescing patiently, Sir Geoffrey perceived that a change had occurred in the grouping of the two young people. Wilgress had drawn nearer to the girl; his figure stood higher against the watery background, apparently he had one foot on the step of the landing-stage. Dorothy extended a hand, which he clasped and held longer than one would have reckoned for in the ordinary farewell. The girl shook her head; another movement, and the punt began to glide reluctantly from the shore; then it turned slowly, swinging round and heading down-stream. Dorothy raised one hand to the bosom of her dress, and before she dropped it to her side threw something maladroitly towards her departing companion. Wilgress caught the flower—it was evidently a flower—making a dash which involved the loss of his punt-pole; a ripple of laughter, and Dorothy, unconscious of the four eyes which watched her from the shadows of the walnut tree, turned slowly, and began to climb the grassy slope.

Mrs. Vandeleur's

Mrs. Vandeleur's eyelids drooped, and her lips, which had been parted for an instant in a pensive smile, trembled a little; she sighed, tapping the ground lightly with her foot, then sank back in her chair and seemed lost in contemplation of the needlework that lay upon her lap. Sir Geoffrey began to move away, but turned suddenly, and stooping, took one of her hands reverently in his own, clasping it as it lay upon the arm of her chair.

"Margaret," he said, "forgive me; but must it be good-bye, after all these years, or is there a chance for me?"

Mrs. Vandeleur's reply was inaudible; but her hand, though it fluttered for a moment, was not withdrawn.