

A SUMMER IDYL.

BY CHRISTIAN REID

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A SUMMER IDYL.

CHAPTER I.

"I, Too, Shepherds, In Arcadia Dwelt."

"One thing is certain," says Geoffrey Charlton, laying down his pen as he speaks; "there must be an end of this. If not, there will be an end of me; and I am not ready to be taken off by brain-fever quite yet. Foster told me the other day that I must leave the city, and I begin to think that he is right. The question is, where to go?"

He leans back in his chair, clasps his hands behind his head, and reflects. Scores of flies buzz and drone around him, scores more thirstily drink the ink from the much-erased and blotted manuscript on the table, while a few commit suicide in the open inkstand. Against the closed window-blinds the sun of July is beating hotly; from the paved street outside a white glare rises; across the way a hand-organ is listlessly giving forth the strains of "Mulligan Guards," and

overhead a painter of Bohemian tendencies is entertaining a company of friends, on whom the heat of the day seems to exercise no sedative effect.

"This is decidedly not one of those quiet retreats which genius loves; neither is it a cool one," continues Mr. Charlton, presently. "I must change my quarters, that is evident. But where shall I go? A summer 'resort' would simply make an end of me by slow boredom instead of quick work. What I want is novelty of scene, health of body, and refreshment of mind. Shall I go out to the Plains and join an exploring party? Shall I go to Nova Scotia, and dream away a month or two? Shall I — confound it! there is somebody at the door. Come in!"

The door opens, and a young man enters — a remarkably handsome young fellow, whose face is flushed with heat, and whose brown hair clings to his brow in short, damp curls when he takes off his hat.

"What, Sunderland, is it you?" says Charlton. "I have not seen you for so long that I thought you were out of town."

"Exactly what I thought of you," answers Sunderland, subsiding into a chair, "until I met Renshaw this morning, and he told me you were still here. Fearfully hot, isn't it? By Jove, Charlton, you'll excuse me for saying that you look awfully overworked."

"I feel awfully overworked," returns Charlton, grimly. "Night-work on the Telegraph, and day-work for two or three journals and magazines, is calculated to tell on a man unless he has the muscles of a horse and the nerves of an elephant. I have neither, and it has told on me. It has come to this — that I must go away and rest, or break down, and be sent to a hospital with brain-fever."

"I should go away and rest," says Sunderland. "It is the pleasanter alternative of the two. Where shall you go?"

"That is the question I was asking myself when you came in, and I have received no satisfactory reply. I want to go to some quiet place and work on my novel. You are not aware, perhaps, that I have a novel in hand destined to make me famous."

"That is your idea of resting, is it?" says Sunderland. "You literary men are certainly odd! My dear fellow, have you not learned yet that all work and no play makes Jack a very dull boy? Take my advice — put your novel aside, and come with me. I leave the city to-morrow."

"Whither bound?"

"To Canada, Niagara, and the lakes."

"What! alone?"

"No — with the Prestons. They propose to make an extensive summer tour, going south finally by the Mississippi River."

"And so you are still in the chains of the fair Gertrude," says Charlton. "I fancied that affair would have become antediluvian by this time. Wasn't it two months ago that you made her acquaintance? No, you can't tempt me by any such programme as that. I pine for Arcadia, and Arcadia does not exist in any region where fashionable hotels and summer tourists abound."

"I wonder if I don't know a place that would suit you?" says Sunderland, with the air of one whom a bright thought has struck. "I certainly know — not exactly a bank where the wild thyme grows, but a country where the whistle of a locomotive has never sounded, where fashionable hotels are unknown, and summer tourists rarely wander."

"Are you in earnest?" asks Charlton. "Let me tell you this is no jesting matter! If Arcadia is to be found, I mean to find it. Once or twice in a man's life, I suppose, a rural longing seizes him. Such a longing has seized me just now, and if you are in earnest—"

"Of course I am in earnest," says Sunderland. "What else should I be? You remember having heard me speak of my cousin Flora Tyrrell, I am sure?"

"Remember! I should think I did!" responds Charlton, with a sigh which is eloquent of past boredom. "But she has been out of date for several months; you don't mean to speak of her again, do you? And what possible connection has she with Arcadia?"

"Only the slight connection of living in it," says Sunderland, a little stiffly. "You have heard of Western North Carolina, haven't you? But I don't suppose you have ever been there."

"You suppose quite rightly," says Charlton. "I have never been there, but I am aware that some adventurous travelers have declared the country to be picturesque and worth visiting. Is that your Arcadia?"

"That is my Arcadia. I ought to know it well, for every summer of my boyhood was spent there; and I inclined to think that a man like you, who cares nothing for fashionable gayety, might like it exceedingly. Frankly, it bores one terribly; but you are different."

"I confess I am more likely to be bored by men than by Nature," says Charlton, quietly. "Will you have a cigar? Now" — after he has lighted his own — "tell me about this place. Where is it? and how is it reached? And what has your cousin to do with it?"

"I have told you that she lives there," answers Sunderland. "Poor little Flora! I used to be very fond of her; but, of course, such fancies fade away as a man grows older. You laugh at me, but no doubt you have a goodly number of them yourself, Charlton."

"Perhaps so," says Charlton, in a non-committal tone. "But to return to Arcadia —"

"I wish to heaven you *would* go there!" interrupts Sunderland, with sudden energy. "You might do me a very great favor if you had a mind that way."

"I am not particularly obliging as a general rule," says Charlton; "but, if I go, I should not mind doing you a favor — provided it entails no trouble. What is it?"

Sunderland does not answer for a minute. He sits and gazes steadily at the floor, his cigar, from which faint wreaths of blue smoke curl, held between the fingers of his right hand, while with his left he caresses gently one of the silken brown whiskers, of which he is very proud. Charlton leans his head against the back of his chair and watches him with a half-amused smile. He likes the young man despite his vanity, his egotism, his volatile lightness — likes him because he is always an agreeable companion, and thoroughly a prince of good-fellows, open-handed, generous-hearted, sunny-tempered. It is no new thing for people to like Sunderland. They have never done anything else since he was born; and Sunderland himself is well accustomed to win the tenderness of women and the friendship of men. He is also well accustomed to making use of his fellow-creatures whenever it will serve his convenience to do so; and, since it is likely that Charlton may serve his convenience now, he unhesitatingly prepares to make use of him. Charlton on his part, fully aware of this, placidly waits to hear what favor the other has to request. He is not long kept in suspense. Sunderland suddenly looks up and speaks a little diffidently:

"You won't mind if I tell you something of a story first. It shall not be long. You have heard me talk of my cousin, and perhaps you don't need for me to tell you that when I left Carolina there was a boy and girl love-affair between us. Flora was very pretty, and we had, in a great measure, grown up together. I was exceedingly attached to her, and of course she liked me." Here Prince Charming pauses, strokes his whisker still more gently, and sighs. "However, I don't think either of us was very hard hit," he goes on in the tone of one administering consolation to himself. "I soon fell in love with somebody else, and very likely Flora did the same; but still I don't know that she did, and so I am placed in rather an awkward position."

"Why so?" asks Charlton, rolling out a cloud of smoke, and watching it curl fantastically about his head.

"I should think you could tell why so," replied Sunderland. "A man who isn't a puppy doesn't like to speak of such matters. You'll think me full of conceit, but I put the question to yourself. Suppose you had taken a fancy to a cousin whom you were always with, and talked nonsense, and then gone away and fallen in love in earnest, should you like to ask the woman you love to marry you, while you don't know how much your cousin still thinks you bound to her, or — or how much she may care for you?"

"That is the state of the case, is it?" says Charlton, trying heroically to repress a smile. "You want to ask Miss Preston to marry you, and you are afraid the blow may break your cousin's heart. Your consideration, my dear boy, does you credit; but, since I am your father confessor for

the time being, let us hear how much your honor is involved. Hearts and darts and things of that kind can be trifled with, you know; but a man's honor—”

“Must stand firm though the heavens fall,” says Sunderland, with a slightly uneasy laugh. “Yes, I know that. Well, honestly, I don't think my honor is involved. Many men would not give the matter a thought. There is no engagement between Flora and myself; but I would have said at the time that we understood each other. I am afraid now that we did understand each other a great deal too well. How much she has changed in the interval since I saw her last, two years ago, I cannot tell. She writes occasionally, but her letters tell nothing; they are much more full of the children, the horses, and the neighbors, than of herself. She always was proud and shy, however, so *that* does not count.”

“What does count, then?” asks Charlton. “The presumption is strong, I should think, that she is a reasonable young lady, who like yourself has put youthful folly aside.”

“I wish I were sure of that,” says Sunderland, sincerely; “but the trouble is that I am not at all sure. Flora never was exactly like other girls. I thought I would go this summer and see for myself how matters stand; but the Prestons have asked me to join them, and — and I can't well refuse. But I am still fond of Flora — as fond as ever, only in a different way — and I would rather cut my throat than seem to act badly toward her.”

“A very good frame of mind,” says Charlton, approvingly. He looks at the young man with a smile which this time is neither satirical nor amused — only full of pleasant cordiality. “You are in a dilemma, certainly,” he adds. “How do you mean to escape from it?”

“I mean to ask you to give me a helping hand,” answers Sunderland, emboldened by his tone. “You'll not refuse, I am sure, Charlton! If you will only set my mind at rest — and you can do so without much trouble to yourself — I shall be the most grateful beggar in existence!”

“You are already the most impudent!” says Charlton. “What have I to do with your affairs, amatory or otherwise? — and how do you propose that I should set your mind at rest?”

“Haven't you decided to go to Carolina?” asks the other. “If you don't find Arcadia beyond the Blue Ridge, let me tell you that you need never look for it. And Flora lives there. I'll give you a letter of introduction to my uncle; he has a charming country-place on the French Broad in Transylvania. *Such* a country, Charlton! you can't imagine anything more beautiful! Then you can cultivate Flora's acquaintance, and let me know if she has any fancy for me yet.”

“I admire your unparalleled coolness!” says Charlton. “Does it ever occur to you that any man or woman was put into the world for other purposes than to serve your convenience? I never heard such a proposal in my life! That I should start out and explore the unknown wilds of North Carolina in order to discover whether or not your cousin is still in love with you!”

“Now, that is all nonsense!” says Sunderland, rather aggrieved. “I did not make any such proposal. You said — or if you didn't say, you implied — that you were going to Carolina, and I merely remarked that in that case you could do me a favor. You asked me what the favor was, and I have told you.”

“You have indeed! But there are one or two small facts to be taken into consideration with regard to it. In the first place, I have not by any means decided to go to Carolina. In the second place, if I do go, I believe the transmontane part of the State is of rather large area, and it may readily come to pass that I do not meet your cousin at all. In the third place, am *I* a fit person for the delicate task of sounding a lady's affections?”

“I consider you a very fit person,” answers Sunderland. “Don't you write of women as if you had turned their heads and their hearts inside out and knew all about them? You must have studied the sex exhaustively at some time or other, to have reached such a state of certainty. Now, why not apply all this knowledge to the case in point?”

“Because it is not absolute knowledge at all,” replies Charlton. “It is partly intuition, partly guess-work, and partly one of the tricks of the trade. I know women in the abstract, but women in the concrete puzzle me as they puzzle every other son of Adam. I might put your

cousin in a novel and analyze her to my own and the reader's satisfaction, but in real life the real woman would, ten to one, be an enigma to me."

"I don't think Flora would be an enigma to a man of your knowledge of the world," remarks Sunderland insinuatingly. "This is not one of the women who tear one to pieces with whims and vagaries. She was a frank, straightforward, proud little soul always."

"And is it probable that a woman like that would let a stranger read her heart as if it were a book?"

"Let you — no! But she is a girl who is simplicity itself, who has never been in society, and whose knowledge of the world is bounded by her native hills. If you cannot read her as if she were a book, you might as well burn your novel, my dear fellow."

"You think my power of observation would not be worth much in such a case?" says Charlton with a quiet smile. "You may be right — who knows? I have had doubts myself on that subject sometimes! Perhaps," he adds meditatively, "this suggestion of yours may prove a crucial test of my ability. After all, if it were not for the trouble of the thing, I might be tempted to take it into consideration — or if this cousin of yours lived anywhere short of the Mountains of the Moon."

"Even the Mountains of the Moon are near at hand in this age," says Sunderland. "The rail-road will take you to the foot of the Blue Ridge. After that, you will find yourself in a region where the customs and traditions of fifty years ago still linger; where the people are hospitable, and the climate is delightful; where blue mountains and flowery valleys —"

"That will do!" says Charlton. "You are becoming flowery, as well as the valleys. I'll take it for granted that the country is very fine. Tell me where this uncle of yours lives, and if there is any comfortable farm-house in his neighborhood where I could be lodged decently, and fed on the milk and honey of the land."

"Flora will be able to tell you all about that," replies Sunderland, in an off-hand way. "The best thing for you to do will be to go straight to my uncle's house. He is the most hospitable old fellow in the world, and will make you heartily welcome. I'll write and let him know that you are coming — then you can look about and decide at your leisure what to do."

"That may be according to your Carolina fashion, but I can't say that I particularly like the idea of presenting myself as a guest at the door of a man I do not know."

"But you *will* know him in ten minutes — and Flora, and George, and Minnie, and Oscar, and all the rest of them. By Jove! if it were not for Gertrude, I should like to be going with you! But no doubt I should be bored in a week."

"No doubt whatever, I am inclined to think. See! here is a map — suppose you show me exactly where this El Dorado is situated?"

"With pleasure!" answers Sunderland, starting up. He crosses the floor and bends over the map which the other opens. "Here is the route you must follow," he says.

CHAPTER II.

"Beyond The Magic Valley Lay."

It is doubtful if there is a lovelier spot, in all that lovely land known as Western North Carolina, than the valley of the French Broad in Transylvania. Those who have only seen the river as it makes its impetuous way through the mountains below Asheville, can scarcely conceive the gentleness of its crystal current, or the pastoral beauty of the scenery surrounding it, in this fair valley overshadowed by the cloud-capped heights of the Blue Ridge and the Balsam Mountains. The traveler passing along the turnpikes finds himself in a very Arcadia of fertile loveliness. Around on every side are great breadths of rustling cornfields, and sweeps of green

meadow-land, bordered by hedges over which the sweetbrier and wild clematis run, and under which starry flowers shine. With many a winding curve, the river flows swiftly by, beneath drooping trees and tangled vines. Here and there on its banks green knolls swell, on almost all of which houses stand. Beyond the level farms wooded hillsides rise, while again beyond these are the mountain-peaks — so blue, so soft, so divinely fair — which make the background for every picture.

The sun is setting behind these peaks, and striking with his last rays of gold the tallest tree-tops, when over a road which leads through an immense field of corn — a road so narrow that two vehicles could not pass abreast without trampling down the green stalks which border it — Flora Tyrrell rides, attended by her brother George. A light breeze comes to them, stirring the blades of corn, and blowing back the light locks of Flora's hair. Seen thus, in her closely-fitting habit and jockey cap, she looks very small, very slight, very young. Very pretty, too; for her delicate features are clearly defined, her complexion has a charming bloom which comes and goes, her brown hair is full of golden gleams, and her eyes are like bits of heaven in their blueness. She does not look a day over eighteen, but she is in truth twenty, and, despite her childlike appearance, has been for four years the mistress of her father's house. George — next in age to herself — is a tall, broad-shouldered boy of seventeen, with the same frank blue eyes shining out of a very tanned and freckled face, hair cut so short that he looks like a convict or prize-fighter, and some downy, incipient signs of a mustache, which fill him with joy and exultation.

These young people have been to pay a visit, and are now returning home — riding leisurely and discussing many topics, domestic and social.

"There's a fishing-party going up to the Balsam next week," says George, "and Tom Fanshaw and I mean to join it. Several gentlemen who are staying in Brevard are going, and two or three more are coming from Caesar's Head. We'll carry tents and be gone about a week."

"What a pleasant thing it is to be a boy!" Flora says, with a sigh of envy. "I should like to take a trip of that description, and I think I shall try to make up a party for such an excursion later in the season, when Harry comes."

"Perhaps Harry may be here to go with us next week," says George. "How jolly that would be! We'd take the dogs, and have some hunting as well as fishing. *What* a shot Harry was! Do you remember that splendid buck he killed the last deer-hunt we went on? He always had such good luck."

"Luck and skill are different things, George, though they are often confounded," says Flora, with an air of pride — which is for Harry's achievements.

"That is all very fine," returns George, "but don't you call it luck when the dogs run the deer right past a man's stand? Other people besides Harry can shoot, but sometimes they wait all day without a chance to pull trigger."

"That is very true," says Flora. "I suppose there *is* luck in the matter. But then, when you get the chance sometimes, do you not miss the deer?"

"Well, yes — sometimes," admits George, a little shamefacedly. "But Harry was always a dead shot. When is he coming, Floy? Wherever I go, somebody asks me that. Everybody likes Harry, you know."

"Yes, I know," says Flora, with a half smile and a whole sigh. "He had such pleasant manners, and was so considerate of others — that is why people like him. I often beg of you, George, to be more careful of *your* manners. But I do not know when he is coming. He has not said."

Talking in this manner, they ride through the rich bottom-lands, and finally come to the river again, which has made a sweeping bend around them. A bridge spans it here, over which they cross. On the farther side a hill rises, crowned by a gabled house. A sloping lawn surrounds it on all sides, bounded by the river in front, and by a stone wall and line of beautiful white pines on the side where the road runs. There is a gate at the end of the bridge, showing that it is all

private domain. George opens this, and they pass into the grounds. A carriage drive winds around the hill, and brings them to the front of the building. Here Flora dismounts — slipping lightly to the ground without assistance — and gathering up her habit enters the house, while George takes the horses off to the stable.

A stranger could not forbear pausing on the piazza to admire the magnificent prospect which the situation commands — doubly magnificent just now from the glory of sunset which fills with radiance the whole western sky; but Flora knows the prospect better than she knows her own face, and, much as she admires it, she is at this moment thinking of other things. As she enters the hall, a voice from the right calls out, "Floy! is that you?"

"Yes, papa," she answers, and, turning, enters the sitting-room. It is a pleasant room at all times, with that habitable look which the most splendid apartment cannot afford to lack, and the grace of arrangement which some women know how to bestow; but at present it is more than merely pleasant — it is lit up with a stream of sunset light which transforms its homely charm into enchantment for the time being. There are pictures on the walls — engravings and photographs chiefly, framed in pretty woodland devices, autumn leaves and acorns, and fir-cones. The glow touches and burnishes these; touches also the ivory keys of the open piano, and the hanging basket with trailing sprays of ivy in the bay-window. The bald spot on the back of Colonel Tyrrell's head comes in for its share of the illumination, and the open page of a letter he is reading.

"So you have the mail, papa," says Flora, advancing. "Is there anything for me?"

"I believe there is a magazine for you," her father answers, glancing toward the budget on the table; "but there is no letter, if that is what you mean."

Her face falls a little. "Not even from Harry?" she inquires, in a tone which hopes against certainty.

"Not even from Harry, for *you!*" replies Colonel Tyrrell. "But the scamp has condescended to write to *me*, if that is any consolation to you."

"Does he say that he is coming?" she asks, with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Not by any means," returns her father, dryly. "Here is what he says. I was just reading it when you came in, and I am not sure that I have made it out correctly. He writes an abominable hand!"

"I never find any difficulty in reading it," says Flora. She comes forward as she speaks, and, leaning on her father's shoulder, reads aloud the letter in his hand. This is what Mr. Sunderland has to say:

"My Dear Uncle: I am more sorry than I can tell you that there seems no prospect of my being able to come to see you this summer. I have been promising myself that pleasure all spring, and writing of it, as Flora knows; but life is made up of disappointments, and I must take my share like all the rest of mankind. When a man puts his shoulder to the wheel, and goes to work in earnest, he should not look back, you know.

"In my present position I am not able to afford a long holiday, though I shall probably leave the city for a short time next week, accompanying a party of very agreeable people — Flora will remember that I have once or twice spoken of the Prestons of New Orleans — to Canada and Niagara."

"Ah," says Colonel Tyrrell, "*that* is putting his shoulder to the wheel with a vengeance! And he cannot afford to come out to Transylvania! If that boy does not go to the dogs — What next, Floy?"

"'Though I cannot come to see you,' " Flora reads on, " 'I shall take the liberty of sending a substitute, who will more than fill my place when you know him. He is a particular friend of mine, and, as such, I am sure you will give him a welcome. His name is Charlton, and he is a literary man of note who promises (everybody says) to be famous. He is well connected, well received, and an uncommonly good fellow. Flora will like him, and I commend him

specially to her kind offices. He has nearly worked himself to death, and wants to recuperate. I have told him that you will recommend him to some ideal farm-house, where he can be as quiet as he pleases, and scribble at a novel he has on hand. It would be better for his health and spirits, however, if you kept him with you, and George took him out deer-hunting among the mountains.

"Tell Flora, with my love, that I will write to her soon. Kindest regards to all the household, and believe me, my dear uncle,

" 'Your affectionate nephew,
" *Henry Sunderland.' "

"Upon my word, that is cool!" says Colonel Tyrrell, with emphasis, as his daughter's voice ceases. "What the deuce do you suppose the scamp means? It is all very well to talk of a particular friend, and being sure that we will receive him kindly; but does he imagine that I want to entertain any Bohemian scribbler that he chooses to send here with a letter of introduction?"

"Harry would not send any one whom you would object to receive, papa, I am sure," says Flora, quietly. However deep the disappointment caused by the letter, she bears it bravely and makes no sign. "As for his talking about a substitute — of course he knows that is nonsense. No one could take his place."

"I am inclined to think that it is a place which is better empty than filled," says Colonel Tyrrell, in the tone of one thoroughly vexed. "If that letter satisfies *you*, Floy " — he throws the letter in question impatiently on the table — "you are more foolish about Harry, and more blinded to his bad conduct, than I gave you credit for being."

"I hope I am not foolish," says Flora, about whose eyes there is something suspiciously dewy, "but I can't help thinking that you are unreasonable, papa, and — and 'bad conduct ' is rather a harsh term, don't you think? If Harry does not want to come to see us, should we wish him to do so, or feel injured because he does not?"

Her father glances at her keenly, but her face being turned from the light, he cannot see the moisture — it can scarcely be called tears — in her eyes. He only sees the slender, black-robed figure on a golden background, and the soft masses of bright hair falling on the delicate neck.

"You know your own affairs best," he says then, "but I think Harry is acting very badly. I am glad that you are able to take it so philosophically. With regard to this man whom he chooses to send — "

"He may prove very pleasant," says Flora, eagerly, glad to turn from the subject of Harry's misdemeanors. "At least he will be a novelty. 'A literary man of note — one who promises to be famous.' The only thing is that I fear I shall feel a little afraid of him!" She ends with a tremulous laugh.

"It is a very unwarranted step on Harry's part, that of sending such a person here," says Colonel Tyrrell, gathering up his newspapers and walking out on the piazza. He is, as Sunderland averred, one of the most hospitable men in existence; but he is chafed with his nephew, and this is his way of showing it. If Harry had written that Charlton was coming *with* him, he would not have hesitated to kill his last fatted calf to do them honor; but now, feeling deeply annoyed at the offending scapegrace, he turns this annoyance against the unoffending stranger.

Flora stands quite still where she had been left, in the middle of the floor — her graceful head slightly bent, while the sunset glow falls tenderly over her. She does not touch Sunderland's letter, which lies where her father disdainfully threw it on the table, but her wistful glance seeks it out, while her lips set themselves together. It is only for a minute that she stands in this attitude. Then she lifts her head with a start, and turns toward the door. "You should not try to read by a waning light, papa," she says to Colonel Tyrrell on the piazza. "I will order lamps."

At supper there is an animated discussion over the stranger who is soon to make his appearance. George is scornful; a man who writes instead of hunting, and who probably knows

little or nothing of fishing, is in his eyes a fit subject for contempt. Minnie, who at fifteen is already taller than Flora, and full of immature coquetry, is frankly curious and speculative.

"Will he be pleasant, do you think, Floy?" she asks. "And what has he written — do we know his books?"

"The only books with which you ought to be acquainted are those of which you know least — that is, your school-books," says her father, severely, before Flora can reply. "I shall certainly send you to school in September; for, if this novel-reading goes on, your mind will entirely run to seed."

Minnie looks extremely injured. "I don't have many novels to read," she says. "I hope Mr. Charlton will bring his with him, if he has written any."

Oscar and Nellie are the only members of the company who regard the coming event with indifference. All the rest are more or less interested in it, as trifling matters do interest people who live a monotonous life. Even Mr. Martin, the tutor — a pale young man, who laboriously leads George, Minnie, and Oscar up the hill of learning, and secretly adores Flora — wonders anxiously what the "author" will be like. His acquaintance with that class of men is very limited, and they are therefore invested in his eyes with the awe and mystery which always attaches to the unknown.

The household has time to subside from this little flutter of expectation, and almost to forget it, before the author in question arrives. A week passes without any sign of him. "Perhaps he does not mean to come at all," says Minnie, disconsolately. She is the only person who is anxious for Mr. Charlton's appearance. Flora privately hopes that he may not come, and the boys openly express the same desire. Colonel Tyrrell's first annoyance is over, but he still visits his vexation with Harry on the head of Harry's "particular friend," and wishes that the latter would change his mind and turn his steps in another direction.

It may be safely asserted, as a general rule, that things usually happen in this life exactly contrary to the manner in which we should like to arrange them. If the Tyrrell family wished to see Mr. Charlton, he would probably disappoint them, as his friend Sunderland has already done. Since they are almost a unit in *not* wishing to see him, he appears when they are least expecting him.

It is in the morning. The day is very warm — at least as warm as days ever get to be in this high, breezy region. Flora is in the pantry, weighing out materials for a cake, with the short, black cook assisting her, and Nellie standing by, a fascinated spectator. On this scene enter Minnie, a French exercise in her hand, and liveliest interest on her face.

"O Floy!" she cries, "I think Mr. Charlton is coming *at last!* I was working at this hateful thing " — French exercise indicated — "on the piazza, when I heard the sound of wheels, and, looking up, I saw a buggy coming round the drive. I am sure it is from Brevard, and Mr. Charlton must be in it. I saw a gentleman in a round hat, and — there! do you hear the door-bell?"

The door-bell is unmistakably to be heard, and Flora puts down the scales, looking much disconcerted. "It may not be Mr. Charlton," she says, trying to reassure herself. "Minnie, you should not startle one so! It may be anybody else. Papa is not at home, Hester," she adds, as a housemaid hurries by the open door.

Breathless anxiety follows for a minute. "How many eggs did you say. Miss Flora?" asks Caroline, but Flora does not heed the question. She is wondering if it is Mr. Charlton, Harry's formidable friend. Nellie goes to the door and peeps. Minnie forgets the dignity of her fifteen years far enough to do likewise. "He is coming in!" she whispers, looking back at her sister. A moment later doubt is over — Hester appears with a letter and a card in her hand. The letter is addressed, in Sunderland's well-known writing, to Colonel Tyrrell; the card bears the name of Geoffrey Charlton.

