

THE WARGRAVE TRUST

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THE WARGRAVE TRUST

CHAPTER I

Reparation

It came, as such things generally come, with the unexpectedness of a thunderbolt out of a clear sky. One moment the train was flying swiftly and smoothly across the beautiful country, full of autumn color and the peacefulness of harvest time; and the next it was as if an Inferno of horror had opened for those within it. There came from the engine a sudden, wild shriek, like a cry of mortal peril and terror; a grinding shock, as the brakes were hurriedly applied, which threw every one who chanced to be standing off his or her feet; and, following immediately, a crash so tremendous that it seemed impossible for anything to withstand it. The Pullman coach trembled under the terrible impact like a living thing, and for an instant seemed about to go over; but its great weight kept it on the track, while, amid the hiss and uproar of escaping steam, the ordinary coaches in front tumbled upon each other, splintering like kindling wood, and imprisoning in their debris the shrieking mass of humanity which they held.

Laurence Desmond sprang to his feet as soon as movement became possible. He had been lying back in his seat, half asleep, when the crash came; but there was no doubt in his mind what it meant. As he opened his eyes he expected to look Death in the face; but when, after that sickening instant of indecision, the Pullman stood still, he knew that for those within it the danger was past; and the impulse to go to the aid of those others for whom it was not past, whose awful cries were even now filling the air, made him start hurriedly toward the door.

His movement was so rapid that, in the act of leaving his seat, he came into collision with the occupant of the opposite section, — a young woman who, like himself, was travelling alone, and whose eager movement into the aisle coincided exactly with his own. Both recoiled, with a gasped word of apology; and then, involuntarily catching his arm, the girl exclaimed:

'You are going to help them? So am I.'

He paused to stare at her. "You'd better stay where you are," he said. "There's nothing you can do, and it will be — horrible! You are quite safe here now."

"I am not thinking of safety," she answered. "And you don't understand. There may be a great deal that I can do. I'm a trained nurse."

"Oh!" He knew what this meant; and he also recognized, with the insight which comes in such moments of emergency, that there was no possibility of flinching or weakness in the face out of which the clear eyes met his own so steadily, whatever horror those eyes might be called to look upon. "In that case," he said, "you may be of much use. Come!"

He moved on hastily, and she followed him as quickly as was possible down the narrow passage, now crowded with men hurrying toward the door, while urging the hysterical women in the different sections to keep quiet. One of these women seized and detained her.

"They want us to stay here!" she cried. "But *you* are going out."

"Because I'm a trained nurse," the girl explained. "I wouldn't go if I didn't think I could be of service. But those who are unable to help had better stay where they are."

"But can't we help?" another asked. "If some of us went with you, couldn't we be of service, too?"

"It is doubtful," the girl answered. "And it will be awful, — you don't know how awful! Better let me go alone; and if there's anything you can do, I will call for you."

Her quietness calmed them, her courage shamed hysterics, and her promise acted as a brace and stimulant. They fell back and allowed her to go on. "Be sure and let us know if there's anything we can do," they told her; and when, with a nod, she hurried away, they looked at each

other with that mingling of wonder and admiration which, while it lasts, uplifts the human spirit above the common things of life. Some faint realization came to them of the awfulness of the scene to which she was hastening, and a shudder shook even the strongest. They sank back into their seats, as if stilled by a compelling hand; and there can be little doubt that more than one prayed in her heart that the call for help might not come to her.

Meanwhile the girl found Desmond waiting for her just outside the car, where no obsequious porter with his stool was in attendance now. As he helped her to the ground, he said hesitatingly:

"Of course I know what your training has been, but I hope you are strong enough to stand this. It's — as bad as can be."

A glance told her what he was trying to prepare her for; and she felt her heart turn sick, as it had not turned since the first days of the training to which he alluded. But her voice betrayed no sign of this, as she said hastily:

"Oh, I'm strong enough! And, any way, I haven't time to think of myself. Let us get on — quick!"

Without more words, they hurried forward to the scene of disaster. The two engines, which had come together in a head-on collision, lay overturned, a great mass of distorted metal, of escaping steam and smoking fires; underneath which were buried the bodies of the engineers and firemen, for whom rescue was so clearly impossible that it could only be hoped that death had come to them with merciful swiftness. But in the frightfully piled-up wreckage of cars there were many shrieking, moaning creatures still living and crying for help; and to extricate these, men were working madly, furiously, tearing away the debris and bringing out the injured and the dead as fast as possible.

Already many had been placed on the ground by the side of the wreck — some, both of living and dead, no more than awful fragments of humanity — and in a minute the young nurse was on her knees by the side of the first of these, her bag open, her quick, deft hands giving such aid as the case required, or exigence made possible. All shrinking was past. It was as she had said: she had no time for thought of herself or her own feelings; she was absorbed in her work, in relieving and sustaining the poor, fainting, suffering souls whom chance had cast on her hands.

For it soon appeared that their only hope of such relief lay with her. There was not — at least among the living — a physician on the train; and as the shattered creatures were brought out from the wreck and laid down in increasing numbers, Desmond and several other men found that they could do their best relief work in giving, under her direction, that "first aid to the injured" which was almost immediately demanded. With coolness, clearness and precision, she issued the orders, which their willing, if somewhat clumsy, hands obeyed; and as she moved from one case to another, seeing at a glance what it was necessary to do, and doing and directing this, she seemed, to those who had time to think and to observe, the incarnation of helpful energy, as well as of trained skill.

Nor was this energy the cold and soulless thing which hospital training too frequently produces. There was in it a warmth of human sympathy, a compassion for suffering, which gave gentleness to every touch, and spoke in every word she uttered. Courage seemed to emanate from her; and many of the most desperately injured hushed their cries as they looked up into her face, at once so tender and so brave. It may have been this influence which made one man catch her hand, as she bent over him to examine his injuries.

"You can do nothing for me," he said. "I 'm hurt past help; I know enough to know that. All you can do is to get me a priest — for the love of God!"

When this demand is made in the face of death, not even the most ignorant ever doubts the religion of the person who utters it. The nurse looked around at her assistants.

"This man is a Catholic," she said, "and he wants a priest. Is there any among the passengers?"

They glanced at each other, and it was Desmond who answered:

"There's no priest, or he would be here with us. But one may come on the relief train that has been telegraphed for to Kingsford."

"Can't you send a message to make sure?" the injured man asked. "Unless there's a call, they may not bring one."

"Yes, I'll go and send a message at once," Desmond answered. He looked apologetically at the nurse. "I'm sorry to leave," he said, "but this is the most urgent need of all. And meanwhile" (he leaned over the man) "you know what to do: make your act of contrition."

"I've forgotten, — help me to make it," the other said.

With only an instant's hesitation, the young man knelt down beside him and repeated a brief act of contrition, pausing between each sentence for the halting utterance to echo his words. Then, rising, he started at a run toward the station, a mile or more distant, whence the message must be sent to the large town, twenty miles away, where the demand for help had already gone, and from which a relief train would be sent to the scene of disaster. The need to dispatch his message before that train left made him put forth all his powers; and even at this moment the men whose gaze followed him could not forbear their tribute of admiration.

"That's sprinting for you!" exclaimed one to another. "He's in fine form. At that rate, he'll make a mile in best athlete's time."

"God reward him!" the man on the ground muttered, and fell to repeating his act of contrition again.

When Desmond returned a little later, somewhat spent and breathless, the nurse, by whose side he paused, looked up at him with the brightness of approval in her eyes.

"You've been very quick," she said. "It was good of you to make such an exertion."

"Oh, anybody would have done as much!" he replied. "To get a priest for the dying is the most imperative duty, you know."

"Is it?" she asked, a little wonderingly. "And did the message catch the relief train?"

"Yes, barely. The answer was that they were nearly ready to start, and that they would certainly bring a priest with them."

She nodded backward. "Tell that poor man. It may help to keep him alive until they get here."

He went as she suggested, and found the man evidently sinking fast, though still clear in mind.

"I hope I'll last," he said anxiously. "But I'm awfully weak, and feel as if I may go any minute. Can't you give me something to strengthen me?"

"Give him some brandy, and this hypodermic of strychnine," the nurse said, when Desmond carried the request to her. "That is all we can do. He is fatally injured, and can not last long."

Desmond looked doubtfully at the hypodermic syringe offered him.

"You'd better come and give that yourself," he said.

She came; and after she had given it, the man looked up at her gratefully.

"Keep me alive!" he entreated. "A great deal depends on it. I'm not thinking only of absolution for myself: there's a wrong I must try to right before I die. I can't face God with *that* on my soul."

The girl glanced at Desmond, and again he read wonder as well as pity in her eyes.

"If we could do anything to help you!" she suggested.

But the man shook his head. "The priest!" he said — "the priest!"

The needs of others being urgent, they were forced to leave him then; and some time elapsed before a distant roar, momentarily growing louder, announced the welcome coming of the relief train. Desmond ran back to see if the man was still living, and was conscious of a thrill of relief when he met his eyes eagerly anxious.

"Yes, it's the train," he said, in answer to their unspoken question. "I'll bring the priest at once."

He was at the side of the train when it drew up, and was not surprised that the first person to spring to the ground, before it had fairly ceased movement, was a spare man wearing a Roman collar.

"This way, Father!" he exclaimed. "There's a man here desperately injured, who has been keeping himself alive just to see you."

"Show me where he is," the priest said, hurrying forward. Then, as they went, he turned a quick glance on the other. "You're a Catholic?" he inquired.

Desmond assented. He might truthfully have added, "Rather a poor one"; but he knew that his shortcomings of conduct were not in question, but only the essential point of faith.

"Then wait while I hear the poor soul's confession," the priest went on, "and you can assist me in anointing him."

Desmond would have been quite sure, at any time before this, that he had a thorough intellectual appreciation of the value of his faith, however lightly he might seem to hold it; but he knew, when he saw the light which flashed over the face of the dying man at sight of the priest, that he had never until that instant appreciated it at all. As a matter of fact, he had never until then seen what might be called the working application of the great principles which he had held as abstract truths; he had never before realized what those marvellous channels of divine grace which we call the sacraments mean to the souls of men; and he had never come into immediate touch with the tremendous power of the Supernatural manifesting itself through the most ordinary agency in the supreme moments of mortal exigence.

It was certainly an ordinary agency, and an ordinary scene this, of a man kneeling down by another, and bending his ear to catch the broken, gasping utterances which death threatened momentarily to cut short. At length the voice ceased, and the priest raised his head, shaking it a little.

"That is enough, — don't try to tell any more," he said soothingly. "Renew your sorrow for all the sins of your past life. Now I am going to give you absolution."

The hand was lifted, the saving Sign made, the old familiar words murmured here amid all this scene of wild confusion and noise, as in the quiet of so many confessionals: "*Ego te absolvo. . . .*"

The man gave a deep sigh, as of one from whom a great load was lifted, and his eyes opened once more.

"God be praised!" he said. "I've told the truth at last; and you'll tell those who should know, Father, — you'll put things right, — you won't forget the name!"

The priest bent down again. "You haven't told me the name!" he whispered urgently. "Quick, — tell it to me now!"

But the eyes had fallen shut, the spirit drifted away into the mysterious region where human speech can no longer reach.

"It's — all right!" the lips murmured. "Lord, I'm sorry — sorry —"

Desmond's hand fell on the priest's shoulder.

"He's dying, Father!" he warned. "You'll have to be in haste if you want to anoint him."

He died ten minutes later; and as the priest looked down into the dead face, he shook his head again, regretfully.

"He never told me the name," he said.

CHAPTER II

At Home

No very long time was required, after the arrival of the relief train, to transfer all the injured to it, for transportation to the hospital at Kingsford; and it was natural that the doctors should have desired to retain the services of the nurse who had rendered such excellent aid before their arrival, and proved so capable in acting under their directions afterward.

"You'll come with us, of course," the chief surgeon told her. "We're rather short of nurses for ordinary demands just now; and, with this influx of patients, I hardly know what we should have done if we had not found you, Miss — er —"

"Landon, — Hester Landon," the girl supplied.

"I see that you have been well trained," the doctor went on. "You are a graduated nurse?"

"Yes, I made my course, and took my diploma at—" (she named one of the most noted medical schools and hospitals in the country) "last year."

"Good! Have you any engagement just now?"

"None. I was on my way to Kingsford for a vacation."

"Well, instead of a vacation, Fate has sent you work you can't refuse. You've helped these poor creatures immensely already, and you'll have to keep on helping them."

"I ask nothing better," the girl said quietly.

So, when the last patient had been placed on the train, and all was in readiness for its departure, Desmond was not surprised to see the nurse also remaining on it.

"Yes, I am going with them," she said, meeting his glance. "They need me, and I am glad of the work. I prefer hospital service to the private nursing I have been doing lately."

A sudden idea flashed into Desmond's mind. He was never able to account for its occurring to him; but he said, nevertheless:

"You have been doing private nursing? Then perhaps, after this demand is over, you would consent to take a case?"

"Why, yes — if nothing else offered." But she looked a little surprised. "Do you know of such a case?"

"I have been summoned to Kingsford by the illness of a near relative, and it strikes me that there may be need of professional nursing. I have seen your work, and so —"

The train began to move. She nodded quickly.

"If you want me, you'll know where to find me — for a time, at least — at the hospital in Kingsford. Ask for Miss Landon. And now you had better get off — unless you wish to add to the number of the injured."

But, instead of getting off, he leaned forward and held out his hand.

"Since we may not meet again," he said, "I can not go without telling you how much I admire all that you have done. I know that it doesn't matter a particle to you whether or not I admire it, but I couldn't help telling you. It was wonderful. Good-bye!"

"You have done a great deal yourself," she answered; "and we may both be glad that we were able to do anything. But thank you — and now *do* get off!"

The train was gathering dangerous speed when he swung himself to the ground a moment later. But he landed safely, and then stood for an instant, looking after it as it vanished in the distance with its freight of suffering, maimed humanity. He was conscious of a load lifted from his spirit in the knowledge that he had looked his last on those sufferers; but he thought of the nurse who still stood at her post — whose work, in fact, was just beginning — and was glad that he had expressed a little of the admiration which he felt. What a charming face it was, too, with lucid gray eyes under black lashes, which had looked at him as he spoke! And what a small hand — to be so capable — had rested for an instant in his! Something in her manner made him think of a Sister of Charity rather than of the ordinary professional nurse, and he lifted his hat in parting salute to the vanishing train that bore her out of his life.

It was several hours later when the remaining passengers, together with the bodies of the dead, were removed from the scene of the disaster; and dusk had fallen before they finally reached Kingsford.

As their train drew up at the station, it was to find a crowd assembled, drawn chiefly by news of the accident, which made it difficult for Desmond to tell whether or not any one was there to meet him. Alighting from his car, he stood for a moment — a marked figure from his height, his well-knit proportions, his clear-cut features and bright eyes — glancing out over the throng which filled the platform. It had been years since he was in the South before — not, in fact, since his early boyhood, — but the familiar characteristics of the scene roused a thousand delightful memories. The soft air, which enveloped him like a caress, seemed in accord with the deliberation of movement, the drawling softness of speech, of the people, white and colored, who lounged around; and he was recalling with a keen sense of pleasure all the associations which these things had for him, when a touch on his arm made him turn, to meet the gaze of a wiry old man, with bronze-colored, wrinkled countenance, who was peering anxiously into his face.

"Scuse me, sah," this dignified person said, with a manner of extreme politeness; "but ain't you Mr. Laurence Desmond?"

Desmond laughed as he grasped the hand which touched him.

"Why, Uncle Hiram," he said, "are you in doubt about me? Have I changed as much as that?"

"No, sah, — no, sah," answered the old Negro, while the smile which irradiated the bronze-colored face and deepened all its wrinkles was a very wonderful illumination indeed. "Now that I looks at you, I sees you is the same little Mass Laurie growed big. And I'm mighty glad to find you safe and well, sah. We've been tur'ble uneasy 'bout you ever sence we heered of the accident."

"I'm awfully sorry!" Desmond exclaimed with quick compunction. "I should have sent a message to say that I was safe. But I never thought of the news reaching Hillcrest. I hope my uncle didn't hear it?"

"Oh, no, sah, — nobody would 'a' told the Judge! An' I don't reckon the news *has* got to Hillcrest. But me an' Miss Edith was in town to meet the train, an' so we heered —"

"Miss Edith! Is she here?"

"Yes, sah, — waitin' just outside in the ca'riage. If you'll give me your checks, you can go right along to her."

Desmond handed over his checks, surrendered his suit-case, and then strode away through the loitering, soft-talking crowd, to where, outside the station, a number of waiting vehicles stood, among which he at once identified an open carriage, on the seat of which a girl sat, holding the reins of a pair of handsome and rather restive horses.

Turning her own handsome and thoroughbred head, she uttered a cry of welcome.

"Laurence! It *is* Laurence? Oh, I am glad to see you alive and — *whole!*" Then, as her outstretched hand was taken in the clasp of his: "Why didn't you let us know that you were safe? We have had the most horrible time, — Uncle Hiram and I! We dared not go home without you, and we couldn't learn whether you were alive or dead."

"I'm really most awfully sorry," Desmond said again. "I never thought of your being in town, and I hoped I would reach Hillcrest before news of the accident did. Unless matters have changed very much down here, a train more or less late is not unusual."

"Not in the least unusual, and mere delay would have caused no uneasiness. But when the demand for relief came, then the news of the accident spread, and we knew it must be very serious. Indeed we heard the most awful things, — that the whole train was wrecked, and all the passengers injured or killed."

"It was quite true, as far as those in the ordinary coaches were concerned," he said gravely. "I don't think any one of them escaped injury or death. It was an awful accident, — one of the worst of its kind. Don't let us talk of it! Tell me about my uncle. Is he dangerously ill?"

"He has been, but the doctors think that, for the present at least, the danger is past. He is very anxious to see you. It will be a great relief to his mind that you have come. I — I couldn't but think during these hours of suspense what a blow it would be to *him* if you were killed."

Desmond uttered an exclamation. "It was absolutely inexcusable of me not to have relieved your anxiety," he said. "But it was not only that I never thought of your being here: it was also that I was so absorbed in helping to get the poor creatures out of the wreck, in doing what one could for them — "

"Ah! then, you are excusable," she told him quickly; "and I won't say another word about my anxiety. But here comes Uncle Hiram at last, so now we can get off."

"All right, missy," Uncle Hiram said, as he mounted with surprising agility to his seat and took the reins. "Steve's got the trunk, an' he'll be comin' right along after us."

"Then do let us get on as fast as possible," the young lady answered; "for I am afraid of some word of the accident reaching Hillcrest before we get there."

"Nobody wouldn't tell the Judge, ef it did," Hiram observed again, with reassuring confidence.

Nevertheless, he obeyed the admonition to drive as fast as possible; and they whirled away from the station and its crowd, through the streets of the town — one of the old Southern towns, painfully taking on an air of newness and parting with dignity and beauty in the effort to be modern and progressive, — and out into the open country, where the dusk was dying away over the wide fields, the rolling hills, and tinted woods. The road lay smooth as a floor before them; the horses were eager; and Desmond thought he had never felt anything sweeter than the freshness of the air, laden with aromatic scents of field and forest; particularly with the balsamic fragrance of the pines, which came to them as they drove rapidly along. He drew a deep breath, realizing how good it was to be alive, and feeling the horror and tragedy of the afternoon deepen rather than lift from his spirit by contrast of his lot with that of those who had been so suddenly swept by a terrible death into eternity, or who at this moment lay maimed and suffering in the hospital of the town.

The girl beside him heard him suddenly groan, and laid her hand lightly on his arm.

"You are thinking of those dreadful things again," she said. "Don't! You did what you could for the poor people, and now you can do nothing more; so try to forget it all."

"Oh, but you don't know!" he exclaimed. "It seems positively awful that I should be here alive — so intensely alive — and *whole*, as you said, enjoying rest and comfort, and this divine air, while they —"

As his voice sank she was conscious of the shudder that again shook him.

"It is awful," she agreed. "But that is life. One suffers and another goes free, and we don't know why." Then she added fervently: "I am glad I never had to look on such horrors."

"And yet I saw a girl as young as you are face them unflinching this afternoon," he said. "It is true she was a trained nurse, but her courage was wonderful. She shrank from nothing, — and there were things from which the strongest man shrank."

"If she was a trained nurse, that explains it, doesn't it? They seem, as a class, to have lost the power to feel for suffering."

"Not all of them, I am sure. I don't think this girl had, for she was as gentle as she was brave. I can give you no idea of how she helped some of those poor creatures. There was one woman hopelessly fastened in the wreck, whose hand she held until she died."

"Oh!" It was the turn of the listener to shudder. "Don't talk of it!" she pleaded. "It is too dreadful! Be thankful you are safe, and try to forget it all. Do you know," with a quick change of tone, "I think it rather strange that I should have recognized you immediately, considering how long it is since I saw you last, and how young you were then? Of course I was expecting to see you, but still it was strange."

"No stranger than that I hadn't a doubt who you were," he answered. "It indicates that we made an impression on each other."

"Some rather hard impressions, if I remember correctly," she laughed. "In default of a boy, I was occasionally allowed the honor of playing ball with you, until various bruises, and finally a tooth knocked out, made mamma forbid it."

"I think," he remarked reminiscently, "that I carried the marks of some of the teeth which were not knocked out, on my hand for a long time after we parted."

"It served you right, then, for the way you tormented, and held me a prisoner when I was trying to get free."

"What a little tigress you were!" he said. "I shall never forget how you set your teeth in my hand. There was not much delay in freeing the prisoner after that."

They both laughed over these childish recollections, as they drove onward over the familiar road, with the friendly country lying under its soft mantle of darkness all about them. Presently the wild, sweet odors of growing things along a water-course was followed by the splash of the horses' feet in a shallow stream, the gleam of the carriage lamps on the swirling water, a sharp pull up the opposite bank, quick trotting for a quarter of a mile through a fragrant valley; then gates were thrown open, and the road began to wind by easy gradients around a terraced hill, to where a large house, blazing with lights, stood on the levelled summit.

As the carriage drew up before the open door, through which a flood of radiance poured on the gravelled sweep before it, a lady came out and stood at the head of the stone steps of the portico.

"O Edith," she cried, "I'm glad to see you at last! What on earth has kept you so long? Hasn't Laurence come?"

"Yes, Aunt Rachel," Desmond answered for himself. "Here I am, and so sorry to have been the cause of worry to you!"

He paused only long enough to help his companion out of the carriage; and then, running up the steps, was greeted affectionately by the lady, who, taking his arm, led him into the spacious and stately hall, where she paused to look at him with a critical glance which quickly changed to one of approval.

"My dear boy," she said, "I am delighted to see you, and to find you so — so much of a Wargrave! You are amazingly like our family. See, Edith" (she glanced at several portraits hanging on the walls), "what a striking likeness to those!"

The girl, who had meanwhile come in, also glanced at the portraits and then at the tall, handsome young man. She nodded smilingly.

"He's like them," she said, "with some differences. But you had better let him go and rest a bit before dinner, mamma; for he has been in an awful railway accident — that's why we are so late, — and come perilously near, having his good looks marred forever."

CHAPTER III

A Trust

It was still with the pleasant sense of recalling old and delightful recollections that Desmond found himself, a little later, following a trim, chocolate-colored youth — grandson of Uncle Hiram — up the broad staircase which led in a wide circle around the hall to the gallery of the second story, on which chambers and corridors opened. Aware of the curious fashion in which things and places which seemed very imposing to the eyes of childhood undergo a shrinking process when viewed in later life, he had not expected to find Hillcrest as stately as his memory represented it; but, to his great surprise, he found that for once memory had not exaggerated. This great central hall, open to the roof of the house, was as fine in space and architectural proportion as anything of its kind that he had ever seen anywhere; and the sweep of the noble staircase, as it circled the picture-hung walls and climbed upward to a turret on the roof, was a delight to the eye. So likewise he found the spacious chamber into which he was ushered

even more handsome than his recollection; for a boy of twelve could scarcely have been expected to appreciate the splendid old carved mahogany of the canopied bed and massive wardrobe.

After the servant had been dismissed, he stood for a moment looking around him, conscious of a thrill of pride, as he realized, more distinctly than ever before, what a fine old house, full of the intangible essence of a wealthy and aristocratic past, this home of his mother's family was. For a century and a half the Wargraves had been planted here, owning many thousands of acres, of which the original deeds were from the Lords Proprietors, who held the Carolinas under grant of the British Crown; and, though war had taken title of these wide acres and diminished their value, enough still remained to form a magnificent heritage. The house, replacing an earlier Colonial structure, had been built in the first half of the nineteenth century, before modern machinery and modern methods were in vogue; and it was, therefore, not only nobly planned — for which his descendants had to thank the Wargrave of the day, who had travelled long abroad, — but all its details of carved wood and finely executed designs in plaster showed the conscientiousness of the old workmanship and handcraft.

In the ante-bellum South, such homes, remaining in the same family from generation to generation, were not uncommon; but under changed conditions, and the ever-encroaching inroads of democracy, their number has grown so much less that the Wargrave estate had become somewhat a matter of wonder. "How has it been held intact?" strangers asked, knowing the conditions of ordinary American life. And even the oldest inhabitants of the country could only answer, "There's some sort of a family trust which has never been violated."

As a matter of fact, it was only in the family that this trust was thoroughly understood, and held as a binding obligation, which no Wargrave had ever failed to observe. Even Desmond had but a vague idea of its conditions, which was natural enough, seeing that they seemed to concern him very little; and what he knew was drawn from sayings of his mother, who had died when he was very young. His father — a gay and gallant young Irish soldier of fortune in the Confederate service — had met the daughter of the Wargraves during the war, swept her away by his tempestuous wooing, overcome the family opposition founded upon his nationality and his religion, and, after their marriage, carried his wife abroad with him, where he had become a famous war correspondent, and was finally killed in one of the Egyptian campaigns. Laurence, the only child of the marriage, had adopted his father's profession; and it was now in obedience to a summons from his uncle, his mother's only brother, that he found himself in the old home of her family.

What the summons, which had been of a very imperative nature, meant, he had no clear idea. It was only now that he began to consider this, and paused in the midst of his toilet to ask himself what he knew of the family situation and affairs. Really, it was very little. He knew that his uncle, Judge Wargrave, had had a son — he remembered clearly hearing his mother speak of him — but what had become of this son he did not know, not even whether he were living or dead. He knew only that silence had wrapped the name when he had been at Hillcrest as a boy; only the old servants had now and then let drop a word about "Mass Harry." So it seemed that, for some unexplained reason, the natural Wargrave heir had ceased to be a factor in the family life. Well, then, there remained only his aunt, Mrs. Creighton, a childless widow, and himself; for his aunt's stepdaughter — the handsome girl who had met him in Kingsford — although she had grown up in the house, and was a great favorite of his uncle, had of course no part in the family inheritance.

He shrugged his shoulders as he took up his dinner coat.

"It looks," he said aloud, "as if the Wargraves had nearly come to an end as a family." And then a sudden shudder shook him again, as he realized once more how nearly in his own person this end had been to coming to pass that afternoon.

The musical chime of a Japanese gong sounding below, told him that dinner was ready; and, stepping out on the circular gallery, he paused for an instant, arrested by the picture-like beauty of the scene beneath. A hanging lamp threw its soft lustre down on a large Oriental rug,

which covered the centre of the parqueted hall; a square mahogany table, with elaborately carved legs and feet, was strewn with books and papers; and by its side, turning over a mass of newly arrived mail, Edith Creighton stood — a radiant, graceful figure, with her richly colored face and brunette head rising above the lace gown that showed her slender proportions — while she talked to her step-mother, who sat in a deep, cushioned chair on the other side of the table. At sound of his closing door, she lifted her face and looked up.

"Yes, that meant dinner," she called out to him gaily, her voice as clear and sweet in timbre as the beautiful metal which had just been struck where it hung by the dining-room door. "Come down!"

He needed no second bidding, but, running down lightly, offered his arm, with a word of apology, to his aunt, and led her through the open door, where the same chocolate-colored youth stood at attention like a soldier, into the spacious dining-room, with its beautifully decorated ceiling in high relief, its massive, silver-laden sideboard, and its table set with old East Indian china. It was a table compressed to its smallest circular limit for the small party of three; and as dish after dish of the distinctively Southern cuisine was served, with wine that had mellowed for many years in the cellar below, Desmond, looking at the two charming women who were his companions, felt increasingly conscious that Fate had been very kind to him indeed. By tacit consent, all mention of the railway accident and its horrors was avoided; and the talk rippled lightly and pleasantly over old recollections, and his later experiences of flood and field, until dinner was over, when, declining to smoke, he accompanied the ladies into the library, which, as he well remembered, was the family sitting-room.

"How unchanged everything is, and how perfectly charming!" he said, as he sat down and glanced around the room, with its dwarf bookcases, above which hung priceless old line engravings; its writing table, with double student's lamp; its deep easy-chairs, and moss-green carpet, in which the foot sank soundlessly. "I didn't know how well I remembered things until I see how familiar they all are. And what a treasure-house of objects for which a modern collector would give his eyes! Really, Aunt Rachel, I wonder how even at Hillcrest you have managed to keep them all."

Mrs. Creighton lifted her delicate brows slightly.

"My dear boy," she remonstrated, "what would have become of them? One doesn't give away one's old furniture and pictures and china."

"No, of course not," he agreed. "But very few people have so much of all these things."

"Oh, well" — and now the tone was careless enough — "that is easily understood! The Wargraves have always, especially before the war, been able to get what they pleased, and they pleased to get the best. It was like this house, which my grandfather — your great-grandfather — built. He allowed nothing common, not even a badly made brick, to enter into it. The Wargraves have always been like that. They cared only for the best of everything."

"So it seems," observed the young man, with another comprehensive glance around. "Nevertheless, I can't but wonder a little how it has all been held together for — more than a century and a half, isn't it? It's like the old country, not at all like America."

Mrs. Creighton cleared her throat, and seemed to hesitate a moment — a moment in which Desmond was aware that Edith glanced at him curiously — before she said:

"That's just it. It *is* like the old country. You know we are descended from the younger son of an old English family; and it seems that his intention in coming over here was to found a branch of the house which should equal the elder branch in wealth and importance. The Revolution was a great blow to him — he was then an old man, so his Royalist sentiments did not attract much attention, or he might have fared badly — and after it was over he tried to devise some means of still accomplishing his object. It was difficult, because you know the entailing of property was forbidden by law, and without entailed property you can not have a family."

Desmond nodded. "That's just what I've been thinking," he said. "How did he manage!"

"He entailed the estate as far as he could," Mrs. Creighton answered; "and laid it as a trust, binding in honor, if not in law, on his descendants to renew the entail whenever it lapsed — that is, in every third generation. He gave clear directions how this was to be done. The property was always to be entailed on the oldest son; or, failing a son, on the oldest son of the oldest daughter —"

"But, good heavens!" (the young man sat up in his surprise), "how were the other children to be provided for?"

"There was no trouble about that — at least before the war. The income from the estate was so immense that it was easy to make investments which secured comfortable fortunes for them. It was only Hillcrest and its fifty thousand acres which was to be kept entailed. There were other plantations bought from time to time and settled on sons and daughters."

"And did no one ever object — ever try to break the arrangement?"

"Never. To maintain the entail unbroken has been a matter of the greatest pride with every member of the family. Of one thing we can boast: no Wargrave has ever tried to break or evade the trust, and none has ever been a waster. After the war, some of the land of the original grant had to be sold; it was impossible, under changed conditions of labor, to hold it all—"

"Oh — excuse my interrupting you! — but I thought you said it was entailed and could not be sold!"

Again he was conscious of a quick, curious glance from Edith's large dark eyes, as his aunt answered:

"You haven't understood. It can only be entailed, according to law, for one generation. Then the entail lapses and must be renewed."

"Ah, I see! And it lapsed with my uncle, leaving him free?"

"Yes; and it was fortunate that it did. If at that time he had not been able to sell twenty thousand acres, and so relieve the estate of — certain burdens, I don't know what would have become of us."

"But of course since then he has renewed the entail?"

The words were spoken before Desmond thought, and it was the look on his aunt's face that enlightened him. Into her eyes, as they turned on him there flashed the same keen, curious glance that had twice shone in Edith's. Catching it, he felt himself flush as if convicted of an intolerable *bêtise*.

"No," Mrs. Creighton said, in a rather constrained tone. "He has not renewed it — yet."

Then silence fell, and Desmond was grateful to Edith when she broke it with a light laugh.

"Aren't you tired of family history?" she asked. "And yet it is just as well, considering your evident ignorance, that it has been somewhat enlightened before you see Uncle George. I am afraid he would be shocked if he learned how little you knew of the sacred Wargrave trust."

"You see I've lived so far away from it all," he said apologetically, "and — and it didn't seem to concern me at all. When do you think I shall be able to see my uncle?" he asked, turning to his aunt. "Not this evening, I suppose?"

"Yes, I fancy he will send for you presently," she answered. "He is so anxious to see you that I don't think he will wait until to-morrow. I wish he would — it is not well for him to be excited at night, — but there is no possible means of preventing his doing as he pleases."

"If he is an invalid, doesn't the doctor order what he must or mustn't do?"

Mrs. Creighton shook her head. "You don't know your uncle," she said. "He has all his life been so arbitrary that he will obey no orders, unless he wishes to do so. That makes treatment of his case very difficult."

"Rather, I should think," the young man laughed. "By the by, what is the matter with him exactly?"

"He has had an apoplectic seizure, what the doctors call a cerebral hemorrhage; and when we telegraphed for you his condition was very critical. But he has rallied in a most wonderful

manner, considering his age. His mind seems now quite clear, and he has almost entirely regained the power of speech —"

"Oh! He had lost that?"

"For a few days, yes; and even yet he confuses names and words a little, but nothing to matter. It will be the greatest possible relief to him that you have come, and I am so glad that he should be relieved. Ah" (she glanced at the door), "here is a message from him now!"

A middle-aged colored man, of the same dignified type as the rest of the household, stood in the open door, and bowed slightly as he addressed her:

"The Judge says that he'd like to see Mr. Desmond now, Miss Rachel."

Desmond rose, and looked at his aunt.

"Are you coming with me!" he asked.

"Oh, no!" she answered. "Virgil will show you the way, and your uncle will wish to see you alone. I would tell you not to stay too long, only it will not depend on you —"

"Yes, it will," Desmond interposed. "I shall not allow myself to be detained very long. I suppose I shall find you here a little later? Well, then, lead on, Virgil; though I think I remember the way."

CHAPTER IV

Laurence Meets His Uncle

Desmond remembered the way so well that it was like walking in a dream of the past, when he went up the sweeping staircase, around the circular gallery, and into a corridor that opened from the last, and led to the apartments of the owner of the house. He recalled these well: the two chambers opposite to each other, — one that of his uncle; the other that of the latter's wife, still kept just as she left it, although she had been dead for twenty years, — and the sitting-room at the end of the corridor, on which both chambers opened. It was a delightful suite in its seclusion and spaciousness, occupying the entire wing, with windows on either side overlooking the beautiful country; and it was here that Desmond always thought of his uncle, seated at his private desk, or in a deep armchair reading in the great bay-window at the end of the sitting-room.

And so, when Virgil, opening the door, stood aside to let him enter, he found the familiar figure now, — seated in the same old-fashioned, winged chair, by a table which bore a shaded lamp and several books and newspapers. At first he thought there was little change in the face turned toward him as he eagerly crossed the floor. But when he took the hand extended to meet his own, and looked more closely, he saw that years and illness had wrought great change in the handsome, stately man he remembered, with his manner of somewhat judicial severity, tempered by the exquisite courtesy and fine manners of the old social order. The white pallor of age was on the face now, the chiselled features were drawn, and the eyes, though still bright, were sunken under their overhanging brows. About the broad brow, which showed the intellectual qualities that had made him one of the first jurists of his day, the hair lay in silken waves of silvery whiteness; and altogether it seemed to Desmond that he had never seen a presence more striking, more full of the aroma and charm of inherited culture and vanished aristocratic conditions.

"My dear uncle," he exclaimed, as he bent over the figure and clasped close the frail hand, "how glad I am to see you again, — and to see you so much better than I expected to find you!"

"Yes, I am better," his uncle replied, speaking with a certain slow precision, as if not quite sure of his power of enunciation; "and very glad to see you, my dear boy. What made you so long in coming?"

"I was out of the country when your message reached me," the young man responded, as he sat down in a chair to which the other pointed. "I had gone abroad for my paper — they

wanted an account of affairs in the Balkans, — but I threw up the matter and returned by the first steamer."

"Yes, I know. It was very good of you," the slow voice answered. "But to-day — what made you so late to-day?"

"I'm sorry to say there was a bad accident to my train — a collision with a freight train about twenty miles north of Kingsford, — which delayed my arrival several hours."

"A collision!" Judge Wargrave leaned forward into the brighter circle of the lamplight, with a more shocked and startled expression on his face than the news seemed to warrant, considering the safe and sound condition of the young man who sat before him. "Was — any one injured?"

"Many were injured and several were killed. It was an awful accident."

"My God!" The old figure shook as if with palsy. "You might have been killed!"

"I might, of course," Desmond said; "only, you see, I was in the Pullman, which, as usual, withstood the shock. No one on it was hurt, but all the passengers in the other coaches were either killed or fearfully injured. It was the old story," he observed a little bitterly. "I had money enough to pay the additional cost of transportation in a well-built car, so I escaped uninjured, while the poor creatures who had to take what the railroad company provides were hurled to horrible death in its flimsy coaches."

"Yes, it is, as you say, an old story and a shameful state of affairs," his uncle agreed.

"In the suits for damages arising out of such cases, I have never failed, in my charges to the jury, to place the responsibility on the railroads — for which," he added, a faint smile curving his thin lips, "they have never failed to antagonize me in every way. But as for the safety to be bought by money — well, that is an old story, too. We can't change the conditions on which the world rests, my boy. I hope" (a little anxiously) "you haven't taken up any of the modern socialistic ideas?"

"Not a bit," Desmond answered readily. "A Catholic can't very well entertain socialistic ideas, you know, sir."

"Oh!" A shade of reserve, of something like displeasure, came into the voice now. "I had forgotten that you are a — Catholic. It seems as if you might have adopted your mother's religion."

"My mother was received into the Church before she died," Desmond reminded him.

The thin white hand waved a little impatiently.

"It was a pity that she yielded so far to your father's influence," Judge Wargrave said in his most judicial tone. "People should be loyal to the inherited beliefs of those who went before them. Well, well, we won't discuss the matter! I'm sorry that you have such a religion; but we must make the best of it. You are the only one left to carry on the old name — I suppose," he broke off abruptly, "you know that is why I sent for you!"

"No," Desmond told him honestly, "I didn't know. I have never thought of such a thing. You see, I belong to another family."

"You are a Wargrave," his uncle returned positively, — "the only one in your generation." A quick spasm of feeling seemed to pass over the fine old face for a moment, and then he added a little wistfully: "You are very like our family in appearance. I am glad — very glad — of that."

Desmond understood now the full meaning of the words which had been his aunt's first greeting, — the significance of her outburst of gratitude that he resembled the Wargrave portraits hanging below. Clearly, it was hard to Wargrave pride that the only representative of their proud old stock should be in a certain sense an alien, the son of an Irish soldier of fortune, bearing the name of a disliked nationality. And the single solace was that the strong Wargrave type had stamped itself upon him, and that, in physical aspect at least, he was clearly a son of the house. Realizing now what this meant to his uncle, the young man smiled a little.

"I am glad, too, if it pleases you, sir," he said. "It is certainly a family of which to be proud."

"Yes," the older man agreed, "it is. We have always been proud of it — we who bear the name, — and of nothing more proud than of the standard of honor maintained since the first Wargrave set foot in the New World nearly two hundred years ago. You know — you've heard of course — of the trust which has kept the family in its high position?"

Desmond assented. "I have heard of it," he said, without mentioning how lately he had heard. "It indicates a fine spirit, that the obligation to maintain the entail has never been disregarded."

"I don't think that any one has ever for an instant entertained an idea of disregarding it," his uncle said. "But there is a point, besides that of maintaining the entail, in the trust, of which you may not have heard; for it is not generally known." He paused for a moment, and again Desmond saw a quick spasm of repressed feeling pass over the clear-cut face, as it leaned forward in the lamplight. "Even more binding than the entail," the slow, careful utterance went on, "is an obligation not to hand the inheritance on to any one who has in any manner stained the name with dishonor." Something in the tone more than in the words made Desmond start. An intuition came to him like a flash. This was what it meant, the old silence and mystery about the absent cousin, which had puzzled him in his boyhood. Whether dead or living, he, the son of the house, whose name was never spoken, had evidently in some manner forfeited his birthright. He was as sure of it now as if the man, who seemed a typical embodiment of justice unswayed by mercy, sitting there before him, had stated the fact in distinct words. He had a sense of touching tragedy, the more intense because denied expression; and his eyes were large and bright with dismay as he looked at his uncle.

"It seems," he said involuntarily, "a hard obligation."

"No," Judge Wargrave's voice rang clear and firm now in its force of denial. "It is not hard, but right and just. As a man sows, so should he reap — always. To maintain his honor, to hand on the family name unstained, has been the paramount obligation of every Wargrave. If — if one forgot it, and disgraced not only himself but those who went before and were to come after him, it was simple justice that he should be a branch cut off and disowned, and that another should take his place and inheritance."

The stern, passionless tones brought a lump into Desmond's throat. Again he was conscious of an overpowering sense of tragedy, — an instinct, amounting to a conviction, that this room had echoed to such tones before, that they had fallen upon a human soul bare in its agony, and that he was here now to take the place of the man who had then been cut off and disowned. An intense distaste for filling such a position rose within him, and once more he was driven to remonstrance.

"You must forgive me," he said, "if it strikes me as almost terrible, an obligation which binds men to mercilessness, to denying forgiveness to error, — a chance to repair, to atone —"

The frown on the face regarding him made him pause in his speech, suddenly aware of its futility.

"I am sorry," said his uncle, coldly, "to see that you have the modern lax idea, which, in mercy to the individual, forgets what is due to the society or the family he has injured. All law, human and divine, is founded on what you call merciless justice, — on the wrongdoer suffering the penalty of his crime."

"Not divine, surely!" Desmond found himself protesting. "In *that* there is room for forgiveness."

The frown deepened, the face in the lamplight was austere indeed now, — the face of the judge pronouncing sentence, armed with the power and majesty of law.

"Almighty God," the firm tones said, "reads the hearts of men and knows what we can never know of their guilt or innocence. Human law can only judge outward actions, and must, for the greater good of the greater number, be merciless in exacting the penalty of wrongdoing. Let us speak no more of this. I only wish you to understand fully the trust handed down with the Wargrave inheritance, no part of which has ever been violated. "

He paused and lay back in his chair, silent for a moment; then, before Desmond could speak, resumed in a lower voice:

"I feel that I have been greatly to blame. I have deferred the imperative duty of fulfilling the trust, which it has fallen to me to fulfil, through a weakness — a vain hope, vainly indulged — which has come near to being most terribly punished. When I was taken ill, when I realized what had befallen me, when for days my tongue would not utter the words I wished to say, a great terror seized me: I saw myself dying without having fulfilled the trust, — I, the first Wargrave who had ever failed to do so! I can not express my agony — or my gratitude when I found speech restored to me; and I have counted the days until you came. If I had known how near you were to death, almost at the threshold of my house, this afternoon —" he lifted his hand to his eyes, as if overpowered by the thought, and again a strong shudder shook his frame. "If you had died," he went on brokenly, "my punishment would have seemed more than I could bear. But you are here safe; and my will is there" (he pointed to his desk) "ready to be signed. I have done nothing but practise writing my signature since I began to be able to use my hand again. Perhaps you wonder why I have waited for your arrival to sign it?" (Desmond's face had expressed his surprise.) "It was because I must have your solemn promise that you will, as far as lies in your power, fulfil all the conditions of the trust —"

Involuntarily a cry forced itself from the young man's lips.

"You can't mean," he exclaimed, "that I am to carry it on — to receive the family inheritance!"

Almost sternly, the vivid eyes under the overhanging brows met his own.

"What else could I mean!" Judge Wargrave asked. "Who else is there to receive and carry on inheritance and trust! To-morrow I will explain everything to you; and then, when I have your promise, I will sign what has waited so long for signature, and be ready to die in peace. Now I am a little tired, and we must take no risks until the will is signed. So you had better go. Thank God, you are here at last! I shall sleep well in thinking of it. Good-night!"

As he echoed the salutation, while clasping again the old hand extended to him, Desmond recalled with a certain sense of amusement his confident assurance to his aunt that he would not allow himself to be detained beyond what he thought a proper time. He knew now that it would have been impossible for him to suggest departure or anything else in opposition to the steel-like will which the frail but indomitable personality before him breathed.

"I am glad to be here, and that my coming has brought you relief, sir," he said. Then, as he turned to go away, Judge Wargrave struck a bell which stood on the table near his hand. Before its silvery sound had died, the door swung open, and Virgil appeared, standing with the same grave dignity of bearing on the threshold, to usher him out.

When he found himself downstairs again, Desmond hesitated a little. Through the open door of the library he saw his aunt reading within; but from an adjoining room the sound of a piano, softly played, told him that Edith was there, and after a minute he entered the latter apartment.

It was a large and beautiful drawing-room, stately in its dimensions, in its pillared chimney-piece of Italian marble, and lofty, stuccoed ceiling, filled with lovely old furniture, among which a few modern articles appeared.

One of these was the handsome piano at which Edith sat; while, on the other side of the room, the small quaint ancestor of this later instrument stood on straight, slender legs in its case of delicately inlaid wood. Desmond fancied a fair ghost, in scant, high-waisted frock, seated at it, drawing from the yellow old keys thin, sweet melodies, which only the ears of the spirit heard; while the graceful figure opposite was modulating some of the most intensely modern music. He sat down beside her and waited until she presently paused and looked at him.