"The gentleman asked for master," Hester says, addressing her young mistress, "and when I told him he wasn't at home, he told me to give those to Miss Tyrrell."

"I *told* you it was Mr. Charlton!" says Minnie, triumphantly.

Flora says nothing; she merely unfastens the large domestic apron which covers the front of her dress, and walks out of the pantry.

CHAPTER III.

"My Love She's But A Lassie Yet."

It is not too much to say that Mr. Charlton has been very pleasantly impressed by all that he has seen so far of the home of the Tyrrells. The beauty of the situation charms his eye at once — especially since it bursts upon him with sudden effect from his having approached the house in the rear. "This is Arcadia indeed!" he thinks, when he sees the outspread beauty of the fertile valley, the bright river winding through it, the magical distance beyond — mountains overtopping mountains until the farthest heights melt into blue infinity — cloud-shadows shifting and falling over the wooded hillsides, a clearness in all the tints, a brilliancy in the atmosphere which is altogether beyond the power of words to describe.

He is astonished as well as charmed. It is so seldom in life that one's longing for an ideal pleasure or happiness of any kind is gratified, that one is justified in the incredulity with which one generally regards such a gratification when it comes. Charlton has told himself more than once since he began his journey that he is a fool — that he will find nothing at his destination to repay him for such an expedition. Now, all in a minute, he feels that he is repaid. Already a subtle sense of repose is borne to the weary brain and overstrained nerves. Let his work be what it will — and he would be the first to tell you that it is poor enough — his is the true artistic temperament which feels beauty of color, form, and tone, in every fibre. This bright loveliness thrills him as one keenly alive to music is thrilled by the first exulting notes from a full orchestra, no matter what the people whom he is going to meet may be — and he has serious misgivings on that score — he has found his place of rest, his sylvan city of refuge.

It has been already said that Hester meets him at the door and receives his card. She ushers him across a hall, where branching antlers hang, into the sitting-room. Left here, he glances round critically, as he has already glanced at the outside of the house. The uncarpeted floor is stained and polished, and there are soft rugs before several of the couches and deep easy-chairs. A large, old-fashioned centre-table is piled with books and papers; the piano is open, and some exercises in scales stand on the music-rack; in the bay-window at the end of the apartment are a low chair and a woman's work-basket. Other windows open on the piazza outside, green shade droops beyond, the murmur of the river comes in, and a gentle breeze moves the curtains. Over the mantelpiece is a fine engraving from one of Landseer's paintings; above the piano a head of St. Cecilia hangs. Charlton observes these things. "For once luck has befriended me!" he says meditatively to himself.

He is standing by one of the windows when Flora enters. He hears the rustling sweep of her dress as she crosses the floor, and turns. They meet by the centre-table.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Charlton," says the young lady. "My cousin wrote of you some time ago, and we have been expecting you ever since. I am sorry papa is not at home just now; but he will return presently."

"You are exceedingly kind, Miss Tyrell," says Charlton, bowing. First impressions are strong, and he is not likely to forget the gracious tact of this reception. To tell a man that he has been expected is to put him at his ease at once; and this Flora, by the simple instinct of courtesy and hospitality, has done. "Your cousin assured me that I might venture to hope for a very pleasant welcome if I presented myself in his name," he goes on; "and I see that he was not mistaken."

"A friend of Harry's could not fail to be welcome," says Flora. "Pray sit down. Do you

come from Asheville? I fear you must have found our roads very rough."

"On the contrary, much better than I expected," answers Charlton. He sits down as he speaks in the chair which she indicates, and, while he praises the excellence of the roads, looks at her, and takes in every detail of her personal appearance. He is struck at once by her youth and her fair looks — though these looks fall far short of what many people would consider beauty. He notes the sweetness of the lips, the frank candor of the eyes, the width of the white brow, the graceful arch of the well-poised head; and he knows what all these things, separately and collectively, signify. He notes, also, the low, sweet tone of her voice, and is surprised by the gentle repose of her manners.

She, on her part, looks at him, and thinks that Harry's friend is not so alarming after all. What she sees is a spare, well-knit man of thirty-two or three, with an intellectual but not handsome face, out of which quiet hazel eyes meet her own. The brows above are very dark and decided; dark also the crisp hair, which has perceptibly thinned on the temples, and the heavy mustache and English whiskers.

They have been talking commonplaces while they scrutinize each other in this manner, and Flora sounds the first note of something different when she says: "I hope you left Harry well? He wrote that he was going to Canada with a party of friends."

"When I saw him last he was very well indeed," replied Charlton, "but that was not for several days before I left the city. His departure antedated mine."

"We have not seen him since he left Carolina two years ago," says Flora quietly, "and therefore we hoped that he would come this summer; but it seems we are not to be gratified. He writes that we are to take you as his substitute, Mr. Charlton. How do you like the idea?"

Charlton shrugs his shoulders slightly. "It would be very pleasant for me," he says, "but I cannot think that it would be satisfactory as far as Sunderland's friends are concerned. He is one of the most agreeable and popular people in the world, while I — well, it is not good taste to abuse one's self, so I will leave you to discover what I am. Miss Tyrrell."

"I have already discovered that you are very modest," says Flora, smiling.

"I beg your pardon, but I must not let you begin our acquaintance with a mistaken idea of me. I am not modest at all — sometimes I entertain an insufferably good opinion of myself; but then I know, and take no credit for knowing, what I *am not*. You are probably aware that Sunderland is an exceptionally pleasant person."

"You are very kind to say so."

"Not in the least. Why is it kind to admit excellence which we cannot alter by one jot or tittle? Sunderland is exceptionally pleasant — even in the great metropolis, where he is now, people feel his charm. I am not surprised, therefore, that I have found such a warm recollection of him here in his native country. Even the boy who drove me over from Brevard dilated upon his prowess in hunting and woodcraft."

"I fear you will hear a great deal of that from my brothers," says Flora. "Harry is their ideal of manly excellence."

"I wonder if he is yours!" Charlton thinks, glancing at the gentle, self-possessed face.

While he is thinking this, a welcome sound comes to Flora's ears — that of her father's step in the hall. He has entered from the stables, for she hears him put down his whip and riding-gloves. A minute later he enters the room, is presented to Charlton, and shakes that gentleman cordially by the hand. He has felt irritably averse to seeing a stranger, but now that the stranger has come it would not be possible to make him other than heartily welcome.

"You will stay with us, of course," he says after the first salutations are over. "What, not prepared? — your trunk in Brevard? Send for it, then — I will send a messenger at once."

"That is quite unnecessary," says Charlton. "I have a buggy at the door."

"But it need not come back," says Colonel Tyrrell. "Give the boy a note — that will be sufficient. Floy, have you writing-materials?"

In this way Charlton — not greatly against his will — finds himself taken prisoner. After dispatching the note, and talking for a short time with Colonel Tyrrell, he is conducted to a room which was made ready for him several days before — a pretty, airy apartment, the windows of which command the same view that he admired down-stairs; and having been informed that the dinner-hour is two o'clock, he is left here.

"What a pleasant haven!" he thinks, looking round. A table stands by one of the windows, before which is a perfect lace-work of shade —green touched with gold. An inviting chintz-covered chair is near. It is an ideal place in which to rest, or dream, or work.

At dinner he meets and is introduced to the assembled family. His presence overawes the junior members somewhat, and there is not as much gay talk and laughter as usual among them; but the boys incline to a large-minded tolerance for his literary labors when they find that he knows something of out-door sports, and is not averse to learning more.

"This country is so much a *terra incognita* to the majority of travelers," he says, "that I, who have merely wandered hither through the lucky accident of knowing Sunderland, must learn as much about it as I can, in order to enlighten the rest of the world, as far as my efforts are able to do so, when I return. I trust that you, sir" — he addresses Colonel Tyrrell — "will add to your kindness by directing me how best to make a tour through it."

"I shall be very glad to do so," replies Colonel Tyrrell. "You had better rest and recruit your health for a week or ten days; and after it is thoroughly established, you can make excursions to all points of interest in the country around."

"I am just back from the Balsam," puts in George. "We were a party of six, and we had a glorious time. The streams up there are so full of speckled trout that you can catch'em by the hundreds just for the trouble of throwing your line in the water."

"If I may be pardoned for the ignorance which the inquiry displays," says Charlton, "where is the Balsam?"

To answer that question intelligently, Colonel Tyrrell proceeds to draw a map of the region on the table-cloth with one point of a fork, tracing off in a general way the mountain chains which surround and the ranges which cross it. Charlton looks on interestedly, and presently, turning to Flora, asks if she has explored it all.

She shakes her head. "By no means. I know our own valley and all surrounding it very well; but I have never been in the remoter parts of the mountains, among the Balsam or the Cullowhee Mountains."

"But you want to go, Floy — you know you do," says Oscar; "and when I am grown I will take you."

"I hope Miss Tyrrell will not need to wait so long for an escort," says Charlton, smiling.

When he smiles his face lights up very genially, though in repose it is rather impassive; and seeing it now in a broad light. Flora perceives that it looks worn and pallid. The temples are sunken, and there are the dark circles under the eyes which a sedentary life and mental toil soon bring. Contrasted with the ruddy, sunburned faces near, Mr. Charlton, in short, looks decidedly out of health.

After dinner he pauses in the hall and asks which of the boys will pilot him out among the hills. "I don't care where," he says, "so it is out-of-doors."

"We are going fishing," says Oscar. "If you would like to come —?"

"Just the thing," says Charlton, taking his hat.

At sunset the boys return, carrying a fine string of fish and full of enthusiasm with regard to their companion.

"He's a first-rate fellow!" says George. "I hadn't any idea that a man who *wrote* would like the things he does. He's a good fisherman, and he says he's a tolerable shot — we are going hunting to-morrow."

"I shouldn't think a writer would care about such things as fishing and hunting," observes Minnie, scornfully.

"But you see he is a writer, and he does care," replies her brother. "He has hunted moose and caribou in Nova Scotia, and caught trout at Cape Breton. Do you know where Cape Breton is, Miss Minnie? Let me hear you bound it."

This conversation takes place in the dining-room, just before supper. It is cut short by Hester's ringing the bell; and the gentlemen, who have been talking on the piazza, come in. Charlton thinks, as he enters, that the pretty, old-fashioned tea-table has an attractive appearance. Everything has a quaint, pastoral seeming to his metropolitan eyes. The distinctively Southern breads, the fish that a few hours ago were placidly swimming in their native element, the amber honey in the honeycomb — all have an Arcadian flavor to the man of clubs and *cafés*.

After supper the gloaming still holds the world in a spell of beauty. Lamps are carried into the sitting-room, but only Minnie follows them, and sits down by the table to read a novel. The trio of gentlemen — for Mr. Martin makes one of the family circle — return to the piazza to smoke. Though debarred from enjoying this luxury, George and Oscar join the group. Flora, accompanied by Nellie, who is her usual shadow, strolls down the lawn to the river-bank.

The air is fresh and fragrant, filled with the odor of many different growing things — that indefinable perfume which evening always brings out on a water-course. The breadths of cultivated land stretch away into softest distance; near at hand the hills are draped in tender shades of purple and blue, but farther off the violet peaks stand outlined against a sky of pale gold, flecked here and there with rosy vapors, out of which Venus shines with serene lustre. The sunset illumination is over, but this twilight is scarcely less beautiful.

"What a lovely evening, Miss Tyrrell!" says a quiet, well-modulated voice at her side. She starts and turns. Unheard, Charlton has approached over the grass. "Like Paul Pry, let me say that 'I hope I don't intrude,'" he adds. "But I am not particularly fond of smoking, and you seemed to be enjoying the gloaming, so I thought I might venture to follow."

"Certainly," answers Flora, with her gentle accent; but he is a man of quick perceptions, and he feels that he has intruded on some mood to which his presence is not attuned. It is too late for retreat, however, and when she says, "We are looking at Venus — Nellie and I," he replies:

"How brilliant she is! — and that mountain-line yonder, how exquisitely it is defined against the sky! What an enchanted place this seems to be altogether! I suppose it does not strike you so, since you live here always; but to me —"

"You are mistaken," she says, as he pauses. "It strikes me all the more, perhaps, for living here. I know these mountains in all their changes, and never weary of them. But I am glad that you like our country, Mr. Charlton. I hope you will stay with us as long as you like it."

"That might be too long," he answers. "But you are very kind. I hope to stay some time."

"And you will do as you please, I hope," she goes on with timid yet charming grace. "I mean you will feel at home, and regulate your time and occupations without regard to us."

"You are more than kind," he says, gratefully; "but Sunderland told me that you would recommend me to some quiet farm-house —"

"Is not this house quiet enough for you?" she asks. "I fear you are hopelessly taken captive. Harry said we must keep you, and papa will never agree to let you go."

Charlton looks resigned to captivity. "I can hardly realize my good fortune," he says. "I undertook this journey in a spirit of complete indifference, and I had no idea of being so well rewarded at the end of it. In a measure, this is not all holiday with me. I have come to work as well as to rest. But nevertheless I mean to explore this El Dorado of yours. Miss Tyrrell. Will you tell me again the names of those places you mentioned at dinner? And where are they to be found?"

"Come to the house, and I will show you on the map," says Flora, turning and leading the way back over the lawn. They hear Colonel Tyrrell's voice talking on the piazza; through the open window of the sitting-room they see the globe-like lamps, and Minnie's fair head bent over her book. Behind them the tender glow of the sunset still lingers over the darkening mountains; stars are gleaming out in the misty sky above; all around is fragrance and stillness — stillness

which seems filled rather than broken by the soft rush of the river, as it flows along the base of the summer hills.

CHAPTER IV.

"In Nature's Eyes to Look and To Rejoice."

Several days pass, and the manuscript of his novel lies untouched in Mr. Charlton's trunk. "Rest must come before work," that gentleman says to himself; and rest with him means to steep his spirit as much as possible in the loveliness of Nature. Consequently, his days are spent out-of-doors. He goes hunting with George, he goes fishing with Oscar, he goes riding with the colonel, and, above all, he goes walking by himself.

He is the least troublesome of visitors, Flora decides. The others grow used to his presence, and the placid current of the household existence flows on as if he made no part of it.

After a while he rouses from the lethargy which for a time seems to weigh upon him — the reaction from a severe strain of mental toil — and in the pure air, the absolute repose, the regular life which surrounds him, finds his body recover health and his mind regain its tone. Then he exerts himself to return, at least in a measure, the kindness so unobtrusively showered upon him. It is not difficult to do this. People like the Tyrrells, who live remote from the great centres of culture, yet are not without mental and social refinement, welcome gladly anything which brings into their life a breath of the world far away. No one questions Mr. Charlton concerning the famous places he has visited, or the famous people he has known; but when he begins to speak of them voluntarily, he finds eager and attentive listeners. Flora in especial is always interested, and one day, meeting her frank, intelligent eyes, he suddenly remembers that he has not yet advanced a step toward executing Sunderland's commission. What degree of affection or fancy this gentle maiden has for her cousin he does not know. It occurs to him that it ought to be easy for him to learn: and he forthwith decides to bring to bear on Miss Tyrrell all that worldly knowledge and professional observation of which Sunderland spoke. "She is an interesting study," he thinks. "If I draw her out, I may make her character of use in my novel. It strikes me that Bertha" — this is one of his heroines — "is very much of a nonentity. If she were drawn a little more on the model of this young *châtelaine*, it might improve her."

Opportunities for the study in question are not lacking. An hour or two after this reflection, Oscar rushes up-stairs, three steps at a time, and knocks on Mr. Charlton's door as if an earthquake were imminent.

"What is the matter? Come in!" says that gentleman, who has just settled himself to his neglected work.

"Mr. Charlton!" cries Oscar, opening the door at once, "don't you want to go to the Falls of Conestee? We are all going, and sister Floy told me to ask you —"

"Certainly, I want to go," answers Mr. Charlton, rising with alacrity. He has not the faintest idea where the Falls of Conestee are, nor what they are, nor anything about them; but he is as eager as Oscar for anything which will take him out into the open air and among the fair hills.

When he goes down he finds the family assembled on the piazza, while a light and convenient wagonette stands before the door, together with two horses saddled for riding. Flora meets him.

"Papa insisted that I should send for you," she says; "but should you really like to go with us? Pray do not hesitate to say 'No,' if you would rather not."

"Why should you imagine that I would rather not?" asks Charlton. "On the contrary, I am as anxious as possible to go. But where are you bound?"

She laughs. "Your faith is charming," she says. "You are anxious to go, and have not an idea where we are bound! Well, we are going to a place which I think will repay you for the exertion you are about to make — that is, the Falls of Conestee. Now, will you ride or drive?"

Charlton sees that she wears a habit, and announces that he will ride. Colonel Tyrrell is not going. Mr. Martin, George, Oscar, Minnie, and Nellie climb into the wagonette and drive merrily off. Charlton assists his companion to the saddle, then mounts himself, and they follow.

The afternoon is perfect — still, golden, and beautiful; and the distant peaks seem clearcut against the sky. All of summer's abounding wealth is spread over the lovely valley, while the greenness which clothes the land from crested hill to level meadow is full of freshness and delight. Shadows quiver, blades of corn softly rustle, and there is a subdued medley of sweet pastoral sounds in the air.

Crossing the bridge, they ride through the cornfields, and along the banks of the swiftly-flowing stream, until they reach the foot of that mountain which in this land of mountains is only known as "Mill Hill." Here cool green woods droop, overshadowing hillsides rise, streams ripple through mosses and over stones with impetuous dash, the verdure is tropical in its luxuriance. As they mount higher — for the well-graded road winds in sweeping curves around the mountain — distant views open before them. Hill rises behind hill, peak beyond peak; the sapphire mountains spread to meet the sky. Their road is now a mere shelf along the mountain-side, and before long they hear the turbulent dash of water in the gorge below.

"That is the stream from the falls," says Flora. "Look! you can catch glimpses of the water foaming over the rocks."

Only a glimpse through interlacing greenness of curling foam and glancing spray — then another glimpse, and yet another, until the road turns and leads them away. They have by this time reached the top of the hill, and pause near the spot where the wagonette has been left empty in the shade. Here they dismount, and Charlton fastens the horses. This accomplished, Flora gathers up her habit and they walk past a small, old-fashioned mill, with the sound of rushing water momentarily becoming clearer in their ears, until they reach a spot from which they command a view of the fall that is filling all the cloistered dimness with its voice. Charlton looks around, amazed. He expected a pretty, silvery cascade, and he is altogether surprised by the flashing splendor of the tumultuous waters before him. The stream makes its first fall in one clear, beautiful cataract of about fifty feet, then dashes down the gorge in a series of rapids, lashing itself to white foam over and around the massive rocks that line its course. Two hundred feet below another stream pours into it, and then, pent in a narrow channel, with a declination of forty-five or fifty degrees, the united current tumbles, whirls, and surges for five hundred feet farther.

"One must have recourse to Wordsworth, I think," says Charlton, at last. Then he repeats those lines which describe a form of ecstasy that every lover of Nature must have felt:

"The sounding cataract
Haunted me like a passion; the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colors and their forms, were then to me
An appetite — a feeling and a love
That had no need of a remoter charm."

"Thank you," says Flora. "I am glad some one has said something worthy of the place."

"I had no idea that you were bringing me to such a place," says Charlton. "It is a haunt for the gods! One might expect to see Diana and her nymphs — if it were not for the mill."

"That is barbarous, is it not? But to the person who built it that lovely fall only commended itself as an excellent water-power. I regret to say that such barbarism is very common."

"It would harrow an artist's soul," says Charlton. "But where are the rest of the party? I see nothing of them."

Flora points down the gorge. "They are there somewhere," she says. "I hope Mr. Martin will take care of Nellie. I am always uneasy — Ah, yonder they come!"

Charlton is not overjoyed to hear this. The society of one gentle intelligent companion — one who makes no effort herself, and demands no effort of him — is pleasant, even in this haunt of the gods. But a set of noisy boys and girls are worse even than the projecting mill. Mr. Martin comes up, breathless with his scramble over the rocks, but enthusiastic. He is a devoted naturalist, and he has found several rare and beautiful plants. He shows them to Flora, who is something of a botanist, and they discuss them with so much interest that Charlton walks away, slightly bored and a trifle annoyed. As he proceeds down the stream, he finds Minnie in a dark recess, overhung by shelving rock, on her hands and knees. Turning her pretty flushed face, she sees him and rises.

"Such lovely moss!" she says, holding it out.

"May I come with you, Mr. Charlton?" cries Nellie, springing forward, and taking his smile for assent.

Ferns, "which Nature made for pure leaves, just to show what she could do in that line," abound in almost countless variety. Even Nellie has her apron full of them. She generously offers Mr. Charlton as many as he wants, and he selects one of the delicate maidenhairs to please her. They are sitting together on an enormous rock overlooking the lower fall; and as she glances up, he thinks how like her flower-like eyes are to Flora's.

"Will you keep it?" she asks gravely.

"As long as I live," he answers, gallantly, and taking out his pocket-book places it between the leaves, scribbling the name and date above it. Then, since the book and pencil are in his hands, he goes on to jot down a few notes of the scene, and one or two thoughts that have occurred to him. Engrossed in this manner, he does not notice his companion, further than to answer her prattle very much at random. The demoiselle feels and resents this neglect. Gathering her collection of ferns together, she announces her intention of going to "Floy." Charlton, who is writing busily, does not hear her, and so he does not interfere when she begins the descent of the rock. He is not conscious that she has quitted his side until he is roused in a manner that he never forgets. Only a child's cry — but the earth opening at his feet could not startle him more. Instinctively he springs forward, his book and pencil dropping unheeded from his hands. But Nellie is gone.

Strong man that he is, a faintness comes over Charlton that threatens to unnerve him altogether, as he glances round and sees no sign of her. There is no use in calling aloud; the waters drown all sound — it was almost miraculous that he heard that faint cry a moment back. He swings himself down the rock with headlong speed, and on the bank overlooking the stream gazes round with a passionate appeal in his glance.

It seems an age, but it cannot be a minute, before he sees that which he seeks — a white, imploring face, a blue dress, a floating wealth of yellow hair. In her fall, Nellie has been caught in the forked trunk of a leaning tree; and, knowing that it is her only hope, she clings there, with both arms tightly twined around the rough bark and her piteous eyes turned upward. The peril of her situation is evident at a glance; but even this to the young man is a great relief. The horrible, sickening sense of despair is lifted from him. There is something *to do*.

He proceeds at once to do it. It is no easy task to descend to where the child has lodged, but he goes down with what care he may; and after securing himself against the danger of slipping by bracing one foot against a small sapling that leans out from the face of the precipice, he puts his arm around Nellie and bids her cling to him instead of to the tree. She needs no second bidding to do this, but flings her arms with almost convulsive force about his neck. So weighted, it is very difficult to climb up again; but, step by step, hand over hand, he mounts slowly, until his head is on a level with a bank. Then there comes a terrible wrench of his foot, which has caught in the root of a tree — a wrench so sharp that it wrings from him a groan of agony, and might

cause him to fall backward if it were not that he has presence of mind enough to seize the stem of a young pine growing near.

"Nellie," he says, "do you think you could climb the rest of the way by yourself, and then go very carefully to where the others are, and ask George and Mr. Martin to come here and lend me a helping hand?"

Before Nellie can answer, a voice, to his infinite amazement, speaks just above him. "Give Nellie to me, Mr. Charlton. I can take her."

He throws back his head and looks up. On the verge of the precipice Flora kneels, her face marble-pale, her blue eyes shining with steady lustre. As their glances meet, she leans down and extends her arms. "Give Nellie to me!" she repeats.

He has no alternative but to obey. In his precarious position, it is certainly imperative that he should be rid of Nellie in some manner. "Be careful!" he says, as he lifts her; "you may lose your balance."

"There is no danger," she answers quietly — and indeed there seems to be none. Even in the midst of his pain, Charlton wonders at her coolness and self-possession. She steadies herself admirably while she draws Nellie to her. It is only when the child is safely by her side that her self-control gives way, and she passionately kisses her. This is only for a moment, however. Then she places Nellie back against the rock, and, returning, kneels down again.

"Now, Mr. Charlton," she says, "let me help *you*. You have hurt yourself, have you not?"

"I have twisted my ankle, I think," he answers. "It hurts very much. But it is impossible for you to help me. George or Mr. Martin —"

"George and Mr. Martin have both gone to see about the wagonette," she interrupts. "I cannot leave you here while I go or send after them. You *must* let me help you. I am strong — you don't know how strong! See, here is a stick I was using as an alpenstock. If you will take it, and give me your hand, I am sure I can assist you. Pray give me your hand!"

He cannot refuse, though he has little idea that she will be able to assist him. But who can estimate the strength which a brave spirit can put into a slender frame? Fragile as she looks. Flora has the firm muscles of perfect health, together with the skill of a mountaineer; and so, to his own astonishment, Charlton finds himself trusting more and more to the resolute young hand, until it draws him over the edge of the bank, and he feels that he is safe. He gives another wrench to his foot in his final spring, however, and the pain mists all things before him. As he sinks down, he hears, as in a dream, the kind voice saying:

"I am sure you are suffering a great deal. Shall I bring you some water?"

CHAPTER V

"Linger, O Gentle Time!"

When Charlton comes to himself again — for he loses all knowledge of things around for a brief space — he is lying on the ground, while a tender hand bathes his face with cold water. He opens his eyes, and sees first the blue sky far above, and then something else which is as blue — to wit, a pair of human orbs regarding him.

"Do you feel better?" Flora asks. "I fear you are in great pain."

Charlton's first sensation is one of intense annoyance. What has he done? Can it be possible that he has fainted, like a sick child, from the mere pain of a twisted foot? Flora sees the

color spring to his pale face, but she does not understand the cause of it. She takes away her hand, and as he rises to a sitting posture, his first words are significant of his state of feeling.

"I am ashamed of myself!" he says. "What possessed me to make such a scene over such a mere trifle, I cannot tell! Pray forgive me, Miss Tyrrell."

"Forgive you!" repeats Flora. "What have you done that I need to forgive? Are you sure you feel better? You cannot tell how shocked I was when I saw you lean back and turn so white! I think you must have lost consciousness for a minute."

"I — suppose I did," says Charlton. "I wrenched my foot again as I sprang over the bank, and the pain was really very intense. Your application of cold water did me a great deal of good. But pray tell me how you chanced to be on the bank just when you were most needed? I am not, as a rule, inclined to poetical metaphor; but I could have likened you to an angel of rescue when I glanced up and saw you."

"I had been there all the time," she replies, quietly. "But I was afraid to speak for fear of startling you."

"All the time! You mean—?"