"Do you like Brahms?" she asked.

"No — yes — I mean, I really don't know," he answered. Then suddenly: "Edith, tell me what has become of my cousin, Harry Wargrave!"

CHAPTER V

A Question Of Confidence

Edith's hands dropped involuntarily with a crash on the keyboard. She shivered slightly at the discord; lifted them, and turned around on her seat, facing Desmond.

"It was too bad to make such a noise," she said; "but you startled me tremendously. I don't know when I have heard that name before."

"But why should it be tabooed?" he asked. "That is what I want to know."

"Don't you know — anything?" she inquired, a little curiously.

"Nothing at all," he answered. "How should I? My mother died so early, and it was only from her that I ever heard anything of the family. Then when I was here as a boy —"

"Nobody told you anything then?"

"Nobody. I felt instinctively that there was a mystery about my cousin, that his name was never to be mentioned. But a boy is a rather selfish animal, who does not generally trouble his head about anything but his own concerns. I was too busy with my various amusements to think of the matter except in the most passing manner. And since then I have never thought of it at all, — never for an instant imagined that it would concern me."

"And now you know that it does?"

"Yes, now I know that it does; and I must know more before I can consent to take a man's inheritance."

With her left hand she absently struck a few chords before she said:

"I don't think you will have a choice in the matter."

"Yes, I have a choice," he replied. "My uncle has just told me that he has not signed his will because he has waited for me to make certain promises. I can refuse to make those promises."

"Oh, you mustn't do that!" she exclaimed hastily. "It would — I don't know what it *wouldn't* do! Break his heart; kill him, perhaps. Since his seizure he has seemed to live only for your coming. The doctor says his recovery has been marvellous, like a triumph of the will over the flesh. And it has all been that he might do this thing — fulfil the Wargrave trust. If you failed him now, it would be terrible."

"I don't want to fail him," the young man said earnestly; "but, equally, I don't want to be a party to injustice. So I must know what has become of my cousin, and you are the only person I can ask to tell me."

There was again silence for a moment. Then, glancing at the door which led into the library, to be sure that it was closed, the girl said:

"I will tell you all that I know, but it is very little. He was already gone when my father died, and mamma came back here to live, bringing me with her. But I think the catastrophe that banished him must have occurred shortly before that; for the servants still talked of 'Mass Harry' —"

Desmond nodded. "Yes, they did that when I was here. It was only from them that I ever heard his name."

"And one — his old nurse, who is now dead — often spoke of him," Edith went on. "It was from her I learned all that I know; for, with a child's insatiable curiosity — I don't, by the by, agree with you that children haven't curiosity —"

"I spoke only of boys," he responded. "Feminine children no doubt have abundance of it." She gave him a flashing smile.

"I understand what you mean; but never mind. Well, Mom Gracie was, I suppose, glad of some one to talk to on the subject so near her heart. She warned me not to tell that she had talked, and then she told me all she knew. As well as I remember, it wasn't very clear as a narrative, but she made me realize that something dreadful had happened. She described the last coming home of the young man, the sense of impending tragedy that everybody about the house had in the consciousness of changed relations between father and son."

"'Virgil was in the dining-room then,' she said, 'and he come out to me fairly shakin'.' "They ain't talkin' an' they ain't eatin'," he says; "an' the Judge" (the young niggahs always called Mass George "the Judge") "looks jes' like he does when he's sittin' on the bench." It was after that — might 'a' been several hours after, she went on, 'for I know it was dark — when Mass Harry come out hisself to my house. "Good-bye, Mammy!" he says. "I'm goin' away, an' I don't think I'll ever be back again." — "G'long, Mass Harry!" I says. "What you talkin' that foolishness fuh?" — "It ain't foolishness," he says (an' then I saw he was as white as your pocket-handkercher, chile, an' his eyes shinin' like stars); "I'll never come back unless my father sends for me, and he'll never do that," he says. — "Good Lord!" I screams out, "an' why wouldn't he send fuh you, when you's his only child?" — "Bekase he believes somethin' of me that isn't true," he says (yes, Miss Edith, that's what he said, — "*somethin' that isn't true*") "an' I can't disprove it, an' I'll never ask him to take my word again."

"'Well, I cries an' pleads with him,' the old soul continued; 'but ov co'se he wouldn't listen (the Wargraves is always awful set when they make up their minds to anything). An' when Hiram come an' tol' him the buggy was ready, he bid me good-bye an' went away.' Then she burst out crying; I shall never forget how she cried. 'An' he never has come back,' she would say, 'an' he never will! I'll never see my baby again. It killed his mother; she never held up her head after he went away. But nothin' don't move Mass George; an' it's my 'pinion,' she added solemnly, 'that the Lord Hissself couldn't move him.'"

"You are a good story-teller, Edith," Desmond said, as the girl's voice ceased. "You have made me see and hear old Mom Gracie. You know she was living when I was here, and I understand now why I was always conscious of a certain hostility in her glance when she looked at me. It vaguely puzzled me then, but I comprehend now: she was jealous of me as supplanting the 'Mass Harry,' of whom she often muttered unintelligible things."

"Yes," Edith said. "I think you must have been indeed a very unobservant and self-centered boy if you were only vaguely aware of her dislike. It was always clear enough to me."

"Of course I was self-centered, — I've acknowledged that," he replied. "But, you see, you had advantage of being in her confidence. Yet none of this clears up matters much. The question is, what did he do!"

Edith shook her head. "I haven't the least idea," she replied. "I have never ventured to ask."

"Well, I must ask," the young man said in a resolute tone; "and, what is more, I shall insist upon an answer. I will make no promise and take no man's inheritance in the dark."

The girl looked at him, as she had looked in the library before he went upstairs. It was evident that he surprised her, and also that he roused her interest. There was not a great deal of light in the room — only that of a tall, silken-shaded lamp by the piano, — but the concentrated radiance of this fell on his face; and it struck her that there was a great deal of strength and determination expressed in the firm contours. Usually the debonair charm of the countenance, the gay smile of the upward curling lips, the gleam of humor in the dark-blue Irish eyes, masked these characteristics; but they were very evident now, as he gazed past her, as if seeing, in the shadows beyond, the picture of the banished son of the house, which her words had so vividly evoked.

"Do you know," she said presently, "that your attitude surprises me a little? Most people would be glad to accept such an inheritance as is offered to you, without pressing inquiries about some one whom you have never seen or known."

He looked at her gravely. "What has seeing him or knowing him to do with it?" he asked. "I am not thinking of him, but of myself. It's a simple question of not profiting by injustice. I can't do that; so I must find out what has become of Harry Wargrave, and why he forfeited his inheritance before I can consent to take it."

"How will you find out?"

"I shall ask my uncle."

"Oh!" It was again an exclamation of something like horrified protest. "You must not dream of such a thing! The effect might be terrible. If you *must* ask somebody, ask mamma."

"Do you think she knows?"

"I should suppose that she certainly does."

"Very well." He rose as he spoke. "I will go and ask her."

Her glance followed him, with mingled wonder and approval, as he walked without an instant's hesitation to the door which led into the library, opened it, passed through, and closed it behind him. At the sound of its closing, she drew a deep breath, then, dropping her hands on the keys of the piano, began to play again.

Meanwhile, at the same sound, Mrs. Creighton looked up from her book and smiled at the young man advancing toward her.

"Well, your uncle did not keep you very long, after all. I am glad of that."

"I have been downstairs some time," Desmond answered. "I've been talking to Edith in the drawing-room. He said that he did not wish to keep me long — to-night."

"No doubt it was enough just to see you, to satisfy himself that you were really here," Mrs. Creighton observed. "He was pleased, was he not?"

"Very much, I think."

"I'm quite sure he was pleased," she said. "It must have gratified him deeply that you are so much of a Wargrave. And did he" (she hesitated slightly), — "did he tell you why he has been so anxious for your coming?"

"Yes," Desmond answered gravely, "he told me. I was very much surprised."

"You had not expected anything of the kind!"

"No, — how could I? It had never for an instant occurred to me that I could be made the Wargrave heir."

She glanced away from him, and he was quite sure that he heard her sigh.

"I suppose not," she said. And then, in a lower tone: "You knew nothing of the family tragedy?"

"Nothing," he answered, — "absolutely nothing until to-night. Now, for the first time, I have learned that there is a tragedy. Aunt Rachel, will you tell me the facts of it!"

As he leaned toward her, his aunt shrank back into her chair, and made a motion of dissent with her hand.

"Don't ask me!" she said. "I — I don't want to talk of it. Be satisfied that your uncle has the right to do what he intends, that no one has any power to interfere."

"That isn't the point," the young man answered. "He may have the right to do what he intends, and no one may have power to interfere; but there is a word for *me* to say, and that word is that I can not accept this inheritance if any shadow of injustice to another is involved in giving it to me."

"Laurence!" Mrs. Creighton sat erect now and stared at him. "You can't mean that you will refuse to take what your uncle wishes to secure to you?"

"I mean just that, Aunt Rachel," he told her firmly, "unless I am convinced that I can take it consistently with justice and honor."

A flush sprang to her face, an angry light to her eyes.

"You venture to question that your uncle could act otherwise than with justice and honor?" she demanded, in a vibrating tone.

He looked at her steadily; and as he looked, she was struck, as Edith had been a few minutes earlier, by the expression of determination that came out on his face.

"I am not questioning my uncle's conduct," he said, "because I know nothing about the motives actuating or the grounds justifying it. But I can not shift responsibility for my conduct to any one else. I must be certain where I stand before I can agree to profit so greatly by another's loss."

"I consider this presumptuous and — disrespectful in the extreme!" his aunt returned. "It should be enough for you that your uncle is acting as he thinks right; and no one — no one in the world — has ever before doubted his honor."

"I am not doubting it," Desmond assured her. "I am certain that he would go to the stake for what he felt to be a point of honor, but it is possible that there might be a difference of opinion between us."

"And you would set your judgment up against his!"

"When it comes to a matter of conscience, I must, you know. I am sorry to vex you, Aunt Rachel, but I can not recede from my position. Before I agree to accept this inheritance, I must know why my uncle's son and rightful heir forfeited it, and what has become of him."

"You —" Mrs. Creighton's voice failed for a moment, and then, regaining control of it, she went on bitterly, — "you are so ungrateful, as well as presumptuous, that if there were anyone to take your place, I should advise my brother to let you go. But you know that we are at your mercy; that there is no one else to carry on the family, the name —"

"I have known nothing of the kind, and I am sorry if it is so," Desmond said, with a gentleness that sprang from pity. "But if you wish me to do this, why not be frank with me? Why not give me the confidence that it is surely my right to ask?"

"I do not admit that it is your right to ask what does not concern you."

He shrugged his shoulders. The ages-old masculine contempt for a woman's reasoning power was in the gesture, as well as a certain hopelessness.

"In that case," he said, "I shall have no alternative but to ask my uncle the question you decline to answer."

"What!" she almost sprang at him. "You would have so little feeling, so little decency, as to mention the matter to *him*?"

Again she was struck by the resolute determination in the young face looking at her.

"You force me to do so," Desmond answered. "Where else am I to go for the information I must have? And I do not believe that my uncle will misunderstand me, as I regret to see that you do. He will recognize that with responsibility must go knowledge; that no man should be asked to make a promise and accept a burden in the dark."

"You call it accepting a burden to take a princely inheritance?"

"However princely, it would be a burden beyond my power of bearing, if I were not sure that it was justly mine."

Mrs. Creighton rose from her chair with a haste of movement which showed that her power of self-control was stretched to its utmost tension. She walked across the floor, stood for a moment gazing out of a window on the moonlit lawns and terraces; then turned, came back and sank into her seat again. Her face was set and very cold as she now looked at Desmond.

"You have found a means to force me to do what you wish," she said. "Anything is better than that you should speak to my brother on a subject which even *I* have never dared to touch with him. I will tell you all that I know about my nephew, and I trust that it will be enough to satisfy your — curiosity."

CHAPTER VI

Family History

Notwithstanding his resolute determination to keep his temper, the last word spoken by Mrs. Creighton stung Desmond a little.

"I do not think," he observed, "that my desire for knowledge on this subject could be called curiosity; but we will not dispute over a name. The essential thing is that I should learn the facts."

"Well," Mrs. Creighton said, "the facts, as far as I know them, are briefly these —"

Although it seemed her intention to go on, she nevertheless paused, gazing into the brass-girt fireplace, where a few logs burned more for cheerfulness than warmth. When she presently spoke again, her voice had changed a little; it seemed that she was thinking less of the young man who had so unexpectedly roused her antagonism than of the events and figures of the past.

"You are," she said, "so ignorant of the family history that I had better begin by telling you that your uncle is only the half-brother of your mother and myself. Our father married twice, and there was a long interval between his marriages. Consequently the son of the first marriage was twenty years older than the children of the second. We were very young, your mother and I, when our father died; and our brother became not only our legal guardian, but in every respect a father to us. I can barely remember when he was married; and Harry, his only son, was therefore practically of our generation, and like a brother rather than a nephew. We were very fond of him" (her voice trembled a little); "and what happened later was, and still remains, a great grief to me.

"Well, we grew up during the war, knowing little of it; for the routine on the great plantations went on just as if there had been no war, until near the close, when your uncle was brought home badly wounded; and the friend who brought him, who had carried him off the field and saved his life was your father. He was very attractive, and we all fell in love with him; but he fell in love with your mother, who had just grown into womanhood and was most charming. Perhaps" (abruptly) "you think all this is very far from what I started to tell, but it seems best to make everything clear to you."

"It is best, I am sure," Desmond told her, "and also very interesting. You see, as you have said, I am very ignorant of all these things, and glad to know them. About my father and mother now — there was opposition to their marriage, was there not?"

"Yes. Much as he liked your father, who was really a fascinating person, my brother had too keen a sense of his responsibility toward us not to feel that there were many objections to the marriage. There was a considerable disparity of age, to begin with, difference of nationality, and most of all, of religion."

The young man nodded. "I understand," he said. "The opposition was very natural, — in fact, inevitable. But they overcame it?"

"Oh, yes! They were both so determined that after a while there was nothing to do but yield. Some time elapsed, however. My brother insisted that your mother should wait until she was older and certain of knowing her own mind; so it was two or three years after the war before they were married and went abroad. Then, still later, I was married and went away; and — and while I was gone the dreadful thing about Harry happened. "

Silence fell again, as she stared once more at the softly-burning fire, the feathery ashes. Aware that half unconsciously she had been dwelling on other things in order to keep away from the subject to which she had now returned, Desmond did not speak, but only sat in an attitude of attention, with his eyes fixed on her. Some instinct of the expectation in that steady gaze, although her glance did not turn toward him, at last forced her to take up the thread of her narrative and go on.

"I can not understand it," she said; "I never have been able to understand it. No one ever had a finer sense of honor than Harry appeared to possess; he was the very ideal of all that one

could have wished him to be. Only in one thing he disappointed his father. He was not willing to stay on the plantation, nor yet to study a profession. In the years following the war, you know, there was a terrible condition of affairs here in the South — an upheaval of all the conditions of life, — and no one knew what would or could finally result. I don't want to recall the anarchy that existed for a time, and threatened to make life impossible. Young men especially were almost unable to bear it; and for this reason (because he was afraid of what Harry might be led into) my brother consented that he should do what no Wargrave had ever done before — go into business. He, therefore, went to Baltimore and entered the commission house of some old friends of ours, — men who, despairing of conditions in the South, had left their plantations, raised what money they could, and founded a prosperous business in that city. I think it was almost a relief to my brother that he was away during the terrible years in which things were gradually righting themselves, when it required all his judicial temperament to avoid trouble. But I know that he never ceased to look forward to the time when the son of the house could return to take up the inheritance which had been saved for him by such careful and almost heroic effort. Then— the blow fell.”

It seemed to Desmond that the tense suspense in which he was left when her voice dropped again was almost more than he could bear. He felt his hands involuntarily clenching. It was as if once more he almost touched the old tragedy; as if its agony took material shape before him, and he felt that he must know whatever there was to know. At length he could wait no longer.

"Don't try to go into particulars," he said gently. "Just tell me briefly what happened."

Then, for the first time since she began her story, she turned to meet his gaze; and in her darkened, dilated eyes he saw all that she was suffering.

"I can't go into particulars," she said, "because I don't know — I never asked for them. Why should I have tortured my brother with questions? He was a lawyer as well as a man of stern integrity. He would have died before he would have been guilty of an injustice toward the poorest negro. Could I imagine, therefore, that he was guilty of any toward his only son? What he wrote to me (for he never spoke of the matter) was this: 'I have learned from my old friend, Colonel Escott, that Harry has been guilty of irregularities — so he puts it — in the business entrusted to him. The proofs, into which I need not enter, seem quite clear. The firm has lost many thousand dollars, and the cheques passed through Harry's hands. I sent for him at once, and he can give no satisfactory explanation of the defalcation, — for that, in plain language, is what it is. He denies that he has been guilty of dishonesty, but the proof would convict him in any court of law. This being so, there has been only one course for me to pursue. I have paid every dollar of which the firm has been defrauded — laying a charge on the estate which it will take me many years to liquidate, in order to do so, — and I have told Harry that, unless he can bring me not merely assertion but convincing proof of his integrity, he can not enter again a house where honor has always been held supreme, and he can never expect to inherit it. With this distinct understanding, he has gone. That is all.'

"No doubt it seems strange to you that I can quote this old letter so exactly," Mrs. Creighton went on, after another pause, which now Desmond made no effort to break; "but it was the only information I ever had, and I read it over and over until it was branded on my memory. Well, you understand now why my brother has let the years go by — it is more than twenty since this occurred — without fulfilling that part of the Wargrave trust which enjoins the renewing of the entail. He had not only to clear the estate of debt, but I am sure, though he has never said so, that he has always hoped, against hope as it were, that Harry would exonerate his name from the charge of dishonor which stood against it. But that hope ended forever when we heard of his death."

"Oh!" Desmond started, for this news came to him as a shock. "He is dead, then!"

She nodded, and lifted her handkerchief to her eyes, with the sound of a smothered sob.

"Yes," she answered. "Two years ago my brother had a brief message from San Francisco — where, it seems, Harry went when he left here, — saying that he was dead."

"Is there no doubt of it? Who sent the message?"

Mrs. Creighton hesitated an instant before replying, and he had an instinctive feeling that she did not wish to answer the question. Nevertheless, with a return of coldness to her voice, she said:

"My brother had not the least doubt of the message. I did not ask him about the name signed to it, which was unknown to me."

"But not to him?"

The persistence of the question evidently irritated her. There was again a flash in her glance as it turned on him.

"Of course it was not unknown to him," she answered; "but I did not trouble him with inquiries. It would have been cruel, absolutely inexcusable, to do so."

Desmond was well aware that the indignation in her voice was for him; that she held *his* inquiries to be, if not cruel, at least "absolutely inexcusable"; but he was too intent upon his object, upon satisfying the insistent demands of his own conscience, to be deterred by this indignation.

"You must forgive me if I ask one more question," he said. "Had my uncle during all these years maintained any communication with his son?"

"Yes," Mrs. Creighton replied. "I know as much as that, although I never saw one of the communications. I think they were rare and altogether formal. My brother was too just a man to cast off his son entirely; and he provided him with a certain income, although he could not make him the heir of the estate. Even if he had wished to do so, the Wargrave trust would have prevented that."

"He told me that the trust enjoins that whoever has been guilty of dishonorable conduct should be cast out and lose the inheritance," Desmond said slowly. "It seems a hard condition."

"A hard condition?" his aunt repeated. "Do you think that any one who had been guilty of dishonorable conduct should be allowed to take the inheritance which only honorable men have held?"

"I think," Desmond answered, "that there should be some allowance made for human weakness, for possible mistakes, and — for repentance."

"Repentance!" There was a shade of scorn in her tone as she echoed the word. "How can repentance change *what has been done*? A criminal may repent, but the law exacts its penalty nevertheless."

"Human law, yes."

"We are not talking of divine law," she returned impatiently. "But I see how it is. You have been brought up in an atmosphere so different from ours that you can not understand our standards, which have for us the force of laws. Of course we might have expected this; and, in a certain sense, I did expect it. But I never thought of your taking so unsympathetic an attitude, setting yourself up to judge —"

"I am sorry," Desmond said, as she broke off abruptly, "that you mistake me so much. I am trying not to be unsympathetic; and, so far from judging, I am only asking to know how matters stand."

"Well, now you know all that is essential."

"Almost all," he agreed. "It does not concern me to decide whether my cousin was hardly dealt with, since his case has been called to a higher tribunal. If he were living, I may tell you frankly that I could not consent to take his inheritance; but since he is dead, and has, I presume, left no heirs —"

The pause was interrogative; for this was indeed the crucial point. On it everything hinged; for in his mind Desmond was quite sure that, whatever Harry Wargrave had done, there

would be no justice in alienating his inheritance from his children on account of it. But Mrs. Creighton answered without hesitation, and more coldly than she had yet spoken:

"He left no heirs, so there is no need for you to take *that* into consideration. And now I think we can drop the subject. It is naturally a very painful one to me, and I suppose that your — scruples, shall I say? — are satisfied?"

"'Scruples' is certainly a better name than curiosity for what I have felt, — what has made it necessary for me to annoy and give you pain in this manner," said Desmond, in a tone of sincere regret. "I wish you would believe that it was only because my conscience obliged me to know exactly how matters stood, that I have troubled you with what you probably consider impertinent inquiries."

"No," she answered. "I admit that they were not impertinent — from you. I acknowledge that you have a right to know family matters which do not concern any one else. I was vexed at your persistence at first, but I see now that it is better to have everything made clear before you go to my brother to-morrow." Then she looked at him with a certain softening of glance and manner. "You are a true Wargrave in your obstinacy," she added, not without approval.

Desmond smiled a little, not caring to explain further that something much stronger, more compelling, than mere obstinacy had been behind his inquiries. He, too, had a sense of relief that the explanation was over, and that apparently there was no reason why he should refuse to gratify his uncle by accepting the inheritance which was offered him.

"You have been very good in bearing with my questions and giving me so much information," he told his aunt, with what she could not but feel to be a very winning grace of manner. "I trust that I shall never have to annoy you in the same way, nor indeed in any other, again. I shall certainly endeavor not to do so."

Before Mrs. Creighton could reply, the door leading into the drawing-room — where the music had ceased some time before — softly opened, and Edith's charming face appeared.

"Have you finished talking? May I come in?" she asked.

"Yes, come in," her stepmother replied. "We have finished, in the most final sense, all that we have to say."

CHAPTER VII

A Change Of Name

One of those radiant mornings of early autumn, which in beauty rival if they do not surpass the mornings of spring, lay like a mantle of enchantment over the wide scene which Hillcrest on its dominating height commanded, when Desmond stepped out of the house after breakfast the next day. With a sense of delight in the mere consciousness of physical existence, he threw back his head and expanded his lungs to the delicious air, while his glance took in the beautiful picture spread before him. The plateau on which the house stood was covered with green lawns, that dropped on one side in a succession of terraces to the foot of the hill, where the cultivated valley swept in graceful curve, with the bend of the stream, around its base; and the horizon was bounded by softly rolling hills and woods draped in sparkling purple mist.

"What a heavenly day!" he exclaimed to Edith, who had come out with him, and who smiled at his rapture.

"I won't go so far as to declare that all days are heavenly at this season," she said; "but at least they are so much the rule that we are not surprised by them. Let us go down to the flower garden. I want some roses for the house."

They passed down a flight of stone steps to the broad terrace, facing the south, where all varieties of flowers bloomed in succession throughout the year, and where the magnificent roses of October, finer than the roses of May, were just then in their glory. The basket which Edith carried was soon full to overflowing; and it was as he looked at their fragrant beauty, and then at the wide, sunlit scene around him, that Desmond was suddenly smitten with a recollection of the railway accident of the day before, and of what it had meant to so many who, like himself, had yesterday looked out on the world in health and strength, and to-day —

Edith was startled by the change in his tone — they had been talking and laughing gaily as she clipped her roses — when he said abruptly:

"I think I am the most ungrateful brute on the face of the earth."

She turned and looked at him in amazement.

"Now, what do you possibly mean by that?" she asked.

"Just what I say," replied Desmond. "Think of yesterday! — think of the horror in which I was involved; of those who were hurled into eternity; of the others who are lying maimed and suffering yonder" (he flung out his hand in the direction of Kingsford); "and here I am as forgetful of it all, as full of the mere animal pleasure in life, as if I were a brute indeed!"

"But you are unjust to yourself," she protested. "Why shouldn't you put it out of your mind, when remembering can do no good, and when, of course, you are grateful for your escape?"

"It is kind of you to be sure of that," he remarked. "I am not sure."

"Not sure that you are grateful? Oh, impossible!"

He looked at her a little oddly.

"It is to be supposed," he said, "that the nine lepers who were cured long ago were grateful in a certain sense; but we are told that they did not express their gratitude."

He almost laughed at the growing amazement in the eyes that gazed at him.

"Do you mean the lepers in the Bible?" Edith asked. "What an extraordinary young man you are! I didn't think that young men knew much about the Bible in these days."

It was impossible not to laugh now, as he answered:

"I fancy that, as a general rule, you are quite right. But some of us are obliged to hear the Gospels read occasionally; and that incident, with its profound light on human ingratitude, early made a deep impression on me. I remember as a child thinking, in a very pharisaical spirit, that *I* would have been like the only one who returned to give thanks, and not like the ungrateful nine. Yet now —" a gesture finished the sentence expressively enough.

"But you *are* grateful," Edith reiterated in her astonishment; "and of course you have — er — expressed your gratitude."

"After a fashion, I suppose I have," he replied; "but I think I must try to express it a little better." He glanced at his watch. "It is nearly ten o'clock. I wonder if I should have time to drive into Kingsford before my uncle is likely to want me!"

"I think not, ' ' she answered. "I fancy that he will want you very soon. I know that he has asked both his lawyer and his doctor to be here this morning."

"That sounds very solemn. What need can he have for both of them?"

"To make quite sure that his will shall be unassailable, I imagine."

"Who would be likely to assail it?"

She lifted her shoulders lightly.

"How should I know? But it is characteristic of him to make things absolutely safe, whether there is danger or not. Now shall we go and see him? I always take him some flowers in the morning, and you can then find out exactly when he will want you."

"It is clear that I can't do better than put myself into your hands," he said.

So they returned to the house, and went together upstairs to the apartments of its master. Virgil opened the door of the sitting-room to Edith's knock; but before he could answer her inquiry, Judge Wargrave's voice spoke:

"Yes, yes, my dear! Come in."

She entered, followed by Desmond, who was immediately struck by the cheerfulness of the sunshine-flooded room, and by his uncle's increased vigor of appearance. He was seated in the same large chair in which he had been sitting the night before; but it was now rolled over to his desk, which was open. As he turned to greet them, Desmond was further struck by the affectionate warmth of his manner to Edith, who kissed him as if she had been his daughter.

"You are feeling better to-day," she told him, as he patted her hand. "Your new physician here" — she glanced at Desmond — "has done you a world of good. At this rate, we shall have you downstairs in a day or two."

The Judge shook his head.

"I'm afraid not so soon as that," he answered. "My legs are still very untrustworthy. But I do feel better — much better — this morning, and no doubt the cause is what you say. I hope you are quite well, my boy," he added, looking at the tall young man who stood smiling down at him.

"As well as possible, sir," Desmond answered. "Who could be otherwise in this divine climate, this beautiful place? I have just been in the garden with Edith enjoying both."

"And see what lovely roses I have brought you!" Edith added, holding up the flowers. "They are blooming gloriously just now. Virgil, fill that vase with fresh water for me."

Both men watched her with a sense of pleasure as she stood arranging the beautiful blooms in the tall crystal vase which Virgil made haste to bring to her; and then Desmond was conscious that his uncle's glance turned again with a certain keenness on himself.

"And so you like the old place!" he said. "It hasn't disappointed you — eh?"

"I don't see how it could possibly disappoint any one," Desmond replied. "I have never seen a more charming place in any country. Everything about it is so harmonious."

Judge Wargrave nodded.

"Yes, there's no note of new conditions here. You'll find them all around, but not — thank God! — at Hillcrest." Then to Edith: "Thank you, my dear! Those roses are indeed lovely. Now I am going to ask you to leave Laurence with me; and if Glynn or Blaisdell come, send either or both of them up."

Edith's smile to Desmond said, "I told you so!" as she gave a last touch to her roses, signified assent to the directions about the doctor and lawyer, and left the room. Judge Wargrave's glance followed her to the door; and, when it closed on her graceful figure, returned to Desmond, who had meanwhile sat down beside him.

"I can't tell you what sunshine she has brought into this house, since she came here as a child," he said. "I could not love her better if she were my own daughter."

"I can easily believe it," Desmond answered. "She seems delightful."

"She is just that — delightful!" his uncle said with emphasis. "You will not be surprised that I have remembered her in this," he added, taking up a legal-looking paper which lay on the desk beside him, and which Desmond immediately divined to be his will. "I wish that I could have left her more, but my power is limited. I have very little to give outside of what must be kept intact."

"I was under the impression," Desmond remarked, "that you had power to do what you pleased with the entire property, and I can see no reason why you should not provide for her as liberally as you like."

Judge Wargrave frowned slightly.

"That speech indicates that you have not grasped the nature of the trust I hold and of which I have spoken to you," he answered. "I have a legal power to do what I please with the entire property, but I have no moral right to make other than one disposition of the greater part of it. Is it possible that you have not yet understood this?"

"Yes," the young man returned, "I have understood it. But — you see" (he hesitated a little), "you are going out of the regular succession in choosing me as your heir —"

"I am doing nothing of the kind," his uncle interposed sharply. "I am, on the contrary, complying exactly with the directions of the trust, — am doing what I have no choice but to do." He extended his thin, tremulous hand and took a folded document out of a pigeonhole before him. "This is a copy of the will which created the trust," he went on. "It was made by Robert Wargrave in 1784, after the Independence of the Colonies was assured, and when he recognized what character of legislation with regard to rights of property was to be expected from the spirit dominant in them. Here" (he folded back a page of the yellow paper and pointed to a paragraph marked in red ink) "you can read exactly what he made binding in honor, if not in law, upon his descendants."

It was with a strange thrill, as if he were touching the hand of the man so long dead, that Desmond took the old document, an attested copy of the original will made more than a hundred years before. Transcribed in the faded, yet beautifully clear handwriting of the clerk of the court of that day, he read the directions, carefully and distinctly expressed, which had bound every Wargrave up to the last representative of the name who now sat before him. When he finally lifted his eyes from the paper they were very grave.

"Yes, it is all here," he said. "He makes the obligation to fulfil his wishes binding in honor upon all his descendants. But — forgive me if I question whether he had the right to do this."

"Laurence !"

"Don't misunderstand me," the young man went on quickly. "He had, without doubt, the right to express his wishes, and ask that they should be observed as far as possible; but to lay them with the force of law upon all who were to come after him, without regard to other conditions which might arise, seems to me unreasonable. Do you think, now, that a man would violate honor who, in obedience to the higher law of justice, should fail to observe this command?"

"I am at a loss to know what you mean by 'the higher law of justice,' " his uncle answered coldly. "You grant, I suppose, the right of the owner to entail his property, if the law permitted, as property is entailed in the old country. Very well, then; how can you deny his right to say to his descendants, 'I am forbidden, in the interest of republican theories, to entail my estate beyond a certain limit; so I trust to your honor to do what I am unable to do, — to maintain this entail for the sake of the family on the lines I have laid down'? If there is no injustice in such an entail for the one or two generations legally permitted, on what principle does it become unjust when put in force for any number of generations?"

"I — don't know," Desmond was obliged to answer; for, as a matter of fact, his protest had been one of instinct and impulse rather than of thought. He could not mention the condition which seemed to him most hard, — that which declared the inheritance should be forfeited by any form of dishonorable conduct. And, after all, he reminded himself, Harry Wargrave was dead, and concern on his behalf altogether unnecessary. He glanced down again at the paper in his hand. "I observe," he said, "that those who are in the line of succession are very clearly specified — first, sons, with strict regard to primogeniture; or, failing these, the sons of daughters. That, of course, is where I come in." He paused suddenly, as if struck by a new thought. "I wonder —" he began, and paused again.

"What?" his uncle asked, and Desmond's ear told him that there was a note of distinct apprehension, as well as of repressed impatience, in his voice.

"Only this," the young man answered hastily. "Since it appears that I am the sole representative of the family in my generation — for so my aunt told me last night, — it occurs to me to wonder whether, if I had been killed in that railway accident yesterday, you would feel yourself free to do with the estate what you like — to leave it, let us say, to Edith?"

"Certainly not," Judge Wargrave answered with decision. "I should have to go back a generation to find an heir, that is all."

"Oh, I see! Nothing short of the wiping out of all the branches of the family could release you from the obligation of renewing the entail."

"You speak rather flippantly," his uncle said, "but you are right. Only the extinction of the family could put an end to the obligation, and that is an event which we need not consider. I am very thankful that you were spared yesterday; but I think that we have had enough of this discussion. Now I must ask your attention and assent to one or two points before I sign my will in the presence of the witnesses whom I am expecting. First, you understand that you will have no power over the property, except to use its income and hold the estate in trust for the heir of entail who will succeed you?"

Desmond nodded. "I understand," he said. "I shall have no responsibility. I represent the generation that is bound, while the heir who follows me will be free —"

"No." The interruption was short and stern. "He will be as bound as you are — in honor. And there your responsibility comes in: to make him comprehend this, to hand on the family tradition in all its binding force. That is what you must promise to do."

Desmond smiled a little. It seemed difficult to imagine himself inculcating the Wargrave tradition on that shadowy, non-existent personality of the future.

"I will promise to do my best to make the obligation clear to whoever comes after me," he said.

His uncle lifted his hand with the gesture of one who administers on oath.

"You promise to fulfil the family trust in every particular, as far as lies in your power, so help you God!" he dictated slowly.

The solemnity of the last words was so unexpected that the smile left Desmond's lips. For an instant he hesitated, conscious of a deep reluctance to bind himself in such a manner; but then the recollection came again that he was not asked to promise anything against which conscience could protest. Why should he not call God to witness his intention to fulfil as far as lay in his power — which did not seem to be very far — the trust committed to him? He met his uncle's piercing gaze after an instant with a candid glance.

"Yes," he assented. "I promise that — so help me God!"

Something like a sigh of relief came from the older man's lips, as he sank back in his chair.

"Well, that is all," he said, — "except that, on inheriting the estate, you must take the name of Wargrave."

But here Desmond demurred. "I don't think," he said, "that I can agree to give up my father's name. I am rather proud of it."

"Use both, then," his uncle answered. "It is a fashion I dislike, but there have been only Wargraves at Hillcrest for close upon two hundred years, and we can have no change now." Then, as voices and steps were heard approaching along the corridor outside, "There are Glynn and Blaisdell," he said. "Thank Heaven, I shall soon have the weight that has burdened it so long lifted from my mind!"

CHAPTER VIII

A Matter Of Justice

"Well," Desmond said, with a slightly whimsical smile, to Edith, when he met her a little later in the hall, where the wide doors were open to the sunny brightness of the day, and the fragrant breezes that swept through: "the weight of the Wargrave trust has fallen upon my shoulders. Do you perceive any change in my appearance?"

"What change should there be!" she asked, regarding him amusedly. "A look of importance, perhaps?"

But he shook his head. "By no means. As far as I can make out, I am of no importance at all, except to hand on the estate, and inculcate the binding nature of the trust on a person known as 'the heir of entail.' Oh, by the way, who is Robert Wargrave Selwyn?"

Edith's laugh rang out. "Bobby Selwyn!" she exclaimed. "Oh, you can't have forgotten him!"

"By Jove, but I had!" Desmond assured her. "Or at least I didn't identify a boy of that name, whom I knew a dozen years ago, with the Robert Wargrave Selwyn whom I have just heard solemnly declared the heir of entail, in case I die without direct heirs.'"

"So Bobby is put in the entail!" Edith said, in a somewhat awed tone. "Of course one expected it — he is the nearest heir after yourself, — but it must have gone hard with Uncle George; for he doesn't like him at all."

"Why not?"

"For the reason that fire and water don't agree: they are mutually antipathetic. Bobby belongs to the new generation, is aggressively, offensively modern, believes in everything that Uncle George abhors, has enraged him by trying to persuade him to sell some of the Hillcrest land and water-power for a manufacturing site; and altogether made himself so obnoxious that I think — I really think it is one of the finest things I ever heard of that Uncle George should have named him as an heir of the property."

"I see what you mean," Desmond said. "It is fine that he is able to rise so entirely above his personal feelings, and act according to the strict law of justice, in carrying out the trust committed to his hands. I wonder —" And then the speaker paused, as he had paused after the same words when talking to his uncle a short time before.

Edith glanced at him curiously. "What do you wonder?" she asked.

"I seem," Desmond answered, laughing a little, "to have done nothing but wonder and ask questions since I have been here. I've no doubt I am a great nuisance; but, you see, I am so ignorant."

"That's understood," she told him, without any unkind meaning. "You can't know things unless you have heard them; and, as you were good enough to inform me last night, I am a good story-teller; so I like to tell you whatever I chance to know of the family affairs. Again, therefore, what were you wondering about?"

"Something which I hardly think even you can tell me," he replied. "I was wondering what my uncle would do if that high sense of justice, which has made him put a man personally obnoxious to himself in the succession to the trust which he holds so sacred, were arrayed against the requirement of that trust."

Edith stared. "I don't know what you mean," she said. "How could that be?"

Desmond flung out his hands in a gesture of a wide ignorance. "That is what I can not tell," he said. "It is an abstract question. One can only — wonder."

"You are really a very strange young man," Edith remarked, much as she had earlier remarked in the garden. "Things seem to strike you in a way that is unusual, to say the least. I suppose," she added, "that we appear as odd to you as you do to us; and you are trying to understand us, as if we were characters in a novel or a play."

"No," Desmond replied, "I find nothing odd in any one except my uncle. And 'odd' is not exactly the word for him. It is more that in him one sees a type of character so strongly marked, so individual, so built on lines that belong to the antique rather than to the modern world, that curiosity and interest are strongly roused; and, imagining certain tests applied, I can only repeat that one wonders what the result would be."

"I don't in the least know how you would expect the test to be applied," Edith said, with a good deal of the wonder of which he spoke in her own tone; "but I can tell you that nothing on earth — and, like Mom Gracie, I am almost tempted to say, nothing in heaven — could shake his

adherence to what his standard of honor demands. He proved that when he sent his only son away."

"Yes," Desmond agreed. "It seems foolish to think of any further test after that; and yet—"

He broke off abruptly; for at this moment the sound of voices made them glance up, to see the lawyer and doctor, whom Desmond had left with his uncle, coming around the gallery which encircled the hall. They were talking and laughing cheerfully together, as they descended the staircase — two middle-aged men, both of the highest type of their respective professions, and evidently intimate friends, — and their cheerfulness was proof that they had left their client and patient in a satisfactory condition. Indeed Dr. Glynn expressed his satisfaction when he approached the two young people.

"The Judge's improvement is extremely gratifying; and, considering his age, the most remarkable altogether that I have ever known," he said to Edith.

"I am sure you must find him much better to-day," she answered. "It strikes me that he is more like himself than he has been since his seizure."

"Yes," the doctor agreed. "He is very much better than he was even yesterday. I suppose that we have to thank Mr. Desmond for the improvement. Your arrival has brought great relief as well as pleasure to your uncle," he added, addressing the young man.

"I am sorry that I could not have brought the relief sooner," Desmond explained; "but I was in remote Eastern Europe when the summons reached me. I do not, however" (he spoke now to the lawyer), "understand why my uncle should have waited for my coming to relieve his mind by signing the will he has signed this morning."

Mr. Blaisdell — a tall man, with a rugged, intellectual face — put out his lower lip in a manner very expressive and peculiar to himself.

"I represented that to him," he said; "but he seemed very anxious to see you, and, as I inferred, to obtain from you some kind of personal pledge before signing the will. I am glad," he continued, "that you were able to satisfy him fully. The Wargrave trust is nearer his heart than anything else, and it is something that all of us who belong to the old order are anxious to have maintained."

"It would certainly be a pity if it should lapse," Desmond assented. "I only wish that there was a Wargrave to carry it on."

The words evidently surprised and somewhat startled his hearers. They glanced at each other quickly before Mr. Blaisdell said:

"No doubt we all wish that; but we must not forget that you are a Wargrave — in right of your mother."

"And in right of something else," added Dr. Glynn, looking up at the family portraits. "You have the stamp of the race, and that's more than a name. By the by" — his glance suddenly returned to the young man, — "weren't you in that railway wreck yesterday? It would have been a terrible blow to the Judge if you had been killed."

Desmond was unable to restrain a slight laugh. "Every one thinks of my escape first with regard to my uncle," he said. "I am glad on his account not to have been killed; and also on my own. I was fortunately one of the Pullman passengers, of whom none were injured. I am almost afraid to ask how those who were injured are to-day?"

"Two more died last night," the doctor answered. "The rest will probably get well, in a more or less maimed condition. There would have been more deaths but for the wonderfully good and intelligent service of the nurse, who appears to have been the only person able to render aid to the injured when the wreck occurred."

Desmond looked at Edith. "You know I told you about her," he said. "She was wonderful. I was with her all the time; and it struck me — though that may have been because of my ignorance — that no doctor could have done more or done better than she did."

"No doubt you were right," Dr. Glynn told him. "The first things to be done in case of accident are mostly very simple, and any well-trained nurse is thoroughly familiar with them. But this young woman seems to have displayed more than ordinary judgment and skill in several cases. Dr. Fielding, our head surgeon, was speaking of her in very high terms this morning."

"Then," said Edith, "I suppose you will keep her at your hospital?"

"Oh, that I can't tell! But she is certainly very useful there just now. Well, Blaisdell, I must be going! Can I take you in to Kingsford?"

"Oh, I'm sure mamma expects you both to stay to lunch — or dinner, if you prefer to call it that!" Edith exclaimed. "And here she is to tell you so."

Mrs. Creighton indeed appeared at the moment, full of the hospitable intentions mentioned. But the doctor declared that, for him, remaining longer was out of the question; and Mr. Blaisdell decided to return with him to the town. As they drove out of the gates of Hillcrest a few minutes later, they met a small but extremely well-appointed automobile just turning in, which paused at sight of them, while the young man driving it uttered the greeting of his day and kind:

"Hallo! How are you both? I hope the Judge isn't worse?"

"On the contrary, much better," Dr. Glynn replied. "I suppose you've heard that young Desmond has arrived?"

"Yes. Heard also that he was in the railway wreck yesterday and narrowly escaped being killed. That would have been a blow to the Judge!"

"Pretty bad," Dr. Glynn agreed, with amused remembrance of Desmond's remark that every one thought of his escape first with reference to his uncle. "But fortunately he was spared, and the Judge seems immensely pleased by his arrival."

"Oh, of course! Heir of the Wargrave trust, and all that kind of thing." A laughing eye roved over to Mr. Blaisdell. "I suppose, from the conjunction of the legal with the medical profession, that the trust has been settled on its heir!"

"Your conjecture is correct," Mr. Blaisdell replied. "The Judge has just signed his will, and the Wargrave trust is safe for another generation."

The young man shrugged his shoulders. "I don't envy the inheritor of tied-up property," he remarked. "I want a free hand with whatever comes to *me*."

"I'll be bound he does!" the lawyer observed dryly to his companion, as they drove on a moment later. "Nobody who knows Robert Selwyn will doubt that. I earnestly hope that the Wargrave property may never come into his hands."

"He would double its value if it did," Dr. Glynn observed. "Bobby has a keen eye to the main chance, and a business ability that isn't common in the class he springs from."

"To be sure," Mr. Blaisdell agreed. "He would plant factories and villages on the estate — you know how he covets the water-power, — and make it pour money into the Selwyn coffers. But meanwhile the Wargrave trust, and all that it stands for, would vanish into thin air, and never be heard of again. Now, I think we should all be sorry for that."

"You and I, and a few other old-fashioned people like ourselves, would be sorry," the doctor said; "but public sentiment, money-mad and progress-mad as it is, would heartily approve."

"No doubt you are right," the other assented; and then silence fell between them, — the sad and slightly bitter silence which now and then overtakes those who know themselves to be out of accord with their time and their surroundings.

Meanwhile Mr. Bobby Selwyn, cheerfully conscious of being entirely in accord with both, and superiorly compassionate of those who were not, proceeded on his way, spinning merrily around the drive which circled the hill, and announcing his arrival by two or three honks of his horn, although well aware that the sound was detestable to Judge Wargrave.

"Here comes a motor!" Desmond remarked, stepping to the door at the sound so familiar to modern ears.

"It's Bobby Selwyn," Edith said, as she followed him, and saw the young man who drew up his car before the portico. "How often have you been told not to make that odious noise within the grounds of Hillcrest?" she demanded severely of the latter, as he sprang out and came up the steps. "There isn't the least necessity for it."

"There's the necessity of letting you know, without the possibility of mistake, who is coming," he laughed; "for I am sure I am the only person bold enough to sound a horn within the sacred precincts of Hillcrest."

"I shouldn't call it 'bold enough,' but inconsiderate enough," she retorted. "You know that it annoys Uncle George extremely."

"But he's well enough again to be slightly annoyed," the young man answered, still laughing. "At the gate I met Dr. Glynn, who gave such a good account of him that I felt impelled to honk my congratulations before I could utter them in person. So glad to hear that he is much better, and that his mind has been relieved by the arrival of —"

"Laurence Desmond, yes," Edith said as he paused. She turned toward Desmond. "Do I need to introduce you two!" she asked. "You used to know each other quite well."

"And we are kinsmen, besides," Selwyn added. "No, I don't think you need to introduce us. I should have known Laurie, as we used to call him when he was a boy, if I had met him on the highway."

"I can't say as much for my recollection of you," Desmond said, as they shook hands. "Perhaps my memory is not so good; at least I don't think I should have known you on the highway."