"I mean ever since you went down. No one could tell me where Nellie was, and I did not know that she had attached herself to you, so I came in search of her. I was in sight when you sprang down the rock, and I knew from your manner that something was the matter, but I could not make you hear. I hurried on as fast as I could, and reached the top of the bank just when you were releasing Nellie. I would not have spoken for anything — even if you could have heard me. I scarcely dared to breathe in my suspense. Oh, Mr. Charlton, don't think me ungrateful because I do not know how to thank you —"

"Excuse me, Miss Tyrrell," interrupts Charlton, "but you must not mention such a word. Instead of thanking, you ought to blame me. It was all my fault. I was scribbling in my note-book and neglecting the child — else she would not have fallen. Is not that true, Nellie?"

But Nellie is a conscientious young person, and she cannot indorse this. She looks up at her sister with tears in her eyes. "It was my fault, Floy," she says; "Mr. Charlton was writing, and I — I thought I could get down myself. Then my foot slipped, and oh! I thought I was gone. All my ferns went, and I fell down the bank till the tree stopped me."

"Never mind," says Charlton, cheerily. "It is all right now — at least it ought to be. But what is to be done with this foot of mine is a serious question. Miss Tyrrell, can you suggest anything? I fear I can never climb over these rocks."

"Not even with the alpenstock and my arm?" asks Flora. "Or had I better go and send for Mr. Martin and George?"

"If you will allow me, I think I will try the alpenstock and your arm," says Charlton. "If I can once get on my feet, no doubt it will be easy enough to hobble along."

Flora hands him the stick, and then assists him. He gains his feet — or rather, to speak with entire correctness, he gains one foot, and stands leaning on that and the stick with an almost ludicrous expression of mingled pain and uncertainty on his face.

"Now take my arm," says Flora. "Oh, you must; it is impossible that you can walk by yourself. And you know there is a great deal of climbing to be done. Nellie, keep close to me. One accident should be enough for you."

It boots not to tell in what slow and toilsome fashion these three make their way back to the neighborhood of the upper fall. "The sun's bright lances" have long since left the cloistral greenness around, but they pause now and then to admire the splendor and tumult of the flashing waters. It is also necessary for Charlton to rest, since every movement of his foot causes him keen suffering. All journeys end after a time, however, and so does this one. Near the mill they are met by Minnie and Oscar, and Flora dispatches the latter at once to have the wagonette brought as near as possible. "You must go home in that," she says to Charlton.

He cannot deny that this is necessary, and does not like to acknowledge how much he feels averse to it. "I suppose it will be best," he says, "but I have been counting on a very pleasant ride back with you."

"You mean that you prefer riding?" she asks.

"I don't care whether I ride or drive, so far as the mere question of locomotion is concerned," he replies. "What I cared for was your society."

She looks honestly surprised, but neither blushes nor laughs. "If you are in earnest," she says, "such a moderate desire can be easily gratified. I will go in the wagonette too. Minnie will like to ride, I am sure."

"Miss Tyrrell, you are too good! I am really ashamed of my selfishness," Charlton begins, for he did not anticipate this.

But she stops him. "I like driving very well," she says. "If you want me with you, I shall be very glad to go."

"What a girl!" thinks Charlton. "One might suppose that she or I, or both of us, were octogenarians! Sunderland was right. There is no material for a coquette here. Some men think that spice necessary to a woman's charm. I am not sure that I do."

Miss Tyrrell is as good as her word. She resigns her horse to Minnie, who gladly mounts him. George takes Charlton's horse, and so they turn their faces homeward. The party in the wagonette find the drive delightful. Soft fresh winds, laden with balm, come to them from remote distance — winds which feel as if they might waft away all care and trouble from human hearts. Summer's enchanted dust is spread over the land; there are low-lying streaks of light in the golden west; the mountains are wrapped in violet haze; the great bending sky is infinitely pure and tender; trees arch overhead, unseen water rushes by. When they reach the valley the fields spread out far and faint, and all the sweet growing things on the banks of the river exhale their perfume on the evening atmosphere.

Charlton feels as if this might go on forever. The closing twilight, the darkening landscape, the melody of flowing water — all seem to him charged with a meaning and a sentiment which a poet might put into language, but a poet alone. He is inclined to be silent, and Flora, feeling his mood, says little. Mr. Martin and Nellie chatter in front, but these two have the back seat and the lovely quiet of Nature to themselves. One, at least, is sorry when they begin to near home, and the lights from the house gleam out with cheerful effect on the twilight. He turns to his companion:

"Will you let me thank you for the pleasure of this afternoon?" he says. "It has been greater than you, I fancy, can imagine. In a measure, that which is familiar loses its charm to us."

"Not to me," says Flora. "I believe I told you once before that I admire this country all the more for knowing it so well. It is an old friend; and who loves an old friend less for knowing every line in his face?"

"Every one is not so loyal as yourself," says Charlton, smiling at the soft pathos of her tone. "Some people tire of their old friends. After all, it is not well to be too constant."

"Are you in earnest?" she says. "It seems to me that is a very lowering philosophy."

"What would you have?" asks Charlton. "The world is lowering. But this is not the world — this is Arcadia," he goes on, laughing. "I forgot for a moment where I was. But I shall never forget the Falls of Conestee," he adds, in another tone.

"I fear your foot will remind you of them for some time," she says.

She proves altogether right. Mr. Charlton's foot has been very badly sprained, and makes an invalid of him for several days. Flora prescribes arnica for the injury, but Colonel Tyrrell insists that the best treatment is unlimited use of cold water; and since Charlton yields his foot up for experiments as cheerfully as if he had no personal interest in its welfare, the result is a mixture of remedies. Part of the time the suffering member is bandaged with arnica; at other times it is bared and extended over a huge tub, while Colonel Tyrrell pours a stream of cold water upon it from a height of four or five feet.

There are to Charlton, however, many compensations for his enforced invalidism and the hydropathic treatment which it involves. He is not a man who is easily pleased by women; but day by day he is more attracted by Flora, and he seizes every opportunity to study her character, to elicit her opinions, to draw out the expression of her tastes. They are pleasant days to him. His work, it must be confessed, is wholly neglected. He does not even write any letters, and is absolutely indifferent whether or not he receives any. Minnie, with the acuteness of her years, remarks this.

"Mr. Charlton is the only person who takes no interest in the mail," she says one day while that important budget is being distributed.

Mr. Charlton, who is lying back in a deep chair, with his injured foot extended over an ottoman, looks at her with a smile.

"Allow me to observe, mademoiselle," he says, "that you would find nothing remarkable in that fact if you could only put yourself in the position of a man to whom the mail cannot possibly bring anything save annoyance."

Minnie's eyes expand. "Can it bring nothing else to you?" she asks, point-blank.

"Not anything else at all. You read Tennyson, I know. Do you suppose the lotos-eaters would have cared much for the arrival of letters? I am a lotos-eater just now."

"Mr. Charlton, here are some letters for you!" cries Nellie, quitting her father's side and darting forward.

"Evil fortune has found me out!" says Charlton, with a heart-felt sigh. Still it is impossible to refrain from glancing at the missives placed in his unwilling hand. One bears the printed address of a publishing-house, another comes from the office of the Telegraph, a third from the editor of a magazine to which he is usually a constant contributor; on the fourth he recognizes, with something almost akin to dismay, the writing of Sunderland. Minnie recognizes it, too, and impetuously announces the fact.

"Why, that is from Harry!" she says — when, catching her sister's eye with reproof in it, she stops and blushes.

"I believe it is," responds Charlton. Then he pockets all four of the letters and quietly unfolds a newspaper which has also come to him.

He does not read these epistles — none of which are particularly agreeable — until he is alone. The business letters make it imperative for him to go to work, and he sighs as he glances over them. Sunderland's letter he opens last, and finds that this is what it says:

"Montreal, August 10th.

"My Dear Charlton: What, in the name of all that is remarkable, has come over you? What spell of silence has taken possession of you? I should be inclined to think that you had failed to reach Arcadia after all, if it were not that a letter from Flora lies before me, in which she mentions your arrival, and says, with a moderation I am sure you will appreciate, that you 'promise to be a very agreeable person.' I entertain no doubt but that you have by this time fulfilled that promise to her entire satisfaction, and are therefore able to throw some light on the problem which is puzzling me more than ever just now, and which I trusted you would elucidate.

"You know what I mean. Paper and ink are unsafe things to trust; accidents sometimes occur in the best-regulated correspondence, and therefore prudence becomes a man, though he were a second Damon writing to another Pythias. But do you, or do you not, mean to help me? I am in a position at present which it will not be possible for me to maintain much longer. You understand, of course, how one is carried on by the force of circumstances — sometimes farther than one wishes or intends to go. As a man of honor, I must do one of two things — declare myself, or leave the party with which I am traveling. Now, as I told you before, I do not wish to declare myself as much as my feelings are involved, until I am sure that no one else possesses, or imagines herself to possess, any claim upon me. I am writing more plainly than I like, but I must make things clear to you. Tell me what you think, and write at once to Quebec. We go there in a

few days, and shall probably remain several weeks. My line of conduct depends altogether on what you say, for I trust implicitly to your powers of observation.

"How do you like Transylvania? Fine place, isn't it? I have never seen scenery that pleased me as well anywhere else. Somehow there's a softness and a boldness together, that — well, I am not trained to analyze feelings, so I leave you to define exactly what sentiments are inspired by the combination. Have you brought down a deer yet? Flora ought to take you to the Conestee. I wonder if she remembers one day when she and I were there. By Jove! when I think of these things, I hardly know what to do. Write, Charlton, for Heaven's sake, and tell me something. I could sooner blow out my brains than return my uncle's kindness by acting shabbily to Flora.

"There is no use in writing of anything else. You know all these places better than I do. Burn this letter, and answer it without delay.

"Yours, H. S."

Charlton proceeds at once to obey the direction contained in the latter part of this missive. He twists it up meditatively, strikes a match, sets it on fire, and throws it on the hearth, watching the flames consume it and leave only a little pile of white feathery ashes. "I'll take care that no accidents occur *here!*" he says, speaking aloud. "Consummate young puppy!" he adds, after a moment. "And yet there's a train of chivalry in his character that almost redeems the puppyism. There are not many men who would trouble themselves so much about a scruple of honor, and the aching of a girl's heart more or less. But then she is no ordinary girl," he goes on, limping to his writing-table and sitting down. "Even Sunderland feels that, I suppose. I fear — I greatly fear that she cares for him! She is like her native hills — steadfast, beautiful, strong, and yet tender. And *I* am appointed to sound the depths of that fine, reticent nature! The thing is absurd and impossible. Yet, if I do not at least attempt to do so, what will be the result? Sunderland will marry that girl after whom he is dangling, and this proud, gentle creature may suffer as such women only know how to suffer. A malediction on all lovers and love affairs! When one has none on one's own account, it seems that fate malignantly appoints one's neighbors to trouble one! I will do what I can. And now it is a fixed fact that I must go to work. My days of idleness are over. That essay must be finished by to-morrow evening, if I have to sit up all night to do it."

CHAPTER VI

"The Mood Of Woman Who Can Tell?"

Notwithstanding the unfinished condition of that essay on social ethics, which is already overdue in the pages of the magazine to which Mr. Charlton lends the force of his genius, he is to be seen, as the afternoon gradually declines into evening, limping down the lawn by Flora's side.

From his window, he saw Colonel Tyrrell drive off with Minnie and Nellie, George canter away with his sworn comrade Tom Fanshaw, and Mr. Martin, accompanied by Oscar, go out among the hills, on fishing and botany plainly intent. Finally, when the sun slopes low toward the western mountains, the much-erased sheets of the manuscript are pushed aside, and the essayist takes his way down to the lower regions of the house. He finds Flora without difficulty, and suggests a walk.

"I am the good boy who deserves a sugar-plum," he says, as she hesitates. "You don't know how hard I have been working during all this long, warm afternoon. Now it is nearly seven o'clock, and I feel that I have earned a brief rest."

"I am sure that you have," she says. "But do you think you ought to walk? Papa spoke of asking you to drive with him, but he was obliged to go to Brevard on business, and Minnie wanted to do some shopping."

"I should have been obliged to decline going with him if he had asked me. I have work that I must finish at once. But you know the twilight is 'labor's brief armistice,' and will you not go with me down to the river to enjoy it?"

"I suppose I cannot refuse," she says. And so it is they take their way down the hill — Charlton with the stick which serves him as a partial crutch, Flora with her hat hanging on her arm. As they cross the lawn their shadows stretch gigantically long behind them; but when they reach the river bank, the region of sunlight is all above. Here is a green, Undine light, a grassy bank, tangled vines, emerald-tinted water sweeping softly by under the drooping boughs of trees.

"Don't you think we had better stop here?" asks Flora. "I am afraid you ought not to walk any farther."

Charlton assenting, they sit down on the sloping bank. There are cushions of moss around the great spreading roots of the trees, and Flora begins to fill her hat with them. "They are pretty for the hanging baskets," she says. There is much grace, together with thorough unconsciousness, in her attitude. An artist, coming upon the little scene, might throw a flowering spray over her delicate head, and draw her for her fair Roman namesake, the sweet goddess of flowers and spring. So her companion thinks, watching her and wondering how he shall introduce the subject uppermost in his thoughts. Chance befriends him — Flora herself begins to speak of Sunderland.

"Mosses always remind me of Harry," she says. "He knew that I was fond of them, and he always brought me beautiful varieties from the mountains. He never went hunting that he did not come back laden with them."

"If you were fond of mosses, he must have been very fond of you," says Charlton, with intent to surprise, if possible, some emotion in her face or voice. "When I first knew him he talked of you continually. You have no idea how well I was acquainted with you before I ever saw you."

"Were you?" she says, simply. "It was good of Harry to find time to speak of me in the whirl of his new life. I fancy, however, that must have been when he first entered upon it."

Charlton cannot deny this. "Of course other interests claimed his attention after a while," he remarks. "But a man may be careless and yet loyal. One cannot always talk even of that which lies next his heart."

"Of course I know that Harry is always loyal," says Flora, with a very charming air of pride. "I do not fear that he will forget us; we formed too close and intimate a part of his life for many years for such a thing as that to be. But we are not necessary to him any longer. He has passed away from us to another life and other interests. I realize that clearly; and I have no doubt it is best so."

The quiet voice utters these words without a single tremor, the candid eyes meet Charlton's gaze with a composure which he cannot believe to be feigned. He confesses to himself that he is puzzled. If she cares for her cousin as he has imagined her to do, her powers of dissimulation are marvelous for one of her years.

"Why should you think so?" he asks, in reply to her last words. "May not his best happiness lie here? I am not sure that the great maelstrom of the world improves such a nature as his — a nature warm in its affections, true in its instincts, yet easily swayed by outside influences."

"Perhaps you are right," she says; "but you see it is too late to think of that now. Harry will never again be content here. How do I know it? Oh, by everything — by instinct, by the tone of his letters, by my knowledge of his character. He may be very much attached to us still — I feel no doubt of that — but a gulf of change lies between our life and his. And I think that such a gulf is harder to span than any other. People who begin by disliking each other may learn to love; natures may alter and characters assimilate; but when a whole world of change lies between — of

joys, sorrows, tastes, and pursuits — those things divide hopelessly all who are not bound together by close and enduring ties."

"And do you not consider Sunderland bound to you by any such tie?" asks Charlton — almost forgetting how strange the question is in his anxiety to hear it answered.

"Certainly not," she answers, calmly. "How could he be?"

Surely this is frankness that might satisfy any man; but Charlton is not satisfied even yet.

"Forgive me if I am presumptuous," he says, "but I have understood — that is, I have fancied — that you were, in a manner, engaged to him."

"What have you seen or heard to make you fancy such a thing?" she asks. "I am sure that Harry did not tell you so."

"No — not exactly," replies Charlton, conscious that he has gone as far as it is possible to venture; "but I imagined something of the kind."

"You made a great mistake, then," she says, "and I am glad that you have mentioned it, in order that I may set you right — for Harry's sake. Do you think he would stay where he is, if such a thing were so? But it is not so. Pray understand that. We are, and always have been, like brother and sister — no more than that. There is no engagement, nor shadow of engagement, between us."

"So far so good," thinks Charlton to himself; Sunderland is evidently not bound in honor — at least not in any tangible manner. But the other and subtler question is yet unanswered. Is the heart of this frank, tender maiden in his possession, or is it not? How to arrive at the solution of this enigma puzzles our acute novelist. While he is considering it, Flora speaks again:

"Now that this point is made clear, Mr. Charlton, I hope you will not hesitate to talk to me of Harry more freely than you have done heretofore. I have felt that there was a reserve and constraint in all that you said of him, but I did not know how to end it. Fortunately it has ended itself. You know that I am only his sister, and that I feel a sister's interest in everything concerning him."

"Why should you think that I have shown any reserve or constraint in speaking of him?" asks Charlton.

"Because," she answers, "Harry is in love, and you have said nothing to me about it. Whom is he in love with? — Miss Preston?"

"You cannot expect me to know," answers Charlton, more utterly at a loss what to say than he ever remembers to have been in his life before, but with the certainty growing stronger that Sunderland's vanity has misled him, and that this girl indeed thinks of him as a brother, and no more.

"I am sure you do!" she says. "Harry's letters to me of late have been singularly unsatisfactory. You will tell me all about him, however, will you not? And who is the lady? There always was 'a lady in the case' with Harry from early boyhood. He was always one of the most susceptible of human beings. I suppose people of his temperament always are."

"While people of yours are always constant," says Charlton, regarding her curiously.

A flush comes to her cheeks. "Never mind what I am," she replies. "No doubt you were right the other day when you said this was a world of change, and he who is wise changes with it. If I am not wise in that manner, I shall probably suffer for my folly, sooner or later. Yet" — she pauses suddenly, and her eyes turn to where the beautiful masses of sunset clouds are marshaling in great pageant — "it seems to me that I would rather suffer and be faithful, than win peace by fickleness."

"Don't say that!" exclaims Charlton, with an earnestness which surprises himself. "You don't know how necessary it is in this world to forget. Characters change, as you said a moment ago, and feelings change with them. There is nothing, believe me, for which we should be more grateful than that they do."

She does not answer. He cannot tell whether or not she heeds him. The large full eyes, blue as woodland violets, still rest on the rose and aquamarine splendor of the western sky. As

Charlton's gaze follows hers, he catches a familiar gleam shining with faint lustre out of the bed of glory which the sun has left. There,

"Bent like Diana's bow and silver bright,
Half lost in rosy haze, a crescent hangs."

He points it out to Flora, and then they are silent, watching the sunset illumination slowly fade — leaving only a delicate flush above the line of distant mountains — and the tender dusk steal softly over the land. The river, bright with the sunset's parting gleam, murmurs at their feet; the fresh cool air is full of fragrance. The sound of wheels rolling over the bridge suddenly breaks the stillness. Flora starts, gathers her mosses, and rises. "It is growing late," she says, "and there is papa. We must go."

"No doubt you are right," says Charlton regretfully; "but it seems a pity — everything is so lovely, and we are so comfortable here!"

She smiles, standing slim and straight beside him as he still lies on the grass. "It is very pleasant, but pleasant things must end," she says. "We will come down here again, if you like, and you can tell me all about Harry's love affair."

"Upon my word, Miss Tyrrell, you take too much for granted. It is a fault of your sex — did you know that? Women have a great habit of leaping to conclusions — which are sometimes right, and sometimes very wrong."

"I have not leaped to my conclusion; I have arrived at it by slow degrees, and I defy you to say that I am wrong."

"I shall not commit myself," he says, rising. "Meanwhile I am going to write to Harry. Have you any message?"

"Yes — my love, and tell him to write me an account of everything. If he does not, I shall be angry with him, and jealous of you; for *I* was formerly his confidante."

"I beg you to believe that I do not fill that honorable but onerous position. It is a matter of mere accident that I know anything whatever of his affairs. I have no doubt, if he has anything to tell, he will gladly unbosom himself to you — secure of the sympathy which he has no possible chance of obtaining from me."

They mount the hill, cross the lawn, and enter the house. Tea is soon ready, and after this informal meal the gentlemen, as usual, go out on the piazza to smoke. The windows of the drawing-room are open, and Flora sings, by her father's request, some of the sweet old Scotch and Irish ballads which are the only songs she knows. It has been many a day since Charlton has heard any of these, and he listens with pleasure. Somehow the pathos of Burns and the grace of Moore suit the idyllic life in which he finds himself. Then Flora's voice, though untrained, is singularly sweet, and she sings with taste and feeling. As the clear notes ring out, "There's not in the wide world a valley so sweet," Charlton feels that he can echo the sentiment from the bottom of his heart.

When he retires to his room, he draws a sheet of paper to him, and answers Sunderland's appeal before proceeding to the manuscript on which he will probably toil until the early summer dawn breaks in the purple east. His letter is brief — containing only these few lines:

"Throw yourself at Miss Preston's feet as soon as you please. Miss Tyrrell does not consider you bound to her in the least. I am inclined to think that she cares for you 'as a cousin, cousinly,' and not a whit more. She suspects that you are engaged in some affair of the heart, and desires me to give you her love and say that she will be glad to have a full account of it from you. Do not imagine that I betrayed you. She divined the important fact by the pure force of feminine intuition. I owe you many thanks for the pleasant place in which I find myself, and for the kindness with which I am treated — mainly because I am distinguished by your friendship. I will write more at length soon. Am pressed for time now, and remain,

"Yours, Geoffrey Charlton."

CHAPTER VII

"Love Was In The Next Degree."

A WEEK or ten days elapse. Then before Colonel Tyrrell's door there is a bustle such as always accompanies setting forth on a journey. The wagonette stands there, drawn by the fine bay horses that are their master's special pride. Pixie and Dixie, two beautiful deer-hounds, are bounding about as if they knew that an "outing" was before them. Colonel Tyrrell's saddle-horse is held by a servant near by. Nellie, in a state of glee almost equal to that of the dogs, hovers to and fro on the piazza. Her little heart is full to overflowing with happiness. She is going — *she*, Nellie — on a journey to Caesar's Head!

Presently the others appear on the piazza — Colonel Tyrrell smoking, Charlton ten degrees more sunburned than when he reached Transylvania. Minnie follows them. Then Flora appears, shakes hands with Mr. Martin and Oscar, who are to be left behind, and is assisted by Charlton into the wagonette. He is to drive, and she shares the front seat with him, Minnie and Nellie occupying the one behind. Colonel Tyrrell mounts his horse; a small negro boy darts away to open the gate; they roll gayly out, across the bridge with the translucent water flowing underneath — water full of lovely opal tints — and into the valley beyond. The air is buoyant with the freshness of early morning, the shadows are long, the colors of the mountains are exquisite.

As they drive along the valley, the music of the river in their ears, the glad morning light on the hills, a shifting picture before their eyes of green and gold, swift motion and exquisite repose, cool shadows and glancing brightness, with the steadfast grandeur of mountains in the background. Flora feels that it is like a *Benedicite*. Her face is like one, Charlton thinks. The sweet flickering color comes and goes on her cheeks, her eyes are the color of the distant heights where they lie faint and far against the sky, her delicate lips stir unconsciously into soft smiles.

Their road lies over Mill Hill, with the great panorama spread before them to the farthest verge of the horizon, crest upon crest, peak behind peak, graceful lines blending, splendid forms towering. The symmetrical point of Pisgah is a landmark as it stands out clearly defined, and wearing its most heavenly tint in the lucid atmosphere. On they go, mounting higher and yet higher — green shade arching over, misty depths of verdure far below, waters dashing, flowers shining, ferns and mosses in profusion. Presently they enter a pass, hemmed in by mighty hills. It is a region of enchanted loneliness, of dazzling lights and solemn shadow. Great heights tower above, overhung with massive rocks, to which veils of softest moss and tangled vines cling; dark gorges lie below, full of green, misty gloom — gloom which no lance of sunlight pierces; far in the depths is to be heard the rush of falling water. The way grows wilder and steeper. Looking up at the great mountain which dominates the pass, they see a shimmer of sunlight among the twigs and stems and sprays of foliage, and the overhanging rocks are full of wonderful tints; but their way is in shadow — shadow delightful in its beauty and refreshment. "This is Jones's Gap," says Flora. "It leads over the Blue Ridge, down to South Carolina."

"Do we follow it long?" asks Charlton.

"No; we turn off very soon now, and ascend the mountain to which we are bound. Here is the place — to the right, over that bridge, Mr. Charlton."

Over the bridge they pass, and begin the ascent of the mountain. The road is very winding, their progress is very slow, and the day would prove very warm but for the forest shade which is

over them, and the pure freshness of the air. All around is the untouched luxuriance of virgin Nature. "Where is the view, Floy?" asks Nellie, anxiously.

"We shall soon come to it," answers Flora. "We are near the summit. Ah, there is a glimpse!" Minnie utters a cry of delight. Is it the ocean — that marvelous blue plain stretching to infinite distance, of which they catch a gleam through interlacing foliage?

"Draw up yonder — where you see those rocks," says Flora, pointing forward. "We must go out on the Head. It is not a good time of day for the view, but still —"

"Of course we must go," says Minnie. She is out of the wagonette almost before it is drawn up. The rest descend more soberly; the horses are left in the shade. On this side the mountain shelves down in an abrupt precipice to the plain below. The jutting rock formation which, viewed from the side, makes a rude outline of a human head — and in another place, even more marked, of a lion's — is the point from which the eye sweeps over a limitless view.

On their right the great chain of the Blue Ridge stretches westward, but in every other direction lies a boundless plain, over which hangs a magical blue light, deepening into distance till land and sky blend in glimmering mist.

"Are you disappointed?" asks Flora, turning to Charlton. "I feared you might be — I have said so much."

"You have not said nearly enough," he answers. "I had not imagined anything half so beautiful. What an ocean-like effect!"

"Floy, there's a gentleman coming round the rock behind us," whispers Nellie.

Flora turns; then she smiles, and utters an exclamation. The face which Nellie espied, glancing round a large boulder, is familiar to her. "Is that you, Mr. Brandon?" she says, in her sweet, cordial voice. Then she holds out her hand. "How do you do? — and where do you come from?"

At this Mr. Brandon's entire figure appears. He lifts his hat, showing a frank, open face. His eyes light up. He, too, smiles.

"This is a most unexpected pleasure. Miss Flora," he says. "I was down in the cave with a book and a cigar, when I heard voices above, and thought I would come up and see who they were. Why, Nellie, have you forgotten me? Is that Minnie?"

"Is it you, Mr. Frank?" says Minnie, turning round from her contemplation of the view.

There are hand-shakings, greetings, inquiries. Charlton walks away. This interruption is like a jarring discord in music to him. He goes to the extreme verge of the rocks, and stands there, looking out into space. Below birds are wheeling like tiny specks; over the boundless expanse of country soft cloud-shadows lie; the breeze is pure and fresh enough to have come from the courts of Paradise. The great rugged cliffs of the mountain are feathered over with the forest-growth which in these regions springs everywhere.

Presently they turn and go back to the wagonette, drive a quarter of a mile farther, and draw up before the long piazza of the hotel, where Colonel Tyrrell is seated — one of a group of gentlemen who are smoking at their ease.