"Oh, it isn't a question of memory so much as of family likeness!" the other remarked. "You are very like the Wargraves. The Judge must have been pleased to see that."

"He was," Desmond replied; "and the likeness must be strong since every one remarks it."

"It *is* strong," Selwyn said, glancing at him keenly. "And of course the old gentleman hopes that it isn't only physical, but that you are a Wargrave through and through."

"From what I have heard of the Wargraves, I have no objection to hoping so," Desmond answered. "The family characteristics seem very fine."

"Yes, they're fine," Bobby Selwyn admitted, in a tone of extremely tempered approval. "Not perhaps entirely suited to the present day, but we needn't — er — enter upon that."

"No, we needn't," Edith agreed with decision. "There is no reason why you should begin to betray at once your highly objectionable opinions, and your personal deterioration from the standards of some at least of your ancestors."

Her tone, not to speak of her words, might have had a crushing effect upon many men; but Bobby Selwyn shook his head in smiling protest.

"Say what you please of me, but don't reflect upon my poor Selwyn forbears in that manner, Edith," he answered. "I really don't think they are accountable for what you find objectionable in my character, although I fear my mother inclines to your opinion."

"I am sure she does," Edith told him. "She is constantly regretting that you are not more of a Wargrave."

"While she derives great satisfaction from certain results which we may assume to come from the other strain," he commented. "But, then, one doesn't look for consistency in woman."

"One is quite as likely to find it in woman as in man, I think," said Edith. "You always try to provoke me, Bobby."

"You are so entertaining when you are provoked!" Bobby murmured.

"But we need not entertain Laurence with our quarrels," said Edith. "Do you want to see Uncle George? Of course he has heard your considerate announcement of arrival."

"I doubt very much whether Uncle George cares about seeing me," Mr. Selwyn replied; "but we can at least give him the option of doing so if he likes. Kindly let him know that I have

called to inquire how he is, as well as to renew my acquaintance with Desmond, and — incidentally — to see yourself."

"I will take care," Edith assured him with a laugh, "that your seeing me is altogether incidental. Now I'll go and send your message up to Uncle George."

"Is it necessary to be in such haste about that?"

"Quite necessary, I think, since it will give you an opportunity to apologize without delay for rasping his nerves with a noise he detests."

Selwyn lifted his brows, as he met Desmond's eyes, while Miss Creighton entered the house.

"I suppose," he remarked, "that you have already discovered something of the autocratic qualities of this young lady, who, I may confide to you, is the absolute ruler of Hillcrest and everybody in it."

CHAPTER IX

Laurence Meets Father Martin

The beautiful day had mellowed to a golden afternoon — one of those perfect October afternoons when the earth seems transformed into a magical world of burning color — when Desmond found himself whirling along the road from Hillcrest to Kingsford in the motor car of his newly discovered kinsman, who, learning after lunch that he intended going into town, insisted upon having the pleasure of taking him there.

Desmond, on his part, had no objection. He was modern enough to like the swift motion, the sense of power, in the car which, in its ugliness, its utility, and its capability of ruthless action, typifies the spirit of modernity more thoroughly than any other invention of the time. He was, besides, not averse to seeing more of one who struck him as being as much a product of new conditions as the machine he drove. Certainly there was nothing even remotely suggestive of the old South, with its high ideals, its dignity and repose, in the alert young man, with his outspoken materialism, his admiration of "progress" and veiled but unmistakable contempt for all the standards of the past.

"Yes, it's a pretty country," he temperately remarked, in answer to some expression of admiration from his companion; "and a fine estate, though poorly managed. I hope you'll make a change in the last respect when it comes into your hands."

To this Desmond replied that he trusted it would be a long time before it came into his hands, and further pointed out that, even when it did so, his power to make changes would be very limited.

"You are mistaken about that," Selwyn answered. "You will probably have power to do whatever you like, short of alienating any of the property. I have made inquiries; for, you see, there was a chance — in case anything happened to you — that I might be inheritor. I'm the next of kin after yourself; and, although the Judge dislikes me, I was pretty sure he wouldn't disregard the injunctions of the trust about selecting an heir."

Desmond reflected that it was not his place to tell him how sure he might be of this, and merely remarked that he had come very near finding himself the next of kin without any one intervening.

"If my Pullman had gone over in the wreck yesterday, as it was perilously close upon doing, the way might have been cleared for you," he added.

"I'm extremely glad that it wasn't," Bobby handsomely assured him, — "glad not only for your personal escape, and to have the pleasure of knowing you, but glad also to be spared an embarrassing position. If the Judge had been obliged to leave the estate to me, he would have

bound it up in every possible way that the law permits, and I'd have no more liberty when it came to me than a legal infant. That wouldn't suit me at all. I'm a keen business man — everyone will tell you that, — and I don't want to handle anything that I can't make the most of, from a business point of view. So you may feel quite certain that I'm not envying you your position as the Wargrave heir; and I'm honestly delighted that you seem so well fitted to please the old Judge, who isn't easy to please, I can tell you.”

Desmond laughed, remembering the expressively caustic glances with which Judge Wargrave had regarded the speaker during their brief interview.

"I sincerely hope that I shall please him," he said. "But I can't forget that I am necessarily an unknown quantity to him; and it is perhaps fortunate that I may not be here very long, since points of difference might possibly arise between us."

Selwyn flashed a round-eyed stare at him.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked. “Aren't you going to stay, and take up the duties of heir apparent? I know that is what the Judge expects.”

"I hope not," Desmond answered, — "I mean I hope that he doesn't expect anything of the kind; for, if so, I shall have to disappoint him. I have no intention of giving up my profession at the present time, and I am here only on a visit.”

"Why, that's really too bad!" Selwyn exclaimed, — but Desmond's quick ear detected something of relief in the voice. "The Judge will be awfully disappointed, I'm confident. And we all hoped you were coming to remain. I can imagine, however, that it might readily seem a trifle dull to you here, after the life you've lived. You are a newspaper man, aren't you?"

"I am one of the stormy petrels who are sent wherever trouble is brewing," Desmond told him. "In times of war we are called war correspondents; at other times we are ordinary correspondents of the papers with which we are connected. I was in the Balkans, studying conditions when my uncle's summons reached me.”

"Oh, I see!" Bobby's tone was rather vague, — perhaps because he was conscious of a large ignorance regarding conditions in the Balkans, or perhaps because he had just narrowly missed collision with a wagon, the driver of which scowled at him with the animosity which the motorist is accustomed to inspiring, and apparently finds a source of keen enjoyment. "Here we are in Kingsford!" he remarked. They were, in fact, whirling into the town, without any lessening of speed in consideration for the traffic of the streets. "Can I take you to any place in particular, or will you come immediately home with me? My mother will be delighted to see you.”

"I shall be very glad to call on her a little later," Desmond replied; "but just now I will ask you to be good enough to set me down at the Catholic church.”

"At the — er — " Selwyn's stare this time was wide indeed.

"Catholic church," Desmond quietly repeated. "There must be one, since there is a resident priest here."

"Oh, yes, there's a Catholic church, and a priest too!" Selwyn said. "I was only a little surprised; but now I remember. You're a Romanist yourself, aren't you?"

"I'm a Catholic, yes."

"Beg pardon! The other name slipped out. By George!" — the speaker ruminated, — "that's a point that won't please the Judge."

"No," Desmond agreed, "it doesn't please him at all; but he is kind enough to overlook what he knows can not be changed. Is this the church?"

The question was natural, since they had drawn up before a building which, but for the cross over it, might have been taken for a factory, with its plain red brick walls and utter absence of any architectural pretension.

"This is it," Selwyn answered. "And there's the priest's residence next door. Well, shall I wait for you, or where can I meet you? I want to take you back to Hillcrest, you know.”

"Oh, thanks! You are very kind," Desmond responded. "But Edith said she would be driving in later, and I will return with her. As soon as I have paid a short visit to Father — what is his name?"

"Martin, I believe."

"To Father Martin, then, — I will meet you at your own house, where I wish to call on your mother."

"Better let me come for you. It's a long way from here to our house. Won't half an hour be enough for your visit? All right," as Desmond nodded assent; "I'll be back in that time."

The car whizzed away, and the young man left standing on the pavement, after regarding for an instant, with an expression of extreme disapproval, the hideous erection before him, moved forward and entered its open door. However much his aesthetic taste revolted from this manner of housing the Presence that dwells in Catholic sanctuaries, he knew too well what that Presence was to fail in paying his first visit there. And if failure had been possible under other circumstances — for faith is one thing, and fervor another, — it was not possible in the light of that delayed duty of thanks of which he had spoken to Edith Creighton.

Fervor being considerably less than faith, however, it was not a very long time before he was ringing the bell of the priest's residence. The door was opened by the same tall, spare man, now wearing a cassock, whom he had met at the railway wreck. Recognition was mutual, and Father Martin cordially put out his hand.

"I am very glad to see you again," he said. "I have been regretting that we parted without my learning your name."

Desmond mentioned his name; and when, in response to hospitable invitation, he followed the priest into a pleasant, book-lined study, and sat down, he was struck by something unusual in the personality facing him. It was not only that the sacerdotal stamp was so strongly set on it — that stamp which attracts a Catholic as much as it offends and repels in its aloofness those outside the Church, — but there was an expression at once keen and reserved — the expression of one who observes shrewdly and speaks little — in the deep-set eyes and on the high-featured, thin-lipped countenance. Those eyes now plainly asked, "What can I do for you?" and Desmond made no delay in stating his business.

"I have come, Father," he said, "to ask you to say a few Masses for my intention; and I would also like you to say one or two for the repose of the soul of the man — I don't know his name — who died just after you reached him at the railway wreck yesterday."

"Yes." The priest elevated his brows slightly, as he glanced at the numeral on the bill handed him. "You want all of this applied in Masses!" he inquired.

"If you please," Desmond replied. "I feel," he explained, "that I owe something more in the way of thanks for my escape from injury or death than my own poor words can express; and it's a great thing to have a religion which offers one a complete mode of expression."

A smile curved the priest's thin lips.

"It's a convenient thing occasionally," he remarked. "But I don't suppose you altogether neglect the duty of personal expression, however poor in form it may be. Your thought of the Requiem Masses," he added, "is very kind and charitable. The man's name, by the way, was Tracy. You didn't know anything about him, then?"

"Nothing in the world, except that he asked for a priest, and so was clearly a Catholic."

"And he owed to you the chance to reconcile himself with God before he died, — I heard that later. Well, he got his absolution; and we'll hope it was effective, as he had the intention, at least, to repair whatever wrong he had committed against others."

"It was most unfortunate his failure to mention an essential name," said Desmond. "I couldn't help hearing as much as that, you know."

"Of course not. It was indeed unfortunate, since it renders the reparation he desired to make impossible."

"I have been wondering a little about the matter," Desmond said, — "especially as I lay awake last night; for my nerves were out of order, I suppose, and I found it difficult to sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I waked with a start, to see all the horrors of the wreck before me again, to hear the cries —" he broke off, shuddering slightly. "It was partly to distract my mind by thinking of something not wholly horrible," he went on, "that I fell to reflecting upon the man of whom we speak, and the wonderful expression that came into his face when he saw you. He may have been a poor Catholic, and he was certainly a careless one; for he didn't know even as much as *I* do about some things — how to make an act of contrition, for example, — but I wish I could hope that I had half as much living faith as he showed then."

"It is likely," observed Father Martin, who found the simplicity and frankness of this young man very attractive, "that if you were placed in his position, you would discover that you did have it."

"I'm afraid not, — at least not in such a degree," Desmond answered. "But to return to my point. I began to wonder about his confession, the desire to make reparation for some wrong, the name unintentionally omitted; and it occurred to me that I would ask you if there is no way of finding out what he meant — of supplying the name, — and so accomplishing what he desired!"

The priest shook his head slowly.

"But he begged you to tell something — to make reparation to some one!" Desmond urged. "Even before you came, he had spoken of a wrong that was on his conscience. It seems to me that if we could help him in this way, now that he is no longer able to help himself, it would be the greatest charity one could do for him."

"It would be a great charity, and most desirable in every way," Father Martin admitted. "But I don't see — however, I will think of it further, and consult the bishop. Meanwhile there is no harm in making a few discreet inquiries about his life. Here is all I have been able to learn concerning him." He turned in his chair, took up a note-book from the desk beside which he sat, and glanced at an entry. "'James L. Tracy," he read, "'travelling salesman for an importing house of wines and liquors in New York.' This is what the letters and papers in his pockets showed him to be. There was, it seems, no personal data of any kind. The house has been communicated with; but if they can give no information about his family or friends, his body will be buried here. I may add" — he glanced up from the book — "that I said Mass this morning for the repose of his soul, and this sums up all that is known about him at present."

"I will try to find out something more," Desmond said, with an air of determination. "I can not forget how anxious he seemed that this thing, whatever it was, should be done. He told us — the nurse and myself — before you came, that he wasn't thinking only of absolution for himself, but that there was a wrong on his conscience that he must set right before he died. I can hear his voice now as he said: 'I can't face God with that on my soul.'" There was a brief pause, and then, "Don't think me fanciful, Father," the speaker went on, in a lower tone; "but all last night I had a feeling as if he were in some way influencing, appealing to me. It may have been only my vivid recollection of what he really did say, of his earnestness, his urgency; but it seemed to me as if he were saying again, from some vague, remote region — I'm expressing myself very badly but perhaps you'll understand what I mean, — 'You helped me before; help me again, who can no longer help myself.'"

The voice dropped; but, despite the hesitation and evident difficulty with which the words had been uttered, the sincerity and feeling behind them were evident to the priest. He had certainly not expected to find as much perception of spiritual things as they implied in this young man, on whom the habitudes and marks of a world which recognizes nothing spiritual sat so lightly and easily; but he was too wise, in his experience of matters which relate to the mysterious soul of man, to be incredulous.

"It is possible," he said, "that God may have permitted you to be influenced by, or on behalf of, the poor soul; or it may be only a charitable impulse of your own soul. But in either

case you can't go wrong in trying to help him in the manner indicated, — that is, by finding out something which would open the way for the reparation he desired to make."

"You can't give me any clue to work on?" asked Desmond.

The priest shook his head again, smiling a little.

"*Non possumus*," he said. "Besides, even if I were at liberty to speak, I don't think I could give such a clue. It was all very vague — what he said, — as is generally the case near death. Often one hardly knows what one has or has not heard; and one gives absolution at last with only a great hope in the mercy of God. But if you can learn anything that might throw light on the confession, I shall be very glad to be informed of it. You are staying in Kingsford?"

"For the present," Desmond answered. "I am a stranger myself, but I have relatives here, some of whom you may know. Judge Wargrave is my uncle."

"Oh, Judge Wargrave!" Father Martin's glance spoke his surprise. "Every one in Kingsford knows Judge Wargrave and esteems him highly. In fact, Kingsford is very proud of him — there are few such representatives of the old social order left, — and there was general deep regret at his late illness. We are all glad to learn that he is better, and — are *you* the nephew of whose expected arrival we have heard so much?" he broke off with a flash of sudden illumination.

"I was not aware that much had been said of me," Desmond replied; "but I am no doubt the person to whom you allude, since I am Judge Wargrave's only nephew."

"And the heir of the Wargrave trust!" Father Martin considered him now with a regard that was frankly curious. "Yes, of course everybody has heard of that. But how does it come about that you are a Catholic?"

"Doesn't my name tell you?" Desmond asked. "My father was an Irishman."

"Ah, if you knew the number of Irish names scattered over this country, borne by those whose parents sold their Faith for a mess of worldly pottage, you would not think that told much!" the priest rejoined, a little bitterly. "But I congratulate you on having had a father of a different mettle, and I am very glad to welcome you to Kingsford, Mr. Desmond."

"I shall not probably be here very long," Desmond began, when a sudden "honk! honk!" made him rise with a quick "Pardon" and glance out of the window. Yes, Selwyn and his car were awaiting him; so, bidding the priest good-day, and promising to report anything that he was able to learn about the dead man in whom they were both interested, he took his departure.

CHAPTER X

Mrs. Selwyn Is Introduced

"Bobby," Desmond said, as he stepped into the waiting car, "will you be kind enough to take me to the shop of your principal undertaker?"

"Well, by George!" Mr. Selwyn, hand on wheel, paused to stare helplessly. "Where will you want to go next, — to the cemetery?"

"Not yet," Desmond replied, with a laugh. "It seems odd, no doubt; but I suppose I shall find at the undertaker's the body of a man who was killed in the railway wreck yesterday."

"And why on earth should you want to find it? Shouldn't think you'd ever want to be reminded of that wreck again."

"I've a reason for desiring to learn anything I can about this particular man. I was with him when he died, and he wanted something done. I have just learned from Father Martin that the body is held while efforts are being made to hear from his friends, and I want to find out if they have been heard from."

"I see." Without more words Selwyn sent the car spinning down the street, flashed around corners, and finally reached the business part of the town, where he paused before a large furniture shop. "I fancy you'll find what you want here," he said. "There's an undertaking establishment connected with this, and an — er — apartment which bears the awful name of a 'mortuary parlor.'"

He proved to be right. The head of the establishment — a sallow, black-eyed man, whom nature appeared to have fashioned for funereal purposes — came forward, and, in reply to Desmond's inquiries, stated that the "remains" in question were indeed in his mortuary parlor, awaiting the final orders of the railway officials for their disposition. Nothing, it seemed, had as yet been heard from any relatives.

"If you were a friend of the gentleman," he remarked to the young man, "perhaps you would like to look at the corpse. It has been very nicely embalmed and placed in a good casket."

"Oh, no! Thanks!" Desmond replied a little hastily; for it is rather a curious fact that cultured human nature is as anxious to avoid all sights and suggestions of death as uncultured human nature is eagerly attracted by them. "I was not a friend, not even an acquaintance of the man," he explained; "but I was with him when he died; and, in order to fulfil a last wish which he expressed, I should like to know who his friends or relatives are. If any are heard from, may I beg you to communicate with me! Here is my card, and you will find me at Hillcrest, — the Wargrave place, you know."

"Oh, yes!" Mr. Simpson knew very well; and his manner took an additional shade of *empressment* as he assured Desmond that he would certainly let him know as soon as anything was heard from or about Mr. Tracy's friends or relatives.

"Well, that being settled," Selwyn said, as they drove away, "is there any reason why you shouldn't go to see my mother now? She is expecting you."

"On the contrary, I was about to ask you to take me to see her at once," Desmond answered.

Back they whizzed, into the residence part of the town, and on its extreme verge entered the open gates of a large and ornate modern house — a granite and brick imitation of a French *château*, — which stood in the midst of wide, handsome grounds, with a fine view of the open country behind it.

"I don't think," Desmond remarked, "that this is where you lived when I was here before."

"Oh, yes!" Selwyn replied, as they drew up under the *porte-cochère*; "this is where we lived; but it's a different house, you see. We built this a few years ago. It's the finest residence in Kingsford now."

"I should think it might be," Desmond observed, suppressing an expression of regret for the old Southern mansion, full of unpretentious dignity, which had been destroyed to make way for this costly erection without any suggestion of the country or its past. As he followed his cousin in, and noted how everything spoke of wealth, lavishly applied in the most modern manner, he began to understand the light in which Bobby was regarded at Hillcrest.

It was quite evident, however, that no doubt of himself or of his residence entered the mind of this extremely self-satisfied young gentleman as he led the way into a luxuriously furnished room, opening on one side from the spacious hall, where they found a rather distinguished-looking woman of middle age, who greeted Desmond warmly.

"Not 'Mrs. Selwyn,' but Cousin Elizabeth," she corrected him in his greeting. "We are very nearly related, you know. Your mother and I were first cousins; and Robert here is as much of a Wargrave as yourself, though I am sorry to say he doesn't look it as you do."

"It's a standing grievance with my mother that I don't resemble her family," Selwyn told him. "And she's shocked when I say that I'd rather not resemble them than have to take some of their qualities with their looks."

"Robert, I *am* shocked!" his mother declared. "There are no Wargrave qualities that you might not be proud to have."

The young man shook his head, a rather pugnacious expression on his face, which, with its blunt features, its aggressive chin, its total lack of intellectual character, notwithstanding a certain keen brightness of expression, and general resemblance to the "business" — that is commercial — type, was certainly far removed from the clear-cut distinction and intellectual character of the Wargrave type.

"Very fine qualities, no doubt, from the ideal point of view," he conceded; "but not the kind that make for success in this day and generation. It's all right as long as they have Hillcrest and its great entailed estate at their back; but fancy the Judge, with all his old-fashioned ideas of 'what is honorable between gentlemen,' having to come into the modern world and hustle for a living!"

"Robert, you know how I detest slang. And I can not endure for you to talk in this way, and imply that you — er —"

"Have to hustle, according to the new ideas and methods," Robert laughed. "Well, if I *hadn't*, all I can say is that you wouldn't be as comfortable as you are at present; and I've never heard you object to the comfort."

Mrs. Selwyn flushed slightly, not so much from a consciousness of her own inconsistency in being proud of her son's business success and enjoying its results while deprecating the methods by which it had been achieved, as because, like many other people, she was not pleased to have her inconsistency pointed out. She therefore changed the conversation by addressing Desmond.

"We are all so glad that you have been able to come to your uncle," she told him. "There seemed a little doubt whether you would care to do so, being so far away."

"I promised my uncle a long time ago that I would come whenever he sent a really urgent summons for me," the young man answered; "and therefore I had no alternative, although it was inconvenient for me to leave my work at this time."

"Oh, your work!" Mrs. Selwyn lifted her brows. "That would seem of slight importance compared to the Wargrave inheritance, I should think."

"But, you see, I had never given a thought to the Wargrave inheritance," he replied. "It was a great surprise to me to find how matters stood, and that my uncle proposed to make me his heir. I did not even know that his son was dead."

"Did you not?" Something of the shadow came over her face that had fallen on that of Mrs. Creighton at mention of Harry Wargrave. "Yes, it has been several years since we heard of his death. It was a great shock to the whole family connection; for he was a person whom we all loved, and we had hoped that some day the unexplained breach between his father and himself might be healed."

"I don't see how you could have hoped it," her son remarked. "The Wargrave qualities that you admire so much were all enlisted on the other side. For a reconciliation, somebody would have to acknowledge himself in the wrong, and no Wargrave could ever do that. I certainly can't imagine the Judge doing it."

"Well, now do you know, I'm not at all sure that he wouldn't, if he were once convinced that he was in the wrong?" Desmond said. "Of course the difficulty would be in convincing him; but his sense of justice is so strong that if it were made plain to him that he had wronged any one, I do not believe that he would hesitate at any reparation."

"If it were made plain to him!" Bobby repeated. "As you observe, that is where the insurmountable difficulty would come in. But we needn't discuss the point, since — luckily for you — Harry Wargrave is dead and buried."

"Robert!"

"There's no good in being hypocritical, mater! It *is* lucky for him. And I shouldn't be surprised," the speaker went on gloomily, "if there was even more luck in store for him."

Desmond stared a little.

"I don't know what you mean," he said; "though I am prepared to admit that finding so many new and charming relatives is rare good luck."

"Listen to the blarney on his tongue!" the other chaffed. "No, my boy, I wasn't alluding to the mater and myself, charming as we undoubtedly are; but to a family effort, which I clearly foresee, to make a match between you and Edith Creighton."

"Really, Robert —" Mrs. Selwyn began.

But Bobby waved remonstrance aside.

"I believe in being open and above board," he stated. "Any one could see it with half an eye. I don't doubt that Cousin Rachel and the Judge have both set their hearts on it. They won't say anything to Edith, for they know her too well. But they'll bring all the pressure they can to bear on Desmond; and he'll be rather a remarkable kind of person if he needs any pressure."

Desmond laughed.

"This is anticipating things indeed," he said. "We aren't living in an old-fashioned romance; and, although Edith is very fascinating, I can't imagine myself yielding either to pressure or to her fascinations."

Bobby eyed him sardonically.

"That shows how much you know about it," he said. "I'll bet you anything you like that you'll be her abject captive before a week is over — unless" (hopefully) "your affections are already engaged."

"No," Desmond laughed again. "I can report myself quite heart free."

"Then in that case there's simply no doubt of it. No man could be closely associated with Edith Creighton and not fall in love with her, unless he were —"

"More sensible than you are!" Mrs. Selwyn broke in impatiently. "You really provoke me past endurance by your ridiculous infatuation about that girl. To hear you talk one would think that she was absolutely irresistible, instead of being a very ordinary and badly spoiled person, in my opinion."

"But, you see, you are quite alone in that opinion," her son informed her. "Everybody else acknowledges that she is irresistible. I frankly confess that she has made a door-mat of me for a long time, and that the chances are that she will keep on doing so — at least until she promises to marry some other man. If you are the man" (he turned again to Desmond), "I'll try and support it philosophically; but I thought I'd just let you know how matters stand."

"You mean," said Desmond, "that you are good enough to warn me that if I fall a victim, as you anticipate, I shall not be without a rival."

"Just that," Bobby agreed. "I think it's always well to make things clear, you know; although, with regard to this matter, my mother considers me to be altogether without proper pride."

"I certainly do," his mother crisply agreed. "I confess myself unable to understand how you can be so poor spirited as to continue to dangle after a girl who has, by your own account, again and again refused you."

"It's dogged as does it!" Mr. Selwyn cheerfully quoted. "Some day, perhaps, she will grow tired of refusing, unless the Wargrave trust interferes. Meanwhile — 'talk of angels' — here she comes now!"

He bolted from the room as a carriage was heard to drive up to the door; and Mrs. Selwyn looked at Desmond with the air of one who apologizes for the misbehavior of a child.

"I hope you won't take Robert's nonsense in earnest," she deprecated. "He really isn't so foolish as he pretends to be. Of course he admires Edith Creighton very much, and I suppose he has asked her to marry him. But it's all done in a way that no girl in my time would have considered serious for a moment, and I can't believe that it is serious."

"If his own account of the affair is to be relied on, it is to be hoped that it isn't serious, since there doesn't seem much hope of his success," Desmond said, with a smile.

"Oh, I'm not sure of that either!" Mrs. Selwyn returned, in a slightly piqued tone. "Perhaps if he were more serious, she might answer differently; although there's no doubt that she has an opinion of herself that hardly appears to me to be justified. Her stepmother and your uncle have both spoiled her dreadfully, and — well, Edith, how are you to-day, my dear?"

"Quite well, thank you, Mrs. Selwyn;" Edith answered blithely, as she entered, with Bobby in her train.

And perhaps it was from the conversation he had just heard that Desmond's eyes seemed freshly opened to her striking beauty, or perhaps the drive in the fresh air had brought the glowing roses to her cheeks, the diamond-like brightness to her glance. She nodded to him gaily.

"So here you are!" she said. "I didn't know whether I should find you or not, but I thought I could pay a little visit to Mrs. Selwyn while waiting. I hope you transacted all your business satisfactorily?"

"I transacted it both satisfactorily and speedily, thanks to Bobby and his car," Desmond answered.

"Odd kind of business it was!" Bobby commented. "First he wanted to go to a church, and then to an undertaker. I thought I should have to end by carrying him to the cemetery."

Mrs. Selwyn looked a little surprised.

"I never know when Robert is in earnest and when he isn't," she complained. "But did you really want to go to such — er — extraordinary places?"

"I really did," Desmond assured her; "and there wasn't anything very extraordinary about it. Catholics are quite in the habit of going to their churches, you know."

"Catholics!" The surprise deepened, — became, in fact, somewhat shocked. "Oh, — ah — I remember! Your father was a —"

"Catholic? Yes. And so am I. But, besides paying a visit to the church, I wanted to see the priest, and make some inquiries about one of the victims of the wreck yesterday."

"Some one you knew?"

"So far from that, some one I never saw before the accident. But I chanced to be with him when he died. I was able to get the priest for him, and there was something he wanted done, which of course we are anxious — Father Martin and I — to accomplish if possible. That was why I went to the undertaker's, where the body is held, to learn if anything had been heard from his friends or relatives."

"It was certainly very good of you," Mrs. Selwyn observed; "for everything connected with undertakers and death is so horrible that one shrinks from it as much as possible."

"But, you see, I came so near being a subject for the undertaker myself, that I can't afford to shrink," said Desmond. "The least I can do is to make every effort to fulfil the wishes of one who was less fortunate than I was."

"You were certainly very fortunate in escaping from so terrible an accident without any injury at all," Mrs. Selwyn agreed. "If you had been killed, it would have been a dreadful thing for —"

Her son's explosion of laughter, in which it was impossible for Desmond and Edith not to join, obliged her to pause with a rather offended expression.

"Excuse me, mater!" Bobby gasped. "But Desmond has heard nothing else since his arrival but how dreadful it would have been for his uncle if he had been killed; and you'll admit that it would have been slightly dreadful for him also."

"I could hardly have meant anything else," Mrs. Selwyn was beginning, in a dignified manner, when the sound of a telephone bell ringing sharply in the hall cut into her speech. Without waiting for the servant whose duty it was to answer such calls, Bobby rose and went to the instrument. His voice being anything but dulcet in tone, what ensued was very audible.

"Hallo! This is Selwyn! Who is speaking? Oh, Simpson! Yes. Yes, he's here. I'll call him." Then, in a louder tone: "Desmond, you're wanted. Simpson, the undertaker," he went on, handing the receiver over as Desmond came up to where he stood, "says he thought he might

catch you here before you left town. He's heard something about that dead man you're interested in, since we were in his shop."

Yes, Mr. Simpson told Desmond as soon as the latter signified that he was listening, he had just heard from the railway officials that the body of Mr. Tracy was to be forwarded to his sister, Mrs. Sarah Barnes, of Baltimore, Maryland; and was there anything that Mr. Desmond would like to see about, in connection with the matter, before the order was carried out? Desmond replied that there was nothing at all, thanked Mr. Simpson, took down Mrs. Barnes' address, and, when the undertaker had rung off, asked Central to give him the Catholic rectory. A moment later Father Martin's voice answered, and he communicated the news he had received.

"I knew you would be interested in hearing at once, Father," he said, "since it may be the means of learning something about the man's past life."

"It may," the priest replied, "and I am much obliged to you for telling me, though I shall no doubt hear from Mr. Simpson a little later. I will write to his sister, who, if she is a Catholic, will undoubtedly be glad to learn that her brother made his peace with God before he died."

"And will you kindly let me know if there is anything in her reply to throw light on his — dying request?" Desmond asked.

"Yes," the quiet tones answered, "I will let you know as soon as I hear from her; but I hardly expect any light on the point you mention."

CHAPTER XI

Laurence Calls Up Miss Landon

When, a few days later, Sunday came around in the weekly procession of days, Desmond drove into Kingsford with his aunt and Edith, dropped them at the Episcopal church — an edifice of severely ecclesiastical Gothic architecture, with spire as lofty as the doctrines preached in it, — and then, with a somewhat chastened spirit, took his own way to the rectangular building, without grace of form, either outward or inward, which enshrined the living Mysteries of the ancient Church from which both architecture and doctrines had been derived. Vainly questioning why it should be so hideous, since simplicity does not of necessity mean ugliness, he went in, dropped on his knees before the Tabernacle, and tried to abstract his mind from the details of ingenious bad taste around him. To a certain degree he had succeeded, when a touch on his arm made him lift his head from his hands with a start. A pretty, curly-haired boy, in cassock and lace-trimmed cotta, stood beside him.

"You're Mr. Desmond?" he whispered; and then, as Desmond nodded, "Father Martin says will you please come to his house after Mass; he wants to speak to you."

Desmond nodded again, the boy hurried back to the sacristy, and a few minutes later Mass began.

Perhaps it was because everything around him was so little conducive to devotional feeling that, in endeavoring to forget these things — in sending his mind back to the splendid fanes of the Old World, where he had seen the great Sacrifice offered with all imaginable pomp of worship, or to simple chapels, full of the spirit of faith, where the people knelt on the floor in humble devotion, — he grasped as never before the idea of the unity of this stupendous action. Not many Masses, but just one continuous Mass, — one continuous Sacrifice offered to Almighty God, under conditions as diverse as the habits of men, but the same in essence as the same in form. That figure, wearing strange, archaic garments, which stood at the altar, was merely a unit in the long succession of figures ever standing before an altar, ever offering the same Victim in the same manner, which stretched back to the upper room in Jerusalem, or higher yet to Calvary, where alone Priest and Victim were one. Vision after vision rose before him, —

scenes in the catacombs, in the marvellous Ages of Faith, in the world-wide Church of to-day; and as in imagination his thoughts swept the globe, seeing ever the same altar, the same figure, he realized not only the majestic unity of that which was taking place before his eyes — the mysterious Miracle of miracles, — but he was able to feel that it mattered little whether one knelt under Michael Angelo's great dome, before the supreme altar of Rome, or in the poorest and ugliest of the churches which materialized, art-blind America builds for the King of kings.

Nevertheless, when he found himself at last in Father Martin's little study, struck by the aspect of this unpretending apartment, and by the refined face of the priest, Desmond could not forbear a question.

"How do you endure it?" he asked, with a gesture toward the church, — "all the ugliness, the rampant bad taste?"

The thin, ascetic lips curved into a smile.

"At first it was rather hard to endure," the priest confessed. "But I have grown accustomed to it now, and hardly see the things that seem to you so dreadful. Of course they *are* dreadful; but where there's no remedy, you know, even dreadful things must be endured philosophically."

"But is there no remedy?"

The smile was whimsical now.

"Do you see any, short of a complete conflagration? The church is new, was built by my predecessor a few years ago. He was an excellent man, and the people adored him. But you can judge for yourself what his ideas of ecclesiastical art were." The speaker paused meditatively, and arranged his cassock over his knees. "Fortunately," he observed, "one can go to heaven without aesthetic cultivation. In fact, it is sometimes a misfortune to have that cultivation, I am inclined to think."

"Oh, no!" Desmond disagreed. "What is needed in this country, and needed desperately I should say, are priests who have such cultivation, and who will suffer under these awful erections until they are swept away. There might be a fire here some day," he added hopefully.

"Don't use a torch, I beg!" Father Martin laughed. "It is better to have this church than none at all. And now let us come to the subject for which I asked to see you. I have had a letter from Mrs. Barnes, — the sister of Tracy, you know."

"Ah!" Desmond was interested at once. "And is she able to throw any light on his dying request?"

The priest shook his head.

"No — or else she does not wish to do so. She is rather noncommittal on the point; in fact, ignores it, and only thanks me for letting her know that her brother remembered his religion before he died. It appears that he had forgotten it for a long time."

"So I inferred," Desmond remarked.

"But," Father Martin went on, "this is not so much what I wished to tell you as that I have had another visitor, who came to inquire about the man and about his dying request — of which, oddly enough, she seemed to know."

"*She?*"

"Yes, it was the trained nurse, who did such admirable work at the time of the accident. Her name is Miss Landon."

Desmond stared for a moment, and then, "I can tell you how she knew," he said. "Before you arrived, the man was talking to both of us — saying that he wanted a priest, not only to obtain absolution for himself, but to repair a wrong he had done another person. And she was with him, you know, while I went to send the message. So she certainly heard as much as that; but it is rather singular she should have been interested enough to come and inquire about it."

"Particularly as she does not appear to be the kind of person to be afflicted with curiosity in acute degree."

"Not at all the kind of person, I should say. May I ask what reason she gave for the inquiry?"

"I don't remember that she gave any. She simply explained that she had learned the man's name from the published list of those who were fatally injured in the wreck, and, knowing the reason why he wished to see a priest — she seemed to think it was the only reason, — came to ask if I would tell her what the matter was which had been on his conscience."

"Na ÷e!" Desmond commented, as they laughed together. "Of course she meant no harm; one has to allow enormously for the ignorance of even intelligent people outside the Church. But the question is, *why* did she wish to know? It looks as if she had some knowledge of Tracy. And yet the man was clearly a complete stranger to her that day."

"She intimated that she had some knowledge, — not of the man personally, but of somebody bearing the name; and she evidently wished to learn if the victim of the wreck was the Tracy of whom she knew."

"And you were not able to help her in deciding?"

"Naturally not in the smallest degree, since all that I know of the man — and that I can assure you is extremely little — was learned under the seal of confession. But I mentioned having written to his sister, and she asked me to let her know when I heard from the latter. It struck me, therefore, when I received this," (he turned and took up a letter from the desk beside him) "that if you still feel the interest which you expressed the other day in this man, and his thwarted reparation —"

"You may take for granted that I feel just the same interest," Desmond said a little hastily. "The impression of which I spoke when I saw you before was too strong to be forgotten, even if it stood alone. But it has been renewed more than once. I can not escape the feeling — though it may, of course, be all imagination — that some outside influence, something apart from myself, is urging me to action in this matter."

"Well, then," Father Martin resumed, "I was going to say that if you were still interested, you might like to take this letter to Miss Landon, and find out, perhaps, what she knows of Tracy, — of *some* Tracy, at least. Her knowledge might prove the clue needed for the fulfilment of his last request, but I could not ask more than she volunteered to tell. It's possible, however" (he smiled as he looked at the attractive personality before him), "that she might volunteer more in talking to you, or perhaps you would not object to asking —"

"Not in the least," Desmond assured him cheerfully. "I'll ask her to tell me all that she knows, and explain why it is that I want the information. I don't think she'll refuse when I make her understand that it may be the clue needed to fulfil the poor devil's dying wish, and repair whatever wrong was on his conscience. Is this Mrs. Barnes' letter? Do you mean me to read it?"

"Of course," Father Martin replied. "I should like to hear how it strikes you."

"It strikes me," Desmond said, after he had read the letter, "that there is some knowledge suppressed on her part. If she had no idea of anything in her brother's life calling for reparation, she would be quick to say so. But she doesn't say so, you'll observe; and, moreover, she expresses no surprise or concern: she simply puts the matter aside, and thanks you for letting her know that he died within the Church. Now I take it that to give her this consoling information was not your chief object in writing to her."

"So far from that, I told her distinctly that I was anxious to obtain some knowledge of her brother's life for the reason which I mentioned; and I asked certain questions which she has not answered."

"And clearly does not intend to answer. Well, I will take this letter to Miss Landon and find out what she knows. When can I report the result to you?"

"When are you going to see her?"

"Immediately, I think."

"Then you can call here after you leave the hospital, or any time this afternoon that suits you. Our services are not until evening."

When Desmond left the priest's house a few minutes later, he expected to find the Wargrave equipage waiting for him; but since there was no sign of it, he walked on down the quiet street, under an archway of golden maple boughs, toward the Episcopal place of worship. The congregation were just issuing from the pointed Gothic doorway as he approached, and he soon perceived his aunt and Edith, with Selwyn in close attendance on them.

"Hallo! Here's our Papist!" was Bobby's cheerful salutation at sight of him. "Your rites appear to be shorter than ours," he remarked, not without a tinge of envy.

"Considerably shorter," said Desmond. "I've been talking to Father Martin for at least half an hour, and was rather afraid" (he spoke to his aunt) "that you might be waiting for me."

"Oh, no!" she replied; "we are never earlier than this in coining out. I am always able to tell Hiram exactly when to be here with the carriage, and yonder he comes now."

"I'll ask you to excuse me from going with you," Desmond said, as the carriage drew up beside them. "I have something to do in town this morning; but I will return to Hillcrest this afternoon."

"When shall we send for you?" she inquired.

But before Desmond could answer, Selwyn interposed.

"Don't send at all. I'll bring him out in my car. I know the Judge doesn't like either horses or servants to be called upon much on Sunday, and the beauty of an automobile is that it's always ready for use without disturbing anybody."

Here Desmond remarked that he had intended to walk; and that nothing would give him more pleasure than to do so, the day being so fine.

"Well, that's not my idea of pleasure," Selwyn observed. "Tramping five miles over dusty roads! No, no! The motor's the thing to put one where one wants to go. You really ought to have a car at Hillcrest, Cousin Rachel!"

Mrs. Creighton shook her head, as she was assisted into the waiting carriage, and sank back on its luxurious cushions.

"Never while my brother lives," she said. "He adores his horses as much as he detests what he calls the last invention of the devil. There's no denying that they *are* very convenient, however; and so if you'll bring Laurence out this afternoon —"

"Oh, yes, I'll certainly bring him out!" Bobby assured her, as he handed Edith to her seat. "Too bad you won't both stay, take dinner with us, and let me whirl you home when you are ready to go," he added regretfully.

"I'm afraid there would be too much whirl about it for mamma," Edith laughed. "Her admiration of automobiles is tempered with a good deal of fear; and, personally, I prefer the pleasure of motion behind these dear horses to a frenzied, breathless rush in your car. We'll look for you both."

The carriage rolled away down the golden archway of the street, and Bobby heaved a sigh as he looked after it.

"The Judge has made Edith almost as rabid about some things as he is himself," he complained. "The idea of a modern girl not liking automobiles!" He mused darkly for a moment on such unaccountable perversity; and then, brightening again, "Look here!" he said. "What are you staying in town for? I mean, have you anything you really want to do, or is it just for a little change of scene? Hillcrest is delightful, but I can imagine life there becoming a trifle monotonous."

Desmond laughed.

"I'm not seeking change of scene on account of the monotony of Hillcrest," he said. "I really have something to do in town. I want to pay a visit at the hospital."

Bobby regarded him with a surprise in which incredulity was largely mingled.

"You are either a very odd chap," he remarked, "or all this is a joke, — the kind of places you want to visit. Now, whom are you going to see at the hospital?"

"I am going to see one of the nurses. Her name, if you wish to know, is Miss Landon."

"I didn't wish to know, but I remember the name. She's the nurse of the railway wreck. The newspapers say she saved a lot of lives."

"I think it likely that she did save some; and there's a matter connected with the man Tracy who was killed, whose body you remember was at the — er — "

"Mortuary parlor? Yes, I remember."

"That I want to see her about. By the by, I suppose I had better make an appointment. Where's the nearest telephone station?"

"Just around the corner," said Selwyn.

A little later, when Desmond, after calling up the hospital and asking for Miss Landon, presently heard himself answered, he was startled by an effect as singular as it was unexpected. It seemed to have to do with the timbre of the voice which struck on his ear; but he was conscious that it was not altogether due to this, exquisite as it was. He was well aware that the great difference in voices is never so perceptible as when they are heard, disembodied as it were, over the telephone. But he had never before heard a voice which seemed to convey so much of personality as that which spoke to him now. It was not only that it was beautifully distinct and clear, with a crystalline quality which suggested the water of a mountain spring, but there were, he felt assured, forces of character behind it — forces both of reserve and strength, — which were as unusual as they were striking. And yet the words which this voice uttered could not have been more simple, so that the effect which startled him did not proceed from them.

"This is Miss Landon," it said. "Who is asking to speak with me?"

"Laurence Desmond," the owner of that name replied. "I don't know whether you remember me, Miss Landon, but I was with you in the railway wreck."

"Oh, it is *you!*" the crystal voice returned. "I did not know your name, but I certainly remember yourself. What can I do for you, Mr. Desmond?"

"You can be kind enough to give me a little of your time," Desmond answered. "I want, with your permission, to call to see you; and I shall be glad if you will let me know at what hour you will be at liberty to receive a visitor."

There was a slight pause, and a shade of more crystalline coolness seemed to come into the voice when it answered:

"I am afraid that I shall hardly be at liberty to receive a visitor at all. I have very little time for social —"

"Pardon me!" Desmond broke in hurriedly. "But I should have mentioned at first that my visit has more than a social purpose. One might call it business. I have been asked by Father Martin — the Catholic priest, you know, — to convey a letter to you, — a letter from the sister of Tracy, the man who was killed in the wreck."

"O—h!" The pause was longer now, as if to consider this information; and then the cool, clear tones said: "In that case it will give me pleasure to receive you. I am at liberty from four to five o'clock this afternoon. If you call at any time during that hour you can see me."

"I will call at four o'clock, if that suits you."

"It suits me perfectly."

"Thanks, very much! Good-bye!"

As he hung up the receiver, Desmond added to himself:

"By Jove, that was a close call! Only the mention of the Tracy letter kept her from declining to see me. I ought to have remembered that it would seem a piece of cheek for me to propose to pay her a visit without any explanation of a reason for doing so. But with what a princess-like tone the permission was given! There's something extraordinarily striking and uncommon in the character behind that voice. And what a voice it is! Either I'm developing wonderful psychical qualities, or else it indicates — yes, Bobby, I've just finished; made an appointment with Miss Landon for this afternoon, and I am now at your service."

CHAPTER XII

Laurence Renews Acquaintance with Miss Landon

On the stroke of the hour of which he had spoken, Desmond rang the door bell of the hospital and asked for Miss Landon. He was shown into a small reception room, which luckily chanced to be empty; and here after a few minutes the nurse came to him.

That she *was* a nurse there was no mistaking now, as she entered, in her spotless white uniform, the crisp muslin cap resting on the soft masses of her brown hair. The dress was extremely becoming to her, accentuating the fairness and purity of her skin, which was of an ivory-like fineness of texture, with very little color, but that little of a wild-rose delicacy of tint, and the translucent clearness of her gray eyes. It occurred to Desmond, as he looked at her, that it would be rather an exquisite thing to have such a presence as this, so eloquent of all things refreshing and healing, about one's sick bed; and he felt almost inclined to envy the patient thus favored. In manner she was as quiet and self-possessed as when he had seen her last among the dying and dead of the railway wreck. But when she held out her hand in greeting, she smiled quite charmingly.

"How do you do, Mr. Desmond?" she said. "I am glad to see you again."

"I'm very glad to hear it," Desmond replied; "for I was afraid, when I first spoke to you over the telephone, that you were not going to allow me the pleasure of seeing you at all."

If he said this in order to discover if she would exhibit any confusion over her refusal, he was speedily assured to the contrary. The gray eyes met his with perfect calmness.

"I hardly think that requires an explanation," she told him.

"No," he said, "it requires no explanation from you: but it would require an apology from me if I had ever thought of offering to call simply because I felt that I should like to meet you again. But I hope you understand that I did not think of such a thing; although I was certainly glad when Father Martin offered me the chance to — renew our acquaintance, may I say?"

"I suppose one might call it an acquaintance, ' ' she replied; "although it was rather an unusual kind of one. And it was good of you to care about meeting me again. I should have thought that you would want to put everything connected with that awful wreck out of your mind."

"Not you!" he answered quickly. "I could never want to put out of my mind anything so wonderful as you were. One would have to be even a duller person than I am not to recognize heroism when one sees it; and, having recognized it, who could wish to forget it?"

The wild-rose color deepened a little on her cheeks, but the gray eyes continued to meet his with quiet steadiness.

"You really must not talk in that way, although I know you mean it kindly," she said.

"It is absurd to speak of heroism in connection with the simple things I was able to do."

"Simple!" he repeated. "Oh, well! I suppose simplicity is a note of heroism. At all events, if it was simple to do what you did — to handle those crushed, mangled creatures, to bind their awful wounds, to hold that poor woman's hand while she died in agony, — then I can only say that simple things are the hardest, as well as the best worth doing, among the things of this world."

"Perhaps they are, in a certain sense, the best worth doing," she said. "At least there is a great deal of tangible satisfaction in relieving the sufferings of the body. The wounds of the spirit go much deeper, of course; but one could never be sure of relieving them." She paused for an instant. "And yet, do you know," she added, "it has occurred to me, since the accident of which we are talking, that if one could be sure — as sure as one is in the case of bodily ailments — of there being a way to relieve them, what a wonderful thing it would be!"

Desmond glanced at her curiously.

"What has made you think of that?" he asked.

"Why, the death of that man Tracy, of whom you have come to speak," she answered. "I can not forget how his physical sufferings, which must have been very great, were completely subordinated in his mind to the suffering of — I suppose one should say, his soul. And he seemed so certain, — so absolutely certain of the power of the priest to relieve that suffering!"

"Oh, yes, he was certain!" Desmond said. "He was a Catholic, you see."

"And are all Catholics as certain as that?"

"All who have faith are."

She seemed to reflect upon this for a moment.

"It is strange," she said then. "I suppose I have known all my life that Catholics did believe such things. Yet I never realized in the least what it meant until I saw that man. I could not forget it: his absorption in the thought of his soul in the face of sudden, terrible death. It wasn't as if he had been a spiritual kind of person. One could see how very far from that he was."

"Very far," Desmond agreed. "One saw at a glance that he belonged to an extremely common class of worldly, careless men, who, when they are in health, forget that they have souls at all."

"And he was more than merely worldly and careless," she went on. "We know from himself that he had something on his conscience; and if he was the man I think him to have been, it was a heavy wrong indeed."

"Will you tell me," Desmond asked, "what you know of the man, and why you should imagine that you are aware of what was on his conscience? Your knowledge might be a great help in enabling Father Martin to fulfil his last request, and make reparation for the wrong of which he spoke."

"I suppose you know that I went to Father Martin when I saw the name of Tracy in the published list of victims of the accident?" she said. "But he would give me no information."

"He couldn't, you know," Desmond told her.

"Couldn't he?" She looked a little puzzled. "But what was the good, then, of the man's asking him to repair the wrong, if he can not speak of it?"

"You don't understand," Desmond said. "He could speak to the person or persons directly affected by the confession, but not to any others. He has no warrant to make the matter public, even if he knew who those persons are. But he doesn't know."

"No?"

He was startled by the energy of her tone, by the intense disappointment which seemed to lie behind, and be expressed by it. Plainly something in this matter touched her very nearly, and Desmond felt his desire to learn what it was sensibly increasing.

"No," he echoed, "he doesn't know. And he is extremely anxious to learn anything that would throw light on that confession. You see, it was this way." He described in a few words what he had overheard, and in that manner learned of the pathetic failure of the dying man to mention an essential name. "If that name could be supplied," he continued, "it might make the reparation possible. Of course we can't tell. It all rests with Father Martin, and he can say nothing to us. But it is possible —"

"It seems to me absurd!" she burst out. "It is like a puzzle without a clue. He can not speak unless he knows something, which he can not learn unless he speaks. Don't you see how absurd it is?"

"I see that it might appear so to you," said Desmond. "But it isn't really so. It is a necessity arising from the inviolability of confession. Father Martin must be absolutely sure of what he is doing before he can reveal a word of what that poor dying creature told him."

"But how is he to be made sure?"

"Ah, that I can't tell! I wish I could. He hoped to learn something from the man's sister, but that hope has been disappointed. Here is the letter he has just received," — he drew it from

his pocket as he spoke. "He asked me to bring it to you, because he promised to let you know when he heard from her."

She took the letter from his hand; and as she opened and read it, he allowed his gaze to dwell on her with a consciousness of pleasure in the singularly harmonious details of her personal appearance. It was not beauty, in the ordinary sense of the term, which charmed the eye; but something more delicate and elusive, — something like the crystalline tone of her voice, — a quality which, as far as words can express it, was as if the finely finished physique were a rare instrument, perfectly fitted to express that nobler part of our complex human being which dwells in mind and soul. When she presently lifted the dark-lashed lids of her eyes and looked at him again, he was sure that he had never met a gaze which expressed feeling and thought so lucidly.

"There is nothing here of what we want to know," she said. "Yet it appears to me that, although the writer meant to tell nothing, she has in some subtle fashion betrayed that she is withholding knowledge that might be useful if it were communicated."

"I thought you would perceive it," Desmond said. "The letter, with its studied evasion of the questions which Father Martin asked, does give just that impression. *He* felt it, *I* felt it, and now you feel it. But I don't see what we are to do. The woman can't be forced to speak."

"Perhaps she can be," the girl said slowly. "At least I shall try."

"You?"

"Yes. Don't you understand that I am deeply interested in this? You can't suppose that I would have taken such a step as to go to the priest and ask him what I did, if I had not had a grave reason for doing so?"

"On the contrary, I felt quite sure that you must have had such a reason," Desmond replied; "and I may as well confess that both Father Martin and I have hoped that you would tell us — or at least tell him — what that reason is."

"But what should I gain by telling him?" she asked. "It is something of which I do not wish to speak unless there were an object to be gained by doing so: unless I were sure that the man who lost his life in the wreck was the man connected with the matter of which I know. I hoped to learn at least as much as this from the priest, but he would tell me nothing."

"He couldn't," Desmond repeated. "I wish you would believe that, because then you might see that you who can speak should do so. And if you supplied the missing link in the confession, Father Martin might see his way to fulfil the man's request that reparation for the wrong he had committed should be made. Consider," the young man went on, leaning forward in his earnestness, "that this poor creature can not help himself now, that he did what he could before he died, and that it is for us to do what we can to assist him in his present helplessness and suffering."

He stopped rather abruptly; for he saw gathering amazement in the eyes gazing so steadily at him.

"You talk," the girl said, "as if *you* knew something about him. What do you know?"

"Of the man personally, nothing," he answered. "I never saw or heard of him until he lay before us dying."

"And yet you speak as if you were vitally interested in fulfilling his last request. What difference can it make to you whether it is fulfilled or not!"

He did not answer immediately; for he had not the least intention of telling her what he had told Father Martin, — of the strong impression he had received that help was asked of him by or for the soul that, as he said, could no longer help itself. He did not wish to be considered either a visionary or a spiritualist, and he knew well that outside the Church there is little or no real belief in the continued existence of the individual spirit after death. He hesitated a little, therefore, before he said:

"Surely you recognize a duty of charity, — a double duty, one may say, since it includes aid for the dead and reparation to the living."

If Miss Landon did not echo Edith Creighton's words, and exclaim, "What an extraordinary young man you are!" her look said it very plainly.

"You seem to be talking in a language different from any with which I am familiar," she said. "It has never occurred to me to think of aiding the dead."

"Ah, that is where the Catholic is different!" he answered. "The dead are to us as living as they ever were, and to help them in any way is an imperative duty."

"Just as you said it was an imperative duty to drop everything else and make a tremendous effort to get a priest for that man before he died?"

"Yes, just so. It all comes, you see, from the Catholic conception of the value of the soul."

"I see." As she gazed at him it was evident, from the wonder in her eyes, that new and strange ideas were unfolding before her. "I confess that I have never given a thought to Tracy's soul," she said. "And, if it is existing, you think that it is suffering still?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm afraid there isn't much doubt of it," he replied. "We have to expiate, you know — or, rather, of course you don't know. And," he added quickly, "I feel as if I should not be talking of these things; because it looks as if I were religious or devout, and I'm really nothing of the kind."

She laughed a little, and he noted that the sound was as musical as her speech.

"Oh, I think you must be!" she said. "At least you must be aware that it is very unusual for a young man to know as much about religious matters as you do."

"It isn't the least unusual among Catholics," he assured her. "In fact, it would be a very ignorant schoolboy, who has studied his catechism, who did not know as much as, or more than, I do. But all this is beside the point, which is, will you tell Father Martin what you know of Tracy, — that is, of *some* Tracy?"

She considered for a minute before answering, while he watched her closely. Then she shook her head.

"I think not," she said slowly. "I would not wish to speak of what I know unless I were sure that this was the man connected with it. But will you tell me one thing: if the missing link in his story, the name he did not mention, were supplied, would Father Martin feel himself at liberty to speak, and tell what he knows?"

"Yes," Desmond answered. "I am sure that he would be glad to speak to those who are concerned in learning the truth, whatever it may be. Indeed, I can assure you that he is extremely anxious to have the opportunity. He has a duty to perform. That is why I am appealing to you."

"In that case I see clearly what I must do," she said. "I must learn beyond doubt whether this man was the Tracy of whom I know."

"How will you learn this?"

"By going directly to his sister, and asking her one or two questions which she can not refuse to answer, and which will establish his identity. May I keep this letter for the address? Thank you! And thank Father Martin, please, for sending it to me. Kindly tell him also that if I discover anything which I think would help him in his difficulty, even if it does not help me in mine, I will let him know."

"And when," Desmond asked, a little startled by the rapidity of her decision, "will you be able to see the woman?"

"Not for some time yet," she replied, regretfully. "I have a patient whom I can not leave for a week or two. But then I will go."

"And will you certainly return?"

There was more anxiety in his tone than he was aware of; for he was surprised to feel how much he should regret it if this girl, who had so strangely entered his life, now passed completely out of it. She looked at him with something of the same surprise with which she had asked why he was interested in Tracy. It was evident that the question in her mind was, "What is that to you?" But she did not utter it. Instead, she said:

"I think that I shall certainly return. The reason for which I was coming here when the accident occurred remains in force; but on account of the accident, and the demands it has made upon me, I have not been able to do any of the things for which I came. I shall come back on account of those things, even if I find that the man who was killed was not the Tracy of whom I know."

"And if you find that he *was* that Tracy?"

"Then I will not be able to return quickly enough to satisfy my impatience to tell Father Martin what I know, and learn if it fits into what he knows."

"I hope that it will," Desmond said fervently. "And I believe that it will. I can not tell you why, but I do believe it."

"I wonder why you should!" Miss Landon remarked.

"Well, for one thing, because we seem so strangely connected together, that dead man, you and I," he said. "There we were, perfect strangers to each other; yet I got a priest for him, and you kept him alive until the priest came. Don't you see how fitting it would be if he, on his part, had something to tell which concerned one or both of us?"

"Fitting? Oh, yes, if it were a story we were putting together!" she replied. "But even in that event I think we should be told that we were working 'the long arm of coincidence' too far in imagining anything of the kind."

"I know," Desmond returned, contemptuously. "There's a lot of what the English call rot talked about the improbability of the long arm of coincidence acting in certain cases. I have not reached a patriarchal age by any means, but I have seen some astonishing things in my own experience of what we call coincidence, but for which I can't help thinking that a wider and higher vision may have another name."

"In other words, you really think that — er — Providence orders these strange happenings?"

"I can't see much use in a Providence that doesn't order things," he replied. "And as for talking about a difference between important affairs and trifles, why, we can't possibly tell until the end of everything what is important and what is trifling. It's like this, that things are so linked together in ways unknown to us that one

. . . can not stir a flower
Without troubling a star. "

"You have certainly given me a good many new ideas," Miss Landon said, as, with a glance at the clock, she rose from her seat. "It seems ungrateful that in return I should have to send you away. But I must now go back to my patient. You will be sure to tell Father Martin how much I am obliged to him for sending me this letter; and please believe also that I am deeply obliged to you for bringing it."

"There isn't the shadow of an obligation on the last score," Desmond assured her. "As I told you, I was only too glad of an excuse to come, and — you won't think me presumptuous, I hope — mayn't I come again?"

She shook her head, though the sweetness of her smile softened the refusal.

"I think not," she said. "You are really very interesting, and it is kind of you to want to come. But a hospital is not the place for social visits. It would excite remark, and — er — in short, you must excuse me."

"But a hospital nurse isn't a cloistered nun," he remonstrated. "And I — do forgive me my persistence! — I can not be satisfied to say good-bye without some hope of seeing you again."

"You forget your belief in the Providence that overrules coincidence," she reminded him, as she held out her hand. "If we are destined to meet again, we shall meet. Isn't that what you believe? I don't mind saying that I hope we shall. But we must — leave it to Providence."

"I'd really rather not," he objected hastily. "I mean, I would rather we arrange it ourselves."

"Under the circumstances, that is impossible," she said, a little more coolly and quite firmly. "Thank you again for coming, and good-bye!"

CHAPTER XIII

Judge Wargrave Receives a Letter

It was three weeks later that Desmond sat one morning before the bright library fire — for, as the season advanced, the mornings grew frosty, — glancing over a newspaper which had arrived in the mail that reached Hillcrest before breakfast. During these three weeks he had found it very pleasant to drop into the position of the son of the house, to enjoy the easy social life and customs of the country, to go shooting with Bobby Selwyn (only the day before they had been out all day on one of the remote parts of the plantation), to realize more and more how delightful Edith Creighton was; and also to understand (helped thereto, perhaps, by Selwyn's hints) that nothing was nearer his uncle's heart than the hope that he would fall in love with the charming girl, and that the desirable and obvious thing (evidently expected by every one) of their marriage would result.

He fancied, from an amused gleam in her eyes now and then, that Edith perceived this as clearly as himself; but if so, she did not allow it to introduce the least element of constraint into their association, which was as frank and agreeable as possible. They were almost constantly together; and he was now waiting for her to get into her habit, while the horses, ordered when they left the breakfast table, were brought out, in order that they might ride in the lovely autumn morning to an outlying farm of the estate, where a tenant was to be seen on behalf of his uncle. Already the stamping of the horses on the gravel outside had reached his ear; and when the door suddenly opened, he looked up, expecting to see Edith's graceful figure. Instead, Mrs. Creighton entered hurriedly.

"Laurence," she said, in a tone as hurried as her movements, "I am anxious about your uncle!"

Desmond stared at her in surprise; for it had not been many minutes since he had left her at breakfast, as serene and cheerful as usual; yet she now appeared more disturbed in manner, and apparently in mind, than he had ever before seen her.

"What is the matter?" he inquired, starting quickly to his feet. "What has occurred to make you anxious about him?"

"Something which Virgil has just told me," she answered. "You know his mail is always sent up on his breakfast tray, and Virgil says that this morning there was a letter which seemed to disturb him very much. After reading it, he scarcely touched his breakfast; in Virgil's words, 'just sat staring at the letter,' and did not answer when he spoke to him. Of course, it may have been merely preoccupation of mind, but I can't help fearing —"

"Another stroke?"

"Yes. The doctors have warned me that any mental agitation might bring one on. And what could have been in that letter?"

Feeling himself unable to conjecture, Desmond made a practical suggestion.

"Why not go and find out?" he asked.

"I was wondering if perhaps it would be well for you to go," she suggested.

"I think not," he returned. "It strikes me that it would be altogether better for you to see him."

"Then I'll go," she said. But, nevertheless, she lingered, handling nervously various small articles on the mantel-shelf by which she stood. "I can't imagine who could have written anything to upset him so much," she reflected aloud. "His business affairs are all in perfect order, so far as I know; and it couldn't possibly be anything about the old trouble."

"Are you sure of that?" Desmond asked. Standing on the other side of the fireplace, he glanced into the over-mantel mirror as he spoke, and met her eyes. Struck by the deepening of their troubled expression, he added quickly: "Don't you really think that, instead of worrying yourself with conjectures, it would be better to go at once and learn what is the matter?"

"Yes; I am going now," she replied hastily. She turned toward the door, but paused before reaching it and looked back at him, as if struck by a sudden recollection. "There was a telephone call for you yesterday from the Catholic priest in Kingsford," she said. "When told that you were absent, he asked that you would call him up on your return. I forgot to give you the message when you came in last evening."

"Thanks for remembering to give it now!" Desmond said. "I don't suppose the matter is of importance, but I'll call him up without further delay."

They left the room together; and while Mrs. Creighton went upstairs, Desmond took down the receiver of the telephone in the hall. He got the priest's house almost immediately, and Father Martin's voice answered the summons.

"This is Desmond, Father," he said. "I was absent yesterday, so missed your call, and have just heard that you asked me to call you up on my return. I'm very sorry for the delay, but hope it hasn't mattered."

"I hope so, too," the priest's deep, quiet tones replied; "but I am not sure. I was very anxious to communicate with you yesterday; and, since my message was urgently expressed, I thought I should certainly hear from you in the course of the day or evening. I was expecting a call up to midnight."

Desmond felt distinctly startled. It was again the voice — that strangely expressive, disembodied voice of the telephone — which told more than the words. Yet the words were significant enough; for clearly it *was* a matter of importance which had kept the priest waiting and hoping to hear from him up to midnight.

"I'm extremely sorry," he repeated; "but, as I've already mentioned, I received your message only a minute ago. What did you wish to say to me?"

"I wished," Father Martin answered, "to communicate some information which concerns you in a certain degree. It is about that man — Tracy, you know —"

"Oh, about Tracy! You've learned something, and it concerns me?"

"Indirectly, yes. But in a more direct manner it concerns — another person. I wished to ask your advice about the best way to communicate with that person. I regret now that I did not wait longer. But, since I did not hear from you, and since I understood that your absence might be of indefinite duration, I mailed a letter late last night."

Desmond was conscious of growing cold. An instinct amounting to a certainty was in his mind as he asked:

"To whom was the letter addressed?"

"It was addressed to Judge Wargrave," the grave tones replied; "but when the mail is delivered at the house, you can, if you like, withhold it from him until I see and talk to you."

Even over the telephone the groan which responded was audible.

"It is too late!" the young man said. "The letter has already been given to him. But I will see you as soon as possible, and — excuse me! I must go. Good-bye!"

It was necessary to close the conversation in this abrupt fashion; for Mrs. Creighton was calling him from the upper gallery, with a note of unmistakable panic in her voice.

"Laurence! — Laurence!" she cried.

"Yes, Aunt Rachel, I'm coming!" he answered, as he flung the receiver into its holder and dashed for the staircase.

Hearing the cry, Edith came flying from her chamber, which opened on the gallery; and together they ran to where Mrs. Creighton was standing, with pale face and startled eyes.

"It is as I feared!" she exclaimed when they reached her. "He has had another stroke, — he is unconscious!"

"Then the first thing to do is to get the doctor," Desmond said quickly. "I'll go and telephone for him."

"No, no!" Mrs. Creighton caught his arm as he was turning to run downstairs. "You must come with me. Edith, go and call Dr. Glynn. Beg him to come *instantly*."

While Edith flew to obey the order, Desmond found himself led — for his aunt kept fast hold of his arm — toward his uncle's apartment.

"I want you here before we call any one else," she told him agitatedly.

A moment later they were entering the large, pleasant room with which by this time Desmond had become very familiar; for of late he had spent several hours every day there, talking, reading aloud, or playing cribbage with the old man, who seemed to find constantly increasing pleasure in his companionship. But instead of the alert, intellectual personality he had learned to know so well, there was now a motionless figure lying back in the great winged chair, with eyes closed, face flushed, and breathing distinctly stertorous.

"So I found him," Mrs. Creighton whispered, although aware that she might have shouted vainly in the unconscious ear. "I tried to rouse him; but when I couldn't succeed, I knew what had happened, and I ran and called you. Speak to him! See if *you* can make him hear."

Notwithstanding his conviction of the futility of the effort, Desmond spoke to the silent figure again and yet again. Then he looked at his aunt and shook his head.

"It is useless," he said. "We can not rouse him."

"And this is what has done it!" she said, pointing to an open letter which the nerveless fingers still held. "It is why I wanted you to come before any one else. Do you think we should read this letter?"

Desmond hesitated an instant before answering. If he had known no more about the letter than Mrs. Creighton knew, he would probably have said that it was advisable to read it, not only in order to learn what had produced such an effect, but also to discover if it contained any matter which demanded attention from Judge Wargrave's family or legal adviser. But since they had talked in the library, he had learned enough about the letter to make him feel disinclined to touch it; and in his mind the thought rapidly formulated: "I had better see Father Martin before looking at it myself, or allowing any one else to do so." Aloud, he said:

"I don't think that we should read it now. Later it may become a duty to do so; but, until the doctor has seen my uncle, we don't know how serious this attack may be. If it is not serious, if he rallies as he did before, he might consider that we had taken a liberty in reading something which may be altogether private and personal."

"You are right," Mrs. Creighton agreed. "That is my feeling also; for he has never permitted any one to take liberties with his private affairs. We had better, therefore, just put it away. Will you take it from him?"

But when Desmond attempted to draw the paper from the hand which held it, a strange thing happened. Judge Wargrave's eyes opened, an angry light flashed through their dull, glazed expression, and an inarticulate murmur of protest came from his lips. Then, evidently recognizing the face that bent over him, his expression changed; there was another inarticulate murmur, but in a different tone, and the grasp of the hand relaxed, permitting the letter to be drawn away, after which the eyes closed again.

"He knew you!" Mrs. Creighton cried. "And since it was you, he was willing for you to take the letter. Perhaps he wanted you to read it."

"I hardly think so," Desmond answered. "I fancy that he simply felt it would be safe with me. So for the present this is what we will do with it." He folded the sheet of paper, slipped it into its envelope which lay on the open desk near by, and placed it in a small drawer below the

pigeonholes. He then closed and locked the desk. "What shall I do with the key?" he asked, glancing at his aunt.

She pointed to a lower drawer.

"That is where he always keeps it," she said.

It was as Desmond opened the drawer and dropped the key into it, that Edith entered the room.

"I was lucky enough to catch Dr. Glynn at his office," she said; "and he is coming out immediately. How is Uncle George? Ah" — as she saw the motionless figure in the great chair, — "it is just such a seizure as the other! Can you rouse him at all? Does he know any one?"

"He seemed to know Laurence a moment ago," Mrs. Creighton answered; "but it was only a gleam of consciousness. Try if you can rouse him."

But Edith tried in vain. Although she laid her soft hand on the Judge's brow, smoothing back the silvery, silken hair, and called his name in her most caressing tones, there was not the faintest sign of consciousness; and Desmond felt quite sure that nothing short of his touch upon the letter could have stirred a chord of the dormant brain.

When Dr. Glynn arrived a little later, heard the details of the seizure and examined the patient, he looked very grave.

"There has been a shock which has produced another cerebral hemorrhage," he said.

"What will be the result, it is impossible to tell. It seems too much to hope that a man of Judge Wargrave's age can rally again as he rallied from the other stroke. He may recover to some degree, but I fear that he will never be himself again. Meanwhile he needs very careful attention, and I would suggest a trained nurse for him."

It was the natural, one might almost say the inevitable, suggestion of the present time; but, nevertheless, Desmond started as he heard it. For it made him once more recall the railway wreck, and how he had then asked Hester Landon if she would be willing to take a private case should she be requested to do so. His uncle had, of course, been in his mind when he asked the question; and, natural as this also was, it seemed to him now another strange link in the sequence of events which connected the master of Hillcrest with that tragic occasion. He had a sudden, vivid picture of the unconscious figure of the man who lay dying on the ground, with the priest and himself standing over him, — a picture which was a companion to that of the other unconscious figure lying back in a chair, with a letter in its fingers. He remembered what he had said to the nurse when he saw her last of the mysterious manner in which we act blindly upon each other in this mysterious life. And then he paused, wondering, yet feeling sure, what would come next.

It was Mrs. Creighton who was speaking.

"Whatever you think best, doctor," she said; "but we managed very well before, you know."

"The Judge rallied in a surprising manner and in a surprisingly short time before," the doctor answered. "This is a more serious attack, and I shall be better satisfied if I know that the case is in the hands of a professional nurse."

"Can you, then, send us a nurse from the hospital?" Mrs. Creighton asked.

"From the hospital? No," Dr. Glynn replied. "We have no nurses to send out. But there chances to be in Kingsford just now a young woman who is one of the best nurses I have ever met with. She is Miss Landon, — the heroine of the railway wreck, you remember?" he added, glancing at Desmond.

"I remember extremely well," Desmond responded; while he said to himself that the manner in which things proceeded, as if in a prearranged drama, was positively ridiculous. "I am sure that whoever secures Miss Landon's services will be fortunate," he went on. "But is she not at your hospital?"

"Not at present," the doctor replied. "On the recovery of the patient of whom she was in charge about a week ago, she left the hospital (although we should have been glad to keep her) and went away — to Baltimore, I believe. But she has returned to Kingsford; for I met her on the

street only yesterday, and she told me that she expects to remain for some time. So it is possible that I may be able to get her for you. Shall I endeavor to do so?"

"If you please," Mrs. Creighton, to whom the question was addressed, replied; "although I don't know what Virgil will think of finding himself supplanted."

"Oh, Virgil will not be supplanted!" Dr. Glynn assured her. "He will have as much to do for the Judge as ever, but you and Miss Edith will not have such demands upon your time and strength as you had before."

"So far as I am concerned, I have no desire to be relieved of the demands," Edith said; "but I am aware that a trained nurse will be able to do things much better than I can, and I suppose one must be modern at all costs. But what Uncle George will think, if he ever recovers enough to be aware of this modern invasion, is what *I* don't know."

"Sufficient to the day is the — er — difficulty thereof," the doctor returned. "And, in order that our dear old friend may have a chance to recover, he must have the best attention of every kind. I think he will be quite satisfied with what we have done, if he is spared to come to himself again."

"I am sure of it, doctor," Mrs. Creighton said. "So kindly let us know as soon as possible if the nurse of whom you have spoken can come."

A few minutes later, when Dr. Glynn was stepping into his carriage, Desmond, who had gone out with him, said:

"I shall be much obliged if you will give me Miss Landon's address, doctor. I am going into Kingsford immediately on a matter of business, and I should like to see her personally, and tell her how glad we shall be if she will come."

The doctor drew out his note-book.

"I took down her address when I met her yesterday," he said. "She is at Mrs. Gray's boarding-house, 29 East Broad Street. But, unless you wish to do so, you need not trouble to see her; for I am going directly to her, and I will promptly telephone Mrs. Creighton if she can come, as I have little doubt but that she can."

It was probably the instinct which had so curiously developed in him lately which made Desmond feel that there was doubt nevertheless, though he did not say so.

"I infer that you think the case very serious," he remarked.

"Why, yes," Dr. Glynn answered. "A second seizure of this kind in a man of Judge Wargrave's years could not be other than extremely serious. I doubt if he will ever recover consciousness again. If he does, he will most probably have lost the power of speech altogether." He paused a moment. "It was very unfortunate that the letter which produced this condition should have been allowed to reach him," he said.

"Most unfortunate," Desmond agreed. "But, since no one has exercised any surveillance over his mail, it would have been difficult to prevent its reaching him."

"Hum!" The doctor cleared his throat significantly. "If anything of this kind was to have been feared, there should have been some surveillance," he commented. "There has evidently been a great shock. I am an old friend of Judge Wargrave, as well as his physician," he broke off abruptly; "so I don't think that I intrude in asking what the letter contained."

"We do not know," Desmond replied, with a sense of gratitude for the impulse which had led him to decide as he did about the letter. "Neither my aunt nor myself felt that we had a right to read it."

Dr. Glynn lifted his eyebrows, evidently much surprised.

"I should not have been so scrupulous," he said, a little dryly. "It may contain something which you ought to know; and I fear that the Judge will never be in a condition to attend to business of any kind again."

"In that case, we will of course examine it," Desmond said. "But for the present we have simply laid it aside. If ray uncle recovers sufficiently to ask for it —"

The doctor shook his head as he stepped into his carriage.

"There is nothing more unlikely than that he will ever even remember it," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

Father Martin Tells Miss Landon's Story

Father Martin showed traces of strong agitation when he met the young man who presently dismounted at his door.

"What has happened?" he demanded at once. "I have been wretched ever since you broke off at the telephone. I could hear a woman's voice screaming for you, and I knew something dreadful had occurred. Have I killed Judge Wargrave?"

"Not quite," Desmond answered; "but the matter contained in your letter proved such a shock to him that it has brought on another stroke of apoplexy, which may prove fatal."

The priest groaned.

"How hard it is to know what to do!" he said. "If I could only have reached you yesterday —"

"But why not have waited until you could reach me?" Desmond asked, although aware of the futility of the question. "You might have known that I would communicate with you as soon as I received your message."

"But I could not tell when you would receive it," Father Martin replied. "And after I had waited many hours, I said to myself that there was really no reason for waiting; that I was, in a certain sense, shirking responsibility by bringing you into the matter; that, after all, my duty was plain: I had only to deliver a message, to tell a few facts to one whom they concerned. And it seemed to me that the sooner this was done the better. 'There has been too much delay already,' I thought. 'What if this man, who is old and frail, should die without knowing what I have to tell him! It might make a difference in many things, and I could never forgive myself if it occurred through my neglect of duty.' So, after a prayer, I went out and mailed the letter I had written."

"Well," Desmond said — they were by this time in the study, sitting opposite to each other, — "it may have been the right thing to do; but there is, unfortunately, no doubt of the effect it has produced. Yet I don't know that if I had received your message, I could have advised a better manner of proceeding. I could only have urged caution, considering my uncle's condition. But if you *had* to tell whatever it was —"

The priest nodded.

"I *had* to tell it," he said. "In a case of conscience, one has no discretion: the reparation of wrong must be made to those who are concerned. But I thought that, as a member of the family and your uncle's heir, you might, perhaps, have prepared him for the communication which it was necessary for me to make."

"It would have thrown a responsibility on me, which I think I am rather glad to be spared," Desmond said frankly. "And in any event the shock would probably have been great, the effect perhaps the same." He hesitated a moment, and then asked: "Can you tell me anything about it?"

"Yes, I can tell you," the priest answered. "And it is easier because you know something already. It relates to the confession of that man Tracy, who — and really this *is* odd — owed the chance to make his confession to you."

"The confession which has — probably — killed my uncle!" Desmond exclaimed. "Don't you see that it is almost terrible, the way I am linked with this thing? But for my effort, as you say, the man would not have had the opportunity to make his confession, which in its immediate result at least —"

But Father Martin's lifted hand stayed his words.

"What do we really know of results, either immediate or remote?" the priest asked. "You did your duty, and you should be glad to feel that you have been an instrument in the hands of God, not only to save that man's soul, but also — see here! Don't you think it better for your uncle to be struck down as he is, than to have died ignorant of a great wrong done to his son, certainly by others, and perhaps by himself?"

Desmond started.

"So that was it!" he said, in an awed tone. "There was a wrong done to Harry Wargrave, and this man knew of it!"

"Knew of it, profited by it, stood back and let the other suffer for his own wrongdoing! I can not give you details, because he did not give them himself (you remember how far gone he was when the confession was made). But it seems that, being in a position of trust in a business house, he had used his friend, an employ élike himself, as a cat's-paw, so that forged cheques and various embezzlements were traceable only to him."

"To Harry Wargrave?"

"Yes, to Wargrave, whose name, however, was missing from the confession as Tracy made it."

"Then how have you been able to supply it?" Desmond inquired with astonishment.

"That is where the story grows rather extraordinary," Father Martin replied, — "almost too extraordinary for belief, indeed, if we priests were not accustomed to extraordinary things; in other words, to the entrance of a supernatural agency into the affairs of human life. Of course it may have been merely owing to what is called coincidence that there was on the train a person possessing a knowledge of the events of which we have spoken in Tracy's life, although she had never seen the man — "

"You are talking of Miss Landon, — the nurse who kept him alive until you came?"

Again Father Martin nodded.

"Just so," he said. "To keep him alive was her part, and God has given her a great reward for her charity."

"In God's name what has she to do with it?" Desmond asked.

"It appears that she has very much to do with it," the priest answered; "so much, in fact, that she assured me that she would have given anything short of her immortal soul to secure the confession which in his last hour Tracy made, unsolicited. Being aware that the man who died as a result of the accident had a wrong on his conscience which he desired to confess, she came to me as soon as she learned his name (you've already heard this), and begged me to tell her what he had said. To tell her was, of course, impossible; but I promised that, if she could convince me that she had a right to know the substance of the confession, I would give it to her. Well, you remember the letter you carried to her. It was soon after that she came to me again and told me she was going to Baltimore to see Tracy's sister. I asked what she expected to gain by this, since it was clear from the woman's letter to me that she had no intention of throwing light on any discreditable acts in her brother's life. Miss Landon replied that she would make no effort to obtain information of the kind from her. 'It is probable that I know much more than she does about the events we are concerned with in her brother's life, if he was the man I think him to have been,' she said. 'I shall ask Mrs. Barnes only to establish his identity, and shall not ask that directly. I shall explain my visit by telling her that I am the nurse who assisted her brother at the time of his death, and that, on hearing his name, I wondered if he were a Tracy of whom I had known. She will be forced to tell me then exactly who he was, and that is all I want to learn.' — 'Is it all that I shall want to learn!' I asked; and she answered: 'I think it is. I think that when I come back and tell you what I know of the man — granting that he is the man I believe him to be, — you will find that my story fits into his story as a key into the wards of a lock, and you will be ready to tell me all that I need to know of what he said before he died.'"

The priest's voice fell, and there was a pause in the quiet study for a minute or two, — a pause that seemed filled with electrical suspense to Desmond, as he found himself somewhat

confusedly realizing the full meaning of what he had just heard. Father Martin gave him time to do this. He looked down, smoothing with his hand his soutane over his knees, and did not glance up until the young man spoke, in an odd, quick voice.

"Father," he said, "do you understand that all this can have but one meaning, — that the person who talks in this way must have been very closely connected with Harry Wargrave?"

"Yes, I understand it," the priest answered. "I have understood it from the time she returned and told me her story, which, as she had promised, fitted into Tracy's confession 'as a key into the wards of a lock.' Hearing it, I could not have any doubt that the missing link of evidence was supplied; that her relation and his relation of certain things was substantially the same; that the name she furnished was the name he had failed to give, and that I was bound to fulfil his last urgent request and tell the truth to those whom it concerned."

"I may suppose, then, that you told it to her?" Desmond hazarded.

Father Martin opened his hands with an expressive gesture.

"There was no necessity to tell her anything," he said. "She knew more than I did, — details at which Tracy had merely hinted in his hurried declaration. She did not want information from me, but merely an acknowledgment that the man had revealed certain facts, and had requested that reparation for the wrong of which he had been guilty should be made by a statement of these facts. What she desired — it seemed to be *all* she desired — was that this statement should be made as soon as possible: that the father of the man who had been wronged should know before it was too late the truth about his son."

"And so you wrote the letter which has —"

"Nearly killed Judge Wargrave, — yes. I do not wonder that when he learned what long and terrible injustice he has done to his son — he, not another, for we owe faith to those whom we love as well as to God, — the blow was overwhelming. But I regret very much that I did not at least consult you before dealing it. For, as I told Miss Landon, you are clearly one of those who have a right to hear the substance of Tracy's confession."

"You told her that? And she—?"

"Was more surprised than I can readily express to you; for it appears that she had never heard of your relationship to Judge Wargrave."

"Of course not," Desmond said. "How would she have heard of it? She knows no one in Kingsford, I fancy; and it's almost unnecessary to say that I never thought of mentioning it to her on the single occasion when I have seen her since the railway wreck."

"The strangeness of your connection with the matter seemed to strike her with great force," Father Martin went on. "She repeated more than once: 'It is almost incredible that he should have been brought into it, — he who is to take the place of the man who was cast off!'"

"She knows that, then!"

"As I have told you, she knows everything. I've little doubt, though we did not enter into the subject, that she knows as much as you do about the Wargrave trust."

"But how does she know all this?" the young man demanded vehemently. "In brief, who is she?"

"It was no part of my duty to ask," the priest replied; "and she volunteered no information about herself. This struck me very much; for most people are only too ready to offer information about themselves on all occasions. But the manner in which this girl told her story was — well, extraordinary. It was so detached, dispassionate, and devoid of one personal word. When she finished her clear-cut and circumstantial account of the relations and transactions between the two men a quarter of a century ago, she asked me if it agreed with Tracy's story. I told her that it agreed in every particular. 'Then,' she said, 'if you are convinced that I have supplied the name which was lacking in his confession, I call upon you to fulfil your promise, and make the reparation he desired.' — 'What exactly do you wish me to do?' I asked, in order to see what she would say. — 'I wish you,' she said, 'to let Judge Wargrave know the truth about his son. And I would urge you to do this immediately; for he is an old man, and likely, I have heard, to die at

any time. I knew that she was right about this — I mean about his age and precarious state of health, — so I promised that I would not delay my communication. And that is one reason why I acted with what appears to you unnecessary haste.”

"I am not prepared to say that it was unnecessary," Desmond responded. "And the consequences might have been unavoidable under any circumstances. For I can well imagine that the agony of mind which a man like my uncle would feel in learning that he had been guilty of such injustice toward his son might produce the effect it did, no matter what precautions had been taken in communicating the facts. But the tragic thing is that nothing seems gained: he is unconscious now, and the doctor says may never regain consciousness."

"Ah, well!" the priest sighed. "We can only do our duty, and leave the rest to God. It will be sad if he is never able to repair any practical injustice which may have been done —"

He paused, as a sudden exclamation escaped Desmond's lips. The young man was looking at him with a startled gaze.

"I have not thought of that before," he said. "If there has been practical injustice done to any one, it must be repaired. I know my uncle well enough to be sure that he will do this if he is able. If he is not able, the duty will fall upon the family, and particularly —"

"Upon you?" Father Martin was regarding him keenly.

"Yes, upon me," Desmond went on; "for his will, if he dies without changing it, constitutes me the head of the family."

"And do you think that, if he lives, he will be likely to change this will?"

"I can think nothing without knowing more," the young man said. "And I can learn more only from the person who seems to hold in her hands the key to much besides Tracy's story." He rose as he spoke. "I will go to her now," he said.

"Yes, that will be best," Father Martin agreed. He, too, rose and held out his hand. "I am sorry for you," he observed. "Your inheritance has brought you trouble very early."

"It is not my inheritance yet, thank God!" the other returned. "And I can assure you that it never will be my inheritance, if it rests in any degree upon injustice to another. I made up my mind to that from the first."

"I do not think, ' ' the priest said reflectively, "that this young woman, whatever her relation to Judge Wargrave's son may have been, is here to make any claim on account of that relationship. From first to last, her manner has impressed me with a sense of singular personal detachment. She wished, as a matter of justice, that the truth should be made known to one whom it deeply concerned, but she has apparently no intention of coming forward herself."

"Fate has settled the matter, however," Desmond said a little grimly. "She must come forward, and she must explain who she is. I am going to ask that question now. Thank you, Father, for being so frank with me. And good-bye!"

"I am ready to be more frank — that is, to go into more detail — whenever you desire," Father Martin detained him to say. "If the improbable, almost the impossible, should happen, and Judge Wargrave ask to see me, I need hardly tell you that I shall be glad to respond to his summons at any time. If you read my letter—"

"I did not read it," Desmond told him.

"No?" Father Martin looked almost as much surprised as Dr. Glynn had looked at the same statement. "I should have expected you to do so," he said. "Well, in the letter I simply informed him that, through the confession of a dying man, whose name I mentioned, I had come into possession of certain facts which completely exonerated his son from a charge of dishonorable conduct. I put this mildly, out of regard for his feelings; but the charge was really of forgery and defalcation. And I added that I would take pleasure in giving all necessary particulars, whenever he was able to allow me to visit him."

"I do not see how you could have put the matter more considerately," Desmond said, with a note of grateful appreciation in his tone. "There would seem to be nothing in such a

communication to affect him so terribly, unless one remembers the long mental suffering it recalled, and the flood of regret and remorse which no doubt overpowered him."

"That was it," the priest said gravely. "Their ideal of personal honor was scarcely less than an idol to the men of Judge Wargrave's generation; and it produced a Spartan sternness toward those who violated its requirements. This spirit upheld him as long as he believed his son guilty of such violation; but when the revelation of the truth came, and he recognized that a code less stern would have been more truly just, why, then it is easy to believe that the proud old heart broke, before some obscure bloodvessel was ruptured in the brain."

Desmond nodded.

"I think it must have been so," he said. "Pray for him, Father. And again good-bye! I am anxious to see Miss Landon as soon as possible."

CHAPTER XV

Miss Landon's Secret Is Revealed

Desmond felt himself fortunate in that the parlor of the boarding-house into which he was ushered was empty; for, aware that boarding-house parlors are frequently otherwise than empty, and that there is scant possibility at any time of securing undisturbed privacy in them, he had been revolving in his mind, as he went from the priest's house to Mrs. Gray's, what means he could adopt to secure private speech with Miss Landon, since private speech was, by the needs of the case, imperatively required. He had decided that he would ask her to take a walk with him, in the hope of finding some quiet spot where they might talk. But, being doubtful how she might receive the suggestion, it was with a great sense of relief that he found himself awaiting her in an apartment which left much to be desired in the aesthetic regard, but nothing at all in the morning stillness which wrapped it.

Into that stillness she entered, without, as it were, disturbing it, so soft was her light tread, so quiet her restrained and graceful movements. Except for this bearing, there was no professional sign about her; for the white uniform of the nurse had been laid aside, and in her well-fitting cloth skirt and silken blouse she was again the girl whose air of distinction had attracted his notice in the Pullman before the awful crash came which had thrown them, both literally and figuratively, together. It was this air of distinction which struck him now, as she came into the room, her head lifted high on its slender throat, and her eyes very clear and shining; while she, on her part, looked with new interest at the tall young man who advanced to meet her, his face vivid with eager pleasure.

"Providence has brought us together again, you see," were his first words, when he took the hand which she appeared in no haste to offer; "and I understand now why I felt so certain that it could not be otherwise."

Her gaze seemed to challenge him as she asked:

"What do you understand?"

"That we are connected by more than our chance association," he replied. "I have just left Father Martin; I have heard his story, and I have come to beg you to be good enough to tell me *who you are*."

She drew her hand from his clasp, and herself stepped back a little, while he was conscious of a spiritual as well as bodily recoil.

"It does not appear to me," she answered—and all its quality of crystalline coolness was in her voice,—“that it concerns you to know who I am."

"That is inaccurate as well as unkind," he returned; "for you must be aware that it concerns me very much. You have heard who I am."

"Yes" (the voice was still more cool and clear now): "you are Judge Wargrave's nephew and heir."

"We will, if you please, leave the question of heirship aside," he said. "It is because I am Judge Wargrave's nephew, and therefore a member of his family, that I am deeply interested in what I have learned of Tracy's confession and the matter with which it deals. You have furnished the key to that confession, have made its revelation possible, and thereby cleared my cousin's name from a charge of the most serious dishonor. Would it not, then, be very strange if I did not desire to know how you were able to do this, — or, as I put it bluntly at first, who you are?"

She did not answer immediately; and so strong was the impression of resistance which her attitude, her firmly-set lips and shining eyes conveyed, that he would not have been surprised if she had not answered at all. But presently she said, in the tone of one who makes a reluctant concession:

"Perhaps it does concern you to know by what right I have interfered in this matter. And you must not suppose that there is any reason why I should not tell you, except —"

"Except that you think I am presumptuous in inquiring?"

"No. I have admitted that I recognize your right to inquire. You are, as you have just stated, a member of the family, and no doubt it seems to you that I —"

With one of the impulses which sometimes overtook him, and were due, perhaps to his Celtic blood, Desmond suddenly extended his hand and caught hers again in a firm grasp.

"You are a member of the family also!" he asserted. "I am sure of it. And it is plain that you are closely related to Harry Wargrave. Won't you tell me how?"

The impetuous demand seemed to break down the barriers of her resistance. With a catch in her voice, like a sob repressed, she said:

"I am his daughter."

"I knew it!" he exclaimed almost exultantly. "I felt convinced of it as soon as I heard Father Martin's story. And why should you have hesitated to acknowledge it, — why?"

"Oh!" (she wrenched her hand from the clasp which this time did not surrender it willingly, and sank into a chair), "because I would sooner die than identify myself with a family which disowned *him!*" she cried passionately.

"But I had no part in disowning him," Desmond reminded her. He drew up another chair and sat down before her. "I had never even heard his story until after I came — until after we came to Kingsford, a few weeks ago. Then I was filled with the keenest sympathy for him. I felt instinctively that there must have been a mistake, and that possibly a great wrong was done."

"You seem to feel a great many things instinctively," she said. "But those who should have felt that — his own father first of all — did not feel it; and so he was cast out as unworthy to belong to them, — *he*, the very soul of honor, the finest, highest —"

Her voice broke, but she bit her lip fiercely, and Desmond saw that she was struggling hard to retain self-control. After an instant she regained it sufficiently to go on quietly, almost coldly:

"I can not allow myself to speak of these things. I have determined that I will not do so. It is unnerving and — and it serves no purpose. I came here to make an effort to find a necessary clue to those happenings which wrecked my father's life in its beginning. I had little or no hope of success; but I promised myself, when I first heard his story, that I would make this effort, and I knew that I could never be satisfied until I had made it —"

"But why," Desmond interposed, "did you come to Kingsford, since the events of which you speak happened elsewhere?"