At dinner, to Charlton's disgust, Mr. Brandon asserts his rights of old friendship by taking a seat at Flora's side and talking to her with great animation. Every other one of his speeches is prefaced with "Do you remember?" — a form of address naturally disgusting to a new friend, since it indicates many memories in common. Flora is kind and courteous, but she does not encourage these reminiscences. The reason of this soon appears.

"We were here together once before," says Mr. Brandon, with the best possible intention of making himself agreeable. "Two years ago, I believe it was. I remember that Harry was with us, and I have not seen him since. What a delightful time we had! I was thinking of it as I lay down in the cave just before I heard your voice above. Odd, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was a singular coincidence," answers Flora. She speaks quietly, but Charlton — who by this time has learned to know every trick of her face and tone of her voice — feels that the subject is distasteful to her. He finds himself wondering why this should be. Having decided

that she cares nothing for Harry, he has of late given little thought to that gentleman; but now Frank Brandon's careless words bring back a sense of doubt.

How pleasantly the days go by, those who have spent such days of golden summer need not be told. It is like an idyl — and one of Nature's own telling — only to sit on the rocks, in the mellow sunshine, and watch the great white billowy clouds sailing athwart the sky, their soft shadows falling over the far-stretching land, over plantations that look like gardens, over hills like mounds, over distant towns with steeples shining, over wooded mountain-sides on which the blue haze of distance lies. On one of the crag-like points which command this view Flora sits one morning, with Charlton on a rock at her feet. They have been talking idly. Now and then silence settles over them. It does so now. Several minutes elapse before either speaks again. Finally voices float to them, and Charlton, stirring slightly, frowns.

"Some people are coming," he remarks. "What a bore! Perhaps they want to propose an expedition. Something was said at breakfast about Table Rock."

"I shall not go," says Flora. "I am tired of expeditions for the present. Especially I am tired of making one of a large party. Now, as we went to Conestee —"

"Ah, Conestee!" says Charlton, smiling. "I shall never forget it. Not even the beautiful falls of the Saluda and Little River have eclipsed the recollection of it."

"Recollection often flatters and magnifies," says Flora, shaking her head, but smiling, too. "You must not go back to Conestee, else you might be disappointed. If one has a pleasant memory, I think it is best not to endanger it by bringing it in contact with reality again."

"I wonder where you learned such philosophy?" says Charlton. "By all means bring recollection as often as possible in contact with realities, and, if they won't stand the test, let them go! Don't live in a world of shadows. It is the worst thing that can befall any one."

"You talk of letting memories go, as if, in that case, one would not have to let a great deal of one's self go with them," says Flora, almost resentfully.

"Even in that case it is best for them to go. They are not healthy food," Charlton answers.

She shrugs her shoulders lightly, and, without answering otherwise, takes her straw hat, which lies beside her, and begins to tie it on. "Those voices are coming nearer," she says, "and I don't think I am in the mood for society. You said the other day that you would like to see the view from the other side of the mountain — the side overlooking Jones's Gap. Should you like to go now?"

"Very much, indeed," he replies, rising with alacrity.

"You must walk a mile — a very long mile."

"Do you think I shall mind that, if you do not?"

"Your ankle may suffer, however."

"My ankle is almost entirely well. It only gives a twinge now and then, and I am sure it is quite equal to your long mile."

"Then we will go."

She rises — or at least attempts to do so. But her dress is caught by a stone, she turns to release it, and her foot slips. In another instant she might have gone over the precipice, down to a death too awful to contemplate, if Charlton's arm had not encircled and drawn her back. It is only an instant — but an instant that he never forgets. Some moments contain within themselves the principle of eternity. This is one of them. Her slight figure clinging to him, her soft hair blowing across his lips — these things thrill him suddenly with a consciousness which is like a revelation. It is new and yet old, familiar and yet unknown before. Man of the world as he is, and well trained in self-control, he cannot utter a word. It is Flora who, drawing away, speaks.

"Thank you very much. That was exceedingly awkward of me, and one cannot afford to be awkward on such a pinnacle as this."

"You came very near falling into the chasm," he says, a little hoarsely.

She turns her head, and looking down into the chasm, shudders. "If I had," she says, "how terrible it would have been — for me and also for you! I should have been killed, and you would have been haunted by the horror of having witnessed such a thing. I am glad you caught me."

Then, without saying anything more, they turn and scramble back over the rocks to the top of the mountain. Skirting around the large boulders which cover the Head, they avoid the party gathered there, but do not avoid certain scraps of their conversation.

"Floy and Mr. Charlton ought to be here somewhere," says Minnie's voice.

"Perhaps they are down in the cave, engaged in the amusement for which it is famous," suggests Mr. Brandon.

"Do you mean flirting?" inquires a lively young lady. "I should not suspect either of them of knowing anything about such an amusement."

"They don't!" says Minnie, a little indignantly. "At least, I know nothing about Mr. Charlton — only I should think he was too old for anything of that kind — but I *do* know that Floy never flirted in her life."

"It is never too late to begin, my dear," says the young lady, with a laugh.

"They certainly seem uncommonly partial to each other's society," remarks Mr. Brandon.

The two involuntary listeners, who thus exemplify the old proverb by hearing no good of themselves, look at each other as they pass out of the sound of the voices. Charlton is doubtful what Flora may think, but she only smiles.

"How do you fancy the imputation of being too old to flirt?" she asks. "You must excuse Minnie. In the eyes of fifteen, thirty-five is the border of middle life."

"She is quite right," says Charlton; "I *am* too old to flirt — too old in mind if not in years. In my youngest days, however, I was not partial to the amusement. I had always a sense of austere, and no doubt uncharitable, contempt for men who make it the business of their lives. But then I was never a society man, and so, perhaps, I could not estimate their temptations. When I was young society did not recognize me. Of late it has been graciously pleased to acknowledge my existence, after a certain patronizing fashion, but I cannot say that its favors have been very gratefully received. Hence I am like yourself — I never flirted in my life. We stand on that much common ground, at all events."

"Why are you sure that I never flirted? Minnie does not know."

"I know. There is fitness in all things."

"But not consistency in all characters."

"No, not at all — only in some. But where are we going? Yonder is the hotel, and I thought we were to see the view from — or is it over? — Jones's Gap!"

"We turn by the spring. Are you thirsty? The water here is so cool that it tempts one to drink merely for the sake of drinking."

They approach the spring, which is very large, limpid, and beautiful. "There is nothing but this out of which to drink," says Flora, taking up a huntsman's horn which is lying near, left by some thirsty and forgetful hunter.

She kneels down on the gray rocks — a graceful, unconscious figure, over which the flickering shadows fall. All things fresh and Arcadian seem to meet in her. To Charlton she appears like an incarnation of the sylvan sweetness which surrounds him. It is the Flora of mythology who is kneeling there, with Diana's horn in her hand — fair, tender, wild, the music of the streams in her voice, the blueness of the skies in her eyes. Are *his* eyes enchanted? It may be; but sometimes such enchantment is not only better, but also wiser, than all the wisdom of earth.

After he has drunk from the horn, which she holds to him full of liquid crystal, they leave the spring behind and enter the forest. There is a road for some distance, then a path, and finally merely a trail which eyes inexperienced in woodcraft would not observe. Flora sees and follows it without difficulty. Charlton loiters by her side — for they do not overheat themselves by fast walking — and thinks that he has never before been so near the perfection of existence. Their

way is level, for this is the summit of the mountain over which they are passing, and the forest around them is as still and green as if no human presence had ever entered it.

"It looks as if it was enchanted, does it not?" says Flora. "Everything is so wild and beautiful!"

"It is a wonderful country," says Charlton, "and you are wonderfully devoted to it."

"Of course I am," she says. "How could I be anything else? Would not you be devoted to it if it were *your* native country?"

"I think I might become so — if I staid here long enough — even without that advantage," he replies.

"I have never been out of it but once," says Flora. "Then I was sent away — down to the low country — to school, and thought I should die of homesickness. I pined for the great blue hills till they were forced to bring me back. Of course I should not be so foolish now. I should try to content myself wherever I was forced to live. But my heart — ah, I know that *it* would always 'flee as a bird to the mountains.' "

"It is a very tender and constant heart," says Charlton.

Talking in this way, they proceed in their walk. It ends after a time as all things do — even the long and loosely-reckoned miles which are a peculiarity of this country. The two pedestrians suddenly emerge out of the shadow of the woods and find themselves on the verge of the mountain. It slopes down on a precipice almost as abrupt as that on the other side; but here the wonderful forest covers every rood of ground, and the eye rests on that sea of green, melting gradually into blue, to which the traveler in these virgin solitudes soon grows accustomed.

Flora advances to the edge of the precipice, and, passing one arm around a tree, sinks down on its moss-covered roots. "Look!" she says to her companion. "Is it not grand?"

Certainly it is. Far below lies the narrow pass, extending miles in length; on each side of where they stand, the mountains stretch away to dim distance. The grandeur, the silence, the wildness of the scene is beyond all expression. The glory of towering heights, the shifting beauty of lights and shades and tints, the lucid sky, the floating clouds, the great presence of absolute solitude — there are no words in which to speak fitly of these things.

There is a long silence before Charlton speaks. Then he says: "I am glad that you brought me here. This is the most impressive view that I have seen yet, and altogether unlike any other. What superb heights! and how we are girt by them!"

"They are magnificent," says Flora, gazing at them lovingly. "But do you not feel in such scenes as if you could not admire sufficiently all that there is to admire?"

"Yes; every one is conscious of such a feeling, I suppose. It springs from the poverty of our emotions. More is given than we can appreciate or enjoy, even with our utmost effort."

"But why is it so?"

"Ah, who can tell? It is the same old note of disappointment which enters into every chord of human pleasure. One grows to expect it after a while. Nothing is perfect. We are vexed either by the poverty or the aspiration of our souls."

"Perhaps it is as well," says Flora. "No doubt it is good for us to possess the unsatisfied ideals that vex us. There must of necessity always be some things which we 'cannot compass in our speech' — nor in our lives."

"That sounds a trifle obscure. I am afraid you are inclined to be mystical," he says, turning his glance from the mountains to her face.

She laughs as her eyes meet his. "What will you tell me next?" she asks. "A short time ago I was inclined to be morbid — and now mystical. What an odd — and not particularly admirable — patchwork my character seems to be!"

"You know better than that," he says. "It is not your character which is in fault; it is I who blundered in reading it, who indeed have lost the power of reading it. And I wonder" — here he pauses for a moment — "if you know why I have lost it."

"No," she answers, simply. "I should think that if you chose to read it, nothing would be easier than for you to do so."

"Nothing probably would be easier," he says, quietly, "if I did not love you."

CHAPTER VIII

"Sweet Is True Love, Though Given In Vain, In Vain."

After this declaration there follows a minute of silence. Flora is so much astonished, so thoroughly disconcerted, that she almost doubts the evidence of her ears. It cannot be that Charlton has really said that he loves her! She must have misunderstood, have made a mistake. The blood which rushed to her face subsides, the sense of confusion leaves her; she turns and looks at her companion.

"I do not understand," she says.

Charlton on his part is perfectly quiet and cool. He had no intention of making such a confession two minutes before he did make it, but he has no idea of receding from it now that it has been made. Though he has never had very much to do with women, he is one of the least shy of men, and his self-command in all emergencies is a proverb with his friends. The hazel eyes meet the blue ones steadily. He smiles.

"Shall I make you understand?" he says. "I wonder if it is worth while. Rather — I know it is not worth while so far as I am concerned, and perhaps you wonder why I do not shrink from useless pain and mortification. But then, luckily, self-love has never been with me a very troublesome sentiment. Few men would tell a woman whom they know to be thoroughly indifferent to them that they loved her. Their vanity would be naturally averse to that which is called a 'rejection.' But my vanity does not trouble me on such a score. In fact, I am not foolish enough to make any proposal which you would be forced to reject. I simply tell you, as something which concerns and may probably interest you a little, that I have learned to love you."

"But — why tell me?" asks Flora. She is so much surprised that the question rises involuntarily to her lips.

"I scarcely know why I have told you," Charlton answers, "unless it be that it is an impulse to tell you the truth. It seems the natural and straightforward thing to do. You are so simple, so direct, yourself. Therefore I am sure you will hear me reasonably and kindly. It may be a misfortune, it is certainly not a fault, to love you."

"A fault!" repeats Flora. "It is certainly not a fault," she says, very gently, "but it may be — do you not think? — a mistake. Why should you love me? You know very little of me, and that little is commonplace in the extreme. I could never have imagined that you would care for me — you who have seen so much of the world."

"It is impossible for me to explain why I care for you," says Charlton. "Who can analyze love? As you say, I have seen a great deal of the world, and I have come in contact with many women — some of them beautiful, a few of them clever. But I never met any woman before who was to me so sympathetic as yourself. My idea has been that, when a woman entered a man's life, she entered it to disturb it; and, valuing above everything the calm necessary for the intellectual life, I have consequently avoided women. But, wherever *you* are, there is serenity. You are always harmonious, you are gentle, you are tender, and yet you are strong. Do I vex you by speaking in this manner?" (as she shrinks a little and a flush comes to her face). "I did not mean to do so. I thought we might discuss the matter quietly, but if it troubles you —"

"It does not trouble me," says Flora, more and more surprised, "but I am sorry that you overrate me so much. I cannot understand it. Why should you have conceived such an idea of me?"

"Why, indeed, if it is not a true one? I have been studying you attentively and dispassionately for weeks; why should I have imagined you to be all of these things if you are none of them? Nothing in my life has ever surprised me more than to find myself in love with you. The knowledge has come to me very gradually. I did not grasp it — or at least I did not realize it in its completeness — until an hour ago."

"In that case," says Flora, "what has come so quickly may pass as soon."

"You misunderstand me if you think it has come quickly. So far from that, I could go back to our first meeting and trace its steady growth to the present time. But such a retrospection would not interest you. One must be moderate even in egotism. I am not presumptuous enough to fancy that you give me a thought beyond kindly friendship now. But may I try to win something more from you — in time?"

If he does not speak eagerly and passionately — as Flora has perhaps imagined that lovers always speak — there is at least no room to doubt that he is in earnest. As she hesitates — not knowing in what words to frame her reply — he goes on:

"Don't mistake me — don't think that I desire any pledge of encouragement. I only ask leave to try to win your heart. Probably I shall fail — I have a suspicion that Nature did not fit me to win a woman's fancy — but I should like to try. May I do so?"

Over the last words his voice falls. It is gentle — it is almost beseeching. Flora is inexpressibly touched. All this to *her*! It seems incredible. What glamour has come over Charlton's sight?

"Why do you think of me in this way?" she asks. "You must forgive me if I say that it is very foolish. I am not what you imagine — not at all. As for this which you bestow on me, it is a very great gift — nothing on earth is more great or precious; but I am sorry, very sorry, that you give it to me. You should keep it for some one else, who could value it and make it the crowning jewel of her life."

"I would rather give it to *you* for a plaything — if you have no other use for it," says Charlton, "Nobody is ever likely to value or make it a crowning jewel, I fear. Don't look grieved! There is no reason why you should. If I have a mind to give you something for which I expect no return, whose affair is it but my own? I shall be sorry that I said anything about it if you let it annoy you in any way."

"You must think me very selfish if you imagine that I could possibly not be grieved," says Flora, with a cadence of indignation in her voice. "I have liked you so much, and now —"

"I hope you don't mean to stop liking me?" he says, smiling. "Why should you be distressed by what is no fault of yours? Why should you change in your feeling toward me, or let a cloud come between us? I have told you frankly what I feel toward you, but this binds you to nothing. You are only asked to receive — not to give. In time, perhaps —"

But here she interrupts him. "I must not let you count on what can never be," she says. "Time can work no change. As I like you now, I shall like you always; but I can never love you."

"Are you sure of that?" says Charlton. He asks the question with a wistfulness which touches her afresh. He is startled by the positive form of her declaration. She is not a woman to talk at random, he knows. In love a man continually advances from one discovery to another: Charlton at this moment discovers how much he hoped.

"I am sure of it," she answers. Her eyes turn away from his face to the steadfast mountains. She looks at the outlines of their splendid crests with a shadow of doubt and trouble in her glance. Charlton feels it, and speaks with what she feels to be great gentleness. "I cannot tell you how sorry I am to have pained you in this manner. Do not think of it any more. Let us fancy that we have been amusing ourselves with the rehearsal of a little comedy, and now we will go back to our pleasant friendship. I have only one thing to ask — don't let my folly bring any constraint between us. I shall not forgive myself if it does. You cannot tell how much I value your kindness — and I shall not misinterpret it."

"It is you who are kind — very kind!" cries the girl. Then she turns to him suddenly. Her eyes expand, a glow of resolution comes into her face. "I can make only one return for all that you give me," she says; "but that return I *will* make. I can tell you more than I have told any one else — about myself."

"Not unless you are sure that you will not regret having done so," says Charlton, quickly. "You can tell me nothing of yourself that will not interest me, nothing I shall not be glad to hear; but you must not do so from any mistaken idea of owing me an explanation. There is not the least necessity for anything of that kind."

"I think there is," says Flora. "Am I to make no return for all that you give me? You say that you only ask me to receive; but surely that is an ungracious role, to receive so much, and make not even an acknowledgment. I would rather tell you everything; but you must promise not to repeat it."

"Is it possible you think that I could —"

"No, I don't think you could; but still I will feel more safe if you promise."

"I do promise, then, to hold all that you may choose to tell me absolutely sacred; but I beg you again not to tell me anything that you are likely to regret afterward. At all events, don't speak hastily. Wait till to-morrow. In the mean time think a little — will you not? — of what I have said. I put myself in your hands. I am your friend or your lover, as you choose. All that I ask is permission to try and win your heart. I hope — I think — that I might make you happy if you could learn to love me; and I am sure that you would make me much more than happy."

"You cannot tell," says Flora. "I am not half that you think me. You would soon find that out. But, nevertheless, I must thank you for thinking so well of me," she adds.

"Never mind thanking me for that," he says. "Perhaps I would not think so well of you if I could help it."

At this Flora smiles, as he intended that she should. And then they rise. The idea occurs to both of them that it is time to start homeward. So they bid adieu to the solemn beauty of the great pass, the unchanging grandeur of the mountains, dappled softly with cloud-shadows, and turn away.

CHAPTER IX

"Love The Gift Is Love The Debt."

The evenings at Caesar's Head are very pleasant. After sunset the air grows so chilly that fires are often necessary for comfort; and no one can deny their cheerful, picturesque effect. Visitors are coming and going constantly. This evening the house is crowded to its utmost capacity. A party of tourists from Asheville arrive in time to see the sunset from the Head, and talk of it rapturously at supper. They are so full of enthusiasm, so overflowing with admiration of the country through which they have passed, that the mountaineers present incline to them kindly, and volunteer a great deal of information. Mr. Brandon advises them strongly to go to the Balsam Mountains. "I took a stray artist who had wandered to this region up there last summer," he says, "and I thought the fellow would lose his senses. 'Great Heaven!' he exclaimed — only he was more emphatic — 'that such a paradise should be unknown!'"

"This is your country, then? — you live here?" says a dark-eyed young lady — with something of French vivacity in her manner — turning to him.

"Yes, it is my country, and I wouldn't exchange it for any other in the world!" returns the young Carolinian, proudly. "When it comes to be known, it will be such a resort for America as Switzerland is for Europe."

One of the gentlemen of the party is meanwhile talking to Colonel Tyrrell. "We came by

Flat Rock," he says, "but we have been advised to return through Transylvania, There is said to be some beautiful scenery in that country."

"We must not fail to see the valley of the French Broad," says the young lady, turning round. "If I am not mistaken, that charming Mr. Sunderland, who advised us to come here, said that he used to live there."

There is a minute's silence; then Colonel Tyrrell says, "If you mean my nephew, Harry Sunderland, he certainly used to live there."

"Of course I mean Harry Sunderland," says the young lady. "Is he your nephew? How glad I am to meet you! I have heard him talk so often of his uncle who lives on the French Broad! Are you that uncle? How delightful! I am Miss Dupont, from New Orleans. We came up to Asheville from the Warm Springs. Gertrude Preston is my most intimate friend. Your nephew is engaged to her, is he not?"

"If so, I am not aware of the fact," says Colonel Tyrrell, a little stiffly.

"Suppose we retreat?" says Charlton in a low voice to Flora.

She assents, and they quietly leave the table; not so quietly but that Miss Dupont's dark eyes follow them. "*Ciel!*" she says, "what a sweet face that girl has! Your daughter. Colonel Tyrrell? Oh! I beg pardon; but pray introduce me."

This introduction does not take place very soon. When Miss Dupont and her party leave the supper-room, Flora is not to be found. Charlton has also disappeared, as Mr. Brandon remarks. "What do you think, *now?*" he says to Minnie. "It is either a case of flirtation, or something very serious. Take care that you don't lose your sister; though, by Jove! it will be too bad if she throw herself away on that fellow! I always thought she would marry Sunderland, or I should have asked her to marry *me* long ago."

"She wouldn't have dreamed of doing it," says Minnie, uncivilly. "As for Harry, I don't know what Miss Dupont means by talking of his being engaged to anybody. We should certainly have heard of it, if he was."

"That might not follow," says Mr. Brandon. "But I'll go and find out all about it."

Meanwhile, when Charlton says to Flora, "Come out and avoid those people. Let us go over to the knoll and see the moon rise," she wraps a shawl around her, and they go out to the knoll in front of the house, whence they look eastward. In daylight the view is beautiful. The blue plain stretches away southward and westward, but in the east and north mountains on mountains rise, cloud-girt, azure-robed, melting into lovely distance.

Just now all the landscape is veiled in obscurity, except that along the crests of the far heights there is an alabaster glow which shows that the moon is behind them. "She will soon be here," says Charlton; and they sit down to wait for her coming. She does not long delay. First the edge of her disk appears; then by degrees the whole silver shield rises into the cloudless hyacinth sky. The world is bathed in mystic beauty; dark outlines and silvery mist make up the scene, but nothing could be fairer.

"I remember that we saw this same moon when she was a mere thread of silver," says Charlton. "Do *you* remember? It was down on the river bank one evening."

"Yes, I remember," answers Flora. "You asked me — or I asked you — about Harry. However it was, we talked of him. I knew then that he was in love, but I did not suspect that he would be engaged without telling his old friends."

"I do not believe that he is engaged," says Charlton. "He certainly was not when I saw or when I heard from him last. Gossip generally outstrips fact. Don't trouble yourself about it. If it is true he will certainly tell you."

"But there is no doubt that he is in love with Miss Preston, I suppose?"

"He fancies that he is," says Charlton, who has no very high opinion of Harry's stability.

"What is she like?" asks Flora. "You have never said anything about her, and Harry has merely mentioned her name."

"I never saw her but once — at a concert with Sunderland. She is a handsome brunette, with a marked air of style, but no great degree of intellect in her face."

There is silence for a few minutes; then Flora says in a low voice: "Do not be vexed with me if I tell you now, instead of to-morrow, what I spoke of this morning. I have thought it all over, and it is best. You say that you only ask permission to try and win my heart. But I must make you understand that I should be wrong if I gave you this permission; and I can only make you understand this by telling you frankly that I gave my heart away long ago, before I ever saw you."

Charlton's own heart gives a great throb, and then seems to stand still for a moment. "I feared it!" he says to himself. Somehow he knows that he has felt a foreboding of this all along.

Flora goes on quickly— perhaps she does not wish any reply. "No one was to blame," she says, "and I do not think that any one suffered except myself; and one's own pain does not matter. That can be borne easily enough. But to cause pain to others — it seems to me that I should never forgive myself if I did that knowingly, or even carelessly. It was not Harry's fault — I never thought so for a moment —"

"Harry!" says Charlton. He is thunder-struck. "Do you mean," he says, breathlessly, "that it is Sunderland for whom you care? Good Heavens! what have I —"

"Done?" he would have added, but stops himself in time. Even in the midst of his surprise and bewilderment, he feels instinctively that he must not let her suspect in what manner Sunderland has spoken of her to him, nor what a mission was laid on him when he came to Transylvania.

The half darkness conceals the blush which rises to Flora's face; yet she speaks bravely.

"Yes, it is Harry. I learned to care for him so long ago — or I never learned, it seemed to be a natural instinct with me — that I do not think I shall ever be able to put it away from me. At least I shall never be able to care for any one else in the same manner."

"But on that evening of which I spoke a minute ago, you told me that Sunderland was not your lover," says Charlton.

"He never was," she answers, simply, "but I thought at one time that he might be. It was natural; I cannot blame myself. He was very fond of me, and I was too young to draw distinctions. I was never so happy as here on this mountain two years ago; but he went away — and never came back. So it was all a mistake."

The proud, tender voice ends abruptly, and silence falls. For what can Charlton say? Can he tell her that it was not a mistake, and that Sunderland, nevertheless, has forgotten her? He feels that such a revelation can serve no good purpose. What has he done? Might he have brought happiness to this constant heart, and has he ignorantly and presumptuously turned it away? Is it too late even yet? As if she read his thoughts, Flora speaks.

"That is all," she says. "I have given you confession for confession, and we will never speak of the subject again. I am very, very sorry that you should care for me, but I hope it will prove a fancy which will soon pass away. In order that it may do so, I have told you what no one else ever heard from me."

"I shall never forget your kindness or your confidence," he says in a low voice. "If I could serve your happiness in any way, believe me I should not think of myself."

"But you cannot!" she says, quickly. "Remember, you have given me your faith. You can never repeat to any one what I have told you."

"I could cut out my heart sooner than repeat one word of it," he says — so earnestly that her fears are set at rest. "But you are mistaken when you talk of my love for you being a fancy that may soon pass away. It is a passion which will endure. But there is no reason why you should be sorry for this. I am not. It is no little thing to love a woman who is worth remembering. And then I have your friendship. That is very much."

"I am glad you think so," says Flora. She is much relieved by this quietude. It is something new in her experience of love affairs, but more agreeable than any amount of passion or pleading. Silence falls again. They hear the wind sighing softly among the trees at their feet;

for the forest here, as everywhere, clothes the precipitous mountain. From the hotel behind, gay tones and laughter float out on the night. Life is full of such contrasts. As two voices suddenly rise in song, Charlton says: "Don't let me keep you any longer. The night-air is very chilly."

CHAPTER X.

"Some There Be That Shadows Kiss."

After he has parted with Flora at the door of the hotel, Charlton takes his way to the Head, lighting a cigar as he goes. He has much to consider, and he feels that he can best command his thoughts in the unbroken solitude of Nature. He finds the point altogether deserted. The brilliant moonlight brings out boldly every escarpment of the cliff, and near its verge he throws himself carelessly down. Lying there with the pure fresh air around him, the hyacinth heaven above, and the vague, far-reaching world, flooded with silver mist, below, he gives himself up to reflections which are by no means pleasant.

Not reflections on his own failure. This is something which he puts aside, with the calmness of one to whom life has brought many disappointments. People grow accustomed to all things — even to failure — after a while, and Charlton's experience is rather more of failure than success. Once before he had set his heart on a woman, and she gave him much the same answer which Flora has given to-night — an answer less gentle but not less decided. In many ways and at many different times he has learned that to him do not fall the prizes reserved for the curled darlings of fortune. This, therefore, is only another example of that fact. He accepts it, and turns his attention to the other aspect of the matter — that which concerns Flora.