"Because this was his home," she answered; "and I thought that here would probably be my best chance to obtain some knowledge and trace of the man who had ruined him by casting the weight of his own misdeeds upon his life; reckoning, with good reason, that in the case of

Harry Wargrave money would be repaid, prosecution waived, and the whole affair hushed up. So I came, in fulfilment of a sacred duty to the dead, but with a hopelessness like despair in my heart; and then — then the man I wanted, and knew not where to find, was flung across my path, broken, dying —" She paused and looked at Desmond, with her wide, sad gaze full of wonder. "It was strange," she said in an awed tone, — "so strange that one is constrained to think —"

"That it was due to something more than accident," he finished. "I don't know whether or not you heard Tracy tell me that, only a few minutes before the accident occurred, he had left the Pullman, in which he was traveling, to see and talk with a man in one of the ordinary cars."

"I did not hear him say so, but that also was strange. And you think —"

"I don't venture to think anything except that life and death are in God's hand, and that even our limited vision can perceive that a great deal was gained by this man's death. Of course I don't mean only from our point of view," he added hastily. "We must suppose that his soul would be the first consideration with the higher powers, and the chance was given him to save it — to make the restitution which was more essential for him than for us, — at the same time that much was given to you which you could never have gained for yourself."

"Very much," she assented, — "all that I ever hoped for, in fact — the wiping away of dishonor from my father's name, and the power to prove to the stern judge who sentenced him to banishment and lifelong pain that he had condemned an innocent man, and lost a son who would have been the crown and honor of his life."

She restrained herself admirably, but the deepening tones of her voice as she uttered the last words conveyed to Desmond's ear all the strong emotion of her soul. He leaned toward her.

"Have you heard the effect of that knowledge?" he asked. "Have you been told what it has done to Judge Wargrave?"

"Yes," she replied. "I have been told. It is a just retribution. But I am sorry —"

"For him?" Desmond queried a little eagerly, as she broke off.

She shook her head. "No," she answered. "I could not be sorry for him, whatever he suffered. I was about to say that I am sorry to hear that his physical condition makes it impossible for him to realize the full meaning of what he has learned."

There was a short silence. Still leaning forward, Desmond turned his gaze downward, and considered this utterance, while he appeared to study the pattern of the carpet under his feet. When he looked up presently his face was set in grave lines.

"It is very natural that you should feel in this way," he said. "But while you have seen the suffering on one side, have you never thought of the suffering on the other? You have let your mind dwell on the stern judge; but have you never thought of the father deprived of his only son, with his pride in him turned to bitterness, and his affection denied expression? And has it never occurred to you that it was, perhaps, harder for the father to be forced to act as a judge than even for the son to be condemned unjustly?" He paused; but as she did not speak — only sat back in her chair, grasping its arms, while she regarded him steadily — after a moment he went on. "I think," he said, "that if you saw him now, you would be quite sure how much he has suffered. And as for the brevity of the last stroke — the brevity you regret, — why, you know we are told that sometimes the mind is able to review the events of a whole lifetime in an instant; and so I think that all the suffering of all these long years may have been present to him, and given added force to the last sharp blow which —killed."

"He is not dead?" she questioned sharply.

"It amounts to death, does it not, when the light of the mind goes out?" he questioned in turn. "It has gone out in this case so completely that the doctor who has seen him gives little hope that it will ever revive in any degree again."

"Perhaps you are aware," she said after an instant, "that Dr. Glynn has been here to ask me to take charge of the case as a nurse."

"Yes," Desmond replied. "I knew that he meant to come. What answer did you give?"

"Is it necessary to inquire? You must know that there was only one answer possible from me."

"You mean that you refused to go?"

"Undoubtedly I refused to go."

"Ah!" Desmond resumed his study of the carpet for a minute. Then, lifting his glance to her again, "Although you have been good enough to refrain from saying so, I am sure that you have considered me very presumptuous several times already," he said. "Well, I am going to be still more presumptuous now. I am going to beg you to reconsider that refusal and go to Hillcrest."

She stared at him; the dark brows knitted in a frown over her dilated eyes.

"Are you mad?" she demanded in a low tone.

"Not in the least," he assured her. "I was never more sane. For don't you see what a wonderful opportunity this is for you to do something so fine that I believe the whole extraordinary occurrence has been to make it possible! It is an opportunity such as could come only once in a life; and if you lose it — but you won't, you can't lose it! — you will never cease in time, or perhaps in eternity, to regret it."

"I think you must be mad!" she said, still staring at him. "You certainly regard things in the most amazing way. Now, what do you mean by saying that this is an opportunity for me to do something so fine that I shall never cease to regret losing it?"

"Don't tell me that you do not understand exactly what I mean," he replied. "It is not possible that nature made you in the mould it has without giving you the power to appreciate the highest possibilities in human conduct. And here is a possibility so high that it fairly dazzles one. It means that, representing the man who was unjustly banished from his father's house, you can go back to that house, to return benefit for injury; to give service to one stricken down by the knowledge of his own terrible mistake; to offer — if you are great enough for *that*, and I believe you are — the forgiveness which Harry Wargrave might have wished to offer the father who indeed judged him wrongly, but to whose teaching and example he owed the qualities for which you admired and loved him. Isn't this worth doing, and aren't you strong enough to do it?"

She gasped under the appeal of his energy, the flashing eagerness of his eyes.

"I don't know," she faltered. "I have not thought of it like that."

"Then think of it now," he urged. "It is, I repeat, the opportunity of your life, — the great opportunity to do the heroic thing, which most of us spend our lives without ever finding, or without its finding us. And it is woe to us, isn't it, if when such an opportunity comes, we can not rise to it? But *you* can — *you* will, — I'm certain of that. For what else, indeed, have you been brought here? To hear of Tracy's confession, — to clear your father's name? Even those things are, I believe, of secondary importance to the great work of charity which calls you now. So come to Hillcrest, — come!"

But she shrank back as if frightened.

"It is impossible!" she declared. "I can not."

"You can and you must!" he returned imperatively. "You dare not refuse the demand which is made upon you. For you can't tell what is meant by it. It isn't as if you had made, or even sought, the opportunity to do this: to enter your father's home, to take what is your rightful place —"

"No, no!" The denial was vehement now. "It is a place I would not take if it were offered me, — I mean if I were asked to go in my true character; but to go in a false character —"

"There is nothing false about it," he interrupted. "You are a nurse, and the doctor himself selected you and offered you the case. Nothing is asked of you except to go just as you would go to any other patient. No one will know who you are unless you choose to tell —"

"I shall never choose to tell," she said proudly.

"However that may be," he continued, "the point is, that, absolutely without your seeking, the opportunity of which I have spoken is presented to you. And, besides its greatest possibilities,

it offers many things which I should think would appeal to you very strongly. Here is this old man whose days are so nearly numbered, your father's father, your own nearest relative, whom I take for granted you have never seen —"

"Of course I have never seen him."

"And would you not like to see him? No?" as she shook her head. "But he is worth seeing, I assure you; and if you saw him you would understand much that is now dark to you with regard to the mysterious forces of character. "Well, you *must* want to see the house in which your father was born, where he grew to manhood, where he is loved and remembered still. And you can do all this in the most easy and natural manner. Oh," the speaker broke off impatiently, "why are we wasting time in talking, when it is obvious that the thing is ordained, that you have no choice — that you must go!"

She caught her breath sharply.

"You put things in a way which seems to make them irresistible," she said. "And you know how to appeal to what tempts me strongly. For I confess that I have longed to enter my father's old home, to see the rooms in which he lived, the scenes he has described. But there appeared to be no way of doing this consistently with my own self-respect. But now you show the way, and I — I —"

"Will take it?"

"How can I say? The higher demands you have made — the higher way to which you have pointed — I can not meet *them*, or take *that*."

"Then let us put those demands — which, by the way, were not demands, but only counsels of perfection — aside," he told her. "I haven't a doubt that you will meet them; but we'll leave them for the present—"

"To Providence?"

"Yes, to Providence. One is quite safe in leaving them there. And you'll come?"

His tone was eagerly insistent, but she hesitated still. At length she said slowly:

"If — if I think of it, will you promise solemnly to tell no one who I am? It is only on that condition I would take the matter into consideration."

"Don't take it into consideration!" he urged. "Decide at once." He rose to his feet, and involuntarily she rose also. "Go and telephone Dr. Glynn immediately. Tell him that you have reconsidered your decision, and that you will go to Hillcrest as a nurse."

"And if I do, will you promise to keep the secret of my identity?" she repeated.

As they stood face to face, glance meeting glance, he understood clearly that, unless he gave the pledge required of him, she would not go; and all his ardent soul was set upon her going.

"Yes, I promise on my honor to hold the secret as long as you desire me to do so," he answered. "But I hope —"

She cut short his words.

"Hope only that neither of us may regret this," she said. "You have overborne my decision, and by your appeals induced me to consent to something which it is quite possible I shall regret. But the die is cast. I will go."

"I do not believe that you will ever regret it," he assured her earnestly. "I believe that you will one day thank me for forcing your decision, as I now thank you for listening to and heeding my appeals."

CHAPTER XVI

Miss Landon Acts As Judge Wargrave's Nurse

"The nurse has arrived," Mrs. Creighton announced at lunch a few hours later; "and I am very much pleased with her appearance."

Edith looked up with an air of surprise.

"How does her appearance possibly matter?" she asked. "They strike me as machines, these trained nurses, who all do exactly the same things in exactly the same way, and who look so much alike that it is difficult to differentiate them."

"Oh, my dear, you are mistaken about that!" observed Mrs. Selwyn, who had made her appearance at Hillcrest as soon as the news of Judge Wargrave's stroke reached Kingsford; and who, in fulfilment of the duty of a near relative, was spending the day, and incidentally worrying Mrs. Creighton with many suggestions drawn from a long semi-invalid experience. There were people ill-natured enough to say that it was because Mrs. Selwyn had absolutely nothing to do, plenty of money, and a rather empty mind, that she devoted so much time and attention to her various bodily ailments, and was understood to have spent a small fortune on their treatment. But, however this might be, there was no doubt of the extensive nature of the experience, from the vantage ground of which she now went on: "I have had so many nurses in attendance on me, you know; and I can assure you that there's the greatest possible difference in them."

"I should rather think so," her son, who was also present, chimed in emphatically.

"There's all the difference in the world. Some are young and pretty, and not at all averse to a little flirtation; while others are as prim as you please, or as grim as dragons. The mater has had an interesting assortment of them about her, as she says; and I know almost as much about them as if I had been trained in a hospital myself. There was that pretty little Miss Archer, mother, you know —"

"I know that you distracted her attention and turned her head to such a degree that I had to get rid of her," Mrs. Selwyn cut him short very dryly. "But I have had some admirable nurses, and I hope that one of that kind has been secured for dear Cousin George."

"Laurence can tell you; *he* knows her," the irrepressible Bobby observed, with a nod toward his cousin.

Mrs. Selwyn glanced at the latter a little curiously, and asked,

"How does that come about?"

Desmond, conscious of a sense of restraint which he hoped did not appear in his manner, explained how he had been thrown with the nurse in question at the time of the railway wreck, in which she had done such good service.

"So that's who she is — the heroine of the wreck, as the newspapers called her!" Mrs. Selwyn said, with much interest. "Why, Rachel, I congratulate you on getting *her*."

"It was Dr. Glynn who got her," Mrs. Creighton replied. "When he proposed a nurse — you know how doctors are these days: they always want a trained nurse, even when there isn't the least need for anything of the kind—"

"But there's always need," Mrs. Selwyn interrupted in the tone of one who knows. "No uninstructed person can possibly take care of a case as a trained nurse can."

"I'm old-fashioned, I suppose," Mrs. Creighton acknowledged; "but I think that those who are nearest the patient can often take better care, even if it isn't quite so scientific. But what I was going to say is, that of course when Dr. Glynn proposed a nurse, I told him to send whom he pleased, and he has sent Miss —er—"

"Landon," said Desmond, at whom she looked interrogatively.

"Yes, Miss Landon. I confess I dreaded her coming. We have never had a nurse in the house, and I've seen how dictatorial they can sometimes be. Why, in the case of Mrs. Somerville, the nurse positively would not allow the members of the family to enter her room, except occasionally, one at a time, and then only for a minute or two —"

"But that was a desperate case of typhoid, my dear," Mrs. Selwyn broke in again; "and the nurse acted by the doctor's orders."

"Well," said Mrs. Creighton, with rising color, "I don't want any nurse, or doctor either, ordering me out of a sick room where I have a right to be. And I can tell you," she added with a smile, "who feels just as I do about the matter, and that is Virgil."

"Virgil! Oh, of course!" Bobby laughed. "He's been the Judge's body-servant so long that he'll naturally resent any trained nurse coming to instruct *him* what to do."

"I had to be very diplomatic in telling him that she was coming," Mrs. Creighton went on; "and I saw that the idea of being superseded in any way hurt him so much that I said a word or two to the nurse before she went in to the room. 'He's an old and faithful servant,' I told her; 'and if you can spare his feelings, and let him still do as much as possible for his master, I shall be glad.'"

"And she took it well?" Bobby queried. "Many nurses wouldn't. I've had them look at me in the most superior manner when I ventured to make any suggestion, and intimate loftily that they knew their own business."

"She took it very nicely indeed," Mrs. Creighton replied. "In fact, she seemed sympathetic. 'Faithful service is too rare a thing to slight,' she said. 'I promise you that I will spare his feelings in every possible way.' And when I took her into my brother's room, she spoke to Virgil in — well, really in a charming manner. 'I have come to help you take care of your master,' she told him; and it wasn't the words so much as the tone that seemed to set all fear of friction at rest."

"Where have you put her?" Edith inquired a little abruptly.

Mrs. Creighton appeared to hesitate for an instant, and then she said:

"I have put her in the unoccupied chamber of the wing. It seemed the best place."

Desmond was conscious of a thrill of surprise, which ran around the table.

"In Cousin Maria's room?" Mrs. Selwyn gasped slightly. "But I thought that nobody has ever —"

"Occupied it since she died?" Mrs. Creighton finished the arrested sentence. "That is quite true. There has never been a reason why any one should. We have chambers enough for ordinary use, and my brother would not have allowed any one to be put so close to him as long as he was in his usual health. But now you can see that the closeness to his chamber, and the isolation of the suite from the rest of the house, make it the best place for the nurse to be."

"Yes, it's clearly the best place," Mrs. Selwyn agreed. "But will Cousin George like it, if he recovers enough to — er — know anything?"

Mrs. Creighton shook her head, while her eyes filled with tears.

"I fear we need scarcely take that into consideration," she said. "But if he should recover enough to know, I am sure he would understand why I made the arrangement. One could always rely on his reasonableness." Then she glanced around the table and gave the movement to rise.

A few minutes later, Desmond waylaid her in the hall, and, with some hesitation, inquired what arrangements had been made about Miss Landon's lunch.

"I asked her to join us," Mrs. Creighton told him; "but she declined. She had lunched in Kingsford, she said; and then she inquired if her meals could not be served in the sitting-room of the suite where she is. 'I should much prefer this, if it does not give too much trouble,' she added. Of course I assured her that it would give no trouble at all. And I was very glad that she suggested it herself; for I hesitated to make the suggestion, and yet it is much the best — indeed, the proper thing."

"Why should it be the proper thing?" Desmond asked a little sharply. He had a sense of growing hot, and involuntarily he lifted his eyes to the Wargrave portraits hanging on the walls. It occurred to him to wonder what those whom they represented would think of their direct descendant, the daughter of the rightful heir of the old house, being served with her food apart, like an inferior.

Meanwhile his aunt glanced at him with surprise.

"Surely that is obvious," she replied. "It is always more or less disagreeable to have at one's table a person who is neither a member of the household nor an invited guest; and, although many nurses are ladies in birth and breeding —"

"Miss Landon is a lady, I assure you," Desmond could not refrain from interposing.

"It is easy to believe that," Mrs. Creighton assented, though the surprise of her tone became slightly accentuated. "I was very much struck with her appearance. There's an unusual air of refinement — one might almost say distinction — about her; but, nevertheless, she is a stranger, who comes to the house merely in a professional capacity. And if she prefers to keep strictly within her place and duties, I consider it a proof of good sense on her part."

Unable to contradict this, which seemed also obvious, Desmond said nothing. But he still gazed at the portraits on the wall; and the thought still in his mind was, what would *they* say if they knew? Then he started, for his aunt was speaking again:

"There's a look about the girl which strongly recalls some one whom I have known," she was saying reflectively. "I can't think who it is she resembles so much, unless — Oh!" She broke off abruptly, and stood silent for a minute, staring at Desmond, who quickly lowered his gaze from the portraits and stared, a trifle apprehensively, at her. "How very strange!" she murmured presently, as if to herself.

"What is strange?" he inquired; and, from hot, he now found himself turning cold. He was afraid of what might come next, — what question might be asked him.

But Mrs. Creighton seemed absorbed in the consideration of her discovery.

"I have suddenly thought who it is she resembles so strikingly," she said. "It is my sister-in-law, my brother's wife; and it's surely an odd coincidence that she should come here to nurse him, and be the first person to occupy her room since she died."

"It is odd," Desmond agreed, while wondering what she would say if she knew exactly how odd it was. "But are you quite sure — about the likeness?" he added.

"I'm perfectly sure," Mrs. Creighton replied. "As soon as I saw her I knew that she reminded me of some one I had seen before; but I couldn't place the resemblance — you know how elusive those things are, — but now I see it clearly. She has Maria's features, and the eyes — well, the eyes are simply marvellously like hers. I — I feel as if it were almost uncanny, as the Scotch say. It's as if Maria herself had come back to nurse your uncle."

A sudden thought struck Desmond.

"Do you think he will see the likeness, if he ever regains consciousness?"

"I don't believe he could help seeing it," Mrs. Creighton answered. "I am quite sure that Virgil saw it, he stared at her so curiously."

"And what effect do you think it would have on my uncle?"

"Oh, I can't tell!" She looked at him helplessly. "But you know the doctor doesn't think he will ever regain consciousness; or, if he does, that he will ever really be himself again."

"Doctors don't know everything," Desmond stated incontrovertibly. "My own opinion is that as he rallied before in the most surprising manner, so he will rally again, though perhaps in less degree. But you had better ask Dr. Glynn what effect the perception of such a likeness would probably have on him."

"I will. I'll ask him as soon as he comes. But I shall not speak of it to any one else. I'm a little curious to find if Elizabeth Selwyn will notice it."

"Has she seen my uncle since she came?"

"Not yet. But she will expect to see him before she goes; and she is such a near relative that I can't refuse to take her to his room for a few minutes. Then she will see the nurse also."

"And she will be certain to notice her critically, for she seems to take a fascinated interest in everything that relates to sickness —"

"She is a perfect hypochondriac," Mrs. Creighton observed, in the unfeeling fashion of many relatives of these habitual invalids whose ailments are somewhat invisible to the ordinary eye. "Yes, she will certainly notice her; and if she sees the resemblance —"

"Why, then we'll conclude that it must be very striking," Desmond said. "You won't bring her up immediately, I imagine?"

"Oh, no, not until she is ready to go! And Heaven only knows" (with a weary sigh) "when that will be!"

"If it rests with Bobby, it will be soon, I think. I heard him ask her if she was going into Kingsford with him, and she said 'Yes.'"

"Bobby!" Mrs. Creighton glanced with a rather vexed air through the open hall door. "Don't you see him out yonder on the terrace with Edith? When he is with her he knows nothing of the lapse of time."

"Edith knows, however," Desmond laughed; "and you may trust her to bring him in soon. Now, if you've no objection, I will go up and see how my uncle is."

His aunt made no objection, but she looked intently after the agile figure as it mounted the staircase. The thought came to her that very soon — no one could tell how soon — this young man would be the master and owner of the old house of her fathers; and, conscious as she was of his pleasant qualities, she was just now still more conscious that he was essentially a stranger. "What do we really know of him!" she said to herself; and then, with another sigh, she went to rejoin her waiting guest.

Desmond meanwhile took his way upward, around the gallery, and into the corridor of the wing containing his uncle's apartments. As he entered the last, his pace involuntarily slackened, until he found himself standing still before a door he had never entered, — the door of a chamber which had never been occupied since Judge Wargrave's wife, Harry Wargrave's mother, was borne out of it dead. The overwhelming strangeness of the events which had brought the daughter of the banished son back to occupy that room, seemed to clutch him like a hand out of the unseen world. He wondered how much the dead mother and son knew of what was going on in this their earthly home; and when the door at which he was gazing suddenly and softly swung open, he would not have been surprised if their figures had appeared.

But, instead, it was a figure with which he felt himself already familiar — Hester Landon in her nurse's dress. She paused abruptly at sight of the young man standing so motionless before the door; and, as their glances met, each was conscious that words were altogether inadequate to express their poignant sense of the situation. It was Hester who presently spoke.

"Well, here I am, you see," she said.

"Yes, I see," he answered — and could say no more. What more, indeed, was there to say? For at this instant he felt that to see was enough, — to take in through the eyes all the charm of the cool, gracious, healing presence. The pause lasted for a moment, and then she made a gesture of her hand toward the room she had left.

"Do you know where I am lodged?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered again. "I have heard."

"Had you anything to do with ordering or suggesting it?"

"Nothing, — absolutely nothing," said Desmond. "It is part of the mysterious strangeness of the whole thing."

"I don't think you can imagine how mysteriously strange it seemed to me when I was led, without knowing anything about where I was going, into a room where my father's picture was the first object on which my eyes fell — as if he were welcoming me! — and where everything else seemed as familiar as if I had known it in another existence. For I had heard him describe it so often — his mother's chamber."

"You could have knocked me down with a feather when I heard my aunt announce that she had put you there," Desmond said. "And yet one sees how naturally it came about. It is the convenient, one might say the inevitable, place for you to be. But that doesn't make it less strange that you are the first person to occupy the room since she — your grandmother — went out of it." He looked at her with a sudden gleam in his eyes. "It's as if, despite yourself, you had come home and taken your rightful place," he said.

"Don't talk in that way," she answered a little coldly, "or you will make me regret that I have come. And — and, as it is, I am glad to be here!"

"I knew you would be glad," he said. "But I must tell you that my aunt is very much struck by your resemblance to your grand-mother."

She fell back against the doorway by which she stood.

"No?" she gasped, extremely startled.

He nodded emphatically.

"Yes. She says it almost seems as if his wife had come back to nurse my uncle."

The startled expression deepened on Hester Landon's face, as she still leaned back, looking at him with wide eyes.

"I never thought of that," she said in a low voice; "and yet I should have done so, for my father often told me how much I looked like his mother. It was a great pleasure to him. But now — do you think she suspects who I am?"

"Oh, no! I'm sure she doesn't. The idea hasn't even remotely occurred to her. But she is a little doubtful how the resemblance will affect my uncle."

"Yes." It was the nurse now, who spoke quickly. "Of course that must be considered. Will she consult the doctor about it?"

"She has promised to do so as soon as he comes. But I fancy the doctor will say that there's little hope of his ever again being in a condition to recognize a likeness."

"Nevertheless, any possible danger should be guarded against," she said firmly. "I will speak to Dr. Glynn myself, and if he thinks best, will get him to send another nurse to take my place."

Desmond was now startled.

"Oh, don't do that!" he exclaimed. "I'm sure the matter is not so serious. At all events, let the doctor decide."

"The doctor does not know all the circumstances," she reminded him. "It's not as if it were merely a chance resemblance. We know that it is more; and he, if he ever regains consciousness, may feel it."

"Let us at least wait until there is danger — I should say hope — of his regaining consciousness," Desmond urged. "It would be intolerable if you had been brought here in this extraordinary manner only to turn around and go away at once."

"I had better go away than to be a source of danger, had I not?"

"It is absolutely impossible that you could be a source of danger," he declared. "I'm as certain as — as that I exist that you have been brought here for a purpose which is not yet accomplished."

"And what do you take that purpose to be?" she asked.

"I can't tell," he replied. "I don't mean any irreverence when I say that I am not in the confidence of Providence. But I'm quite sure that it is Providence which has brought you here, and which has something for you to do that neither you nor I can yet clearly perceive."

She regarded him suspiciously.

"I only hope," she said, "that you will not attempt to interpret or assist the designs of Providence in any way."

"You need have no fear of that," he told her. "My promise binds me to inaction. Yet I may be permitted to feel satisfaction in your presence, and interest, deep interest, in what may result —"

"Nothing will result," she interrupted, "beyond what you see: a nurse fulfilling ordinary duties. Which reminds me that I am not fulfilling them at present. I was on my way to my — patient when I ran upon you, standing and staring like a statue at my door."

"I was thinking," he explained, "how strange it was that it should be your door. But if you are going to your patient, may I go with you?"

"Oh, yes!" she answered. "No one can disturb him, you know." She moved across the corridor; and as she laid her hand on the opposite door, she turned and looked again at Desmond. "This, too, is strange," she said, — "that I should have the right to enter here."

CHAPTER XVII

The Judge Recognizes The Likeness

It would have been difficult for Desmond to give, even to himself, a coherent account of the feelings with which he followed the girl whom he knew as Hester Landon into his uncle's chamber. He would probably have described his condition as one of mental chaos, so fast did one thought follow and displace another, so incapable did he find himself of realizing the situation he had helped to bring about. It was with a sense of almost incredulous amazement that he regarded the figure which preceded him into the room. Harry Wargrave's daughter! Was he dreaming? It seemed that he must be.

But when, having crossed the floor, he paused by the great, carved mahogany bed, and looked down at the motionless form extended upon it, he was conscious of one controlling thought which brought all other thoughts into the coherence of order — an intense conviction that something more than chance had governed the events which led to this conclusion; which brought the nurse, in her garb of service, to the side of the grandfather who had never seen her; who, having spent his life in administering and worshipping justice, was now struck down by the crushing revelation of his own injustice toward his only son. The young man glanced across to where she stood, this girl so strangely led to her father's home. With her arm around one of the carved bedposts, she was gazing steadily at the figure lying before them, — the face with its clear-cut features, set like sculptured marble; and the long, thin, scholarly hands folded on the breast. He wondered what she was thinking; and, as he wondered, she spoke, very quietly:

"What a noble face it is! I am glad to have seen it."

"I knew that you would be," Desmond answered. He glanced around quickly to see if Virgil, who had been in the room when they entered, was still present; but Virgil, whose feelings were not yet placated toward the invader of his domain, had noiselessly withdrawn. So he was able to go on, a little eagerly: "Don't you feel, in looking at this face, that whatever error he committed was through the very excess of his great qualities?"

"My father used to say something of the kind," she replied slowly. "He always admired, understood, and — yes, forgave. You were right in divining that. But I — ah, let us not talk of it here! It does not seem right, though he knows nothing of what we say."

Nothing indeed; there could be no doubt of that. But for the regular breathing, he might have appeared dead, so entirely was the soul a helpless captive in a body which, like a broken instrument, refused to do its work, — to express either thought or feeling. And, regarding this immovable repose, it was easy to believe that it might pass into the deeper repose of death, without even a glimmer of renewed consciousness.

But if such consciousness should come! Desmond suddenly threw back his head and looked up at a picture which hung over the bed, where the eyes of the occupant must open immediately upon it. It was a very charming picture, — the extremely well-painted portrait of a girl in her bridal dress. All in white, with the fleecy veil swept back from her face, and her soft hair crowned with orange blossoms, she stood, three-quarter length, so that the slim grace of her young figure showed, looking out of the canvas with lucid, smiling eyes, — eyes so perfectly reproduced in another face that he was not surprised Mrs. Creighton had recognized them at once. He might have wondered that he had not recognized them himself, but for the fact that since his boyhood he had not seen this portrait until to-day. But now — as his gaze dropped from the

canvas to the girl standing beneath it, all in white also, with the same outline of feature, the same slender grace of form — he involuntarily uttered an exclamation which made her glance at him quickly. He pointed to the picture over her head.

"Have you observed that?" he asked.

"I observed it as soon as I came into the room," she answered, "and recognized it immediately. For I have often heard my father speak of that also, and say —"

"How much you are like it!"

"Yes. Do you perceive the likeness?"

"A blind man might perceive it," he told her, with a touch of pardonable exaggeration. "You spoke a little while ago of your right to be here. You carry the right in your face."

She shook her head, lifting it with an air of pride, as, Desmond felt instinctively, the gentle, smiling girl of the portrait never would have lifted hers. Clearly there was a harder strain, whether from nature or training, in this other girl, to whom she had handed down her features and her eyes.

"I found no right whatever on that," she said coldly. "I am only sorry that I did not realize sooner how strong the resemblance is, and I would not have come. Now I am sure that it will be well for me to go as soon as possible."

Desmond turned his eyes to the insensible face lying on the white pillows before them.

"The only possible reason for your going," he said, "would be a fear of harming *him*. But, since I see him, I do not think that anything will ever again have power to harm him; I don't believe that he will ever regain consciousness."

"It is by no means certain that he will not," she said. "I have seen cases like this, where consciousness returned very unexpectedly. When Dr. Glynn comes —"

She paused abruptly, for at this moment steps and voices were heard in the corridor outside. The door of the chamber opened, and Mrs. Creighton, accompanied by Mrs. Selwyn, entered.

"Ah, Laurence, you are here still!" the former said, in discreetly lowered tones, as they approached the bed. "We have come to see how my poor brother is. I suppose there is no change in his condition, Miss Landon?"

"None at all since you saw him last."

"One can hardly hope for any — yet," Mrs. Creighton said, with a sigh. "But my cousin, Mrs. Selwyn, did not wish to leave without seeing him. This is Miss Landon, the nurse who has taken charge of the case, Cousin Elizabeth."

Mrs. Selwyn, whose attention since she entered the room had been absorbed by the sight of Judge Wargrave, and who was now regarding him with sorrowful intentness, looked up at these words. Desmond, watching her closely, saw her eyes suddenly expand when they fell on the nurse. She stared for an instant, and then, extending her hand, grasped Mrs. Creighton's arm.

"Rachel!" she exclaimed, "don't you observe — it's the most astonishing thing I ever saw! — how much Miss Landon resembles Cousin Maria, — how much she is like that portrait?"

Mrs. Creighton, who had evidently given no thought to the portrait up to this time, now glanced at it quickly, and from it to the girl standing beneath it. She also was plainly startled by the likeness between the two.

"There is — some resemblance," she said. "I observed it when I first saw Miss Landon. But it is — er — more striking in this dim light, and on account of her dress."

"It's — amazing!" Mrs. Selwyn declared, still staring at the girl. "I've never seen anything like it, in the way of a chance resemblance. And — and, Rachel, how do you think it will strike Cousin George — if he ever recovers consciousness?"

"We must ask the doctor —" Mrs. Creighton was beginning, when the nurse quietly interposed:

"That seems unnecessary. I think there is no doubt that I should leave, if my resemblance to this portrait is indeed so strong."

"It is very strong," Mrs. Creighton murmured. And then she turned to Desmond: "Don't you see it, Laurence?"

"Oh, yes, I see it!" he replied, a little reluctantly, since nothing was further from his wish than that Hester Landon should go away. "But we can hardly imagine that my uncle will ever recover sufficiently to recognize a likeness of the kind. And, in any event, Dr. Glynn is the person to decide —"

"Of course I never meant anything else," Mrs. Creighton said. "I should be very sorry if Miss Landon thought that I intended to imply any desire for her to go."

"I did not think so," Miss Landon assured her. "But we are agreed that no risk of any shock to Judge Wargrave should be run. I am sure Dr. Glynn will be of that opinion, and I shall ask to be relieved from further duty when he comes."

"That seems a pity," Mrs. Selwyn observed. "I'm confident that you are a very good nurse. I have had much experience with nurses — having had two operations performed, as well as many severe illnesses, — and I can tell a really good nurse as soon as I see her. There's a clearness of look and a coolness and steadiness of manner, — you have it all, and I think it would really be a great pity to deprive Judge Wargrave of your excellent services because of a resemblance which, after all, may not be as strong as we fancy, and which he may never see at all."

"I agree with you heartily," Desmond said, conscious of more cordial feelings for Mrs. Selwyn than he had ever known before. "In fact, I don't think we ought to entertain the idea of Miss Landon's going away on such a fanciful ground, unless Dr. Glynn says that it is absolutely necessary. And I'm quite sure," the speaker ended confidently, "that he won't say anything of the kind."

Miss Landon gave him a glance which he readily interpreted as one of extremely doubtful approval; and, turning, bent over her patient, who had suddenly stirred a little.

"I think that he is sufficiently aware of the talking to be disturbed by it," she then said, addressing Mrs. Creighton. "It will, perhaps, be better not to discuss the matter further — here. I will come into the sitting-room, if there is anything else you would like to say to me."

"There is nothing — nothing at all," Mrs. Creighton answered quickly. "Cousin Elizabeth, I think it will be best for us to go now. Laurence, I almost forgot to tell you that Bobby wants to see you before he leaves."

They all filed out of the room; but as Desmond held the door open for the two ladies, Mrs. Selwyn paused for an instant and glanced back at the silent figure on the bed, watched over by the portrait hanging above, and its living reproduction below. Her eyes, when they met his, had an awe in them which he comprehended through sympathy.

"It's — the most astonishing thing!" she exclaimed, when they found themselves walking down the corridor outside. "I don't know how it affects you, Rachel, but I don't mind confessing that it gave me a turn I haven't got over yet when I looked up and saw — it seemed as if I saw Cousin Maria herself standing by the bed!"

"It was rather startling," Mrs. Creighton acknowledged; "and the reason why I didn't mention the resemblance to you was because I wanted to find if it would strike you as it struck me when I first saw the girl. I couldn't immediately place the likeness. I only knew that she reminded me of some one I had seen; but it flashed upon me who it was before I saw her again; and then — in that room — in that white dress — well, the resemblance *was* simply amazing. No one who ever saw my brother's wife could have failed to be struck by it."

"Not possibly," Mrs. Selwyn agreed. "Who is the girl? Does anybody know anything about her?"

Mrs. Creighton shook her head.

"It hasn't occurred to me to inquire anything about her personally," she said. "Dr. Glynn simply recommended her as a good nurse, but I think she is a stranger in Kingsford. Didn't

I understand that she was one of the passengers on your train, — the train that was wrecked, Laurence?"

Desmond, assenting briefly, was unable to refrain from adding that it was extremely fortunate for the other passengers that she had been one of them.

"No doubt she is a good nurse," Mrs. Selwyn remarked. "As I said to her a few minutes ago, I have had so much experience that I can tell at a glance whether a nurse is competent or not. She looks as if she would be admirably competent; but it is surely strange that she should have come to nurse Cousin George. It almost makes one feel — er — a little superstitious."

"There is nothing to be superstitious about," Mrs. Creighton declared, in apparent forgetfulness of her own remarks to Desmond not long before. "Very likely we are fanciful. The likeness probably isn't as strong as we think. It may have been only the white dress and her standing under the portrait which made it seem so remarkable."

By this time they were descending the staircase; and Edith, who was with Selwyn in the hall below, caught the last words, and turned with a look of surprise to Desmond when he joined them.

"What are they talking about?" she asked. "*Who* was standing under a portrait in a white dress?"

"Miss Landon the nurse," he replied. "You know the portrait of my uncle's wife in her bridal dress which hangs over his bed?"

"That lovely picture? I should think I did know it well! It is the thing I should most like to possess in Hillcrest. But what has the nurse to do with it!"

A wild impulse to say what she had to do with it — in other words, to explode a bombshell in the family circle — seized Desmond. But, aware of the obligation which bound him to restrain this impulse, he only answered, a trifle shortly:

"Nothing, except that she resembles it strikingly."

"Resembles it, — resembles that picture? Oh, nonsense!"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not giving you my own impression," he said. "Naturally, that would be of slight value. But my aunt and Mrs. Selwyn were both so much struck by the likeness that they are discussing it yet."

"That doesn't signify much," Edith returned. "People often see resemblances in the oddest manner where they don't exist at all. I won't believe that a mere stranger, coming into the house by chance, can resemble my favorite picture. Why, that girl, as she is painted there, looks as fine and high-bred as a princess, — a very flower of aristocratic conditions! And to talk of an ordinary trained nurse resembling *her*!"

Wilder and stronger grew Desmond's impulse to speak, — so wild and strong, indeed, that he was forced to keep his lips closed to prevent his tongue from betraying him. And so it was Selwyn who answered the young lady's scornful words.

"But there are a good many trained nurses in these days who might be described as flowers of aristocratic conditions," he reminded her. "There's General Singleton's daughter, and Miss Brooke — one of *the* Brookes, you know, — and Miss Carteret —"

"I know," Edith cut him short impatiently. "But the fact that those girls have gone into nursing, partly under pressure of necessity and partly because it's a fashionable fad, doesn't make trained nurses, as a class, other than people who, however estimable, are certainly *not* flowers of aristocratic conditions, and whose training tends to harden them in a very unpleasant manner."

"Oh, I say!" Bobby deprecated. "I really don't think that's the case — except with a few, of course."

"The stamp of their training — a training which must harden — is on them all," Edith insisted. "And, therefore, I'm positive that to talk of a resemblance between this nurse and that lovely picture is simply absurd."

Desmond looked at her quickly, and as she met his glance she was struck by the restrained excitement which it showed. But his manner was quiet enough as he said:

"You are so contemptuous of our opinions — of your mother's and Mrs. Selwyn's as well as of mine, — that I challenge you to come and see for yourself whether or not there is a likeness between Miss Landon and that portrait."

"Very well." She took up the challenge promptly. "Shall Bobby come also?"

"There's no reason why he shouldn't. And probably he would like to see my uncle."

"I hadn't thought of it," Bobby said candidly. "But I wouldn't mind seeing the nurse and the portrait; so, if you're sure I won't disturb the Judge —"

"He is unconscious, you know," Desmond said, "and can hardly be disturbed, — although it will be well to refrain from talking in his chamber."

"Are those the nurse's orders?" Edith asked. "I suppose she feels it necessary to assert her authority in some way. But, as a matter of fact, one could talk, if one liked, without the faintest danger of disturbing him. I was with him just before she came, and I know that it was impossible to rouse him in the least degree."

Having learned by this time that, despite her many charming qualities, Miss Creighton was not one with whom it was wise to argue, Desmond held his peace, and, together with Selwyn, followed her upstairs. She led them into the Judge's sitting-room, where his great chair stood pathetically empty, beside his closed desk; and where Virgil, with face set in deep lines of sadness, rose from a seat by the window as they entered. Edith paused, hesitated, and looked interrogatively at Desmond.

"Perhaps we had better send and ask the nurse to come and speak to us," she said. "It is only courteous to recognize her authority in the sick-room before taking Bobby in. Virgil, will you go and tell the nurse that Miss Creighton would like to see her for a moment?"

Virgil, in well-trained silence, disappeared into the adjoining chamber; and there was a short interval, in which no one spoke, but in which Desmond, whose nerves were on edge, was unpleasantly conscious of Selwyn's tattooing on the back of a chair. Then the portiere which hung over the door was drawn back, and Hester Landon entered. As the folds of the curtain fell behind her white-clad figure, throwing it into relief as she paused, Desmond was again struck by the impression of something cool, fresh and delicate — of all exquisite potentialities of healing — which she produced. He stepped forward quickly, before Edith could speak.

"You must pardon us for troubling you so soon again, Miss Landon," he said. "But Miss Creighton wishes to take Mr. Selwyn" (he indicated Bobby, who bowed) "in to see Judge Wargrave, and she thought it best to consult you before doing so. Edith, I believe you have not met Miss Landon?"

Despite her somewhat supercilious attitude of mind toward trained nurses, Edith was incapable of treating anybody with discourtesy. Indeed, according to the code of manners in which she had been educated, courtesy was particularly due to one who was in any degree a social inferior. She thought Desmond's interference rather uncalled for, but her manner left nothing to be desired in graciousness when she said:

"How do you do, Miss Landon? I have heard so much of you, of your noble work in the railway wreck, that I am very glad you have come to help us take care of my dear uncle. We would like to see him for a few minutes, if you are quite sure our presence will not disturb him."

"I am sure that your presence will not," Hester answered, with her quiet nurse's manner; "but it is possible that talking might disturb him a little, — at least, as Mr. Desmond knows, it seemed to do so when Mrs. Creighton and Mrs. Selwyn were here a short time ago."

"Yes," Desmond told Edith, "it certainly seemed so. We were talking about the — er — portrait over the bed, and he stirred as if our voices annoyed him."

Edith lifted her brows. She was plainly incredulous, but did not express her opinion.

"We will not talk at all," she assured the nurse. "Mr. Selwyn simply desires to look at him."

Mr. Selwyn, conscious of having no such desire at all, nevertheless murmured something which sounded like acquiescence; and Miss Landon, again drawing back the portiere, invited them by a gesture to enter the chamber.

A moment later they stood silently grouped about the bed on which the recumbent figure lay, with so much majestic calm in the lines of the chiselled face, the quietly extended limbs, the folded hands, that the incapacity of illness was almost forgotten. For even in this extremity of physical weakness, the strong character, the dominant will, the keen intellectual force which had made Judge Wargrave throughout his life such an impressive personality, still asserted themselves, and still had power to inspire in those who saw him something so closely approaching to awe that even Bobby Selwyn, after gazing for a moment with a look of unusual gravity on his countenance, drew back and whispered to Desmond:

"Seems incredible he isn't able to rouse himself. One can't associate the idea of incapacity with *him!* You feel as if he had will enough to do anything, — to open his eyes if he liked, and say something — er — conclusive, you know."

"I'm afraid," Desmond responded, in equally low tones, "that he has said something conclusive indeed. I wonder, by the by, what it was, — his last utterance? One would like one's last utterance to be noble and dignified, if possible; at least his should have been so."

"But last utterances aren't often, I believe," Bobby said; and then abruptly, in an unconsciously louder tone: "Oh, by George!"

Desmond seized his arm warningly, but he did not heed; he was staring at the portrait, and from it at the nurse, whose face turned quickly toward him with a look of admonition. But Selwyn lost the admonition in studying the resemblance which struck him with such overwhelming force that he forgot everything else.

"Never saw anything like it!" he announced in tones which rang through the silence of the hushed room. "It's simply astounding, how much alike —"

But the nurse's lifted hand now stopped his words. Judge Wargrave, at sound of that loud "By George!" had stirred, as if responding to the call of his own name; and when the strident tones went on, he opened his eyes. There was an instant's pause while the nurse bent over him. His gaze settled on her face and rested there — at first blankly, then gathering expression as the light of understanding came slowly into it. And then — while those who stood by, motionless as statues, held their breath in suspense — there followed a flash of recognition: the lips unclosed, the tongue seemed struggling to speak, and finally, with great effort, uttered one word: "Maria!"

CHAPTER XVIII

The Judge 'S Illusion

"It is," said Dr. Glynn, "one of the most gratifying things I have ever known that the Judge should have recovered consciousness in any degree so soon."

He spoke to Mrs. Creighton, on whom, however, his cheerfulness did not appear to have an entirely reassuring effect.

"But, doctor," she demurred, "how about his mind? That was perfectly clear as soon as he rallied at all from the other attack. But *now* — you have heard that he imagines the nurse to be his wife!"

"An entirely temporary condition," the doctor replied. "The mind has not altogether cleared yet, and therefore confuses persons as well as names; but I believe that it will clear —"

"And that he will be quite himself again?"

"W-e-ll" — the word was drawn out slowly, — "perhaps not quite himself as we have known him. We could hardly expect that. But he will recover the use of his faculties to a certain

degree; and it is not likely that he will continue to mistake the nurse for his wife. What a really remarkable resemblance, by the by, there is between Miss Landon and the portrait of Mrs. Wargrave! I scarcely wonder that, in his present condition, the Judge should confuse one with the other."

"There is a very strong likeness," Mrs. Creighton agreed. "Before he roused, we were all struck with it, and were inclined to think that it would be well for Miss Landon to go away, because we feared just what has happened — a shock to him."

"But there hasn't been any shock," the doctor interposed positively. "On the contrary, the recognition of the likeness has had a distinctly stimulating and beneficial effect. Miss Landon spoke to me herself about going away: she seemed to have an impression that you desired it."

"Oh, she is mistaken about that! Or, if I expressed any desire of the kind, it was only because I feared the effect of the likeness on my brother. But I always said we must ask you whether she should go or stay."

"I told her to stay; in fact, I would not hear of her going. In the first place, we could not replace her as a nurse without trouble and delay and, in the second place, the Judge would probably miss her and be distressed and irritated. Anything likely to have that effect on him must be carefully avoided. If he is kept perfectly quiet in mind and body for a few days now, I have every hope that he may rally again."

"I am very glad to hear it, — very grateful!" Mrs. Creighton observed, in a tone of deep feeling. "It is more than I expected."

"It is much more than *I* expected," the doctor frankly replied.

It was indeed a fresh proof of the strength and vitality of Judge Wargrave that, after his unexpected and somewhat startling recovery of consciousness, he did not again relapse into unconsciousness so deep that he could not be roused. There was, it is true, a difficulty in this rousing, as if the soul had withdrawn to some inner citadel of the senses, from which it came forth reluctantly and with an effort. But it did come forth when summoned by a voice that he knew. And to every one except Desmond it was strange that no voice had such power to rouse him from the coma-like condition into which for several days he fell as soon as the demand upon his attention was over, as the voice of the nurse. That the only name his tongue seemed able to pronounce was that by which he called her — the name of the wife of his youth, — was, they agreed, not so strange; but his response to her voice was a matter of astonishment to all, and of distinct resentment to Edith.

"You would think," she said to Desmond, "that Uncle George would respond to the voice of some one whom he knows and loves rather than to that of a mere nurse. I don't — I really *don't* understand why this stranger should come in and take the first place with him in this manner."

"Oh, yes, you do understand!" Desmond told her. "You know it is because —"

"Of an accidental resemblance to his wife? Of course I know that; but, as far as I am concerned, I don't see the likeness as the rest of you do; and I don't think it accounts for the manner in which he responds to her voice."

"Perhaps there is a similarity of voice as well as of face," Desmond suggested, feeling himself the worst of hypocrites, since he was perfectly convinced that such a similarity must exist by inheritance.

"It seems to me more probable that it is merely the association of the voice with the face," Edith remarked reflectively. "But, in any case, it is strange and — disagreeable. I wish that Dr. Glynn had never brought the nurse here. There's really no need of her at all, and it is a pity mamma had not sent her away before poor Uncle George roused to consciousness and mistook her for his wife."

"Then you would have missed a very dramatic moment," Desmond observed. "I shall never forget how we all waited to see what would be the result of Bobby's exclamation, — holding our breath while my uncle opened his eyes and the light came into them as he saw

Miss Landon. Then when he called her 'Maria!' in a tone such as I am sure no one but his wife ever heard from him before, one felt one's self wonderfully moved."

"I didn't!" Edith declared. "I felt disgusted."

Desmond could not restrain a laugh, although it was a trifle nervous.

"I believe that you are positively jealous of the nurse," he said.

"I am jealous for Uncle George," Edith returned, — "jealous that he should be wasting his deep and rare affection on a mere —"

"You must remember," Desmond interrupted hastily, "that he is not wasting his affection at all. It is directed toward his wife, and not in reality to the nurse whom he mistakes for her. But you'll be glad to hear that the doctor thinks this condition merely temporary, that in a little while he will probably know who she is."

"I shall certainly be glad when that time comes," Edith said, a little loftily. "I love and admire him so much that I confess I find the present state of affairs very trying."

Pondering these utterances, and others like them, Desmond presently took his way upstairs. The situation was so far a false one that he could not avoid feeling irritated by it; and this irritation was largely directed toward the nurse, although he had candor enough to admit that he was chiefly responsible for her presence at Hillcrest. "But I could not have expected *all this!*" he said to himself; by which vague expression he meant the universal recognition of her likeness to the portrait of Mrs. Wargrave, and the fact that his uncle's clouded mind had mistaken her for the grandmother she resembled. These things being so, he had an intense conviction that she should speak — or allow him to speak, — declare who she was, and take her rightful position in her father's home. Miss Creighton's slighting allusions to "a mere trained nurse" roused in him a deep sense of annoyance; for he could not lose sight of the fact that it was of Harry Wargrave's daughter that she spoke, of the — yes, of the rightful heiress of Hillcrest.

The last thought struck him like a blow, so that he positively paused and gasped over it. Of course she was, in justice, the heiress of Hillcrest; and yet — there was the Wargrave trust; and there was his uncle's will, naming himself as the Wargrave heir! Fortunately, he remembered, people could not be forced to accept inheritances which they felt were not justly theirs; but, again, neither could other people be forced to take such inheritances. And he had a strong conviction that nothing on earth would ever induce Hester Landon to take what was not explicitly given to her. "Oh, by Jove!" he muttered helplessly to himself, very much as Bobby Selwyn might have muttered; for the muddle of the situation seemed, on the surface, hopeless; and all that he was sure of was that the key — if key there were — lay in the hands of the girl of whom he was thinking.

A few minutes later he was standing by his uncle's bed, looking at those hands — white and slender, yet with capability expressed in every line — as they changed the pillows and performed other offices of a nurse about the patient. The manner in which the old man roused from his state of partial unconsciousness to acknowledge these attentions with a smile and a word or two of grateful appreciation was, Desmond thought, hardly less than pathetic in the light of the actual state of affairs. He tried to rouse the same notice for himself, but it was more difficult. There was doubt and uncertainty in the glance which met his own, and the lips were altogether unable to utter his name.

"I don't believe that he knows me at all," he said to the nurse, when the eyelids fell over the eyes, as if the mind rebelled against further effort.

"I think that he does," she answered. "But he is evidently puzzled and confused between past and present. This state will not last, however. The mind is clearing; I notice that very perceptibly."

"He certainly knows you very well."

"You mean that he knows me as the person he mistakes me for? Yes, that is true, and it is also natural. I must look very much like her."

"So much that I — I want to talk to you about it," the young man said impulsively. "He does not need anything more just now. Will you come into the sitting-room for a few minutes?"

She hesitated an instant, and then —

"If you think it worth while," she said, a little reluctantly. "Ring for Virgil. Judge Wargrave must not be left alone."

When Virgil appeared, she walked into the next room; and Desmond, following, closed the door between it and the chamber, — the door over which a curtain always hung, since Judge Wargrave was very susceptible to draughts. Then he approached the girl, who had paused and turned toward him.

"Do sit down," he said, drawing a chair for her before the open window. "You must be tired."

"Not in the least," she answered. But, nevertheless, she sat down, and then leaned forward with an exclamation of involuntary delight at the scene outspread below, — sweeping valley, gently rolling hills, and distant woods, all steeped in the dreamy softness of that exquisite Indian summer which in Carolina lingers far into December. "How beautiful!" she murmured as if to herself; and, presently turning her eyes to the young man who was leaning beside the window, she added: "It is a fine old place. I am not sorry to have seen it — once."

Desmond perceived, and promptly seized his opportunity.

"It is your rightful home," he told her quickly. "You ought to feel this, and — and you ought to feel also that your present position here is a false one."

"I don't acknowledge that it is a false position, for I am here simply and solely as a professional nurse," she said, "but if it were, whose fault is it?"

"Mine," he replied. "And, being mine, I have a sense of responsibility which makes me very uncomfortable."

"You must pardon me for observing that you should have thought of the things which make you uncomfortable before you incurred the responsibility," she said a little dryly.

"I suppose that I should," he answered. "No doubt I was presumptuous; but, you see, I didn't know anything about some of the things. Particularly, I didn't know that your likeness to your grandmother is so strong that it would be noticed at once. "

"I didn't count on that," she confessed. "If I had, I should not have come. I am extremely sorry now that I did come, and I have tried to induce the doctor to let me go away."

"And he will not?"

"No, he will not consent. I could only go by taking the matter into my own hands, and leaving without his permission. But I am averse to doing this, — not only from a professional standpoint, but because his strongest argument for my staying is that he regards my presence as a distinct benefit to the patient."

"Yes, I heard him say so very emphatically. He thinks that the likeness which makes my uncle mistake you for his wife has had a beneficial and stimulating effect upon him."

"So far it has," she conceded. "But I am not sure what the effect may be when he realizes that I am not the person he takes me for. Therefore I think it would be well for me to go before he realizes this, and then he would fancy that it had all been a dream that 'Maria' had been beside him." She clasped her hands tightly together as they lay in her lap, and a sudden note of entreaty came into her voice. "Oh, I want to go away!" she exclaimed. "Can't you help me to do so? It is your fault that I am here."

"I know that it is my fault," he said. "But I would rather help you to stay than to go. Indeed, in my opinion, you *must* stay: it is your duty as well as your right to be here."

"It is not my duty; I deny that utterly!" she told him.

"Denying a fact does not change it," he reminded her. "This old man is not only your nearest relative, since I take for granted that your mother is not living —"

"My mother died when I was an infant."

"Well, then, where have you any tie nearer than the tie which is here? — any duty more pressing than a duty to your father's father —"

"Who unjustly condemned and banished my father!"

"On the contrary, who condemned him through the high sternness of his sense of justice, and who now lies crushed and broken under the late knowledge of his mistake. And in this sad condition no one can help him as you can. You have the word of the doctor for that. No one of those who love him best can do for him what you have the power to do. And yet, in the face of an opportunity so great that, as I told you before, it could come only once in a lifetime, you talk of going away!"

His tone carried such a keen edge of reproach that for a moment she could only stare at him, with a mingling of wonder and resentment in her eyes. Then:

"When I listen to you," she said, "I seem to have a glimpse of things — ideals and standards — which are new to me, and which have a certain attraction, — an attraction that has brought me here, and which I now regret. So I think I will close my ears —"

"You can't close your mind," he interrupted confidently. "Many people can do so, but you are not one of them. You see what I mean. You recognize its force in coming here; and now that you are here, you can not, you dare not, go away."

"I dare do anything that my conscience and judgment approve," she answered a little proudly.

"Oh, I'm quite sure of that!" he returned. "But the point is that neither your conscience nor your judgment will approve of this, and so you can't do it. You must stay at Hillcrest, and I have come now to beg you to stay as something more than a nurse."

"You mean —"

"I mean that I want you to let me tell my aunt — *your* aunt also — who you are."

"Do you remember that it was only on the condition of your promising to keep the secret of my identity that I came here?" she demanded.

"Of course I remember it," he answered; "but I am begging you to release me from that promise, I am begging you to recognize that it places both you and me in a false position."

"I don't recognize it," she replied coldly; "but if I did, I should still decline to release you from your promise. Nothing would induce me to do so, — nothing! The only way in which you can change the position you consider false is by helping me to get away."

He shook his head.

"I'll never do that!" he said.

There was an instant's pause as they looked at each other, will set against will, neither with a thought of yielding, and both so absorbed in the tension of the situation that they were entirely unconscious of the slight click made by the closing of a door, which had been noiselessly opened behind its portiere.

"I must remind you," the girl said presently, "that by your appeals you overbore my decision and induced me to come here, and that I came only because you pledged your honor to keep my secret —"

"Oh, I'll keep it!" he said abruptly. "I can't do other than keep it, if you insist. But you are wrong, I'm sure of that."

"You should have been sure before you persuaded me to come," she replied, as she rose from her seat. "If the situation is a false one, you have yourself chiefly to blame; though I am to blame also for yielding to your persuasions. I can help you only by going away as soon as possible, and that I will certainly do."

"I beg you most earnestly —" he was beginning, when she lifted her hand.

"Some one is talking in the next room," she said; "and — ah, Judge Wargrave is calling!"

She ran across the floor, followed quickly by Desmond, and opened the door leading into the chamber. The scene upon which they entered was as startling as it was unexpected. Judge

Wargrave had partially risen, and was sitting on the side of his bed, evidently making an effort to rise to his feet, from which Virgil on one side and Edith on the other were trying to restrain him, while he called loudly and repeatedly: "Maria! Maria!"

Hester Landon came quickly forward, and as his gaze fell on her he became instantly quiet, the distress that had been on his face vanished, and he held out his hand to her with a pathetic expression of gladness and relief. "Maria!" he said again; and then, murmuring something unintelligible, but which seemed to be an expression of his fear that she had left him, he lifted to his lips the hand she had given him, bending his head over it with the air and grace of a courtier kissing the hand of his queen.

Desmond glanced quickly at Edith. She had drawn back as the nurse approached, and her eyes met his now, shining with indignant anger under her dark, level brows. Her voice fell on the silence like the stroke of a bell.

"I am sorry," she said, "that I was so unfortunate as to rouse Uncle George. I came in a few minutes ago; and, finding the nurse absent, I spoke to him, wondering if he would know me. I don't know whether he knew me or not; all that he seemed to observe was that I was not the nurse, and he was so dreadfully distressed that he began to call and tried to rise at once. It is fortunate" (she now addressed herself a little haughtily to Miss Landon) "that you had not gone very far, since neither Virgil nor I was able to control him."

"He has never been disturbed by my absence before," Hester said quietly; "so I did not hesitate to go into the sitting-room for a few minutes to speak to Mr. Desmond."

"He seemed to be afraid that I had come to take your place, and wanted to go in search of you," Edith said; and there was no mistaking the hurt feeling in her tone.

Hester looked at her with something like compassion.

"You should not mind that," she said gently. "Surely you understood that it is because he mistakes me for some one else."

Miss Creighton lifted her head.

"The explanation does not render the fact less disagreeable," she remarked crisply; "and I shall be careful not to subject myself to anything so unpleasant again."

She turned as she spoke and walked out of the room. Desmond lingered a moment to say to the nurse, in a low, significant tone, "You see how impossible it is for you to think of leaving him!" and then followed Edith.

CHAPTER XIX

Edith Creighton's Opinion of Laurence

Edith had walked in very dignified fashion out of Judge Wargrave's chamber, but she must have quickened her pace greatly the instant she was outside; for when Desmond followed, he found no sign of her. The corridor stretched before him empty, although there was a sound of flying feet and rustling skirts around the curving gallery beyond. But when he reached the point where the corridor opened on the gallery, the last also was empty, and the sound of a sharply closing door told him that Edith had taken refuge from pursuit in her own chamber.

He paused and stood for a moment, looking at the closed door with a sense of exasperation against feminine unreasonableness, which is a common masculine state of mind, — as common as the exasperation which is produced in women by the obtuseness of men. "How can she be so foolish!" was his impatient thought, and he was strongly tempted to knock on the door and summon Edith out in order to express it. But wiser thought prevailed, and he walked slowly downstairs, conscious that the irritation which so unpleasantly possessed him was not altogether due to Miss Creighton's unreasonableness. Indeed, he acknowledged to himself that it was chiefly

due to his failure to make any impression upon Hester Landon. It was perhaps because he had prevailed with her once — had induced her to see things as he saw them, and to act as he wished, when it was a question of her coming to Hillcrest — that he was so keenly disappointed now at his inability to prevail with her again, — to make her realize the falseness of the position in which they were both involved. He had gone to her, eagerly confident of his power to influence, to convince; and he had failed utterly! Not only so, he had been reminded that he was chiefly, if not altogether, to blame for the situation of which he complained; that if he had not interfered at a crucial moment — if, in words of current speech, he had minded his own business — she would not now be under the roof of Hillcrest, and beside Judge Wargrave's bed.

All this was true. It was impossible to deny it, yet equally impossible to regret what he had done. He was quite clear on the latter point. However much Hester's obstinacy might irritate, it could not make him sorry that she was where he was quite sure that she should be, and where he was equally sure that, if in any degree it rested with him, she should remain. He looked up and nodded to the portraits hanging around the hall; he had a feeling that they, with their steadfast, watching eyes, were in the secret with him. "I must keep my promise," he confided, half-aloud, to them. "There's no help for *that*. But I'll see that she doesn't leave this house, where we know that she belongs." Then, with a sense of vaguely soothed irritation, he snatched up a hat, pressed it down over his brows, and went out doors.

About half an hour later a motor-car glided with unwonted quietness up to the door, and from it Bobby Selwyn stepped just as Miss Creighton emerged from the house, pulling on a pair of large gloves with a good deal of energy. There were other storm-signals besides the energy, which Mr. Selwyn's wary eyes at once perceived, — a heightened color on the cheeks, a compression of the usually smiling lips, and a gleam in the dark eyes, which swept him with a careless glance.

"Oh, how d'ye do, Bobby!" Edith said, in a tone as careless as the glance. "I didn't know you were here."

"You couldn't know it," Bobby meekly remarked, "since I have just arrived; and I beg to call your attention to the quietness with which I came up. I don't suppose you heard the car at all."

"No, I didn't hear it," she answered, "or I shouldn't have come out at this moment. I had no desire to meet any one."

"I hope that doesn't mean that you had no desire to meet me," Bobby observed; "for I am, as always, extremely glad to meet *you*."

"You are very good," she returned impatiently; "but I really can't reciprocate the sentiment at present. I've just remarked that I am leaving the house in order to avoid people, so you must excuse me. You'll find mamma in the library, and she'll be delighted to see you."

"Well, I can't reciprocate that sentiment," Bobby answered frankly. "I shouldn't be a bit delighted to see Cousin Rachel under these circumstances, — with you gone off alone in a huff—"

"Bobby, how dare you!"

"But you *are* in a huff, so what's the good of not saying so! I haven't seen you in such a temper in a long time. What has happened? Who has made you so angry?"

"I'm not angry —"

"Oh, what nonsense!" Mr. Selwyn permitted himself to remark. "You are simply fighting mad, and you might as well give yourself the relief of telling me what it is all about."

As Edith looked at him, it was doubtful for an instant whether she would not give herself the relief of blazing out with the temper he divined. But something in his expression, which was at once bold and deprecating, provoked a laugh instead.

"You are perfectly absurd!" she said. "I am not 'fighting mad' at all: I am only 'out of sorts, disgusted, disappointed, and perhaps a little indignant, and therefore not good company for any one.'"

"You are always good company for me," Bobby told her simply. "You couldn't be in any condition in which I shouldn't like to be with you. See now! Suppose that instead of going off to — er — sulk by yourself, you come and take a little spin with me? That will help you to feel better —"

"It wouldn't help me at all. You know that I detest being blown about."

"You shan't be blown about. I'll crawl if you say so, — though it's curious taste. Come!" — he held out his hand pleadingly. "The car's going beautifully to-day; and while we glide along — for I won't do any speeding at all — you can tell me what has disgusted and disappointed you."

Miss Creighton still regarded him doubtfully for a moment; but there was a temptation in the partial diversion from her angry thoughts, which he offered. All women are aware that there is a certain kind of devotion — the rare devotion which gives much and asks little — that is very attractive to the feminine nature; especially when some other devotion to which they feel they have a right has failed them. Hurt, disappointed and indignant, as Edith truthfully described herself, she was for the first time conscious of a sense of comfort in Bobby's unwavering sympathy, and in the devotion which was always at her service, like the faithful, unexact love of a dog. After all, it might be a relief to talk to him — there are times when a friend is a good safety-valve, — and so, somewhat to his surprise, she said:

"You are so persistent that I suppose I might as well go with you as have you following me."

"Quite as well," he answered, while he helped her into the car; "for you couldn't shake me off, you know, — at least not by anything short of stamping your foot and telling me to begone, as you used to do."

"To hear you talk, one would think I was an awful spitfire!" she laughed; and then added more gravely: "Perhaps I am one. At least there's no doubt I can get dreadfully angry."

Selwyn nodded without looking at her.

"Oh, I know that!" he said. "I mean I know that you can get dreadfully angry; but then, it's only when you have good reason for being so."

"I'm not sure of that," she observed hastily.

"I am sure of it," he asserted stoutly. "I'll back your sense of justice every time. At present, now, I am certain that whoever is in fault, it isn't you."

"Bobby, you are perfectly ridiculous!" she told him. "And yet it is good to have a friend who believes in one even to the extent of ridiculous loyalty."

"I'm sorry you think it ridiculous," he said. "But at least I'm glad that you believe in the loyalty. And now, what's the matter? Who has disgusted and disappointed you?"

"Can't you guess?"

Something in her tone made him turn and glance curiously at her.

"You don't mean — Laurence Desmond?" he exclaimed with quick intuition.

"Yes," she answered, "I mean Laurence Desmond. Bobby, we've all liked him very much."

"We certainly have," Bobby assented.

"But I am afraid that he doesn't deserve our liking or our confidence," she went on. "Quite accidentally I have discovered something which has altogether changed my opinion with regard to him."

Selwyn did not answer immediately. They had left the grounds of Hillcrest, and were running at the moderate rate of speed which he had promised along the highroad; and, with his gaze fixed ahead, he almost appeared for an instant not to hear. Then he said slowly:

"It has always seemed to me that after one has given one's confidence it's well to be cautious about withdrawing it. There are so many possibilities of mistake in life, you know."

"There's no possibility of mistake in this," she returned. "I have had an instinct from the first that there was something more than ordinary in his acquaintance with the nurse."

"The nurse!" Selwyn's tone showed his surprise. "He's never made any secret of the fact that he met her in the railway wreck —"

"Oh, yes!" Edith broke in impatiently. "We have all heard about the wreck, and her heroism, and so on; but we have never heard that his acquaintance with her goes very much beyond that. Now, I think it would have been only candid to mention this fact before he brought her to Hillcrest."

"But he didn't bring her. Dr. Glynn —"

"Bobby," Miss Creighton interrupted loftily, "if you think that you know more about the matter than I do, there is really no need for me to go on."

"I don't think so," Bobby hastened to declare; "but we know that Dr. Glynn did —"

"Select her as a nurse? Yes, we know that. But we didn't know what I have just learned — that she really came at Laurence Desmond's solicitation, and because he promised to keep some secret which makes his and her position with us a false one."

"By George!" Mr. Selwyn took refuge in his invariable ejaculation, for he was very much startled. "I wonder," he added involuntarily, "if that can be so?"

"Bobby, you are intolerable! Do you suppose I would say such a thing if I were not certain of it?"

"Oh, I'm sure that you are certain in your own mind!" Bobby explained. "But I must think there's some mistake. Desmond's not that kind of fellow."

"How do you know what kind of fellow he is?" Edith demanded trenchantly. "We really know little or nothing about him. He is very pleasant and — er — plausible. I believe Irishmen mostly are. But such people are often insincere, if not absolutely false."

Selwyn shook his head a trifle obstinately.

"Desmond's neither insincere nor false," he said. "I'm confident of that. There's some mistake."

"There's no mistake, I tell you!" Edith cried irritably. "How can you suppose I would say such things if I were not sure?"

Selwyn reduced the already moderate speed of the car until it almost stopped, as he turned toward her.

"How are you sure?" he asked bluntly.

"I am sure because I heard the facts I have stated from their own lips," she answered. "I suppose you will ask how I came to hear them, so I will tell you exactly. It was an hour or two ago that I went to Uncle George's room. I knew that Laurence Desmond had gone up a little while before; but he was not in the chamber when I entered, and neither was the nurse. I asked Virgil where they were, and he said they were in the sitting-room. There did not seem any reason why I should not join them, especially since I wanted to ask the nurse a question or two about Uncle George. So I opened the door between the rooms, and was about to draw back the portiere which hangs over it, when I heard them talking so earnestly that involuntarily I stopped for an instant. I was struck by the tone of the voices, even before I heard any words, it seemed to imply so much intimacy. Then, while I hesitated, I caught a few words. I heard her ask if he remembered that it was only on the condition of his promise to keep some secret about her that she had come to Hillcrest, and I heard him answer that they were both in a false position. I was so dismayed by *my* position that I do not remember very clearly what he said, except those words. But about them I could not be mistaken, for she repeated them; she said that the only way he could change the position he considered false was by helping her to get away."

"And he—"

"Said he would 'never do that.' Then I managed to close the door noiselessly, and get away myself. That is all I know; and of course I should have preferred not to learn it in such a manner, but I had not the faintest suspicion of anything between them when I opened that door."

"Of course not." Selwyn directed his attention again to his wheel. "But the question is, what does it mean? What do you think is between them?"

"How can I tell?" she replied. "It is not a subject that I care to speculate about. But it throws — you must see that it throws — a very disagreeable light on Laurence Desmond's character and conduct."

"It seems hardly fair to make up our minds about that unless we know a little more," Selwyn ventured. "I would suggest telling him frankly what you overheard, and asking him to explain it."

"Ask him to explain it! I!" Edith exclaimed haughtily. "Lay myself open to the charge of eavesdropping!"

"That's nonsense, you know."

"It isn't nonsense. The fact that I overheard what was not intended for me to hear would appear to prove it. Then it's really none of my business to inquire what his relations with this girl may be."

"I don't believe he has any relations with her that he would hesitate to explain," Bobby said stoutly.

"Oh, you don't?" Miss Creighton's tone was extremely crisp. "Then how would you account for his statement about the false position in which he is placed?"

Selwyn shook his head. "I can't account for it," he said. "But I wouldn't be afraid to ask him plainly what he meant."

"It isn't a question of being afraid," Edith told him loftily, "but of not condescending to inquire into what doesn't concern one. After what I heard, I am perfectly certain that there is some tie between the nurse and himself. They may be — married."

This was a suggestion which, metaphorically speaking, knocked Bobby flat. He stared wide-eyed for a moment, and then —

"Married!" he gasped. "I never thought of that."

"I suppose not," Edith answered. "But when one does think of it, everything seems to concur to make it probable. They arrived together, on the same train —"

"But Desmond said —"

"Kindly be quiet until I finish! They arrived on the same train; and, whether married or merely engaged, we may reasonably suppose that they decided to wait until Laurence could break the matter to Uncle George; so *she* went to the hospital, while *he* came here. What are you shaking your head in that ridiculous manner for?"

"Because you are letting your imagination run away with you. The thing's impossible. Desmond couldn't have been here all this time in such a position, and never said a word to the Judge, who would have been so keenly hurt by his lack of confidence."

"How can you be so absurd as to say in that positive manner that he couldn't have done it, when you don't know what he could or couldn't have done?" Edith demanded exasperatedly. "I have reminded you that he is a stranger to us."

"Yes, he's a stranger," Selwyn admitted; "but I'm quite sure he's a gentleman. And — women don't always understand — but there are some things a gentleman can't do."

"You are as flattering as you are lucid," Edith informed him sarcastically. "What is the particular thing to which you have reference at present that a gentleman couldn't do?"

"He couldn't," Bobby answered quietly, "have occupied the position that Desmond has toward *you*, if he were, as you suppose, either married or engaged to another woman."

"The position toward *me*!" The blood flew to Miss Creighton's face and fire flashed from her eyes. "Bobby, your stupidity is past endurance! What position do you imagine Laurence Desmond to have occupied toward me?"

"Well," Bobby returned, "it's not very hard to define. I should say that he was in the same boat with the rest of us, who were your adorers and suitors before he came, but that his chance of success has — er — appeared to be better than ours."

"In other words" (Miss Creighton's tones were icy now), "you have paid me the high compliment of thinking that I was prepared to accept a man who entered into my life only a few weeks ago, and of whom I know little or nothing, because, I suppose, he is the heir of Hillcrest."

"Edith, you know that is absurd! No one would ever think such a thing as that of you. But there's no denying that he is very attractive, and you've seemed to like him very much."

"I *do* like him — I mean I *have* liked him, — but surely one may like a man without being ready to marry him."

"Oh, yes!" (Bobby's assent was unqualified now). "You are apparently able to like any number of men without being ready to marry them."

Edith threw back her head, and in a gay peal of laughter her bad temper seemed to evaporate.

"You are very absurd," she remarked. "But, after all, you're not far wrong. I do like a good many men without entertaining the faintest idea of marrying any one of them. I can't say" (the note of modernity showed itself now in her candor) "what idea of the kind I might in time have come to entertain with regard to Laurence Desmond, if he had really joined the ranks of my — what was it? — adorers and suitors? — but he never has. Of course we have both seen what mamma and Uncle George hope for —"

"Plain as a pikestaff!" Bobby growled.

"But there hasn't been anything between us up to this time except pleasant *camaraderie*. Nevertheless, although I personally have no right to complain, I feel that he hasn't acted well in bringing this girl here in some false position; indeed I am, as I said at first, thoroughly disgusted and disappointed in him."

"It doesn't look well on the surface," Bobby found himself forced to agree; "but I think he ought to be given a chance to explain. Perhaps you'd let me speak to him —"

"Certainly not," Edith interrupted with emphasis. "What I have told you is in strict confidence, and I shall never forgive you if you mention the subject to him."

"I shall not mention it without your permission," Bobby assured her. "But I believe you are wrong, quite wrong, in making a mystery of the matter."

And thus did two masculine opinions of feminine conduct closely coincide in sentiment and expression.

CHAPTER XX

The Judge Asks Miss Landon's Name

Desmond's words, uttered as he left his uncle's chamber, remained with Hester Landon after the door had closed upon his exit. "You see how impossible it is for you to think of leaving him!" he had said; and her sinking heart seemed to echo the sentence, while she felt the clasp of the hand which clung to hers, and acknowledged the irresistible appeal made by weakness and dependence. "It was madness to have come!" she told herself; but, having come, she recognized that it was indeed impossible for her to go away without doing serious harm to the patient placed in her charge, against which her professional conscience protested.

And yet, as she presently sat on the side of the bed gazing at him — for even when he dropped again into partial unconsciousness he still kept hold of her hand, as if fearful of her leaving him, — the thought flashed upon her that if she desired a means of revenge for the injury inflicted upon her father, it was here within her reach. Remembering the long pain, the condemnation and injustice which had overshadowed his life, she had often said to herself with the bitterness of impotent passion: "Oh, if I could only repay suffering with suffering, if I could only stretch to breaking the heart-strings of the father who dealt so sternly with him, I should be

glad — *glad!* Nothing had seemed less possible than that she would ever be able to do this; yet now by a strange chance of fate — so she put it to herself — the opportunity was given, was literally here in her hand.

She looked down at that hand, at the frail fingers which clung to it, and was conscious of a certain fascination in the thought that she had only to withdraw her hand, withdraw her presence, in order to inflict keen and lasting pain. The temptation to seize the opportunity thus presented almost overwhelmed her. "I have no right to be here — where he was cast out — unless I do it!" she thought. "I can have been brought here for no other purpose!" Yet even as she told herself this, some other words recurred to her memory: "An opportunity to do something so fine that, if you lose it, you will never cease in time, or perhaps in eternity, to regret it." Would this be the "something so fine" which she could never cease to regret? And then: "It is not possible that nature made you in the mould it has without giving you the power to appreciate the highest possibilities in human conduct. And here is a possibility so high that it fairly dazzles one."

Could that be said of the possibility she was now considering, — the possibility of inflicting pain on helpless weakness! And what was it that had been suggested she might do, "if she were great enough for it!" Was it not to forgive, as Harry Wargrave himself might have wished to forgive, the father who had banished him! But all the energy of her passionate spirit rose up to repudiate this. "No," she cried inwardly, "I am not capable of that! I do not even wish to be capable of it! I long, as I have always longed, to return pain for pain, — to make the man who wronged him suffer as he suffered. But it must be intelligent suffering, not that of imbecile weakness. If I went away now, he would indeed suffer, but he would not understand; and I want him to understand fully. The only hope that he will ever do so rests in his recovery. I must help him to get well, as far as he can ever be well again; and then, when he is able to comprehend, I will strike my blow and go."

With a sense of sustaining power in the resolution, she drew her hand gently from the fingers which still clung to it; and, when the eyes opened appealingly on her face, she bent down and spoke in the quiet tones that a nurse soon learns to make so effective.

"Don't be afraid!" she said. "I shall not leave you, — I shall not go away while you need me."

She hardly expected that the sense of the words would penetrate to the clouded brain, but relied on the tranquillizing effect of the tone; so her surprise was great when Judge Wargrave answered, more clearly than he had spoken since his seizure:

"I need you always," he said, articulating with difficulty, yet distinctly.

"Yes," she assented hastily. "Yes, I understand. Have no fear of my leaving you — now."

She repeated the assurance because there was perceptible anxiety in the eyes which continued to regard her intently. Then his hand went out again and caught hers, while the stammering tongue, with the same pathetic difficulty of utterance, demanded:

"You *are* Maria, are you not?"

It was a startling inquiry; for she recognized that the mysterious mist which obscured the mental faculties was clearing away, that the question meant doubt, and that to answer it was extremely difficult. While she hesitated what to say, her quick ear caught the sound of the opening door behind her; and she turned, with a great sense of relief, to see Dr. Glynn and Mrs. Creighton entering the room. Disengaging her hand quickly, she went forward to meet them.

"Well, nurse," (the doctor's cheerful voice filled the quiet chamber), "how is our patient?"

"There seems a decided improvement in his condition, doctor," she answered in low, professional tones. "He has just been speaking quite intelligibly. The power of speech is very much improved, and his mind seems growing clearer. He has just asked" (her voice dropped lower still) "if I am Maria."

"Ah!" The doctor's interest was alert. "And you told him —?"

"I didn't tell him anything, for you came in at the moment. But I was very much in doubt what I should tell him."

"It will be well to evade an answer for some time yet," Dr. Glynn observed thoughtfully. "The impression that you are Maria has done him a great deal of good, and we had better let him come gradually to the knowledge of who you really are. If the mind is clearing, the knowledge will come. But we do not wish it to be in the nature of a shock."

"Direct questions are difficult to evade," the nurse suggested.

"Well, well, I'll see what his condition is," the doctor said. "He has probably forgotten all about the question by this time."

He moved forward as he spoke; and, approaching the bed, took the hand of the old man, who looked up at him with familiar keenness in his glance.

"How are you, Judge?" he asked. "I think that you are much better."

"Yes" (the answer came distinct, though with slow and difficult articulation), "I am better."

"Good, — very good!" The doctor was clearly as much surprised as pleased. "You have improved immensely. We'll soon have you on your feet again. Mrs. Creighton, do you hear how well the Judge is speaking!"

"Oh, yes, I hear!" Mrs. Creighton replied eagerly. She, too, leaned over the bed. "Dear brother," she cried, "it is such a happiness to know that you are so much better!"

The Judge regarded her without speaking for a minute, as if settling in his mind who she was; and then, extending one hand, he caught her wrist, while with the other he pointed to the nurse, who stood at the foot of the bed.

"Who is that?" he inquired.

If his question of a few minutes earlier had startled the nurse, this most unexpected and apparently altogether intelligent inquiry had a still more startling effect on Mrs. Creighton. She looked appealingly, almost wildly, at the doctor, and it was he who answered:

"That is some one who is here to help you get well, Judge. You mustn't trouble about anything else."

"What's her name?"

It was the old peremptory accent, the imperative tone that no one had ever disobeyed; and the doctor cleared his throat nervously before he tried the policy of evasion which he had recommended.

"Never mind about her name," he answered. "As I've just said, she's here to help you get well, and you mustn't excite yourself —"

He paused in dismay; for the Judge abruptly lifted himself to a sitting posture, and, with flashing eyes, said sternly, though with the same difficult utterance:

"Don't talk to me so! I'm not — imbecile. She's not Maria — I know that now, — Maria's dead. *Who is she?*"

"Tell him, doctor, — tell him!" Mrs. Creighton urged in a whisper; while Hester stood like a statue, challenging as it were the agonized inquiry of the awakening brain, the gaze of the eyes so persistently fastened on her.

"She's a nurse who is here to take care of you, as I've been telling you," the doctor replied. "You can call her what you like — I'm sure she won't object, — but her name is Miss Landon."

"What?"

"Landon. You've heard it before?" (The Judge nodded.) "It was connected with the railway wreck, — don't you remember the railway wreck that young Desmond was in? This was the nurse who was the heroine of the occasion, and helped to save so many lives. We've brought her now to employ her skill in helping you to get well again; and if you continue to improve as you've improved since I saw you last — hallo! This is what I expected! A stimulant, Miss Landon, — quick!"

For the Judge had suddenly fallen back on his pillows, white as they, and the lids closed over his eyes. The doctor shook his head as he laid his fingers on the pulse, while the nurse brought the stimulant for which he had called.

"Weak heart-action," he said in a low aside to Mrs. Creighton. "That is where the greatest danger lies. I was afraid of this explanation. But the brain had cleared so wonderfully that it couldn't be avoided. Happily, it is over now; and when he recovers from the effect of the shock, he will probably be more like himself than we have seen him since his seizure."

"But will he remember, do you think, what you have told him?" Mrs. Creighton asked.

"Oh, yes, he will remember!" the doctor answered. "The cloud over the mind is passing off, and he will not mistake one person for another again, nor forget what he has heard. There will no doubt continue to be great difficulty of speech, especially with regard to names; but otherwise I look now for a rapid improvement in his condition."

This prediction was so far justified that within a day or two Judge Wargrave was able to be wheeled in his winged chair into the sitting-room, where the members of the household eagerly assured him that he was "just like himself," while sadly acknowledging to one another how greatly he was changed since he had sat there before. It was not only that he was much aged and very frail in appearance — his face like ivory carving in its paleness, his eyes dull and absent in expression, — but the cloud on the mind was only partially lifted; and the mental faculties, once so keenly alert, were now only capable of slight exertion. He indeed recognized every one who approached him, although unable to call any one by name; but they soon learned that intercourse in any real sense was impossible. He not only spoke with difficulty, slowly and indistinctly, confusing words so that his meaning was not clear, but his pride suffered so much under this infirmity that, when he failed to make himself understood, he would lift his hand with a tragic gesture of despair, and sink into silence from which nothing could rouse him.

At such times every one turned instinctively to the nurse, who understood him best, and who could almost always divine and interpret his meaning. Whether or not he remembered what he had been told concerning her, it was at least clear that his dependence upon her increased as he regained intelligence. He was ill at ease whenever she was absent, and his welcome when she returned from exercise or rest was pathetic in its eagerness. He had apparently ceased to confuse her with his dead wife, for he did not now call her by the only name his lips were able to pronounce; but his perception of the likeness which had first startled his faculties did not grow less. It arrested his attention continually; and she often observed him staring at her with a strange, intent, startled gaze, as if doubting who she was. At such times — especially if they were alone — she found herself trembling a little. Instinct told her that a question was forming in his mind which the halting tongue would some day make an effort to ask, and then — what would she answer?

She was meditating upon this one day as she walked among the fragrant alleys of the rose-garden, while the sun was sinking — a great red ball, wrapped in the Indian summer haze — down the western sky. In the soft radiance, her slender, white-clad figure moved with charming effect among the tall, green shrubs and hedges; and as Desmond approached her he was struck, as often before, by the quality of delicate grace, of something spiritual and exquisite, which her aspect breathed, and which seemed peculiarly expressed in her clear, pale skin and lucid eyes. His own eyes were smiling as he came toward her with outstretched hand.

"I am so glad to find you here!" he said. "I hastened as soon as I caught sight of you from the other side of the river."

She glanced out across the smiling valley, through which the stream, shining now with sunset tints, flowed in its lovely current.

"Were you the horseman whom I saw across the river a few minutes ago?" she asked. "You have certainly made haste, to reach here so quickly."

"I would have made even more haste if possible," he said, "because I feared to find you gone. You have a most wonderful faculty of disappearing. I hardly like to charge you with deliberately avoiding me — it seems perhaps to imply an undue opinion of my own importance, — but it has been rather remarkable, the way in which I have failed to secure any opportunity to speak to you of late."

"Whether it argues an undue opinion of your own importance or not," she said, "it is quite true that I have avoided you. I don't know whether or not you have observed it, but I think Miss Creighton suspects something — and so I have thought it best to see as little of you as possible."

"Oh, yes!" he replied, "I am well aware that she suspects something; and I have consequently avoided *her* as much as you have avoided *me*. For, as I pointed out to you when we talked together last, my position is an extremely difficult one."

"I think I pointed out on the same occasion that the difficulty was entirely of your own creating."

"That is quite true," he admitted; "and I should be willing to accept the difficulty and all that may arise from it, if there were any necessity for the situation. But there really isn't, you know."

"Pardon me! I don't know anything of the kind."

"Then that is because you refuse to open your mind to conviction," he said, with a sigh. "So far as I am concerned, it seems to me every day more incredible — and may I say absurd? — that you should be here as a professional nurse."

"You may," she told him quietly, "call it what you like; but shall I remind you again that the absurdity is as much due to your insistence as to my weakness?"

"I acknowledge the insistence," he said, "but I must take issue with you about the weakness. I have never seen any one display as much strength as you have done in this trying situation —"

She shook her head.

"It was not strength which I displayed when I let you persuade me against my judgment into coming here," she said. "And it is not strength that I am displaying in remaining now. It is simply weakness, — weakness for which I despise myself."

He was so unprepared for the sudden passion which shook her voice as she uttered the last words that he paused abruptly, and, turning, faced her.

"What does that mean?" he asked. "You give me the impression of being so reasonable, so free from emotional excess of any kind, that I can not understand what you possibly find to despise where *I* see cause only for admiration."

She looked at him as he stood in the path before her, and he read in her eyes — those clear eyes which in her case were truly "windows of the soul" — all the deep self-scorn of which she spoke.

"You see matter for admiration," she told him, "because you imagine that I was influenced to come here by the motives you put before me when you begged me to come. But you must understand, once for all, that those motives did not move me. I had no desire to seize the opportunity to render good for evil, as you suggested. On the contrary, I came because I hoped that I might be able to find a means of inflicting suffering on one who had been so cruel, so merciless —"

"No!" Desmond put out his hand and caught hers, in the force of his denial. "You may have dreamed of such a thing, but you don't know your own nature. You could not do it."

She made no effort to withdraw her hand from his grasp, as she stood still, looking up at him, while something of the wonder he had roused in her from the first came into her gaze.

"I don't know how you found it out," she said, "but you are right — I can't do it."

"No," he said again — in assent rather than in denial now, — "you can't do it. And it is because you can't that you scorn yourself? How strange!"

"It is not strange at all," she returned. "Would you not scorn yourself if you found weakness where you had thought to find strength, — pity, even something like tenderness, where there should be only the stern remembrance of ineffaceable wrong? How does it change what he has *done* that he is old, feeble, stricken now? And yet when I go in to him (as I presently shall go), and he looks at me with that pathetic smile of welcome, I despise myself that my heart melts and I have no courage — no courage —"

"Ah, what injustice you are doing yourself! You have courage for the greatest opportunity that, in my knowledge, has ever been given to any one — to render service for injury, to return benefit for wrong."

"No, no!" She tore her hand from his clasp. "You must not give me credit for such feelings. I tell you again that I did not come here for that, but for something very different. Yet day by day this weakness has invaded me, until now I have no strength to do what I had resolved upon, and I hesitate even to strike the one blow which is still in my power, — the blow of going away."

"I believe it is a blow which would kill him," Desmond said. "You have just spoken of his pathetic pleasure in your return to him. Remember that it is absolutely the only pleasure that he has now; that his dependence upon you in every way is so great that to fill your place even in the matter of service would be impossible. He cares for no society except yours, — not even the society of those whom he has known longest and loved best. And I can not but believe that some mysterious instinct tells him who you are. If I could only induce you to tell him yourself —"

"Don't try to induce me to do that," she warned; "because I could tell him in only one way — the way I have resolved upon, — and that you would not desire. It is what I have grown too weak to do." She paused, and her gaze turned away, out over the wide tranquil scene of valley and hills and woods toward the sinking sun. "His life is like that," she said: "sinking fast into the night that awaits all, and one couldn't — oh, no, one couldn't add a pang to that passage, whatever weakness the failure implies! Now I must go. No, I can't stay a moment longer. He will be watching anxiously for me. Good-bye!"

CHAPTER XXI

Pardon and Love

When Hester Landon returned to the house, and, passing with her light, noiseless step upstairs, opened the door of the now familiar sitting-room, she found it filled with the sunset glow which poured in through the wide western windows. And silhouetted against this glow was the figure of the Judge, seated in his great chair, but bending forward in an attitude of strained expectancy.

Her heart smote her; for she knew that this expectancy, this waiting was for her; and she forgot everything except the impulse which had made her a nurse — the impulse to heal and help those who suffered, — when she came forward and saw the pleasure which lighted up the sad old face at sight of her. As he eagerly held out his hand, she said gently:

"I am afraid you have wanted me, that I have been away too long!"

"No," he answered — and she was instantly struck by the clearness of his enunciation, as if there had been a sudden return of the power of speech, — "you have not been long; but I always want you, and I have been impatient because I have remembered something —"

"Yes?" She spoke softly, encouragingly, as he halted; the distressed look, which had now become habitual, deepening on his face. "It is something in which you wish me to help you?"

"To help me, yes." The hand which still held hers tightened its clasp, while the other hand lifted and pointed toward the desk. "It is there," he said, — "a letter — I remember now, — and I must find it. A letter —"

Then Hester began to tremble; for she had not the slightest doubt that the letter of which he spoke was that which had been the cause of his illness, — the letter that had struck him down once, and the mere sight of which, her professional judgment told her, might strike him down again — this time to death. It was part of the weakness which had assailed her, the inconsistency of which she had just spoken to Desmond in the garden, that she felt as if it were more than she

could bear, to stand by and watch him receive another blow from the weapon she had forged; and so she said hastily:

"I would not trouble about that just now. When you are better, we will look for the — letter. But not now. You are not yet well enough."

"I shall never be better." Again she was startled by the clearness of his utterance, as if the mind, that had dominated the body throughout all his life, was determined to assert its mastery over the weak and failing powers to the end. "Another stroke may come. I have had a stroke, haven't I?"

"Yes," she answered. "That is what it is called."

"Well, you know what that means. Another may come any day, any hour; and then death, or worse than death."

"Yes," she acknowledged again (for she recognized that, in the light of this sudden clearing of the mental faculties, this grasp of the situation by the mind which a little while before had been so clouded, she dared not attempt evasion of the truth); "that may be. But, because it may be, you must take no risk that might bring on such a condition. You must wait, you must grow stronger, before you can safely make any exertion, or do anything to cause mental agitation."

But even as she talked she saw that her words hardly reached him, so intent was he upon the object which he had in view. His eyes, full of imploring eagerness, were fastened on her face; his hand still clasped hers tightly.

"I can't wait!" he said. "There is something which must be done. I don't know what it is until I see the letter; but you'll help me to find it— Maria?"

She started; for it was the first time he had called her by this name since he had understood who she really was. But now it seemed that once more, for an instant at least, he confused the present with the past; once more, struck by her resemblance to his dead wife, he called her by the name of that wife, and appealed to her, as he might have appealed to Maria herself, to aid him in what concerned them both so deeply. The poignant pathos of the situation — of the truth which he did not know — almost overwhelmed the girl; and, losing sight of everything except that moving appeal, she said quickly:

"I'll do anything I can to help you; but where is the letter?"

"There," he said, pointing again toward the desk. "It must be there."

Then, with a feeling of being overmastered by some power stronger than herself, she drew his chair nearer to the massive piece of furniture, followed the direction of his pointing finger to the drawer where the key lay, fitted this in its lock, and opened down the old-fashioned, sloping top, which, lowered, formed the table of the desk, and displayed its inner drawers and beautifully carved pigeonholes. The sight of the familiar interior seemed to act as a stimulant on Judge Wargrave. He leaned forward, and his hands moved quickly from one compartment to another. But it was soon evident that the mind could not follow the eager fingers. Hester, watching him closely, saw that he was unable to read the papers which he drew out and attempted to examine. She was not surprised when presently, dropping a package, he raised his eyes to her full of pain and reproach.

"You don't help me!" he complained. "And I—I can't find it!"

The piteousness of the appeal was irresistible; and, scarcely knowing what she was doing, she leaned over the desk and pulled open one of its inner drawers. It chanced to be a drawer which held only a single paper, and that a letter which lay staring at her as it were, with the printed name of the Catholic church of Kingsford in the corner of the envelope to identify it. She stared at it for a moment, and then — "*Kismet!*" she murmured to herself as she drew it out.