He sees now the error into which he has led Sunderland, but he does not perceive with anything like equal clearness how this error is to be corrected, or what possible good can result from its correction. Flora has learned from others besides himself — has been warned, indeed, by her own instinct — of Sunderland's inconstancy. Would she be likely, under these circumstances, to accept the latter if he were to offer himself? Charlton feels that he knows enough of her character to answer this question in the negative. But if in the first instance he had read more correctly the riddle which he was set to solve, would matters have been different then? Perhaps — only perhaps — so. Sunderland might have relinquished his suit with Miss Preston and returned to Transylvania; but Charlton is very doubtful.

"At all events, I am glad that I did not know the truth when I wrote to him!" he mutters. And with this decision jealousy has little or nothing to do. He feels keenly how deeply Flora would have been wronged if a sense of honor alone had brought her cousin back to her. His blood stirs hotly at the mere imagination of such a thing. If he had not grown to love her — if she was merely to him the graceful, tender girl who had pleased his taste and awakened his interest when they first met — he would still regard this as a desecration. Now he feels that he could sooner leap over the verge on which he stands than suffer Sunderland to suspect what place he carelessly won in the loyal heart that has not learned the lesson of facile forgetting.

So much for the past. With regard to the future, he marks out a programme for himself very decidedly and clearly. He will trouble Flora by no further allusion to the confession so untowardly made to-day; and he will shorten his stay in Transylvania as much as possible, so that in a few weeks at furthest he can turn his back on Arcadia, leaving forever behind the fair pastoral region in which for a little while he has forgotten the roar and strife of the world beyond these blue mountains.

While he reflects in this manner, and Flora, sitting at her chamber window, watches with half-absent eyes the great sea of silver mist stretching away to infinite distance, Miss Dupont is engaged in writing a letter to her friend Miss Preston. After relating how she chances to be in the

mountains of Western Carolina, she touches lightly on the attractions of Caesar's Head, and finally sums up in this manner:

"Fancy whom I have just had the pleasure of meeting! No other persons than the uncle and cousin of your admirer and special subject, Harry Sunderland. The uncle is the ordinary old gentleman; the cousin is lovely, in a fair gentle style that has no *chic* or sparkle in it, but is attractive, nevertheless. Mr. Charlton, the writer, is here in her train, and seems to engross all her attention. A communicative young gentleman who was introduced to me this evening — Brandon, I think, by name — told me that Mr. Charlton's devotion is *most marked*, and that Miss Tyrrell seems to respond to it very kindly. I should like to make the acquaintance of a man who writes essays; but after having spent some time with Miss Tyrrell watching the moon rise, he brought her back to the hotel and strolled off" alone — unable I suppose, to endure any other society after hers. Probably I shall see him to-morrow and be able to tell in what degree an essayist is like other people."

Much more than this the letter contains — especially some inquiries into Miss Preston's relations with the aforesaid Harry Sunderland — but the above extract is all that need be given to the public. After the epistle is finished, signed, sealed, and directed, Miss Dupont calmly consigns herself to her couch and sleeps the sleep of innocence.

The next morning this young lady has an opportunity to learn how much an essayist is like other people. Charlton is presented to her, and does not make a very pleasant impression. He is never discourteous, but on occasions he can be distinctly disagreeable. This is one of the occasions, for few things interest him less than the empty chatter of a society woman. He escapes as soon as possible, pleading an engagement to join a hunting party who are going down to Buck Forest in search of deer.

Later in the day the Dupont party leave Caesar's Head. Colonel Tyrrell regrets courteously that he is not at home, so that he might entertain them. "We can at least look at your place in passing," says Adèle, graciously. "I have heard Mr. Sunderland talk so often of its beautiful situation."

"You must do more than look at it in passing," said Flora. "You must go in and see the view of the valley from the front."

"We should enjoy it more if you were there to point out all its beauties to us," says one of the gentlemen, gallantly.

But it is doubtful whether Flora is sorry that she will not be there. Miss Dupont and herself own little in common; and there is something in the fact that the former belongs to that world which has separated Sunderland so widely from his old friends that makes Flora, despite her utmost efforts to the contrary, regard her with a sentiment approaching to dislike. She is vexed with herself for feeling in this manner; but to feel differently is quite out of her power. It is a relief when the last compliments are exchanged, the Dupont party gone, and she is at liberty to take a book and go out on the rocks.

She finds without difficulty a nook where she is not likely to be disturbed — a craggy point of the great precipice, like that on which she was enthroned the day before, with Charlton lying at her feet. The immense expanse of the wide and beautiful prospect seems to sink on the spirit with a charm which can never be forgotten. Yet at present she is scarcely conscious of it in any active sense. Her mind is full of other thoughts. Her hands are lightly folded over the book in her lap; her eyes gaze at the remote limit of the scene, where land and sky blend in ocean-like mist; her lips are closed with a tense expression, significant of pain. She is

. . . . telling her memories over
As you tell your beads,"

and not gathering a great deal of profit or pleasure therefrom.

How well she remembers those summer days two years ago, which she spent here with Sunderland! — how every sight and sound recalls his frank, handsome face! She can almost fancy that all the lapse of intermediate time is a dream, and that she will start suddenly to hear his voice ringing over the mountain-side in the hunters' chorus from "Der Freischütz," which he liked so much and sang so well. Yet she knows that the pleasant music of that voice is far away — sounding, perhaps, under the tamarac trees of distant Canada, or on the blue waters of the great lakes. The green Carolina heights, the semi-tropical magnificence of the wild Carolina forests, have not heard its cadence in many days; and the tender, pathetic eyes, sweeping wistfully the verge of the horizon, look in vain for the presence that comes not.

But Flora's thoughts are not altogether, nor chiefly, retrospective. Do what she will, Charlton's words sound in her ears, and she finds herself questioning constantly whether she was right or wrong in answering them as she did last night. Need she have told to this stranger the secret of her heart — the secret which even to herself she scarcely ever put in words before? She could not tell another person, she can scarcely intelligibly set before herself why she did so. In truth an overmastering sense of the hardness and cruelty of life came to her — a sudden sad realization of how many precious things are wasted, love for which no one cares, faith that is betrayed, hope that sickens unto slow death. Her own misplaced affection was nothing — so she would have said; but for Charlton to set his heart on her and suffer through her — *that* seemed more than she could bear! Most women would not have thought it necessary to say more than simply, "I do not love you," but the impulse of candor made Flora add *why* she did not love.

Now, thinking it all over, she cannot be sorry that she yielded to that impulse. To feel that one's feet are planted on the truth is always — in little or great affairs — a sustaining consciousness. Let the worst come, we can face it fairly then, with unstained rectitude and conscience at rest. There is no room for misapprehension, for doubt, for self-reproach, when all mists of concealment have been swept away. "He has given me a great deal," Flora says to herself, thinking of Charlton. "The truth is none too much to give him in return." Besides this, she has an intuitive consciousness that the man to whom she spoke that truth can be trusted to the uttermost extremity. He makes no pretensions whatever, he is the last person in the world to profess that he would go to the stake sooner than betray a trust deliberately given to him, but nevertheless she feels that this is so. Under his quiet manner she has read his character with perfect accuracy. She knows that her secret is safe; and in the first glance of his eyes, the first tones of his voice when they met this morning, she saw that her friend was still her friend — that he spoke truly when he said that he had little of that vanity which makes most men resent as a grievous insult, as well as a grievous wrong, such an answer as she had given.

It is late in the afternoon of the next day before the hunting party return. They are flushed with success, and bear its spoils. Charlton brings to Flora a pair of antlers taken from the head of a stag. "It was the first deer I have been lucky enough to get a shot at," he says. "I wish you could have seen him as he paused for a moment opposite my stand! I almost hated to pull the trigger. What an excellent thing callousness is, is it not?"

"I am not sure of that," says Flora. "It would spare us some pain, no doubt; but would you not rather suffer more pain than to care as little for the pain of others as some people do?"

"But there is a kind of sentimentality that one falls into if one is not careful. Stags, for instance, were made to be shot; yet I felt almost like a murderer when that creature leaped up with his death-wound."

"Poor fellow!" says Flora, smiling, yet laying her hand gently on the branching antlers. "These shall be hung in the hall at home," she goes on. "Thank you for bringing them to me."

"I wish it was the tuft of feathers from the breast of the golden eagle, which is valued so highly in the Tyrol," he answers. "Then you might wear it in your hat as a souvenir of a summer which I shall mark with white in the history of my life. It might serve to remind you of me after I am gone."

"I shall not need anything to remind me of you," she says, lifting her eyes frankly. "I never forget a friend. We, too, will mark with white the pleasant summer days you have spent with us."

"How I shall think of you in the winter," he says, quickly, "and try to picture the valley and the mountains covered with snow and wrapped in mist! I entertain serious fears, indeed, that my life for some time to come will be set to the refrain of 'My heart's in the Highlands wherever I go.'"

"Then you must come back to the Highlands as soon as possible," says Flora; and she does not consider how little this is likely, till her companion's silence, and a subtle shade falling over his face, tells her so.

The next day they bid adieu to Caesar's Head, look their last on the beauty of its fair prospect, feel for the last time the breeze which seems to come from no nearer distance than the curling waves of the vast Atlantic, drink to their return in the clear, sparkling water of the Cold Spring, shake hands for the last time with their genial host, and turn their horses' heads toward the Transylvania valley.

CHAPTER XI

"Westward Ho!"

Never did this fairest of all valleys seem more beautiful than as they saw its pastoral loveliness spread before them in the westerling light and long shadows of late afternoon, its frame of graceful mountains wearing their purest tints in the transparent atmosphere, and the bright river winding through the green breadths of its fertile lowlands.

"After all, we have seen nothing so beautiful as this!" says Charlton, turning to Flora. "It would be impossible for the soft and the bold to be mingled more admirably than they are mingled here. Absolutely the scene is so perfect that there is nothing left to desire."

"I think so," replies Flora, with a tender light in her eyes, "but I have always feared that I was partial through affection. Yet many other people have said that the Transylvania valley is the loveliest in the mountains."

"I am sure it must be," says Charlton; "but I mean to improve my knowledge of other valleys, and so be able to speak with more authority. Did I tell you that I am pledged to go with Mr. Brandon to the west — through all the country over which we have journeyed on the map?"

"Oh, Mr. Charlton," cries Minnie, before Flora can speak, "is it possible you are really going to leave us and go so far as that?"

"I am desolated, as a Frenchman would say, at the thought of leaving you," says Charlton, smiling; "but I am also glad of an opportunity to make the tour under the conduct of such a competent guide as I am sure Mr. Brandon will prove."

"I, too, am sorry to lose you even for a time," says Flora, "but I am glad that you are going. I want you to see as much as possible of the country. Then some time, perhaps, you may write a story of your travels that will tell people how beautiful it is."

"I am afraid I shall not be able to do that," he answers. "The country has won my heart so completely that I should scarcely know how to attempt describing it. A man cannot paint when a glamour is over his eyes."

He wonders, while he speaks, if it is this glamour which makes the valley into which they have now fairly descended seem so lovely to him. The crystal river, with many a swirl and rapid, flows swiftly by under its vine-draped trees, hastening from its far birthplace among the peaks of the great Balsam, and gathering strength with every mile, to thunder a little later through its splendid gorge down to Tennessee. On each side stretch the cultivated lands bearing their rich

harvest. Over the wide fields of rustling corn the sunlight rests like a mantle of gold, and streams in serene glory on the eastern hills, while deep shadows steal over the land from the western heights. There is a fragrance of sweetbrier and clematis on the air. Freshness and repose are in every sight and sound. It is like an enchanted land into which pain and care might never enter.

When they reach home they are welcomed vociferously by all the household. The airy house seems to receive them kindly. "It is worth while going away if only to come back," says Minnie. Charlton feels the charm of return as strongly as any one — perhaps, indeed, more strongly, since to the others this is their home from which, in the natural course of events, they need fear no exile, while to him it is only a place of brief sojourn, which he must soon leave behind, probably never to see again. He cannot restrain a slight sigh as he enters the pleasant chamber that has grown to have so familiar an aspect to his eyes. Just now the sunset radiance is filling it with light; the network of shade outside the windows is shot with gold; the river is murmuring below; soft green hills are scarce a stone's-throw away; westward the violet peaks stand, height upon height and range behind range, against a sky ablaze with glory.

"And I must leave it all! The sooner the better," he thinks. "What a fool I have been to suffer myself to take root so deeply! As if a life could be all a summer holiday, or as if such a haven of Arcadia is likely to be found more than once in one's journey through it!"

The charm of Arcadia is soon to be broken in more ways than one. Charlton discovers this at the tea-table, when Colonel Tyrrell tells his daughter that he has found among his letters one from an old friend, saying that he will be in Brevard the next day with a large party. "We must go over and bring them here," that hospitable gentleman goes on. "The ladies may stay several days. They talk of remaining in Transylvania while the gentlemen of the party go west to Haywood and Jackson."

"I hope the ladies are not very formidable," says Flora. "If they are like Miss Dupont, I don't know how they can be amused."

"Take'em in the woods, Floy, and have a gypsy supper," suggests Nellie, to whom this is the *ne plus ultra* of enjoyment.

After tea, Flora is sent to the piano by her father. Contrary to his usual habit, Charlton follows her into the room, and draws a chair near the instrument. He does not say so, but he feels that this is a farewell to the idyllic life he has been leading. To-morrow evening those people who are coming will be here; the next evening he will be gone, and when he returns it will only be to say farewell and go — not to return. Hence he declines to-night to join the smokers on the piazza, and, sitting in the half-shaded room, listens, with a sense of mingled pain and pleasure, to the sweet voice that sings the plaintive Irish melodies Colonel Tyrrell chiefly likes.

After this they go out on the lawn — for the summer night is full of fresh, cool sweetness — and while the river sings its mystical refrain to the silent earth, and the dew brings out innumerable odors that are never perceived by day, they talk and watch the moon rise in silvery majesty over the eastern hills.

Charlton has himself well in hand, and Flora does not suspect that under his self-control a fire is burning which would startle her if she knew of its existence. *He* knows it, and, conscious that every hour of this association is to be paid for — and paid heavily — in future pain, he is in a measure anxious to end it. "The calm necessary for the intellectual life" had, as he said himself, always seemed to him the most desirable thing in existence; and he is perfectly aware that, if he tarries here much longer, that calm will be hopelessly gone, to be recovered — who can say when?

Reasonably, therefore, he should not be sorry when it is time to say good-night; yet, to Flora's surprise, he does not content himself with the simple salutation, but takes her hand and holds it for a moment.

"This is the end," he says, "of all our pleasant evenings. I am very sorry, and yet you must let me thank you for them. I can never forget all your kindness. I shall remember it as long as I remember *you* — and how long that will be, God only knows. I fear I shall never forget you."

He certainly did not mean to say anything like this when he began to speak; but the tongue is at best an unruly member, and just now it has spoken out of the fullness of his heart. Flora does not draw away her hand; she only looks at him with something very gentle and pathetic in her eyes.

"Why do you talk of this being our last evening?" she asks, ignoring the latter part of his speech. "You are going away, it is true, but you will come back, and we shall be as good friends as ever, shall we not? You will not forsake us, you will not go away, Mr. Charlton, because — because I have been unfortunate enough to give you a little pain?"

It is difficult to express the sweetness and entreaty in these last words. The delicate face is lifted, the frank eyes meet his with no shadow of self-consciousness in their depths. She knows the world so little, she does not for a moment imagine that she should not ask the man whom she has rejected to stay on the familiar footing of a friend. But Charlton does not misinterpret her. He is aware that no impulse of coquetry, no *tendresse* for himself, prompted those simple, kindly words. It was out of the fullness of *her* heart also that Flora spoke.

"I shall come back — yes," he answers; "but it will be only to say good-by. You must not blame yourself for my departure. I am not churlish enough, nor rich enough in such gifts, to refuse your friendship because I cannot win your love. On the contrary, I prize it very highly — more highly than you can imagine. But my holiday is nearly ended. I must go — I should go in any event. I shall never forget my summer in Transylvania, however, and you are right in thinking that we shall always be very good friends."

The courage with which he bears himself, the determination to spare her any possible self-reproach, touches Flora. "You are very kind," she says, in a low voice. "I shall never forget how kind — how considerate."

"Floy, are you still on the piazza?" says Colonel Tyrrell's voice in the hall. "You had better come in, my dear. It is growing late."

"Yes, papa," answers Flora. "Good-night," she says to Charlton; and, with his clasp still lingering on her hand, she passes into the hall, kisses her father, and goes up-stairs.

The next day the party of tourists are brought by Colonel Tyrrell and Flora from Brevard, and the day after that a party of gentlemen, of whom Charlton is one, take their departure for the remote west.

To follow their line of march, and record all the adventures, hardships, and pleasures which till the next six days, would require the pen of Defoe at least, and would fill a volume in itself. At the end of that time the majority of the party return, unaccompanied by Charlton or George. Their absence is explained by the two following epistles:

"Franklin, September 10th.

"My Dear Colonel Tyrrell: Taking advantage of the kind permission you gave me at parting to keep Bayard as long as I like, I have decided to accompany Brandon still farther. Tomorrow we start for Cherokee. It is difficult — indeed impossible — to give any idea of the wild magnificence of the scenery here; but you may tell Miss Tyrrell that I have seen nothing which charms me so much as Transylvania. The valley of the Nantahala is beautiful, and the gorge of the same unspeakably grand; but man has done much to spoil it, while man has only adorned Transylvania. I cannot tell when I shall return — probably not for ten days. With warmest regards to all the household, believe me

"Most truly yours,
"Geoffrey Charlton."

Epistle No. 2 was indited at the same time and from the same place:

"Dear Papa: We got here last night, tired out, I can tell you. "We've had splendid luck in hunting, though, and I like roughing it first-rate. I shouldn't mind being a hunter all the time, except in winter. We've had some of the mountaineers with us all the time, and such tales as they

tell ! — you never heard the like! Tell Oscar to tell Tom Fanshaw when he sees him that he'll be sorry to the last day of his life he didn't come on this trip, and that when I get back I'll open his eyes for him with some of the toughest bear-stories he ever heard.

"Mr. Charlton isn't going back with the others. Since I came with him, I suppose of course you'll wish me to go on with him. The horses hold out first-rate, and we haven't had but one rainy day since we started. Then we were out on the mountains, and it soaked us through.

"Brandon says he can't tell exactly when we can get back — it depends on the roads and the horses, and a hundred other things. There's no use in waiting when the mails are so uncertain; so you may expect us when you see us. Love to everybody, and tell Floy this isn't half so pretty a country as ours.

"Your affectionate son,
"George Tyrrell."

"That scamp knew perfectly well that he ought to have come back," says Colonel Tyrrell, handing this characteristic missive to his daughter, whose eye has by this time traveled to the end of the page filled with Charlton's clear black writing. "But there's a good deal of sagacity in his pretending to take for granted that what he wanted to do was the proper thing to do."

"Perhaps he honestly thought that he ought to remain with Mr. Charlton," says Flora, smiling. "It is quite true that he went with him."

"What a thing it is to be a boy!" says Minnie, enviously. "How I wish I was in George's place!"

The day after the return of the hunters the party of visitors leave, and then blankness and dullness settle heavily on the Tyrrell household. There is no mode of escaping or throwing off the sense of *ennui* which envelops them like a cloud. Minnie is bored to the point of desperation, and makes the air resound with her lamentations and regrets — lamentations that she must live in Transylvania, regrets that she is not a boy instead of "a horrid stupid girl."

"I was not aware before that you had such a good idea of your own character," says her father, overhearing the last remark.

Even Flora feels that life at present lacks some zest. "How soon one can become demoralized!" she says. "It seems scarcely worth while to have cakes and ale when their loss leaves such a flatness behind them."

There are other cakes and ale in store for the Tyrrells at this moment, however — little as they suspect it. Several days have dragged their slow course by, and Minnie rises each morning, saying, "I wonder if Mr. Charlton and George will come to-day!" Instead of Charlton and George, there comes a letter from Sunderland, addressed to Colonel Tyrrell, and this is what it contains:

"Richmond, September 13th.

"My Dear Uncle: You will probably think me very much a will-o'-the-wisp when you glance at the top of this page, since my last letter to Flora was written from the lakes. We left there almost immediately after that epistle was dispatched, and traveled down through the Western cities to the mountains of Virginia. There I left the Prestons, and came here yesterday. Constant travel has slightly knocked me up, and I am lying over a day or two in order to rest and see some old friends. Then I shall come on directly to Transylvania. You would scarcely believe it, perhaps — I have been such a thorough prodigal — but I am homesick for a glimpse of its blue hills. Tell Flora so, with my dearest love. I suppose, from what I hear, that I shall still find Charlton with you. I hope my coming won't prove inconvenient. If you can stow me away in a corner, I will excuse the killing of a fatted calf.

"Yours, with affection,
"Henry Sunderland."

The rejoicing which takes place on receipt of this intelligence is tumultuous. "Harry is coming!" cry Minnie, Oscar, and Nellie, in chorus. The news is carried to the servants, whose sable faces glow with delight. Let his faults be what they may, Sunderland is one of Nature's princes — generous-hearted, open-handed, winning love and fealty from high and low. Only Flora looks a little disturbed and pale, and Colonel Tyrrell tries ineffectually to mask his pleasure by saying:

"What does the boy mean by writing nonsense about hoping his coming will not prove inconvenient? Does he think such a thing likely?"

CHAPTER XII

"How Should I Greet Thee?"

SUNDERLAND is coming! This is to Flora something so unexpected as to be almost overwhelming. Two months ago she would have received such an announcement as the best thing that could possibly be heard; but in the interval things have changed so much with her — she herself has seemed to change so much — that it is now confusing in the extreme, and, if she were honest with herself, she might add unwelcome.

But she is not honest with herself. She will not admit for an instant that Harry's appearance could possibly be unwelcome to her. She tries, indeed, to assure herself that she is, that she must be, glad that he is coming. Yet she knows in her heart that she is not glad, and she knows why she is not glad. Two months ago she longed to see him, because her trust in him had not been shaken — or, if shaken, it had not been shattered. The certainty of his love, in which for a time she had rested content, had been disturbed by vague fears and doubts, but these fears and doubts only made her long the more for the presence that would end them. Since that time everything has been altered. She has learned beyond doubt that he loves, she has even heard it confidently asserted that he is engaged to, another woman. For herself, she has been forced by these things to face the secret of her own heart, and she has even gone so far as to acknowledge that secret to Charlton. And now Harry is coming — Harry, whom she almost feels as if she could fly to the ends of the earth to avoid! He is coming, and she must meet him; she must be in all things exactly what she was of old; she must receive his confidences, and let him suspect nothing.

Meanwhile Sunderland makes no long tarrying — at Richmond or elsewhere — but follows his letter with rapidity, and arrives in Transylvania the second day after it. His reception almost amounts to an ovation. His prolonged absence, his carelessness, his faults of all kinds, are forgotten. He has come. That is enough for his loyal subjects.

It is enough, at least, for Colonel Tyrrell, for Minnie and Oscar and Nellie. Even Flora finds her strife of thought — her painful doubt and hesitation — partially swept away and forgotten. Sunderland is so entirely the Harry whom they all remember, the world has changed him so little, that the strange constraint with which we often face, after long absence, a once familiar friend, and feel that time has dug a gulf of change between us, is impossible with him. It has already been said that, with all her gentleness, Flora is not weak. She has braced herself for this meeting, and there is no betraying flush on her cheek, and no betraying tremor in her voice — only the old frank gladness in her eyes, the old frank affection in her tone.

"Harry, dear Harry, how good of you to come! — how glad I am to see you again!" she says, when she finds both her hands in the eager clasp of his.

"Good of me to come!" repeats Harry, with a laugh. "It is very good of *you*, Floy, to put the matter in that light. You don't know how glad I am to be back! There is no place in the world so dear to me as this — and none so pretty."

"Listen, papa, how he is trying to flatter us!"

"Flatter you!" says Sunderland. "I should as soon think of trying to paint the lily or gild refined gold."

Indeed, there can be no doubt that the young man is sincerely glad to be again among the familiar scenes of his boyhood. His is a nature volatile and impressionable in the extreme — a fact which constitutes half the secret of his popularity. He is so honest — for the moment — in the pleasant sentiments which he expresses, that people feel this honesty (as a mere sham never can be felt), and yield at once to its charm. Men who are very strong in their individuality rarely win so much personal regard as those who, like Sunderland, are quick to receive impressions and equally facile in losing them; to whom the moment is all-sufficient, and the interest of the moment supreme; who accommodate themselves to others, and swim lightly on the current of events.

So, for a little time, Flora's uncertainty is set at rest. She listens to Harry's gay voice telling all the wonderful things that have befallen him, and is almost inclined to ask herself if she is awake or dreaming. Is it "Yesterday come back, with its old things, and not To-day?" They are gathered in the familiar sitting-room, with the murmur of the river coming in on the soft breeze that stirs the green leaves outside the windows and the curtains within. Harry's handsome face is before her; she hears the ring of pleasure in her father's voice as he asks question after question. Is it because she has changed, that these things, which have not changed, strike her with a sense of incongruity? She is so little accustomed to self-analysis, that the question puzzles her, and while she is debating it Harry is saying:

"You have all altered wonderfully little. Minnie has become a young lady — or something very near one — and Oscar and Nellie are two or three sizes larger, but that is all. No doubt George is almost a man. And, by-the-by, what have you done with Charlton? When I came in, something was said about his having 'gone west.' What does that mean — Cherokee or California?"

"Cherokee in this instance," answers his uncle. "George has gone with him, and Brandon — you remember Frank Brandon?"

"I should think so indeed."

"They left here with a large party; but, instead of returning with them, went on to Cherokee — and elsewhere. Mr. Charlton is anxious to acquire as much information as possible about the country."

"He must like it. he has been here nearly two months, hasn't he?"

"He came the last of July," says Minnie, "and this is the middle of September. Yes — it's nearly two months. Floy, should you think it had been so long?"

"We have found him a very agreeable person," says Colonel Tyrrell, "and we are much obliged to you for introducing him, Harry."

"He's a capital fellow in his way," replies Harry, "and I thought it likely his way might suit you better than it would some other people. You have certainly suited *him*, or he would never have staid so long. What has been the principal attraction?"

He looks at Flora as he speaks, and Flora answers with a smile: "You have been so long out of Transylvania that you don't remember how many attractions it has. After you have renewed your acquaintance with them, you may not be so much surprised that Mr. Charlton has lingered."

"Do you think I am surprised? On the contrary, I know that Charlton has good taste; and nobody with good taste could fail to like Transylvania. If you think I have forgotten a single one of its attractions, I will prove to you that you are mistaken."

"Harry, we've got two of the prettiest colts you ever saw," cries Oscar. "Don't you want to come and look at'em?"