"Is this the letter you want?" she asked, laying it in Judge Wargrave's hand.

It had an effect upon him on which she had not counted. As his glance fell on the envelope, it was clear that he not only recognized it at once, but that he took up the thread of memory where it had been broken off when, under the shock which this letter brought, he had

sunk away into black depths of unconsciousness. Now it seemed to give another shock, as reviving as the other had been paralyzing. Age and illness appeared to fall away from him when he seized it, and the girl, who had seen him only under the cloud of physical infirmity, looked at him with wonder, as, for the moment at least, this cloud lifted, vigor came into his frame, light flashed over his face, and he cried in a clear, ringing voice:

"Yes, this is the letter which gave me back my son!"

"No!" The vehement denial burst from Hester's lips before she had time to think, or to control herself. "It did not give you back your son," she said. "It only told you what you lost forever when you sent him away."

The hand which held the letter dropped in Judge Wargrave's lap, as he looked up at her. And, meeting his eyes, she knew that the man who regarded her was the man who had been reckoned the foremost jurist of his day and time. The keen intellect was working again as well as it had ever worked; the piercing gaze seemed reading her through and through.

"What," he asked slowly and clearly, "do you know of it? What do you know of my son — or of me! And who are you" (it might have been the judge on the bench who spoke, so full of stern authority was the tone) "who come here, with his mother's face and voice, to tell me what I lost when I sent him away?"

Standing with her back against the desk, to which she was holding with both hands, she answered proudly:

"You must know who I am. Since I have his mother's face and voice, who could I be but his daughter?"

"His daughter — my son's daughter! But I never knew —"

"That he had a daughter? No; he was as proud as you. He would claim nothing, ask nothing, from the father who had misjudged and cast him off. Didn't you know him well enough to know that? He was a Wargrave as well as yourself."

"His daughter!" The old man sat as if turned to stone, gazing at her. "And he never told me! He died and never told me!"

"Do you think he would have told you *then*?" she demanded, with all the bitterness of long-repressed passion in her voice. "Do you think he would have asked your charity for me any more than for himself? More than once he said: 'If you were a boy, I would claim the Wargrave inheritance for you; it would be only just and right. But as it is, we will ask nothing, not even recognition.' And I would never have asked recognition, — I don't ask it now, understand that!" she cried. "I did not come here to ask anything. I came to try to clear his name, as he would never make an effort himself to clear it. And God helped me. He must have helped me; for how else was it that the man I sought, and could never have found by my own efforts, was flung dying at my feet, and that he had the grace — oh, the wonderful grace! — to confess the truth before he died?"

Judge Wargrave held out the letter in a hand which shook violently.

"Then it was through *you* that this came?" he asked.

"It was through me, in as far as I furnished the key which enabled the priest to write it," she answered. "But you understand that it was the dying confession of a man who was killed in the railway wreck?"

"I understand: the man who was the — the thief?"

"Yes, the thief and forger which you were blind enough to believe that your son could be. Oh," she cried suddenly, "thank God that the man belonged to a religion which taught him that there was something to *do* to atone for wrong, — something besides merely being sorry! And so, when death stared him in the face, he told the truth; and that is why you have it there, on the testimony of the priest who attended him in his last moments."

"The priest!" Judge Wargrave repeated the unfamiliar word, as if wonderingly, to himself. "God forgive me," he said slowly, "that during a long life I have thought poorly of priests, and held the confessional an instrument of evil! Now I see how great an instrument of good it is, —

now that it has given me back my son!" He held out the letter again in his old trembling hand. "Read it to me," he said; and then, as she hesitated: "You know I can not read it myself."

The appeal of his helplessness, even more than that of his tone, overcame the girl's attitude of resistance. As he extended the letter, something in his manner and glance seemed to say: "It concerns us equally — you and me, — and us alone." And it was this recognition of her right to share in the revelation which cleared Harry Wargrave's name forever of any shadow of dishonor, that made her take the letter and drop on her knees beside his chair; for so only she felt that she could read it.

When she finished reading, there was silence in the room, — silence which to Hester's fancy still echoed with the sound of the words she had spoken. For, few and simple as those words were, she knew their tremendous import to the old man who listened so eagerly, drinking them in as it were. And it seemed to her that there might be others listening also; the son who had heard his sentence of banishment in this room, and went out of it so proudly, and the mother who had died broken-hearted because of his going. Surely they must be there in the gathering shadows to hear her voice read aloud the words — which but for her would never have been written, — that made an end of cruel misunderstanding and estrangement.

Still kneeling, she looked out of the great western window, over the broad acres of the Wargrave heritage which lay below, to the far horizon, where the ineffable glories of sunset had faded into that luminous calm which, with its hint of heavenly remoteness, speaks to our poor hearts, as nothing else on earth can speak, of the world toward which we are hastening as pilgrims and wayfarers. Filled with the thought of those who had already reached that world, as well as of the old man beside her who stood upon its threshold, the girl was conscious of an exaltation of spirit such as she had never known before, — the exaltation of one who has attained to some height from which, if only for a brief instant, the meaning of life becomes clear, its bitterness is wiped away, and the gracious purposes of God are justified. By what a strange and wonderful way she had been led to the spot where she now was she suddenly seemed to see, as if by a flash of illumination, while Desmond's words sounded in her ears: "A wonderful opportunity to do something so fine that, if you lose it, you will never cease, in time, or perhaps in eternity, to regret it." And again: "It means that, representing the man who was unjustly banished from his father's house, you can go back to that house, to return benefit for injury; to give service to one stricken down by the knowledge of his own terrible mistake; to offer — if you are great enough for *that* — the forgiveness which Harry Wargrave might have wished to offer to the father who indeed judged him wrongly, but to whose teaching and example he owed the qualities for which you admired and loved him." , And then the ringing appeal seemed once more sounding in her ears: "Isn't this worth doing? And aren't you strong enough to do it?"

She almost gasped again, as she had gasped in listening to what her spirit even then acknowledged as a call to arms; for the question still faced her — was she strong enough to do it? Only a little while ago, down there among the roses, she had cried out upon her weakness, which she now knew to be strength. But was this strength great enough for the demand upon it? She had returned benefit for injury; she had given service to one sorely stricken by his own great mistake; she had brought him the knowledge which, in his own solemn words, gave him back his son; and now there remained one thing still to do — was she great enough to do it?

Half unconsciously, she started to rise to her feet; but the old man's hand fell upon her shoulder, and she remained kneeling beside him, while he spoke as she had not heard him speak yet; for the deep fountains of feeling were broken up, and he was moved as in all his long life he had never been moved before.

"Harry's daughter!" he said. "Harry's daughter! And she comes as a stranger under my roof! my God! How dare I ask You to forgive me, when I can never forgive myself! Child, I don't wonder that you want to go, now that you have done what you came to do. But before you go I should like to fall at your feet and beg one word of pardon for Harry's sake. Did he go away

without a sign of forgiveness for the father whose heart was broken for him? Oh, my son! my son!"

The passionate cry, the outburst of weeping — the hard weeping of manhood and old age, — such as rives the very heart asunder, were more than she could bear. "Are you great enough?" a voice seemed whispering in her ear; and she answered by putting her arms about the bowed and shaking form.

"He always understood and forgave," she whispered. "I have come to tell you that, too. And before he died he said: 'When you see my father, give him my love.' I thought he was dreaming; for I never imagined it possible that I would ever see you, and I knew that he knew how I felt toward you. But the dying have strange insight sometimes, and I believe that he foresaw what would follow if we ever met."

He looked up at her with a light which was like a blessing on his face.

"Child," he said, "*what* has followed?"

And she answered: "Pardon and love."

CHAPTER XXII

Edith Listens at the Door

It chanced that the brief interview in the rose garden between Desmond and Hester had a witness of which neither was aware, — an altogether involuntary witness; for when, attracted by the beauty of the sunset, Edith went to a window which overlooked the garden, the river, and the distant woodlands sloping up to the western sky, she had no thought of seeing the two figures which at once caught her eye as they walked on the lower terrace, the white uniform of the nurse showing in strong relief against the green background of shrubs and hedges. She forgot the sunset, as she stood looking at them — frowning slightly while she looked, — until Desmond suddenly paused and caught the hand of the girl; then, with a start, she turned abruptly and moved away, conscious of having again surprised something not meant for her to see or know.

A sense of indignation possessed her as she walked hurriedly up and down the room. "What does it mean!" she asked herself in futile inquiry and hot scorn. Why this underhand intercourse, these clandestine meetings? If some tie, such as she had imagined, existed between Desmond and the nurse, why should he not avow it? What reason could there be for secrecy which seemed as unnecessary as it was unworthy? "What has he to lose by being open with us?" she wondered bitterly. "The will is made, and poor Uncle George has no power to change it now. It is almost as if he were already dead and the heir he has chosen is virtually master of Hillcrest. No one doubts or denies this; so why — *why* should he act in such a manner, maintain these secret relations with this girl, who has acknowledged that she is here in a false position?"

Vainly asking these questions as she paced back and forth, Edith found herself also reflecting upon her own relations with Desmond. That he had given no sign of any intention of fulfilling the evident desire of the family by asking her to marry him, she was well aware; but it was part of her superb self-confidence that she had, nevertheless, entertained no doubt whatever of her power to bring him to her feet as a suitor if she desired to do so. She had not yet decided whether or not she did desire to do this; she was only pleasantly conscious of what she conceived to be her power to do as she liked, when the shock came which seemed to tell her that she possessed no such power; that, instead of commanding the situation as she fancied, she was of no account in it.

This at least had been her first impression; but it was characteristic of Edith Creighton that the belief in herself which every influence of her life had up to this time fostered, could not remain in eclipse very long. After the conversation with Selwyn, in which she relieved her mind

and expressed various hasty opinions and conjectures, she recovered something of her usual poise; and it began to seem probable that the key to Desmond's unaccountable conduct might, after all, be found in his intentions toward herself, — intentions which it seemed impossible that he had not entertained, since every one gave him credit for them; and she knew how irresistible she had often proved when making no such effort to charm as she was quite conscious of having made for his benefit. She decided, therefore, to give him, after a certain interval of coolness and delay, an opportunity to explain his apparent intimacy with the nurse. And her own interest having been stimulated by the element of doubt so unexpectedly introduced into the situation, there was no question but that she was more inclined than she had ever been to consider favorably the suit which might be offered as a result of the explanation, when — the sunset glow called her to a window in time to witness the scene in the garden, which again threw all her thoughts and plans into chaos.

Now, reflecting upon these things, she was conscious of an anger more intense than any she had felt before, — even than that which, oddly enough, Selwyn had been the person appointed to soothe. For, although she would have said that Bobby's opinion had no weight with her, there was no doubt whatever that his positively expressed views had influenced her very much. Women feel instinctively that a man's opinion of men is based upon surer knowledge than their own; and when Selwyn declared, "You are letting your imagination run away with you. . . . There are some things a gentleman can't do," she was more impressed than she was willing to acknowledge. But now — she longed to have him before her now, in order that she might cry out upon him that he had been a fool to believe that the standard of a gentleman applied to Laurence Desmond, and that she had been an even greater fool to listen to him.

Briefly, Miss Creighton was in a state of mind and feeling which, if it could not possibly be described as the fury of "a woman scorned," which we are assured is beyond any other fury known, was at least sufficiently one of anger with herself, as well as with others, to make her mood dangerous. She felt — unreasonably enough, as we are aware, but nevertheless intensely — that her self-esteem had received a crushing blow; and considerations of dignity yielded to the natural human impulse to return the blow, — to prove to all whom it concerned that Desmond was not worthy of the trust which had been bestowed upon him; that if one of the first requirements of the Wargrave heir was that he should show a record of spotless honor, this man was not fitted to be that heir and to carry on the traditions and standards of a line of gentlemen.

In this highly charged condition of what might be described as spiritual electricity, she went down to dinner, where it was, in a certain sense, a relief to find that Desmond was absent. Replying to her interrogative glance, Mrs. Creighton said:

"Laurence has gone into Kingsford. Bobby telephoned for him to come and meet some people of importance — magnates, as they are ridiculously called, of one kind or another, — who have stopped over to examine the resources of the country, with a view to railways or mills or — er —"

"Some other means of making money and demoralizing the people, as poor Uncle George would say," Edith concluded. "Yes, I heard Bobby talking of them, — the magnates, I mean. They are, of course, to be feasted and flattered, in order to induce them to spend some of their ill-gotten millions here if possible; and he wants all the help he can get in this effort. So he naturally called on Laurence, who has the Irish blarney on his tongue."

The speaker's own tongue betrayed more than she intended of the bitterness of her mood; but Mrs. Creighton made no comment beyond a quick glance, until they were in the library after dinner. Then she said:

"I have been wanting to ask you for several days, Edith, why you seem so — well, so irritated against Laurence. What has he done to annoy you?"

"To annoy me personally, nothing," Edith replied loftily. "But I have lost respect for him, — that's all."

"Lost respect for him!" Mrs. Creighton looked, as she felt, confounded. "Why what on earth has happened? What *has* he done?"

"I'd really rather you didn't ask me," Edith answered irritably. "As I've already said, he has done nothing toward me, but I have learned — that is — er — happened to find out some things about him which make me very sorry for poor Uncle George."

"Edith! This is perfectly dreadful. What have you found out? And why are you sorry for my brother?"

"I am sorry for him because I know that his chief requirement for the Wargrave heir is that he shall be a man of honor, and I am convinced that Laurence Desmond is nothing of the kind."

Now, this was more than Miss Creighton intended to say when she began; and much more, her conscience informed her, than she had a right to say. But, as we have all had occasion to learn in life, anger does not tend to moderation of statement; and the impetuous words burst from her lips before she could check them. When she saw the horrified expression of her stepmother's face, she realized that she had gone too far. But, explanation being difficult, she sprang to her feet.

"I told you that I'd rather you didn't ask me anything about it!" she exclaimed. "I don't want to talk of Laurence Desmond, or anything concerning him; and I wish I had never heard of him."

Then, still more angry from the self-betrayal which this implied, she turned and went quickly out of the room.

In the hall Edith paused, undecided what to do with herself, yet acutely conscious that her mood required distraction. At this moment she understood the pity which some of her friends in Kingsford bestowed upon her for living at Hillcrest, and felt that it might be desirable to be where it was possible at any moment to escape from one's self by means of social intercourse. Just now there was no social intercourse available at Hillcrest except that from which she had fled, unless she went up to the Judge's room; and intercourse with *him* had of late been hardly more than a painful attempt to interpret his difficult utterances.

The nurse would be there, however; and concerning the nurse Miss Creighton was now aware of a consuming curiosity. Something about the girl had, almost against her will, impressed her from the first, — something connected with, and yet distinct from, the likeness to the portrait of Mrs. Wargrave which had so much impressed by every one else. Despite her self, she had been forced to acknowledge the indefinable personal charm which had struck Desmond so strongly, and to own that there was an arresting quality in the glance of the lucid eyes, the composure of the quiet manner. But she had made no effort to know the nurse except in her professional capacity, and since the day when she overheard the conversation with Desmond in the sitting-room, her manner had been of so repellent a frigidity, that it was no wonder Hester had said, "I am sure Miss Creighton suspects something."

Now, Miss Creighton felt that the time had come to resolve suspicion into certainty. She suddenly determined that she would go up to the Judge's apartments; that she would talk to the girl, and find or make an opportunity to learn the truth concerning the relations which clearly existed between herself and the young man, who was so distinctly a stranger in Hillcrest, although its heir. She turned toward the staircase, and as she did so she became aware of a figure which came swiftly around its sweeping curve and descended to meet her. It was Virgil, and something in his look and manner as he halted made her say quickly:

"Well, Virgil! What is it?"

"It's about Mass George, Miss Edith," Virgil answered; and she caught a note of excitement in his voice, a startled glance of apprehension in his eyes. "There's a change in him."

"A change!" She was startled now, for this expression usually means only one kind of change — the last known to mortality. "Is he worse? Has he had another stroke?"

Virgil shook his head.

"No'm. He's a great deal better. He's talkin' as well as ever he did."

"Virgil! Impossible!"

Virgil moved aside and made a motion of his hand upward.

"Go and see, Miss Edith," he said in a tone of solemnity. "I couldn't hardly believe my ears when I went in his room a little while ago, to git everything ready for his goin' to bed, an' I heard him in the next room talkin', — not stumblin' an' blunderin' like he's been doin' since his last stroke, but *talkin'*. It skeered me. I listened at the door a while; an' then I thought I better let you an' Miss Rachel know, so as you might git the doctor."

"But what is the nurse doing?" Miss Creighton exclaimed. "It is her place to give us warning of any change."

Virgil glanced at her oddly.

"It hardly seems like she *is* the nuss! I — I could a 'most a' swore it was Miss Maria in there talkin' with him. Go up, Miss Edith — for the Lawd's sake, go up an' hear for yourself! It's a miracle has happened or — or somethin' else."

"Yes, I'll go up and hear for myself," Edith told him; "and meanwhile say nothing to mamma. I don't want to startle her, but if I find that there is any need of the doctor, I will come down and telephone for him. Just keep quiet, Virgil; and be at hand in case I need you."

She moved up the staircase, conscious of a not unpleasant interest and excitement — something welcome, as taking her out of herself for the moment, — in this strange news. She gave it only a slight degree of credence, however; for she knew how poorly equipped for a witness the negro is. Impressionable, emotional, and deeply superstitious, the most truthful of the race can hardly be relied upon for exact testimony; and she had read in Virgil's dilated eyes the proof of an excitement which just now rendered him peculiarly unfit to give anything of the kind.

Nevertheless, she could not doubt that some change in Judge Wargrave's condition must have taken place, and her judgment told her that caution was therefore necessary in approaching him. Dr. Glynn had warned the household that anything tending to excite him was to be carefully avoided; and there had been hints of a weak heart, as well as of the danger of another cerebral hemorrhage. Bearing these things in mind, she paused in the corridor outside his sitting-room. If everything was quiet, she might not go in at all, at least just now.

But, so far from everything being quiet, she found herself listening with amazement and dismay to the sound of voices in sustained conversation, — amazement, because no such conversation had been possible with Judge Wargrave since his seizure; and dismay, because now and then his voice was raised in what seemed passionate argument or appeal. The words were inaudible, but the tones could not be mistaken; and Edith found herself wondering if insanity had overtaken him and loosed the power of speech in this extraordinary manner. But if so, what was the nurse about? Her tones as well as her words were almost inaudible; but it was clear that she was trying to soothe, to persuade, and — yes, to expostulate. And, subtly enough, Edith was conscious that this expostulation was not that of a nurse in her official capacity, but rather of one who discussed personal matters as an equal. More and more as she listened, wonder overcame Miss Creighton; and with wonder, curiosity. *What* could they be talking about in this passionate, absorbed fashion! It was strange enough that the power of speech had been restored to Judge Wargrave in a manner which seemed indeed almost miraculous; but even that strangeness was lost sight of in her desire to know the subject of this amazing conversation.

She hesitated, asking herself what she had better do. To enter the room and demand an explanation — call the nurse to task for neglect of duty — was, of course, open to her. But while that might put an end to the conversation, would it tell her what its subject had been? She felt a conviction that it would not; and just now nothing seemed of so much importance as learning what it was that these two were so eagerly, so absorbedly discussing. She told herself that it was necessary for her to know, in order that she might inform the doctor what kind of nurse he had placed in charge of his patient; and it was also right that, representing Judge Wargrave's relations and friends, she should learn what the object was for which this girl was pleading with one whom

age and weakness had placed in her power. What revelation had she made to him? What was she trying to induce him to do or not to do?

It was less curiosity than passionate indignation, and the desire to gain a knowledge which would enable her to protect the old man whom she loved, that made Edith resolve that she would find a means to hear what was going on in this closed room, from which only the inarticulate sound of voices issued. She suddenly remembered Virgil's words, "*I listened at the door*"; and with them came a recollection of that curtain-hung door between the sitting-room and the chamber behind it, where she, too, had once listened accidentally to a conversation. The memory was like an inspiration; and she did not pause to weigh the impulse which made her turn swiftly, enter the chamber, from which Virgil had fled in dismay a little while before, and cross the floor noiselessly to the door. It was closed, but she put out her hand and opened it softly behind the shielding portiere. As she did so — as it yielded to her touch and swung toward her — a sound as of rustling paper met her ear, and then the Judge's voice, loud, passionate, arbitrary:

"I know what I am doing. It is the only way. Burn it, I say! Let me see you burn it!"

There came a murmur of something like protest, another insistent, "Burn it!" and, forgetting everything else in her eagerness, Edith Creighton drew back the curtain sufficiently to see the white-clad figure of the nurse stoop and lay a paper in the heart of the glowing fire.

CHAPTER XXIII

Hester Explains

Desmond was roused from uneasy slumber — in which some consciousness of impending trouble seemed present with him — at an early hour the next morning by the sound of an opening door, and a footstep crossing his floor. He sprang up in bed to see Virgil standing beside him, and said quickly:

"You have come to tell me that my uncle has another stroke?"

"Yes, Mass Laurence," Virgil answered. "I was waked a little while ago by his breathing — the same as when he was struck before, only worse, — and I called the nurse. As soon as she saw him, she told me to telephone for the doctor, and let you and Miss Rachel know that he's took very bad."

"I'll be there in a few minutes," Desmond said, as he rose.

He dressed so quickly that he was able to reach Judge Wargrave's chamber before Mrs. Creighton could get there; and to say a few words to Hester Landon, whom he found by the bedside.

"What do you think of his condition?" he asked her immediately.

"As far as I can judge," she answered, "it is hopeless. This is the end."

"Then," he said hastily, knowing how limited the time in which he could speak might be, "you must let me tell my aunt who you are. It is not right, it is intolerable, that you should be here unrecognized."

"No," she answered as quickly as himself, "you must not do so. It is not the right time; it is as if I waited for *this* to make a claim which may be challenged. He was to have told every one himself to-day —"

Desmond interrupted with a sharp exclamation.

"Then you had told him!" he cried.

"Yes," she replied. "When I came in after our meeting in the garden yesterday, I found him in a condition of mental excitement which had for the time cleared his mind and even

restored the faculty of coherent speech. He asked for the letter — the priest's letter, you know, — and I was forced to get it and read it for him. Then he said something which brought an answer from me that made him ask me directly who I was. I could not refuse to answer that question from him, and I told him.”

"Thank God!" Desmond exclaimed fervently.

In the swift, grateful glance of her eyes he saw the tears which filled them.

"Yes, thank God!" she echoed softly, — "thank God that I spoke in time, — in the only moment of time allowed me in which to speak; that I told him who I was, and that if, in the strange world to which he is going, he meets my father, he can tell him that I forgave him!"

"Ah!" Desmond caught his breath and for an instant could say no more. But he put out his hand and, as twice before, seized hers in a strong clasp. "I knew you would do it," he said; "but how grateful I am that you did it before it was too late to give peace and comfort to him! How different our feelings will be in seeing him go now from what they would have been if you had failed either to speak or to forgive, when the great moment came! But I was sure that you would not fail."

"You were surer of me than I was of myself, then," she said. "But I, too, am very grateful that I did not fail. I have many things," she added hurriedly, "to tell you of what happened then, many things to explain; but this is not the time for explanation, even if we were not certain to be interrupted in a few minutes. You must trust me for a little while."

"I trust you for always," he told her.

Again her glance thanked him.

"I owe you more than I can express," she said. "But for you, I should not be here; and for the privilege I am most deeply grateful."

"But," he urged, "you should be here in your true position. So again I must beg you to let me tell my aunt when she comes —"

"No, no!" she interrupted with low-toned imperativeness. "I can not allow it. I repeat that this is not the time for the disclosure. I hold you bound by your promise still, and — here is Mrs. Creighton now!"

Desmond looked around. His aunt was entering with Dr. Glynn, whom an automobile had brought with rushing swiftness from Kingsford; and he realized that Hester was right: this was not the moment to intrude any matter of life into the solemn matter of impending death which concerned them all. As he drew back to allow Mrs. Creighton and the doctor to approach the bed, he met the eyes of Edith, who was following them, and felt as if he had received an electric shock. For if ever human eyes were charged with meaning, with strong emotion and with unutterable feelings, those of Miss Creighton were. Dilated and brilliant, they fairly blazed upon him; and he found himself confusedly wondering what had happened, as the tall, graceful figure swept by him and approached the bed, where Dr. Glynn was bending over the outstretched form, with its stertorous breathing.

When the doctor raised his head, he looked at Mrs. Creighton with a glance which before he spoke said, as the nurse had already said, "This is the end."

"I can not conceal from you that the condition is as serious as possible," he told her. "There is no hope that he will ever rally again."

"You mean that he is dying?" she whispered.

He nodded solemnly, — for even doctors grow solemn in the face of death, common as this great mystery might seem to become to them.

"Yes, he is dying," he answered. "It is not probable that he will live more than a few hours longer. This is a very severe stroke."

Then Edith suddenly spoke, and her voice, charged with the same electric quality as her glance, made every one in the chamber start.

"Is he entirely unconscious?" she asked.

"Oh, entirely!" Dr. Glynn replied. "The brain is practically drowned by a cerebral hemorrhage."

"Then," Miss Creighton said in the same clear, vibrant tone of intense excitement, "I must tell you, Dr. Glynn, that the nurse whom you have placed in charge of him has betrayed her trust, and is directly accountable for this condition."

"Edith!" — it was Mrs. Creighton who gasped the name, for every one else was too astounded to speak — "what do you possibly mean?"

"Just what I say, mamma," Edith answered, facing toward her. "I might have told you last night, but I thought that I would wait until to-day, when I could ask Mr. Blaisdell to come and meet you and Dr. Glynn, and I could then tell you together what I had learned."

"And what have you learned?" Dr. Glynn demanded. "This is a very serious charge which you are making against Miss Landon, and I must ask you to explain it fully."

"I think," Edith said, "that it is a charge Miss Landon will hardly venture to deny. I chance to be in a position to assert with the utmost positiveness that she was responsible for exciting Judge Wargrave to a dangerous degree last night, that she interfered with and destroyed some of his private papers, and that his condition to-day is therefore directly due to her betrayal of trust."

"Good heavens!" Dr. Glynn ejaculated, with a stunned expression. "Miss Landon, what have you to say to all this?"

But before the young nurse, who stood calmly at the foot of the bed, could answer, Desmond advanced and eagerly interposed.

"Aunt Rachel," he said, addressing Mrs. Creighton, "there is such a terrible misunderstanding here that I can not be silent a moment longer —"

"Forgive me!" Hester Landon's hand fell on his arm, and her voice, with its crystalline tone, seemed to bring a quieting influence into the scene. "You must be silent a little longer," she told him. "It is time now for me to speak." She turned to Dr. Glynn. "I shall be glad to give you the explanation which you have certainly a right to demand, doctor," she said "But shall we not go into the next room — all of us, I mean — in order to avoid excitement here!"

"Yes, that will be best," the doctor answered; and his tone expressed, by its subtle change, the effect of her composure and dignity.

It seemed to Desmond eminently fitting that she led the way into the sitting-room, only pausing at the door to allow Mrs. Creighton to precede her. The latter, as soon as she reached the Judge's great winged chair, sank into it, pale and overcome.

"This is very — shocking!" she said tremulously, as Hester, with the impulse of the nurse, bent over her.

"I am sorry that it should have come upon you at this time," the girl answered gently. "I would have prevented it if I could. Try to believe that things are not as bad as they seem, until I can explain them. Meanwhile, shall I not get you a glass of wine?"

"It is not necessary —" Mrs. Creighton was beginning, with a consciousness of Edith's rebukeful glance, when Dr. Glynn pounced upon her pulse.

"A good suggestion, Miss Landon," he said. "A glass of wine, by all means. Yes, my dear lady, you need a slight stimulant to carry you through these — er — very trying scenes."

Desmond rang the bell; the wine was ordered and brought by a scared-looking servant; and while Mrs. Creighton drank it, Edith and Desmond, together with the doctor, involuntarily formed a group about her chair, thus facing the young nurse, as she stood, leaning against the dark rich wood of the Judge's old desk. Her glance swept over them, and settled on Mrs. Creighton, to whom she spoke in her clear, quiet tones.

"What you have just heard has naturally been very startling," she said; "and I regret that Miss Creighton did not tell me last night what she had learned, and so given me an opportunity of explaining matters to her, rather than have made such sensational charges at a time when you are already so much distressed."

"I hardly think," Edith broke in, "that it is for Miss Landon to venture to find fault with *me*, and to speak of 'sensational charges.' They may be sensational, but they are exactly true, and I defy her to deny them."

"I have no intention of denying anything which is true," Hester replied. "I could deny only some of your conclusions, but even that is not worth while. It will be best simply to make a clear explanation of what did take place between Judge Wargrave and myself last night. I am anxious that the doctor, who has been so good as to entrust me with this case" — her eyes turned upon Dr. Glynn with a great kindness in their depths — "shall be assured that I did not allow anything to make me forget the duties of a nurse which I undertook when I came here."

"It seems to me almost incredible that you could have done so," Dr. Glynn hastened to say.

"But, at the risk of offending Miss Creighton further, I must add that I do not blame her for misinterpreting what she evidently saw and heard," Hester went on. "I am only sorry that your attention" — again she addressed Mrs. Creighton — "should be distracted in this manner, at a time when you would desire to be left undisturbed by the bedside of one who is leaving you so soon. I would not have wished to make certain disclosures, which must be made, at this time or so abruptly. But the matter has been taken out of my hands. I will try to speak as briefly as possible —"

Nevertheless, she paused, as if speech was difficult to her; and Desmond, unable to restrain himself longer, stepped forward to her side.

"Will you *now* let me speak for you?" he asked her.

She looked up at him gratefully.

"Yes," she replied in a low tone. "I am not so strong as I thought. You may tell them who I am. I will explain the rest."

"Thank you!" he said gratefully in turn.

Then he turned to his aunt, with an unconscious dignity of manner and bearing, as if at that moment he also stepped into his place as the head of the house.

"Aunt Rachel," he said, "you have already observed the strong resemblance which this young lady, whom you have known as Miss Landon, bears to the portrait of my uncle's wife. Has that likeness never made you suspect who she may be?"

He felt the shock of surprise which passed over the group before him, and he saw his aunt's eyes expand in startled amazement.

"No," she replied. "I have thought of the resemblance only as — an accident."

"It is not an accident," Desmond said gravely. "It is the stamp of hereditary likeness. Miss Landon, as she has chosen to be called, is Harry Wargrave's daughter."

"My God!" It was Dr. Glynn who uttered this exclamation, as he stared wide-eyed at the girl. "Why didn't I think of it!" he muttered. "Why didn't I see it before?"

"But — but," Mrs. Creighton stammered, bewildered, "we never heard — we never knew that Harry had a daughter."

"No, you did not know," Hester told her calmly, "because when I was born my father felt too bitterly against the family which had cast him off, to have any communication with them; and later, when I could understand his position, I felt such resentment against those who had doubted him that I resolved I would never belong to them nor acknowledge the connection. You will wonder perhaps why, having made such a resolution, I came here —"

"I think" — it was Edith's voice which again interposed rather hurriedly, as if she wished to anticipate some possible action on Mrs. Creighton's part — "that we may be pardoned if we rather wonder whether an accidental resemblance has not inspired this extraordinary claim."

"Edith," Desmond exclaimed, "do not say things which you will afterward deeply regret, and which are unworthy of you!"

"They are at least excusable, inasmuch as they are natural," Hester Landon said with unchanged composure. "But Miss Creighton may rest assured that I would not make the claim

unless I was quite certain of being able to prove it to the satisfaction of every person concerned. I never meant to tell any one who I was, when I came to this part of the country. My sole object — the object to which I had consecrated my life — was to clear my father's name. I came in search of evidence for that purpose, and — I found it. The proof of the deep wrong he had suffered was given into my hand by a miracle, as it were; and through my efforts the letter was written which told my" — she hesitated only a moment — "my grandfather the truth about his son."

"Was that the letter which struck him down?" Dr. Glynn inquired.

"That was the letter," she answered. "It was written by the Catholic priest in Kingsford, who had heard the confession of a man who was mortally injured in the railway wreck. And to that confession I was able to supply the key. The letter, as you have said, struck him down once, and it may have done so again; but I should like you to believe that, if so, the shock was not my fault. When I came in yesterday evening, I found Judge Wargrave in a state of singular clearness of mind and speech. He seemed to have recovered all his powers; he understood his own situation perfectly, and he insisted that I should get for him the letter which he distinctly recollected. I was unable to evade or deny his request; and when I read the letter to him he — said something which forced from me the avowal of who I am. Don't think" — once more she addressed Mrs. Creighton — "that this revelation injured him. It seemed, on the contrary, to act as a strong stimulant to all his powers; and perhaps you may understand that I can not regret that I saw him once with his vigor restored — the father of whom my father had so often talked to me, — and that there was no cloud upon his mind when he understood that his son's name was cleared, and that I brought the assurance of his love and forgiveness to him. Even if the excitement of this knowledge caused his present condition, are you not glad that the moment was granted him in which to know all that meant so much to him? that he did not go down into the great darkness — or perhaps into the great light, we do not know — ignorant of the truth?"

It seemed to Desmond that he had never heard tones so full of exquisite vibrations, so pathetic in their appealing quality, as those which asked this question; and, as she asked it, Hester extended her hands. It was an unconscious gesture, straight from the heart; and he at least did not wonder that, unable to resist it, Mrs. Creighton rose to her feet. It was plain that she forgot Edith's disapproval, — forgot everything except the appealing figure before her. She took the hands, and then suddenly put her arms around the girl.

"My dear," she said in a voice which shook with emotion, "I am glad, so glad, that you gave him such great happiness before he died! And I am sure he would have welcomed death to obtain the assurances you brought."

CHAPTER XXIV

Judge Wargrave's Death

Mrs. Creighton was usually a person so little given to demonstration of feeling, one who kept her emotions so much under control, that her impulsive action when she took the young nurse into her arms astonished those who witnessed it. They were still gazing at the two figures as they clung together — Edith with a sense of growing indignation — when the door leading into Judge Wargrave's room opened and Virgil appeared. Again, as to Desmond a little earlier, his face told the story of what he had come to say before he uttered it; and Dr. Glynn instantly asked quickly:

"Is there a change in the Judge's condition?"

"Yes, sir," Virgil answered in a trembling voice. "I come to tell you that I think he's goin' fast."

The doctor, without further word, walked hurriedly into the next room; while Mrs.

Creighton turned with a start, and glanced at Desmond.

"What did Virgil say?" she inquired.

"He says that my uncle seems to be sinking," the young man replied. "Perhaps you had better return to him."

He was about to offer his arm, when she laid her hand again on that of the girl before her.

"Come!" she said. "If you are Harry's daughter, your place is beside him."

Hester did not answer. It was plain that her composure had at last failed, and emotion had reached the overpowering point; but she drew Mrs. Creighton's hand within her arm, and together they passed into the chamber where the last inheritor of the Wargrave trust lay dying.

Edith and Desmond thus left stood for an instant staring at each other. Then the former flung herself down into a chair, and motioned toward the door where the others had disappeared.

"I think mamma is mad," she said. "But since you seem to share her madness, and to believe this unproved story of one who may be a mere adventuress, you had better go also. As for me, I have loved Uncle George too much to wish to stand by his deathbed in such company; so I shall stay here."

"Edith," he remonstrated gravely, "do you think such judgment as this is reasonable? What do you know of Miss Landon, that you should venture to speak of her as a possible adventuress?"

"I know," Edith answered, "that, according to her own admission, she came to this house and has remained here in a false character; and I also know that you have been aware of the fact. By an accident, I heard you, in this very room, charge her with it; and I must tell you that I have ever since despised you for your want of frankness and sincerity. What the mystery about her was I did not know until I heard her claim of relationship a little while ago. But I felt that, whatever it was, you had no right to maintain it, — that you owed candor at least to Uncle George and to mamma."

"Looking at the matter from your point of view, you are right," Desmond told her. "Under ordinary circumstances, I should certainly have owed them candor. But these were not ordinary circumstances. The story is too long to tell you now; but I wish you would believe that I have not been at liberty to act in any other manner than that in which I have acted. In order to induce Miss Landon to come to Hillcrest in her capacity as a trained nurse, I had to promise to keep the secret of her true identity —"

"And you believe that it is her true identity?" Miss Creighton broke in scornfully. "The story seems to me incredible, — that Harry Wargrave could have had a daughter of whose existence his father was ignorant."

"You forget the alienation which existed between his father and himself; and you also forget the Wargrave pride, — intense, unbending, passionate. I had to reckon with this pride up to a pitch of excitement which even one who in the daughter when I went to her to persuade her to come here."

"Why should you have wished her to come?"

He regarded her with astonishment.

"Why should I have wished her to come? Surely that is evident. Did you not hear my aunt when she said that she believed her brother would have welcomed death to obtain the knowledge and the assurances this girl brought to him?"

"Yes, I heard her" — again the note of scorn rang in Edith's tone — "and marvelled at her credulity, especially since I am in a position to know that, whatever assurances, true or false, the girl may have brought to him, she also brought death."

"Edith! How dare you make such a charge?"

"How dare I?" Edith's great eyes blazed upon him. "I dare because I know exactly what I am saying, and mean every word of it. In this room, last night, she worked the old man had not the advantage of being a trained nurse would have known was dangerous; and she took advantage

of his condition to examine his private papers, and to destroy some of them, — possibly his will, in which she had no recognition or part."

"Edith, it is impossible! In one way or another, you are fearfully mistaken."

"I am not mistaken at all," Edith assured him coldly. "It occurred last night, while you were away. Virgil came down and told me that something unusual was going on; and when I came up to see about it, I found the nurse in here with Uncle George, — he talking clearly, and so excited that I was afraid to enter for fear of exciting him further; but, standing yonder behind the curtain" (she pointed to the portiere-hung door), "I saw her burning papers."

"What papers?"

"That I can not tell, but I fancy that it was his will; for I heard him say to her, 'Burn it!' I could not then imagine what it was that he wished her to burn. But when I heard her story, I understood. She had made him believe that she was his son's daughter; and, believing this, he was overwhelmed by the thought that he had not provided for her in his will. To make another, or to add to that already made, was, we know, impossible to him. And so no doubt she suggested that he should destroy the will which preserved the Wargrave trust —"

"It is impossible, I tell you, — impossible!"

"And thus leave her sole heiress of the Wargrave estate. You will find that she did this; and I can tell you, if you do not know as much yourself, that the doing of it gave his deathblow to poor Uncle George."

"Miss Edith" — again it was Virgil's voice, low, shaken, full of grief, and the awe which death brings, — "Miss Rachel says you better come if you want to see Mass George again before he — dies."

"Yes, Virgil, — yes!" Edith said.

She rose, and, with one last, reproachful glance at Desmond — as if to say, "See what you have helped to bring about!" — went hastily into the next room.

As Desmond followed her, he suddenly felt, with a pang of self-reproach, that, so rapidly had one sensation, one surprise, succeeded another since he was first waked, he had hardly found time to give a thought to the soul bound on its last dread journey, or to breathe a prayer that it might find mercy before the judgment-seat of God. When he entered the chamber now, a sense of something like horror seized him; for truly death is terrible when deprived of every gracious sacrament, of every sign or emblem of the divine hope which alone can sustain the sinking soul or the breaking heart at the awful passage from time to eternity.

No one who has seen only Catholic deathbeds can fully realize all of which the stupendous apostasy that we call the Protestant Reformation has deprived those who still suffer from its effects. For, as a matter of fact, we are born only in order that we may die; and, since death is therefore the most important act of life, what is so appalling as the mutilated forms of Christianity which send the soul forth unshriven by the great absolving power of Holy Church, unfed with the sustaining Viaticum for its last journey, unblest with sight or touch of the crucifix to strengthen it by the thought of Him who also tasted this last agony of humanity! We may know these things at all times; but to witness such a deathbed is not only to understand the full, terrible result of that great spiritual robbery of the past, but to be filled with a pity as wild as it is impotent for the particular soul thus bereft in its last dire extremity.

Such pity rose in a mounting tide which almost choked Desmond, as he joined the silent group about the bed, and looked at the figure extended upon it. All the signs of swiftly approaching dissolution were apparent to the most inexperienced eye. It seemed as if every slow breath would be the last; and when Dr. Glynn laid his finger on the swiftly hurrying pulse — that ominously rapid pulse of death, as if the heart were in haste to finish its long task, — and then, lifting his head, looked with solemn significance at Mrs. Creighton, the young man could restrain himself no longer. He laid his hand on his aunt's arm.

"Aunt Rachel," he whispered, "surely there should be something done, — or — or at least said for him! Is there no one to — pray?"

He never forgot the astonishment in the eyes which met his own.

"To pray!" Mrs. Creighton echoed. "I — I had not thought of it. We might send for Mr. Craven, if there was time."

Desmond knew that Mr. Craven was the Episcopal clergyman.

"What would he do if he came?" he asked, with a vague hopefulness.

"He would read the prayers in the prayer-book," she answered.

"Oh!" Without much knowledge of the book alluded to, Desmond had an instinctive consciousness that there would be little help in this. "I am afraid there is not time for him to reach here before the end," he said. "But it is terrible to think of a deathbed without a prayer," — yet even as he spoke, he realized that there was nothing terrible in it to any one present except himself. "Couldn't *you* read the prayers of which you speak?" he asked.

She shrank. "Oh, no, — I couldn't!"

"Then" (he forgot everything except his passionate desire to aid, in however small a degree, that soul going away so fast) "would you mind if I read some prayers?"

"Why," Mrs. Creighton gasped in her increasing surprise, "I — I suppose not. But he is unconscious, you know."

"They are not addressed to him," Desmond replied involuntarily, "but to the God before whom he will soon appear. Since you don't object, I'll get my prayer-book."

He left the room hastily, and in a moment returned with a book which, fortunately, contained a few at least of the beautiful prayers of the Church for the dying. Amazement was unquestionably the predominant sentiment of all present; for to them such an act, on the part of a young man whose religion as a general rule sat very lightly upon him, seemed almost incredible. But the Protestant shame of appearing religious, and the Anglo-Saxon dread of exhibiting feeling, were alike unknown to Desmond's Catholic and Celtic soul. That he was not the person who should have given this last aid to the dying, he would have been the first to acknowledge; but, since there was nobody else to offer it, he flung himself into the breach with characteristic ardor, and absolute lack of any thought of how his act would be regarded by the wondering group around him. There was simply something for him to do — the last earthly service possible for him to render to the dying kinsman whom he had learned to love, — and he proceeded to do it without hesitation.

Opening his book, he knelt at the foot of the bed; the others followed his example, and only Virgil's smothered sobs broke the silence on which rose those beautiful prayers for the departing soul, in which the Church seems to have attained her greatest height of impassioned and pathetic utterance. One person at least among those who listened was quite sure that she would never forget the touching effect of that grave, melodious voice flowing in a steady stream of majestic words, imploring the mercy of God for him who lay breathing out his soul; one whose noble and upright life had been lived with little supernatural aid; had indeed been fashioned on the great old pagan ideals rather than on Christian models, but to whom the tender passage in the "Agricola" of Tacitus might have been applied: "If there be any place for the spirits of the good — if, as wise men believe, great souls do not perish with the body, — mayst thou rest in peace!"

The memory of this passage was in Desmond's mind, but he did not utter it; instead he read even more touching words, drawn from an ancient Spanish liturgy: "Receive him, Lord, to Thine eternal rest, and give him the grace of Thy vision! May he find a part in the resurrection of the dead. Among them that wash their robes in the well of light, may he make his raiment clean; among them that knock, may he open the gates of that Jerusalem which is in heaven; and among them that see God, may he behold Him face to face evermore."

Then, as the long, gasping breaths grew slower and fainter, there came the solemn adjuration, "Depart, Christian soul, out of this miserable world," so familiar to Catholic ears, and so unfamiliar to those outside the Church. Its lofty beauty of idea and phrase thrilled Hester Landon like noble music; and as she listened the thought came to her that it was appropriate that he whose son, in his own pathetic words, had been given back to him by the agency of the Faith

he had ignorantly despised, should now pass out of life to the sound of Catholic prayers. It was as if the great Mother whom he had never known, from whose care ancestral sins had torn him before ever he came into the world, had gathered him into her arms at last, crying in appealing supplication: "May Christ Jesus, the Son of the living God, place thee in His garden of paradise; and may He, the true Shepherd, own thee for one of His flock. May He absolve thee from all thy sins, and place thee at His right hand in the inheritance of His elect. Oh, may it be thy happy lot to behold thy Redeemer face to face; to be ever in His presence, in the beatific vision of that Eternal Truth which is the joy of the blessed!"

The girl shivered from head to foot under the deep passion of the imploring words; and as she glanced at the dying man she saw his breast rise in one long, soft breath, and then lie still. The soul had gone to find that Eternal Truth which here so many vainly seek.

It was a few hours after Judge Wargrave's death that Mrs. Creighton sent for Desmond. He had already seen her several times, and received her directions for the arrangements to be made in preparation for the funeral; but when he went to her room now, he at once perceived that something besides these arrangements was engaging her attention. Mrs. Selwyn, who, with her son, had come out to Hillcrest as soon as the news of the Judge's death reached her, was sitting with her; and Edith, who did not turn around at his entrance, was standing at a window. There was a moment's pause as Desmond entered the room, and then —

"You sent for me, Aunt Rachel?" he asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Creighton answered, a little hesitatingly. "I — I feel that there is something we ought to consider, Laurence. Please sit down."

Somewhat reluctantly, for he had an instinct of what was coming, Desmond sat down, and then again had to prod her hesitation by saying:

"Well, what is it that you feel we ought to consider?"

"It is about this girl who claims to be Harry's daughter," she answered. "Edith thinks that I have been very — er — precipitate and imprudent in accepting her as what she claims to be; and Cousin Elizabeth agrees with her. So we have decided that I should ask you, who seem to believe the story, what proof you have had of its truth?"