"Not just now," answers Harry. "We'll stroll out after dinner while I smoke a cigar."

After dinner they stroll out. Colonel Tyrrell accompanying them, and Sunderland shows such lively interest in, and recollection of, everything about the place, whether animate or inanimate, that the elder gentleman's heart warms.

Having made the tour of the home premises, he suggests that they take horses and go out on the plantation. But this Sunderland declines. "Another afternoon I shall like nothing better," he says, "but to-day you must excuse me. I have scarcely seen Flora yet, and I am anxious to renew our acquaintance."

So it happens that, half an hour later, the door of Flora's chamber opens, and a curled, shining head appears in the aperture. It is the head of Nellie, and it is Nellie's voice that speaks.

"Floy," she cries, "Harry says will you take a walk or a ride? He says whichever you please will suit him — and the horses are in the stable."

"Are they?" says Flora. "Tell Harry, then, I will ride with him at five o'clock."

She sighs a little after the eager messenger has departed. Of course this is one of the things to be expected — one of the things which she must necessarily endure — but, nevertheless, she shrinks from it. No sense of indignation occurs to her, as it might to another woman. She does not say to herself that Sunderland might have remained at Miss Preston's feet, and not come back to amuse himself again with playing at cousinly love. On the contrary, she thinks that it is she, and she only, who mistook that cousinly love for anything deeper. No doubt Sunderland has come to tell them of his engagement, and he treats her now as he treated her always — like a favorite sister.

At five o'clock she comes down in her habit, to find the horses before the door, and Sunderland idling in the hall.

"May I say how charming you look?" he says, coming up to her. "I always thought a habit the most becoming dress a woman could wear, and you are so graceful, so dainty. By Jove! how is it a man can ever be blind enough to admire an Amazon?"

"I thought you admired Amazons very much," says Flora.

"One has fits of abnormal bad taste occasionally, but it would not be just to hold one accountable for them."

"Perhaps not," she answers, with gentle sarcasm, "if it were possible to discover what are your normal tastes."

"You think me so fickle?"

"In some things — yes. But they are not very essential things," she says, looking up with a sudden, sweet smile. "I should never think of doubting your constancy where important matters are concerned."

"I must make you define what are important matters, before I can accept that in the light of an *amende*," he says, gayly.

Then they go out to the horses and mount. "How like old times this is!" says Sunderland, as they ride across the bridge. "But I suppose they scarcely seem old times to you. I have always observed that when time passes monotonously it also passes quickly."

"I don't know," answers Flora. "In some points of view it seems a long time since you were here last. Because life is quiet, it does not follow that it is monotonous."

"But life with you is full of regular occupation, and nothing helps the flight of time more than *that*. While I — ah! how long it seems since I rode by your side along this lovely valley! Was it always so pretty? It seems to me it has grown more beautiful since I went away."

"It has not changed in the least," answers Flora. "How could it?" As she speaks, her eyes are tenderly limpid. Let what will have come between them, Harry is Harry still. The breath of the world may have passed over him, but his heart is still loyal to the friends and the scenes of his youth. This thought sets her more at ease than she has felt yet. She looks at him with a smile. "How could it?" she says. "But I am glad that *you* have not changed, Harry — I mean I am glad that you can still find something to admire here."

"Something to admire!" says Harry. "By Jove! I find everything to admire. I have seen nothing so charming since I went away. And you seem to suit it so well. Flora. What a fool I have been to stay away so long!"

"I won't quarrel with that sentiment, since it has brought you back at last," says Flora.

Talking in this manner, they follow a road which skirts the great cornfields and leads them into the woods. O wild and beautiful forests, what words can describe your glory when the serene splendor of September has come upon you like a benediction? Some one has said very truly that "we admire the beauty of other lands, we feel that of our own;" and all in a moment, as it were, Sunderland realizes this. To his inmost heart he feels the chord of nativity thrill. He is no stranger here. There is scarcely a ravine among these hills, or a path over them, which he does not know as Rob Roy knew his native heath.

"What a fool I have been!" he says again with emphasis. "Floy, I wonder if you forgive me for my folly? I am half inclined to think you don't. You are gentle and sweet and cordial, but not what you used to be."

Flora does not blush at this. Some things are too deep for blushing. She only looks at him with her frank blue eyes, and answers quietly: "If I don't remember all that I used to be, Harry, you should not blame me. Two years make a chasm in one's life. But you must not think I have anything to forgive with regard to your having staid. Why should I have? I felt all the time — and told papa — that it was very natural."

"That was kind of you; but if you had wanted to see me, perhaps you would not have been so reasonable."

"Perhaps not," says Flora. She smiles a little — a smile he does not comprehend. "Whether I wanted to see you or not," she goes on, "I am glad that you are here, and that ought to satisfy you."

"It ought, certainly; but I suppose I am unreasonable. I should like you to make the assurance a little warmer — if you could conveniently do so."

"I am afraid you have been badly spoiled. I shall not think of making it warmer. Here we are on the top of the hill. See! This used to be one of your favorite views."

It is a charming view, and Sunderland admires it as much as his companion could possibly desire. "Broad extended, far beneath," lies the fertile valley — an Arcadia of peaceful loveliness — with its swelling background of wooded hills and azure peaks.

"I have seen nothing like it since I went away," says Sunderland — "nothing so wild, so beautiful, so fresh! Floy, I am half-minded never to go away again."

Flora laughs — a low, sad little laugh, though Sunderland's ear is not quick enough to catch its sadness. "You will think differently a month — perhaps even a week — hence," she says, turning her horse's head.

He turns his horse also, with a quick, impatient movement, and rides up to her side. "Such speeches are not like you," he says, "and I consider them very unkind. I must know why you have begun to think so poorly of me — to consider me so hopelessly fickle? Has Charlton been giving you his idea of my character?"

She looks at him with eyes half indignant, half reproachful. "How little you know me, Harry!" she says. "How little you could ever have known me, to ask such a thing! Do you think I would listen while any one — any one in the world — spoke ill of you? But I have not been tried, for Mr. Charlton has never said anything that was not good. I am sure that he is one of your best friends."

After this they converse amicably enough for some time, as they ride along with low red sunshine streaming through the brown boles of the trees, and their shadows stretching gigantically in front. They pause on the crest of a hill to watch the sun go down in glory — dipping behind the distant mountains, and leaving islands and continents of purest amethyst in a sea of dazzling gold, while over the sky above light feathery clouds of rose color, soft as an angel's plumage, float. Then they turn their horses' heads homeward, and it is then that Flora musters courage to say: "You have not mentioned Miss Preston yet, Harry. Don't you mean to tell me anything about her?"

Harry is surprised, and shows as much by changing color — a sign of confusion into which, "as a man of the world," he dislikes exceedingly to be betrayed. "What do you know about Miss Preston?" he asks.

"Nothing very much," she answers. "Only that you are said to be engaged to her; and when matters reach such a serious point as that, I think your old friends ought to know something of it."

"How in the name of all that is wonderful did any gossip of that description reach here?"

"I met a Miss Dupont at Caesar's Head, who knows Miss Preston very well. She told me that the affair was considered settled."

"Confound her!" says Harry, ungallantly. "She is a thorough-paced mischief-maker, and wrote any amount of gossip about *you* from Caesar's Head."

"Gossip about me!" says Flora, amazed. "To whom, pray?"

"To Miss Preston, who gave me the benefit of it."

"But what did she find to say of me?"

"Only that Charlton was 'most devoted' — and much more in that order."

"She must certainly have drawn on her imagination for the devotion," says Flora, quietly, "since to the best of my recollection she did not see me with Mr. Charlton at all."

"But she was aware that you went out with him to see a moonrise. In short, you were brought in guilty of a flirtation of the deepest dye, and therefore I expect you to be lenient to me when I confess my mild peccadilloes."

Flora remembers that moonrise — and all that was said then — so well that she cannot restrain a laugh which is compounded of various emotions, and which is more nervous than mirthful.

"Don't talk more nonsense than you can help, Harry," she says; "but tell me, are you engaged?"

"I will be obliging, and answer frankly — I am not. Since it is not the fashion for men to say what is untrue on that subject, I hope you will believe me."

"Believe you! I should think so, indeed. But I suppose you *will* be engaged — some time."

"I think it very likely — some time, as you say. But not to Miss Preston."

"Harry!"

"So you don't believe me! Well, I can't help it. A man can tell no more than the truth, if he is a truthful person."

They are riding down hill now, and their road leads between high banks, with such dense shade arching overhead that, although the colors of sunset still burn in the sky, their way is almost in twilight. Flora cannot see her companion's face, to judge whether or not he was in earnest; hence there is a strong spice of doubt in her tone when she answers:

"I hope you are truthful, but it was not always a virtue of yours. And how can you deny that you are — that you have been — in love with Miss Preston?"

"Confine your accusations to one tense, sweet cousin. I am not in love with Miss Preston now, whatever I may have been."

"And yet — O Harry! — you say that you are not fickle!"

"I do say it, and I mean to prove it — but not just now. Here we are at the foot of the hill; let us have a canter."

The horses are willing enough, and they sweep at a rapid pace through the rich bottom lands, surrounded by tall, rustling corn, with wafts of fragrance from the river-side borne to them on the fresh breeze, and golden stars beginning to gleam faintly in the violet sky above. They reach the bridge, cross it, and, still at a canter, ride up to the door of the house. Then, as Sunderland swings himself to the ground in order to lift his companion from her saddle, Nellie rushes out and proclaims at the top of her voice:

"O Floy, George and Mr. Charlton have come!"

CHAPTER XIII

"If She Be Not Fair To Me."

"And so," says Charlton, calmly, "you are off with the new love, and on with the old — is that it?"

The time is the day after Charlton's arrival; the hour is approaching noon; the place is Colonel Tyrrell's lawn. The two young men are lying on the warm, dry grass, with flickering shade falling over them. As they glance upward, they see one of the most charming sights in the world — depths of green foliage with sunlight striking through it, and patches of sky showing beyond. On these September days the sky is blue as the heart of a sapphire, and the far mountains look as if they were carved in lapis-lazuli. The river flowing over its rocky bed does no more than fill the silence with a soft, reposeful murmur. Sunderland, supporting himself on his elbow, looks at his companion, and thinks that he is provokingly calm; yet if the truth were known, Charlton is not very much in unison with his surroundings. He is angry, disgusted, contemptuous; but none of these things appear on the surface. He only regards Sunderland through half-closed eyes as he utters the words recorded above.

"I suppose that is about the sum of it," the young man answers. "I might do worse than be on with the old love, however; you've seen enough of Flora to grant that, I'm sure."

"I begin to think that you are a consummate young puppy to imagine that you can be on or off with women exactly when you like," says Charlton.

"You ought to know me better than that," Sunderland replies, flushing, but keeping his temper. "Nothing was farther from my thoughts than to imagine that I could be on or off with them as I liked. There's Gertrude Preston — by-the-by, I haven't told you about her yet."

"No. I imagine, however, that she grew tired of you, or vice versa."

"It would be putting it more correctly to say that we grew tired of each other. I had been drawn into offering myself before I received your letter setting my mind at rest about Flora, but of course it was a great relief to me. Gertrude accepted me — I never had much doubt about that — and we were engaged for several weeks. Now," says Mr. Sunderland, with an air of profound reflection, "it is a very disenchanting kind of thing to be engaged to a woman — almost worse than being married to her. With regard to marriage, there's something in a man's nature which makes him resign himself to the inevitable. But one has no sense of that kind about an engagement. You begin to feel grave doubts as to whether or not you have acted wisely, and you look at the lady far more coolly and critically than you ever did before. It is unnecessary to remark, perhaps, that not very many women can stand being looked at in that manner. Gertrude certainly could not. Before a fortnight had passed, my most active sensation when with her was a sense of boredom. I suppose I was not so devoted as I should have been, in consequence. She grew tired of *me* also. A rich Kentuckian whom we met at the lakes came in opportunely to cut the knot of our difficulty. She flirted with him. I ventured to express disapproval; she grew angry. I declined to recede from my position, whereupon she gave me my *cong é* I retired with a sense of great relief. And there ends the story."

Vexed as he is, Charlton cannot restrain a smile as he looks at the unruffled face of the speaker. "What a thorough epicurean you are!" he says. "Do you mean to go through life chasing every object that attracts your fancy, and tiring of it as soon as it is in your possession?"

"I consider that the fault is in the object or objects, not in me," returns Sunderland, placidly. "You are mistaken in thinking there is no constancy in my nature. I am like a man who left a star to follow an *ignis fatuus*. Now I have come back to my star."

"Meaning your cousin, I presume?"

"Meaning my cousin, of course. You don't understand women very well, Charlton; so I think you must have been mistaken when you decided that she did not care for me, save 'as a

cousin, cousinly.' I am certain that she cared for me in a different fashion two years ago; and women like Flora don't change readily."

"I suppose, then, that you intend to reward her supposed constancy by the offer of your heart and hand — for a week?"

"Don't be sarcastic, my dear fellow. If Flora accepts me, you may be sure I shall be constant to *her*."

"Why should I be sure of it? You haven't been constant to other women."

"They were not women who deserved, desired, or expected constancy. But Flora is different. How gentle yet how true she is!" says the young man, with his voice softening a little. "By Jove, Charlton, you may laugh if you like, but I have come to my senses at last, and I see now that my best chance in life is here; and I mean to win it if I can."

He rises as he speaks and goes away toward the river, leaving Charlton still lying on the grass. "Laugh!" repeats that gentleman. "'He laughs best who laughs last;' and I'm not likely to do that. After all, it may be for the best. She deserves a better fate, but *che sar à sar à*."

Fortifying himself with this bit of philosophy, he remains for several minutes in unmolested quiet, until a shadow falls over him; and, removing his gaze from the depths of green and gold overhead, he finds that Sunderland has returned and is standing by his side.

"Charlton," he says, in an insinuating tone, "you've been here two months now, and you ought to have learned a good deal about Flora. What do you think of the chances for me?"

"Unless I am mistaken," answers Charlton, "you expressed a very poor opinion of my judgment with regard to women, a few minutes ago."

"It may be better than I fancied."

"Accordingly as it suits you or not. Thanks; but in the present case I have no opinion to offer."

"Look here," says Sunderland — and his voice has suddenly become grave — "are you in love with her yourself?"

"Do you fancy that, because you are giddy, the world turns round?"

"That's no answer at all — and, by Jove! I believe that you are in love with her!"

Charlton deliberately raises himself from the grass, picks up his straw hat, and says, with a sigh: "If you are determined to discuss the subject, you can at least come out of earshot range of the house. There is no saying how much of a nuisance a man in your position may make himself, but at least he need not be overheard. Let us go down to the river."

So down the gentle slope of the lawn they stroll to where the river flows idly by under its drooping shade.

"Now," says Charlton, as he finds himself with his companion in the same green dell where he sat with Flora one evening and felt sure that she cared nothing for her cousin in the way that cousin imagined, "you asked me a question a minute ago which you had no right to ask, but which I shall answer nevertheless. You asked if I am in love with your cousin. I answer candidly — yes."

Sunderland, notwithstanding his suspicions, is so much astonished by this reply, that he does not even say "By Jove!" but only stares.

"Are you in earnest?" he asks, after a minute. "I did not really think that a man of the world like you would fall in love with a girl like Flora. I thought you might have flirted, but in love —"

"Do I look like a man who flirts?" asks Charlton, with contemptuous severity. "And you ought to know Miss Tyrrell better than to associate such an idea with her, when I tell you that I asked her to marry me three weeks ago."

Harry's familiar expletive comes to his aid now. He says "By Jove!" with emphasis.

"I tell you this," Charlton goes on with the utmost coolness, "in order that you may not misinterpret anything that you may observe in your cousin's manner to me. I also feel that I owe you a slight explanation. I came here charged, as you know, with a very difficult and delicate

mission. I was commissioned to sound Miss Tyrrell's heart and let you know how much of a place you had won therein. I performed this task to the best of my ability, and gave you what I honestly believed to be the result."

"Yes," says Harry, "but — you'll excuse me — did not your own desires color that result? In other words, didn't you *think* what you *hoped*?"

"At that time I hoped nothing. My interest in your cousin was no deeper than friendly admiration. When I learned that she was fancy-free, however, my own fancy grew, until it ended as I have told you."

"And she rejected you?"

"Yes — very kindly, but decidedly."

"By Jove!" remarks Harry once more.

Then there is silence for several minutes. The younger man is amazed by what he has heard, and there can be no doubt that Flora rises in his opinion by the fact that she has brought to her feet the impassive Charlton — and rejected him. It is a triumph which Harry appreciates more than she was able to do. He knows that since the young writer has become noted, more than one fashionable woman with a *penchant* for "clever men" has endeavored to throw her toils over him, and failed signally. Consequently, Charlton has won for himself in certain drawing-rooms the reputation of a well-bred bear. And this bear Flora has the distinction of having tamed. Sunderland — like most men — feels justified in his choice when he finds that it is also the choice of another man. He feels sure that Flora could have had but one reason for rejecting Charlton, and that reason must have been a partiality for himself. Charlton reads his thoughts and smiles a little. "The comedy will soon be ended," he thinks, "but I shall leave before the closing scene of clasped hands and tender vows."

Meanwhile there is some important matter afoot in the household this morning — at least as far as the younger members are concerned. Minnie and the boys seclude themselves in a mysterious manner, while Nellie flits to and fro with a face of grave importance. The cause of this transpires at dinner, when every one finds in his or her napkin a three-cornered note. These missives are all alike, and contain the following, in Minnie's large, straggling writing:

"You are invited to attend a gypsy supper, which will be given this afternoon at Glen Flora, at 5 p. M. punctually."

There is a general laugh, and Charlton asks where Glen Flora may be situated, and by whom it was so felicitously named.

"By Harry," answers Miss Tyrrell. "It is a lovely glen where we used to go for all festivities of this kind when we were children."

"And will you all come?" asks Nellie, anxiously addressing the company.

"I, for one, will certainly do myself that honor," answers Charlton.

Flora, Sunderland, and Mr. Martin, respond to the same effect. Only Colonel Tyrrell excuses himself from attending, and mildly expresses a hope that he may have some tea at his usual hour, and in his usual manner.

The earlier hours of the afternoon pass as usual. Flora escapes to the sanctuary of her own chamber — ostensibly for siesta. Charlton goes to his room and turns the key — ostensibly for writing. Colonel Tyrrell lies on the lounge in the hall, and snores virtuously. Sunderland, left to his own devices, wanders about aimlessly, drums a little on the piano, and dips into one or two magazines. Minnie is busily employed in sending well-laden messengers to Glen Flora, whither she herself goes at four o'clock. At half-past four the invited guests assemble in the hall. Flora comes down in a pretty blue muslin that is very becoming, with a broad-brimmed straw hat shading her face. She smiles and says, "It is time to start, since we were requested to be punctual."

How it chances — whether from accident or not — Charlton does not know, but he finds himself by her side as they pass out of the house, and he has no opportunity to rectify the mistake, if mistake it is, by falling back. Perhaps he has little desire to do so. Flora shows by a certain gentle eagerness of manner that she is not ill-pleased with his companionship, and there is a charm in hers which he appreciates as much as ever. The flower-like eyes, the quick sympathy, the wistful, tender voice will be Sunderland's for life; so the man who must soon say farewell to them forever feels that he may, without harming any one, enjoy them for a little while. He strolls by her side, therefore, along the river bank, which they follow for some distance. Then the path turns abruptly and leads them among the hills. Long lances of sunlight stream into the green stillness of the forest. All manner of sweet resinous odors greet them. Through the winding gorge which they enter, a tumultuous stream comes in white, foaming rapids. Presently they pass around the jutting shoulder of a great hill, and then a pretty sight is before them.

The gorge has expanded into a lovely glen, overhung on all sides but one by steep, precipitous hills, the sides of which are a mass of verdure, a riotous tangle of vines and flowers. At the base of the steepest of these heights, a spring gushes up from among gray rocks — the head of the stream which takes its way through the gorge. Large masses of rock are scattered in every direction, cushioned with moss, draped with ferns. On one of these — a smooth, flat boulder — the table is set. At a little distance a bright fire burns, over which a kettle is suspended. Minnie and Oscar are hovering around this, busily engaged making tea; George, at a little distance, is cutting lemons for lemonade; Jack is pounding the lemons preparatory to their being cut; while Nellie is assisting (and hindering) both parties as much as possible. The smoke mounts upward among the green boughs, a pretty pale-blue thread; the crystal water flashes like

“a Naiad's silvery feet,
In quick and coy retreat,”

as it ripples by; the amber sunshine streams on the hillsides, lighting up the rich foliage and massive rocks, while the glen rests in cool green shadow. The whole scene is charming and picturesque in the extreme.

"So this is Glen Flora!" says Charlton. "What a lovely place! Why have you never brought me here before?"

"There have been so many places to show you," Flora answers, "that I never thought of this. Well, Minnie, I hope we are not too early?"

"Oh no," replies Minnie; "tea will be ready in a few minutes. Nellie, bring some more twigs to the fire. This kettle is not boiling as it ought."

"Let us sit down and wait for the kettle to boil," says Flora.

So they sit down on a rock, and for ten minutes longer Charlton enjoys his bit of pleasure undisturbed, looks in the fair face that is not fair for him, and listens to the sweet voice that will never utter the words he wishes to hear. Then Sunderland appears round the corner of the hill, and the pleasure is over. He comes up and throws himself down on the ferns at Flora's feet. Charlton rises, feeling that his hour is over, says a few words, and then walks away, leaving the cousins together.

One of them, at least, is grateful for this consideration. Harry looks up in the blue eyes above him and says: "How pleasant this is, Floy! Do you feel it as well as I? Are you glad that we are here again — together?"

His voice drops over the last words into a tender key. With the best intentions possible, he is not averse to practising on his cousin the art which a two years' training in flirtation has given him — the great art of implying in tone and look infinitely more than is expressed in words. He learned this lesson very quickly, and is now regarded as an adept in the science. There can be no doubt, however, that at present he has made a grave mistake. Flora, who is ready to renew the frank kindness, the cousinly familiarity of their old association, draws back from such glances

and cadences as these. She understands them — the dullest woman alive must have understood them — and it seems to her that their meaning is very plain; that Harry wishes to amuse himself by flirting with her — feeling, no doubt, that this amusement is better than none. A quick throb of indignation, a quick sensation of wounded pride, passes over her; but she is self-possessed enough to keep all traces of such emotions out of her tone as she answers:

"Of course I am glad that you are back again; but I should think that all this would be very dull and uninteresting to you. A gypsy supper must seem like tea after champagne to one who has known gayer festivities."

"The gayer festivities have bored me a hundred times — which no gypsy supper ever did," says Harry. "If you knew how happy it makes me to be here with you now, you would not say such unkind things."

"I did not mean to be unkind. It did not seem to me a very terrible accusation that pastoral pleasures might have lost their savor to you."

"How could they — when all the best happiness of my life is connected with them?"

"The best happiness of your life!" She laughs. "My dear Harry, do you know for two days together what is the happiness of your life?"

"Flora!" says Harry. He is so much surprised, that he scarcely remembers that he has a right to be indignant. "What do you mean? By Jove, I never heard anything —"

"Supper's ready — come to supper, Floy!" cries Nellie, darting forward.

Flora rises at once — by no means ill pleased with the interruption — and, accompanied by Harry, goes to the rock which serves as a table, where the rest are gathered. Charlton is the only laggard; but before Minnie has finished pouring out the cups of tea, he appears with two or three flowers in his hand.

"I saw these on the hill yonder," he says to Flora, "and remembering that you said they were rare, and that you wanted a specimen, I got them for you."

"Thank you," she says, receiving them with a grateful glance. "It was very kind of you to remember what I said, and to climb that steep hill. They are beautiful."

"They are the tribute of the glen to its goddess," says Harry, gallantly.

"I like better to think that they are the fruit of Mr. Charlton's kindness," says Flora, looking at that gentleman.

And he, meeting the frank sweet eyes, thinks again how fair she is, how gracious, how tender — and how far beyond his reach!

CHAPTER XIV

"Under The Greenwood Bough."

The gypsy supper is a great success, if success be gauged by the appetites of the company. Sandwiches and cold chicken, jellies and cakes, disappear with rapidity. Minnie's tea is pronounced excellent, and George's lemonade is commended. A bottle of claret is opened, and various toasts are proposed. There is some mock speech-making and much merriment — the last, probably, in undue proportion. When hearts are light and spirits high, when summer skies are fair and summer woods green, who can wonder at the laugh which is quick to follow the poorest jest?

"Oh, a life in the woods is the life for me,
And that is the life for a man!
Let others boast of their home on the sea,
But match me the woods if you can!"

sings George, who is slightly exhilarated by the claret. "Mr. Charlton, do you like this better than roughing among the Balsams?"

"Do you?" inquires Charlton.

"Not I," answers the young fellow gayly. "Bear-meat and venison are better than all your dainties. Miss Minnie."

"I'm sure you needn't sneer at my dainties," says Minnie. "You have done full justice to them."

Presently the last rays of sunlight disappear from the crest of the hills, and then the little party agree that it is time to think of preparing to go home. Flora rises and walks to the spring. She has not been here before since Harry went away, and it seems to her as if all the changes which the intermediate time has wrought are mirrored in the crystal water at her feet — water in which she saw her face last when it was two years younger. She bends and looks at it now, a little wistfully; and as she does so, another face suddenly appears, reflected beside her own. The last time that she bent over the water in this way, it was Harry's that she saw — now it is Charlton's! The accident startles her, as trivial things of the kind often do startle those least inclined to regard them. She turns quickly.

"How did you come here?" she asks. "I heard no step. You — you surprised me very much."

"I beg pardon," says Charlton — who sees, to his surprise, that she is seriously moved — "I did not think of surprising you. I approached, and seeing you looking into the water, I looked also involuntarily. I ought to have remembered that you could not hear my step on this soft turf, and would therefore be startled at seeing my face."

"Pray excuse me — I should not have spoken so hastily," she says, blushing. "I am not often nervous, but — I was nervous just then."

"And I was to blame. Don't think of it any more. I came to ask you if you can climb that hill to see the sunset. I am sure there must be a fine view from the top."

"I — don't think I can," she answers hesitatingly. A sense of constraint with Charlton comes over her — why, she scarcely knows. Perhaps the cause is in a look she catches on Sunderland's face — a look of restrained yet significant intelligence; or perhaps it comes from that accidental reflection in the spring. It is difficult to say how the feeling originates, but it certainly exists, as she says: "The ascent is very steep, and I believe I am tired."

"I thought it might be too steep for you," Charlton says, "but *I* shall try it. Judging from these clouds floating above, the sunset must be gorgeous."

He goes off without saying anything more, and Flora thinks again — as she has thought before — that his tact and consideration are perfect. Then she accuses herself of having been brusque and unkind for no reason whatever, and so sits down depressed and despondent. She sees Charlton, Mr. Martin, and the rest begin the ascent of the hill. Sunderland does not accompany them. He saunters, instead, up to her.