"Why, really none at all," Desmond said calmly, "unless you accept as proof her intimate knowledge of those events in Harry Wargrave's life which no stranger could know — the knowledge which made it possible for Father Martin to communicate the confession that cleared him, — and, I may add, the striking likeness to her grandmother which you have all recognized."

The two elder ladies looked at each other with a startled air; they had plainly forgotten the likeness which spoke so clearly of the truth of Hester's claim.

"Resemblances of that kind are sometimes accidental," Mrs. Selwyn suggested.

"Sometimes, yes," Desmond agreed. "But, taken in connection with other facts, it constitutes in this case very strong evidence. Judging from what I have seen of Miss Landon," he added, "I should say that if you ask her for proof of her identity, you will readily obtain it. Personally, I have not the least doubt that she is the person she claims to be; but I can understand your position — your hesitation."

"I thought you would understand," Mrs. Creighton said eagerly. "Somehow when she spoke to us, I had not any doubt of her truthfulness. But no doubt I *was* too precipitate; one has to consider many things."

"I am sure that you only desire to consider doing what is right," Desmond told her; "and of course it is right to be cautious in a matter of such importance. May I not ask Miss Landon to come to you and tell her story more in detail?"

Again a quick glance was exchanged by the two ladies, and then they both looked at Edith, who did not stir, but whose motionless attitude seemed to express the closest attention.

"I hardly think that would settle the matter," Mrs. Creighton said appealingly. "You see there are so many things to consider! There's the funeral, — if she is really Harry's daughter, she must take her rightful place in it. But I can not accept the responsibility of putting her there. So

Edith — I mean we all think that Mr. Blaisdell should be asked to come and — er — advise us what to do."

"Mr. Blaisdell?" Desmond said with some surprise. "I had not thought of him; but there can be no objection to his coming to settle the matter to your satisfaction. I am sure Miss Landon will have no objection to seeing him."

"Then will you explain it to her, and will you ask him to come?" Mrs. Creighton began in a relieved tone, when Edith suddenly interrupted her by turning around and speaking for the first time.

"Mr. Blaisdell is driving up to the house now," she said. "I would suggest that you send for him at once, mamma; and, although I am not a member of the family, I must ask to be present at the interview with him, in order to tell what I saw and heard last night."

Desmond rose from his seat.

"In that case," he said, "I will go and bring Miss Landon, that she may also be present."

"Take her to my brother's sitting-room," Mrs. Creighton said hurriedly. "We will all meet there."

CHAPTER XXV

Laurence Burns the Will

Astonishment is hardly a strong enough term to express the mental condition of that excellent lawyer, Mr. Blaisdell, when, on coming to pay a call of sympathy and respect to the family of his old friend and client, he was confronted with the situation which had so unexpectedly developed in that family.

Desmond, hurrying downstairs, met him as he entered the house; and, after a few words on the subject of the Judge's sudden death, drew him aside and communicated the discovery of the relationship of the young nurse to Harry Wargrave. As amazed as he was interested, Mr. Blaisdell would willingly have discussed the matter in detail; but he found himself hurried up to Mrs. Creighton, where the clear statement he had received below proved of inestimable value in enabling him to comprehend that lady's somewhat incoherent remarks. In one opinion, however, he was at once prepared to agree with her.

"Yes, yes," he said, in his somewhat abrupt fashion, "it is highly important to examine such a claim immediately. Glad you didn't defer it. If this girl is an impostor, we can't know it too soon."

"Ok, I don't think she can be an impostor!" Mrs. Creighton deprecated.

"She is either an impostor or she is Harry Wargrave's daughter," Mr. Blaisdell stated positively. "There is no alternative. It looks badly that she waited to spring the matter upon you until the Judge was dying —"

"It seems that she had told *him*, and that he believed her story," Mrs. Creighton again interrupted.

Mr. Blaisdell thrust out his lower lip.

"Have we any proof besides her word for that?" he inquired.

"None." It was Edith's clear-cut tones which answered. "We know only what she chooses to tell us of what passed between them last night, with the exception of a little — a very little — of the conversation which I chanced to overhear."

"Ah!" The lawyer's keen glance turned on her. "You overheard something! Do you mind telling me what it was?"

"I should prefer telling you in the presence of Miss Landon," Edith replied.

"Right, — quite right!" There was unqualified approval in Mr. Blaisdell's tone. "But where is Miss — er — Landon!"

"I asked Laurence Desmond to take her to my brother's sitting-room," Mrs. Creighton said. "Shall we go there now? Elizabeth, of course you will come. And I think" (she glanced questioningly at the lawyer) "that Robert should be present also."

"Certainly," Mr. Blaisdell assented. "It is a matter which concerns all the family. Robert Selwyn should be present. "

The bell was therefore rung, a message was sent to Mr. Selwyn, and, with a surprised look on his round, good-humored face, he presently joined the family party in the sitting-room, so associated with the presence of Judge Wargrave that it seemed still pervaded by it, in that subtle way in which the dead haunt the scenes where they have dwelt in life. Bobby promptly joined Edith, who was again standing by a window, apart from the group, composed of the two ladies and Mr. Blaisdell, who had seated themselves beside the large table in the middle of the room.

"What on earth is the meaning of this!" he whispered to her. "It looks like the convening of a court of inquiry."

"It is a court of inquiry," she told him. "We are here to help Mr. Blaisdell examine an extraordinary claim which has been made —"

"By Desmond?"

"No: by the trained nurse concerning whom I talked to you not long ago. You remember I said there was a mystery about her?"

"Of course I remember. You were quite certain about it, and thought she was married to Desmond."

"Oh, that was a mere conjecture!" Miss Creighton said hastily. "It seems that, instead of anything of that kind, she had told him that she was Harry Wargrave's daughter, and he believed her."

"Harry Wargrave's daughter!" Bobby looked as astounded as he felt. "Why, we never knew —"

"That he had a daughter? That is what every one says. So you see how necessary it is to examine the story before it is accepted further."

"Who has accepted it besides Desmond?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say that mamma has. She is not usually impulsive, but she has acted very impulsively in this matter; and — but here they come now!"

She looked toward the door, which opened at the moment, and Desmond ushered Hester Landon into the room. Every eye was fixed on them, and certainly they made a striking pair, — the girl with her pure, pale face, her lucid eyes and white dress; and the young man with his distinction of appearance and manner. Instinctively the lawyer rose as they entered; and it was Desmond who spoke, after he had placed a chair for Hester and stood beside her.

"This young lady, Mr. Blaisdell, has been here some time as Miss Landon; but now I have the pleasure of introducing her to you, and to all whom it may concern" (his glance took in the Selwyns), "as Miss Wargrave, the daughter of Judge Wargrave's only son."

Mr. Blaisdell bowed. He acknowledged afterward that he had never in his life been more startled than by the striking resemblance which the girl bore to her grandmother, and of which he had not been warned. This resemblance seemed indeed to offer so strong a proof of her being Harry Wargrave's daughter that he had difficulty in checking his inclination to admit the fact at once; but, after an instant's hesitation, he said gravely:

"I could not be other than very happy to meet the granddaughter of my old friend; but I am sure that Miss — er — Wargrave will not misunderstand me when I say that such a claim, brought so unexpectedly, must be closely examined and clearly proved."

"I do not misunderstand you in the least," Hester answered calmly. "But I must correct you a little. I have not brought any 'claim': I have only stated certain facts which are very easily proved. My father's marriage and my birth are on record in San Francisco; and I could bring

many witnesses to my identity, if it were necessary to do so. But it is not necessary. I came here to fulfil a certain task, which, by the help of God, I have accomplished; and, this being done, I have no claim of any kind to make, and nothing to ask — not even the recognition of my right to bear my father's name."

"The name which she has cleared of any shadow of dishonor," Desmond interposed, addressing Mr. Blaisdell, who had now resumed his seat. "With your permission" (he spoke to Hester), "I should like to tell what I know of this matter."

She gave him a grateful glance.

"Tell it by all means," she said.

Standing then, with his hand on the back of her chair, Desmond faced the group, who were all now gathered about the table; and so facing them, like an advocate in a court of law, he related the story of his entire connection with the chain of events which had ended by bringing Harry Wargrave's daughter into her father's home. His journalistic capacity and experience told in the manner in which he presented his facts, — marshalling them impressively, describing dramatically the railway accident, and all that resulted from it; the demand of the injured man for a priest, the unavoidable delay which brought him to the very moment of death before the priest arrived; his confession, his failure to mention an essential name, and therefore the inability of the priest to make the restitution of character which the confession demanded. Then in brief words he described the interposition of the nurse, who, in the strange providence of God, had kept the injured man alive until the priest could reach him, and the manner in which she supplied the necessary key to the confession. He spoke of Father Martin's letter to Judge Wargrave, and was interrupted by an exclamation from Mr. Blaisdell.

"So," he said, as Dr. Glynn had said before him, "that was the letter which caused his stroke?"

"Yes," Desmond answered; "and, in order that no one may have any doubt of the fact, I will, with my aunt's and Miss Wargrave's permission, produce the letter and ask you to read it." He stepped to the desk, opened the drawer in which he had placed the letter when he drew it from the Judge's fingers on the morning of his fatal seizure, and held it out toward Mrs. Creighton. "You remember it, do you not?"

"Yes," she answered; "I remember it by the printed stamp — the name of the Catholic church — on the envelope, which made me wonder, when I came to think the matter over, if it did not in some way relate to *you*."

"You will find that it does not relate to me at all," he said, "and that I have played no part in the matter —"

"Oh, yes!" (It was Hester who spoke quickly.) "You played a great part in it. I must tell all who are interested in this clearing of Harry Wargrave's name from a false shadow of dishonor, that it would never have been cleared but for you. It was he who ran a mile to get the priest for the dying man," she said, looking at Mrs. Creighton and Mr. Blaisdell. "But for that Judge Wargrave would have died without knowing the truth about his son. If" (the words seemed impulsively forced from her) "you have ever regretted that he who is to take up the Wargrave trust does not hold the same religion as those who went before him, you may be glad of it now; for only a Catholic would have made such an effort to bring to that man the priest to whom alone he would have confessed the truth."

They looked at each other with a quick, startled gaze; and for a moment at least their souls did involuntary homage, as in a similar moment Judge Wargrave had done, to the wisdom of the great Church, which has maintained so inflexibly the essential character of that sacrament which was the first that human nature, in its revolt against divine authority, cast away, and which Protestants have been most sedulously taught to dislike and distrust. Then Mr. Blaisdell extended his hand for the letter.

He read aloud, in the silence of profound attention, the explicit words in which the priest related the confession of the dead man, — the confession which told how he had taken advantage

of Harry Wargrave's friendship and ignorance of business methods, to throw upon him the suspicion of defalcations and forgery, which, when discovered, had seemed to cast the proud Wargrave honor into the dust. Father Martin ended by saying that if Judge Wargrave wished to see him with regard to any details of the confession, he would be glad to respond to a summons at any time; and when Mr. Blaisdell looked up from the letter, he addressed Mrs. Creighton.

"I think," he said, "that you will wish me to call and thank Father Martin for putting this complete exculpation in such decisive form, and also to obtain from him any corroborative details that he may be able to furnish. I never knew before how serious the charge was against Harry Wargrave; although, knowing his father's high sense of justice as well as his deep attachment to him, I was sure it must be very serious. But this explains everything."

"And you must not forget" (it was Desmond who again interposed) "that Father Martin could not have divulged that confession if Harry Wargrave's daughter had not supplied the key — by her statement of Tracy's connection with him — which enabled the priest to apply the story. When I heard this," the speaker went on, "I felt convinced that she was in some way closely related to the man who had suffered so undeservedly, and I went immediately and charged her with it. She acknowledged that she was his daughter; and then, finding that she had refused Dr. Glynn's request to take charge of Judge Wargrave's case as a professional nurse, I begged her to reconsider that refusal. She was resolutely determined to make no claim of any kind upon her grandfather; but I thought — that is, I hoped — that if she were once under his roof and associated with him, matters might arrange themselves. I did not, however, anticipate that her likeness to her grandmother would be recognized as soon as she entered the house."

It was now Mrs. Creighton and Mrs. Selwyn who glanced at each other with looks which acknowledged that this was indeed evidence that could not be gainsaid. Meanwhile Desmond went on:

"When the likeness was recognized, I begged her to let me tell my aunt who she was; but I could not induce her to do so, — could make no impression upon her determination to remain unknown. Only yesterday afternoon, in the garden, we talked of the matter; and she was still obdurate, though she confessed that her feeling toward her grandfather had changed. But something occurred, after she returned to the house, to bring out the revelation of her identity; and what that was she will no doubt tell you."

With the last words, he turned toward Hester, who took up the thread of his story without hesitation.

"I have already told you," she said, addressing Mrs. Creighton, "that when I came in yesterday evening I found Judge Wargrave in a singularly clear mental condition; that he remembered and insisted upon hearing me read the letter to which you have just listened, and that his comments on it forced from me the avowal of who I am. This revelation had no immediately bad effect upon him; and in the hours which we afterward spent together he insisted upon my telling him all about my father's life, as far as it could be told in so short a time. I was afraid of too much cerebral excitement, and urged him again and again to wait until to-day to hear more; but he said" (her voice faltered a little here) "that, in his condition, he could not count on a single day, and that he wanted to hear everything I was able to tell him. I could not refuse — I am glad now that I did not refuse, for it gave him so much pleasure, — and then an idea, which I had feared might develop from all this, took possession of his mind. He began to think of his will."

There was a short pause — one of those pauses which are full of electrical intensity of interest and expectation, — while the clear tones ceased for a moment, and then calmly resumed:

"I urged him not to think of it, and assured him that I was perfectly satisfied for all to remain as he had arranged it; but he would not hear of this. He grew dangerously excited. 'What!' he said, 'Shall every one else, even my old servants, be remembered, and my son's daughter be ignored? I could not rest in my grave if that were so.' Then he told me to get his will. I begged him not to insist upon this; to wait until to-day and send for you" (she spoke to Mr. Blaisdell). "But he would listen to nothing. 'He can come to-morrow,' he said; 'but meanwhile I

might die to-night, and that will would be in existence. It must be destroyed.' — 'But you forget the Wargrave trust, and what would happen to it if you died without a will,' I reminded him, in order to induce him to put the matter off."

"Ah," Mr. Blaisdell leaned forward, "there was nothing nearer to his heart than the Wargrave trust! What did he say to that?"

"He said nothing at first," Hester answered. "He looked at me with eyes which I shall never forget, so piteous were they. Then he said slowly: 'I must choose between the greater and the lesser dishonor. If I die before I can find means to secure the Wargrave trust, the great Judge above will know that it was because I could not be guilty of injustice to one already so deeply wronged. You must burn the will, or I will do it myself.'"

Again Mr. Blaisdell uttered a sharp exclamation.

"And did you burn it?" he demanded.

Hester looked at Edith with, for the first time, something like a challenge in her glance.

"Miss Creighton will tell you that I did," she replied.

Then Edith addressed Mr. Blaisdell.

"You will remember," she said to him, "that I spoke to you of something which I preferred to tell you in the presence of Miss Landon. It is briefly this. I was warned by Virgil last night that there was some great change in my uncle's condition, and I came upstairs to see for myself what was really going on between himself and the nurse (Virgil also spoke of *her*) before alarming mamma or telephoning for the doctor. When I approached this room, I heard, just as the servant had described to me, the voices in earnest, sustained conversation, — conversation so different from anything of which my uncle had been capable since his illness that it was startling in the highest degree. I thought it ought to be stopped, yet I was afraid to interfere — afraid of the consequences to him, I mean, — so I listened in the hall for some minutes. Through the closed door I could not hear what was being said, but I was struck by the tone of Miss Landon's voice. She seemed pleading with or urging something upon him, and I felt as if it were only right that I should know why one who was apparently only a trained nurse had so far forgotten her duty to the patient under her charge as to excite him in such a manner. I have therefore no apologies to make for the fact that I presently entered his chamber, where there is a door" (she pointed toward it) "which commands this room. Behind that curtain I stood, and I heard Judge Wargrave's voice — as clear and ringing as it had ever been in health — say distinctly and emphatically: "Burn it! Let me see you burn it!" I must so far corroborate Miss Landon's story as to say that she seemed to remonstrate, though I could not hear her words; but he repeated, 'Burn it!' in those tones of his which, as we all know, every one always instinctively obeyed; and —"

"And then?" Mr. Blaisdell demanded impatiently; for at this point Edith paused, and seemed for an instant unable to proceed.

"And then" (she looked now straight at Hester) "I saw Miss Landon lay a paper in the midst of the fire."

"So," Mr. Blaisdell turned sharply toward the girl, "you *did* burn the will!"

"I perceived," she answered quietly, "that nothing else would satisfy him. His excitement had reached so dangerous a point that, to quiet it, I must either burn the will or make him believe that I had done so. In the large envelope which held it I found two papers, — does any one remember that?"

She looked from the lawyer to Desmond, but both shook their heads.

"I never saw the will after I left it with the Judge the day it was signed," Mr. Blaisdell said. "I had brought it to him, together with the draft of its contents, which he had given me that I might prepare it properly."

"Then it was no doubt that draft which remained in the envelope when he put the will away," Hester said. "At least I found two papers in this envelope when I took it from the place he indicated. It was here."

She rose, and, with every eye upon her, walked to the desk, where she opened an inner compartment, — a small door which closed with lock and key. The key was now hanging in the lock; so she flung back the little shutter, and drew from the space within a long, blue envelope. Mr. Blaisdell nodded when he saw it.

"That held the will," he said briefly; and it was apparent to all that he spoke in the past tense, because the envelope was now evidently empty of any enclosure.

Holding it in her hand, Hester turned again toward the group so breathlessly observing her; and Desmond was filled with amazement, as well as admiration, by the perfectly unconscious yet admirable dignity of her bearing, the tranquil grace of her manner, the untroubled calmness of her voice, the clear candor of her glance.

"Yes, this held it," she said. "From it I drew the signed paper which I showed to him; and when he insisted that I should let him see me burn it, I walked toward the fireplace and, while my back was turned to him, slipped the will into the envelope, drew out the other paper, without being able to examine what it was, and put it into the fire."

"But" (Mr. Blaisdell was staring at her in astonishment, as was everybody else) "if you did not burn the will, where is it? It is not there."

He pointed with a long, lean finger to the empty envelope; and she answered in the same tone of candor:

"No, it is not here, because, after he went to bed, I came back, took it out and concealed it in another place, for fear he should be suspicious and examine the envelope before I was able to give it to you."

"Then if the will is still in existence, where is it?" the lawyer inquired, with an anxiety which he made no effort to conceal.

Hester turned to Desmond, and pointed to one of the lower drawers of the desk.

"You will find it there," she said to him. "I slipped it in behind the papers, at the back."

The young man dropped on one knee, pulled open the drawer and ran his hand into it. After an instant lie brought out a long, folded, legal paper, upon which Mr. Blaisdell instantly pounced.

"Yes," he said, as he opened it, "this is the Judge's will, just as I prepared and he signed it a few weeks ago."

Desmond took it from his hand, and glanced at it also. There was certainly no doubt that it was the authentic will which preserved the Wargrave trust. He saw his own name, he saw Selwyn's, Edith's, and various others; and then, remembering what name was absent, he looked up and again faced the assembled family, head erect and eyes shining.

"I must disagree with Mr. Blaisdell," he said. "That is not properly a man's will which is not the expression of his last wishes with regard to the disposition of his property. We know now, not only from the testimony of Miss Wargrave but from that of Miss Creighton, that my uncle's wish with regard to this will was simply and solely that it should be burned. He felt that it did grievous injustice not only to his granddaughter, who is not mentioned in it, but to himself, who would never knowingly have been guilty of such injustice. For the sake of avoiding that wrong, even the preservation of the Wargrave trust became a matter of slight importance to him; for he recognized that to keep the Wargrave honor unstained is a higher duty than to hold together the Wargrave acres. His wishes were defeated by the person whom he asked to fulfil them. I understand the high pride which would not allow Miss Wargrave to destroy this will; but, as its chief beneficiary, I feel that it is my duty and my right to fulfil my uncle's last earnest request. So I do it,"

As he ended, he strode to the fireplace, and, before any of the startled group could interfere, dropped the paper into the heart of the fire.

CHAPTER XXVI

A Family Discussion

The sound which Mr. Blaisdell uttered when he saw Judge Wargrave's will thrown into the fire was more like the roar of a wild beast than the cry of an amazed and angry man. He rushed forward, but Desmond's strong young arm held him back from snatching the document out of the blaze. Then he looked at Selwyn.

"Get it!" he cried. "Why the devil do you stand there doing nothing? Snatch it out! There may be enough left to probate."

"Don't touch it!" Desmond warned Bobby, who showed not the least intention of attempting anything of the kind. "The disposition which the Judge wanted made of that paper is going to be made, no matter what the law may call the act."

"The law calls it so grave a crime that you render yourself liable to penitentiary imprisonment by committing the act," the lawyer told him indignantly. "In the course of a long life I have never seen anything, as outrageous so daringly done."

"Wouldn't you have done it yourself!" Desmond demanded, turning upon him. "Would you, would any one here" (his eager glance flashed over the assembled family), "have accepted what that will gave me, knowing not only that it wronged and injured the rightful heir of the man who made it, but that the last earnest wish of the testator was that it should be destroyed? Allow it to stand! Accept it! The color flew to the ardent face. "There isn't law enough in all Christendom to make me do so."

Then Bobby Selwyn surprised every one by stepping forward and seizing the speaker's hand.

"You did exactly right!" he declared. "I'm most concerned after you — for I believe the Judge had put me in the entail, — but I'm glad you destroyed the will, and I heartily endorse all you've said about it."

"Thank you, Bobby!" Desmond said. "It never would have occurred to me to imagine that you wouldn't endorse it. When it comes to a point of honor, men of honor always think alike."

Mr. Blaisdell regarded them both with a sardonic glance, under which, however, something like approval clearly lurked.

"Very fine sentiments!" he growled. "But I don't think they excuse law-breaking. I grant that it seems clearly proved, by the separate but corroborating testimony of the two young ladies whose stories we have heard, that Judge Wargrave very much desired the destruction of that will, and believed that it had been destroyed. But the fact remains that he merely intended its destruction to guard against what has — er —"

"Happened." Desmond's clear-cut tones supplied the word as he hesitated. "Judge Wargrave feared that he might die before he could execute another will which would provide for his granddaughter; and he also knew that, if he did not die, another stroke might again deprive him of his suddenly and strangely regained power of speech. But he was willing to take either risk rather than leave that" (the young man flung out his hand toward the black mass of burned paper which lay on the top of the fire) "to misrepresent him, and to work injustice when he would be powerless to prevent it. Even the preservation of the Wargrave trust — so near his heart, as you have said — became of less importance than securing this. And I can't believe that there is any one here" (again the bright, challenging glance swept the circle) "who does not feel that I have rightly interpreted and executed his wishes in what I have done."

This time it was Mrs. Creighton who answered him, quickly, impulsively, as few people had ever heard her speak before:

"I am sure of it, Laurence; and, as the only one now living among those who were nearest to him during his life, I thank you for having done it. I am sorry about the Wargrave trust; but I

recognize that it was better for it to be broken at last than for my brother to appear to disown the claim of the daughter of his son, — the son whom he had so deeply and sadly wronged.”

Desmond walked across the floor and took her hand.

"I could not regret what I have done under any circumstances," he said; "but I can't tell you how grateful I am for your approval, Aunt Rachel."

"I couldn't fail to approve," she said, with moist eyes. "It not only seems to me what should have been done, but I like your manner of doing it; and I am glad that you have showed so unmistakably that you are — I mean that you were — worthy to be the heir of the men who have been here before you."

Then Edith, with something between a sob and a laugh, also held out her hand.

"Mamma is slightly incoherent," she said; "but I understand what she means, and I agree with her. We all approve of what you have done, Laurence; although I suppose Mr. Blaisdell disapproves of *us*."

Mr. Blaisdell was indeed shaking his head in grave reprobation of the whole business.

"You are approving a very serious offence," he told them. "To destroy a man's last will and testament is regarded by the law as so grave a matter that the penalty, as I have already said, is very severe. However, it is destroyed now, and we must therefore consider the result, which is to make this young lady" (he turned toward Hester) "the sole heir of Judge Wargrave's estate, including all that has heretofore constituted the Wargrave trust. I mean, of course, that it will make her the heir when she has proved according to legal requirements that she is the only child of the Judge's son." He paused a moment, and then added, "I feel that I should express myself, and I think for all present as well, admiration and appreciation of her conduct in regard to this matter. There are few people who would have been capable of such disinterestedness as she has displayed. "

Hester, who had not uttered a word or sound of any kind since she gave an audible gasp when Desmond flung the will into the fire, now turned toward the speaker a face pale with emotion, out of which the eyes were shining like stars.

"You are extremely kind," she told him in her low, clear voice; "but it seems to me that what I did was very simple, and the only right thing to do under the circumstances. I had not come here to claim anything, and my father would have desired as much as any one who went before him that the Wargrave trust should be preserved. I was anxious, therefore, that it should not be endangered in any way through me, that my grandfather's wishes should be exactly carried out as he expressed them before he knew of my existence. I am sorry that the will has been destroyed. I understand the impulse under which it was destroyed, but it was a mistake. I have no intention of taking the Wargrave estate."

"As far as that is concerned, you will not be able to avoid taking it," the lawyer said, a little dryly. "When your claim is once established, the law will recognize no other heir. But I may remind you that it will be in your power to establish again the Wargrave trust."

They all saw the light that flashed into her face.

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "I can do that?"

"Certainly you can do that," he replied. "The estate will come to you free of any encumbrances or claims whatsoever."

She was silent for a moment, looking at him, as if taking this in fully; then, with a sudden impulsive movement, she advanced toward Mrs. Creighton.

"You approved the destruction of the will a few minutes ago," she said to her, "because it ignored the claim of one who had been greatly, although unconsciously, wronged; but I am sure that in your heart you must have regretted deeply the apparent end of the trust for which so many sacrifices have been made. I am glad, therefore, that it is in my power to promise you that it shall be renewed as soon as I have legal power to do so. "

"My dear girl," Mrs. Creighton answered, "I regret nothing now except that my brother should have died as soon as we found you! And I don't need any legal proof that you are Harry's daughter, — none!"

"Not when it might be cousin Maria herself talking to us!" Mrs. Selwyn chimed in.

Then, with a grace all her own, Edith moved forward and held out her hand.

"I hope you will pardon whatever I have said or done that was offensive to you under a misconception of the truth," she said; "but you must forgive me if I add that I think mysteries are always mistakes."

"Generally speaking, you are right," Hester acknowledged frankly; "and I should like for you and for all" (her glance swept over every one present) "to believe that I had no intention of creating or maintaining any mystery when an accident, or what seemed to be an accident, brought me to this house. I was urged to come, and I yielded because there was a great temptation in the thought of seeing my father's home. And if I thought less of seeing those who were within it than of the home itself, that was because there was a great bitterness in my heart; and I recognize now that the bitterness was also a mistake. I resisted every appeal of one" (she looked at Desmond) "who desired earnestly that the truth should be told, because I intended to go away as I had come, unknown. It was only what I begin to think was the mercy of Heaven which prevented this; for I had not a thought of telling my grandfather who I was when I returned to this room yesterday evening. I had just refused, out yonder in the garden, a last appeal for leave to tell the truth; and nothing could have astonished me more than to be assured that in a little time I should myself tell it. The matter seemed suddenly taken out of my hands; and altogether what then occurred has led to *that*" (she pointed to the burned will); "I can not regret it, since I am told that I shall have power to renew the trust, and since no one can doubt that my father's vindication is complete when his daughter is acknowledged and received as — as—"

The soft, thrilling voice, with its pathetic note of deep feeling, broke down, and it was Bobby Selwyn who ended the sentence:

"As the owner of Hillcrest and undisputed heiress of the Wargrave trust."

After this all sense of strain relaxed, and the occasion resolved itself into a family council, in which the details were settled of the manner in which Hester should take her rightful place before the world.

"All of our friends must be told at once," Mrs. Creighton said, "that my brother recognized her before he died, and that by his direction his will was destroyed; so that she not only succeeds to the estate by law, but by his desire."

Mr. Blaisdell put out his lip.

"The less said about the destruction of the will the better, in my opinion," he remarked.

"As I have warned you all, you are condoning a very grave as well as an audacious offence against the law; and before this young lady can inherit the estate — at least before she can exercise any power connected with the inheritance — we must have all the legal proofs of her identity as Harry Wargrave's daughter. Have you," he asked Hester, "brought any of these proofs with you?"

"Yes," she answered. "While I had no intention of making myself known, and especially not to any member of the Wargrave family, I felt that an occasion might arise when it would be necessary, or at least well, to be able to prove who I was. Therefore I have with me my father's personal papers and pictures, besides the certificate of his marriage, and a copy of his will."

"So far so good," the lawyer told her with a nod. "There is of course a little more necessary for legal identification, but that can easily be secured. Meanwhile" (a slight twinkle came into his eye here) "although I can not approve the law-breaking spirit which the Wargrave family, in its various branches, has to-day displayed, I do from my heart congratulate the family on the spirit of another kind which it has exhibited — on the high-mindedness with which it has met and dealt with an unusual and difficult situation."

"Since I don't belong to the family except by courtesy and affection, I may be permitted to say that I heartily agree with you, Mr. Blaisdell," Edith's ringing voice announced. "When we consider how abominably many people behave when it is a question of wills and property, one appreciates the fine spirit of the heir who tosses into the fire the will which secures him a great inheritance, because he feels that he is forced to do so by the higher law of honor and justice; and the spirit also" (here her glance dwelt on Bobby with a very kindly light) "of those, whose interest was only second to his, who have applauded the act."

"I submit that Miss Creighton can not be permitted to put herself outside of the family in this manner," Desmond eagerly interposed. "She is not only one of us by the affection of which she speaks, but she must be aware that she was very closely concerned in the will, the destruction of which she is good enough to approve."

"I am glad if it were so," Edith returned, "since in that case I can feel that I, too, have a share in what, despite Mr. Blaisdell's professional opinion, I regard as an act of which to be proud."

"Well, well," Mr. Blaisdell observed a little testily, "I repeat that the less said about the will the better. The family have approved the manner in which the last wishes of the testator have been carried out, and that ends the matter. I will now ask the young lady whom we have known up to this time as Miss Landon —

"Landon is my second baptismal name," Hester quietly told him.

"But whom we must now call Miss Wargrave," he went on, "to give me the address of her attorney in San Francisco, that I may write to him for certain necessary particulars and papers. Meanwhile" (he looked at Mrs. Creighton) "there are some connections, and many old friends of the family now in the house, to whom I would suggest that you present Miss Wargrave, with a slight explanation of her — er — appearance at this time. It is well to avoid gossip, which is otherwise quite certain to be spread rather wildly."

"Thank you for the suggestion!" Mrs. Creighton said gratefully. "You are right: gossip can not be forestalled too soon. Let us settle exactly what is to be told, and then Robert Selwyn and Laurence can bring to us here every one who has any claim to come."

"There is one important preparation for that," Edith said quickly. "The nurse's uniform must be laid aside; and if" (she spoke now to Hester) "you have not a black dress with you, I shall be happy to lend you one."

"You are very kind," Hester answered; "but I have a black gown, which I was about to put on when I was summoned here. I did not know then how I should be received, so I did not wish even to seem to join in the mourning of a family that might reject me. Therefore I came in my nurse's dress. For the manner in which you *have* received me" (she again extended toward them hands which, as well as her tones, slightly trembled) "I have no words with which to thank you. I can only say that it has wiped away forever all memory of bitterness."

CHAPTER XXVII

Laurence Stays

Despite every effort which the family could make there was more than a nine days' wonder over the sudden appearance of Judge Wargrave's granddaughter, the news (which could not be suppressed) that the Wargrave trust had lapsed, that this unknown girl was sole heiress of the estate, and that the young man who had been brought from afar to fill the position of heir, was

left with no interest at all in the great inheritance. His attractive personality and debonair ways had made him very popular with all who met him during his stay at Hillcrest as the Judge's recognized successor; and sympathy was freely expressed for his disappointment.

"You are wasting your pity!" Bobby Selwyn told all who uttered this sympathy to him. "Desmond doesn't care a rap for the loss of the estate. On the contrary, he is delighted that the Judge's granddaughter has inherited it; and indeed he had more than any one else to do with the fact that she has come into her rights."

"Is it true that he destroyed the will that gave everything to him?" more than one person curiously inquired.

"Well" (Bobby was mindful of Mr. Blaisdell's stern admonition), "I can only tell you that the will was destroyed in accordance with the Judge's positively expressed wish, and with the approval of every one concerned. Desmond acted extremely well, and we all endorsed his — er — action."

"Pity that such a fine fellow couldn't have inherited the estate!" was the consensus of public opinion; and Bobby permitted himself to say significantly,

"Perhaps it may come into his hands, after all."

This suggestion he owed to Edith Creighton, who, when twitted with the mistake she had made in her judgment of the relations existing between Desmond and the young nurse, had replied with a touch of asperity,

"You are not half as clever as you think yourself, Bobby. It is true that I was mistaken about the mere facts, but I wasn't mistaken in the perception of something which made, or seemed to make, those facts possible. I don't know whether or not it has had any effect on Laurence Desmond's conduct, but it is very clear to me that he is in love with the girl whom we now know as Hester Wargrave."

"Do you really think so?" Bobby asked anxiously. "In spite of all you said that day when you were — er — so angry, I've always believed that he was in love with *you*."

"You seem to labor under the impression that everybody must be in love with me," Edith informed him, with slightly increased asperity; "and of course it might have appeared the obvious thing in Laurence's case. But, in reality, he has never been in love with me for an hour. His mind was filled with thoughts of that girl when I first met him — he talked of her as we drove from Kingsford the evening he arrived, — and therefore my charms, great as you imagine them to be, never had a chance to impress him."

"Well, of course that explains it," Bobby conceded; "for I don't imagine your charms to be any greater than they really are. And if his mind hadn't been already filled with her, he couldn't have helped falling in love with you. I don't honestly see how he avoided it, anyway; but if he did, it's clearly providential. For if she reciprocates his feeling, as I suppose she does—?"

"I haven't the faintest idea whether she does or does not," Edith answered his interrogative pause. "She is an extremely reserved person — at least to me, — and has not betrayed in any way how she feels toward Laurence."

"She must have been impressed by the magnificent way in which he flung that will into the fire in order to give her a great inheritance," Bobby hazarded.

"Naturally she must have admired that," Edith agreed. "But I think she recognizes that he did it for a higher reason than merely to give her a great inheritance."

"You mean —?"

"I mean that whatever she had been — if he had disliked instead of being, as I fancy, in love with her — he would have acted in the same manner. I don't believe that he was thinking of her at all when he put that will in the fire; I think it was done in obedience to a standard of action which would not have been changed by any personal consideration whatever."

Bobby stared for a moment.

"You certainly think very highly of him," he said then.

"Yes, I think highly of him," she answered, "perhaps more highly because it has not been long since I did him injustice, as you know. But he is not the only person of whom I think highly," she added quickly. "I was proud of you that day, Bobby. You were as deeply concerned in that will as Laurence Desmond — you knew that it named you as the heir of the Wargrave trust after him, — but you saw it burned without an effort to save it; although you could easily have snatched it from the fire, as Mr. Blaisdell roared to you to do."

Bobby laughed.

"I should have had to fight Desmond."

"Oh, no! Mr. Blaisdell could have taken care of him. But you never thought of it; you were perfectly willing for it to be burned."

"Of course I was willing, since the Judge had desired it; and, besides, it was, under the circumstances, the only right thing to do."

"That is it!" Edith exclaimed. "You felt that it was 'the only right thing to do,' and so you did it, with less outward display than Laurence Desmond, but just as really. And do you know what this proves, Bobby?"

"Well — er — that I haven't forgotten everything that you've sometimes charged me with forgetting," Bobby suggested, not very luminously.

"Yes: that you haven't forgotten anything that is vital in those standards and traditions that dear Uncle George held so high. Oh, he knew what he was doing when he put you in the line of succession to the Wargrave trust! I thought it very fine of him when I heard of it, because I knew that he disapproved of so many of your modern ideas and methods. But I know now that he understood you all the time, — understood better than I did that, whenever you were put to the test, you would show that sense of the fine spirit of honor which he worshipped above all things. You showed it, Bobby, when you stood by and let Laurence Desmond destroy your prospect of inheritance as well as his own, because you both felt that it was 'the only right thing to do.'"

As Bobby looked at the eager speaker, the moisture which is the mark of deep feeling sprang to his honest eyes.

"You are awfully good to say these things to me, Edith!" he told her. "It didn't occur to me that there was anything at all remarkable in what I did; but I'd burn a dozen wills to have you think so well of me. While we are talking of the destroying of the will, however, let me tell you that you said something on the occasion which I didn't like at all."

"Indeed!" Edith's eager expansiveness suffered a slight frost. "What, pray?"

"You said that you did not belong to the family. Now, in a strict sense that may be true—"

"It is true in every sense."

"No, it isn't! You admitted the ties of connection and affection which make you one of us; but there ought to be more, Edith. You ought to enter the family. I've thought of late that you would enter it by marrying Desmond; and, after a fashion, I had resigned myself to your doing so. But since you tell me there is no prospect of that, if I could only induce you to consider marrying *me* —"

"Bobby," Edith declared, with something between a laugh and a sob, "you are the most absurd human being on the face of the earth! I have never known you to fail to take advantage of any occasion, however inappropriate, to make that suggestion."

"There is nothing inappropriate about the present occasion," Bobby affirmed; "and I promise you that I shall continue to make the suggestion as long as there is the faintest hope that you may some day take it seriously into consideration."

She regarded him steadily for a moment, and then held out her hand.

"I think that day has come," she said. "I think I must take it into consideration quite seriously."

It was several days after Judge Wargrave's funeral, when the household of Hillcrest had returned to those normal conditions of life which must go on, like the rising and setting of the sun,

whatever presence is withdrawn from the world, that the girl who was now recognized as the owner of the fine old home sat in the library talking to Mr. Blaisdell. He had just informed her that all the legal steps were taken to put her in possession of the estate; and he had listened with many demurring interruptions to certain instructions which she at once attempted to give him.

"My dear young lady," he said, "you must wait a little for all of this. I am aware that you pledged yourself to renew the Wargrave trust as soon as possible, but no one would or could expect you to do anything of the kind until your life is — er — somewhat settled."

"My life is as much settled now as it is ever likely to be," Hester told him quietly. "At least my intention is clearly settled to replace my grandfather's will as far as possible. Nothing could induce me to profit by the accident of its destruction."

Mr. Blaisdell put out his long lip.

"I should hardly call the destruction an accident," he said. "It was a very deliberate action, and I don't think you will succeed in conferring the estate upon the legatee who in such a decisive manner rejected it."

Hester looked distressed.

"Can he not be forced to take it?" she asked.

The lawyer shook his head.

"I know of no means by which that could be accomplished," he said, — "especially in the case of a person so self-willed as this young man has proved himself."

"But you have forced it upon me!" the girl remonstrated.

"Not at all," he corrected her. "The law forces it upon you, — which is a very different matter. You are the only heir of Judge Wargrave whom the law recognizes, and you must accept the estate in order to be able to dispose of it as you desire."

"I am afraid you think me very self-willed also," she said. "But you don't know how anxious I am that my coming shall make no change in what had been arranged before I came. My grandfather had selected his heir, he had brought him here from the other side of the world, he had settled everything; and it is intolerable to me that my mere existence should upset what was even to the end so near his heart."

"He proved that there was something even nearer to his heart, which was to do tardy justice to the son who had been so deeply wronged," Mr. Blaisdell answered. "As for your existence, you can't help that, you know; and I don't really think that there is any reason why you should desire to help it. I knew my old friend very well, and I am sure that he would be satisfied that the daughter of his son reigns as mistress in his home."

"But the Wargrave trust!"

"Ah, we must let the Wargrave trust take its chances! Some day when you are — er — married perhaps —"

Hester rose abruptly from her seat.

"You don't understand!" she cried. "I want this matter settled, so as to be independent of anything I may or may not do in the future. I want to put the heir my grandfather selected in his place, and then go away to live my own life as I like, without any responsibility here."

The lawyer, who had also risen, shook his head at her.

"You won't be able to manage that," he told her. "Life is so ordered for all of us that we can't throw off our responsibilities, however much we might like to do so. You would like just now to turn the Wargrave trust, and all that it implies, over to Laurence Desmond; but I don't think he will oblige you so far as to take it. However, yonder he is! You can ask him."

He had glanced through one of the windows as he spoke, and he now walked across the floor and threw it up.

"Hallo!" he shouted to the young man, whose figure, attended by two leaping dogs, he had seen on the terrace. Then, as a surprised face turned toward him, he beckoned imperatively. "Come here!" he cried. "We want you."

"Oh, I don't think we do!" Hester hurriedly remonstrated behind him.

"I'm sure that we do," he replied, turning back to her. "As far as I am concerned, I must insist upon a clear understanding between you two before I take instructions for legal instruments of any kind. Come in, Mr. Desmond," he continued, addressing the young man, who now appeared at the window. "Miss Wargrave and myself wish to talk to you a little."

"Mr. Blaisdell may wish to talk to you," Hester interposed with some spirit, "but I have not expressed any desire of the kind."

"Then" (Desmond abruptly withdrew a leg which he had advanced over the window-sill) "I will have the pleasure of seeing Mr. Blaisdell later at his office in Kingsford."

"No, you won't!" Mr. Blaisdell shot out a long arm and drew him into the room. "You will be good enough to see me here and now; and I must beg Miss Wargrave to remain with us" (for he detected a slight tentative movement of Hester toward the door) "until certain matters can be discussed, and a conclusion distinctly agreed upon by all concerned."

"Really, Mr. Blaisdell," Desmond objected, "this seems rather an arbitrary proceeding, in view of Miss Wargrave's assurance that she has nothing to discuss, and my strong conviction that I am not in the least concerned in any matter which you may have under consideration with her."

Mr. Blaisdell regarded him with a sarcastic, though friendly, glance.

"My dear Mr. Desmond," he said, "you must kindly allow me to be the best judge of my own business. We are not disposing of wills, by fire or otherwise, at present; but are rather intent upon a question of making them —"

"No, no!" Hester interposed quickly. "You are quite mistaken. I do not want to make a will — that is, something which will operate only after I am dead — I want to arrange the matter of which I spoke to you, so that it will be immediately operative now."

"I quite understand," Mr. Blaisdell assented with a nod, "and I used the word 'will' in a comprehensive sense. But this being so, there is all the more reason that the person in whose favor you propose to resign your inheritance shall have a word to say in the matter."

"What!" Desmond strode forward and stood in front of her. "Is it possible that you have for an instant entertained the idea of resigning your inheritance in my favor?"

She looked up at him with something like defiance in her eyes.

"It is not my inheritance," she told him. "It is yours. My grandfather chose you as his heir; he gave his estate to you in the will which you destroyed; and I positively decline to profit by the destruction of that will."

"You forget that it was his desire that it should be destroyed."

"I do not forget that. But he was not only in an irresponsible condition of mental excitement when he desired it: he had even then no intention of ignoring the Wargrave trust, or of changing your place in it. I am sure of this, and therefore I have told Mr. Blaisdell that I wish him to prepare whatever papers are necessary to put the entailed estate into your hands in exact accordance with my grandfather's wishes and directions."

"And you think — you really think — that I would accept it?"

"You would have no alternative, since I refuse to keep it."

"No alternative!" He threw back his head with a laugh of angry scorn. "I would soon show you whether or not I had an alternative. I am very much obliged to Mr. Blaisdell" (he swung round toward that gentleman) "for letting me know what was being considered. I think I need hardly tell him that I would not tolerate such an arrangement for a moment."

"I warned Miss Wargrave that it might be — er — well to consult you before she took any decisive step," Mr. Blaisdell remarked. "That is why I called you in. It seemed," he added dryly, "a trifle unnecessary to prepare any more papers to be burned."

"Quite unnecessary," Desmond assented, with a laugh out of which the flash of anger had gone, "since burned any such paper surely would have been. Perhaps" (he turned back to Hester) "you think me ungrateful —"

"No," she interrupted in a low tone, "I only think you very unkind."

"Unkind!" He put out his hand impulsively and caught hers, as he had caught it more than once before. "Now, why, in Heaven's name, should you think *that*?"

"Because," she told him, with something like a suggestion of tears in her voice, "you brought me here — for it was all your doing, — you have placed me in a false position by destroying the will which secured the Wargrave trust, and you now refuse to let me do the only thing possible to repair — atone for the trouble I have caused."

"You have caused no trouble," Desmond assured her; while Mr. Blaisdell, after clearing his throat in a significant manner, stepped through the still open window, and walked away unheeded. "Don't you know that, so far from that, you have ended trouble by your coming; you brought peace and comfort to a dying man; and there is no member of the family, either near or remote, who is not glad that Harry Wargrave has come into his inheritance in the person of his daughter, and who is not willing that the final disposition of that inheritance should be left in your hands?"

"But *you* are not willing!" she urged reproachfully. "You refuse to accept the disposition I wish to make of it."

"I said the *final* disposition," Desmond reminded her. "For the present, you must accept the burden that has come upon you. There is no help for that. You can not tell yet how life will deal with it or with you, or what will be finally the best disposition to make of it. I am only sure that with the Wargrave trust, as with all else, you will act in a fine, high spirit of conscientious endeavor to do your duty toward God and man."

She looked up at him like a child, and the tears suddenly overflowed from the clear fountains of her eyes, as she sank into a chair.

"How shall I know the way to do all this — after you are gone?" she asked.

Infinitely touched, he knelt down beside her, and gathered her hands again into the clasp of his.

"Hester," he said softly, "if you wish me to stay, I will never go."

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