"You must be surely out of practice, Floy, to consider that hill too steep for climbing," he says. "I am sure you used to climb it like a deer."

"No, I am not out of practice," answers Flora; "but I don't feel like the exertion — that is all."

"Neither do I — since you don't," he says, with a well-satisfied air, seating himself on the rocks by her side.

At this moment it chanced that Charlton turns his head and glances down into the glen. He did not turn to look at Flora, but she feels as if he did. It suddenly occurs to her that he will think she staid to be with Sunderland, and the thought sends the blood in warm tide to her face. "Pray go, Harry!" she says, in an almost imploring tone. "I cannot bear to think that you are depriving yourself of the sunset to stay with me."

"But suppose I would rather stay with you?" says Harry, composedly. "You credit me with more taste for sunsets than I possess."

"You said yesterday that you admired them exceedingly."

"So I do when you are with me. You don't surely need to be reminded of those lines in your favorite song:

"We feel how the blest charms of Nature improve
When we see them reflected in eyes that we love."

"I wish you would not talk in that way!" says Flora, with impatience. "It is nonsense — and I don't like nonsense!"

"Then you've changed amazingly," says Harry. "But what I said was not nonsense at all. That is your mistake."

"Oh, well, I don't care to argue about it. Go, like a good boy, and look at the sunset."

"I'll go if you will come, or if you seriously want to be rid of me; but, honestly, I don't care a fig for the sunset."

"I don't think you have improved in taste since you went away," says Flora, who has decided that to follow with Harry will be (in Charlton's eyes) exactly the same as if she remained at the spring with him. Of course none of this consideration would be necessary but for the memory of her unfortunate confession at Caesar's Head — unfortunate, because she fancies that Charlton interprets all her actions now in the light of it.

"You are mistaken again," says Harry, in answer to her last speech. "My taste is neither worse nor better than it was when I went away. I should have taken your society in preference to a sunset then, just as I take it now."

"Your memory of things before you went away is better than mine," says Flora — not quite sincerely, it is to be feared. "See the sunset radiance on those clouds yonder! Is it not beautiful?"

"Very fine!" says Harry, glancing carelessly at the refulgent masses of cumulous vapor. "But I wonder if you mean what you say? I wonder if my memory is better than yours of some things that occurred before I went away?"

"Very likely it is," says Flora, outwardly calm in exact proportion to her inward disturbance — a rare and happy faculty which some temperaments possess.

"Turn your head," says Harry, "and you will see on the beech behind you the record of something which I at least have never forgotten. Do you mean that you have done so?"

Flora does not turn her head, but she knows what he means. On the silvery beech-bark are carved the initials of their names, encircled by a true-lover's knot. How well she remembers the last day they were here together, when, with eyes filled with tears, she watched him carve it! There was nothing explicitly said — but how well they understood each other! "The tree will be our witness," Harry had said. And now they are once more here together, with the silent yet eloquent tree flinging its rustling depths of shade over them. And Flora looks at him and says, "That was childish folly. Why do you speak of it?"

"Childish folly!" he repeats. "By Jove! we were rather mature children. You were eighteen and I was twenty-two. If that is not old enough for one to know one's own mind —"

He stops suddenly, for she extends her hand and lays it on his arm. "Hush, Harry!" she says. "This is folly which has not childishness to excuse it. You did not know your own mind then any more than you know it now. Don't think I mean to say anything harsh. No doubt you will be stable enough some day; but the time for it has not come yet. That is all."

"That is *not* all!" says Harry, who is rousing out of his usual sunny-tempered calm to absolute indignation. "You must not think that I am to be set down like a schoolboy in that fashion. I don't mean to defend my conduct — I know I have acted like a fickle fool — but a man is often forced to learn what is true by testing what is false. I have learned. I was certain of that

before I saw you — I am more certain now. I would not try to bind you by a promise before I went away, because I was not sure of myself. Now I *am* sure, and now — with our beech-tree for witness again — I beg, Flora, dear Flora, for your promise. Your promise, do I say? I beg for yourself!"

"O Harry!" says Flora. For a moment it is all that she can say. She turns away her face, that he may not see the tears which gather so thickly in her eyes that she cannot distinguish a feature of the landscape. A little while ago they would have been tears of joy — now they are tears of a strange, sad regret that this, which might once have meant happiness, has been delayed too late. Harry, who has very confident anticipations of what her answer will be, is greatly astonished when, with something like a sob, she says, "You might have spared me this."

"What is there in it that I might have spared you?" he asks. "Surely you knew it long ago. I loved you with all my heart when I went away, and held myself as much bound to you as if we had exchanged vows as betrothed lovers."

"Harry!" she says again — but the tone of her voice is changed now. She turns and looks at him. Tears are still hanging on her lashes, but in the dewy eyes there is a startled gleam. "Harry," she says, gravely, "I don't think you know what you are saying. It is impossible that you could have felt yourself in any manner bound to me when you went away."

"By Heaven, I did!" cries Harry. "And I considered that in the same manner you were bound to *me*."

"I think not," answers Flora, calmly. "I am glad to think that we were not bound in the least. I have done you the justice to remember that always, Harry; and you do yourself injustice when you try to make me believe differently."

"I suppose you are thinking of Miss Preston," says Harry, feeling, with a sudden thrill of recollection, that he has overshot his mark and said a little too much.

"Yes, of Miss Preston," Flora answers. "I should not like to believe that you felt yourself in any manner bound to me when you were in love with — perhaps engaged to — her. It would not have been treating either of us very fairly, do you think? But I am sure you could not have done such a thing. It is only because you are here — in the midst of scenes which revive old fancies — that you imagine anything of the kind."

"I am not so volatile as you suppose," says Harry, injured and obstinate. "I did feel myself bound to you, and I should not have made a fool of myself with Gertrude Preston if I had not been assured of your indifference to — old fancies."

"My indifference!" says Flora, with a gasp. "How could you possibly be assured of that?"

Harry hesitates. He is confused at the unexpected turn which the conversation has taken, and for the life of him he cannot decide whether it is better to be reticent or candid. But he is aware that Flora regards his last assertion incredulously, and he is anxious to make her understand with what high-minded virtue he has acted.

"If you must know," he answers, finally, "I told Charlton, when he came here, to discover if possible how you felt toward me; and he wrote positively that he was sure you only cared for me as a —"

He breaks off abruptly, for Flora's face tells him what a blunder he has made. Never has he seen it wear such a look before. The blue eyes expand, and flash on him a glance in which amazement, indignation, and scorn are mingled. Then she rises, before he can say one word to detain her, and walks away.

Not far. Only to where one of the surrounding hills shelves down in an abrupt cliff, and where there is an escarpment that she knows well — a flowery ledge on which she formerly loved to climb and sit. She bends her face down on this, and bursts into such passionate tears of anger, and grief, and mortification, as have never come from her eyes before. It seems almost more than she can bear! That Harry should have cared for her so little as to send a stranger to pry into the most sacred secret of her heart; and that this stranger should have been Charlton, to whom she

confessed everything! There are no words to describe the resentment, the sense of having been deceived and outraged, which possesses her!

"Flora," says Harry, coming to her side full of the deepest concern, "what have I done or said that you should treat me like this? I can explain everything. If you will only listen —"

"Listen!" she says, drawing back from the touch of his hand. "I have heard more than enough already — far more than I can ever forget. Go, Harry. There is nothing to be explained. I see it all. You fancied your honor was bound to me, and you wanted to be set free. Ah, if you had only trusted me, if you had only written one word, if you had only spared me an indignity I can never forget or forgive — As it is, there is nothing to be said. Pray go, and leave me alone."

"Go and leave you angry with me, like this! That is asking too much. Flora, on my honor, I never thought such things as you fancy. I wanted to know the truth, and —"

"And you had not courage enough to ask me for it!" she says, turning her face around with an absolute blaze of scorn and indignation in her eyes.

"How could I ask you for it? There are some things a man cannot ask."

"Then he should be ashamed to send another man — like a spy — to discover them."

"Flora!" says Harry. He is amazed to the degree of absolute consternation. In his wildest dreams he never imagined such capabilities of passion in his gentle cousin as she is now displaying. "What a fool I was to say anything about the matter!" he thinks.

But this thought — like many wise and witty ones — comes too late to be of service. Flora takes her hat, and ties it on with trembling hands. Then she says, "I am going home."

"Of course, I shall come with you," he answers.

"No," she says; "I beg that you will not. I prefer to go alone."

"Are you so angry with me?" he asks. "Floy, this is not like you," he goes on, taking one of the small, tremulous hands. "In all our quarrels you never refused to forgive me when I begged — as I do now — for pardon."

She draws her hand from his clasp and darts away, leaving the glen now as she left it two years before — in tears.

Harry does not wait to be assailed by the questions of the party descending the hill. He follows Flora — keeping her figure in sight until she reaches the familiar river-path. Then he turns into a pine hollow, throws himself at length on the carpet of dry and fragrant needles, lights a cigar, and proceeds to meditate.

CHAPTER XV

"Oh, My Cousin, Shallow-Hearted."

Flora is not seen again that evening. When the others reach the house, they are informed that she has retired to her room with a severe headache. This is felt on all sides to be singular, since she is seldom a victim of this common feminine malady; but only Charlton suspects of what cause the headache may be an effect. Indeed, his suspicion is resolved into a certainty by Sunderland's absence. After the merriment of the afternoon, general lassitude is the order of the evening, and most of the party are assembled on the piazza in the broad, lustrous moonlight when that young gentleman is finally seen slowly approaching the house.

"Well, Harry," says Colonel Tyrrell, as he drops into a chair, without uttering a word, "we began to think that you had turned gypsy in earnest. Where have you been all this time?"

"Smoking on the river-bank," answers Harry. "It is very pleasant there just now. The current is so clear and placid, I was half -minded to go in for a swim."

"Just the thing!" says George eagerly. "We'll try it at bedtime — and sleep like tops afterward."

"Some of us will sleep like tops without it," says Minnie with a yawn. "Harry, what gave Floy a headache? We left her in the glen with you, and the first thing we are told when we come home is that she has gone to her room with a headache."

"I am sorry to hear it," answers Harry; "but I am unable to imagine what could have given her a headache — unless it was some of George's jokes."

"I don't think they were heavy enough for that," says George, good-naturedly. "But what made you both disappear so fast when you saw us coming?"

"Because we wanted a quiet walk," replies Harry, who has as little regard for veracity — when veracity does not answer his purpose — as any other man.

Soon after, the boys go away for a swim, inviting Harry to accompany them. He declines. "It would be pleasant," he says, "if it were not for the exertion required; but I feel too indolent for that." So he remains, lying idly back in his chair, and bearing no part in the conversation which the other gentlemen sustain. This conversation is not very absorbing in its nature, and presently Mr. Martin follows the boys. At ten o'clock Colonel Tyrrell, according to his usual custom, retires; and then Sunderland speaks:

"I don't suppose you are inclined to go to your virtuous slumbers at such an hour as this, Charlton. Come, let us stroll down to the river. I've a few words to say to you."

"I may as well light another cigar, then," says Charlton with a slight sigh.

The cigar is lighted, and they take their way, in the balmy white moonlight, toward the bridge. On it they pause. The river flows below with glancing light on every ripple; the trees droop motionless with glistening leaves; the wide-spreading fields, the hills, the mountains, all stand distinct — yet glorified — in the silver radiance. The beauty of the night makes Charlton recollect much such another. "A month ago I was on Caesar's Head," he thinks; and as he thinks it, his companion's tones break on the soft stillness.

"I made an awful blunder this afternoon, Charlton. I wonder if you can imagine what it was?"

"Not much difficulty about that," Charlton answers. "You offered your hand and your heart, and anything else you had about you, to your cousin — too precipitately."

"What do you mean by too precipitately?"

"You know what I mean. You have been away two years, and you have been in love with another woman. You ought to have effaced those facts from her memory before you fired a declaration like a broadside at her."

"I did not think of firing a declaration like a broadside," says Sunderland, slightly piqued. "I only spoke of the past. It was almost impossible to avoid doing so in that glen."

"There was no harm in doing so," remarks the Mentor, rolling out a cloud of smoke.

"It would seem not; but harm came of it, as you shall hear." Then he relates with sufficient accuracy all that occurred in the glen, not omitting the crowning blunder when he told Flora that he had commissioned Charlton to report how much she cared for him.

At this Charlton takes his cigar from his mouth and looks at the speaker with amazement, "By Heaven, Sunderland!" he says; "you don't seriously mean that you told her that?"

"Yes, I do!" answers Sunderland. "Of course it was a blunder, and one which, if I had been cooler, I should never have committed; but it came altogether from my eagerness to explain my entanglement with Gertrude Preston."

"I could not have conceived that you were such a fool!" says Charlton, relieving his feelings by flinging his cigar into the river.

Sunderland does not resent this plain speaking. On the contrary, he agrees that he was a fool, and says as much with despondent humility. Then he describes the manner in which Flora received the information, and Charlton feels that she must have been moved in no ordinary manner to display so much passion and indignation.

"To think that, after all these years, you should know your cousin no better than that!" he says. "Why, I — I, in two months — have learned to understand her better."

"You've had nothing to do but study her," says Sunderland impatiently, "and you are an observer of character by trade. But I ought to have known better on general principles. I confess that."

"It is rather late to confess it," says the other, grimly. "Unless I am very much mistaken, you have done more mischief than you can readily mend."

"Do you think so?" asks Sunderland. "I don't believe Flora will bear malice — she never did."

"Bear malice—stuff! Who is talking of bearing malice? She'll forgive you, no doubt; but she will not forget such a wound to her heart, or such an insult to her pride. And you must needs draw me into the matter — as if it was not enough that I undertook such a fool's errand simply to oblige you!"

"It doesn't matter about you," says Sunderland, indifferently. "If she has refused you, there's no reason to care what she thinks of you, I'm sure."

"That is your idea, is it? But to my mind there is something in the world besides love-making; and I should have liked to keep Flora Tyrrell as my friend."

"And do you honestly think she'll resent the matter so very much?"

"I am convinced that she will. What *your* chances may be with her after this, I don't pretend to say; but unless she is very unlike other women, she will never forgive me."

And this is not merely an utterance of the moment, but remains an opinion firmly fixed in Charlton's mind. After he has at length got rid of Harry, and faces the matter coolly in the solitude of his own chamber, it is more than ever the conclusion to which his reflections point. He knows enough of Flora to understand how deeply she is wounded, how slow she will be to condone such an offense; but he also fancies that he knows enough of women in the abstract to predicate with certainty that she will finally pardon the man she loves, and will visit all the strength of her indignation on the man she does not love — the man who (she may possibly fancy) gave the advice that kept Harry away, in order that the field might be clear for his own suit.

The next morning astonishment fills the household that Flora does not appear at breakfast. Minnie takes her place, and answers all inquiries by saying that "Floy does not feel well enough to come down. She is feverish and has a sore throat."

"Just what I expected!" says Colonel Tyrrell, while Charlton and Sunderland exchange a quick glance. "Now, don't let me hear of any more gypsying nonsense! There is no possible reason why supper should be better, eaten on the ground than on a table."

The day wears away in rather dull fashion. Minnie informs every one that "Floy has a dreadful headache," so all sounds are subdued; and as Charlton sits in his own room writing, he could almost fancy that the house is deserted or under a spell. Usually the boys laugh and whistle and bound up and down-stairs, Nellie's voice is heard, Minnie sings, the notes of the piano sound. Now an occasional careful footstep is all that is heard. In the afternoon — Flora being still reported "feverish" — George goes over to Brevard and returns with a doctor. This gentleman speaks lightly of the malady. "Some cold — a slight fever — nervous system disordered," is the amount of his diagnosis. He prescribes accordingly, and departs.

Flora's indisposition — which is very real, though not very severe — continues for several days. By this time September is well advanced, and although summer gives no sign of drawing her reign to an end, Charlton feels that he must go. Already he has delayed his departure far beyond his original intention, and now he tells himself that he only waits to see Flora once more, to touch her hand, to look into her eyes, to say if possible one word in his defense, and then to make the wrench of departure. At least he tells himself this, until a day comes when something suggests that perhaps it would be better if he went without such leave-taking; and the result of the thought is that Nellie brings to the side of the couch on which Flora lies, pale and languid, the following note:

"My Dear Miss Tyrrell:

"It becomes daily more necessary that I should tear myself away from this pleasant resting-place, and go back to the world and to work. I should like to have the satisfaction of bidding you a personal farewell. But it has lately struck me that perhaps you had rather be spared such a last tax upon your kindness. If this is the case, may I beg you to say so frankly? I hope you know me well enough to be aware that I could not misinterpret anything you might say or do, but that, with best wishes for your speedy recovery, I am always

Faithfully yours,
"Geoffeey Charlton."

The answer to this is short but satisfactory:

"Dear Mr. Charlton:

"I shall be truly sorry if you leave before I am well enough to see you. I hope to come down to-morrow.

Yours sincerely,
"Flora Tyrrell."

Flora is as good as her word, and comes down the next day. She looks frail and white, and more as if she had passed through a long illness than a trifling indisposition. On some temperaments the sickness of a day or an hour leaves such traces as these; but they are generally temperaments that rally as quickly as they fail. There is an undefinable change of expression on Flora's face that makes Charlton realize that *her* sickness has been more of the mind than the body. The eyes — which seem to have grown larger — are also graver, the tender lips are more firm, the gentle manner a shade more reserved. It is only to Sunderland and himself that this reserve is perceptible; and to them it is so delicately marked that men of duller perceptions would not observe it.

They observe it, however, and each wonders how much the other is conscious of it. The family are assembled in the sitting-room after breakfast, and Flora says with a smile:

"I have been in solitary confinement long enough to feel that it is agreeable to enter society once more. If I were sufficiently strong, I would make a speech of thanks for all the kind attentions I have received. As it is, you must all be good enough to believe that I am very grateful for your birds and fish and other pleasant things."

"We tried to get all we could for you," says Oscar, constituting himself spokesman for the party. "Harry shot the birds."

"And they were excellent," says Flora, looking at Harry.

"I am glad you liked them," he answers a little diffidently. "I find that I am out of practice as a sportsman, but I tried a gun in your behalf."

"We must get up a deer-hunt, Harry," says George. "Fanshaw was speaking to me about it yesterday. What a pity that Mr. Charlton is going away so soon!"

"Are you going soon, Mr. Charlton?" Flora asks.

"I have made my arrangements to leave to-morrow," he answers, "and this time I think that I shall certainly go."

"If you'll wait a week longer, Charlton, I'll go with you," says Harry. "After all, you know there is no need for haste."

"Not the least need as far as you are concerned," answers Charlton. "I can best judge of the necessity in my own case, however."

"I was not aware that you were thinking of leaving so soon, Harry," says Colonel Tyrrell, with his brow clouding.

"Oh," says Harry, "I only came for a glimpse of you all. Having had that, I might as well take flight again."

"Harry is bored, papa," says Minnie. "That is what is the matter."

"In that case, perhaps the best thing that he can do will be to go," says Colonel Tyrrell, rising and walking away.

"It is rather a dangerous business that of attempting to interpret what you don't understand, Minette," says Harry, quietly. "Now, Flora, this is not very interesting. Can we do or say anything to amuse you? Should you like some reading?"

"Very much," answers Flora, who just now prefers anything to conversation.

"What will you read?" asks Charlton.

"'The Earthly Paradise,' I suppose," answers Sunderland, going to the table and taking up a volume of that poem.

He returns to his seat, opens the book, and begins to read in his pleasant, well-modulated voice. By degrees the circle diminishes — as, perhaps, he intended that it should. The boys soon depart, Nellie slips away, and presently Minnie is summoned to some housekeeping duty. Only Charlton is left, and he does not long play the part of Monsieur de Trop. He waits until Sunderland finishes the story which he is reading; then he rises to excuse himself, and leaves the room.

"By Jove! how glad I am that they are gone!" says Harry, closing the book at once. "Now, Floy, you must be very good to me in order to atone for all the anxiety that I have endured during these last four or five days."

The tug of war comes now. Flora knows it, but she does not shrink. Perhaps she has prepared herself for this. At least the grave blue eyes meet Sunderland's very calmly as she says: "Why have you been enduring anxiety? I do not understand for what I have to atone."

"You do not have to atone for anything," he answers. "If there is atonement to be made, it falls on me. And I am ready to make any that will cause you to forget my folly, and will give me your trust again. Floy, I am going to tell my whole story to you — everything that has occurred since I went away. Will you listen?"

"Yes," she answers, gently, "I will listen to anything you wish to tell me."

So, bending a little closer, he begins to tell his story. That he tells it well — making the very best of it in every way, without tangibly transgressing truth in any particular — it is impossible to deny. By a few strokes he sketches himself with a great deal of skill, conveying the impression that his fancy alone wandered, while his heart remained true, making his listener realize the flattered vanity, the superficial admiration, which he regarded for a little while as his love for Miss Preston. Then he touches on the delicate ground of his commission to Charlton; tells, with suitable reservation, how it was given and how executed; describes the rapid cooling of his passion for the woman to whom he was engaged, and then — half unconsciously — betrays that it was Miss Dupont's letter which turned his thoughts again to Flora by suggesting a vague jealousy of Charlton, a vague doubt that the latter may have been mistaken in his assurance of her indifference. "I determined to come and see for myself how matters stood," says Harry, "and every hour that brought me nearer to you seemed to bring my heart back to its true allegiance. I begin to feel like a man who had been crazy and was sane again — who had been drunk and was sober. The thought of you was like pure mountain air — it brought rest and refreshment. When I saw you — ah, Floy, I can't tell you what I felt when I saw you! For one thing, I felt I had been an ineffable fool! Dear, tell me that I have not lost everything by my delay — that I have not come too late!"

He holds out his hands eagerly, the handsome face looks imploringly into her own. That he is altogether in earnest it is impossible to doubt. Flora does not doubt it. She reads him better than he has read himself, and with a sweet, sad smile she says:

"No, you did not come too late. I am glad now that you did not come earlier. All might have been different then, and we might have made a worse mistake than our childish folly two years ago. Dear Harry, don't you see that what you feel for me is only the result of old association? It is not strong, nor stable, nor independent of other things; it is a mere fancy which will pass as it has returned — when you go away."

"Flora!" cries Harry, unable to credit the testimony of his own ears. He seizes her hands, and holds them in a vise-like grasp. "It is impossible that you can mean this," he says; "it is impossible that you can expect me to receive it as final. Flora, you forget that this is no affair of a day or an hour; you forget that I have loved you all my life, and that the associations of which you speak are more to me than anything else in the world except yourself. You must understand one thing distinctly: my life is in your hands. If you turn me adrift, I shall feel as if I have been cut loose from every anchor — every hope and good intention. There is not one of them which is not and has not always been associated with you."

"And will not be associated with some one else in the time to come," says Flora, quietly. "Ah, Harry! why do you not know yourself better? A little while hence you will feel how right I am in what I say to-day. You are fond of me; yes, I know it; and just now you fancy that you are in love with me. But that is a mistake. If I were foolish enough to let you bind yourself, do you know what would follow? You would go away, and in a little while some one else would come into your life; you would fall in love with her, you would be bound by your honor to me, and then — and then — either you would keep your faith at a cost I shall never exact, or you would do something which would lower you more in your own respect than sending a stranger to discover how much your cousin cared for you."

"Floy!" he says, in a half-suffocated voice, "you have not forgiven me for that yet! If I could only make you understand —"

"I think I understand perfectly," Flora interrupts. "Forgive you? Yes, I am reasonable enough to forgive you now, though I think you were wrong. Some things a man should discover for himself. If you had come, or even if you had written frankly, I would have showed you that I was only your cousin."

"But you were not always only my cousin," he says, quickly. "Two years ago — ah, Flora! if you forget, I cannot."

"Forgetfulness is a good thing," she says, very quietly. "If you remember those foolish times, it is because you have come back, after long absence, to a place fraught with their associations."

"I remembered them before I came back — I never forgot them." (For a moment he honestly imagines that he never did.) "Floy," he goes on, with a beseeching passion in his voice that thrills the girl, "if I could only win your trust again, I am sure all would be right. You could not send me away. For the sake of the dear old times — foolish though you may call them — you would try to love me a little, and I would try to make that little much."

She is shaken to the very centre of her soul — that is evident from her pale face — but she is immovable in her resolution. "Harry!" she cries, like one driven to bay, "I cannot! Don't say anything more! You mean it now, but I know you better than you know yourself. I know that the end would be worse than it has been already. One or both of us would be wretched for life, if I yielded to you. Harry, my cousin, my brother, my dear, dear companion, it almost breaks my heart to give you even the shortest pain. Forgive me, forgive me — but it must be so!"

There is no faltering in voice or look. Tears fill her eyes, and she clasps her hands as she leans toward him; but a rock could sooner fly from its base than any words alter her resolve. He sees, feels, realizes this. It is borne to him with a sudden flash of intense consciousness that he has lost his opportunity, and lost it finally. It was his a little while ago — his to play with, to hold lightly, to depreciate in the security of possession. Now it has been snatched out of his grasp, and placed beyond his reach forever. To say that in his eyes it has increased tenfold in value by this process, is only to state something familiar to all who observe human nature. The possibilities that we have lost seem more rich than any we have grasped; the jewel we never wore shines brightest; the happiness we never tasted seems sweetest. That which might have been and yet is not — that which we cast heedlessly by, little knowing its true value — it is that which seems to us most sad among all the sad things of which life is full. No one has touched this strain better

than Robert Browning in some of his minor poems, and two lines from one of these poems comes to Harry's mind as he sits, gazing almost despairingly into his cousin's eyes:

"This could but have happened once,
And we missed it, lost it forever."

"It is my fault," he says, suddenly breaking the silence. "I see it all. I have been a fool. and one must pay the penalty of folly. I have lost the best chance of my life, and I have only myself to blame. If I had come sooner — Well, other kingdoms than that of Heaven are lost by laggards, I see. Flora, my sweet cousin, I think I might keep straight with your hand to guide me; but since it is not to be —"

He stops abruptly, takes her into his arms, kisses once, twice, thrice, the white brow where the fair hair is parted, then puts her back in the chair and leaves the room.

CHAPTER XVI

"O Last Regret, Regret Can Die."

Before an hour has passed, Charlton learns all that has happened. "You know so much of the story, that it would be a pity not to give you the end," Harry calmly observes. "I have told Flora everything, and she has forgiven me — and declined to have anything more to do with me. So I think I shall pack my trunk and leave with you to-morrow."

"Are you in earnest" asks Charlton, skeptically. He felt so sure that the matter would end with the approved reconciliation scene, that he is as much surprised by Flora's decision as Sunderland could possibly have been. "You have made another blunder," he says, impatiently, "or you have misunderstood your cousin. Something is certainly wrong."

"Everything is wrong," answers Harry, "but as for making a blunder — I flatter myself I am not the person to do that kind of thing twice. And as for misunderstanding Flora — you could as soon misunderstand a man when he knocks you down."

"There is some mistake in the matter," Charlton thinks — but is wise enough not to say. "Harry must have blundered again. It is impossible that her pride can be so much stronger than her love." Then he asks aloud: "Are you serious in thinking of going with me to-morrow?"

"Perfectly serious. Why should I stay here? I hope I can bear disappointment like a man, but I am not philosopher enough to live face to face with it. I hardly know what I shall say to my uncle by way of excuse."

"I have found in my journey through life," remarks Charlton, "that the truth is generally the best and the safest thing to say. Your uncle will have cause to be offended if you go away with merely an ordinary excuse; but, if you tell him the truth, you will find him, I am sure, reasonable and kind. Every man has a fellow-feeling for a man in such a position as yours."

"By Jove, so I will!" says Sunderland — and leaves the room.

Colonel Tyrrell was as kind and reasonable as Charlton had predicted, but more deeply disappointed than can be readily expressed. The plan which had failed was one on which he had for many years set his heart and counted confidently. He feels sure that for the failure his nephew is solely to blame; but to strike a man who is already down by saying as much is more than he can do. "I am sorry, Harry," he says, "very sorry; but Flora of course knows best. I don't deny that I have always hoped that you two might marry. Perhaps it's not best to build hopes that depend on others for their fulfillment. I shall not try to detain you if you feel that you must go. But you have always a son's place in my heart and my house; remember that."

"There is nothing I could not sooner forget," says Harry; and then their hands meet in that grasp which expresses so much.

Flora, meanwhile, has gone to her room, and does not appear again until late in the afternoon. Then she comes down, and is met by her father, who asks if she does not think a drive will do her good. "I don't propose a ride," he says, "because, in the first place, I hardly think you are strong enough for it, and, in the second place, the saddle-horses are all gone. Harry and George have taken two, and Minnie and Oscar the others. If you care to drive, I'll order the carriage."

"No, papa, the wagonette," she interposes. "That is open, and one wants as much of this delightful air as one can get."

The wagonette is accordingly ordered. Charlton and Nellie are invited to accompany them, and presently they are bowling through the valley, with the soft, fresh breeze coming from the far-off azure heights.

The charm of the winsome valley, the magical expanse of receding heights, the reposeful greenness of meadow and field and hill, all seem intensified to Charlton by the fact of his approaching departure. He is as little inclined to sentimentalism as a man can be, but he has found something here which he knows he is not likely to find soon, if ever, again; and the knowledge gives a pang to his parting which the mere beauty of Nature would be unable to cause.

"How strange that I have been here only two months!" he says after a while, partly addressing Colonel Tyrrell, partly speaking to himself. "I feel as if it had been a much longer time. I have grown to regard these scenes with the familiar affection of an old friend."

"We shall expect you to say a good word for the country when you go out into the world," says Colonel Tyrrell, touching up his horses. "It needs to be better known."

"I shall say all that I can," Charlton answers, "but that may not be much. I am not one of the people whose deepest impressions crystallize readily into descriptive phrases. I like the spirit of those lines of Moore's which you sometimes sing, Miss Tyrrell:

"Sweet Innisfallen, fare thee well!
May calm and sunshine long be thine;
How fair thou art let others tell,
While but to feel how fair be mine.' "

"It is so much to be able to feel," says Flora, smiling, "that it might seem unreasonable to ask for more; but I am sure you could describe it if you chose."

"Few things are more difficult than to describe with truth and simplicity," he says. "We should all be artists if we could paint the common world which lies around us *as it is*. Besides" — unconsciously his voice sinks a little, so as to be audible only to Flora — "how could I describe the charm which this summer has had for me by putting it in type for indifferent eyes to read?"

Flora is spared reply, for at this moment Colonel Tyrrell draws up the horses. "Floy," he says, "I am going down into the meadow where those men are at work. You and Mr. Charlton can extend your drive, and come back for me in half an hour or so. There's a fine view from the top of that hill over yonder, and a good road leads up to it."

The hill chanced to be the one where Flora and Harry paused to see the sunset on the first evening after the arrival of the latter. Miss Tyrrell looks at it with a slightly troubled expression, but she only says, "Yes, papa," as her father hands the reins to Charlton, and steps down.

They drive on for a minute before that gentleman speaks. Then he says: "Where shall we go? I see you don't fancy the idea of that hill, and I don't care a fig for the view."

"What a close observer you are!" says Flora, flushing. "I did not fancy the idea of going to the hill at first, but — it does not matter. Drive on, please."

"But why, if you feel the least disinclination toward doing so?"

"Why?" — she hesitates. "Well, if you must know, because I don't choose to yield to the disinclination. You told me once that I was morbid, and I fear you were right; so I have determined to conquer such weakness."

"I think I said only that you were inclined to be morbid; and I retract that now. It was presumption in me ever to have said such a thing."

"It was quite a true thing, I am sure. Turn here to the right — into the woods."

Into the woods, full of dreamy, slanting sunshine and bosky depths of shadow, the road leads them.

When they reach the summit of the hill and pause for the view, Nellie insists upon being set down, in order that she may search for ferns, which is one of her favorite pursuits. While she is engaged in this manner, Charlton looks at Flora. "I wonder," he says in a low voice, "if I may venture to speak to you of something which has annoyed you very much — something in which, unfortunately, my name bore a share? I should not think of doing so if I were not going away so soon, and if this were not probably my last opportunity to set myself right in your estimation."

She starts a little when he speaks first, but soon recovers herself, and looks at him without any change of color, with the same grave, gentle regard which puzzled Sunderland earlier in the day.

"You may speak, if you care to do so," she answers, "but it is not necessary. I understand everything, and I have no right to blame you — farther than to think that you should have told me frankly upon what errand you came here."

"I did not come upon any errand," he says, quickly. "It is you who misconceive the importance of all that passed between Sunderland and myself. You know, I hope, that nothing would induce me to deceive you; you also know that I have no possible reason for endeavoring to represent your cousin's conduct in a better light —"

"Stop a moment," she says, in a low voice. "You *have* reason! You remember — ah, I am sure of it—the folly I uttered to you at Caesar's Head, and you think that it might be better for me to be deceived than to be unhappy. But I" — she pauses an instant — "do not think so. I am glad to have learned the truth, though I cannot thank you for it. I am glad — yes, glad even, to know that Harry could send a stranger to learn what place he still held in my heart, and could hope to hear that he held none. It is hard; but, since it is true, it is best to know it."

"It is natural that you should feel in this way," says Charlton. "But it is not altogether just. Harry, as you are aware, is very volatile and impressionable; for a little time he fancied himself in love with another woman, but I am inclined to believe you possess his true allegiance."

"I am sure that you are mistaken," she says, quietly. "A mingling of many different motives brought Harry back, and, once here, the spell of old association did the rest. I am glad that he came, and that I have had an opportunity to end everything. If he had not done so, he would have felt all his life that he had failed to act as a man of honor should."

"And do you not think that he will feel it now?"

"I think not— I hope not. Why should he?"

"For the simple reason that, if he had been two months earlier, everything would have been different."

"I am not certain of that." She speaks slowly, gazing not at her companion, but at the far blue mountains. "I have thought of a great many things during the days that I have been sick, and very much alone. I have seemed to see a great deal that I never saw before. My own folly is one of the things. I fancied myself so constant, I was determined not to change. I had an ideal to which I clung — an ideal of the Harry who went away two years ago — and I did not recognize how much the reality must necessarily differ from that. Do you remember saying once that it is well to bring memories as often as possible in contact with realities, and, if they will not stand the test, to let them go? I have done that, and — have let my memory go."

There is a minute's silence. Charlton looks at her doubtfully. He distrusts the serenity of her face, the calmness of her tone. These things baffled and deceived him once before, and he

fancies they are baffling and deceiving him now. He is aware that women often cloak an aching heart under such an exterior as this; and he knows that Flora Tyrrell is just the woman to do it. But she is not a woman to utter for any purpose or under any provocation that which is not true. Knowing this, he is constrained to believe her; and yet he doubts if she is not deceiving herself.

"Do you not think that you may be acting hastily?" he says, at length. "You are disappointed, no doubt, in Harry — disappointed as we are almost certain to be when, after long absence, we see one whom we have invested meanwhile with all the illusions of love. But do you realize all that your decision means? You must forgive me if I am presumptuous, but I fear that you are trifling with your happiness, in that ignorance of life which is so common to youth. It is only after a time that we learn how life means for the most of us — compromise. That which we would have we cannot reach; so that which we can obtain we take, and are as contented as our neighbors. We find that our gold is mixed with base metal, and we close our eyes to the unpleasant fact. It is only when we are very young and intolerant that we cast it aside, saying that we will have pure gold or none."

"And the meaning of this is that you think I ought to marry my cousin?"

He starts, and the blood comes to his cheek in a dark glow. "It is impossible for me to say that," he answers. "I only fear your falling into a mistake which, recognized too late, may sadden your life."

"You are very kind," she says, gently; "you have been so from the first. But do not fear for me. I am making no mistake. I fancied myself very constant, but one changes despite one's self; and so I find that I have changed. During these two years Harry and I have drifted farther apart than I ever fancied was possible. If we were foolish enough to think of spending our lives together, I should not suit him any more than he would suit me. It is sad to realize this — but it is true."

She speaks quietly, but with the same air of fixed decision that was so remarkable in her interview with Sunderland. She has plainly taken a resolution which nothing can shake. Her eyes fill with tears. It is, as she says, sad to realize that all is over, that the rude hand of change has touched her boy-lover and herself, that so many fair hopes will perish without any fruition; but since it is and must be so, she faces it without faltering. Charlton, regarding her keenly, makes only one last effort.

"Do you not think," he says, "that you might take time — time to test yourself and him?"

"Why, that is exactly what has been done," she says. "Time has tested both of us. I should be foolish and weak if I desired any further test. What, Nellie, have you finished? Ah, those are lovely ferns! Now ask Mr. Charlton to lift you up, and let us go down for papa."

Colonel Tyrrell joins them at the meadow, and they drive home in the lovely evening glow. They find Sunderland, together with Minnie and the boys, on the piazza. He comes forward and assists Flora from the wagonette. "I hope you have enjoyed your drive," he says. "I was sorry, when I came back and found you gone, that I had taken your horse. You might have preferred to ride."

"No — I was not strong enough," Flora answers. She is surprised and relieved by his manner, and slips past him into the house with a lighter heart. She does not know that Harry is modeling his conduct on that of Charlton. He would be afraid to flinch — to play the part of disconsolate lover — before a man who has borne a misfortune similar to his own with so much philosophical composure.

At supper, however, Flora is startled to hear that he means to leave the next day. She looks at him with wistful, astonished eyes. "O Harry," she says, "are you really going so soon?"

"Yes," answers Harry, with commendable lightness, "I am really going. Have you any commissions that I can execute? I have a very good taste in feminine attire, though you have never tested it. I think I might even be trusted to buy a silk dress. Silvery-blue would suit you, Flora."

"But it would not suit Transylvania," says Flora, with a tremulous smile. "One needs useful and substantial things here."

After tea is over, the party as usual distribute themselves between the piazza and the sitting-room. Harry, still manfully preserving his nonchalant demeanor, strolls into the latter apartment and asks Flora to sing. "Those charming old Irish and Scotch songs — the Irish especially — that you are so fond of, I don't hear any one else sing in these days," he says. "Sing 'Silent, O Moyle, be the sound of thy waters!'"

Flora cannot refuse; yet, as she sits down to the piano, she is peculiarly averse to singing this song. It is not only heart-breaking in its pathos, but it is connected with her past life more closely, perhaps, than any other. She has sung it for Harry a hundred times, and sung it to herself a hundred times more when thinking of him; for, despite its sadness, it somehow rose involuntarily to her lips on such occasions. Now to sing it on the eve of his departure, when he may be going away never to return — this, she feels, will be hard. Yet she tries to do it. The first verse she accomplishes, but over the second she breaks down, and leans forward on the instrument with her tears dropping thick and fast on the ivory keys.

For a minute Harry is astonished and concerned. Then a flash of hope comes to him. He thinks he understands what this emotion means. They chance to be alone in the room. He starts forward, and in a moment his arm is round the drooping girl's figure.

"Floy, my darling!" he says, eagerly, "you can't be so hard-hearted after all — you can't mean for me to go! Think how happy we have been, think how happy we may be. Say but one word, give but one sign of forgiveness, and I will stay."

It is a minute before Flora can control her voice sufficiently to speak. Then she says: "You are mistaken; what troubles me is not that. It is — oh! it is that everything is changed — and changed so inevitably. We have separated so far; and I fear we must — must separate farther."

"That is very likely if we part," says Harry; "but, Flora, you ought to feel, as I do, that we should not part. Dear, trust me again — once again — that is all I ask."

"O Harry, it is useless to talk like this," says Flora, still struggling with her sobs. "It is not that I don't trust you, but — everything is changed. That is what seems so sad. We can't — do what we will, we can't bring back the past; and the present is so — so mournful!"

"We could bring back the past — at least all in the past that was best worth having — if you would listen to me," says Harry — "if you would trust me, if you would love me. O Flora, why don't you see that it is the best chance of our lives you are thrusting away?"

"No," says Flora. His passionate earnestness restores her to her ordinary composure. She draws back from him, but lays one hand on his shoulder, and looks at him with tear-misted eyes. "You are wrong," she says, "but I am sure you are sincere, and it breaks my heart to deny you what you want — even though you will not want it long. But it is best so — believe me, it is best so. Some day — before long, I hope — you will feel it, and then you will come back, will you not? Then we will put all this folly away, and we shall be brother and sister as we were long ago — O Harry, shall we not?"

"Yes," answers Harry, touched and overcome; "we shall be what you like. Perhaps you are right — perhaps it is best. I am unstable and not worthy of you; but I shall always love you, Flora, and I shall never forget all that you have been to me from first to last. God bless you, dear, for your sweetness, your tenderness, your faith."

"And God bless you, Harry, and give you some one to love in earnest," she says. Then, as a step approaches the window, she turns and passes swiftly from the room.

CHAPTER XVII

"Sweet Innisfallen, Fare Thee Well!"

"In order to make the day's journey with comfort to ourselves and our horses, we must start early to-morrow morning," Harry says to Charlton when they part at night.

"What do you mean by early?" the other asks.

"I mean eight o'clock, sharp."

"Oh, very well; that is not terrible."

It may not be terrible, but it is nevertheless more than Harry — without that stringent sense of necessity which taking a railroad train entails — can prevail upon himself to do. As a matter of convenience to the travelers, breakfast is served half an hour earlier than usual, and Charlton is ready for it. Not so his companion. That young gentleman appears just as the clock is striking eight, and is greeted with a shout of derision by the younger members of the family.

"Not but that you are quite right to take your nap out, Harry," says George; "for if you get off by nine o'clock, you will be lucky. I am just from the stables. Morgan has cast a shoe, and been sent to the blacksmith."

"The deuce he has!" says Harry. "Well, my prophetic soul warned me of something of that kind. I felt that there was no good in tearing myself out of bed earlier than usual. Thanks, Uncle George; I'll take a chop. By Jove! when shall I see such mutton again?"

"Harry's regrets are very sentimental," says Minnie.

"They are sincere, at all events," says Harry. "Let me tell you there are worse things in the world to regret than juicy, tender, mountain mutton."

After breakfast, George proposes that they shall go and see after Morgan; so Harry, lighting a cigar, strolls stableward with him. Charlton declines to accompany them, and postpones his cigar until later. He says to Flora, as they stand in the hall together, "Will you walk down to the river with me? I should like to look at it for the last time."

"I hope not for the last time," she says. "If you really like Transylvania so much, you will surely come back."

"I am certain you do not doubt how much I 'really like' Transylvania," he says; "but coming back is another question. Nothing is more marked in life than the difficulty which attends any attempt to repeat a pleasure. Ah, what a morning! — what a scene! And I must turn my back on all this loveliness."

They have emerged from the house, and descend to the lawn as he speaks. Fair and far the level valley spreads before them; the mountains are draped in sparkling haze; a dewy brightness lies over the scene; the green hills and shadowy woods wear the indefinable freshness of early morning; the bright river is full of glancing lights and wavering shadows. They walk down the lawn, and pause on its brink.

"Men may come, and men may go; but it goes on forever," says Charlton. "What pleasant days I have spent here! Miss Tyrrell, you must let me thank you for them once more."

"Why should you thank me?" she asks, simply. "You have given me as much or more pleasure than you can possibly have received. And if, at any future time, you should care to come back, we shall be very glad to see you. I cannot say more than that — we have so little to offer."

"Beware of false humility!" he says, smiling. "You know — or ought to know — that you have everything to offer. *I* know it, at least. Yet I do not think I shall come back."

She does not say anything, but she looks at him with so much wistful distress in her glance — a glance which says, "Is it *I* who have made you form this resolution?" — that he feels impelled to answer it by an explanation.

"Don't think that I say so because I have not succeeded in winning your heart. This is something which cannot be helped, and which leaves no bitter memory whatever. Do you know that I pay you a high compliment in saying so? Do you know that there are few women whom a

man can love, by whom he could be rejected, and yet around whom he could find pleasure in lingering as I have lingered here? There are still fewer who could pass through such an ordeal without waking some angry or disgusted chord of feeling. But I was thinking last night as I smoked my final cigar — not a bad time for meditation, let me assure you — how entirely you have done this. I shall carry away a recollection of you which is without a flaw. Even my love for you has seemed altogether above the passion which often bears that name. I shall look back upon this summer as on a time set apart in my life — an idyl in the midst of jarring prose; and hence I should be loath to come back and spoil its memory by bringing reality, with I know not how much change involved, to bear upon it."

"But that — that is morbid!" cries Flora, with a cadence of triumph in her quivering voice. "The very thing against which you warned me, and now you are guilty of it yourself! Is that the way philosophers practise their precepts?"

"Very often, I fear. But since this is our last *tête-à-tête*, and since I am confessing everything, let me say that this which I have mentioned is not my only reason for saying I shall not return. To go away to-day is not only a wrench, but I shall have a sharp fight for many days to come with longing and regret. Now, when a man reaches my age, he knows that such things are not trifles. They unsettle one's life, distract one's mind, and very seriously interfere with one's power of working. Honestly, I can't afford to be wretched; so, when I have fought my fight, and won peace back — as I shall do, after a fashion — I shall not endanger it by returning here. A relapse is said to be worse than the original disease."

Flora scarcely knows whether to laugh or to cry at the coolness and unmistakable sincerity of this speech. A duller woman might take its restraint as the token of a shallow sentiment, but she is not likely to fall into such an error. She not only remembers the familiar proverb that "Still waters run deep," but, with the quick instinct of a sympathetic nature, she feels that it is no schoolboy passion which Charlton talks of conquering. His quietness, instead of deceiving, touches her more deeply than any vehemence could do. No woman likes a man the less for being master of himself, even where she is concerned.

"I suppose it is strange, and not according to precedent, that you should tell me all this," she says, after a while. "I scarcely know how to answer you. I only know that I am sorry — very sorry — if we are not to meet again."

"We may meet accidentally," he says, trying to speak lightly. "Don't fancy for a moment that I should not be delighted at such an accident. I only meant that I should not come back here — like a moth to the light which has singed it."

"Then you are not likely to meet me. My life lies here."

"But it will not lie here always."

"I think most probably that it will."

He glances at her. "Then you are quite determined with regard to Harry. You will give him no hope?"

"I thought I answered that question yesterday afternoon."

"In that case," he says, quickly, "I am forced to ask you once more if there is any hope for me? No doubt it is folly, but at least I shall know the worst, and I cannot torment myself hereafter by thinking: 'If I had spoken again I might have won at least a chance.'"

"What do you mean by a chance?" she asks, in a low tone.

"I mean time and opportunity in which to endeavor to win your heart," he answers, a thrill of sudden hope passing through him and sending a glow to his eyes and the blood to his cheek. "I know you do not love me now —"

"No," she says, as he breaks off. "I like you very much indeed, but I do not love you. At least" — she hesitates — "that is what I think. Perhaps I do not know what love really is."

"You would know it if you felt it," he says. "I did not expect any other answer. It would not be natural or characteristic for you to turn to me now. Your mind and your heart have been full of other things. But if you can give me the slightest hope —"

"I am afraid to give you that," she says, after a pause which he feels to be very long. "I fear misleading you; I fear giving you further pain. I am not certain of myself. After all, it may be safest for you to forget all about me — as you spoke of doing."

"And as I never shall do!" he says, with a passionate impetuosity that astonishes her. "Don't you feel that? Don't you know that you have twined yourself for good or for ill about my life? I say for ill only in case I can neither win you nor forget you. But, if you will give me a shred of hope, I will come back and try my fate once more."

Silence falls. Many a woman, who has been in Flora's position, will understand the conflict of doubt which made her uncertain what to answer. It is a more common state of mind than people think. When this issue comes — an issue involving the whole course and meaning of life — a woman is not always provided with fitting Yes or No. Her heart is often an enigma even to herself; her wishes are chaos. Flora looks in troubled silence at the emerald current flowing swiftly by under the drooping trees. What shall we say? How can she be truthful and yet not imply too much? At last she says, slowly:

"You should not ask this of me. It is impossible for me to give you hope. I should never forgive myself if I did so — only to disappoint you at last. Perhaps it is best to part as you meant to do. Put me out of your mind — or, rather, out of your heart; but pray do not forget that I shall always remember how kind, how considerate, how unselfish a friend you have been."

He looks at her with a keen scrutiny of which she is conscious, yet which she feels no inclination to resent. He knows as much of her as she knows of herself — and is welcome to make what he can of the unknown remainder. This is what she thinks, and, while she thinks it, Charlton is bringing to bear upon her all the force of observation and intuition which he possesses by nature, or has acquired through art. He knows that on the result of this observation everything depends now. He must decide for himself — and that speedily — whether or not this woman is ever likely to learn to love him. No need to waste time and passion, hope and endeavor, if she is *not* likely to learn that lesson. On the contrary, if she is, the best chance of both their lives lies now in his grasp. The responsibility, the doubt, the sense of all that is involved, make his heart for a moment absolutely seem to stand still. The indications by which he must judge are so slight; and, if he mistakes, the mistake can be made but once.

Upon this hesitation, a voice from the house breaks sharply. "Mr. Charlton," shouts George, "is your trunk ready to be taken down?"

"Quite ready," Charlton answers. Then he turns to Flora with sudden resolution. After all, the chance, however vague, is worth a trial. An instinct comes to him that this is his best hope in life, and he is not the man to let that which is best slip from his grasp for lack of earnest holding.

"I have decided," he says. "I shall come back. You are bound to nothing — you have not uttered one word or given one hope for which you can hereafter, in any event, reproach yourself — but I shall come back. Are you sorry to hear that?"

"Sorry — no! How could I be?" she answers. Her voice quivers, something like relief comes over her. She is not to lose her friend. That is the first thought which occurs to her.

"Remember you are not bound to anything — not even to listen, if you don't feel inclined," he says. "The risk is mine — and mine alone. But I am willing to take it. He who dives for a pearl cannot be sure of finding it; but he dives nevertheless. So I shall dive and hope to find my pearl. If I fail — well, even in that there will be consolation.

"'Tis somewhat to have known, albeit in vain,
One woman in this sorrowful bad earth,
Whose very loss can yet bequeath to pain
New faith in worth.' "

"Oh, how you overrate me!" she cries, with a thrill in her voice. "What an unintentional hypocrite I have been to make you think so much better of me than I deserve!"

"A very unconscious hypocrite indeed!" he says, smiling. "Now I fear that we must go back to the house. I see that the wagonette has come round to the door. I have only one more request to make — may I write to you?"

She hesitates only a second before saying;

"Yes — if you have time to do so."

"Ah, I shall find time," he says. "Don't you fancy that you are likely to escape on that score. You will receive a letter once a week — will that be too often? And in answering them — you will answer them, will you not? — pray tell me everything about yourself and all the household. No detail will be too trivial to interest me — not even Nellie's and Oscar's escapades. You can't tell how often I shall think of this idyllic, pastoral life, or how welcome any breath of it will be on the feverish and tumultuous existence to which I am going."

"I may write now and then if you really desire it," says Flora, "but once a week is overwhelming. I should have nothing to say."

"I did not mean to ask that *you* would write once a week. Write when you feel inclined, and only then. Meanwhile —"

"Charlton," shouts Sunderland, "everything is ready. Come on!"

That voice seems to bring Flora back to herself. "O," she says, clasping her hands, "remember I have not promised anything — not anything at all — and *pray* don't hope too much!"

"I have very little hope," Charlton answers, "but a great deal of resolve. Don't trouble yourself. I remember that you have not promised —"

"Charlton!" shouts Harry from the piazza.

"It is I who am detaining you," says Flora, turning hurriedly. "Come — we must go back. Ah, how dreary parting is!"

Harry regards them suspiciously when they reach the piazza, but is forced to admit that their manner is very unlike that of people who have been interrupted in the exchange of tender vows or passionate farewells. Charlton goes at once to tighten a strap on his trunk; Flora turns to her cousin.

"Dear Harry," she says, "pray do not let it be two years again before you come back. You cannot tell how we shall long to see you."

The true tender voice touches Harry's warm heart. "It shall *not* be two years again, Floy," he says. "I promise you that. And when I come back I mean to make you forget everything disagreeable connected with me, and remember only the pleasant things."

"I have done that already," she says. "I remember nothing which you need wish me to forget. God bless you, Harry — good-by."

He kisses her as a brother might, then wrings his uncle's hand. "I'll come back before long, uncle George," he says, "and I can never forget your kindness — never as long as I live!"

The other adieux are quickly made, after which it is Charlton's turn. He shakes hands with Colonel Tyrrell warmly, thanks the latter for his invitation to return, and says that he may avail himself of it for a short time next summer. Then he bids the rest a cordial farewell and comes to Flora last. He holds her hand tightly for a minute, and is strongly tempted to kiss it; but too many eyes are looking on — he restrains the impulse, and only takes one long intent gaze into the blue depths of her eyes. "Good-by!" he says. "I shall not forget. Remember that you have promised to write to me."

The next minute the wagonette is driving off, hats are waving, last words are uttered. The gate is opened and shut with a clang; the wheels roll out. Mechanically Flora sits down on the steps where she is standing. All is over. They are gone.

The road to Brevard, and thence to Asheville, leads away from the river; but Charlton turns as they pass out of the gate for one last glimpse of the valley. He never forgets the picture which this last glance leaves on his mind. The far blue heights seem steeped in soft repose; dappling cloud-shadows are lightly falling over the wooded sides of the nearer hills; the great

sweep of fields and meadows, and the winding foliage that fringes the river, with the golden sunshine of September lying over all, are almost magical in their fairness.

"*Et in Arcadia ego!*" he says to himself. "To-morrow how far I shall be away! Shall I ever return? Who can say? But summer will come again, and then—"

Yes, summer will come again, and then, perhaps, on some green hillside, or by the banks of the beautiful French Broad, the idyl may be told of which all that is written here may stand only as a preface.

THE END.

Edited by Yawtsong Lee
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